



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

'Oscan, Greek, and more: the linguistic history of central and southern Italy from a non-Roman perspective' - Review of: N. Zair, *Oscan in the Greek Alphabet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016)

Citation for published version:

Roth, U 2018, 'Oscan, Greek, and more: the linguistic history of central and southern Italy from a non-Roman perspective' - Review of: N. Zair, *Oscan in the Greek Alphabet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016)', *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, vol. 31, pp. 597-602.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1047759418001599>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1017/S1047759418001599](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1047759418001599)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Journal of Roman Archaeology

Publisher Rights Statement:

This article has been published in a revised form in Journal of Roman Archaeology [<http://dx.doi.org/XXX>]. This version is free to view and download for private research and study only. Not for re-distribution, re-sale or use in derivative works. © copyright holder.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Journal of Roman Archaeology 31 (2018)

Oscan, Greek, and more: the linguistic history of central and southern Italy from a non-Roman perspective

Ulrike Roth

NICK ZAIR. *OSCAN IN THE GREEK ALPHABET* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016). Pp. xiv + 260. ISBN 978-1-107-06892-6. £64.00.

This handsome volume may seem unlikely to be the first port of call for anyone interested in the archaeology and history of ancient Italy. Nick Zair's *Oscan in the Greek alphabet* does what it says on the label: it offers rigorous linguistic analysis of the currently known body of Oscan texts – all epigraphic, from the fourth to the beginning of the first century BC – in the Greek alphabet from southern Italy. Zair's study arises from the AHRC-supported 'Greek in Italy'-project, led by James Clackson at Cambridge University.¹ It follows on the hoof of a related publication, by Katherine McDonald, also concerned with Oscan in Southern Italy, but specifically focussed on issues of language contact.² Both studies draw in turn extensively on the first fully illustrated corpus of Italic inscriptions, published in 2011, *Imagines Italicae*, which offers up-to-date textual editions, English translations and brief commentary on some 1000 inscribed texts, nearly all from mainland Italy, some from north-eastern Sicily, of which the vast majority is in Oscan:³ the inscribed monuments and objects date from as early as c. 500 BC to the early first century BC,⁴ documenting inter alia the active use of Oscan up to the incorporation of the Italian peoples into the Roman state after the conclusion of what in English is known as the Social War, in the 80s BC. Together with the (uninscribed) archaeology, the body of epigraphic materials (including coin issues) are the only sources *from* the peoples who fought – and lost – against the Romans in that war; they are therefore of immense value for the study of the history of ancient Italy from a non-Roman perspective.

Used in Campania, Samnium, Lucania, Bruttium and Sicily, the epigraphic evidence for Oscan documents rich and varied written use of the language, including in multiple alphabets – i.e. Etruscan and Oscan, as well as Greek and Latin. The inscriptions written in the Greek alphabet are the object of Zair's study – 81 texts, mainly from Lucania and Bruttium. The inscriptions of interest to Zair thus constitute a small sub-group of all known Oscan texts. Following an overview of his data, his approach to dating, Oscan and its alphabets, as well as the linguistic situation of ancient Italy (Ch. 1), Zair seeks in the first instance to provide a new evaluation of the spelling of Oscan in Greek, discussing in great detail vowels (Ch. 2), consonants (Ch. 3), and orthographic influences from Oscan written in the Oscan alphabet on the Oscan texts written in the Greek alphabet (Ch. 4). A summary Conclusion (Ch. 5) precedes a lexicon of all the Oscan words discussed in the text that completes the study (Ch. 6). The book documents well the considerable level of variation in the spelling of Oscan, regularly emphasising individual choice behind such orthographic variation: 'we must work with a framework of "individual" decisions on how to spell a given sound or sequence of sounds' (p. 169). Zair's conclusions have significant repercussions for our understanding of the development of Oscan, especially with regard to the notion of 'orthographic' or 'scribal schools' (on which more below), and are, by definition of the book's remit, of primary interest to the linguist. But even if the orthography of

¹ 'Greek in Italy: investigating the linguistic effect of the long-term presence of Greek speakers on the native languages of Italy'; <https://www.classics.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/greek-in-italy>.

