# The Novilara Stele (PID 343) and Italic Warrior Ritual

Roger D. Woodard

*Résumé : La stèle de Novilara (PID 343) semble être l'un des deux seuls documents connus à préserver le picène du Nord, langue de l'âge du Fer en Italie. Bien que cette langue ait longtemps été considérée comme probablement indo-européenne (et peut-être italique), l'inscription, qui apparaît au recto de la stèle de Novilara, s'est avérée notoirement difficile à interpréter. Dans cet article, je propose que la glyptique du verso de la tablette soit destinée à illustrer (1) une expression italienne locale du triple sacrifice ancestral indo-européen et (2) un événement de combat arrangé, un phénomène largement attesté parmi les premiers peuples indo-européens – y compris italiques. Je suggère en outre qu'une lecture correcte des deux scènes fournit des indications utiles à l'interprétation de certains éléments linguistiques de l'inscription au recto et, ce faisant, confirme l'authenticité de notre document en langue du picène du Nord.*
*Mots-clés : Picène du Nord, Étrusque, Iguvium, triple sacrifice indo-européen, triple feu indo-européen, combat arrangé, Horaces, Curiaces.*
*Abstract : The Novilara Stele (PID 343) appears to be one of only two known documents to preserve the Iron-Age language of Italy that has been called North Picene. Though this language has been long viewed as likely Indo-European (and possibly Italic), the inscription, which appears on the obverse side of the Novilara Stele, has proven notoriously difficult to interpret. In this article I propose that the glyptic of the reverse side of the tablet is meant to illustrate (1) a local Italian expression of the ancestral Indo-European triple sacrifice and (2) an event of arranged combat, a phenomenon widely attested among early – including Italic – Indo-European peoples. A proper reading of the two scenes, I further suggest, provides elegant guidance in interpretation of certain linguistic elements of the inscription of the obverse side and, in so doing, supports the authenticity of our evidence of North Picene language.*
*Keywords : North Picene, Etruscan, Iguvium, Indo-European triple sacrifice, Indo-European triple fires, arranged combat, Horatii, Curiatii.*

The Novilara Stele, PID (*Prae-Italic Dialects of Italy* [= Whatmough 1933]) 343, is best known for preserving the longest surviving text in what has been identified as the North Picene language.[1] The text appears on what

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1. Novilara Stele, PID 343, resides in the collection of the Museo Preistorico Etnografico "Luigi Pigorini" in Rome. This stele should not be confused with that one which is engraved with a scene of Picene nautical combat ("Stele delle Navi," Museo Oliveriano di Pesaro) which has also been sometimes simply labeled as "the Novilara Stele." For that image see Naso 2000, figure 73, with Naso's comments on pages 227–228. I am grateful to Professor Naso for giving me permission to use the obverse and reverse images of the Novilara Stele PID 343 that appear in his 2000 work. High-resolution color images can be viewed at https://ilcantooscuro.wordpress.com/2020/02/28/iscrizioni-di-novilara/#jp-carousel-16411 (image is reversed) and https://ilcantooscuro.wordpress.com/2020/02/28/iscrizioni-di-novilara/#jp-carousel-16410.

I will here call the *obverse* side of the stele, a monument fashioned from a sandstone block, approximately 63 cm by 45 cm in height and breadth. The skillfully-executed inscription runs in 12 lines, from right to left, etched in an Etruscan alphabet. On the *reverse* side appears an example of North Picene glyptic, less adroit in its execution.

PID 343 is one of several inscriptions that Whatmough (1933:207–257) identified as attesting North Picene language: these are PID 342–347. PID 346 is a short bilingual text, bearing a Latin counterpart to the undeciphered portion; Lejeune (1962:162), however, argued persuasively that the non-Latin text is Etruscan (on the text see more recently Zavaroni 2003, with bibliography). PID 347 has also been eliminated from the corpus: its brief text appears to be written in Umbrian (see Rix 2002:64 [= Um 23]). The inscription of PID 342, consisting of four words, each on a different side of a bone tessera, is perhaps also Etruscan, the terms comparing to Etruscan lexemes found in the corpus of Rix 1991.2 (see Agostiniani 2003:115n6).

Concerns over the authenticity of some or all of the three remaining North Picene inscriptions have been raised. A notable work in this regard is Agostiniani 2003, in which that author contends that PID 344 alone can be judged to be authentic, owing to its excavation documentation (see especially page 122). The view that all of the North Picene inscriptions are forgeries has been tenaciously advocated by Belfiore 2021. Belfiore, an Etruscologist, would appear to be operating with an *a priori* assumption that the inscriptions are fakes and sets out to show how such fakes could be manufactured.[2] A more moderate tone is struck by Di Carlo 2009 (and see earlier Di Carlo 2005–2006), a work in which he is responding, in part, to Agostiniani 2003 (and comparing Morandi 1988–1989 and Zavaroni 2002). Di Carlo concludes, largely on epigraphic and linguistic grounds, that the inscriptions of PID 343 and 344 are genuine and that they constitute the entirety of the known North Picene language corpus.

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2. Upon reading the work one is left wondering if Belfiore's mode of operation could be applied to nearly any random inscription on stone, or on some other medium, in order to declare it to be a forgery, other than those artefacts equipped with the very tightest provenience. The now generally discredited attempt to declare the Praeneste Fibula to be a forgery, promoted by Margherita Guarducci, comes readily to mind.

The glyphs on the reverse side of PID 343 straightwardly appear to be intended to construct a semiotic system. What I would like to do in this study is to examine closely the several component signs of that system and to offer an interpretation of the sign structure which is sensitive to the socio-historical, ritual context of early Indo-European Italy and its ancestral Indo-European heritage. I believe that a plausible reading emerges, one that entails warrior elements which are not only attested in Italic tradition, but which have homologues in both Vedic and Greek tradition. The reading of the glyphs as the representation of one expression of early Indo-European warrior ritual appears to be consistent with the text of the obverse side to the extent that meaningful inferences can be made about the text. My hope is that this investigation will shed some light on the question of the authenticity of the PID 343. The art of the Novilara Stele will thus provide the focal point of my investigation. But before we examine the artwork, something needs to be said about the nearly impenetrable inscription (as it has been traditionally viewed) that accompanies the glyphs.

**Text**

The stele, PID 343, may attest one of only two known inscriptions that appear to preserve a North Picene language of sixth-century BC Italy. Unlike South Picene, which is clearly an Italic language of the Sabellian variety (thus, related to the much better-attested Oscan and Umbrian), the genetic affiliation of North Picene is a matter of some uncertainty. A sound and concise treatment of the text of PID 343 is provided by Poultney (1979), who assesses and builds on earlier work, notably Herbig 1927, Whatmough 1933, Norden 1934, Rosenkranz 1935, and Brandenstein 1941.[3]

The inscription of PID 343 is nearly completely legible and epigraphically familiar, being presented in an Etruscan alphabet (unsurprising given the date and location of the stele) of, ultimately, Euboean Greek origin.[4] The language that the inscription records is, however, quite poorly

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3. Poultney (p. 63, n. 15) also calls attention to and comments on Durante 1978. See earlier Durante 1962.

4. For an epigraphic analysis of the various characters, with phonological considerations, see Di Carlo 2005–2006:10–25; see also Blažek 2008–2009:174–177.

understood. Following is Poultney's transcription of the text (1979:50), based upon that of Whatmough (for Poultney's transcription values see his pages 52–54):



**Figure 1.**

**Novilara Stele: Obverse (Naso 2000)**

1.       mimnis · erů̃t · gaarestades
2.       rotnem · ů̃vlin · parten · ů̃s
3.       polem · isairon · tet
4.       sů̃t · trat · neši · krů̃š
5.       tenag · trů̃t · ipiem · rotneš
6.       lů̃tů̃is · θalů̃ · isperion · vů̃l
7.       tes · rotem · teů̃ · aiten · tašů̃r
8.       soter · merpon · kalatne
9.       nis · vilatos · paten · arn
10.      ů̃is · balestenag · ands · et
11.      šů̃t · i · aků̃t · treten · teletaů̃
12.      nem · polem · tišů̃ · sotris · eů̃s

Poultney (1979:54–56) proposes that the text is composed in verse,[5] consisting of "six trochaic tetrameters catalectic," a scansion that would seem to fit the periodic structure of the text well. Eichner (1993:202–203) comes to a similar conclusion. It is a highly plausible proposal, and we might add that the meter itself may inform our "understanding" of the *nature* of the largely incomprehensible text; this is so in light of the association of trochaic tetrameter catalectic with warrior contexts. One thinks of the often-mentioned use of this meter by Roman soldiers, providing the marching cadence called the *septenarius*, on display at military triumphs.[6] But perhaps equally revealing in this regard may be the use of the meter in the archaic Greek poetry of Archilochus of Paros (seventh century BC). Bowie (2018) has argued that fragments of poems in which Archilochus uses trochaic tetrameter catalectic are preserved from battle narratives (which seems assured) and that they were performed at warrior gatherings, as in (pp. 38–39) preparation for combat,[7] or perhaps for the burial of fallen warriors after a battle. Poultney's examination of the apparent morphology and phonology of

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5. See already the comments in this regard of Brandenstein 1941:1190–1191.

