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A novel way of explaining and sharing epigraphy with  
the public displayed at the Roman Museum  
in Nyon, Switzerland

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# A novel way of explaining and sharing epigraphy with the public displayed at the Roman Museum in Nyon, Switzerland

Véronique Rey-Vodoz & Michel Aberson

The project to be discussed here is part of a much wider programme called “Julius Caesar’s Legacy”, with the aim to renew the presentation of Nyon’s Roman past and its territory for the public. The first stage, which was completed in June 2021, concerned the Roman Museum itself; in the long term, the entire Roman site and its problematic issues will be affected.

## 1. Nyon and its Roman past

The complete title of the project is “Julius Caesar’s legacy: making the invisible visible”. The aim is to modernise and accentuate the presentation of Nyon’s Roman past by providing the public, especially the younger generations, with a new level of visibility. This approach reflects the long-term concerns of the Roman Museum (Musée romain) itself, but also of Nyon’s Cultural Service (Service de la culture) with its responsibility for all of Nyon’s museums. In 2014, at a time when the Roman aqueduct was undergoing new and successful excavations, the start of the project’s structuring benefited from a request by three municipal councillors with a particular interest in this exceptional phase of their hometown’s history.

For those unfamiliar with the site: today, Nyon is an attractive and rapidly developing district capital within the canton of Vaud, located on the shores of Lake Geneva (Le Léman), 25 kilometres from Geneva and 35 kilometres from Lausanne (Fig. 1).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Nyon had 5,000 inhabitants, growing to 15,000 in 1990 and 22,000 in 2020. It manages and finances three municipal museums: the Château de Nyon, the Lake Geneva Museum and the Roman Museum (Fig. 2).

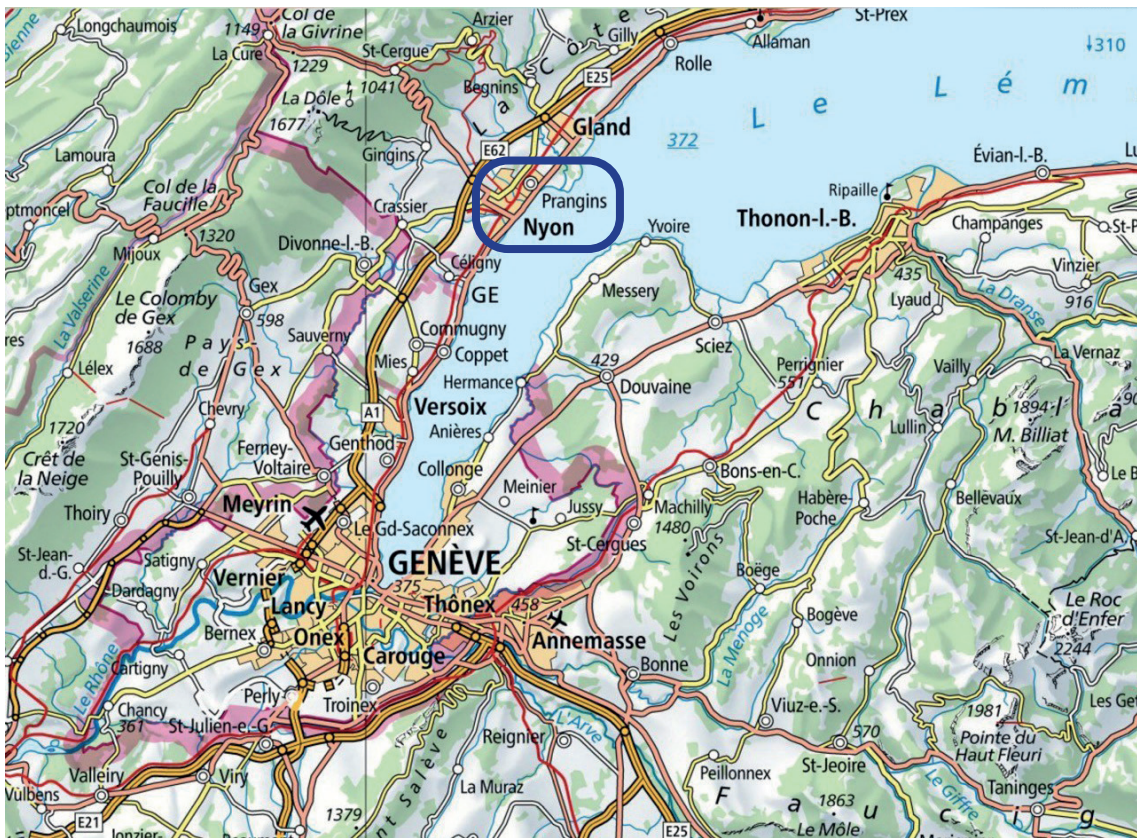


Figure 1: Location of Nyon at Lake Geneva. © Office fédéral de topographie – Swisstopo



