Introduction

Women's Lives from Inscriptions

Two inscriptions from Casinum in central Italy record lavish donations bestowed by a senatorial lady, Ummidia Quadratilla. She endowed her town with a temple and an amphitheatre and – provided that the emendations to the mutilated inscription are correct – also restored the local theatre, which had 'collapsed due to old age'. To celebrate its dedication, she gave a banquet to the decurions, the people and the women of the town. Because of these generous benefactions, the remains of which are still visible, Ummidia Quadratilla must have been a prominent figure in her town. By an unusual stroke of luck, this same Ummidia Quadratilla was the subject of an obituary letter by Pliny the Younger after her death at the age of almost seventy-nine.[1] Though Pliny vividly describes her healthy constitution, her lifestyle and daily occupations, he says no word about her remarkable generosity. Without these inscriptions, therefore, we would only have known that she gave her grandson a decent upbringing despite her luxurious lifestyle and her unsuitable fondness for theatre shows, but not that she was an important civic benefactress, who left her mark on the city. Thus, the inscriptions offer an unexpected view of her life that draws her into the urban society of her days.

Inscriptions on women's lives have been under-studied. Tucked away in the storerooms and courtyards of modern museums, or displayed high on the walls of epigraphic galleries, inscriptions are overlooked by most visitors.[2] Recut and re-used through the ages as building blocks for walls and pavement, they have mostly been found outside their original display context, which severely complicates their interpretation. Apart from this, the texts are often difficult to read because of damage to the stone, not to mention the frequent use of abbreviations. Finding one's way through the epigraphic corpora and journals, such as the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (*CIL*) or *L'Année épigraphique* (*AE*), can be a bewildering experience, despite the immense help offered by epigraphic websites that provide the Latin texts with the abbreviations spelled out and with

1 Plin. *Ep*. 7.24. The inscriptions are translated in Chapter 6 no. 7.

2 This is currently changing; see the exemplary presentation of inscriptions in the Museo Nazionale Romano (in the Baths of Diocletian) in Rome. For more examples of excellent epigraphical presentation, see Rodà (2012).

restorations and modern reconstructions of missing words and lines.[3] For all these reasons, inscriptions largely remain the field of specialists. Yet, immersing oneself into the world of inscriptions is highly rewarding. Though ancient women (and children) are underrepresented in the epigraphic record, as in other types of evidence, inscriptions allow us a glimpse of the lives of groups of women who remain largely invisible in the literary sources: women of the upper and middle classes in Italian and provincial towns, freedwomen, and even some household slaves. Though of widely varying descent and social status, they had in common that they belonged to the (partly) literate classes, who set store on inscriptions commemorating themselves or their dear ones. Besides, inscriptions offer a different perspective: not only do they often focus on issues of daily life and death, but they also represent the voices of men and women outside the senatorial and equestrian elite who usually dominate the historical record. Thus, inscriptions reveal some of the richness and variety of life in the ancient world and may throw new light on the conventional virtues (and vices) repeatedly attributed to women in the literary sources.

Aims, Organisation and Limitations

Inscriptions set up by and for men predominate in the Roman world. Even so, the volume of epigraphic evidence related to women is overwhelming, and any compilation will necessarily be selective. Therefore, my aims and criteria for selection have to be briefly set out, along with the limitations of this book. The primary aim of the book is to present a selection of inscriptions on various aspects of women's lives, their social and family relations, legal status, occupations, religious roles, public activities, travels and migration, and to interpret these within their social and material context. Because of their special position, a separate chapter is devoted to women of the imperial family. In selecting the inscriptions I have not aimed at comprehensiveness, nor is this collection representative of the mass of women's inscriptions, which are brief, formulaic epitaphs merely recording the name and, sometimes, the age of the deceased and the relationship to the dedicator of the stone. Though a few such inscriptions are included, I have foregrounded inscriptions that allow a glimpse of the variety of women's lives, relations, activities and ideals, which – I hope – will prove useful for students of antiquity and for others interested in the study of (Roman) women.