6. For general treatment of the meter, see, for example, Lindsay 1922:282–285; Postgate 1923:95–96.

7. Such as (p. 38) "a gathering of the Parian στρατός on Thasos, called by a *strategos* or *archon* who will lead this στρατός . . . into battle."

the North Picene inscriptions (1979:57–61) leads him to conclude (p. 61) that the language is "in all probability" an Indo-European language, as had Herbig (1927) before him, and perhaps specifically, again in agreement with Herbig, a form of Illyrian (about which precious little is known).

*Polem*

Tentatively – with much caution – Poultney briefly examines several individual lexemes found on the Novilara Stele (PID 343) from a comparative Indo-European perspective . Thus (p. 59), he compares *polem* (lines 3 and 12) to the Greek accusative πόλιν, as investigators have commonly done. Greek πόλις is frequently identified as expressing a collective political identity – 'city', 'country', 'community', corresponding to Latin *cīvitās*. However, as Benveniste (1969.1:367) emphasizes, in the historical period Greek πόλις fundamentally denotes 'fortress, citadel'; and this is consistent with Proto-Indo-European usage as indicated by cognates such as Sanskrit *pū́r* 'wall, stronghold, fortress' and Lithuanian *pilìs* 'fortress' (also Latvian *pils* 'fortress').[8] Construction of permanent fortifications would hardly be expected of transhumant ancestral Indo-Europeans: for the semantic origin of the term we should look to a practice of erecting temporary enclosures that provide physical and/or metaphysical protection. If Proto-Indo-European \*pelH-, the etymon of πόλις etc., is to be related ultimately to \*pel(i)s- 'rock', as Gamkrelidze and Ivanov (1995:648n11) contend, then we may envision an ancestral structure of piled rocks serving to enclose some designated space. Among reflexes of \*pel(i)s- Gamkrelidze and Ivanov draw particular attention to Sanskrit (neuter plural) *pā́ṣyà*, meaning not only 'stones' but also a 'bulwark of stones', as in *Rig Veda* 1.56.6 of the enclosure of Vṛtra. The Sanskrit form occurs in the dual (gen. *pāṣíyor*) in *Rig Veda* 9.102.2a, denoting the two pressing stones of Soma cult, here enigmatically called the 'two stones of the third one'. The 'third one' is simply Sanskrit *tritá-* 'third', but the referent is obscure.[9]

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8. See also Walde and Pokorny 1927:51; Chantraine 1968:926–927; Mallory and Adams 1997:210; Watkins 2011:66.

9. The mythic Trita Āptya, the third of the Āptya brothers, would readily present himself as a possible referent; Trita Āptya is a homologue of the Roman warrior Horatius, victor over the triple Curiatii: see Dumézil 1942, 1956, and 1985; see also

*Kruštenag*, *balestenag*, *arn|ůis* and *mimnis*

Other graphemic sequences in the text of PID 343 that Poultney (1979) identifies as lexemes (guided by interspersed punctuation marks) and discusses include the following. He draws attention (p. 59) to the "two long words *kruštenag* [lines] 4–5 and *balestenag* [line] 10" and suggests the possibility that these might perhaps be agent nouns ending in the formant *-ags* (from Proto-Indo-European *$h_1 a\hat{g}$- 'to drive, lead'). Here he compares Latin *rēmex*, *rēmigis* 'rower'[10] (from *rēmus* 'oar; rowing'). As a further potential comparandum, we should consider Greek *stratāgós* (στρατᾱγός) 'leader of the army', from *stratós* (στρατός) 'warrior host'. This Greek agent noun appears earliest in Archilochus *fr.* 114.1 West, which happens to be one of the fragments composed in trochaic tetrameter catalectic that we mentioned above (see Bowie 2018:36–37). With *arn|ůis* (lines 9–10) Poultney compares (p. 60) Latin *armīs*, dative/ablative plural of *arma* 'weapons; defensive arms' (from Proto-Indo-European *$h_1$ar-mo-), drawing attention to the similarity between the North Picene termination in -*ůis* and that of Oscan dative-ablative/instrumental plurals such as **eídúís** (Latin *īdibus*) , **feíhúís** ('behind the walls'), and **lígatúís** ('by the envoys'). With *mimnis*, the very first word of the inscription, Poultney (p. 60) compares the Indo-European root *men- 'to think', suggesting a possible meaning 'monument' (that is, 'memorial') for *mimnis*. More recently, Harkness (2011:13) has drawn attention to Oscan **memnim**, which equally has been proposed to mean 'monument, memorial',[11] as what he contends to be confirmation of Poultney's suggestion.

*Rotnem*

Line 2 of the North Picene inscription begins with the lexeme *rotnem*. The form likely also occurs at the end of line 5, as in Eichner's (1993:201) transcription, though others, including Whatmough, have there read

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Woodard 2013:179, 183, 241. On Horatii and Curiatii, see below.

10. On the formation see Ernout and Meillet 1959:17,

11. On this possible meaning, see the comments of Untermann 2000:469, with bibliography of earlier work.

*rotneš.*[12] A form *rotem* is found in line 7, and one might suspect that this is simply a spelling variant of *rotnem*: compare the orthographic variation that is especially common in Umbrian texts, characterized by Buck (1979:27) as being "as diverse as possible" and as occurring "sometimes wholly promiscuously." Omission of the symbol *n* before a consonant (rather than after, as in *rotnem ~ rotem*) occurs often in both Umbrian and Oscan. Harkness (2011, see especially pp. 24–26) proposes that North Picene *rotnem* is related to Latin *rota* 'wheel', drawing attention also to Sanskrit *ratha-* 'chariot' and Lithuanian *rãtas* 'wheel' (which in the plural denotes 'wagon').[13] These have their origin in the Proto-Indo-European verb root *ret- 'to run, roll'.

Reflexes of Proto-Indo-European verb root *ret- are broadly distributed geographically, though an *n*-stem (i.e. a formant agreeing with *rot-nem*) does not appear to be otherwise in evidence.[14] In regard to North Picene *rotnem*, we should note, however, that Latin does offer an adjectival *-nd-* derivative *rotundus/rutundus* 'wheel-shaped, round'. This is a stem formation that is productive only in Italic, providing the Latin "gerundive." The comparable forms in Oscan and Umbrian show assimilation of *-nd-* to *-n(n)-*: thus, for example, Umbrian *pihaner* and *pehaner* (genitive singular), from the verb meaning 'to purify' (a form we will encounter again below).[15] If North Picene *rot-n-em* should display this same stem formation, with the phonological modification seen in Oscan and Umbrian, then we would have here strong evidence not only for North Picene being an Indo-European language, but also for it being an Italic language – or the attested remnant of some Indo-European group quite close to Italic. An evolutionary course *rot-ond-o/e- → *rot-onn-o/e- → *rot-on-o/e- → *rot-n-o/e- entails in the last-noted step (i.e. *rot-on-o/e- → *rot-n-o/e-) syncope of the medial vowel. Such a development

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12. Both Di Carlo 2005–2006:6 and Blažek 2008–2009:174 leave both options open.

13. Though the plausibility of Harkness' (2011:14) suggestion that the North Picene inscription is identifying the stele as a "wheel-monument" is difficult to evaluate. See below on the possible significance of the wheel symbols that occur at top center of both sides of the stele.

14. See, *inter alia*, Mallory and Adams 1997:491, 640–641; Wodtko, Irslinger, and Schneider 2008:575–580; Watkins 2011:73–74.

15. For discussion see Poultney 1959:140.

would be consistent with the word-initial stress that Poultney (1979:54–55) suggests to characterize the North Picene language – as indicated by the metrical pattern. We think in this regard of the so-called "vowel weakening" and vowel-syncope processes in Latin medial syllables that appear to have been conditioned by an archaic word-initial-stress pattern. Such syncope in North Picene may have been sensitive to fine-grained phonological (and perhaps morphological) conditioning, but if it occurs commonly enough it may be one factor that complicates efforts to identify lexemes of Indo-European origin.