Figure 2: Location of the Roman Museum. © Musée romain de Nyon

Today, Nyon/Noviodunum – *Colonia Iulia Equestris* bears unique testimony to Roman history in a region extending far beyond contemporary borders at that time. Most historians of Antiquity are convinced that the Roman *Colonia Iulia Equestris* was founded by Julius Caesar (Fig. 3) in 45 BCE to consolidate the gains of his victorious campaigns in Gaul (Fig. 4).



Figure 3: Statue of Julius Caesar (cast of a marble statue in Rome), erected next to the Roman Museum in 1980.  
© R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

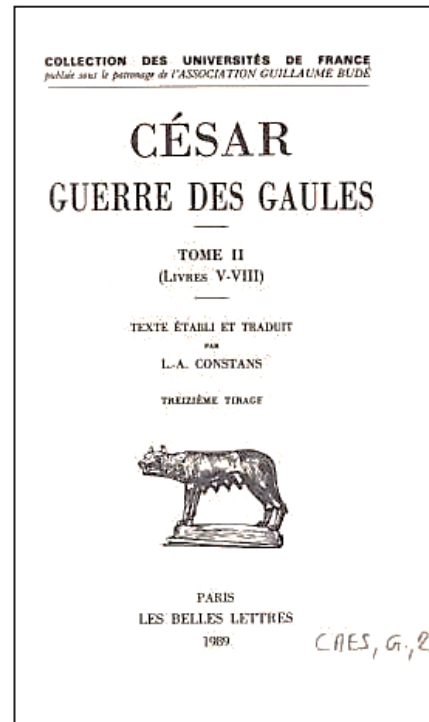


Figure 4: Caesar's account on the Gallic War in the French Budé edition

The first Roman citizens after its foundation were essentially Roman veterans. The peculiarity of these beginnings and its early history are unique in as far as it had and still has consequences for the evaluation of the relation of provincial inhabitants and Roman citizens, of periphery and centre – Rome –, in the context of a Roman *colonia*. In keeping its privileged status and in accordance with its foundation apparently '*ex nihilo*', its material remains reveal the unusually strong link it entertained with Rome, setting it apart from other Roman towns in the region.

The remains of a forum with a basilica at its eastern end are among the first traces of urbanisation, dating back to the time of Augustus (Fig. 5). Shortly afterwards, under Tiberius, the forum area became reorganised. A new basilica was built under Vespasian, and it is in the foundation area of this building upon which the Roman Museum was set up in 1979 (Figs. 8, 10).

