

Roman Inscriptions

This resource has been created for students who are studying the Romans and would like an introduction to deciphering inscriptions and understanding the Roman numerals system. The gallery activities can be completed in the Hadrian's Wall gallery on the ground floor.

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Roman Inscriptions

What are Inscriptions?

Wherever the Romans settled, they often left behind inscriptions. These carvings help us learn more about the Romans and how they lived, worked, and died. Around Hadrian's Wall we have found several dedications and tombstones, which tell us who was living on the wall, their origins, their status, their gods, and their family.

Inscriptions are also the reason we know who built the wall! Previously historians thought Septimius Severus had ordered the construction, until an inscription was found in the 1900s. It read "The 2nd Legion built this in the name of Emperor Hadrian." You can see it on display at the Great North: **Hadrian's Wall: Building the Frontier #1**.

Deciphering the North's Inscriptions

You may have noticed that the Romans' alphabet is very similar to ours today. However, there are a few differences in lettering, and a completely different numbering system. Look at the charts on the front and back of this sheet to familiarise yourself with these changes, and then turn to the next page to see them in action.

ROMAN ALPHABET							
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
I	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q
R	S	T	V	X	Y	Z	

Notice that J, U, and W are missing. J was replaced by I, while V was used instead of U and W. For example, Julius Caesar would have been written as IVLIVS CAESAR, and Vulcan would be VVLCAN. Try writing your *nomen* (name) below:

NOMEN MEVM EST (*My name is*): _____

Roman Inscriptions: Numerals

Roman Numerals

Instead of the numbering we use today, Romans used a system of letters to write their numbers. Numerals are a bit difficult at first, but very easy once you get the hang of it!

I	V	X	L	C	D	M
1	5	10	50	100	500	1000

Romans put these letters together to create different numbers:

$$\begin{array}{lllll}
 \text{I} = 1 & \text{II} = 2 & \text{III} = 3 & \text{IV} = 4 & \text{V} = 5 \\
 \text{VI} = 6 & \text{VII} = 7 & \text{VIII} = 8 & \text{IX} = 9 & \text{X} = 10
 \end{array}$$

Numbers are formed by following these two rules:

- 1) Putting a letter **before** a larger one means you **subtract**
- 2) Putting a letter **after** a larger one means you **add**

*Roman numerals read in descending order, so if you see a lesser-value ahead of a higher value, it needs to be subtracted!

For Example:

$$\text{IX is } \text{I} - \text{X} = 9 \quad \text{and} \quad \text{XI is } \text{X} + \text{I} = 11$$

$$\text{DCVI is } \text{D} + \text{C} + \text{V} + \text{I} = 606$$

$$\text{LXIX is } \text{L} + \text{X} + \text{X} - \text{I} = 969$$

Try your hand at these numerals:

1) XXV = _____

2) LXXIV = _____

3) XC = _____

1) CDXX = _____

2) CCCLXIII = _____

3) MLXVI = _____

Roman Inscriptions: Key Terms

Deciphering the North's Inscriptions

Much like texting today, Romans used shortened versions of words in order to fit their message into the stone (However, Romans wrote DOM instead of OMG). Below are some common key-terms to help you read inscriptions like a Roman!

Funerary Inscriptions

D[IS] M[ANIBUS] = to the Departed Spirits (*if you see "DM" you know it is going to be a tombstone!*)

ANNIS = Years (*how old someone was when they died, for example ANNIS XXXII would be 32 years*)

M[ENSIBUS] = Months

D[IEBUS] = Days

CIVIS = a citizen or tribesman/tribeswoman

F[ILIVS or FILIA] = a son (or daughter)

LIBERTVS/A = a freedman/freedwoman (*ex-slave*)

OBSEQ[VENTIS] or POSVIT = Set up by (*preceded by the name of the inscription's commissioner*)

CONIVGI = a wife or husband (*usually tombstones were set up by the deceased's spouse*)

Dedications

Name ending with **-O/-IS** or **-AE/-IBUS** = The name of the person or god to whom the inscription was dedicated.

IMP[ERATOR] CAES[AR] TR[AIANO] HADRIANO AVG

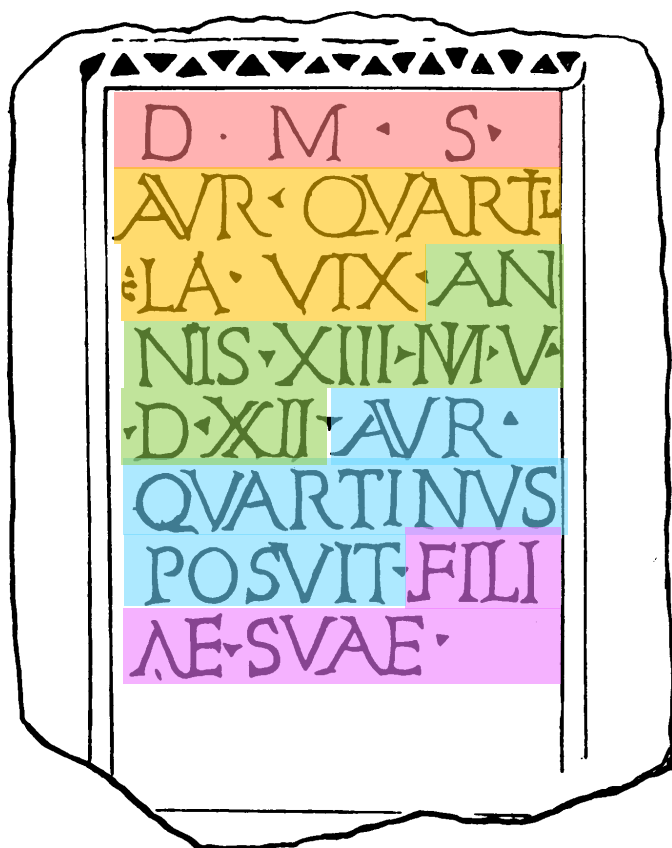
[VSTO] = To the emperor Hadrian (*emperors had several names, so that is why we go by their nick-names*)