The Latin concept and descriptor *rotunda* (feminine) 'round' are conspicuous within the context of Roman cult space. Ovid employs the term in lines on the *aedēs* of Vesta, in which he tells his readers why it is that Vesta's sacred architectural space is 'round' rather than quadrangular, which is the shape of a *templum* (see *Fasti* 6.265–282; for *forma rotunda* see line 280).[16] The spherical earth-shape of Vesta's *aedēs* is crucially linked to the flame that burns within that space; it is the *vigil* 'sleepless' (*Fasti* 6.267) sacred flame of Rome which ensures Rome's security: *significant sedem terra focusque suam* '<u>earth</u> and hearth denote their own fixity' (*Fasti* 6.268). Dumézil (1954:27–43; 2000:318–332) has demonstrated that the *forma rotunda* of Vesta's *aedēs* and the outline of the quadrangular *templa* of the *Forum Romanum* correspond to the respective shapes of the Vedic sacrificial fires called the *Gārhapatya* (round) and *Āhavanīya* (square) which burn within the sacred space of the Iṣṭi. The third Vedic fire is the *Dakṣiṇāgni* (of half-moon shape), the fire that turns away menacing forces. The *Dakṣiṇāgni* burns at the southern margin of the Iṣṭi space. It finds a Roman counterpart in the fire of the sanctuary of the fire-god Volcanus, the Volcanal, located within that most sacred of archaic Roman spaces, the Comitium.[17] It is the devouring fire, marginal in its placement because of its destructive capacity, and through its location protecting the edifices within the walls by drawing Volcanus to that spot (Vitruvius 1.7.1). The doctrine of the triple sacred fires and their shapes is clearly one of Proto-Indo-European origin.

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16. See Boyle and Woodard 2004:146, 291–293.
17. See also Woodard 2006:82–83, 152–155 and 2013:52–56, 80–81.

*Isairon*

With the North Picene form *isairon* in line 3, Poultney (1979:60, following Rosenkranz 1935:112) compares Greek ἱερός 'filled with divine power, holy, hallowed, under divine protection'.[18] The Greek adjective ἱερός is a reflex of the Proto-Indo-European root *\*eis-*, an etymon linked with notions of energetic vitality and the sacred. A nominal stem *\*is-(H)ro-* gives Greek ἱερός (Doric ἱαρός, Aeolic ἵαρος) 'filled with divine power' and Sanskrit *iṣirá-* 'vigorous', which is used too as a name of the fire-god Agni. In his study of these Greek and Sanskrit cognates, Benveniste (1969.2:192–196) draws attention to the formulaic Greek syntagm ἱερὸν μένος (eight times in Homer's *Odyssey*),[19] literally 'holy power'[20] and the comparable Sanskrit syntagm *iṣiréṇa mánasā* 'with a vigorous spirit' (*Rig Veda* 8.48.7). We are here dealing with a deeply archaic poetic formulation. As Benveniste reminds us (p. 195), Greek ἱερός can also modify στρατός 'army', or, more accurately 'warrior horde', found at *Odyssey* 24.81 within a description of the funeral rites of Achilles, in which the warrior's body (line 71) is consumed by the 'flame of Hephaestus' (φλὸξ . . . Ἡφαίστοιο), along with his weapons. The warrior horde is not innately ἱερός 'sacred', as Benveniste rightly points out, but is made ἱερός by its participation in the sacred rites dedicated to a fallen warrior.

North Picene *isairon* follows the form *polem* in line 3 of the stele text. It would seem probable, however, in contrast to the constructions of the preceding paragraph, that the phrase *polem* □ *isairon* would not constitute a noun phrase; though it goes without saying that we cannot be certain. *Polem* (line 3 and 12) should perhaps be construed as an accusative singular nominal (thus, *inter alia*, Poultney 1979:59), along with the other forms terminating in *-em*: *rotnem* (lines 2 and 5)/*rotem* (line 7), *ipiem* (line 5), and *teletaŭ-nem* (lines 11–12). Given this, the form *isairon* (line 3), terminating in the orthographic sequence *-on*, perhaps

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18. On the idea that North Picene *isairon* names the *Isaurum*– purported earlier name of the *Pisaurum* (see CIL VIII, 25741 e and Lucan *Pharsalia* 2.406) – river from which Pesaro takes its name, see most recently Coarelli 2023:297n13. See earlier Durante 1962:74 and 1978:397 and 428n9, with reference to still earlier work.

19. *Odyssey* 7.167; 8.2, 4, 385, 421; 13.20, 24; 18.34.

20. On the Greek formula see Nagy 2008 II§41.

spells a third-person plural verb (i.e. from word-final \*-*ont*), a possibility that Poultney (p. 60) intimates; the same – again, perhaps – may hold for *isperion* (line 6) and *merpon* (line 8). We may thus be dealing in line 3 with a verb phrase that expresses the performance of some action of making a *polem* sacral, much as the Greek στρατός is ritually made to be ἱερός. Compare the Greek denominative ἱερόω 'to consecrate', as in, for example, Plutarch's *Roman Questions* 269F–270A: here Plutarch writes that the Romans ἱέρωσαν 'consecrated' the first month of the year Ὀλυμπίοις θεοῖς 'to the Olympian gods' (!) but the second month χθονίοις 'to chthonian [gods]'. Note too that the *polem* specified at the beginning of line 3 may perhaps be modified by the *rotnem* that begins line 2 – a point to which we shall return below.

**Art**

Let us now turn our attention to the images incised on the reverse side of the Novilara stele (PID 343), which will be our primary concern. The scenes depicted have been often presumed (as, for example, by Whatmough and Poultney) to be related to the narrative of the inscribed text. This seems a plausible association and it will be for me a working hypothesis. *À la* Bowie 2018 and Archilochus (see above), we might suspect that the text, composed in trochaic tetrameters catalectic, preserves verses uttered at a ritual gathering of warriors. The art clearly portrays warrior activity. I believe that Poultney thus judges rightly when he offers, as a general consideration, (1979:51) that "it seems reasonable to use the drawing for help in ascertaining the content of the written text." It appears, however, that relatively little attention has been directed toward a careful and deliberate interpretation of the images.

*Lower register: sacrifice of bull and boar*

The carved surface presents itself as divided into an upper and a lower register. It is the lower register that I would like to consider first. Here two human figures are depicted in the center field standing back-to-back, roughly balanced, but with the figure on the left raised head-and-

shoulders above that one on the right, perhaps simply a function of the space left available as incising of the composition advanced.



**Figure 2.**
**Novilara Stele: Reverse (Naso 2000)**

Each of the figures holds a spear and it appears that each spear is being thrust into an animal, penetrating in the area of the neck. The two

animals are presented in an approximately symmetrical fashion, facing toward center, with their tails and hindquarters incised near the two edges of the stone and their heads oriented towards the two human figures. The heads of the animals approach the heads of the humans.

As we shall see, human corpses appear in the upper register. Poultney (1979:51) proposes that what is being depicted on the reverse side of the stele is thus either a battle or a boar-hunt. Which would it be? The presentation of animals in what I have identified as the lower register leads Poultney to suggest that there "seems a strong ground for taking the scenes to be those of a hunt, not a battle." What is being depicted, I will argue, is however neither a hunt nor a "battle," at least not a battle of a conventional sort.

The image of the animal that is incised on the left unquestionably represents a male bovine, which I will identify simply as a "bull." It seems reasonably clear that the artist intended the animal depicted on the right to be porcine; it has large hindquarters with a characteristic dorsal pelvic hump, thin tail of appropriate length, and massive head resembling *grosso modo* that of an adult pig. There is little presented in the way of finer anatomical detail: no tusks are presented, nor ears for that matter, but there may be some indication of intended male body profile.[21]

Boar hunting with a spear is well known in Greek tradition: one thinks readily of distinctive Mycenaean boar-tusk helmets, of an archaic epic of a Calydonian Boar Hunt, of the identifying scar of Odysseus (trace of a wound inflicted by a boar), and so on. The situation has been judged to be different in Italy, however, at least among Romans: it has been something of a conventional view that during the time of the monarchy and the early Republic Romans did not engage in hunting. The evidence is discussed by Anderson (1985:83–100) in his authoritative work on hunting in the Greco-Roman world; and Anderson too endorses the

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21. Herbig (1927:128) saw here a bear, but a bear seems not at all intended. Poultney (1979:51) makes note of Brandenstein's (1941:1194) response to Herbig: "nicht Bär," which is undoubtedly correct. Examination of ancient Italian graphic representations of boars and bears reveals that the head of a boar is typically large and shaped much like that of the animal on the Novilara Stele, whereas bears are given a quite distinct, more elongated, less massive, head.

idea that early Romans did not hunt, at least not for blood-sport. That dangerous, destructive wild animals were hunted down and killed on an *ad hoc* basis must, of course, have been the case. When hunting as sport became somewhat normative among Roman elites in the second century BC, it was boar hunting with heavy spears that appears to have been predominant, followed by the chase for deer with light javelins; in the first century AD, hunting for hares acquired popularity (on all of which see Anderson 1985:93, 97). Green (1996) presents a survey of the previous scholarship and challenges this conventional model, contending for hunting being commonplace among earlier Romans.

Whatever we might make of Green's arguments, whatever might have been the practice in Latium in the sixth century BC, we must allow that hunt-customs may have been otherwise in the northern coastal Picene region. Green (1996:231–233) draws attention to the evidence of hunting as sport among elite Etruscans; this evidence is chiefly decorative in nature and not integrally linked, it seems, to warrior activities (p. 231): "these artifacts belonged to a section of society that did not have to spend the major portion of its time finding food or fighting off intruders." As Green acknowledges we must certainly see Greek influences at work in the Etruscan artistic evidence for hunting.