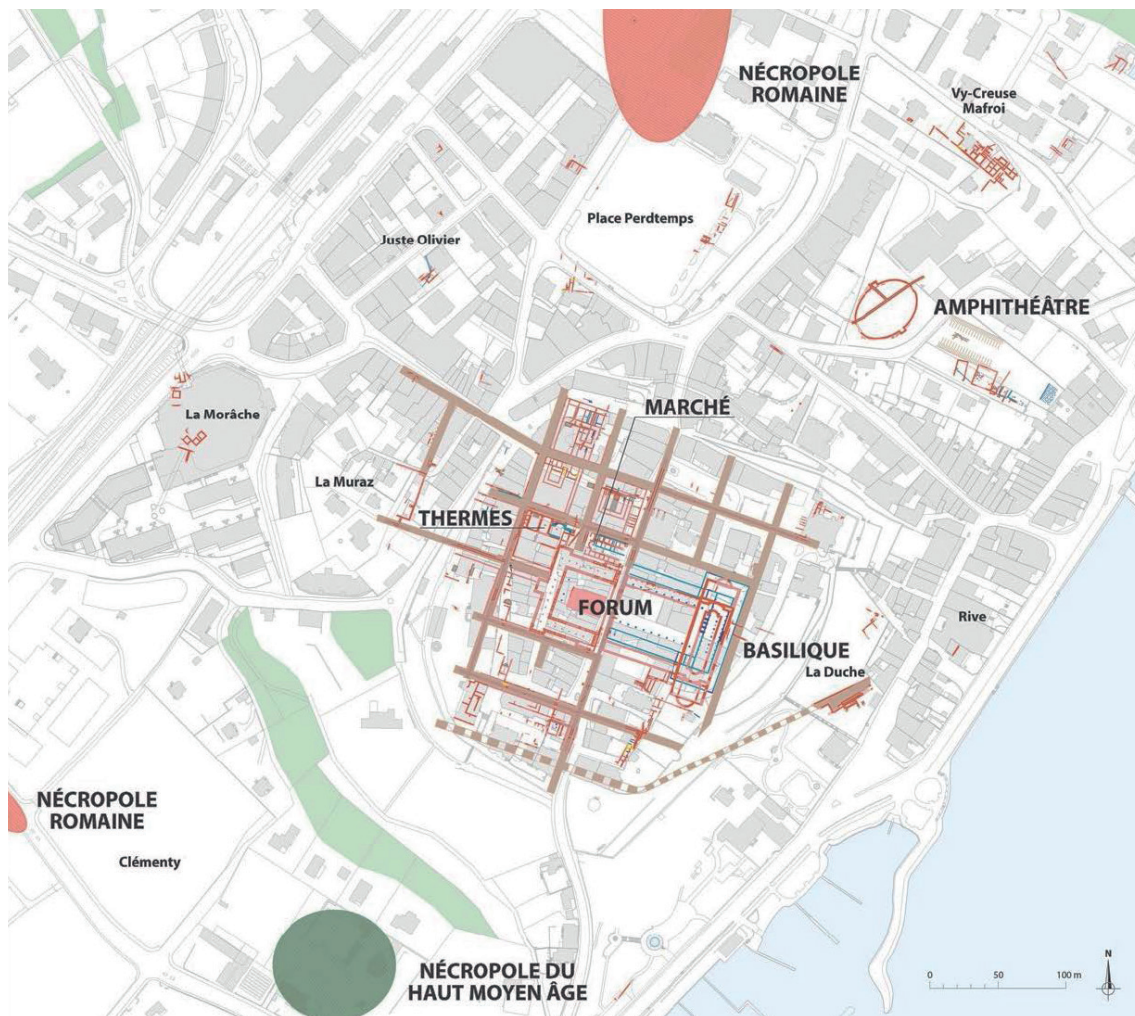


Figure 5: Map of the modern town indicating the Roman remains. © Archeodonum SA, Gollion, and Archéologie cantonale vaudoise, Lausanne

The aim of the project “Julius Caesar’s legacy: making the invisible visible” is to highlight the often fragile remains of this unique history. The largest part, brought to light decades ago, was and is impossible to preserve and therewith display on site due to Nyon’s archaeological topography. A difficulty in common with many other former Roman towns in Europe is that the centre of the ancient city is entirely covered by later stages of urban development.

Unlike, for example, Avenches, the capital of the *civitas* of the Helvetii, the town centre of Nyon has not moved since ancient times. This is why only a few scattered re-used architectural blocks (Fig. 6) and statues (Fig. 7) remain visible within the architecture of the modern city to testify to the existence of the Roman town.



Figure 6: Relief re-used on the Place du Marché in the 16th century. © R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry



Figure 7: Bust of Attis re-used in the "Tour César" in the 12th century. © R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

This means that, other than the amphitheatre and basilica (Figs. 8–9), the discovery of which in 1974 led to the establishment of the Roman Museum (Fig. 10), the remains of most of *Noviodunum*'s other buildings *in situ* are invisible to the population of today.



Figure 8: Northern apse of the forum basilica. © Archéologie cantonale vaudoise, Lausanne



Figure 9: Model of the forum with the basilica at its eastern end. © A. Besson, Nyon



Figure 10: Entrance to the Roman Museum. © R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry



## 2. The benefit of digital methods

It is obvious, that reconstructed models and virtual realities are an excellent way out of the dilemma of well based knowledge in combination with difficulties in preservation and only little visibility. Digital methods immediately come to mind; they are up-to-date, are constantly developed and provide new options for visualisation and dissemination. Even more important are the following reasons:

Archaeological research remains are mostly fragmentary; we have to place them into their context using all possible methods of scientific research in order to understand them and obtain information from them. It is not easy to present this fragmented evidence to the public; outside scientific circles, explanations and restored documents are not very meaningful in many cases.

The potential of digital technologies opens up promising prospects in this regard, naturally provided that their implementation is based on a rigorous scientific approach. With these technologies, objects can be arranged in a dynamic context that can be directly linked to visual or auditory data. Images, film, targeted lighting and animation, 3D reconstruction, etc. may be both varied and complementary (Fig. 11). In this way, they can provide the visitor with a genuinely emotional experience with archaeological artefacts, which initially can seem austere.



