To read or not to read: an introduction to Roman epigraphy

An inscription in the Lapis Niger (‘Black Stone’)

The *Lapis Niger*, an area of ill-omen and an early cult site in the Forum Romanum, was paved in black stone by Sulla around 80 BC. It provides the earliest evidence of Rome’s *comitium* (an assembly meeting-point) and contains one of the oldest surviving inscriptions in ancient Rome. The archaic inscription found within this area, often called a *cippus* (*CIL* 1.2.1), is an excellent case study, both for archaic Rome and for the use of inscriptions as evidence.

This unassuming slab of grey tufa has the distinction of being one of the most confounding objects from antiquity. Even the name, *Lapis Niger*, often used by scholars for the inscription, is a term coined by the ancient sources for the area around Sulla’s pavement (not the inscription itself). To assess some of the mysteries behind this inscription one must examine it both as a text and as a monument. This involves looking not only at the writing but how it was displayed and in what context it was placed. In this respect the inscription falls within a number of fields, and requires literary, archaeological, geographic and sometimes geological analysis. This study will consider a number of different approaches to show to illustrate both the insights and the limitations of this source.

The role of context: what can urban and archaeological contexts tell us about an inscription?

The location of this inscription and the fact that it remains in situ provides a wealth of information (especially in Rome, a city that is notorious for ‘eating itself’: materials are often moved and reused). The site of the stone, in the centre of the Forum (*Slide 1*), placed it at the meeting place for the King’s Council as well as the epicentre of democracy (*Curia Hostilia*), where assemblies met and speeches were given on the Rostra. The republican *Curia* building evolved into the Senate House, which still stands today, and during the empire this urban area remained for centuries the beating heart of Rome.

The archaeological context also provides a timeline of events for the site, which contains seven different levels, from archaic finds, including a number of votive offerings (seventh–fifth century BC), to the current (imperial period) ground level (*Slide 2*). From the current level, one can see the fenced-off area of Sulla’s black paving is clearly lower (*c.* 80 BC). Below ground, the U-shaped altar, built after the Gallic sack of Rome in 390 BC, is raised above the level of the archaic inscription, as recorded by G. Boni, who excavated the site in 1899–1900. The science of levels, often called stratigraphy, can be used to reconstruct the order of events in the development of a site. This archaeological means of dating is not always exact (often earlier layers have been disturbed by later work), but it is often helpful in narrowing the scope of a chronological period.

Dating an inscription: where do these dates come from and on what evidence are they based?
Basic information – such as date, context and the text of an inscription (sometimes a translation) – can be found online (see websites below) and in published volumes, some of which are easier to use than others (see bibliography). Often less clear, however, is how a date for an inscription has been established. The archaeological context indicates that this is an archaic inscription, likely from seventh–fifth century BC, but its date is often given as the much more precise 570–550 BC. Where does this date come from? Some inscriptions are dated by the style of letter forms or the formula, language and spelling, which can be helpful, but this is precarious and hardly definitive (usually narrowing a date down to a century or two either way). In the absence of such information, sometimes decorative elements – such as portrait hairstyles (particularly in the imperial period) or comparisons with similar dedications – are used. Historic and literary information are also used whenever possible, particularly if known public figures (officials, emperors) are named.

In the case of the Lapis Niger inscription, we have a plethora of information, little of which is definitive on its own, but all of which points in a similar direction. Like the archaeological context, the grey tufa material, which had largely fallen out of fashion by the mid–late republic, suggests a date in the seventh–fifth century BC. The style of the writing (discussed further below) is difficult to gauge, because there are so few surviving archaic inscriptions for comparison, but this too has some parallels with the writing styles of archaic Greece (seventh–fifth century BC).

Ancient literary sources associated the inscription with a grave or monument to three historic Roman figures: Romulus (founder of Rome), Faustulus (his father, the shepherd) and Hostus Hostilius (father of the third king, Tullus Hostilius), who fell (according to Livy) defending the city during the Sabine invasion after the mythical ‘rape of the Sabine women’. All of these figures remain touchstones of Rome’s mythical foundations, and all date to the eighth or seventh century BC, perhaps a century before the estimated date of the inscription. In early history, this is not so much of a problem because the early kings’ ruling dates are a bit too programmatic to be believed. (Many archaeologists would like to condense the 250-year period between the foundation of the city and the start of the republic to a shorter period.) However, it does illustrate how difficult dating can be, as the various dating factors do not always add up. The best advice is to be careful with dates, especially when the evidence upon which they are based is unclear.

Reading a monument: how was an inscription displayed? Was it visible? What space was it associated with? Was it meant to be read?

There are a number of debates about what this inscription actually said, both within the literary sources and after close inspection of the text itself. Before we enter these waters, it worth remembering that literacy rates in the ancient world were low: even optimists don’t claim more than 20 per cent (and in the archaic period the figure was probably even lower). So the majority of the Roman audience, like many modern classics students, would read a monument, but not necessarily its text. The Romans’ advantage lay in the fact that they had an oral tradition, although after a time even this became more convoluted. In the first century BC the historian Dionysius of
Halicarnassus suggested that Faustulus (Romulus’ father) was buried below a statue of a lion in this area (1.87) (Slide 2), and that Tullus Hostilius (Rome’s third king) was buried with an honorary inscription at a special place by the Roman Forum (3.1). Republican Rome may have paved over their period of regal rule, but it was clearly not forgotten, even 500 years later.

