

# Young Ladies with Their Writing Equipment. Indications of Literacy in Roman Tombs

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The Romans introduced reading and writing on a larger scale to their provinces, which is recognizable by the increasing numbers of mostly Latin monumental inscriptions, graffiti and legal documents. As writing equipment is essential to writing, it was distributed similarly to these testimonies. The equipment, incorporating *stili*, inkpots and wax-spatulas, was widely spread throughout the Roman Empire.

As grave goods these objects were found in the tombs of men, children and women and are linked directly to the buried person. In combination with other grave goods, the anthropological information and the geographical localisation, we are able to draw some conclusions about the abilities of the person in question and their social world.

This investigation is part of my PhD project at the University of Bern. My work focuses on the literacy of Roman women by inquiring the archaeological material such as *instrumenta scriptoria* in grave contexts, grave inscriptions and iconographic depictions in funerary context. It is based on published material.

The area under investigation is the Latin west including Italy, with a time frame from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC to Late Antiquity; although the specific historical situation in Italy also supplied earlier examples mainly in the south. While the focus lies on women, their situation is compared to that of men and the relevant archaeological findings.

In this area, I located 345 graves containing writing equipment as grave goods. 81 of these graves can be assigned to female individuals, 75 to males and 189 graves are of persons with an unknown gender. The gender was assigned partly with the help of the grave goods and partly through anthropological investigations.

The general geographic distribution of the graves with writing equipment shows a concentration along the limes. In Heidelberg, Köln, Bad Reichenhall and Wederath-Belginum we see a high density of graves. All these places are linked to the Roman army or are located on important long-distance roads. Therefore the inhabitants were likely to be in closer contact to the Roman culture and trade than the people in more isolated and civil settlements. There are no graves containing writing equipment in the *Gallia Lugdunensis* and hardly any in *Aquitania*, *Tarraconensis* and *Baetica*.

Instruments to write in wax, such as stylus and wax-spatula or writing tablets were used more often (187 graves) than the ones to write in ink such as inkwell, pen and penknife (97 graves). Sometimes the two techniques are combined (58 graves). In some excavation reports, the instruments were just listed as writing instruments and not described in detail, consequently it was not possible to assign them to a technique.

It is striking that deceased women were often equipped with precious objects and valuable materials. We can see this most clearly in the group of the young girls under the age of 18. Their grave goods consist among others of jewellery made of gold, silver

and precious stone as well as small objects of ivory, amber and rock crystal. The writing equipment mostly contains a stylus, made of iron, bronze, bone, silver or with golden ornaments.

One example is the sarcophagus of Antestia Marciana from Aquileia.<sup>1</sup> She was buried with a small *balsamarium*, a little jewel case and fruits, all these objects being made of amber. Two *stili* were made of bronze. She died in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. The small amber objects are likely to be *crepundia*, some kind of lucky charms with an apotropaic effect.<sup>2</sup> They protected the child and were, according to literary sources, dedicated to the gods before marriage.<sup>3</sup> The appearance as grave goods could be a sign of an unattained marriage of the deceased. The inscription gives us her name and the age of 12 years. Her loving parents set up her grave. That probably means that she was not yet married and supports the interpretation of the *crepundia*. The normal age of marriage for girls started at 12 years, but most girls married in their late teens.<sup>4</sup> Therefore Antestia Marciana may be seen as a young girl that passed away shortly before she reached her intended role as wife and mother. The precious grave goods can therefore be seen as a symbolic dowry. The *Antestii* or in its older form *Antistii* were a plebeian family, known in Rome from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.<sup>5</sup> Even if Antestia Marciana was buried in Aquileia, it is possible, that she belonged to this *gens*. The grave goods document the wealth of her family.