Figure 11: 3D modelling of the forum incorporated into the contemporary urban environment.  
© Archéotech SA, Epalinges, and Point Prod, Genève

This is particularly relevant for the epigraphic legacy, access to which is difficult for a public without the means of reading these written and often heavily abridged Latin documents. It is in the context described above that the realisation of the project, which is presented in more detail below, becomes manifest for the visitors of the Roman Museum. The interesting content, the exceptional diversity and high number of inscriptions in Nyon's collection was an immediate justification for inclusion of epigraphy into the project. The austere aspect of these documents should no longer be an obstacle in sharing these Roman remains with the public. This rich Roman inheritance reveals so many aspects of Roman society in general and the individual passionate human experiences of their protagonists.

For the Museum's 20th anniversary in 1999, an entire section devoted to the inscriptions had already been collated. It was included into a pioneering computer-assisted process under the guidance of the Archeodunum company: Interactive terminals were installed in the Museum and a CD was produced. This first digitally enriched installation functioned for ten years, which is remarkable for technology of this type, but it became obsolete around 2009 and all the work done for this IT medium was consigned to oblivion. This should make us aware of the temporal limitations of such developments, but also of the problems of archiving a digital production long-term. The above experience should make us attentive to the imperative need to include the conservation aspect in all digital projects involving an archaeological or historical legacy. We need to look out for digital storage media in cases where software (and hardware) becomes obsolete and unreadable after ten or twenty years. In addition, funds need to be made available to transfer the previously collected data to new storage media.

Taking up the epigraphic collection as the initial part of the early 2000s digital presentation, we have now a new epigraphy-presentation in the Roman Museum (Fig. 12), inaugurated in October 2020. As before, it has the task of bringing Roman inscriptions to life. It is infused by the genuine interest and empathy of all the specialists who have contributed to the success of this realisation, for the inhabitants of the *Colonia Iulia Equestris*, the protagonists of a bygone world, to whom we have given the power of speech to enable them to tell their stories to today's visitors.

Thanks to an approach both accessible and lifelike, our public can discover that writing played an essential role in how Roman society functioned. Inscriptions were everywhere in the public sphere, informing citizens and inhabitants about laws and regulations, or activities and careers of those in power, and also remembering the deceased, so that their legacy would live on. To transmit these messages of a past society is a goal achieved in part, at least. Thanks to the public (and digitally enhanced and explained) display of these documents written in stone, individual human beings still emerge from the shadows with their varied destinies today.



Figure 12: Touch screens and movable letters projected on the inscribed objects to transmit the life histories set out in the inscriptions as in 2020. © Point Prod, Genève

### 3. The realisation of the project

The epigraphic collection is exhibited in the main hall of the Roman Museum (Fig. 13).



Figure 13: The epigraphic collection on view in the museum. © Point Prod, Genève. Photography by R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

Eight of the most interesting inscriptions presented in this space were chosen for the interactive programme provided on tablets at the public's disposal (Figs. 14–15). All information is made available in both French and English. Using individual career paths revealed by the inscriptions and linking them with the history of Nyon and of the Roman empire, we also created fictional monologues and dialogues that invite visitors to explore the Roman past with the help of storytelling (in modern and Latin languages).