3 The most comprehensive is Epigraphik-Datenbank Clauss/Slaby (EDCS): www.manfredclauss.de; see further the Epigraphic Database Heidelberg (EDH): www.adw.uni-heidelberg.de and the Epigraphic Database Rome (EDR): www.edr-edr.it. For Greek inscriptions, see the database of searchable Greek inscriptions of the Packard Humanities Institute (PHI): https://inscriptions.packhum.org. For graffiti, see the website of the Ancient Graffiti Project: http://ancientgraffiti.org; for stone monuments, especially reliefs, see the Bilddatenbank Ubi Erat Lupa: http://lupa.at. For the Vindolanda Tablets, see http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk.

For reasons of feasibility and coherence this book covers only Italy and the Latin-speaking provinces of the Roman West. The Greek East in the Hellenistic and Roman periods will be covered in a companion volume to be compiled by Riet van Bremen. The aim of coherence and the availability of epigraphic evidence also determine its chronological scope, which with a few exceptions ranges from the first century BC to the late third century AD, thus largely excluding Christian epigraphy.[4] The focus on Italy and the West implies that the majority of the inscriptions in this book are translated from Latin, which was the main epigraphic language in the Roman West. However, to do justice to the greater variety of languages used in the western part of the Roman Empire and in particular to the Greek evidence from the West, a few bilingual and Greek inscriptions have been included in translation. As is to be expected, these Greek inscriptions mostly come from Rome and Naples, which had large Greek-speaking populations.

Throughout the book, I have tried to cover all regions and provinces of the Roman West. Yet, an emphasis on Rome and central Italy cannot be avoided, since they show the highest epigraphic density and produce numerous inscriptions by, and for, women. This holds especially for the epigraphic evidence for slaves and freedwomen (Chapter 2) and for women's occupations (Chapter 3), which is mostly from Rome. Also, the chronological spread of the inscriptions in this book is somewhat skewed towards the period between the mid-first and early third centuries AD, which aligns with broader trends in the production of inscriptions and with the curve of the so-called epigraphic habit in the Roman West.[5]

The book includes inscriptions carved in stone or bronze and incised in, or stamped on, other types of metal (for instance, lead curse tablets and water pipes). Apart from these, painted messages (dipinti) and graffiti on walls and objects (such as pottery) have been incorporated, as well as a few wooden tablets, though these are usually considered to be the field of papyrologists. The selected inscriptions have been organised thematically into seven chapters, divided into several sections each with subheadings and short introductions to the various subthemes. Within each subtheme the texts are presented in a roughly chronological order but, given the problems of dating inscriptions, this can only be tentative.

The translation of each inscription is preceded by a brief description of the monument or object on which it was inscribed and its material and/or social context. In my translation, I offer what is to my mind the most plausible interpretation of the inscription. Variant readings and modern corrections or restorations of the text are not indicated, but the reader can easily find them through the PDF accompanying the book. Throughout this book, I have checked

4 For Christian epigraphy, a good start is Cooley (2012) 228–50.

5 For discussion of the Roman epigraphic habit(s), see MacMullen (1982); Mann (1985); Meyer (1990); Woolf (1996); Bodel (2001) 6–10; and Hemelrijk (2015) 29–35. For the concept of 'epigraphic density', see Harris (1989) 265–8 and Woolf (1998) 82–105.

my reading and interpretation of the inscriptions against modern publications and epigraphic corpora, but I have refrained from citing references to these readings and discussions so as not to overburden the text. I also checked my interpretation as much as possible by autopsy of the original monuments and inscriptions. A few highly selective references to further reading, limited (with a few exceptions) to English-language publications, are provided under the introductions to the various themes and subthemes, in order to help readers interested in the subject to find their way into the discussions.

