

The mysterious deity of Lagole: ritual and writing in ancient Italy

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The use of written documents is a key point in the development of any society, but the impact that literacy had on the development of early Mediterranean societies is not well understood. The Ancient Literacy project at the Institute aims to examine the effects of literacy on early societies by studying the earliest written documents from three regions of pre-Roman Italy. In this article, a member of the project describes one of the case studies, in northeast Italy, where a large concentration of inscriptions and other objects dedicated to a deity have been found at a sacred lake.



Figure 1 The region of the ancient Veneto, showing the location of the towns and archaeological sites mentioned in the text.

The first case study being undertaken by the Ancient Literacy project¹ focuses on a region in northeast Italy that roughly corresponds to the modern region of the Veneto. Written inscriptions, using an alphabet borrowed from the Etruscans, began to be produced there in the seventh century BC. The people of the region, traditionally called Veneti by ancient Roman authors,² went on to develop a flourishing culture of writing that was confined to only a few types of social activity. Written inscriptions³ were used mainly for grave-stones and for votive inscriptions (short dedications to a god or goddess, inscribed on the object to be dedicated). The earliest writing was roughly contemporary with several major cultural changes. The largest sites in the ancient Veneto, which correspond to present-day Este, Padua, Vicenza and Altino (Fig. 1), began to develop into cities at this time, and the amount of wealth controlled, and ostentatiously displayed, by the aristocracy seems to have increased markedly. Several important religious shrines also developed at this time, mostly on the outskirts of the emerging cities.⁴

One of the most interesting archaeological sites to have produced a large quantity of inscriptions is the Venetic shrine at Lagole, just southeast of Calalzo di Cadore in the upper Piave valley (Fig. 1). It is very different in character from the major Venetic sites in the south of the region. It is a sacred lake in a wooded area on the lower slopes of the Alps,⁵ well away from the main Venetic population centres. Like most of the Venetic sites in the northern Veneto, it developed from the late fifth century BC onwards, slightly later than those in the south of the region. The site raises many intriguing questions, but the main issue from our point of view is the presence of a deposit of about a thousand objects dedicated to the deity of the site, of which 88 are inscribed with a written dedication – a much higher percentage of the total number of dedications than we find at larger sites such as Este and Padua. It is the only large concentration of inscriptions

known from the alpine area of the Veneto and, because the site is well away from any major settlement, it raises interesting questions about literacy in a non-urban context, the connection between writing and ritual, and the question of how both the writing skills and the inscribed objects reached Lagole.

The sanctuary at Lagole

The site at Lagole was excavated between 1949 and 1956.⁶ At the centre of the sacred area, there is a small lake formed by the outflow of several mineral springs (Fig. 2). Most of the dedicated objects were found distributed around the banks of the lake. There is no reliable evidence of any buildings nearby, but it is possible that there were some wooden buildings at the site, although no remains of such have survived. The distribution of the dedicated objects indicates a clear zoning of ritual activities and a boundary to the site, but the boundary seems to have been marked by the limits of the clearing in the wood rather than by a permanent structure.⁷ The earliest finds date to the fourth century BC and

are approximately contemporary with the earliest finds from other religious sites in the northern Veneto. Lagole remained an important religious centre throughout the Roman period, as is indicated by the presence of objects dedicated to Roman gods and by coins that date to as late as AD 380.

The relationship in pre-Roman times between Lagole and the surrounding area is difficult to determine. It was close to the main Roman road of the area, the Via Claudia Augusta, which ran from the southern Veneto up into the Alps and which probably followed the same route as the major pre-Roman road.⁸ There is evidence that the valley was under cultivation and well populated in both the pre-Roman and Roman periods, but local settlements were small and there was apparently no major settlement to which Lagole was attached – unlike the sanctuaries in the southern Veneto, each of which was part of the territory of a larger settlement. From 50 BC Lagole became part of the territory of the Roman colony of Julium Carnicum, but we



Figure 2 The site of the sanctuary at Lagole, showing the sacred lake.