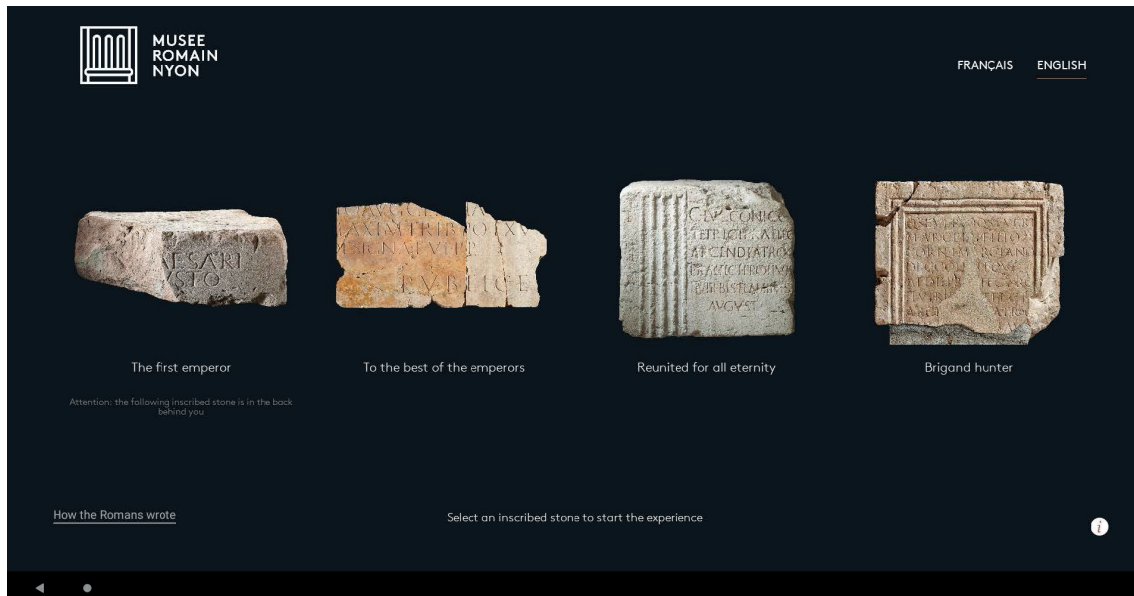


Figure 14: The first four inscriptions selected for the interactive programme (images not to scale); all of them are presented in this paper (Figs. 17–28, 30–31). © Point Prod, Genève. Photography by R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

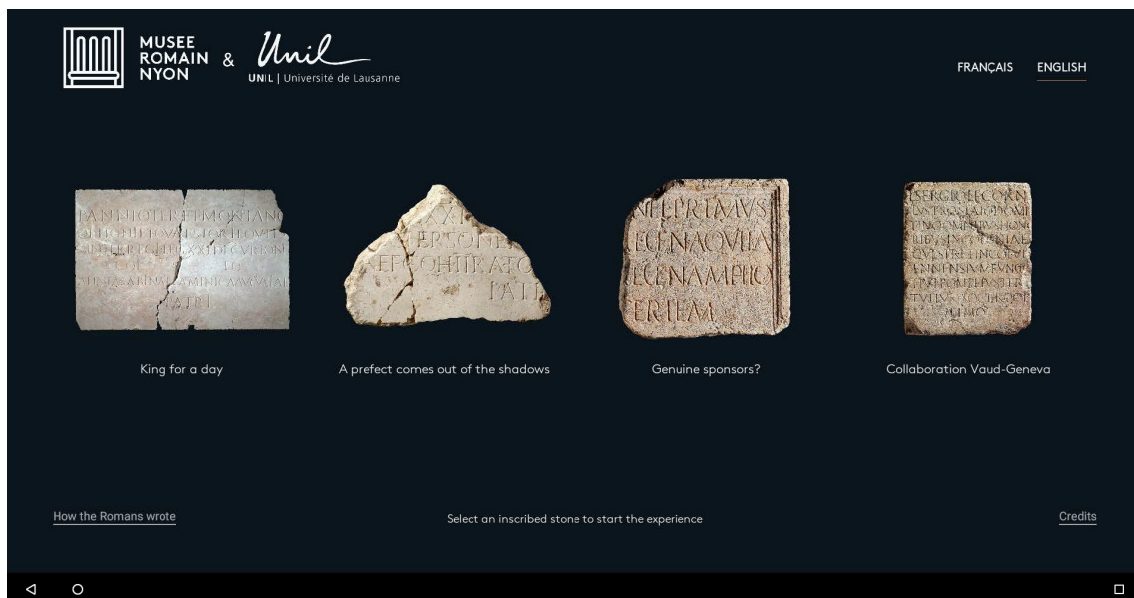


Figure 15: The next four inscriptions selected for the interactive programme (images not to scale); the two on the left are presented in this paper (Figs. 29, 32). © Point Prod, Genève. Photography by R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

The project was realised by the Musée romain de Nyon, the Institut d'Archéologie et des sciences de l'Antiquité, Lausanne, and the Point Prod-Actua Group, Genève (Fig. 16).

