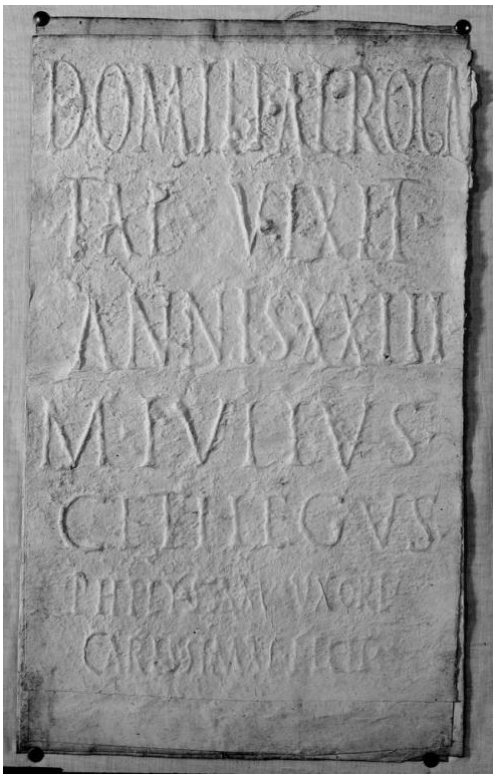
Taking inscriptions home

Inscriptions are words or letters scratched into a hard surface such as stone, metal or clay [**Education 29–30, 37–39; Citizenship 21**]. **Epigraphy** is the study of inscriptions. By studying inscriptions **epigraphers** help us to learn about people, business and politics in the ancient world. Inscriptions also help historians connect people and events with dates: even if the inscription does not mention a date the style of the letters might be a clue as to when it was made.

Many inscribed stones cannot or should not be moved: they are heavy and some of them are even parts of buildings! So epigraphers record the inscriptions for later study. The three recording methods are drawing, photography and **squeezes**. A squeeze is an impression of the inscribed surface in **latex** or paper (liquid rubber) [**Education 31; Citizenship 22**]. A squeeze and a photograph together make the best record. Photographs capture the stone's colour and its overall appearance. Squeezes provide more surface detail than photographs; they are also easier to make [find out how on the next page].



Squeeze of a Roman funerary inscription in the Ure Museum.

© Ure Museum, The University of Reading

Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology

Squeezes provide even more information than studying the inscriptions themselves. This is because we can study squeezes from every angle and even see inside the lines carved on the stone (this helps us to identify the scribe who carved the inscription). By collecting squeezes from many different places we can compare the style and content of inscriptions. We can also rejoin broken inscriptions.

How to make a paper squeeze

You will need: Paper [medium thickness] and a brush with stiff bristles

1. Wash the dirt off the inscribed surface. (You don't want the dirt to be picked up by the paper.)
2. Wet both the paper and the surface.
3. Lay the paper on the inscribed surface.
4. Use the brush to beat the paper against the surface. Start at the centre for the best results (so the paper won't move around). Be careful not to tear the paper with the brush's bristles.
5. Let the paper dry.
6. Peel the paper off carefully and you have a squeeze!

Epigraphers made the first **latex** (liquid rubber) squeezes in the 1950s. Latex captures even more surface detail than paper. They are also easier to store: latex can be folded up without creasing. Latex works well on horizontal surfaces (but runs on vertical or slanted surfacesa).

How to make a latex squeeze

1. Wash the dirt off the inscribed surface.
2. Remove more dirt by applying a thin layer of latex and peeling it off.
3. Apply several layers of latex.
4. Allow the latex to dry well (this may take up to 24 hours).
5. Peel the latex off carefully.

Leslie Bonaventura

© Ure Museum, The University of Reading