Epigraphic Culture

In the Roman world, inscriptions were a predominantly urban phenomenon. Building inscriptions and inscriptions on statue bases honouring local and imperial worthies were set up in public places throughout the towns; rows of inscribed altars were to be seen in front of the temples; the walls of the houses along the main streets were covered with painted notices (dipinti) and with graffiti conveying all sorts of messages and countless inscribed tombs lined the roads leading into the city. In comparison to the towns, inscriptions and graffiti were scarce in the countryside, except for a few rural sanctuaries and, of course, Roman military camps. Only a small percentage of the inscriptions from ancient times have survived until today, and their survival rate is skewed not only by ancient conditions and modern excavation and publication practices, but also by the material that the texts were inscribed on. For instance, most tablets of bronze and precious metal have been melted down, and marble inscriptions – if not burnt in limekilns – were re-cut and re-used as building blocks, often destroying part of the text. Dipinti and graffiti have admittedly been preserved in large numbers in Pompeii and occasionally elsewhere, but must have been ubiquitous in all Roman towns.[6] As a consequence, the surviving inscriptions are not necessarily representative of ancient epigraphic practice. Moreover, they are mostly found outside their original display context. This must be kept in mind when working with this kind of evidence.

When using inscriptions as a historical source, we should also be aware of the fact that inscriptions are by nature selective. The limited space on the stone and the costs of the stonecutter forced people commissioning inscriptions to consider carefully what to inscribe and what to omit. Almost all inscriptions include the name of the dedicator, honorand or deceased, which was often carved in larger letters at the head of the text. The additional text depended on the nature of the inscription, with standardised formulas for each type. To save space and costs most words were abbreviated, so that even quite long expressions could be reduced to a few letters. For instance, abbreviations were adopted for frequently used expressions such as *D(is) M(anibus)* ('to the spirits of the

6 Generally, Cooley (2012); see also Baird and Taylor (2011) on graffiti.

departed', written as DM) on tombs, *v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)* (VSLM: 'he or she fulfilled the vow willingly and deservedly') in dedications to deities and *l(ocus) d(atus) d(ecreto) d(ecurionum)* (LDDD: 'the location was granted by decurial decree') on bases of public statues. In accordance with the purpose and genre of the inscription, commissioners further selected what was of importance to their intended public or sufficiently noteworthy to be inscribed. For instance, epitaphs praised the achievements of the deceased or their exemplary virtues, votive inscriptions conveyed the piety of the dedicator and building inscriptions the generosity of the donor. In sum, inscriptions mostly highlight details that were cause for pride while omitting failures and what was considered obvious. Though an important source for social ideals and aspirations, such messages should not be taken for a direct reflection of reality.

Women are underrepresented in all types of inscriptions but to differing degrees, depending on the type or 'genre' of inscription. Among the inscribed statue bases and portrait statues adorning the public areas of Roman towns, those portraying women formed a minority. Since women were formally excluded from political functions and administration (with the exception of some priestly functions), there were fewer reasons for honouring them in public. Yet, women of substance participated in public life in other roles which could earn them a statue. In Roman towns across Italy and the West, numerous public priestesses, benefactresses and patronesses of cities and civic associations were honoured with public statues, and public buildings funded by women displayed inscriptions recording their benefactions to the towns.[7] In addition, a public statue might be set up for a woman of a high-ranking family in return for, or in anticipation of, unidentified favours to the town or to console her family for her early death. In this book, honorific and building inscriptions of women outside the imperial family are found mainly in Chapters 5 and 6. The city of Rome was an exception in this respect, since in the imperial period public building and public statues in Rome were increasingly restricted to the imperial family (Chapter 7).[8] Only very rarely has an honorific inscription on a statue base for a woman been found together with the statue that once crowned the base. Together with the loss of the original display context (i.e. the exact location of the statue and its relation to neighbouring statues and buildings) this makes it hard to assess the impression the combined statue and inscription made on the ancient public.[9]

Unlike honorific and building inscriptions, women are recorded only slightly less than men in funerary inscriptions. Women set up and were commemorated in various types of tombs ranging from the monumental mausoleum of Caecilia Metella on the Via Appia (Figure 1) to small inscribed niches for burial urns in *columbaria*, communal tombs with underground chambers for urns that were built by propertied families and civic associations (*collegia*) (Figure 2).

7 Hemelrijk (2004b), (2008), (2013) and (2015). See Chapters 5 and 6 below.
8 Eck (1984) and (1992); see also Alföldy (1991) 296–7.
9 For a full discussion of this issue, see Hemelrijk (2015) 271–338.

Figure 1 Mausoleum of Caecilia Metella on the Via Appia. The brief inscription on the marble tablet reads: '(Tomb) of Caecilia Metella, daughter of Quintus Creticus, wife of Crassus'.
Photo author.