IMP[ERATOR] CAES[AR] M[ARCO] AVRELIO SEVERO ANTONINO PIO = To the emperor Caracalla

LEG[IO] = Legion (*often followed by a number, for example LEG X would be the 10th Legion*)

CO[N]S[VLIS] = Consulship (*often followed by the number of times this position was held, for example COS III meant they were consul three times*)

Roman Inscriptions: Example



DIS MANIBUS SANCTIS

AVR[ELIA] QVARTILLA VIX

ANNIS XIII M[ENSIBUS] IV

D[EIBVS] XXII

AVR[ELIVS] QVARTINVS

POSVIT

FILIAE SVAE

Sacred to the spirits of the departed: Aurelia Quartilla lived 13 years, 4 months, 22 days; Aurelius Quartinus set this up to his own daughter.

As you can see, reading inscriptions can be quite tricky! There was no backspace or re-sizing, so some letters end up very tiny, or being placed over other letters. Look at where they list Aurelia's age (green section): the I in IV has been placed over the M, and the two Xs in XXII have been placed over each other.

Roman Inscriptions: Gallery Activity

Inscriptions help us learn more about the Romans and how they lived. Walk around the Hadrian's Wall gallery and find the inscriptions below. Use the information at the beginning of this packet to help with your answers.

Worshipping at the Wall: A Choice of Gods #1-2

- 1) Who are these inscriptions dedicated to?
- 2) How do we know these were dedicated by the 6th Legion?
- 3) What do you think the purpose of this dedication was?

Worshipping at the Wall: A Choice of Gods #15

- 1) How would a Roman (and you!) know that this was a tombstone rather than a dedication?
- 2) Who set up this tombstone? How were they related to the deceased? How do you know this?

Living on the Wall: The Written Word #3

- 1) Who was this inscription dedication to? (hint: this person had 7 names! Also, in Latin grammar, these names would all end in 'O')

Death and Burial on the Wall: Remembering the Dead #9

- 1) Was Felicio a citizen, freedman, or slave? What word on his tombstone tells us this?
- 2) How do we know Felicio was 20 years old when he died?

Roman Inscriptions: Find out more

Want to learn more about inscriptions? Want to impress friends and family next time you stumble across a message left by the Romans? Have a look at some of the links below:

Inscriptions along Hadrian's Wall:

- 1) **The Great North Museum** - as you have seen today, the North has a great collection of dedicational and funerary inscriptions found along the wall, with several on display to the public. This includes the dedicatory inscription to Hadrian, confirming that he was the one who ordered the building of the wall.
- 2) **Vindolanda Museum** - As well as a selection of inscriptions, the museum's collections includes the famous 'Vindolanda tablets.' Delicate, wafer thin slivers of wood covered in spidery ink writing, the tablets were found in the oxygen-free deposits on and around the floors of the deeply buried early wooden forts at Vindolanda and are the oldest surviving handwritten documents in Britain. Find out more on their website:

<http://www.vindolanda.com/roman-vindolanda/writing-tablets>

Other inscriptions in Roman Britain:

- 1) **RomanInscriptionsofBritain.org** - This website hosts more than 2,400 monumental inscriptions from Britain and is still being updated with new finds. You can go on here to find pictures, transcriptions, and translations of nearly all the roman inscriptions in found in Britain!
- 2) **The Roman Baths** - The Roman Baths is built on the remains of the Romano-British settlement of Aquae Sulis, which was named after its healing springs. The Baths collections include a selection of religious votive inscriptions dedicated by people thanking the gods for answering their prayers. The museum also possesses 310 curse tablets, which were written prayers inscribed on small sheets of lead or pewter and thrown into the spring. Find out more at <https://www.romanbaths.co.uk/key-objects-collection>

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Roman Inscriptions: Gallery Activity

Worshipping at the Wall: A Choice of Gods #1-2

- 1) **Who are these inscriptions dedicated to?** Oceanus and Neptune
- 2) **How do we know these were dedicated by the 6th Legion?** LEG VI is written on both dedications
- 3) **What do you think the purpose of this dedication was?** As the dedications were part of a bridge, it is most likely the Romans were asking these two water gods to look after the structure and not destroy it.

Worshipping at the Wall: A Choice of Gods #15

- 1) **How would a Roman (and you!) know that this was a tombstone rather than a dedication?** DM [DIS MANIBUS] is written at the top, translating as “To the departed spirits.” Whenever we see DM we know for sure that we are dealing with a tombstone!
- 2) **Who set up this tombstone? How were they related to the deceased? How do you know this?** AVR[ELIVS] MARCUS OBSEQ[VENTIS] (Aurelius Marcus set this up) followed by CONIVNGI (husband [of the deceased]).

Living on the Wall: The Written Word #3

- 1) **Who was this inscription dedicated to?** The inscription begins with ‘IMP[ERATOR] CAES[AR] M[ARCO] AVRELIO SEVERO ANTONINO PIO.’ This was Caracalla’s formal name at the end of his reign.

Death and Burial on the Wall: Remembering the Dead #9

- 1) **Was Felicio a citizen, freedman, or slave? What word on his tombstone tells us this?** Felicio was a freedman. We can tell this from the ‘LIBERTI’ following his name.
- 2) **How do we know Felicio was 20 years old when he died?** ANNIS XX (20 years) is written at the bottom.