8 out of 12 graves of girls or young women show a similar richness in the grave goods and most of them are from Italy (Rome/Puglia/Aquileia).<sup>6</sup> The earliest dates to the early 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the latest to the 4<sup>th</sup>. There is a peak in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. It is likely that they all belong to the group of the “*mors immatura*”, girls who died before their age, that is, their marriage.<sup>7</sup> The writing equipment is probably a sign of their literacy. If we look at their age in death, some of them would already have finished their early education.<sup>8</sup> They all belonged to the Roman upper class, as indicated by the wealth and number of their grave goods and the elaborate form of the burials. This fits in with the image of the written sources, which sometimes mention women from the upper classes in passing as being able to read and write.<sup>9</sup>

Golden rings with inscriptions were included in three of the graves, perhaps these were engagement rings: a ring with agate cameo from Flerzheim shows a *dextrarum iunctio* and the Greek word HOMONOIA – unity/harmony.<sup>10</sup> Therefore it is likely that the girl was able to understand Greek. The *dextrarum iunctio* is a very common motive for marriage. The second ring bears the inscription FILETUS in its cameo: this may have been the name of the fiancé of Crepereia Tryphaena.<sup>11</sup> According to her name she was probably the child of a freedman and lived in Rome. The third ring seems to have been a present, as the inscription IVNONI MEAE suggests and had been given to the women buried in the Simpleveld sarcophagus.<sup>12</sup>

Not only girls but also adult women were often buried with objects made of precious materials. The male burials are generally much simpler. Particularly rich burials for adult people are located in the Dutch-Belgian region. Several tombs are from Nijmegen,<sup>13</sup> the

principal town of the *civitas Batavorum* and later a *municipium* in relation to a military camp. The high number of grave goods has its roots in the local funerary tradition, but a lot of the objects are from the Roman culture, such as the writing equipment, Samian vessels and *balsamaria*. Burial 1 is outstanding due to its exceptional richness.<sup>14</sup> The cremated individual was anthropologically determined as a female, aged between 20 and 30 years. The grave goods consisted of approximately 80 objects. Among them are various objects of amber, a ring made of rock crystal and gold, glass beads and a bone box with silver frame and lock. A bronze inkwell, two iron *stili*, an iron wax spatula, a fragment of what may have been an iron pen knife and a burnt rest of a bone object, probably a ruler, formed her writing equipment. The amber objects in the form of shells, fishes and spindle rods resemble the *crepundia*. According to her age, the woman was likely to have been married, but there is no possibility to be sure.

Wax tablets are a special category. Most archaeological finds are located south of the Alps. They show a clear division connected to gender: Three examples are from male burials, 8 from female.<sup>15</sup> While the wax tablets for men are all made of wood, the ones for women are mostly of ivory or bone. Two wax tablets from burials of unknown gender are made of the same material.<sup>16</sup> They are smaller than the wooden examples (ca. half the size; 8.5 × 4.7 × 0.2–0.5 cm vs. 15 × 10 × 1 cm). Unfortunately, the wax layer is very fragile and as ivory is much harder than wood, it is not possible to find any traces of the writing once scratched in the tablets.

The *instrumenta scriptoria* testify almost all writing skills. Only the wax tablets can be written on or be read. Other written texts are found in the form of short inscriptions or *graffiti* on small finds. There is no evidence for longer texts or to be more precise, no evidence for the content of possible longer texts. But in Egypt there is a grave recorded, where the first two books of the Iliad written on papyrus were placed under a women's head.<sup>17</sup> This probably testifies to her skills in reading, not writing.

I did not try to collect all the graves with small finds with inscriptions.<sup>18</sup> But one quarter of the graves with writing equipment also contains such objects. The largest group is formed by the stamps of producers and or simple *graffiti* such as “X” or numbers. These are not very informative about the literacy of the deceased. More interesting are inscribed names and longer inscriptions on small objects. While the first category is a sign of at least very basic literacy,<sup>19</sup> the second requires more skills. The small texts were certainly written by the manufacturer of the object, but the additional effort to add carefully crafted details probably made the price rise and the item was chosen on purpose. The inscriptions often speak in an active way to the reader; for example they greet the person (AVE, SALVE) or invite him/her to do something, mostly in relation to drinking or love. We find such inscriptions on cups or often on “female” objects such as spindle whorls, fingerings or brooches. They are said to be love tokens. The three rings mentioned before belonged to this category. Only one male grave from Taraneš contained objects with inscription: a drinking vessel saying “VIVAS” and a precious golden crossbow-brooch, probably given to a high military officer by the emperor.<sup>20</sup>

The writing equipment presented so far was made of precious material. If we look at the chronological distribution, we can see some changes in the materials used (fig. 1. 2).