² K. McDonald, *Oscan in southern Italy: evaluating language contact in a fragmentary corpus* (Cambridge 2015); reviewed by M. Anelli in *AHBOR* 6 (2016) 28-32; W. D. C. de Melo in *B/MCR* 2016.08.10; K. Nishimura in *CR* 67 (2017) 66-8.

³ *Imagines Italicae*, ed. M. Crawford *et al.* (London 2011); hereafter *ImIt*.

⁴ An exception is constituted by a graffito from the wall of one of the rooms in the brothel on the corner of the vico del Balcone pensile and the vico del Lupanare in Pompeii (Reg. VII, 12, 18), which is dated to the Flavian period (c. AD 71 to 79): the graffito is on the same plaster as the imprint of a coin from AD 71 (or 72); *ImIt*, Pompei 46.

Journal of Roman Archaeology 31 (2018)

this member of the Indo-European language family is not one's own passion, students of ancient Italy in the second half of the first millennium BC would be foolish to ignore this meticulously researched contribution to the linguistic history of the Sabellic language Oscan. It is the purpose of this review to draw attention to two of the thematic and methodological aspects of Zair's study that are of immediate interest also to the non-linguist.⁵

First, on the basis of a significantly larger body of evidence than what had been available to earlier generations of linguists, Zair demonstrates that the theory of distinct graphical traditions concerning the spelling of vowels that had been put forward by Michel Lejeune in the early 1970s, and followed by most scholars since, does not stand the test of time if the presently known body of relevant inscriptions is fully taken into account (pp. 30-95).⁶ In a careful examination, Zair shows that there existed a significant range of spellings of the vowels /e/, /o/ and /u/, as well as the diphthong /ei/, both within individual inscriptions and throughout the period studied, demonstrating that the notion of rigorously followed graphical traditions cannot be applied any longer to this body of evidence. Zair concludes that 'it was not generally felt important to establish a consistent one-to-one relationship between a given vowel or diphthong and a given (di-)graph', and that 'there was no causal relationship between the adoption of different spellings of the sort envisaged by Lejeune' (p. 91). Importantly, this also means that the chronological development previously seen in the particular spelling of the relevant vowels and diphthong can no longer be used even as a rough guide to the dating of Oscan inscriptions – and the contexts in which these may be found. Crudely put, dating by letter choice is no longer an option.

A second aspect of Zair's investigation into the orthography of Oscan written in the Greek alphabet deserves more comment because it raises important questions regarding both methodology and the history of ancient Italy – and can be illustrated on his approach to the study of vowels (Ch. 2). For instance, Zair's study of the 31 inscriptions that present the vowel /o/ – spelt in some texts with the symbol <o> and in other texts with the symbol <ω> – leads him to suggest that '<ω> was not used before c. 300 BC' (p. 63) – because six texts that fall according to the dates employed by Zair (probably or possibly) into the fourth century BC do not present <ω>. Although Zair notes the possibility of coincidence for the described orthographic pattern, he corroborates the idea of orthographic change around 300 BC with the similar (chronological) behaviour of the spelling of the accusative singular (pp. 63 and 80-3). This conclusion foregrounds some of the methodological premises adopted by Zair. First, he relies primarily on the archaeological context for the dating of the inscriptions – however uncertain or vague the results. Zair's choice is strongly influenced by the scholarly context in which he works, and in which the orthography of inscriptions has previously been used to establish rigid chronological developments: Zair's analysis of Lejeune's theory of 'scribal schools', discussed above, demonstrates lucidly the problems with establishing chronological developments on the basis of the orthography of inscriptions; these problems motivate and justify the reservations expressed by Zair vis-à-vis this approach. As Zair contends: 'it would obviously be completely circular to use the datings established only through these claimed orthographic developments [...] when examining the orthography itself' (p. 12). This is entirely sound; but it also means that the fringe benefit for the historian and archaeologist of Zair's linguistic analysis is likely to be of limited value if the chronological base line is derived from archaeological study in the first instance. Second, Zair's study is in essence qualitative, i.e. a single text is enough to document the existence of a particular spelling at a particular point in time – or not, as the case may be with the use of <ω> for /o/ before 300 BC. Put differently, absence of evidence is in effect used as evidence for absence. But the combination of often broad or uncertain archaeological datings with qualitative analysis in a small sample does not make for the best match: the problems inherent in this combination can be shown precisely on the spelling of the vowel /o/.