In between these two, tombs and grave monuments of all types and sizes – funerary steles, altars and free-standing tomb buildings – testify to women's lives, family relations, occupations, social or ethnic background and age at death. Cremation was the predominant form of burial in the early imperial period, but inhumation continued to be practised, and recurred in the second century AD. After cremation the bones and ashes were collected in an urn that was placed in a cavity in a funerary altar (Figure 41.c) or in a niche of a *columbarium* or family tomb. When someone had died abroad, relatives might undertake the considerable trouble and expense of repatriating the bones of their beloved for burial in the home town. This might even lead to a double burial: the ashes were interred at the place of death and the bones were transported for burial in the home town (see Chapter 4 no. 70).

Women also figure fairly frequently as dedicators of votive inscriptions to deities. Alone, or together with relatives, they put up inscribed votive altars and steles for male and female deities, testifying to their adherence to a wide range of cults across the religious spectrum, not merely to the so-called women's cults that have often been ascribed to them.[10] Further, women's names are found in graffiti and painted announcements, both as writers or commissioners and as objects of greetings and of (erotic) messages scratched into the walls of houses and public buildings.[11] Finally, curse tablets commissioned by women and/or targeted at them offer a glimpse of their enmities (Chapter 4); water pipes, tiles

10 As has been argued convincingly by Schultz (2000) and (2006); see also Hemelrijk (2015) 44–7.
11 Benefiel (2011).

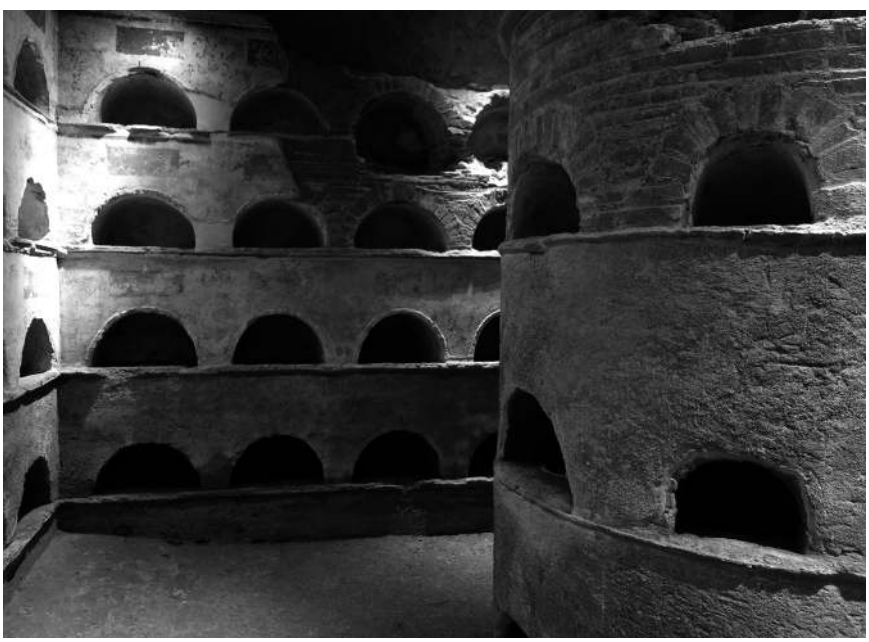

Figure 2 Columbarium of Pomponius Hylas in Rome.
Photo Kit Morrell.

and pottery record the names of female landowners and workshop managers (Chapter 3); and military diplomas granting Roman citizenship to veterans of the auxiliary units of the Roman army may include the names and origins of their female relatives (Chapter 2). In short, though a minority in the epigraphic landscape, women had a distinct presence in inscriptions, especially in funerary inscriptions, which constitute the majority of all surviving inscriptions.