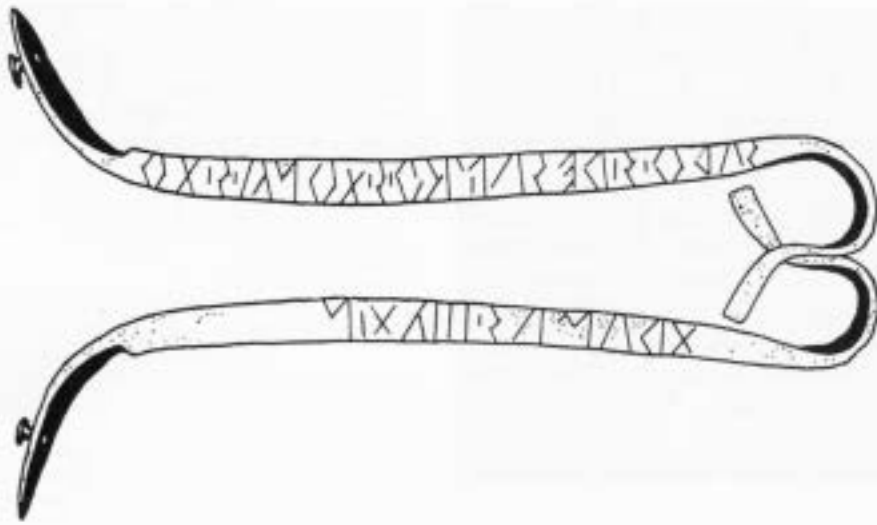


Figure 3 Handle of a bronze ladle (26 cm long) from Lagole (fifth or fourth century BC). The inscription, not fully deciphered, is a dedication made by the community, probably to the deity Trumusiatos or Trumusiata, although the name of the deity is missing.

do not know to which community it may have belonged before that date. It is possible that one of its functions was to act as a meeting place and political centre for the local population.⁹ Several of the dedicated objects are inscribed with the words *teuta toler* ("dedicated by the community", Fig. 3), which may indicate that Lagole acted as a focal point for the people living in the surrounding area.

Archaeological finds from Lagole

The finds comprise quite a wide range of different types of small objects, mainly made of bronze, that were dedicated to the patron deity of the site. They include square bronze plaques; ladles, cups and other drinking vessels; bronze figurines; models of various body parts; and coins. As already noted, a higher proportion than usual are inscribed, although the inscriptions are restricted to bronze vessels (especially ladles), plaques and figurines of warriors, or, in the Roman period, deities. The votive plaques are of a distinctive type: square, with a slight concave shaping to the sides, and a decorative border of embossed lines and beading (Fig. 4). The inscriptions are also mostly embossed or punched and are very formulaic in type. The bronze figurines exist in a variety of types. Some of the earliest are warriors, often naked apart from boots and a helmet, and shown with one arm raised as if throwing a spear (Fig. 5); others, mostly of Roman date, are figurines of gods, including Apollo (the only Roman deity to receive inscribed dedications), Mars and Jupiter. There are many bronze handles, mostly from ladles or strainers, and in the Roman period, from shallow saucepan-shaped vessels (Figs 3, 6). The many offerings linked with the pouring, storage or drinking of liquid show that the pouring of libations (liquid offerings) to the god was an important ritual practice at Lagole. However, it was not the only type of ritual. The numer-

ous animal bones found at the site suggest that animal sacrifice was also part of the rites that were practised there.

Inscriptions from Lagole

The inscriptions have distinctive local features. The alphabet is slightly different from that found in the southern Veneto. Some have different forms (Λ instead of α to represent A; × instead of x, to represent D); and a letter (Ϸ, transcribed as J) that is used in a way that does not occur farther

south. Most inscriptions are very simple, consisting of the name of the person making the offering, together with a dedicatory formula; for example, *Fouvos Enejios doto donom Trumusijatei* ("Fouvos Enejios gave this gift to Trumusijatos" or "Trumusijata"). These formulae also differ from those at such southern sites as those at Padua and Este. At Lagole, most worshippers use the forms *doto donom* ("gave this gift") or *donom toler* ("brought this gift"), whereas at Este most dedications are inscribed with the worshipper's name and the verb *donasto* ("gave this").

The inscriptions also offer an insight into what sorts of people made offerings at the shrine, and this also shows important differences between Lagole and other concentrations of Venetic inscriptions. Only men made dedications at Lagole, unlike the sanctuary of Reita near Este, where many inscribed objects were offered by women.¹⁰ The deposit also contains several dedications in the name of *teuter* (i.e. the state or community) rather than an individual, whereas dedications from the southern Veneto are mostly in the names of individuals.

Although these may seem minor differences, they demonstrate that different communities in the region were developing their own distinctive cultures of writing and ritual. As well as differing from the religious sites of Este and Padua, the offerings and their inscriptions at Lagole are very similar to those found at



Figure 4 Bronze votive plaque (19×17 cm) from Lagole, with an embossed figure of a horse and an inscription around the edge reading *Kellos Pittamnikos toler Trumusijatei donom d(onasto) a(isum)* ("Kellos Pittamnikos gave this gift to Trumusiatos" or "Kellos Pittamnikos gave this gift to Trumusiata"); late fifth or early fourth century BC.