⁵ The linguistic contributions of Zair's study have been focused on in other reviews: F. Murano in *JRS* 107 (2017) 402-4, together with reviewing McDonald (supra n. 2); W. D. C. de Melo in *CR* 67 (2017) 64-6.

⁶ M. Lejeune, 'Phonologie osque et graphie grecque', *Revue des études anciennes* 72 (1970) 271-315; 'Phonologie osque et graphie grecque II', *Revue des études anciennes* 74 (1972) 5-13.

Journal of Roman Archaeology 31 (2018)

Thus, of the 31 texts in question, listed by Zair in numerous tables,⁷ only twelve (in total) use <ω> for /o/. Of these twelve texts, one inscription is only known today from a 19th century publication and cannot be dated at all.⁸ Another three texts are dated to ‘c. 300’, ‘300-250’, and ‘300-200’ respectively, according to the dates employed by Zair following *Imagines Italicae*: these texts *could* thus be from as early as 300 BC or thereabouts, i.e. the very end of the fourth century BC, rather than the third century BC.⁹ In short, we can only be more or less certain of the use <ω> for /o/ *after* the fourth century BC for eight of the twelve texts in question – reducing the weight of the ‘post-300’ sample by one-third. If, on the other hand, the uncertainty of many of the dates is read the other way, and we included all texts that have been associated with 300 BC or later into the ‘post-300’ sample – which is a perfectly possible scenario – there remain just two inscriptions that fall clearly before the postulated 300 BC watershed.¹⁰ Even if we added to this pair those inscriptions that have been associated with a broad range in the fourth century up to 300 BC – i.e. another two,¹¹ we only arrive at four texts that fall into the ‘before 300’-group – representing just 12.9% of the total sample of 31 inscriptions. In this total sample of 31 texts, the statistical probability of a text documenting <ω> for /o/ is 38%. If the same probability figure is applied to the sample of the four texts assumed to be from before 300 BC, one would indeed expect to have evidence for at least one inscription documenting <ω> for /o/ if this spelling was used then: the fact that none of these inscriptions sports <ω> for /o/ has been interpreted by Zair, as stated, as evidence for the later, c. 300-development of this feature. But in the light of the sample size, i.e. the four (or perhaps only two) inscriptions that stem (possibly or probably) from before 300 BC, it is immediately clear that the discovery of any one inscription from this early period is very much a matter of chance – what Zair has termed coincidence: it seems to my mind fairly bold to build a developmental theory on the current lack of such a (single) text. Finally, the four texts that have been given a (probable) date *in* the fourth century BC are part of a total of 19 texts (out of the complete total of 31 texts) that do *not* document <ω> for /o/: these four texts thus present the more *typical* spelling of /o/ in the sample *as a whole*. In terms of numbers of words, that is seven words that feature /o/ before 300 BC compared with 83 words from (c.) 300 BC onwards.¹² It is thus fairly easy to find other sets of seven words in the total relevant *Wortschatz* from *after* 300 BC that also do not use <ω> for /o/, without this having any (developmental) meaning.