The oldest tombs in my study date back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and are located in southern Italy.<sup>21</sup> The grave goods are clearly influenced by the culture of the Magna Graecia. The shapes and materials of the writing equipment had an effect on the earliest Roman specimens. In general, the writing equipment of the tombs dating to before the present era consists of a ceramic inkwell or a bone stylus. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, the graves with writing equipment spread towards the north and, starting in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, are found north of the Alps and in the northern provinces. The number increases and peaks in the second century AD. Bone *stili* and ceramic inkwells are still in use, but in the 1<sup>st</sup> century bronze inkwell and iron *stili* are dominant. Sometimes they are decorated with other metals (copper and copper alloys). In the second century AD, we can see a higher variety, more combinations and an increased value of the materials

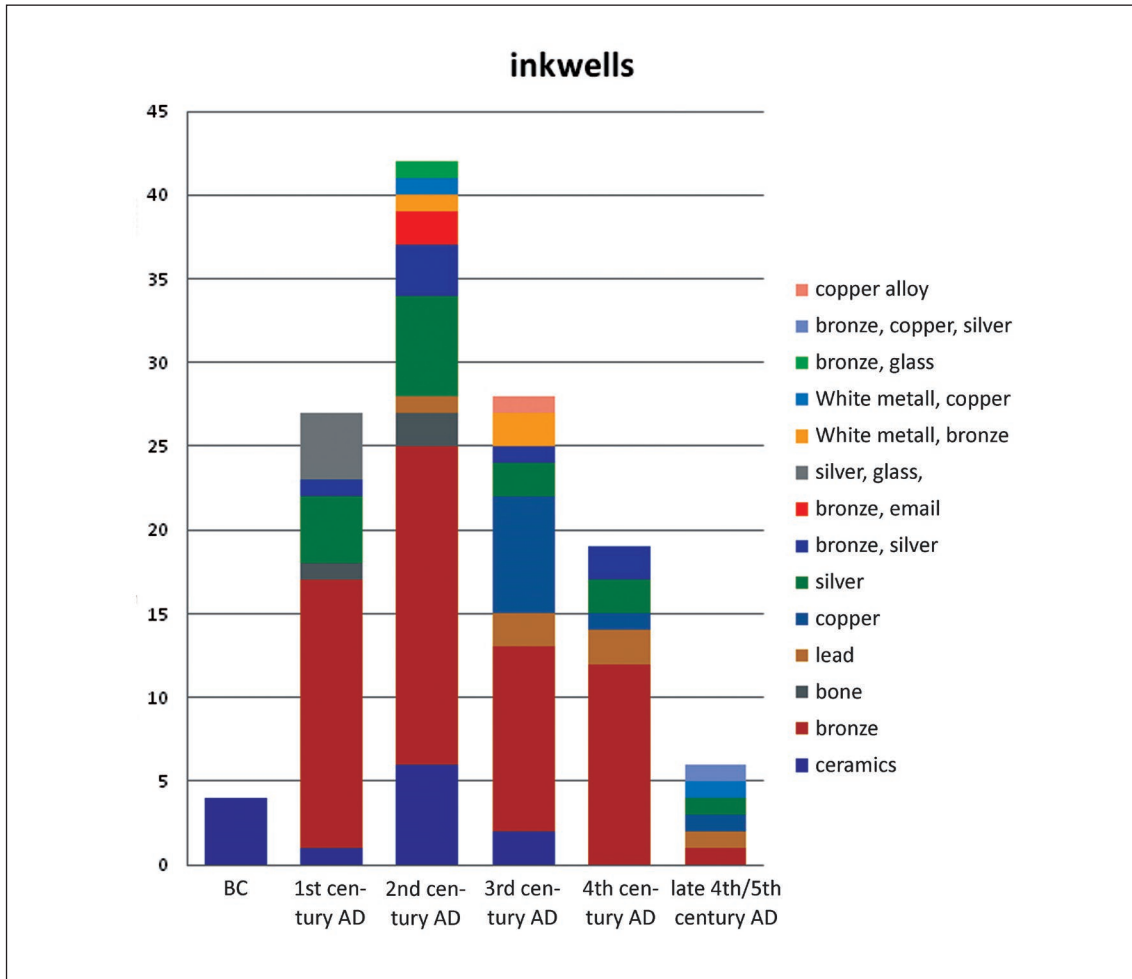


Fig. 1: Materials used for inkwells.

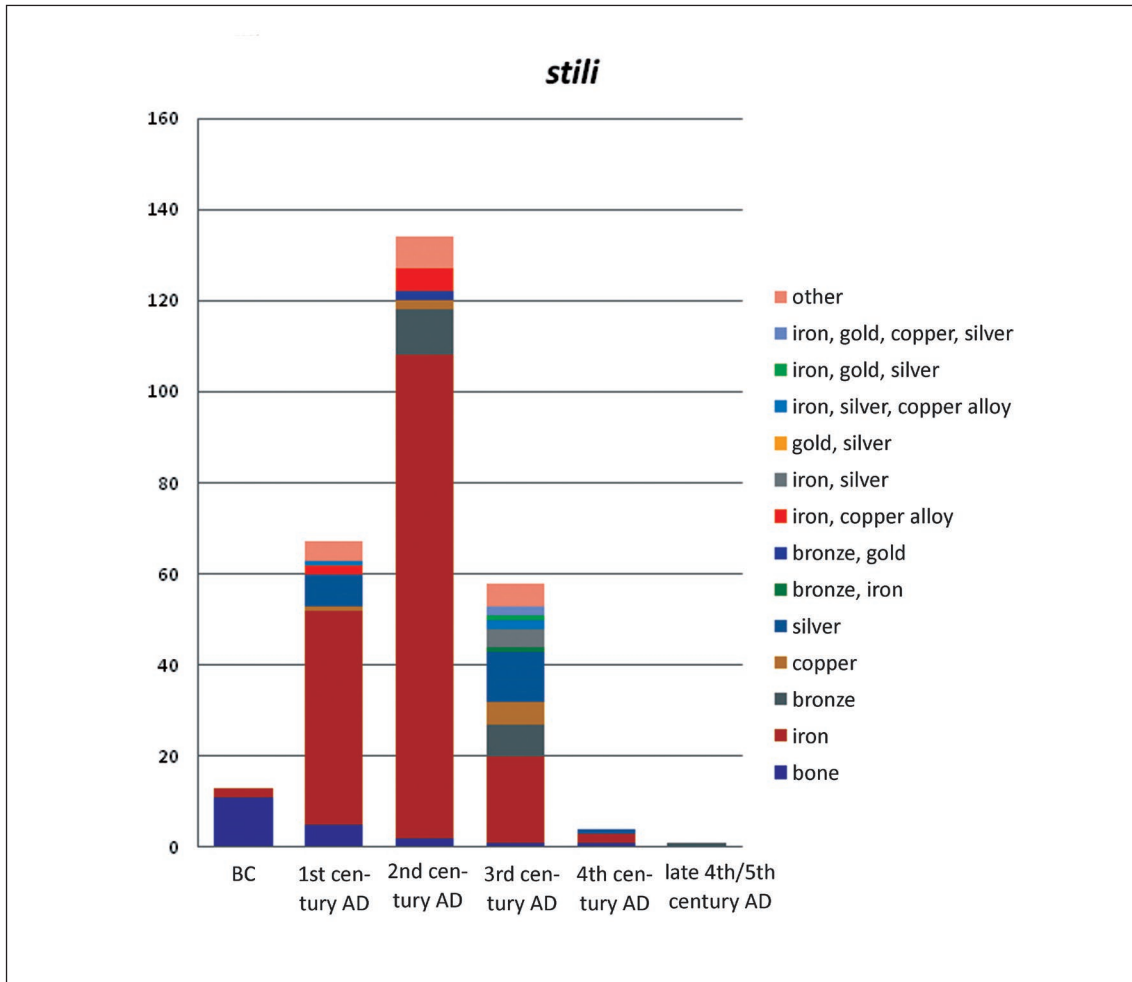


Fig. 2: Materials used for *stili*.