In funerary contexts the influence of Greek and Etruscan practices appears in North Picenum in the seventh century BC (so Menozzi and Ciarico 2017:590–591). This is a period, Picene III, in which elite warrior burials entail "swords, spears, helmets, shields, and a new status symbol, the chariot."[22] In Picene IVA (sixth century), approximately the period of the Novilara Stele, burials containing chariots become more common. Picene IVB provides the stunning head of a funerary statue of the "Numana warrior."

If we were to isolate the lower right register of the Novilara depiction and focus our attention solely on the image of the figure who is thrusting his spear into a pig, we might be prone to interpret the act as a hunting scene, perhaps made a part of a warrior composition under the influence of imported Greek traditions of heroic action.[23] But if we

22. Here Menozzi and Ciarico (2017:590) cite Camerin 1997.
23. See Colona 1992:93–98.

widen our gaze to include the opposing scene of a figure stabbing a bull, this hardly appears feasible. The notion of going spear-hunting for bulls within a context of heroic tradition is decidedly odd. A favorite pastime of the Indo-European warrior may have been cattle thieving, but not bull spear-hunting. Bulls are routinely killed in Italian antiquity, of course, but that is a matter of sacrificial ritual, not of hunting as heroic alternative to war-making.

We are given to understand that a heavy axe is the implement that Romans typically used in the ritual immolation of a bull. Most likely, as Aldrete (2014) has argued, the animal's spinal column was severed in the cervical region by an initial axe stroke, after which the bull's throat was slit. A spear is surely not the implement that would have typically been used for the ritual slaying of a large and powerful bovine: that would be a marked ritual procedure – but, of course, it has been claimed that one such rite existed – the *taurobolium.*

### Taurobolium

The *taurobolium* is a Roman rite conspicuously associated with the cult of Magna Mater – that is, the Great Phrygian Mother Cybele.[24] The Latin term is a borrowing of Greek *taurobólion* (ταυροβόλιον), which can be seen as early as the first half of the first century BC in an inscription from Pinara in Lydia (TAM II 508.13), and in another, of nearly the same date, from the Troad (IMT Skam/Neb Täler 209.14). Like the goddess with whose cult the rite is associated, the *taurobolium* was an import to Rome from Asia Minor. The evidence provided by the several inscriptions from Asia Minor in which a *taurobolium* is mentioned (or insinuated) have been interpreted to suggest that the Anatolian ritual entailed a sort of "running of the bulls,"[25] though an early-second-century AD inscription from Pergamum (IGR 4.494, 499, 500) indicates

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24. A conjectured affiliation of a form of the rite with Mithraism is an uncertain matter.

25. Compare the ritual of running heifers through the Umbrian town of Iguvium, one element of the lustration of the Iguvine *populus.* For text and discussion see Poultney 1959:168, 292–294.

performance of a sacrifice.[26] In his discussion of the *taurobolium* Rutter (1968:228) makes passing reference to Suetonius *Claudius* 21: here we read of games celebrated in the Circus Maximus that entail Thessalian horsemen pursuing feral bulls, jumping on the animals, and wrestling them to the ground.

The typical Roman *taurobolium* seems to have been rather different from the Anatolian.[27] A particularly colorful description of the Roman rite is to be found in the often-rehearsed work of the fourth-fifth century Christian poet Prudentius.[28] In his *Peristephanon* 10.1006–1050 he writes of a celebrant descending into an excavated area covered by a platform constructed with gaping planks and drilled with holes. A sacrificial bull is led onto the platform and a consecrated *vēnābulum* 'hunting spear' is plunged into the breast of the bull with the result that the animal bleeds out, soaking the celebrant below with its blood.[29] As Turcan (1996:50, with note 73) points out, however, iconographic evidence points us not toward a *vēnābulum* but to a *harpē*, a dagger with a hook beneath the tip, as the implement used to open a wound in the bull of the *taurobolium*.

### October Equus

Whatever we may make of Prudentius' report of the use of a *vēnābulum* 'hunting spear' in the *taurobolium*, there is another Roman ritual that is conspicuously marked by the non-characteristic use of a spear as an instrument of immolation. The animal on this occasion, however, is a

26. An earlier inscription from Pergamum (MDAI(A) 29 (1904) 152,1. 27; c. 75–50 BC) mentions a sacrifice in conjunction with the celebration of a *criobolium* (entailing sacrifice of a ram), a rite also associated with Magna Mater in Rome. For discussion of the inscriptional evidence from Asia Minor, see*, inter alia*, Rutter 1968:227–230.

27. Though there is a minority opinion that holds otherwise, interpreting the shafts that form a component of Phrygian rock-cut cult façades as conduits for a shower of bull-blood per descriptions of the Roman cult of Magna Mater (see below in the main text). For a review of the evidence and scholarship, see Berndt-Ersöz 1998:94–95.

28. The accuracy of Prudentius' account has been dismissed by some in recent years (see, for example, note 50 of Beard 2012). One might well expect embellishment in a Christian apologetic context, but that context also makes the prospect of creation of a pure fiction implausible; to co-opt and invert Cameron (2011:160), who is numbered among the dismissive, the report must be at worst (rather than "at best") "a caricature of the truth."

29. Julius Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum* 27.8 (fourth century AD also) writes of blood drenching (*perfundō*) the celebrant during the rite.

war-horse, and its sacrifice is central not to a borrowed ritual but to one that Romans inherited from their Indo-European ancestors, as is revealed by the attestation of homologous rites among, at the least, Indo-Aryans and Celts.[30] The Roman reflex of this ancestral ritual finds expression in rites performed annually on the Ides of October – the *October Equus*, as Festus (pp. 178 and 179 M) names it. This ritual is a thoroughly martial affair, dedicated to Mars, conducted on the Campus Martius, at which the Flamen Martialis was likely the officiating priest, and marked by a great struggle between two "factions" – one residing in the gritty Subura, the other along the posh Sacra Via – for possession of the sacrificed horse's head. The sacrifice is preceded by a chariot race, the mechanism by which the victim is identified: the right-hand member of the winning team of horses is sacrificed. Polybius (12.4b.1), one of our several sources of information for the ritual, uses the verb κατακοντίζω to describe a piercing of the horse's body; the verb is derived from ἄκων, a term typically denoting 'javelin' rather than a heavy spear: the sacrificial horse is "javelined."

### Suovetaurilia

While Mars receives a horse in October, as the season of military campaigning in archaic Rome comes to an end, the animal that is routinely offered to the war god is the bull. One particularly significant iteration of the bull sacrifice to Mars is the *suovetaurīlia* – actually a triple sacrifice, that of a pig, sheep, and bull (hence the name: *su ove taura* [*facere*]). Mars is said to be the recipient, though at the same time there is clear reason to understand each of the three victims as dedicated to a separate deity: the pig to Tellus (earth-goddess), the sheep to Jupiter (sky-god), and, as usual, the bull to Mars.[31] Performance of the *suovetaurīlia* antedated the foundation of Rome: an exact homologue, *mutatis mutandis*, is provided by the Vedic triple sacrifice of the Sautrāmaṇī, consisting of a goat, a sheep, and a bull.[32] The recipient is, in a parallel fashion, the warrior-god Indra

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30. See, *inter alia*, Puhvel 1970:159–172; Watkins 1995:265–276; West 2007:417–419, and especially Dumézil 2000:225–239. See also Oudaer 2020 and 2021 on the Celtic rite.

31. See Woodard 2006:106, 128, building upon Benveniste 1945.

32. A goat substitutes for a pig in the Sautrāmaṇī as pigs are not offered as sacrifice

(the *Sutrāman* 'Good Protector'), though in actuality there is a plurality of divine recipients: the goat goes to the Aśvins, the sheep to Sarasvatī. The sacrifice is equally known among the Greeks, identified as the τριττύς, (or τριττύα or τρικτύα), for which there appears to be evidence already in the Mycenaean Greek documents.[33] The celebration of the Roman rite is associated with purification of space and entails a movement of the triple victims around the perimeter of a delimited space, or within the marked boundaries of that space.[34] Both the Roman and Vedic rites have explicit connections with the warrior realm. A *suovetaurīlia* is offered in connection with the lustration of the Roman army within the space of the Campus Martius; the ritual entails conducting the triple victims three times around the army.[35] The Vedic Sautrāmaṇī is performed as a component of the celebration of the Rajāsūya, ritual of the consecration of a warrior-king.[36]

Variant forms of the canonical *suovetaurīlia* are attested in and beyond Rome (and the same is true of the Greek τριττύς). In the annual rites of the Roman priests called the Fratres Arvales (said to be the "brothers of Romulus"), held in the sacred grove of their goddess Dea Dia (located at the fifth milestone south from Rome along the Via Campana), a variant *suovetaurīlia* is offered through the course of a single day of ritual activities; this triple sacrifice consists of two pigs, a cow, and a lamb.[37] In Falerii, reports Ovid, priestesses offer to Faliscan Juno, on a naturally-formed altar within an ancient sacred grove, a triple set of victims: a pig, a ram, and white cows and calves (Ovid *Amores* 3.13).[38]

Thanks to the fortuitous survival of bronze tablets recording rites performed by the Iguvine priests called the Frater Atiieřiur ('Atiedian Brothers'), we have knowledge of an Umbrian form of the triple sacrifice, which we see utilized in the 'purification' (*pihaner/pehaner/peihaner*, gen. sg.) of the city of Iguvium (referenced as purification of "the Fisian Mount"). The

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in Vedic rites: see Woodard 2006:105, 174.