As noted earlier, Zair emphasises more broadly the importance of individual choice in the spelling of words (over the notion of ‘orthographic’ or ‘scribal schools’). But if individual choice matters so much, the small sample size constitutes an even greater obstacle to wide-reaching conclusion on any developmental aspects of the use of the language and its Greek script: if people wrote to a certain extent as they wished, why should we assume that four texts presumed to be from the fourth century BC are sufficient evidence to exclude other ways of spelling the letter in question in this period? Should we, in other words, assume that these four texts are sufficient evidence to show that the idea of individual choice does *not* apply to the

⁷ See esp. Tables 16 and 20 (pp. 54-5 and 61-3) in Zair’s study.

⁸ *ImIt*, Potentia 37.

⁹ *ImIt*, Petelia 2: ‘c. 300’; *ImIt*, Anxia 1: ‘300-250’; *ImIt*, Crimisa 2: ‘300-200’; with Table 20 (pp. 61-3) in Zair’s study.

¹⁰ A bronze Chalcidian helmet without secure provenance, dated to 400-375 BC: *ImIt*, Metapontum 1; and a lead tablet with a list of names, understood to be a curse tablet, found in the course of emergency excavations of a tomb in the western necropolis of Laos, dated to c. 330-320 BC: *ImIt*, Laos 2.

¹¹ A fragmented lead strip once (and still partially) rolled up and understood to be a curse tablet, dated by Zair to between 400-300 BC: *ImIt*, Buxentum 3 (but note that *Imagines Italicae* does not specify a date; see also n. 15 below); and a fragmented lead tablet, found on the surface with other lead fragments near the so-called theatre at modern-day Castiglione di Paludi in Calabria, also understood to be a curse tablet, and dated to 350-300 BC: *ImIt*, Thurii Copia 1.

¹² Including *ImIt*, Potentia 37, which cannot be dated. Some words contain more than one /o/, while *ImIt*, Messana 4 and *ImIt*, Messana 5 both feature one word that sports <ω> *and* <o> for /o/: ‘τωφτω’. (Note however also the fragmentary state of Messana 5, restored largely from the (same) text featured on Messana 4.)

Journal of Roman Archaeology 31 (2018)

spelling of /o/ before 300 BC, excluding that period and that particular letter from the theory of individual choice, and hence variation in spelling – which is a logical corollary? Given that – as Zair has clearly shown through his dissection of Lejeune’s theory – the discovery of new materials has the potential to change the evidential basis in such a way as to render redundant conclusions based on earlier sets of evidence, it is obvious what might happen to Zair’s view of the use of <ω> for /o/ before 300 BC if only we had more material from this period.

Whether or not future archaeological excavation will bring to light new inscribed materials that address these and related issues will have to be seen, but there is certainly reason for optimism given the discovery of new texts in the last few years that have clearly added to our understanding of the use of Oscan in Italy.¹³ And the more of such materials are found *in situ*, the better also for the study of the language Oscan. Focussing tightly on the linguistic analysis, Zair does not take archaeological context – or the lack thereof – into consideration, nor the type of monuments or objects that feature the Oscan texts. This is not without problems – which can, once more, be illustrated on the issue over the spelling of /o/. Thus, the four assumed ‘pre-300 BC’ texts that feature the letter /o/, discussed above, include three inscribed lead tablets or strips, besides one bronze helmet.¹⁴ One of the tablets (from Roccagloriosa in Lucania) has an archaeological context – but it is a fill, making it quite impossible to date the object and inscription.¹⁵ Another from the territory of Thurii in ancient Bruttium is a surface find without a proper archaeological context, leaving only the third lead tablet, from Laos in Lucania, with an archaeological provenance and, hence, a relatively secure date in the late fourth century BC. And while the helmet (also without archaeological context) is of a type known from the fourth century BC, it is of course not possible to know when the text was inscribed on it. In short: three of the four texts in question are for all practical purposes free-floating in chronological terms, and the date ranges employed by Zair following in general *Imagines Italicae* are without solid foundation. Most likely, the dates proposed for the three inscriptions without a securely datable archaeological context are influenced by the work of Lejeune and others, potentially causing precisely the kind of circularity of argument that Zair has been keen to avoid. In sum, the evidence for the postulated orthographic pattern assumedly documented by these four inscriptions for before 300 BC is even weaker than the sample size alone suggests if archaeological context (or, rather, the lack thereof) is taken into account.