used, such as bronze and copper alloy for *stili*, bronze, copper alloy, silver and white metal for inkwells.

The total number of graves decreases in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, but the writing implements in them are still of a high quality. Most *stili* are simply made of iron, but some are decorated with silver and – as an innovation – with gold. The geographical distribution shows a shift to the east in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. These finds are clearly linked to the military, as the silver inkwells are often combined with a crossbow-brooch. Most of them were found in male or ungendered graves, as the one from Taraneš with the golden crossbow brooch.

Finds of writing equipment are not only a sign of the spread of literacy in the Roman Empire, but also objects of a specialized trade. Often it is not easy to trace the place of production or even the workshop. While simple iron *stili* cannot be attributed to a specific place and may well have been produced locally, the Samian inkwells have

well-known places of production. Steven Willis<sup>22</sup> collected the occurrence of Samian inkwells produced in Gaul in Roman Britain in his 2005 study. The sites are mostly associated with the military and frequently with major civil centres. He noticed just one ceramic inkwell known to come from a grave and it's probably not Samian. In relation to the overall distribution of Samian vessels, the inkwells are a very infrequent form. As Great Britain is not very close to the major centres of the Empire, the finds testify to the long distance trade of objects connected to literacy.

There are other objects that were not produced locally and had to come from trade. The ivory writing tablets were always imports from the south, as well as the papyrus used to write upon.

In rare cases we know more about the producers. The stamp of Longinus Socrates was found on several inkwells in nowadays Great Britain, the Netherlands, Germany and Serbia.<sup>23</sup> They vary in their appearance, but are all made of bronze. Some have a precious silver and niello decoration. The workshop itself was probably located in Italy and maybe owned by a freedmen of Greek origin.<sup>24</sup>

The writing equipment in graves often testifies to the wealth of the richer parts of society, especially women. The objects themselves but the additional grave goods, too, are often made of precious materials and traded over long distances. It is still difficult to find evidence of the lower classes but the picture of the literate social classes given in the written sources can be enlarged and diversified by the study of grave goods.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Giovannini – Feugère 2000, 36 f.

<sup>2</sup> Martin-Kilcher 2000, 67.

<sup>3</sup> Eg. Persius, Satura 2. 69f.; D'Ambra 2014, 319.

<sup>4</sup> Hemelrijk 1999, 9. The average age at marriage varied according to social status and location.

<sup>5</sup> DNP 1 (1996) 795–798 s. v. Antistius (K.-L. Elvers – W. Will – W. Eck – T. Giaro).

<sup>6</sup> Rome, Via Ostiense (Bordenache Battaglia 1983, 92–95); Rome, so-called “Kindergrab des Berliner Antiquariums” (Platz-Horster 1978, 184–195); Rome, grave of Crepereia Tryphaena (Griesbach 2014, 262f.); Aquileia, grave of Antestia Marciana (Giovannini – Feugère 2000 36 f.), Puglia, a girls grave (Scarpellini Testi 1987, 161); Bonn, Josefstrasse (Haberey 1961, 319–332); Rheinbach-Flerzheim (Lösch 2011, 117–122); Augst (Schwarz 1997, 75–83); Ptuj, grave 24/1973 (Tomanič-Jevremov et. al. 2001, 111–115). The simpler graves are from Heidelberg, grave 62/25 (Hensen 2009, 264f.; pls. 117. 118 no. 62/25); Bregenz, grave 506 (Konrad 1997, 69. 93. 139. 173. 217 pl. 28, A) and Köngen, grave 128 (Luik 1994, 357–381).