The location of the inscription in the Forum afforded a visual association with the most popular meeting-place in Rome. If it was a grave, it represented a fundamental breach in burial practice (which required bodies to be placed outside the city walls). Despite the exceptional honours that would have been attributed to a burial in such a prominent location within the city walls, the appearance of the monument and writing is less than impressive. The letter forms are difficult to recognize, especially as they are written not frontally or left to right, but up and down (bottom to top, then top to bottom) around the stone. This is called *boustrophedon* (literally ‘ox-turning’) because the writing is inscribed as in the path of a plough (or a lawnmower) – right to left, then left to right. This style is evident in archaic Greek inscriptions, and is another factor in dating the *Lapis Niger* text to the sixth century BC. Even if one could read this monument, the reader would probably collapse from vertigo long before he walked around the four sides!

To the modern reader, it is strikingly apparent that the organization and mental processing of writing, as well as its appearance, were very different from classical Latin. While it is easy to attribute poor carving to a poor craftsman or a lack of resources, the prominence of this text stands against those points. The difficult display of the writing may, however, indicate that the function of the writing was more symbolic in nature and was thus placed where it could be seen but not necessarily read.

Assessing and restoring text: how are published versions of texts created and what can language, spellings and letter forms tell us?

The text of this inscription has yielded a number of different interpretations. The stone was broken at the top in a seemingly deliberate act of desecration that some scholars have linked to the sack of Rome in 390 BC, though it could have occurred on any of a number of other occasions. The damaged nature of the stone means that many sections of the text are incomplete. Moreover, the form of Latin is so far removed from traditional Latin that it is difficult to make sense of the text that we do have. The ‘H’ on line one looks more like a Greek theta, and the typical Roman sound of ‘C’ is expressed with a Greek-like kappa, ‘K’. There are also similarities to Etruscan letter forms, which, like the Greek, were based on a Phoenician alphabet. From the fifteen lines of text, scholars have been able to identify only a handful of words, notably ‘king’ (from ‘Reccei’, dative case), which was cited by those who ascribed the monument to Romulus. While the word ‘king’ could indicate one of the historical figures noted above, republican augurs, who took their role from the kings, had a regal capacity, so this does not necessarily rule out a date in the early republic.

While the literary sources suggest that this is a tomb or an honorary column, what remains of the inscription does not read like an honorary inscription. Apart from the
word ‘king’, the inclusion of such words as ‘sacred’ (*sacros*), ‘public servant/slave’ (*kalatorem*) and ‘livestock’ (*iouxmenta*) means it reads more like a ritual. It is often interpreted as a warning of a bad omen, if the yoked livestock should happen to defecate while entering this sacred space, based on parallels in Roman and Greek literature. ‘Parallel texts’, surviving inscriptions with similar words or formulae from a similar period or place, are used by scholars to reconstruct missing sections of an inscription. Missing spaces are often indicated with periods or marks as guides to how much is missing (Slide 3). Any proposed restorations are given in square brackets. Sometimes these are quite straightforward, but on other occasions they are more imaginative, so be careful what you construe from any material in square brackets.

**Conclusions**

To assess the name, date and subject of this inscription is to observe a number of inconsistencies in the evidence. When interpreting the monument as whole, however, one can observe the almost otherworldly appearance it must have presented to the Roman viewer and the role it played in representing the mythological history of Rome as the city moved from a simple agrarian society of clay and tufa to a global empire of travertine and imported marble. As Professor Chris Smith (Director of the British School at Rome) observes in his on-site lecture (see web resource below), whatever they chose to believe, for the Romans this inscription ‘marked that indissoluble link between where they were now, and where they had come from’.

**Web resources**

Digital Roman Forum. Historical background, archaeological context (including reconstructions), timeline and bibliography:
http://dlib.etc.ucla.edu/projects/Forum/reconstructions/NigerLapis_1/introduction

The *Lapis Niger*: Myth at the Heart of the Roman Empire (Open University). Five-minute video featuring an on-site lecture by Chris Smith:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5SBhchFXIGg

Platner and Ashby website (University of Chicago). Although somewhat dated, this is an extensive treatment of the site with links and literary passages provided:

**Bibliography**

*CIL* = the *Corpus of Latin Inscriptions* (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*). This is an expensive multi-volume collection of all Latin inscriptions in the empire. Volumes are mostly geographic (e.g. ‘Rome’ is Volume VI). They offer the text, context (if known), date and commentary. However, all of the information is in Latin. A.E. Gordon, *An Illustrated Introduction to Latin Epigraphy*, University of California Press, 1983. This dated but still very good book is useful for translations (although not so much for the *Lapis Niger* inscription). It also contains extensive commentary about dates, text, vocabulary, etc., and has images of a number of inscriptions. Note that this is also a Google book, so it is (at least partially) available online.