Figure 5 Bronze figurine of a warrior (15.5 cm high) from Lagole (fourth century BC). The inscription runs down the back of the raised arm, across the shoulder and down the side of the figure, and reads *Broijokos donom doto Sainatei Trumusijatei* ("Broijokos gave this gift to Sainatei Trumusiatos" or "Broijokos gave this gift to Sainatei Trumusiata").

other ritual sites in the valleys of the Gail and Piave (Fig. 1). This may indicate that Lagole was not unique but was part of a more general Alpine-Venetic culture with its own norms, in writing and votive offerings, as well as in other features.

The deity of Lagole

One of the key puzzles about Lagole is the identity of the deity worshipped there. Four deity names or epithets are inscribed: Trumusiatos(a), Tribusiatos(a), Sainatei and Apollo. Apollo is the Roman god most closely associated with the shrine, and the only Roman god who appears in inscriptions, although un-inscribed figurines of other gods have been found. The term Sainatei also occurs at other sites, and may be an epithet of the Lagole god, meaning "the healer" or something similar. The presence of models of body parts may also indicate that the cult at Lagole was a healing cult. Trumusiatos/a (the predominant deity name) is more difficult. We cannot even assign a gender, as the inscriptions are all in the dative case, which in Venetic does not differentiate between male and female. The later association with Apollo

and the all-male inscriptions suggest a god, but other traditions of a fertility cult are associated with a goddess. There is the possibility that it is a tri-partite deity equivalent to the Greek deity Hekate, derived from the root "tri-" or "tru-", in which case it could include both male and female attributes.¹¹ It may also derive from the place name. The suffix "-at" is frequently used to indicate place of origin in Italic languages, so Trumusiatos could be the "deity of Trumusios", Trumusios being the name of the sacred grove. It is possible that the deity was initially an ill defined woodland deity, later divided into two more specialized cults, dedicated to Sainatei (later Apollo), who had a healing function, and Trumusiatos (later Mars or Hercules), who had a more military or hunting role.¹² At present, there is little clear evidence either way, although the balance of evidence favours a male rather than a female cult.

Writing and society in the northern Veneto

Lagole poses interesting questions about the early development of literacy and writing in the Veneto, as well as about the nature of the site and its cult. The simplicity of the dedications and the abundance of utilitarian objects such as ladles have been interpreted as evidence that the site was used mainly by worshippers of low social status, possibly slaves or freed slaves. The simple structure of the inscriptions, and the fact that they do not always include the name of the dedicator, have been used to support an argument that this was a sanctuary frequented by the non-elite, who made cheap generic votive offerings and did not make many personal written dedications.¹³ In fact, the social profile of the people who used the site is not clear. Only 11 of the 88 anonymous inscriptions conclusively lack a personal name. The remainder are fragmentary, and may or may not have had the name of the dedicator inscribed. The short and formulaic nature of the inscriptions is not unusual; it

characterizes many other religious inscriptions from the Veneto. The dedications are certainly not as varied and elaborate as those at the shrines nearer the main urban centres, but this may not be a reflection of poor or low-status worshippers.

There is a shift over time evident at religious shrines throughout the Veneto, from specialized items, made specifically for use as dedications, to the dedication of everyday items. Most of the dedications at Lagole are of bronze – an elite commodity – and are of types (ladles and cups, figurines, square plaques) that have close parallels with finds from other religious sites in the Alpine area. The presence of ladles and drinking vessels is less a function of socio-economic status than of the nature of the cult, because it seems very likely that drinking or libation was a significant part of the ritual. One inscription records a dedication by a man freed from slavery, but this cannot be taken as a general indicator of the status of other worshippers. Rather than viewing Lagole as the site of a low-status cult or part of an impoverished region, perhaps we should interpret it as part of a local culture, its own identity differing from that of the southern Veneto.

It is clear that writing in the pre-Roman Veneto was mainly used for religious purposes, at least when it involved writing on durable materials such as stone or bronze. It also appears that differences existed between the writing cultures of different parts of the region, with differences in alphabet, forms of expression and choice of object to write on. These differences inevitably form part of the distinctive cultures of various areas of the Veneto. The strong similarities between Lagole and the neighbouring shrines at Auronzo and Gurina (Fig. 1), both in forms of writing and in the overall forms of objects found, point to the development of a distinctive local culture of writing as part of a more general local ritual culture, particularly in the fourth to second centuries BC, but also continuing into the Roman period.

