

AN INSCRIBED ROCCHETTO FROM POGGIO CIVITATE (MURLO)

1. ROCCHETTI AT POGGIO CIVITATE

Ceramic spool shaped objects are quite commonly found at the site of Poggio Civitate, an Etruscan settlement 25 km south of the city of Siena that was occupied from the years of the late 8th through to the middle of the 6th century BCE. This type of spool is commonly called a *rocchetto* and is found in a variety of sizes and fabrics, from coarse impasto to highly refined bucchero. Some specimens are quite small, measuring only .04 m in length. The largest tend to measure approximately .10 m to .12 m but the overwhelming majority of the 785 currently listed in the Poggio Civitate Excavation Digital Archive¹ are between .06 m and .08 m in length. *Rocchetti* consist of a cylindrical shaft with ends that splay outward to a diameter typically twice that of the shaft itself. Gleba's discussion of implements related to textile production at Poggio Civitate argues that the extraordinarily large number of *rocchetti* as well as spindle whorls found at Poggio Civitate points to a surplus manufacture of thread at the site².

Hundreds of Poggio Civitate's *rocchetti* display some sort of ornamentation. Distal ends of *rocchetti* are often stamped with a variety of designs, incised or on a few examples, decorated with rouletting. Curiously, there appears to be no correlation between the refinement of the clay used to produce a *rocchetto* and any potential decorative addition to the object. Some *rocchetti* made from coarse clay are decorated, some made from highly refined clay are not. Similarly, *rocchetti* recovered from Poggio Civitate's aristocratic residence (OC1/Residence) appear no more likely to be decorated than those found in the environs of Poggio Civitate's industrial area (OC2/Workshop)³. In short, the question of whether or not a *rocchetto* is ornamented appears to be one left largely to the object's maker before it is fired and does not seem to be governed by any future

¹ <http://poggiocivitate.classics.umass.edu>. This system provides digital records for materials excavated at Poggio Civitate from 1966 through to the present. The database continues to evolve, but scholars can access any and all available primary data concerning excavation at Poggio Civitate by following the URL listed above and proceeding to the section labeled CATALOG. Artifacts and data are available through the search interfaces and all artifacts are recorded according to their year of recovery.

² GLEBA 2008, pp. 170-171 argues for surplus thread production rather than the manufacture of completed textiles since the relative number of loom weights found at the site is probably only sufficient for one or two warp weighted looms. However, no other site of the mid to late 7th century BCE preserves the volume of industrial and domestic evidence as does Poggio Civitate. Until a chronologically and contextually comparable site is excavated, we must delay judgment on this point.

³ See NIELSEN-TUCK 2001 for a discussion of the various buildings of this architectural complex.

expectation concerning the *rocchetto's* intended environment of use after it is treated in a kiln.

Of the 785 *rocchetti* currently catalogued from Poggio Civitate, only one preserves an inscription (fig. 1 a). Artifact PC 20090211 is a fragment of a *rocchetto* preserving all of one rounded end and a portion of the spool's shaft⁴. It is made from reasonably well refined clay and fired in a kiln atmosphere that reduced the color of its surface while leaving the interior core grayish in color⁵. Such a buccheroid or 'near' bucchero is quite common at Poggio Civitate and probably reflects a technically imperfect application of a firing technique intended to produce bucchero⁶. It was recovered approximately 4 m from the northern edge of OC2/Workshop within a stratum clearly associated with the building's destruction and the subsequent preparation of the plateau for the construction of the site's 6th century BCE complex. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that PC 20090211 was manufactured in OC2/Workshop and can be dated by its association with that structure to the years between the second quarter of the 7th century and the end of the 7th century BCE⁷.

2. THE INSCRIPTION ON PC 20090211

An inscription *rixa* /rik^ha/ measuring 1.5 cm in length was incised in sinistroverse direction on the shaft of PC 20090211 (fig. 1 b). The letters were made using a sharp implement, possibly a stylus, after the ceramic had been fired. The height of the letters ranges from .8 cm for *khi* to 1.1 cm for the vertical bar of *rho*. *Alpha* is roughly .5 cm wide at its base. The spacing between *iota* and *khi* is somewhat greater than the spacing between the other letters. The disparity is perhaps to be attributed to the fact that *khi* was written by first incising the vertical bar but leaving ample room for the incision of the letter's oblique bars.

