

“The Word as Material Reality: Interpreting Inscriptions as Visual Objects”

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We have long known that Roman inscriptions provide a significant source for learning about women's lives, especially women of the lower classes, but they are usually treated merely as another form of text, analyzing the words without reference to the physical reality of the monuments upon which they were carved. This PowerPoint presentation demonstrates how important it is to visualize and interpret these words in their physical context.

I discuss the intricate interplay of word and image in inscriptions, illustrated by numerous inscriptions about Roman women (ranging from simple funerary plaques to cinerary altars and elegantly carved sarcophagi and even including a bronze owner's stamp) in order to demonstrate how we can learn to read the iconography of the monuments together with the texts. What can we learn from the different types and quality of carving, the change of size or spacing in letters to fit in the space, or the spelling and grammatical errors? What does the presence or absence of portrait faces reveal, or the clothing, hairstyles, or poses of the portraits? When viewing sarcophagi with elaborate mythological scenes (such as the sarcophagus of Claudia Arria), how does this imagery complement or extend the meaning of the words? How can studying and interpreting inscriptions in all their material reality lead us to explore fascinating questions about family relationships in the ancient world, about the status of slaves and freedpeople, about Roman names and occupations, about the meaning for the Roman populace of mythological symbolism and gestures like the *dextrarum iunctio*?

My work with inscriptions inspired me to create a role-playing game in *VRoma* in which students learn more about lower-class Romans by assuming the personalities of real people in the city of Rome, women and men known to us now only through inscriptions (http://www.vroma.org/course_materials/index.html#roleplaying). My presentation concludes with a discussion of this game, illustrating how the inscriptions can become the starting point for imaginatively recreating Roman lives in relation to differing social classes, specific places in Rome, and various occupations and activities.