When considering the predominance of funerary inscriptions, we have to keep in mind that, in the Roman world, funerary monuments were of the utmost importance to men and women alike: they perpetuated the memory of the deceased and publicly displayed their social status, achievements and family ties in the accompanying inscription.[12] Though the poorest members of society were buried anonymously in simple uninscribed containers or occasionally even in mass graves, and though not even everyone buried in a family tomb was mentioned in an inscription (this holds especially for family slaves), those who could afford it set great store on individual remembrance after death. The simplest and cheapest kinds of commemoration were names carved or painted on stone tablets under the niches housing the urns in a *columbarium*. Since each

12 The literature on death and burial customs in the Roman world is vast. I here refer only to Carroll (2011a) for an excellent study of Roman funerary inscriptions, to the edited volume by Carroll and Rempel (2011) and to Graham (2006) for the burial of the urban poor.

niche contained two cinerary urns, the small marble or limestone plaques identifying the deceased were usually divided into two sections recording the names of the deceased, their occupation or age at death and, if space permitted, the name of the dedicator and some terms of endearment. Such *columbaria* were usually set up by members of elite families, including the imperial family, for their slave and freed staff (Chapters 2 and 7) and by *collegia* (civic associations) for their members, but niches could also be sold or granted as a favour to outsiders. This holds even more for privately owned *columbaria* among the less wealthy classes, who commonly sold niches for gain. Unlike inscriptions on tombs along the roads, those inside a *columbarium* were visible only for relatives and social peers who visited the tomb for commemorative events or a new burial. This did not deter people from creating a hierarchy within the *columbarium*, with more costly and better-placed niches distinguishing some individuals and families from others. For all, however, a burial place with an inscription meant perpetuation of one's memory, and was therefore of the utmost importance.

A free-standing family tomb, funerary altar or stele ensured those who could afford it public perpetuation of the family name as well as individual remembrance. Family tombs of various kinds were built by men and women for themselves, their partners, children, freedmen, freedwomen and their descendants. Unlike the family members buried in the tomb, the family's freedmen and freedwomen generally did not enjoy individual commemoration. They were included collectively with the standard formula: 'for their freedmen and freedwomen and their descendants' (*libertis libertabusque posterisque eorum*; abbreviated in varying ways). In return for their inclusion, moreover, the freedmen and freedwomen were expected to maintain the tomb, perform the celebrations at the annual feasts for the dead and perpetuate the family name when this threatened to become extinct (Chapter 2 no. 26). The standard formula (with some variants), translated as 'this tomb will not pass to the heir' or 'will not fall to the share of the heir' (*hoc monumentum heredem non sequetur*, often abbreviated as HMHNS), reflects similar concerns. Since the family tomb was intended only for those who bore the family name, which includes freedmen and freedwomen, heirs outside the family were excluded from inheriting the tomb as they would have no interest in upholding the memory of the family, and alienation of the tomb was prohibited. The tomb and its surrounding plot of land – the exact dimensions of which could be recorded in Roman feet in the inscription (in width and depth) – were considered a sacred place (*locus religiosus*). For this reason, violation of the tomb, removal of the bones or unauthorised introduction of other bodies into the tomb were punishable offences, which were sometimes also explicitly prohibited in the inscription. In Gaul and northern Italy in the second and early third centuries AD, tombs were often dedicated 'under the axe' (*sub ascia*). The meaning of this dedicatory formula, which is often accompanied by a depiction of an axe in relief, is debated. The most likely interpretation is that it placed the tomb under divine protection, thus rendering it inviolable.

The inscription on the tomb was meant to keep the name of the deceased alive. Since many tombs were set up along the streets leading to or from the city they drew the attention of the passers-by. The red paint of the letters and the habit of carving the name of the deceased and/or the dedicator of the inscription in larger letters heightened its legibility. Though full literacy was restricted to a small proportion of the population, many more people were able to read brief formulaic inscriptions picking out at least the name of the deceased, the honorand of a public statue or the donor of a public building. This made inscriptions at least roughly understandable even to the semi-literate who were able to read the 'stonecutters' letters'.[13] Since, in the ancient world, inscriptions were designed to be read aloud, passers-by reading the epitaphs called out the name of the deceased, thus securing their remembrance. In some inscriptions, the deceased is presented as speaking to the passer-by, creating a fictive dialogue between the living and the dead. The farewell (*vale*) the passer-by was asked to say to the deceased repeated the ritual of farewell at the funeral and created an impression of emotional communication.[14] Given the importance of preserving the name of the deceased, the deliberate removal of a name from an inscription was a sign of conflict or revenge: it eradicated the memory of the deceased or, if erased in a conspicuous way, served as a mark of disgrace for the person thus targeted. Misbehaviour by relatives or disloyalty by freedpeople might also be penalised by exclusion from the tomb, which condemned the culprits to oblivion or, if excluded by name, eternally damaged their reputation. In the following chapters, examples are found of all these practices.

