

"For a Long Time, Inscriptions Were the Scholars' Favourite Plaything". The Place of Latin Inscriptions in Peripheral Central European Collections and Museums – A Case Study of Monuments Preserved in Polish Holdings

"For a Long Time, Inscriptions Were the Scholars' Favourite Plaything" wrote Stanisław Kostka Potocki at the early 19th century, a pioneer of art history and archaeology in Poland and the author of *O sztuce u dawnych, czyli Winkelman polski* (On the Art of the Ancients, or the Polish Winckelmann), a three-volume work inspired by the writings of J. J. Winckelmann. This project is grounded in a critical reflection on that statement. Though slightly ironic, it captures the former way of treating inscriptions solely as texts, detached from their materiality and historical context. Meanwhile, disciplines such as epigraphy, archaeology, and museum studies adopt a fundamentally different approach. Inscriptions are no longer seen merely as documents but as physical objects with complex biographies, created in antiquity, collected and reinterpreted in the modern era, and now functioning as museum exhibits.

The project focuses on Latin inscriptions from the Roman period currently held in Polish museum collections. Most of these inscriptions arrived in the 18th and 19th centuries, brought to Central Europe during the widespread fascination with antiquity by aristocrats, collectors, as well as teachers and humanists. They were imported from Italy and other regions once part of the Roman Empire. Today, they are housed in institutions such as the National Museum in Warsaw, the Czartoryski Museum in Kraków (a branch of the National Museum in Kraków), and the Museum in Nieborów and Arkadia (a branch of the National Museum in Warsaw). Most of them have not yet been studied using contemporary scholarly methods – and many have never been published.

The aim of the project is to examine these inscriptions as "objects with histories": to trace their origins, identify who collected them, understand why they were acquired, and explore how they were presented and interpreted across different historical moments. Special attention will be placed on their museological, cultural, and political contexts – especially considering that most of the collections in question were formed in areas considered "peripheral" to the major centers of classical research: in the lands of partitioned Poland, East Prussia, or Silesia.

The starting point for this research is the assumption that inscriptions entered collections primarily as symbols of affiliation with Western European classical culture, often serving as prestigious decorations in lapidaria or gardens, rather than because of their completeness or legibility. At the same time, another form of their use existed – more functional and didactic – as exemplified by the collection in Braniewo, where inscriptions were gathered as auxiliary materials for teaching Latin, rhetoric, and ancient culture. Today, with modern museological approaches and interdisciplinary research methods, it is possible to reveal the full significance of these objects – not only as historical texts, but as artefacts with complex cultural biographies.

The project uses contemporary research methods, including 3D documentation, RTI (Reflectance Transformation Imaging), archival research, and modern digital epigraphy tools. These techniques allow for improved readings of worn or intentionally erased inscriptions and support the reconstruction of the full "biographies" of the objects – their movements, changing roles, and evolving modes of display. This approach makes it possible to treat inscriptions not merely as textual sources but as artifacts layered with textual, material, and visual meanings. In this way, the project offers a new quality in the study of ancient heritage and its reception and serves as an argument for their interdisciplinary interpretation.

The outcome of the project will be critical studies of Latin inscriptions preserved in Polish museum collections, along with the associated collecting and museological practices. These studies will consider not only the content of the inscriptions, but also their physical features, acquisition histories, display strategies, and shifting interpretive contexts. The research will result in new critical editions and digital documentation. The project addresses a significant gap in the study of Roman epigraphy in Central Europe, while also showing that objects gathered in politically peripheral collections played a key role in shaping modern forms of cultural memory, identity, and participation in the European classical heritage.