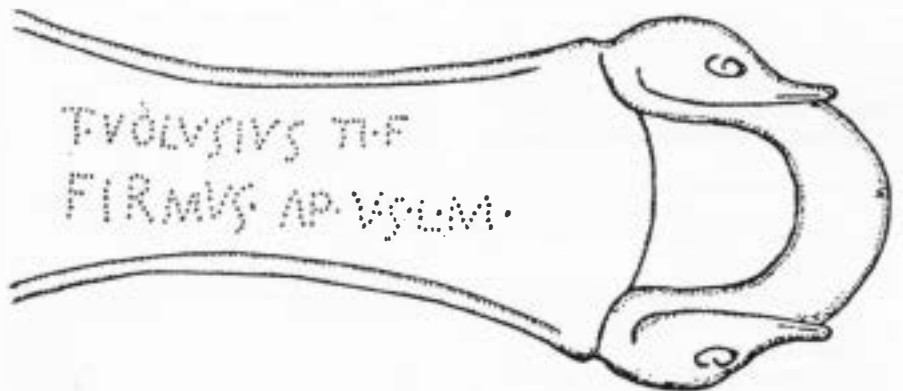


Figure 6 The handle of a bronze vessel resembling a saucepan (15 cm long) from Lagole (first century BC), with two dedications in Latin written on the handle. The first is a dedication to Apollo by T(itus) Volusius Firmus, and the second, which does not name the god to whom the offering is made, is by Covos Sabinaius. The first of the dedicants has a Roman name, the second (Covos Sabinaius) a local Venetic one.

Notes

1. The Ancient Literacy project, entitled "Developmental literacy and the establishment of regional identity in Italy", is funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Board and is being carried out jointly by Dr Kathryn Lomas and Professor Ruth Whitehouse of the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, and Dr John Wilkins of the Accordia Research Institute, University of London. Its aim is to study the role of incipient literacy as a critical factor in the formation of urban and other complex societies, and in the emergence of differing cultural identities, in ancient Italy.
2. Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural histories*, book 3, chapters 127 and 132–4, translated by H. Rackham, *Pliny the Elder: natural histories*, vol. 2 (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1942) quotes descriptions of the Veneti and their territory given by the earlier Roman writers Cato the Elder and Cornelius Nepos. The poet Virgil, in the *Aeneid*, book 1, line 247 (translated by C. Day Lewis (London: Hogarth Press, 1954)) also describes the Veneti, as does the Roman historian Livy in book 5, chapters 33–34 and book 10, chapter 2 (translated by B. O. Foster, *Livy: from the founding of the city*, vols 3 and 4, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1924, 1926)). Although Livy wrote his history at a much later date, during the reign of the emperor Augustus (33 BC to AD 14) he was a native of Padua and had a good knowledge of the history of the region.
3. The principal collected edition of the inscriptions is G. B. Pellegrini & A. L. Prosdocimi, *La lingua Venetica*, 2 vols (Padua: Istituto di Glottologia dell'Università di Padova, 1967), which is also the source of the illustrations reproduced as Figures 3–6 in this article.
4. See C. Balista, G. Gambacurta, A. Ruta Serafini, "Sviluppi di urbanistica Atestina" in *Este preromana: una città e i suoi santuari*, A. Ruta Serafini (ed.), 105–126 (Treviso: Canova, 2002).
5. The most complete recent publication of the site is in *Materiali veneti preromani e romani del santuario di Lagole di Calalzo al Museo di Pieve di Cadore*, G. Fogolari & G. Gambacurta (eds) (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider, 2001).
6. The site was excavated by a local archaeologist, G. B. Frescura. Initial reports on the excavations were published by E. de Lotto & G. B. Frescura in "Gli scavi archeologici di Valle di Cadore", *Archivio Storico di Belluno, Feltra e Cadore* 32, 11–16, 1961. The inscriptions are collected in Pellegrini & Prosdocimi, vol. 1, 455–568 (1967: n. 3 above).
7. For a description of the site, see G. Fogolari, "Lagole: storia delle scoperte" in Fogolari & Gambacurta, 27–33 (2001: n. 5 above).
8. See S. Pensaventa Mattioli, "Il santuario di Lagole nel contesto topografico del Cadore" in Fogolari & Gambacurta, 43–47 (2001: n. 5 above).
9. A. Marinetti, "Il Venetico di Lagole" in Fogolari & Gambacurta, 61–72 (2001: n. 5 above).
10. The inscriptions from the sanctuary of Reita at Baratella (Este), which include an unusually high number of dedications by women, are collected in Pellegrini & Prosdocimi, 140–68 (1967: n. 3 above).
11. The possible interpretations of the name Trumusiato(s) are discussed by A. Marinetti in "Il Venetico di Lagole" in Fogolari & Gambacurta, 66–71 (2001: n. 5 above).
12. A. Maggiani, "Luoghi di culto e divinità a Este" in A. Ruta Serafini (ed.), 77–88 (2002: n. 4 above).
13. A. Marinetti, "Il venetico di Lagole" in Fogolari & Gambacurta, 63–64 (2001: n. 5 above).