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Epigraphic Notes on a Chiusine Cinerary Urn in the British Museum

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Notices

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Epigraphic Notes on a Chiusine Cinerary Urn in the British Museum

Abstract: The inscription discussed in this note is not yet entered into the corpus of Etruscan inscriptions. It was painted on a Chiusine terracotta cinerary urn of the Hellenistic period, now in the collections of the British Museum (inv. no. 1856,1226.542). The epitaph was published in the Museum's 1903 catalogue, but with a long lacuna in the middle. Our reading replaces the lacuna with the deceased's family name, *peśumśnei*, which permits us to connect the epitaph on the cinerary urn to the *peśumśne* epitaph recorded on a Chiusine terracotta tile once used to seal a burial niche. We conclude by discussing the reasons for the differences in the spelling of the final syllable of the names, *peśumśnei* and *peśumśne*, on the urn and the tile.

Keywords: British Museum, cinerary urn, Chiusi, epigraphy, Hellenistic, inscription

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A Chiusine terracotta cinerary urn in the collections of the British Museum (inv. no. 1856, 1226.542) (Fig. 1) is composed of a lid bearing a reclining female figure holding a fan in her lap, and a box decorated with a scene of Eteocles and Polyneices in relief. Above the scene the name of the deceased is painted in red from right-to-left along the top of the box. The middle portion of the *dipinto* is difficult to read because the letters have begun to fade. The transcription offered in the British Museum's 1903 catalog,¹ which is cited in (1), has a lacuna at this point.

¹ Prior to 1856, the urn was in the collection of William Temple. The inscription was transcribed as *thanalesuan...esia* in Walters 1903, 430-431 (cat. no. D790).

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Fig. 1: Chiusine terracotta cinerary urn with dipinto.
(British Museum, Inv. no. 1856,1226.542) (Photo: Courtesy of British Museum).

(1) *θana : lesuan ... esia*

Despite the fading of some of the letters, it is possible to read the *dipinto* in its entirety based on the photograph supplied by the Museum and Theresa Huntsman's inspection of the urn in June 2011. The inscription, with punctuation, is transcribed in (2).²

(2) *θana : peśumśnei : veśiša*

The style of the letters on the urn is difficult to ascertain in some cases because of the state of preservation. Even so, diagnostic features of the style known as northern type II, *manierato*, can be identified:³ *Mu* and *nu* have the forms $\mathbb{M}$ and $\mathbb{N}$. The oblique bars of *epsilon* are of unequal length. The lowest bar is longer than

² The letter *sigma*, which represents the palatal sibilant /ʃ/, is transcribed as *ś*. Letters that bear an under-dot are not well enough preserved to be legible.

³ See the classification of Hellenistic Etruscan alphabets made by Maggiani (1990, 188–193).

the others; the medial bar is very short. *Theta* has no medial point. And finally, the letter *sigma* is serpentine in shape.

The name of the deceased on the urn may be linked to an inscribed tile published as *ET Cl 1.2078/CIE 2545*.⁴ The tile, which is cited as (3), records only the name of the deceased.⁵

(3) *θana peşu|mśne*

The family name *peşumśna* is not common, but it is attested as a gamonymic on an inscribed Chiusine olla-form urn (*ET Cl 1.2194/CIE 2650*), the text of which is given in (4).

(4) *θα : pvrnei : yelznal : peşumśnaśa :*

Given the rarity of the family name, *peşumśna*, it is likely that the deceased mentioned on the urn (2) and accompanying tile (3) is related to — perhaps the sister of — the husband of *θα(na) pvrnei*.

The inscription incised on the tile is, to judge from the form of *epsilon*, in a different “hand” than the *dipinto* on the cinerary urn. Professionals employed by workshops to inscribe urns did not necessarily incise the inscriptions on tiles, too. Rather, the tiles were inscribed by non-professional writers, perhaps even by the relatives of the deceased.⁶ The fact that the final syllable of the family name was spelled as *-ne* on the tile could be an indication that the writer was unfamiliar with the spellings used by professionals in workshops.⁷ The final syllable of the name, which would have ended originally in the diphthong *-ai*, shows the regular change of *-ai* to *-e* in word-final position.⁸ The spelling of the final syllable as *-nei*, which is attested on the urn, reflects an analogically reintroduced *-i*, a sign that served to make the feminine gender of the deceased’s family name more transparent morphologically.

⁴ According to the *CIE*, this tile has been at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale at Chiusi at least since 1886.

⁵ Based on the illustration in the *CIE*, letters at the end of line 1 are difficult to read. These letters bear an under-dot in our transcription. The pipe indicates a line break.

⁶ See Benelli 2010, 126–127.

⁷ The spelling of the final syllable of the family name as *-ne* could be an error for *-nei*, but there are other examples of such spellings.

⁸ For these changes, see Rix 2000, 206.

Abbreviations

CIE = *Corpus Inscriptionum Etruscarum*

ET = *Etruskische Texte*

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