33. See Woodard 2025, §4.5, §4.5.3.
34. See Woodard 2006:161–162, 263.
35. See Woodard 2006:104–105.
36. See Woodard 2006:105 and Woodard 2025, §§4.3.2–3, §4.4.1.
37. See Woodard 2006:132–140, 174, 180.
38. On the poem and its religious elements, see Farrell 2014.

procedure is described twice, with slight variation – once on tablet Ia 1–Ib 9, and once on VIa 1–VIb 47 – and is conducted in conjunction with ritual movement through the bounded space of Iguvium. Following is a précis of relevant portions of the procedure (based on the two reports) excerpted from Poultney's summary in his edition of the Umbrian texts (1959:15):[39] after the taking of auspices, (1) three bovines (**buf**, acc. pl.) are sacrificed to Jupiter Grabovius in front of the Trebulan Gate; (2) three pregnant sows to Trebus Jovius behind the Trebulan Gate; (3) three bovines to Mars Grabovius in front of the Tesenacan Gate; (4) three suckling pigs to Fisus Sancius behind the Tesenacan Gate; (5) three bovines with white foreheads to Vofionus Grabovius in front of the Veian Gate; (6) three ewe-lambs to Tefer Jovius behind the Veian Gate. What we see here is the offering of the bovine portion of the triple sacrifice, the mostly costly element, to three deities at the same relative position of three separate gates. These three gods – Jupiter, Mars, Vofionus – each further characterized by the descriptor *Grabovius* (referencing 'oak', it seems)[40] – correspond to the three Roman deities of the so-called "Pre-Capitoline" triad,[41] the three major gods of archaic Rome, those to whom are assigned the three 'major Flamens' (*Flāminēs Maiōrēs*). On the other hand, porcine portions go to Trebus Jovius (a "Jovian" deity)[42] and to Fisus Sancius (compare Sabine

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39. See also Buck 1979:302–306.

40. See Kretschmer 1921. Umbrian *Grabovius* finds linguistic counterparts in various Balto-Slavic tree names, denoting the 'hornbeam'; compare also toponyms such as, *inter alia*, Polish Grabowo. Kretschmer (see especially pp. 90–93) argues for various Greek cognates which, like the Umbrian form, have shifted in sense to denote 'oak'. See also Friedrich 1970:99–106, who, citing Pallottino 1955:273, draws attention to an Etruscan phrase "of a god *in crapśti* and of Neptune" on the wrapping of the Zagreb mummy; Friedrich suggests an Italic borrowing into Etruscan. For a similar comparison of the Etruscan form with Umbrian *Grabovius* see more recently van der Meer 2008:219.

41. See Benveniste 1945.

42. With the Umbrian theonym **Trebe**/*Trebo* (dat. sg) compare Oscan **trííbúm** 'house'; comparison has also been made to Latin *trabs* 'tree trunk; timber', as by Poultney (1959:6). See also, *inter alia*, the comments of Untermann 2000:760, 765–766. Regarding the similar name of the gate behind which Trebus Jovius receives offerings, the *Trebulan* (Umbrian **Treplanu** acc. pl, **Treblanir** abl. pl etc.), Poultney (1959:2) draws attention to Italic toponyms of similar form, such as Sabine *Trebula Mutuesca* and *Trebula Suffenas*.

*Semo Sancus Dius Fidius*),[43] offered opposite – across an urban boundary – the sacrifices to Jupiter Grabovius and Mars Grabovius, respectively. An ovine portion is offered to Tefer Jovius opposite the sacrifice to Vofionus Grabovius. Clearly it is the three major deities who receive the bovine portion of this Umbrian expression of the ancestral *suovetaurīlia*, while pig and sheep are reserved for three lesser gods.[44] These several elements of the Umbrian expression of the ancestral triple sacrifice (each offered in triplicate) and the position of the performance of each element relative to the urban boundary can be represented as follows:

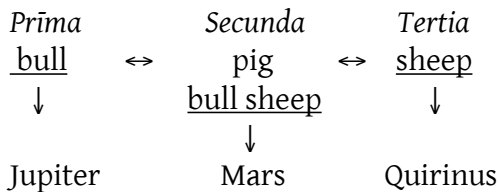| Bovine Victims | Boundary | Non-Bovine Victims |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| Jupiter | ↓ | Trebus Jovius (pregnant sows) |
| Mars | ↕ | Fisus Sancius (suckling pigs) |
| Vofionus | ↑ | Tefer Jovius (ewe-lambs) |
| | Boundary | |

What we see depicted in the lower register of the Novilara Stele, PID 343, is a ritual procedure entailing two-thirds of the Roman *suovetaurīlia* – that is, sacrifice of a bovine and a porcine victim. The use of a spear as the instrument of immolation suggests that the context of the North Picene ritual is a conspicuously martial one and, by the use of this implement, one seemingly distinct from the Roman sacrifice in any of its several attested forms. It is worth noting here that the *suovetaurīlia* can play a role in performance of the ritual of *dēvōtiō*, by which a Roman military leader "devotes" his enemy, and even himself or another Roman warrior (through combat suicide), to Tellus and the di Manes. Livy reports certain particular features of the rite at 8.10.13–14, such as the provision that it 'is *iūs*' (*est iūs*) for the leader who devotes himself 'to dedicate' (*vovēre*)

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43. See Woodard 2013:19, 125–126. On the Semones (of whom Semo Sancus is one) as warrior deities, see Woodard 2006, especially pp. 181–189. They are gods to be invoked by Mars in the hymn of the Fratres Arvales, as Mars himself is invoked to take up a position on the border of Arval sacred space. Here, in the Umbrian ritual, Fisus Sancius is positioned opposite Mars Grabovius, across an urban border.

44. Each separate set of victims numbers three, and three is a number of conspicuous significance throughout Iguvine ritual – a point made already by Poultney (1959:19) in his edition of the tablets.

his arms to Volcanus (fire-god), or to whatever deity he wishes. Also, 'it is not *fās*' (*fās non est*) for the 'spear' (*tēlum*) on which a consul stands and prays (in conducting the rites of *dēvōtiō*) to be acquired by the enemy; if the spear does fall into enemy hands, then 'atonement' (*piāculum*) must be made to Mars by offering a *suovetaurīlia*.

The converse of this procedure is provided by the ritual of the *spolia opīma*, as presented by Festus (p. 189M), which involves a Roman military leader slaying an opponent in personal combat and offering his opponent's arms to a deity. Festus identifies three forms of the rite. The *prima spolia* are offered to Jupiter Feretrius, together with a bovine sacrifice; and the *tertia spolia* are offered to Janus Quirinus, together with an ovine sacrifice. In between these grades is the *secunda spolia* which goes to Mars and entails offering a *solitaurīlia* (= *suovetaurīlia*) within the space of the Campus Martius. This is clearly a ritual procedure of deep antiquity, involving the three major gods of archaic Rome – Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus, constituting the Pre-Capitoline Triad, as noted just above. Corporately the three forms of the rite constitute an iterative, embedded expression of the *suovetaurīlia*: (*prīma*) bull to Jupiter, (*secunda*) pig/sheep/bull to Mars, (*tertia*) sheep to Quirinus – with the pig of the *secunda* itself accompanied by bull and sheep (i.e. *suovetaurīlia* within *suovetaurīlia*) – a triad within a triad. In other words,

| *Prīma* | | *Secunda* | | *Tertia* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| <u>bull</u> | ↔ | pig | ↔ | <u>sheep</u> |
| ↓ | | <u>bull sheep</u> | | ↓ |
| | | ↓ | | |
| Jupiter | | Mars | | Quirinus |

We should also take note of the default Roman procedure of offering enemy spoils to deities following battle, as reported by Livy: enemy arms are piled up and burned to Volcanus (23.46.5–6; 30.6.9) and to Mars, Minerva, Lua Mater (45.33.2). We thus see that in Roman cult it is the Volcanic fire that *both* continues the liminal, destructive fire of the ancestral Indo-European doctrine of triple flames *and* which can provide the fire for destruction of enemy spoils.

