

Teaching notes on 12.04a Inscriptions & ancient writing

Slide 1

Learning objective: To encounter different forms of ancient lettering and to use these alphabets to write our own names on various media.

After saying 'salve' to Lucundus, mouse-clicks on this slide will make Lucundus ask, "esne*... curiosus/curiosa aut incuriosus/incuriosa?" ("Are you ... curious or not curious?") to which the pupil can reply 'curiosus/curiosa sum' or 'incuriosus/incuriosa sum' (making sure they pick the right gender to describe themselves).

* -ne on the end of the first word automatically turns it into a question.

Slide 2



On this slide, we're going to see some examples of ancient writing but before we do, the students will be asked to consider four questions for each of the examples they see:

- What materials are the letters written on?
- What tools or materials are used to write the letters?
- What's the purpose of the writing?
- Is there a modern equivalent?

Once students have had a chance to discuss each example, you can tell them a little about the background:

Inscription on the Arch of Titus, Rome, 1st century CE

This monument was built in 81 CE by the Roman emperor Domitian to commemorate his brother's death and deification (being officially declared a god). It's made of marble, one of the hardest and most enduring stones, which is one of the reasons it's still around today. However, carving such hard stone is very labour intensive and is done by expert stone masons using specialist chisels and carving equipment. The purpose of the writing is to be a public commemoration of Titus so it needs to be big and clear. The writing we can see in this picture is:

SENATVS POPVLVSQVE·ROMANVS DIVO·TITO·DIVI·VESPASIANI·F VESPASIANO·AVGVSTO

The Senate and the people of Rome (dedicate this monument) to the deified Titus Vespasian Augustus, son of the deified Vespasian

Some interesting facts:

- The dots floating in the middle of the line are used to separate words (rather than sentences, as we do today). The origin of the word 'punctuation' is 'punctus', meaning 'poked' or 'jabbed' in Latin, as these dots are made by the stone mason making a jab with his chisel.

- The triangular ‘ends’ of the letters are called serifs and we still use them today on modern fonts such as **Times New Roman** (there’s a clue in the name!).

Of course, we still inscribe on stone in modern times. One particularly beautiful example is the Great Court in the British Museum. There are some lovely videos on YouTube of modern stone masons (eg <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xBJdhexwug>) – these can help students visualise the tools, materials and process.

Graffiti, Pompeii, 1st century CE

When the town of Pompeii was buried in Vesuvius’ ash after its eruption in 79 CE, so many wonderful aspects of Roman life were preserved. Some of the most fascinating are the words graffitied over walls throughout the town. Actually, these painted letters are more accurately described as ‘dipinti’ (‘painted’) as ‘graffiti’ technically means ‘scratched’. The eye-catching red paint is made from a mineral called cinnabar (mercury sulphide) and is applied to the plaster of the buildings’ walls. The distinctive style of the letters is due in part to the square-ended brush used, resulting in variation in stroke width.

The content of the dipinti could range from political messages to people simply writing their names. There are many modern equivalents of this, such as ‘tagging’ and graffiti. You could even argue that social media, where everyone can get their voice heard in public, is a modern form of Pompeian dipinti.

Political decree, Athens, 4th century BCE

This Greek stone inscription, originally in the Acropolis in Athens but now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, officially recognises Straton, a Phoenician king of Sidon (now modern Lebanon), as a friend and ally of Athens.

The letters are remarkable to our modern eye as they are all evenly spaced with no punctuation – this looks a bit like a word search! However, because Ancient Greek, like Latin, is an inflected language and changes the endings of words, the original readers would be much more attuned to where the ends of words were.

Interestingly, this is not the sort of text we’d now record in stone (more likely to be a signed paper treaty or digital legal document), but such an important state decision as this would need to be a permanent record for the Athenians. In fact, we do still use the phrase, ‘set in stone’ to mean something that is permanent and unchangeable.

Curse tablet, Bath, 2nd–4th centuries CE

This one we’ve seen before, back in Unit 3, so hopefully the students will be able to dig out their knowledge. The material is lead and the writing is scratched on using something sharp. Experts believe that professional engravers would make the curses for those looking for a hotline to the goddess Sulis. However, some tablets simply have non-letter form markings on them, suggesting that some illiterate people carved their own. The writing on the lead is very hard to read and is written in a Romano-British version of Latin. The modern

equivalent, as pupils may remember, is throwing pennies into a wishing well, although things like prayer boards arguably fulfil a similar purpose (but not as nasty!).

Roman coin, 1st century CE

This is an *aureus* made from gold and very valuable. The coin would have been minted using carved metal dies – there’s a really great video explaining the process here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6T_ZutXzNQ. Considering the small size of the coin, the detail of die carving is amazing. The writing is clear and reminds the bearer exactly who is in charge of the economy and the Republic.

Of course, we still use similar coins today and some of the features (the shape, the lettering, the face in profile) are pretty identical.

Slide 3

Here we look at three writing styles in a bit more detail and think about how the materials, tools and purpose affect the letter formation.

- For the Pompeian dipinti, the letters are bold, bright and quick to paint, and their shape is very much influenced by the square shape of the brush (imagine writing with a square-nibbed fountain pen or a chisel-tipped marker).
- The monumental inscription is even, large and decorative as befits the purpose of the arch (dedication to a deified Roman emperor).
- The third picture is an example of everyday writing. Unfortunately, we don’t have many examples of this because everyday materials tend to perish easily. However, this is one of the Bloomberg tablets, discovered when excavating the Temple of Mithras in the City of London. There would have originally been a layer of wax over the wood, but the writer pushed so hard with their stylus that they managed to scratch the wood underneath.

Slide 4



This slide leads us on to the lesson’s activity:

Step 1: Using the worksheet, practice writing your name (real or Roman) in the letter styles.

Step 2: Write your name on different media using different tools:

To recreate the stone inscription letters, use clay, plasticine or polymer clay and a clay tool, table knife or toothpick. Make sure the serifs are there.

For the Pompeian-style dipinto, use red paint with a square-ended brush on old stone (or paper). Make sure there’s a variation in line width by using both the broad end and the narrow side of the brush.

To write in a cursive style, it's nice to use dip-pens and ink on wood - a broad lolly stick works well - or paper. Either you can make your own dip pens (instructions here <https://www.painters-online.co.uk/tips-techniques/mixed-media/articles/how-to-make-and-use-your-own-reed-pen-with-jason-bowyer/>) or you can buy them fairly cheaply here: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Set-3-Bamboo-Reed-Pens/dp/B00266DFEO> (or look on eBay or Etsy).

N.B. The word 'cursive' doesn't have anything to do with cursing, but instead comes from the Latin 'currere', 'to run' as the style of writing is quick and fluid.

Slide 5

The plenary slide:

Question 1 What Latin words give us the English word 'inscription'? ['in' – in or on, 'scribere' to write]

Question 2 What is the name of the type of everyday writing used by the Romans? [cursive]

Question 3 Which of the different writing types you've seen here today is your favourite?