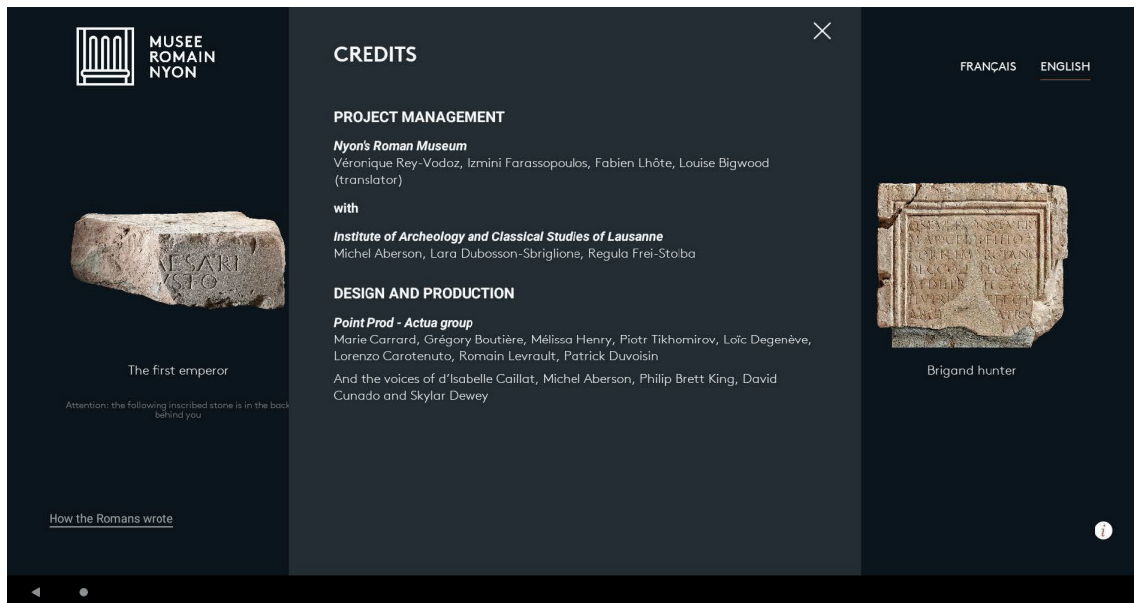


Figure 16: Credits. © Point Prod, Genève. Photography by R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

Using the example of the statue base that mentions the first Roman emperor (Aberson – Fuchs 2017; Kolb 2022, 16 no. 5; Fig. 17), the following figures show the kind of detailed information visitors can obtain under the various headings of the interactive programme (Figs. 18–25).



Figure 17: Fragmentary statue base mentioning Emperor Augustus. © Point Prod, Genève. Photography by R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

“How to read this inscription?” is a question confronting visitors again and again, because Roman inscriptions usually contain abridged forms and are often only preserved in a fragmentary state. Clicking on this question (Fig. 18, here in the French version) visitors can learn what rules have been adopted for transcribing the inscriptions.

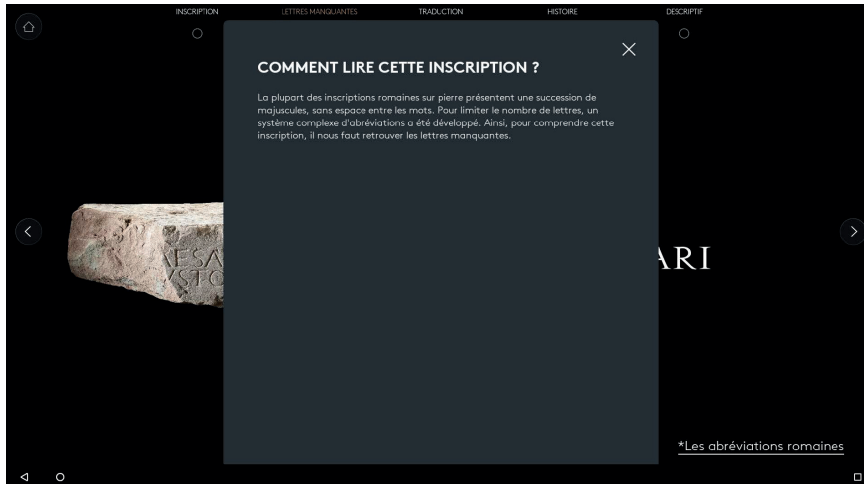


Figure 18: Explaining some characteristics of Roman inscriptions. © Point Prod, Genève. Photography by R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

We did not adopt the usual rules for transcription of Latin texts, but decided to use a simplified system (Fig. 19):

- 1) Existing letters are shown as white upper case;
- 2) Lost letters are reconstructed as grey upper case;
- 3) The completion of an abbreviation is shown in brackets in lower case, in white or grey colour depending on the state of preservation.