In terms of paleography the letters *rho* and *khi* fit the profile of other examples on Etruscan inscriptions from the 7th century BCE⁸. *Rho* has a long vertical stroke and a small 'eye' in the form of a half-circle. The oblique bars of *khi* are short; they are positioned near the top of the vertical bar, giving the letter a distinctively slender appearance. *Alpha* has a form that is typical of *alphas* incised on other objects produced at Poggio Civitate⁹. The right bar of the letter, though straight, tilts in the direction of writing. The

⁴ When complete, the *rocchetto* was likely an example of Gleba's B3 type. See GLEBA 2008, pp. 143-144.

⁵ The Munsell Color value of 20090211's surface is 5YR 2.5/1 Black.

⁶ TUCK 2009, pp. 25-27 provides a general discussion of ceramic types found at the site.

⁷ TUCK-NIELSEN 2008, p. 55.

⁸ Compare the letterforms *khi* and *rho* on the *abecedarium* from Marsiliana d'Albegna (RIX, ET AV 9.1).

⁹ *Alphas* with a shape similar to that found on the *rocchetto* appear on other objects recovered at Poggio Civitate. The *alpha* on PC 20070107 may be the closest in form. Although only the bottom two-thirds of the letter is visible, it is possible to see that the medial bar slopes down to the left in the direction of writing and passes through the bottom of the left bar of the letter. An *alpha* with a similar shape was incised on the

left bar curves downward in a gentle arc. The medial bar is straight; it descends sharply in the direction of writing, bisecting the left bar of the letter near its base.



fig. 1 - a) *Rocchetto*, inv. no. 20090211; b) Detail of inscription on *rocchetto*, inv. no. 20090211.

The inscription appears to have been centered in the middle of the *rocchetto*'s shaft, equidistant from the heads. We suspect then that *rixa* is a complete word. Unfortunately, this is the only attestation and it is morphologically isolated. We have not identified other Etruscan word-forms that might be related. The meaning or function of the word is also uncertain, but three possibilities come to mind: (1) *rixa* is the word for *rocchetto*; (2) *rixa* refers to an activity associated with the *rocchetto*, e.g. spinning; (3) *rixa* is the name of a person who was perhaps engaged in the production of textiles.

The first possibility strikes us as unlikely. 7th century BCE inscriptions that refer to objects by name generally have the structure of 'iscrizioni parlanti', viz., *mi* 'I' + name of style of ceramic + name of owner¹⁰. Possibility two seems unlikely as well. We know of few inscriptions in which an adjective, a noun, or a verb stand in isolation and none that date to the Orientalizing period¹¹. Although we have reservations (on which, see below), we suspect that the third item in our list of possibilities – that *rixa* is a name – is the most likely.

Following this interpretation *rixa* is a formation in *-a* in the zero case, that is to say, in its uninflected form. Native formations in *-a* are not common in Etruscan but the

bottom of a small coarse ware pot (PC 19800240), but in this case the medial stroke extends far beyond the base of the left bar of the letter.

¹⁰ A few inscriptions have the form: name of style of ceramic + name of owner, but these are in the minority and they date to the 6th century BCE, e.g. Rix, *ET* Vs 2.7.

¹¹ The oldest inscription that we have been able to identify with a noun in isolation is Rix, *ET* AT 0.3, which reads *θina* "water vessel". COLONNA 1972, p. 462, no. 78 speculates that *θina* may not refer here to the vessel but rather refer to the volume of storage capacity.

following items extracted from inscriptions of the archaic period (700-500 BCE) may serve as comparanda:

- *akas*, s-genitive, stem *aka-* (masculine, Vs 1.145)¹²
- *alχas*, s-genitive, stem *alχa-* (masculine, Cr 2.17)
- *arpaσ*, s-genitive, stem *arpa-* (feminine, Cl 3.1)
- *raikas*, s-genitive, stem *raika-* (feminine?, Vs 2.9)
- *saza*, zero case, stem *saza-* (gender uncertain, Fa 2.2)
- *unas*, s-genitive, stem *una-* (masculine, Vs 1.155)¹³
- *utas*, s-genitive¹⁴, stem *uta-* (masculine, Cr 3.9)

Most of the formations in *-a* (*aka*, *alχa*, *una* and *uta*) are old personal names that have been recycled as family names¹⁵. *Arpa* is a constituent in an onomastic phrase referring to a woman, *arpaσ kamaia*. *Raika* may refer to a woman as well as the object on which it was incised is a loom weight¹⁶. We cannot determine whether *saza* refers to a man or a woman. The same is true for *riχa*. However, since *rocchetti* are used in the production and storage of thread for textiles, the creation of which is an activity that appears to be associated largely with women in the ancient Mediterranean, we may prefer to see in *riχa* a woman's name, rather than that of a man¹⁷.

