In a society in which only a fraction of the population was literate and numerate, being one of the few specialists in reading, writing and reckoning was to possess an invaluable asset. The fact that the Roman state heavily relied on these professional scribes in financial and legal administration led to their holding a unique position and status. By gathering and analysing the available source material on the Roman scribes, Benjamin Hartmann traces the history of Rome’s public scribes from the early Republic to the Later Roman Empire. He tells the story of men of low social origin who, by means of their specialised knowledge, found themselves at the heart of the Roman polity, in close proximity to the powerful and responsible for the written arcana of the state – a story of knowledge and power, corruption and contested social mobility.

Benjamin Hartmann is a former Research and Teaching Assistant in Ancient History at the University of Zurich. His research focuses on the role of literacy in the ancient world, ancient cultural and social history, and Latin epigraphy. He has published mainly on writing on everyday objects and small finds from the Roman world.
THE SCRIBES OF ROME

A Cultural and Social History of the Scribae

BENJAMIN HARTMANN

University of Zurich
to my parents Annemarie and Josef

to Esther

sine quibus non
Er hat einen Sturm in einem Wasserglase beobachtet und dabei noch Verschiedenes mehr entdeckt als nur Eigenschaften eines Sturmes.

He observed a storm in a teacup and thereby discovered much more than just the characteristics of a storm.

Ludwig Hohl, Die Notizen
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2.2 Forum Romanum, Curia Iulia, Rome. So-called Plutei Traiani, stone balustrade with bas-relief of Hadrian’s general debt relief. Antonio Cederna. Archivio Cederna, 1206.3_000_000_011. By permission of the Archivio Cederna – Capo di Bove, Parco Archeologico dell’Appia Antica, MiBAC.


2.4 Paestum, Capaccio (Seliano). Marble plaque, funerary inscription with relief depiction. Umberto Soldovieri. By permission of the photographer.


3.2 Forum Romanum, behind the rostra. Marble tablet, 27 × 14.5 × 3.5 cm. Fragment of an album of the scribae quaestorii (CIL 6, 37145). Museo Nazionale Romano, Parco Archeologico del Colosseo, Chiostrò S. Francesca Romana, Rome. Inv. nr. ep. 5213. By permission of the photographer.
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Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo – Parco Archeologico del Colosseo.


5.2 Ostia, Porta Romana, via Ostiense. Remains of the tomb of C. Domitius Fabius Hermogenes. Luciano Morpurgo. ICCD – Gabinetto Fotografico Nazionale, Fondo GFN, E038116. By permission of the Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione – MiBAC.

Table

3.1 Hierarchy of *apparitores* of the *colonia Iulia Genetiva* (Urso) according to annual wages, with number of yearly assignments to municipal officials.
Acknowledgements

Historical research is a joint effort. I am indebted to those who have gone before me, who have been engaged with the same questions and who have made invaluable headway in the search for answers. I join their ranks in the hope that my own questions and provisional answers may be of use and be an incentive for further scientific inquiry.

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Abbreviations

The abbreviations of the names of ancient writers and their works adopted here are the ones used in the index of the Thesaurus Linguae Latinae and Liddell-Scott-Jones’ Greek–English Lexicon. Short forms of epigraphic corpora follow the usage of Clauss-Slaby’s Epigraphik-Datenbank. Journals are abbreviated according to the usage of L’Année Philologique. For the sake of convenience, the abbreviations of epigraphic corpora and reference works used in the text are reproduced below.

Acquasparta

AE
L’Année épigraphique (1889—). Paris.

Aesernia

Allifae

CAG

CartNova

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3 www.manfredclauss.de.
Abbreviations


CIL Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum (1862–). Berlin: de Gruyter.


Abbreviations


IDR  *Inscriptiones Daciae Romanae* (1975–). Bucharest.


IG  *Inscriptiones Graecae* (1902–). Berlin.


Abbreviations


### Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>InscrIt</td>
<td>Inscriptiones Italicae (1931–). Rome.</td>
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### Abbreviations

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PIR²</strong></td>
<td>Klaus Wachtel et al., eds. (1933–). <em>Prosopographia Imperii Romani saec. I. II. III</em>. Editio altera. Berlin: de Gruyter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RIU</strong></td>
<td>Die römischen Inschriften Ungarns (1972–). Budapest: Enciklopédia Kiadó.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SEG</strong></td>
<td>Supplementum epigraphicum Graecum (1923–). Leiden: Brill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SupIt</strong></td>
<td>Supplementa Italic a (1981–). Rome: Quasar.</td>
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Abbreviations

\textit{TitAq} \quad \text{Péter Kovács and Ádám Szabó, eds. (2009–2011). \textit{Tituli Aquincenses I–III}. Budapest: Pytheas.}

Again his eyes were drawn to the comitium lying beneath him on the forum. Again he felt the anxiety that had haunted him since before dawn. He wasn't even sure if he had slept at all, kept awake by wheels clattering on the cobbles, the muted sounds of the sleepless city. Any other night he would have been able to ignore the noise, but this night was different. It didn't help that he was now engaged in preparing the very event that was the source of his disquiet. Again he stole a glance at the circular enclosure where the tribes used to elect the magistrates. For a moment he saw himself standing in the midst of the crowd, his white toga resplendent in the blinding summer sun, donned with the broad purple band of the aedile-elect. Among the people stood his father, Annius, in sheer disbelief that his own son, the son of a freedman, could make it as far as the Roman senate. His father had already been more than content when he had aspired to become an apparitor of the Roman magistrates. 'Cnaeus Flavius, scriba of the Roman people'. It had a certain ring to it. Things started to happen very fast when he was allotted to serve Appius Claudius. Looking back, the random lot that was picked that early December morning didn't seem entirely coincidental now. He didn't even consider himself a revolutionary. Sure, he knew the hardships of the common people from personal experience. But he had considered the order to be God-given. Appius had opened his eyes, an experience he shared with so many others. Change was possible. He himself was living proof of it. He had learnt the legal calendar by heart, betrayed the priests, smuggled their jealously guarded treasure out of their precinct. Sure, he had become a scriba on Appius' behalf, the publication of the priestly arcana had been his idea. He couldn't have done it without the protection of his patron, who had assumed responsibility. The duped aristocrats would have eaten him alive. But now, some years later, he couldn't help but accept it as his own achievement. Not for no reason had he become a favourite of the plebs. And they had vowed to help him on even further. — Clamour from the entrance area of the aerarium suddenly pulled him back from his reverie. Startled, his otherwise steady hand slipped and left a deep impression in the wax surface of the writing tablet that lay before him. It was the tablet that was supposed to receive the results of the election later that day. He smiled.