*Upper register: sacrifice of sheep and combat*

With these observations we turn our attention now to the upper register of the stele, in which we see a more complex scene playing out. A border between upper and lower registers is effectively created by a set of four horizontal figures, compactly arranged, running like a ribbon across the width of the stele, constituting a mélange of bodies. Three of these figures, appearing left, center, and right, can be identified as dead, or dying, humans: the two that are incised left and right of center are oriented with heads projecting rightward; that one situated in the center of the border is oriented oppositely (i.e. with head to the left), so that it neighbors the other two figures head-to-head and feet-to-feet. Depicted beneath the central corpse is a non-human figure, one that appears equally to be lifeless, hence most probably an immolated quadruped. Its body is made to extend sufficiently far left and right so as to underlie all three human corpses – located fully beneath the central corpse, beneath the head of that one to the left and beneath the feet and lower-legs of that one to the right. To the right of the animal's head and beneath the right-side corpse is incised a small oblong shape, the left half of which is missing, of uncertain significance. Could it possibly be intended as a natural feature of the landscape – perhaps a stone?
The identification of the animal within the horizontal band of carnage is complicated by its elongated presentation – an elongation that may be merely stylistic, but perhaps more likely is intended to encode a symbolic metaphor. I suggest that the head of the creature is fundamentally lamb-like and that we may identify here the sheep that constitutes the third member of the *suovetaurīlia*. The presence of the animal thus physically and thematically draws together the lower and upper registers of the composition.
Above the border depicting carnage we find five upright human figures. Four of these are grouped symmetrically in pairs – a central pair and a marginal pair – but unified by their representation as spearmen each. A fifth standing figure is positioned asymmetrically in the lower left field, holding a different implement (not a spear), and sharing its asymmetric

presentation with a triangle positioned laterally at the left margin. I will return below to a consideration of the fifth figure.

### Arranged combat

It is clear enough that we are viewing in the upper register a combat scene of some sort. Let us consider the central pair of spear-bearing warriors. The two face each other, positioned so that they appear symmetrically arranged beneath the wheel which is carved into the top center of the stone. The warrior on the right (depicted as the larger of the two) is thrusting his spear into the abdomen of his opponent. The opponent's arms protrude abruptly outward and this presentation presumably is meant to signal that his body has been penetrated by the spear. The head of the spear is not made visible in the composition, and this is a further indication of penetration of the weapon.

The second pair of warriors is presented laterally to the first pair. The warrior on the left margin is positioned superior to the other three warriors, an arrangement required by the intrusion of the asymmetric fifth figure into the composition. In stark contrast to the first, central pair of warriors, the second, marginal pair is depicted in a relaxed position. That one on the right margin holds his spear downward at a sloping angle, its tip seemingly resting on the ground; the spear point approaches the corpse positioned inferior to this figure, but the point of the spear is made fully visible, indicating that the spear is not presented as penetrating the body of the corpse, unlike the spear of the central warrior who stabs his opponent and unlike the spears of the lower register, which penetrate the bodies of the bull and boar. His opposing member stands with his spear placed casually across his shoulder. The marginal pair of warriors appear to be standing by and awaiting the outcome of the fight between the central pair, which seems to be suddenly at hand, in the moment captured by the artist. Are the opposing warriors-at-rest now about to engage in combat with one another, or is the combat event now decided? Either way, this arrangement suggests not a battle scene but a scene of arranged combat, a *vápna-dómr* 'judgment of weapons' or *darra-dómr* 'judgment of spears', to appropriate the Old Norse kennings. The combat is clearly attended by associated ritual actions.

Proxy warrior engagement with binding result is a phenomenon attested among early Indo-European peoples. In Italic tradition one thinks immediately of the combat between the hand-picked Horatii and Curiatii which will determine the outcome of Rome's military entanglement with Alba Longa. A distinct but related Roman phenomenon is that of personal (typically single) combat between two warriors, but not a fight that determines bindingly the outcome of battle – what we might instead identify as a duel set within a larger combat event. Oakley 1985 offers a catalogue of 31 examples of what he labels simply as "single combat."[45] While he includes in his inventory the mythic fight between Horatii and Curiatii during the reign of Tullus Hostilius, the remaining examples are all drawn from the time of the Roman Republic, listed in chronological order. From the early fifth century BC comes the example of Lucius Siccius Dentatus,[46] called the "Roman Achilles," who is reported to have been victorious in eight[47] or nine[48] instances of single combat (*prōvocatiō*). Ritual, and legal, acts are performed prior to the proxy combat of the Horatii and Curiatii. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Antiquitates Romanae* 3.18.2) reports only that the necessary rites for the gods were performed in advance of the fight and that the two armies placed aside their weapons and left between them an open space of three or four stades in which the two sets triplet warriors would fight– a large space of almost 600 to 800 meters.[49] Livy (1.24) assigns a preparatory role to the Fetial priests and their ritual procedures and enunciations. Whatever we make of Livy's decision to incorporate fetial rites into his account of Horatian-Curiatian combat, it is an interesting configuration given the centrality of *bounded space* to the operations of the Fetiales, who

45. Oakley (1985:392) writes: "The main concern of this essay is with those formal situations in which a champion from one army challenges one of his opponents to a duel and in which the two armies are not normally engaged in fighting at the time and thus watch the spectacle."

46. Oakley 1985:393, 409–410.

47. Valerius Maximus 3.2.24; Pliny *Naturalis Historia* 7.101.

48. Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Antiquitates Romanae* 10.37.3. Aulus Gellius *Noctes Atticae* 2.11.4, who calls the warrior *Sicinius* (as does Festus p. 190M), simply states that he won many such fights.

49. Similarly, Livy seems to suggest that the combat between the two sets of triplet warriors played out over an expansive area: see Woodard 2013:184–185.

undoubtedly constitute an archaic *Italian* priesthood.[50] We will consider later a possible significance of this for the etched scene of North Picene combat.

### *Triangles and boundaries*

Let us return to an examination of the upper register of the Novilara Stele, PID 343, and focus our attention on what remains – namely the sole asymmetrically-presented figure and the triangle incised directly to the left of that figure. The two images are striking, but in different ways – the human figure by its asymmetry (which entails the absence of a paired human figure) and by the unique implement that the figure holds in his hand(s); the triangle jars by its abject abstractness in a composition that otherwise depicts scenarios of animated violence, or its aftermath. In this way, the pair (asymmetric human figure and triangle) seem to form something of a conceptual unit. This portion of the composition is, I believe, the most difficult to interpret and, thus, the interpretative remarks that follow should be considered especially tentative.

First, we should note that a triangular symbol also occurs on the obverse side of the Novilara Stele, set to the left of the wheel symbol that is incised top center. The triangle is balanced on the opposite side (i.e. to the right of the wheel) by a symbol consisting of a pair of bisecting double lines, one vertical, one horizontal, overlapping at their midpoint, giving the impression of being set within a square perimeter. The triangular symbol on the obverse side is scored with vertical striping, that one on the reverse side is not. There is also variation between the wheel symbols on the two sides: that one on the obverse has five spokes, that on the reverse has four.

Why triangles? The four standing combatants of the upper register of the reverse side are themselves arranged in such a way as to conform to, approximately, a triangular space, though that *de facto* triangle is geometrically inverse to that of the incised triangular symbol. In a treatise on categories of land, Hyginus, a Roman *agrīmēnsor* (land

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50. See the comments of Santangelo 2008:89, who draws attention (n. 97) to rehearsed connections with Albani, Aequicoli, Faliscans, and Samnites.

surveyor) of AD 100, lists *triangulāris* as one of the basic shapes of *agrī* as marked out by boundaries (edition of Campbell [2000] 82.2). Triangular *agrī* are also addressed by Columella (*De re rustica* 5.2.5–6), found in a discussion of how to compute the area of a field. In his playful and clever *Griphus ternarii numeri*, Ausonius systematically capitalizes on the significance of three (the *numerus perfectus* 'complete number', line 52),[51] and of three times three, in Roman ideology, casting his net wide to include Greek myth: he affirms that a triangle exists in three 'forms' (*speciēs*), equilateral, isosceles, and scalene – a triplicity of triples. The triangularity of the symbol incised on the North Picene stele brings to mind the specification of the three Iguvine gates before which and behind which the Umbrian triple sacrifice was carried out: based on the names of the gates relative to toponyms of surrounding sites, Poultney (1959:2) suggests that the gates were located on the southwestern (Tesenacan), southern (Veian), and southeastern (Trebulan) sides of Iguvium, noting that this distribution "is strikingly uneven." The specification of three ritual points in the walls of the city idiosyncratically defines a triangle.[52] We are reminded of the occurrence of *polem* (twice) in the martial poetic text of the Novilara stele and of the ancestral etymon of Greek πόλις and its cognates as likely a term denoting demarcated space, of temporary nature, one possibly enclosed or otherwise bounded by stones. Perhaps we are to read the triangle juxtaposed to the combat scene as symbolizing bounded space which is associated with the depicted warrior action.