Although the interpretation of *riχa* as a name, possibly a woman's name, is plausible, there are reasons to be cautious. In the few cases where a name appears in the zero case in a 7th century BCE inscription of the proprietary type, it is embedded in syntax, e.g. Rix, *ET* Fa 2.2, Cr 2.28, and AV 2.3. Uninflected names standing in isolation are not otherwise attested on *instrumenta domestica* at this early period. And while we note that a few examples of uninflected names appear in the 6th century on ceramic artifacts recovered from sites scattered throughout Etruscan-speaking Italy¹⁸, our *riχa*, if it is a name, is the only example that can be dated to the 7th century BCE.

The absence of distinctive morphological features and the lack of a syntactic context make it all but impossible to provide a satisfactory or satisfying solution to the mean-

¹² Inscriptions are cited from RIX, *ET*.

¹³ *Una[s]* appears on a ceramic fragment recovered at San Giovenale. Here it is a personal name (CIE 10454 [M. PANDOLFINI ANGELETTI]). MORANDI TARABELLA 2004, p. 568 suggests that the name is Faliscan in origin. The name is not attested in Faliscan.

¹⁴ The /s/ of *utas* is spelled with the sign of the cross.

¹⁵ See MARCHESINI 2007, p. 95 and the discussion that follows for the 'refunctioning' of personal names as family names.

¹⁶ *Reice*, which is attested in a Neo-Etruscan inscription from Perugia (RIX, *ET* Pe 0.5), may be the masculine counterpart to *Raika*. The name also serves as the base for Neo-Etruscan family names formed with the suffix *-na*, e.g. *reicna* Cl 1.838, etc.

¹⁷ GLEBA 2008, p. 173.

¹⁸ We note the following names on artifacts dated to the 6th century BCE: *ranaza* (RIX, *ET* Cr 2.81), *larece* (Cr 2.83), *kape* (Vc 6.2), *larθ* (Vs 2.3), *racventu*, *racvitu* (Ru 2.2), *karke* (Cl 2.14), etc. Other forms standing in isolation may be word-forms but they are difficult, if not impossible, to interpret. See, for example, *ara*, which appears several times on pieces of ceramic, e.g. Fa 0.1, Cr 0.15.

ing or function of *rixa*. It may be the name of a woman, but this cannot be proven or disproved.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The presence of inscriptions such as PC 20090211 on utilitarian items at Poggio Civitate, especially those examples recovered from the environs of the site's 7th century BCE manufacturing center, raises interesting questions about the nature of literacy in early central Italy. The instruments of literacy, letters themselves, are sometimes used at Poggio Civitate in a manner unrelated to word form or syntax. Many examples of terracotta roofing tiles and ceramics display letters that perhaps served as maker's marks or indications of production batches¹⁹. Although the precise purpose of these markings is unclear, their use indicates a familiarity with letterforms on the part of laborers manufacturing such utilitarian objects²⁰.

Given that this example of an inscribed *rocchetto* is unique at Poggio Civitate, the inscription might simply represent a whimsical application of the newly embraced technology of writing. It bears noting that when the *rocchetto* served its practical function as a spool or bobbin for thread, the inscription would have been entirely obscured. In all likelihood, few individuals at Poggio Civitate possessed the ability to read and fewer still to employ letters in the service of composing texts and incising them on ceramic. The underlying logic of inscribing the word *rixa* on a *rocchetto* after firing it in a kiln, whatever the word's meaning, may relate more directly to the interpersonal dynamics of laborers in Poggio Civitate's OC2/Workshop, at least one of whom appears to have been nominally literate²¹. Conceivably, if *rixa* is a woman's name, a woman by this name may have written it on an implement she intended to use. Alternatively, a literate worker may have incised the word on the *rocchetto* at another's behest or merely to impress the intended user of it. We cannot know. For the time being, the inscriber's motivation in placing this word on the shaft of a *rocchetto* remains as obscure as the precise meaning of the word s/he wrote. Nevertheless, the word *rixa* on this *rocchetto* provides a curious if enigmatic view into the complexities of the technology of literacy and its co-optation in communities such as Poggio Civitate in the 7th century BCE.

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¹⁹ CRISTOFANI-PHILLIPS 1971, pp. 13-22.

²⁰ However, it should be noted that while letter forms are commonly used to mark tiles, other types of symbols, such as a staffed spiral, are also employed in this practice.

²¹ See WALLACE 2008, p. 75 plus footnote 28 for the question of literacy as it pertains to the inscribed ivory plaques recovered from OC1/Residence.

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