

# Writing and Religious Traditions: A Multifaceted Relationship

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This volume stems from the fruitful convergence of two initially autonomous research projects: *SalnAT-Ve. Sacred Inscriptions from the Ancient Territory of Venetia*, led by Lorenzo Calvelli,<sup>1</sup> and *‘Aut recepti beneficio obligatos putant’: las formas ‘no coercitivas’ de transformación indígena (siglo IV a.C. - siglo II d.C.)*, directed by María Dolores Dopico Caínzos.<sup>2</sup> Bringing together these two initiatives has paved the way for new analytical directions by facilitating the intersection and comparison of case studies, geographical contexts and primary sources, with a view to enhancing the richness, originality and reliability of the scientific results.

Our work has revolved around the examination of ‘sacred inscriptions’, a category traditionally applied to inscribed objects associated with religious settings. By examining the written messages conveyed by such media, our enquiry set out to investigate religious phenomena and ritual practices as enacted within a variety

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of ancient sanctuaries distributed across a broad territorial range.<sup>3</sup> The contributions collected in this volume address topics reflecting the thematic breadth and geographical variety of our collaboration, extending over the Iberian and Italian peninsulas, as well as adjacent islands, such as Malta.

In recent decades, scholars have increasingly recognised the distinctive value of epigraphic evidence linked to sacred contexts – not only for elucidating the nature of communication between individuals or communities on the one hand and divine entities on the other, but also for the reconstruction of the ‘archaeology of ritual’ (*archéologie du rite*) and the ‘archaeology of gesture’ (*archéologie du geste*). These two interrelated fields are vital for understanding the historical development and spatial articulation of sacred spaces, which must certainly be investigated through stratigraphic evidence and material culture, but also through inscriptions, whose written words, especially verbal forms, offer direct testimony to actions underlying rituals and gestures.<sup>4</sup> The presence of human bodies, the choice of attire, the recitation of formulaic speech and the deployment of aromatic substances – as well as the ritual significance of gestures, ceremonies and their paraphernalia – formed essential components of cult practices in the ancient Mediterranean. In their interplay, these elements reveal both the prominence of ritual agents and the performative dimension of sacred action.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, from a methodological standpoint, the history of religions, the analysis of sacred landscapes and the understanding of ritual practices associated with such contexts demand the integration of different categories of evidence.<sup>6</sup> As Olivier de Cazanove aptly observes in the opening contribution to this volume, the growing importance of archaeological and topographical data in the study of Roman religion must be complemented by the critical examination of literary, epigraphic, iconographic and numismatic evidence. In particular, while archaeology makes it possible to identify cult practices otherwise absent from the written tradition – such as the dedication of anatomical ex-votos – and to reconstruct local religious histories through intra-site spatial analysis, the orientation of altars, the layout of offerings and the organisation of sacred spaces, one must remain wary of over-interpreting material data, which always require a critical and contextualised reading.

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**3** On the notion of sanctuary in the ancient world, see Kindt 2024; Rupke 2024.

**4** For discussions of the *archéologie du rite* and the potential of archaeological material to reconstruct ritual practices, see Scheid 2008; Raja, Rüpke 2015; Moser, Knust 2017. For a detailed exploration of the *archéologie du geste*, see Van Andringa 2021.

**5** See the essays collected by Gherchanoc, Huet 2022.

**6** Cf. Czachesz 2022.

The cultic scene can best be reconstructed through an interdisciplinary approach that combines a variety of primary sources with advanced analytical tools, such as georeferencing and the creation of distribution maps of offerings by category and chronological phase. Among the various kinds of materials that contribute to this reconstruction, inscriptions occupy a distinctive place. While scholars remain aware of the selectivity and socially embedded hierarchies that underlie epigraphic sources, they also acknowledge that writing played a prominent role in numerous ancient sanctuaries.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, one should not presume that inscriptions represent a documentary category superior to other forms of *realia*. Within the framework of this volume, the analysis of inscribed objects has therefore acted chiefly as a point of departure, allowing the authors to formulate a series of structured research questions for which it was necessary to turn to a broader body of evidence.

Building on this foundation, this collective endeavour seeks to clarify a number of issues: how inscriptions and other forms of evidence can shed light on the religious procedures central to each sanctuary; what role performative practices – both collective and individual – played in these settings; how ritual sequences combined recurring patterns with unique occurrences; how sacrifices were organised and their operational chains articulated; how functional equipment and furnishings were managed; how offerings were conferred and displayed; and how the regular maintenance of consecrated spaces was ensured.<sup>8</sup> The answers to these questions must be sought with the awareness that, in sacred contexts, tangible evidence is paramount, for it must precede and provide the foundation for any theoretical model, enabling scholars to investigate the structure of rituals and to determine their social function.