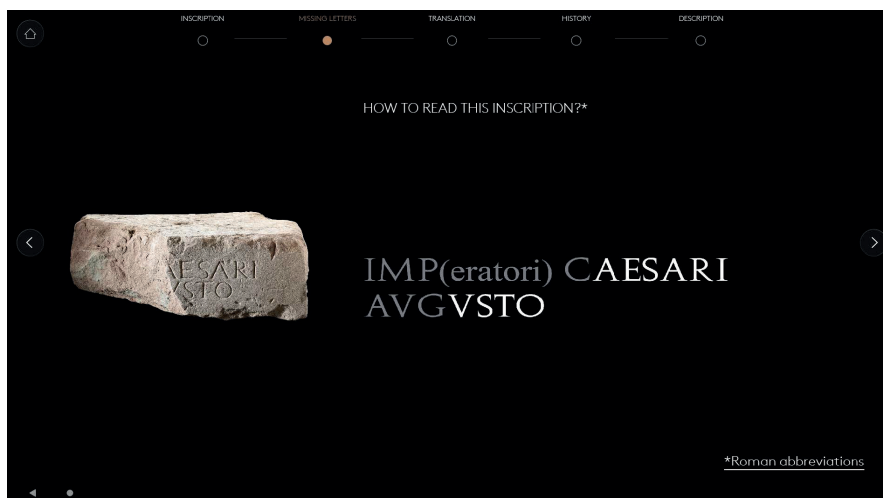


Figure 19: Inscription reconstructed and abbreviation completed. © Point Prod, Genève. Photography by R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

The programme not only offers a translation of the inscription (Fig. 20) but also further information on persons, places and specific terms (Fig. 21). All words that can be found in the glossary are marked with an asterisk. Terms of Latin origin are italicised.

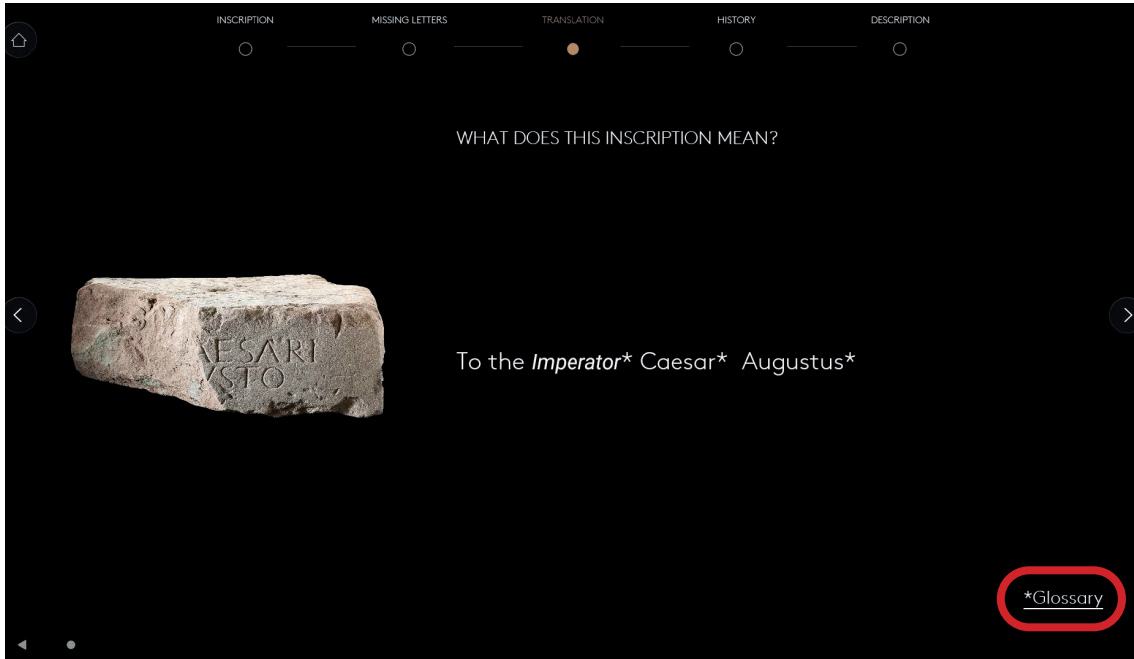


Figure 20: Inscription translated. © Point Prod, Genève. Photography by R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