Spatial boundaries can characterize the performance context of the Roman *suovetaurīlia*, a North Picene form of which appears to be presented in the artistic composition of the stele. The private rite of land lustration described by Cato (*Agricultura* 141), with its accompanying

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51. Not in the Pythagorean sense of a *numerus perfectus* (being a number that is equivalent to the sum of its divisors), but in conformity with Martianus Capella 7.733: *trias vero princeps imparium numerus perfectusque censendus* 'three is in fact the first odd number and is to be considered complete'. For a different interpretation of Ausonius see Green's (1991) comments on the line.

52. Consider Macrobius *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.6.22; to begin his discussion of the significance of three and four, Macrobius offers the observation that the triangle is the figure having the fewest of an odd number of lines, a quadrangle the fewest of an even number.

deeply archaic prayer, entails the movement of a *suovetaurīlia* around and through a bounded patch of terra firma: it is an "ambarvalic rite."[53] In his *De re rustica* (2.1.10) Varro reports that at the time of the lustration of the *populus Rōmānus* "with a *suovetaurīlia*," a boar, a ram, and a bull 'are driven around' (*circumaguntur*): a ritual of circumambulation of demarcated space is being described.

If the triangle incised in the upper register of the reverse side of the North Picene stele does in fact symbolize a bounded space which frames some ritual action, perhaps the viewer is meant to understand the triangle as being thematically (though not necessarily functionally) linked to the small oblong object partially preserved in the right margin of the band of bodies. It is just possible that this may represent some sort of *terminus* – that is, a boundary marker, which would be commonly, though not universally, a stone. In this case, while the triangle is given an asymmetric orientation, it nonetheless would have a paired member along the opposite margin, one integrated into the presentation of sacrificial and combat carnage. As I have argued elsewhere, the *terminus* (deified as *Terminus*) has a fundamental association with the war god Mars in its presence along boundaries.[54] Perhaps also relevant to the scene depicted on the stele is that particular variety of the *terminus* identified as a *terminus sacrificālis*, boundary marker explicitly designated for ritual use.[55] We are accustomed to envisioning *terminī* as having a vertical orientation, and rightly so, though this is not always the case. The above-mentioned *agrīmēnsor* Hyginus reports, in remarks on 'boundary stones' (*terminī*), that flintstones (*silicēs*) and volcanic stones (*igniferī lapidēs*) are placed, according to their nature, 'lengthwise' (*per longitūdinem*), and seemingly Tiburtine stones as well (Campbell 80.12–13).
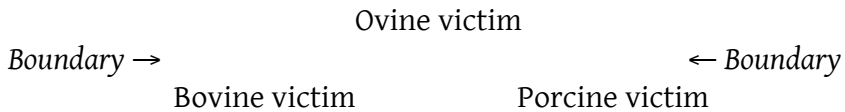
Regardless of how the oblong object is to be interpreted, there is a clear incorporation of a boundary into the Novilara Stele composition. What I have described as a band composed of compactly arranged horizontal images of four slain figures, three human and one animal, serves as a

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53. On the term see Woodard 2006, especially pp. 125–141, 160–163, 258, 262–263.

54. See Woodard 2006 *passim*, but especially pp. 53–58, 241, 258–267, and Chapter Two generally on Terminus.

55. See Woodard 2006:83–85, 89, 95, 156.

*boundary* between the upper and lower registers. It divides the sacrificial ritual action of the lower register from the combat action of the upper register. Yet – as noted above – even within the scene of combat action, there is evidence of sacrificial ritual action: the body of a sacrificed sheep appears to underlie the bodies of fallen warriors. This boundary appears to function as a meta-boundary, not only dividing the artistic composition into upper and lower halves but also marking a physical boundary in the depicted scene. We are again reminded of the boundary on display in the Iguvine urban purification ritual (having its own triangularity), with bovine offerings made to the three major deities on one side of the boundary and porcine and ovine offerings made to other deities on the other side of the boundary. What we see in North Picenum appears to be a variant of Umbrian sacred geometry, here with bovine and porcine offerings made on one side of a boundary and ovine on the other side of the boundary.

<center>Ovine victim</center>

*Boundary* →                                        ← *Boundary*

         Bovine victim               Porcine victim

Novilara neighbors on the Umbrian region and lies only 60 km or so from Iguvium (as the crow flies), locales nearly joined by the land course that would eventuate as the space of the route of the Roman Via Flaminia. Given the proximity of Iguvium to Novilara and the contiguity of North Picenum and Umbria, a similar arrangement of components of the ancestral Indo-European triple sacrifice – one that entails apportionment of victims across an intervening ritual boundary – could be understood as an areal phenomenon. The configurations are not fully identical at the two sites, Iguvium and Novilara; and this might be understood to reflect fine-grained local distinctions in performance of inherited rites, or alternatively, as due to the martial setting of the Novilara ritual as opposed to the urban setting of the Umbrian. If speakers of North Picene were an Indo-European people, as Poultney and others have suggested, then we can meaningfully speak of the Indo-European triple sacrifice as being ancestral to that people, as would seem to be a plausible

scenario. Otherwise we would see North Picene acquisition of the rite by borrowing from neighboring Indo-European peoples (such as Umbrian and South Picene).

### An axe and its function

What remains to be addressed is the fifth standing figure in the upper register, highly marked in the composition by his asymmetrical positioning. What is the figure depicted as holding, and what is he doing with it? The *prima facie* answer to the first part of that question would likely be "an axe." The head of the implement looks much like that of a single ax. Do we see here a Picene variety of the Roman *sacēna* or *secūris*, terms denoting axes used in immolation of a sacrificial victim? The Roman sacrificial axe is commonly depicted as a double ax, typically with a small posterior blade, or bolt; though among the several images of Roman sacrificial axes reproduced by Aldrete (2014:34, Fig. 2) from Roman art, a single-bladed axe can be seen, as also, for example, in a relief on a pilaster from the Etruscan Tomba dei Rilievi (Cerveteri, late fourth/early third century BC).[56] In the rich burial of the North Picene tomb of the Prince at Crocifisso (T182; c. seventh century BC), both single and double axe heads are found.[57] The same burial assemblage provides a bronze cist bearing, among several decorative bands, a register of repeating images of a warrior who carries a spear in one hand and what appears to be an axe with a single blade in the other.[58] Is a more conventional implement for immolation used to sacrifice the ovine victim of the upper register of the Novilara Stele than the spears used in the lower register for bovine and porcine victims?

The implement that the asymmetrically-placed fifth figure holds is represented with a distinctively curved handle. While perhaps having

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56. See Johansen 1932:125, with Abb.10, Wilkinson's drawing of the pilaster seen photographed in Abb. 8.

57. Picene III. For the plan of the tomb see Silvestrini and Sabbatini 2008:201, Fig. 83, and p. 208, Fig. 85. On the axe heads see pp. 207–209. For images of the axe heads see p. 210, Cat. 248 (single head) and p. 213, Cat. 257 and Cat. 258. On axes in eighth-century tombs in the area of Ancona (North Picenum), markers of "socially eminent individuals," see Riva 2007:91.

58. Silvestrini and Sabbatini 2008:227, Cat. 299.

a less-familiar appearance, axes with curved handles are in fact known in Iron-Age northern Italy. Torelli (2001:28), for example, reports them as being found in various tombs in Etruria. Haynes (2000:31) describes axes from tombs (c. seventh century BC) in the vicinity of Volterra as "bronze axes, whose curved wooden handles were sheathed with bronze . . . ." A sixth-century BC example of a single axe with a curved handle is provided by the "statue-stele" of Filetto II (Lunigiana), bearing a short inscription in Etruscan letters.[59] An axe having a single blade and a curved handle that, *grosso modo*, provides a close match to the shape of the Novilara implement can be seen on an Etruscan *aes grave* coin from the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze.[60] Similarly, the warrior depicted on the Etruscan grave stele of Larth Aninies (sixth century BC Faesulae) holds a spear upright in his right hand and a single-bladed axe with a curved handle in his left.[61]

But if we can judge from Roman evidence this is not the morphology of a *sacrificial* axe. Does the Novilara figure – marginal to the central action – represent, instead, a person designated to deliver a ritual *coup de grâce* to fallen warriors with a war axe designated for this ritual purpose? It may seem a somewhat sensationalistic interpretation, though perhaps not an aberrant one. Weiss (1977) analyzes a Corinthian helmet in the Lowie Museum as being likely of Italian provenance ("made" or "worn" [p. 205]), perhaps to be associated with "the Etruscan port of Spina," and as having been severely damaged by a heavy axe blow to the crown; this blow, she hypothesizes (p. 198), was the work of a *coup de grâce.* The ritual *coup de grâce* of gladiators in the Roman arena is of course well known; see, for example, the treatment of Edwards 2007:60–61, who draws attention to Seneca's (*Epistles* 30.8) description of the defeated gladiator who presents his throat to his opponent. Edwards here quotes Wiedemann (1992:35), who offers that the gladiator was "expected to take the *coup de grâce* without protest, and the ritualized way in which it was carried out will have helped many gladiators fulfill