Dedicating a volume to such a sensitive subject as the relationship between epigraphy and religions presents a considerable challenge, not least because adopting a collective and wide-ranging perspective requires moving beyond the disciplinary boundaries that often shape academic research. This was the guiding ambition of the collaborative and interdisciplinary project *SalnAT-Ve. Sacred Inscriptions from the Ancient Territory of Venetia*, which brought together researchers from within and outside Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Anchored in a long-term historical perspective, the project – conducted between

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<sup>7</sup> On the role of epigraphy in ancient sanctuaries, see Benelli 1999; Rüpke 2009; Annoscia, Camia, Nonnis 2022; Tord Basterra 2023; Estarán Tolosa forthcoming. For votive dedications, see Panciera 1989-90.

<sup>8</sup> For the operational sequence of sacrifice, see Leroi-Gourhan 1964. For the iconography of sacrifice, see Ryberg 1955; Huet et al. 2004; Scheid 2005. For inscribed sacred furnishings, see Nonnis 2023.

November 2021 and June 2024 – investigated the transition from pre-Roman cultures to the Roman world in the region of Venetia, understood as the territory once inhabited by the ancient Veneti and later integrated into the Roman sphere, with a particular focus on the interplay between writing and sanctuaries.<sup>9</sup> Ancient Venetia stands out as a particularly revealing case study, as scholars widely recognise that in its territory writing and literacy emerged, from the outset, as sociocultural phenomena intimately tied to the sacred sphere.<sup>10</sup> This close connection persisted into the Roman period and the record of sacred Latin inscriptions from what became the central section of *Regio X* is remarkably rich – yet remains partially unexplored.<sup>11</sup>

Members of the research group were drawn from a range of disciplines and brought with them a diverse array of expertise. Throughout the project, they engaged in sustained dialogue on various occasions, often adopting a comparative perspective. By exchanging ideas in numerous meetings and workshops, the participants soon reached a shared methodological insight: addressing the topic in an innovative manner required moving beyond conventional scholarly approaches to material evidence and stepping outside the comfort zones of their respective disciplines.<sup>12</sup> While the inquiry began with the analysis of specific categories of objects, such as inscriptions, collaboration soon expanded the scope, allowing the team to break free from pre-established interpretative frameworks and to formulate new scholarly questions. Understanding cultic and ritual practices in Venetia also demanded a nuanced view of the mutual dynamics between Roman society and local communities.<sup>13</sup> Rather than framing the interaction through an interpretative framework privileging the viewpoint of Rome, scholars sought to foreground the diversity of social actors across the historical contexts involved. This

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**9** See the project website at <https://pric.unive.it/projects/sainat-ve/home>.

**10** Prosdocimi 2001; 2009; Marinetti 2014.

**11** Epigraphic evidence has long played a central role in studies of religion in Roman Cisalpine Gaul, beginning with Murley 1922 and Pascal 1964. For a more recent overview of Venetia, see Bassignano 1987; Calvelli, Pesce forthcoming.

**12** A significant moment of exchange took place on 1 and 2 March 2023 at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, during the methodological workshop titled *Fonti epigrafiche e 'sacro' nel mondo antico. Nuove prospettive a confronto*.

**13** Sacred inscriptions as markers and tools of integration are examined by Cresci Marrone 2023; Girardi 2023; Zaccaria 2023. The identity-related aspects of religious practices are explored in Ackermann, Lafond, Vincent 2022.

reorientation was pursued through close cooperation with experts in Venetic culture.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, this undertaking was not without risks and difficulties. Epigraphic evidence and other categories of *realia* under examination presented several critical issues, including the existence of unpublished material, the uneven geographical distribution of evidence – often the result of gaps in fieldwork or delayed publication – and the challenges of dating artefacts, whether due to their removal from stratigraphic contexts or to divergent evaluations of chronological indicators. One illustrative example is the asymmetry in the archaeological record: within the area under consideration, it was possible to analyse numerous Venetic sanctuary sites in considerable detail, whereas the paucity of data hampered the possibility to reconstruct the religious landscapes of the Roman period as a whole, both urban and rural – despite the fact that nearby settlements, such as Aquileia and Verona, have yielded a wealth of material evidence, including architectural remains, which serve as useful *comparanda* and complementary support.<sup>15</sup>

An additional challenge lay in defining the chronological scope of the research, particularly its closing phase, given the difficulty of identifying the moment of transition from early forms of cultural convergence to full integration into Roman identity – a process that unfolded at different times and according to different patterns across local contexts, shaped by environmental, geopolitical and infrastructural factors. This uncertainty made it necessary to extend the project's temporal horizon to include the entire first century CE, in order to encompass the wide variety of local experiences of interaction with the Roman world, whether earlier or more gradual.