A frequent phenomenon, especially in the Greek inscriptions, is the verse epitaph. The reasons for composing or commissioning verse inscriptions, which are often longer and more elaborate (and thus more expensive), are complex. They may have included a mixture of status concerns presenting both deceased and dedicator as cultured individuals and a desire to convey feelings of love and sorrow that went beyond the standard, rather terse expressions in prose. Verse epitaphs are mostly composed in hexameters, elegiac distichs (hexameters alternating with pentameters) or iambic *senarii* (commonly used for prologues in Roman comedy). Except in unusual cases where the metre is particularly meaningful, the metre used is not mentioned in the introductions to the individual inscriptions. In most cases, only part of the inscription is in verse. The heading and last lines, containing the names of the deceased and the dedicator and some terms of endearment or words of farewell, are usually in prose.

On the more elaborate tombs, the inscribed texts are accompanied by reliefs portraying the deceased and their families. Portraits were meant to keep the physical appearance of the deceased alive, and offered comfort and consolation

13 Cf. Petron. *Sat*. 58.7: *lapidarias litteras scio*. For ancient literacy, or rather literacies, see Harris (1989); Beard et al. (1991); and Johnson and Parker (2009).

14 For an illuminating discussion of 're-enacted speech' and of the emotional impact of reading inscriptions aloud, see Chaniotis (2012).

to relatives. Portrait statues of the deceased also served as a focus of affection and commemoration: they were cleansed, anointed and crowned during celebrations for the dead. It is a matter of debate, however, if and to what extent funerary portraits produced a truthful likeness of the deceased. Multi-person reliefs on family tombs, funerary altars or steles were commissioned at the death of one member of the family and depicted other family members at the same time. Not always, however, were all eventually buried in the tomb. Decorated sarcophagi might be bought from stock, the heads to be worked into portraits at the death of the intended recipients, but sometimes the heads were left unfinished for reasons unknown to us.[15] Moreover, re-use of steles, altars or sarcophagi for later burials led to the re-cutting of portraits (sometimes even changing the gender of the individual portrayed) or to a mismatch between the persons mentioned in the inscription and those depicted in the relief. Therefore, we have to be very careful in interpreting the messages conveyed by the images. In some cases, their relation to the inscription may be tenuous or different from what we believe at first sight.[16]

What can we learn about women's lives from these inscriptions? To my mind, the most striking feature of the inscriptions in this book is that they demonstrate the extent of women's integration into ancient society and the complexity and diversity of their lives. As is to be expected, women's relationships with their husbands and children take pride of place. This is bound up with ancient ideals of women's devotion to their homes and families, but also with the fact that most inscriptions testifying to women's lives are funerary inscriptions set up by, or for, relatives. Thus, the genre of inscription partly dictates the outcomes. We should also take into account that most funerary inscriptions for women were set up by male relatives and reflect their views and preconceptions. That said, a significant number of these funerary inscriptions also record women's jobs and paid occupations, which show a remarkable variety ranging from the predictable hairdressers, nurses and midwives to female craftswomen, merchants and managers and to women renting out urban property (Chapter 3). Most of these working women were freedwomen, who probably learned their trade as slaves. Their predominance may be connected with the general overrepresentation of freedpeople in funerary inscriptions, particularly in the city of Rome. Nevertheless, the fact that their occupations were recorded on their tombs testifies to pride in their professions and to the extent to which these were part of their social identity.[17]

Female slaves had much less chance of individual commemoration than freeborn or freed women, but homeborn slaves and favoured household slaves

15 For discussion, see Huskinson (1998).

16 Davies (2007) offers an insightful introduction to the relationship between image and inscription on Roman funerary monuments. See also Newby (2014) on Roman flexibility in the use of myths on sarcophagi.

17 Joshel (1992).