In the study of Latin, moreover, a spelling reform concerned with the letter *g* (i.e. *G* = *C* with a diacritic) is widely seen as having occurred *in* the third century BC.¹⁶ The reform enabled

¹³ For instance, *ImIt*, Cumae 4 bis was found in 2006, documenting the use of Oscan at the site around 100 BC, and thus after the point for which Livy reports the Cumaean request to Rome to be permitted to use Latin in matters of state and business: Livy 40.42.13. The Livian comment has hitherto been interpreted as evidence that ‘the Cumaeans’ attitude to Latin was a strongly positive one and that they wanted the Romans to know they were using Latin, as an expression of *their new identity* and allegiance’ (my emphasis): J. Clackson and G. Horrocks, *The Blackwell history of the Latin language* (Malden, Oxford, Carlton 2007), 82. Similarly, *ImIt*, Caulonia 2, a limestone with a reference to the goddess Venus in the genitive, was found in 2007, documenting the use of Oscan at Caulonia (modern-day Monasterace Marina on the south coast of Calabria) by the second half of the fourth century, being the only inscription of the four attested Oscan texts at the site that is not of a type that is by its very nature on an object that might well have been sourced elsewhere, as is the case for the other three text, all being stamps on roof-tiles or bricks (*ImIt*, Caulonia 3, 4 and 5; *ImIt*, Caulonia 1 is a coin issue without legend).

¹⁴ Supra n. 10 and n. 11.

¹⁵ *ImIt*, Buxentum 3, found outside of the south-east corner of the portico of complex A at Roccagloriosa: M. Gualtieri and H. Fracchia, *Roccagloriosa*, Vol. 1 (Naples 1990) 84-5 and 317. The location and territory of the site (located in modern-day Campania) is discussed in H. Fracchia, M. Gualtieri, F. de Polignac, ‘Il territorio di Roccagloriosa in Lucania (Provincia di Salerno)’, *Mélanges de l’école française de Rome* 95.1 (1983) 345-80.

¹⁶ In his *Roman Questions*, Plutarch identifies Spurius Carvilius Ruga, a freedman of Spurius Carvilius Maximus Ruga, as the originator of the change, c. 230 BC: Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 54 and 59. Spurius’ contribution is however not clear, and already Mommsen pointed to earlier inscriptional evidence for the observed pattern in his *Unteritalische Dialekte* (Leipzig 1850), at 32-3. Brief discussion of the reform is in Clackson and Horrocks (supra n. 13) 96.

Journal of Roman Archaeology 31 (2018)

differentiation of voiced /g/ and voiceless /k/, as for instance in Gallia and Caledonia respectively. Looking again at the evidence for the spelling of Oscan /o/ in the Greek alphabet, and taking into account the considerable degree of ambiguity inherent in the dates proposed for much of the relevant *Inscriptenschatz*, would (on the present state of evidence) the deep third century not constitute a much better digging ground also for this Oscan spelling reform than the shallow watershed of 300? I.e. a period of considerable political, economic, social and cultural change that affected in particular the Italian south, and that included increased contact between the various peoples of Italy, and between them and peoples from outside Italy?¹⁷ The profound ambiguity of the date of what appears to be the earliest Oscan text sporting <ω> for /o/ in the analysis offered by Zair needs stressing in this context: ‘c. 300 BC’ is how *Imagines Italicae* labels the text in question from Petelia (modern day Strongoli in Calabria).¹⁸ By contrast, the only four other inscriptions that display <ω> for /o/ before the second century BC are dated to ‘300-250’, ‘c. 250’ (twice), and ‘300-200’: these texts therefore fall to all appearances into the third century BC.¹⁹ Seen from this angle, it is clear that the text from Petelia offers an important chronological pointer for Zair’s thesis, seemingly marking the postulated shift in spelling precisely around 300: without this text, it needs stressing, we are in any case in the third century BC – and not necessarily towards the beginning of that century. Yet, the inscription in question is another lead tablet without an archaeological context, found as a stray find on the ground in the area of ancient Petelia: the date is rough guesswork based on object type and letter forms (which is all that is possible given the lack of an archaeological context), rendering it fairly weak however as a dating tool for a chronological change.²⁰ Put differently, without this text and its ‘c. 300’ date the particular spelling reform of /o/ that Zair argues for sits more comfortably in the third century than ‘c. 300’, if such a reform should at all be assumed.