Considering these limitations and starting from an interdisciplinary perspective grounded in epigraphic evidence, the investigation sought to assess whether, in the wake of radical institutional changes and the emergence of competing divine entities, the religious system of the ancient Veneti retained or lost its identity. Particular attention was given to local deities, usually associated with specific places linked to supernatural activity, as they were seemingly resistant to hierarchy and cohabitation. The research aimed to determine

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**14** A methodological sensitivity to the interplay between indigenous traditions and Roman frameworks can be seen in the works of Häussler 2013; Murgia 2013; Häussler, Chiai 2020. Major studies on religion in Republican Italy include Stek 2009; Stek, Burgers 2015; Bispham, Miano 2020; Fabbri, Sebastiani 2025. For the western Mediterranean, see Kistler et. al. 2015; Estarán Tolosa, Dupraz, Aberson 2021.

**15** For religious buildings in the urban area of Verona, see Cavalieri Manasse 2008; for Aquileia, see Fontana 1997. Within the context of Venetia, Opitergium offers a particularly significant example of temple remains dating to the transitional phase between indigenous and Roman culture: see Tirelli, Ferrarini forthcoming.

whether they were later accommodated within newly configured panthea, reshaped in profile or diminished in influence.

A further objective was to assess whether the continued use of sanctuaries in the Roman period reflected persistent devotion, memorial practices or processes of resemanticisation and reinvention of earlier traditions. Further questions concerned the degree and nature of continuity, rupture and coexistence, as well as whether change took place in uniform ways or assumed divergent forms. A final line of inquiry examined the extent to which the flexibility of the Roman polytheistic system, with its dialogic and receptive nature, turned sacred spaces into privileged arenas of cultural osmosis.

In close dialogue with *SalnAT-Ve*, the Spanish research strand evolved through two nationally funded projects supported by the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación. The first phase examined direct interventions by Rome in indigenous communities, drawing on a well-known passage from Cicero that encapsulates two complementary strategies of imperial expansion: the use of force and the negotiation of loyalty through the granting of *beneficia*.<sup>16</sup> The focus was initially on coercive mechanisms of control, studied across a wide geographical span that included north-western Spain, northern Italy and southern Gaul.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, the second phase investigated forms of accommodation, negotiation and voluntary adoption of Roman cultural models. This line of inquiry explored instances in which indigenous communities appeared as key actors in processes of transformation – whether through emulation, selective appropriation or gradual assimilation – carried out without the threat or presence of overt violence. Particular attention was devoted to the political vocabulary of *lenitas* and *clementia*, as articulated in Roman literary sources from the republican and early imperial periods.<sup>18</sup> These concepts provided the ideological foundation for a political practice designed to secure allegiance without coercion – an approach explicitly embraced by Roman statesmen, including Scipio, Pompey, Caesar and Augustus.

The project examined cases in which indigenous groups appear not as passive recipients of domination, but as protagonists of

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**16** Cic. *Catil.* 4.22: *Quamquam est uno loco condicio melior externae victoriae quam domesticae, quod hostes alienigenae aut oppressi serviunt aut recepti beneficio se obligatos putant.*

**17** Dopico Caínzos, Villanueva Acuña 2021.

**18** For *lenitas*, see Cic. *Rosc. Am.* 154: *Vestrum nemo est quin intellegat populum Romanum qui quondam in hostis lenissimus existimabatur hoc tempore domestica crudelitate laborare.* For *clementia*, see Livy 42.38.4: *Si male meriti clementiam populi Romani experti essent, bene merendo liberalitatem experirentur*; 44.9.1: *Popilius priusquam armatos muris admooveret, misit, qui magistratibus principibusque suaderent, fidem clementiamque Romanorum quam vim experiri mallent.*

change – whether through spontaneous integration into the Roman world, emulation of Roman customs or more subtle forms of adaptation shaped by indirect influence. These transformations were addressed through an interdisciplinary methodology that integrated epigraphic, numismatic, archaeological and literary sources. The geographical scope of the investigation included the north-western Iberian Peninsula, northern and central Italy, as well as southern Gaul, enabling comparisons across diverse historical and regional contexts. The research initiative reconsidered the complexity of cultural negotiation in the western provinces of the Roman world and was conducted by a network of scholars based at the Universities of Santiago de Compostela, Braga, Coimbra, Grenoble, Rome (Sapienza) and Venice (Ca' Foscari).

The partnership between the Venetian and the Spanish research teams has evolved over time through shared initiatives and ongoing intellectual exchange. Each of the two projects has already resulted in a dedicated publication.<sup>19</sup> It is within this collaborative environment that the present volume has taken shape, as a continuation of our shared line of research. We have chosen to dedicate it to the memory of our colleague Adriano Maggiani, whose critical judgement and scholarly depth have long served as a point of reference for many of us.

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