<sup>7</sup> For the *mors immatura* see Martin-Kilcher 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Bonner 1977, 56 f. Cf. DNP 11 (2001) 263–268 s. v. Schule (C. Johannes), 263; Marrou 1957, 391 f.

<sup>9</sup> Agrippina was said to have been talented even in rhetoric. Suet. Aug. 86. And Cicero addressed various letters to his wife Terentia, asking her to write back. Cic. fam. 14, 2, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Lösch 2011, 117–122.

<sup>11</sup> Griesbach 2014, 262 f.; Martin-Kilcher 2000, 64 f. fig. 7, 1; 69 f. fig. 7, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Galestin 2001, 63–76.

<sup>13</sup> Koster 2013, 46–49. 53–67; 71–73 graves 1. 8. 9. 11. 21; Künzl 1983, 93–96.

<sup>14</sup> Koster 2013, 46–49. 389–394 pls. 6–14.

<sup>15</sup> Female graves are from Aquileia, Necropoli di Ponterosse, grave 7 (Giovannini 1991, 48–52; 71 f. pl. 2) and via Annia, grave 3 (Brusin 1941, 63 f. no. 3, fig. 24); from Rome the already cited so-called “Kindergrab des Berliner Antiquariums” (Platz-Horster 1978, 184–195) and the grave of Crepereia Tryphaena (wooden tablets: Griesbach 2014, 262 f.); a cluster of objects probably from an Italian grave, now in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge (Vassilika 1998, 118 f. no. 57); Nîmes, grave 130 (Espérandieu 1928, 165 f.), Durrës, grave 14 (Tartari 2004, 17. 24 f. 65. 67. 73. 75 pls. 6; 40, 93; 42, 127) and the above mentioned grave 24/1973 from Ptuj (Tomanič-Jevremov et. al. 2001, 111–115). Male graves are from Giubiasco, grave 527 (Pernet et. al. 2006, 89 f. 96. 155. 162. 243. 253. 283. 285. 333. 345. 347 tab. 12.6; pl. Tombe 527), Budapest-Óbuda, Testvérhegy, lot 20.539/7 (Nagy 1935, 4. 35) and Dunaújváros-Intercisa, grave 1993 (Bilkei 1980, 65. 73. 81 nos. 113–115; 90 pl. 4)

<sup>16</sup> Ungendered are grave 413 from Alghero, Necropoli di Monte Carru (Fragola 2015, 247–256) and a grave from Aquileia, S. Egidio (Fünfschilling 2012, 169 f.).

<sup>17</sup> Cavallo 1995, 523.

<sup>18</sup> For such objects see Pfahl 2012; Dondin-Payre 2006; Thüry 1994.

<sup>19</sup> There are only three names on objects in the catalogue of my thesis, all of them are male. “ITALI” on a small bowl in a grave from Mérida, el Disco (Hidalgo Martín 2014, 16 f.) and “PRIMI” on a casserole in an inhumation burial from Locarno, Solduno (Donati 1979, 170–177). Both deceased are unsexed. “MARCI” was written on a bowl in a double burial from Günzenhausen and associated with a women. The second, juvenile person is unsexed (Fasold 1987/1988, 183 f. 190. 198–211).

<sup>20</sup> Ivanovski 1987, 81–91. The inscription of the brooch is “IOVI AVG(VSTE) VINCAS/IOVI CAES(AR) VIVAS”. The grave dates to the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. One drinking vessel with the inscription “DAMI” was found in an ungendered grave from Bonn, Rheinstrasse. Lindenschmit 1911, 308.

<sup>21</sup> E. g. a grave from 17. 8. 1957 from Taranto: Juliis 1984, 427 f. no. 88.

<sup>22</sup> Willis 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Eckardt 2018, 63 f. with distribution map; Koster 2013, 158.

<sup>24</sup> Eckardt 2018, 63 f.; Koster 2013, 158.

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