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### **Competing Standards: Orthographic and Epigraphic Standardisation in Italy 500-100 BC**

Among the many written languages attested in Italy in the first millennium BC, there are varying levels of alphabetic and orthographic standardisation. A few languages, such as Latin, have a single strong orthographic standard centred on a single influential urban centre. Other languages which have multiple important and influential urban centres may show several competing standards. These competing standards often appear to have developed very quickly during the increased urbanisation of the sixth and fifth centuries, and can be maintained as stable regional differences over many centuries once they have been accepted. It is not always clear, though, how and why these standard orthographies have developed or what impression they are supposed to make on the intended readership.

Using Venetic and Oscan as particular case studies, this paper explores the different patterns of standardisation of alphabets and spellings systems in the languages of ancient Italy. In the Veneto, the nearby cities of Este and Padua maintain different standard orthographies and alphabets over hundreds of years, reflecting carefully maintained differences in the material cultures of the two cities. In Oscan-speaking Italy, however, there is wide standardisation of orthography across large geographical regions. But in Oscan, we also need to explain the development and maintenance of three different long-lived alphabets for writing the language. I suggest that alphabets and orthography were actively used – independently of the language of the inscription – to signal group membership, to reinforce ties to nearby cities or groups, or to reiterate the separate identities of different urban elites. I also suggest that the maintenance of different standards also had a part to play in differing regional reactions to “Romanization” and the adoption of Latin.