

Abstract for *Language and Identity in Antiquity* (Lausanne, 19–20. July 2024)

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Lepontians and Cisalpine Gauls – Linguistic identity (?) in late Iron-age northern Italy

Fragmentary remains of Celtic languages/dialects spoken in pre-Roman Italy and the adjacent Alpine region are preserved in currently ca. 450 epigraphic documents on objects found between Aosta and Verona, dating from around 700 to the late 1st c. BC. The inscriptions, predominantly on stone and ceramic vessels, are written in the Lepontic alphabet, one of the “North Italic” adaptations of the Etruscan alphabet.

The presence of speakers of Celtic in Italy is by no means a surprise, since both classical historiography and the archaeological record of Iron-age northern Italy document the immigration of Gaulish tribes from the Transpadanian area to the plains north and south of the Po in the early 4th c. BC. However, a considerable portion of the epigraphic evidence predates this historical population shift. Though the archaeological and historical data indicate that a Celtic-speaking population – the “Lepontians”, associated with the archaeological Golasecca culture of the lake region – had been native to the area since the late Bronze age and was overlaid by the immigrating “Cisalpine Gauls”, these two putative Celtic layers have proved difficult to prise apart from a purely linguistic perspective. Though a few of the longer inscriptions from the last phases of Cisalpine Celtic epigraphy (La Tène D) show clear affinities with the Gaulish inscriptions of France in terms of the onomastic material and lexicon, it has not been possible to establish phonological or morphological criteria by which Lepontic and Cisalpine Gaulish can be reliably and convincingly distinguished. This suggests that the vernacular Lepontic and the Gaulish dialects were at the very least mutually intelligible. The issue is complicated by the gradual Gallicisation of the northern Padan plain, which must be expected to also have been reflected on the language level.

In my paper, I want to investigate the available evidence for a continued co-existence of distinguishable Lepontic and (Cisalpine) Gaulish features in the epigraphic record of the younger Iron age, in the form of potential manifestations of Lepontic identity in contrast to Gaulishness, and vice versa. After a brief outline of the relevant archaeological and historical aspects, I will discuss the slender linguistic data (archaisms/Leponticisms vs. evident Transalpine features) including onomastics (differences in personal name formation), inscription types and text formulae (e.g. chronology and classification of funerary stelae in the Ticino), as well as the use of the Lepontic alphabet as an identity marker – on the part of the Lepontians after the arrival of the Gaulish tribes and consequent breakdown of commercial and cultural relations with the civilisation of Italy, and possibly again on the part of the Gauls in the 2nd and 1st c. BC as a counter-cultural gesture under increasing political and cultural pressure from Rome.

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