As noted, Zair is perfectly aware of the problems inherent in the size of the samples he works with regarding the chronological patterns that these produce. He continues to stress the matter throughout the book, concluding on numerous occasions that ‘it would not be surprising if future discoveries contradict the picture’ (p. 166; see also pp. 144, 146, 156, 164, 176, 183). Apart from the particular orthographic example focussed on above, given that of the total body of known Oscan inscriptions only a minority falls into the period before 300 BC, the importance of (new) archaeological investigation for the future study of the Italic languages can hardly be overestimated. This is not to deny that qualitative analysis of small samples can provide meaningful and significant insights. For instance, Zair’s analysis of influences from Oscan written in the Oscan alphabet (Ch. 4) demonstrates that ‘Oscan written in the Greek alphabet shows signs of having been influenced by the conventions of the Oscan alphabet’ (p. 165). This observation is not new, as Zair notes; but his study of the relevant evidence foregrounds Messana (modern-day Messina in north-eastern Sicily) over Lucania and Bruttium. Zair therefore suggests that the relevant spellings might have been employed in Messana ‘to emphasise a Campanian or Samnite identity despite the adoption of the Greek alphabet’ (p. 141). Again, the data pool is small (with seven inscriptions); but the qualitative analysis proves that the conventions of the Oscan alphabet were known in Messana – raising intriguing questions over the historical and contemporary contexts that explain the observed pattern.

¹⁷ This is not to suggest that linguistic change must always come in tandem with broader changes in society. The reform attempted by the emperor Claudius for instance, to introduce new letters, is a good example for a top-down (attempted) reform that was not obviously caused by (for instance) language contact as a result of widening cultural horizons. But no such (politically) centralised, top-down models are assumed for the postulated reform in Oscan.

¹⁸ *ImIt*, Petelia 2; see also notes 9 and 20.

¹⁹ 300-250: *ImIt*, Anxia 1; c. 250: *ImIt*, Messana 4 and 5; 300-200: *ImIt*, Crimisa 2. See also above, with n. 9.

²⁰ See *ImIt*, Petelia 2 (‘Discovery, archaeological context, later history of object’): ‘Found on the surface in loc. Cassana, near the necropolis areas of Fondo Castello and le Manche’; with M. L. Lazzarini, ‘Lamina plumbea iscritta da Petelia’, *Mediterraneo Antico* 7.2 (2004) 673-80. Note also that the inscribed text displays both <ω> and <ο> for /o/ in the same name and case, when referring to one Caunota Statia (?) (καῤνοτα στατία) and one Emauta Statia (εμαυτο στατία).