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59. See, *inter alia*, Bossoni 2007.
60. See Johansen 1932:117, Abb. 4.
61. See Johansen 1932:129, Abb. 14.

this expectation."[62] It has been commonly held that fallen gladiators could be given a final blow with a hammer (the ultimate *coup de grâce*), delivered by an official in the guise of Mercury or Dis Pater, or perhaps Etruscan Charon, based at least in part on the testimony of Tertullian (*Apologeticus* 15.5–6; *Ad Nationes* 1.10.47).[63] In recent years, analysis of unearthed skeletal remains of gladiators at Roman Ephesus, and perhaps also at York (where decapitation is common), appear to confirm the practice of a final strike to the head.[64] One might view the warrior who lies supine directly in front of the asymmetric "axe-wielding" figure on the Novilara Stele as about to receive such a ritual blow.[65]

On the other hand, is it possible that the figure is not wielding an axe but removing one from the body of a slain warrior? With the stabbing and presumed death of the warrior who receives a spear thrust, the outcome of the ritualized proxy-fight has perhaps been decided, and *spolia* are being collected by the victorious party. Might the triangular symbol that adjoins the axe-bearing figure then signify the dedicated space within which the *spolia* will be incinerated as an offering to a deity? We earlier took note of Livy's report that in Roman tradition *spolia* are offered by burning to Volcanus; it is worth mentioning that in one of Archilochus' trochaic tetrameter fragments (fr. 108 West) he directly invokes Hephaestus to be an 'ally' (σύμμαχος) and to 'show favor' (χαρίζω) in his characteristic way: Bowie (2018:39) suggests a possible reference to cremation of slain warriors. We saw too that *spolia* can be offered to the cult pair Mars and Minerva (= Nerio), and also to one Lua Mater, whom Varro (*De lingua Latina* 8.36) and Gellius (*Noctes Atticae* 8.23.2)

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62. See Wiedemann's (1992) further comments on his pages 95–96, in which the various forms of the victor's final stroke and his defeated opponent's posture in receiving that stroke are discussed.

63. The Etruscan tormentor-figure called *Phersu*, depicted in sixth-century tomb paintings from Tarquinia, has been drawn into the discussion of these gladiatorial officiants but likely does not offer a meaningful parallel. See, *inter alia*, the discussion of Wiedemann 1992:30–31; see also Kyle 1998:156–157.

64. See, *inter alia*, Kanz and Grossschmidt 2006 and 2009 (Ephesus). For York, see Caffell and Holst 2012, who report two possible instances of "peri-mortem blunt force trauma to the cranium" (pp. 73–74).

65. Might the supine warrior's partially elevated right arm possibly indicate that he is not yet dead?

identify as cult partner to Saturn, hence likely having some association with earth phenomena, whatever her name may signify. Beyond Livy's earlier cited reference, he also mentions Lua Mater at 8.1.6, as he describes the Volscian retreat from Satricum: the Romans, led by the consul Gaius Plautius (mid fourth century BC), recovered a large cache of Volscian arms, and the consul 'declared' (*dīxit*– some ritual utterance is undoubtedly intended) that these he would give (*dāre*) to the goddess. As we have again noted, enemy *spolia* may be incinerated for Volcanus. The second context in which we have encountered Volcanus was that of the Indo-European doctrine of the triple fires, one of which fires in Vedic cult is the *Dakṣiṇāgni*, corresponding structurally to the Roman Volcanal fire. The *Dakṣiṇāgni* is also the flame associated with the chthonic *Pitaras*, the 'Fathers', equivalent to Roman Manes.[66] In our exploration of the art carving of the Novilara Stele we have already met with chthonic beings. We noted that the rite of *dēvōtiō* entails a Roman military commander devoting the enemy, himself, or another Roman warrior to Tellus and the di Manes. This earth-goddess Tellus provides a point of intersection for the rituals of *dēvōtiō* and *suovetaurīlia*, in that (1) if the spear on which a consul stands in performing the rites of *dēvōtiō* is captured by the enemy, a *suovetaurīlia* must be offered to Mars, and (2) while Mars is routinely identified as recipient of the canonical *suovetaurīlia*, triple animal sacrifice, each of the three component victims has an immediate recipient – Tellus being recipient of the pig. Tellus thus belongs to the sphere of the inherited triple sacrifice – depicted on the Novilara Stele – and to the chthonic ambit to which the Manes equally belong. And to judge comparatively, from Indic perspective, the Indo-European "third fire" is linked to the realm of the chthonic. The ancestral doctrine of the triple sacrifice and that of the triple fires overlap ideologically in Italic expression.

## Text and Art

Bearing the preceding observations in mind, let me bring this inquiry to a close by returning to the enigmatic North Picene text of the stele.

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66. See, *inter alia*, the discussion of Keith 1998:28–289.

In lines 11–12 we encounter the word-sequence *. . . treten · teletaŭnem · polem . . . .*, perhaps an accusative noun phrase. If we were to compare the North Picene *treten* with earlier-mentioned Sanskrit *tritá-* 'third' – beside Albanian *tretë*, Greek τρίτος, Tocharian A *trit*, Tocharian B *trite* – all from Proto-Indo-European *trito- 'third'[67] – then we might, with due caution, hypothesize that *treten polem* refers to the 'third' *polem*.

This 'third' *polem* is further characterized as *teletaŭnem*. Do we see here a compound formed with a North Picene comparand of Latin *Tellūs*, naming the earth-goddess? For the origin of the Latin theonym *Tellūs*, and that of her cult partner *Tellūmō/Tellūrus*, we look to the Proto-Indo-European etymon *tel- 'ground', source also of, *inter alia*, Old Irish *talam* 'earth' and 'grave' (i.e. the earth as surrounding matter) and Sanskrit *tala-* 'surface', 'part underneath', with compounds such as *tala-loka-* 'lower world' (from *loká-* 'world'); *tala-loka-pāla-* 'guardian of the lower world'.[68] Ernout and Meillet (1959:679) draw attention to the peculiar morphology of *Tellūs*, built with a stem formant *-ū-* ("c'est le seul exemple de cette flexion en latin") and to Breal's comparison of *Tellūmō* with the Etruscan personal name *Lucumō*; they suggest the scenario of an Italic word borrowed into Etruscan, and then subsequently borrowed into Latin. If this envisioned Italic word finds a North Picene expression in a compound *teletaŭnem*, then we would be dealing with a 'third *polem*' that is linked with the "ground," with the chthonic.

This must be considered quite tentative, but we see before us the potentiality of an interesting contrast in the lines of the Novilara text. On the one hand, in lines 2 and 3 there may be reference to some plural subject consecrating a 'round' (*rotnem*) *polem*. On the other hand, in lines 11–12 there may be reference to a 'third' (*treten*) *polem* with chthonic associations. North Picene *polem*, if rightly linked to πόλις, and thus descended from Proto-Indo-European *pelH-*, may perhaps denote some delimited, "protective" – possibly metaphysically "protective" – space. Does a *rotnem polem* contrast with a *treten polem* in a way that parallels the contrast of the round space of Vesta's *aedes*, in which burns Rome's

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67. See, *inter alia*, Mallory and Adams 1997:400.

68. See, *inter alia*, Walde and Pokorny 1930:740; Ernout and Meillet 1959:679; Mallory and Adams 1997:247; Watkins 2011:92; eDIL s. v. talam.

consecrated flame, with the space in which burns the devouring flame of Volcanus – Roman deity to whom enemy arms are offered by fire, as also to martial Mars and Minerva, and to Lua Mater – she with earth/chthonic connections? Such ponderings draw our attention back to the three symbols incised at the top of the obverse side of the stele. Moving from right to left, the direction of the writing of the text, the first conforms to the perimeter of a square, the second is round, and the 'third' (*treten*?) is a triangle, geometric shape that recurs on the reverse side in close coordination with the asymmetric human figure who appears to grasp an axe. If these three geometric shapes each symbolize a *polem*, a delimited space, one that is round and a third that has chthonic attachments, then we might well look to the primitive Indo-European triad of sacred flames to understand a significant point of connection between the text and art of the Novilara Stele.

In summary, and cautiously, what we may see in the text of the Novilara Stele are martial verses to be performed in a ritual setting of a warrior assembly – such as a lustration of the warrior horde – that make reference to essential delimited sacred spaces of primitive Indo-European origin, geometrically-encoded spaces that are associated with the ancestral doctrine of the triple fires. In this way the text of the obverse side would *at the least* establish a general liaison with the ritual actions carved in the stone of the reverse side. Those actions entail the performance of a North Picene version of the Proto-Indo-European triple sacrifice (bovine, porcine, ovine) and depict an event of arranged combat, such as that of the Horatii and Curiatii, and, as with the Roman tradition, may be one mythic in nature.

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