Journal of Roman Archaeology 31 (2018)

A number of broader questions are also raised by the general contention among linguists that Oscan written in the *Oscan* alphabet too underwent a spelling reform c. 300 BC (e.g. pp. 2, 26-27, 150). First, if such a spelling reform took place, what were the social and economic, cultural, religious and/or political contexts that encouraged or promoted it, around 300 BC, especially on the ground (i.e. among ordinary Oscan-users) in (primarily) south-central Italy? And how are we to imagine more broadly the relationship between historical change and linguistic change in this period and geography? Regarding the adoption of Latin among Oscan-speaking groups, scholars have typically foregrounded significant change in the socio-political landscape of Italy as the driver, caused by the Roman conquest of Italy and the associated processes euphemistically termed Romanisation. What are we to consider, then, to have been the drivers behind, opportunities for, or facilitators of the spelling reform *in* Oscan? For the non-linguist the term ‘reform’ may in any case read as fairly strong in the context of a tiny number of changes to letter shapes (esp. the addition of diacritics to the Oscan letter <u> to form <ú> to represent /o/, and to the Oscan letter <i> to form <í> to represent /e/).²¹ The conventions of different disciplines are of course what they are. But the example of the spelling reform throws into relief the quite different research trajectories and perspectives of the disciplines involved in the study of ancient Italy: by contrast to the notion of a spelling reform around 300 BC, discussion of the histories and material cultures of the Oscan-speaking peoples of ancient Italy does not single out 300 BC as a particular watershed for significant change. The answers to the above questions could have a seminal bearing on our understanding of the relationship between Oscan-speaking communities and Rome, on our understanding of the influence of Rome on other peoples, and of the influence of the non-Roman peoples on Rome more broadly.

The ‘Greek in Italy’-project identifies dialogue across disciplinary boundaries as one of its four key aims, with particular regard to scholarship concerned with Greek colonisation in Italy, especially of an archaeological and historical nature, ‘to integrate issues of linguistic contact and linguistic borrowing into the discourse of archaeologists, historians and other scholars working on Greek colonization in Italy, and to promote dialogue between linguists and other scholars’.²² The above questions make for obvious points of contact for such a dialogue. There is, moreover, potentially much to be gained from confronting the very different methodological approaches used for instance by linguists, historians and archaeologists respectively – regarding especially the question over what absence of evidence can tell us, and what not.

Notwithstanding the issues raised above especially in regard to sample size, Zair’s study is a fine example of how much can be done with very little evidence, demonstrating the possibilities inherent in engaging with often highly fragmentary and seemingly isolated materials. The rigorous linguistic analysis, the clear argumentation, and the impeccable presentation make Zair’s book a rewarding read. And while its focus is entirely on the linguistic aspects of the studied materials, *Oscan in the Greek alphabet* shows the necessity for collaboration across different disciplines and between different specialists to advance our understanding of a geography and a period that we all care about so much, raising intriguing questions of a methodological, archaeological, and historical nature. In short, Zair’s study is a must-read for anyone interested in ancient Italy, non-linguists explicitly included.

The book offers in conclusion changes to current datings based on letter shapes and orthography to roughly 10% of the Oscan texts in the Greek alphabet – nine in total, of which one, a dedication to Mefitis is moved entirely from the date range suggested by previous scholars

²¹ Well known examples that sport both ‘new’ and ‘old’ letters are constituted by two building inscriptions from Pompeii: one recording the letting of a building contract through the quaestor V. Vinicius (and his subsequent approval of the works), financed through monies passed by the will of one V. Adiranus to the Pompeian *vercia* (*ImIt*, Pompei 24); the other (*ImIt*, Pompei 8) recording the act of V. Popidius in his role as *meddix tuticus* to build and approve, and once affixed to the inward-facing side of the arch of the Porta di Nola, but now displayed in the British Museum (Museum/Registration number: 1867,0508.76; displayed at G71/dc5).

²² *Supra* n. 1.

Journal of Roman Archaeology 31 (2018)

(from 125-100 BC to 325-200 BC),²³ and another, perhaps a miniature altar, remains (now) undated.²⁴

ULRIKE ROTH, The University of Edinburgh, u.roth@ed.ac.uk

This article is published in the *Journal of Roman Archaeology* and should be cited from that publication, including from the journal's page numbers.

OA COPY

²³ *ImIt*, Potentia 14.

²⁴ *ImIt*, Lucania or Brettii or Sicilia 1.