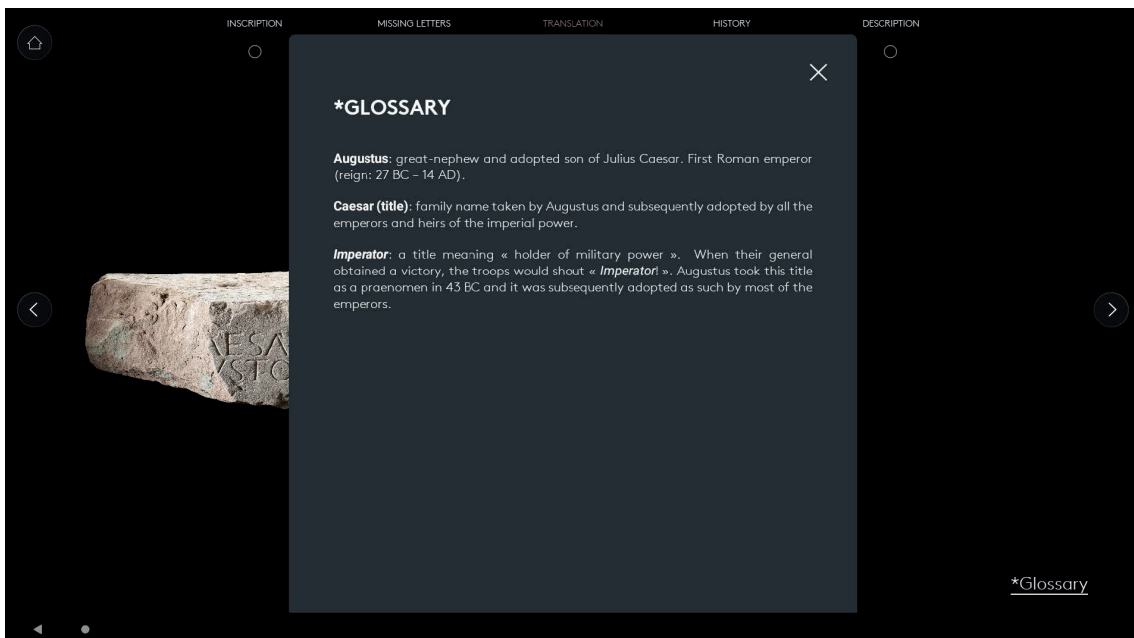


Figure 21: Superimposed glossary with further information. © Point Prod, Genève. Photography by R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

The section “History” contains more information about the context of the inscription and its significance (Fig. 22). For instance, the statue base mentioning Augustus is currently the oldest securely dated inscription found in Nyon. Again, the glossary can be consulted for persons, sites and terms (Fig. 23).



Figure 22: Some historical information. © Point Prod, Genève. Photography by R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

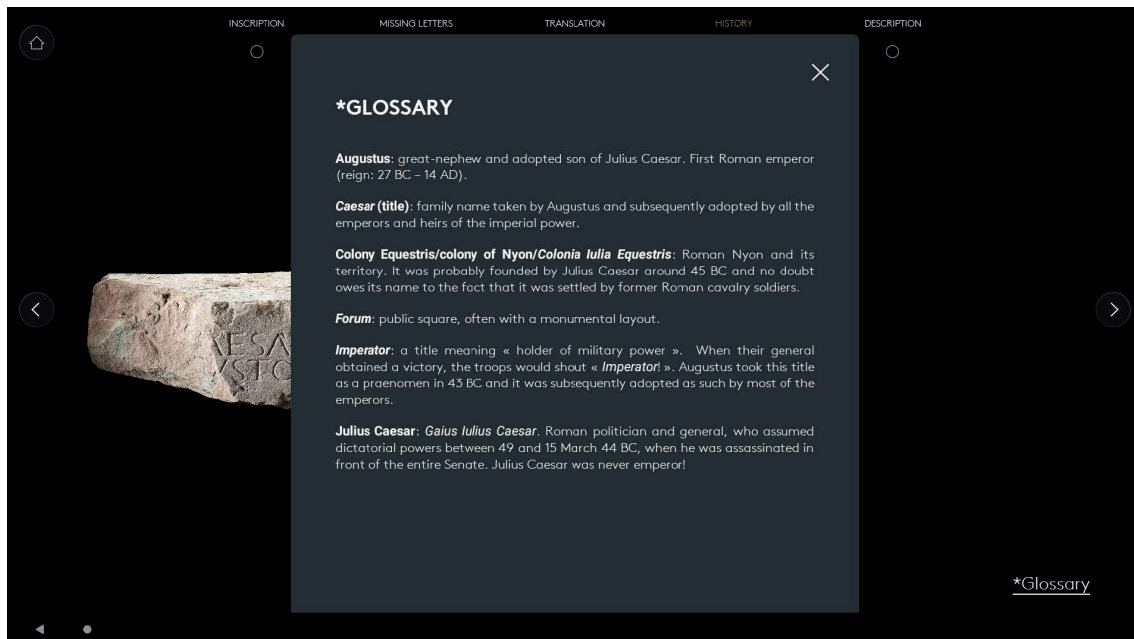


Figure 23: Superimposed glossary with further information. © Point Prod, Genève. Photography by R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry



Finally, the section “Description” provides basic data about the object such as material, dimensions, inventory number and publication (Fig. 24). It also contains information about its discovery (site, year), provided these are known. In the subheading “Specifics” the user will find some assumptions about the use of the object and its original location, again with a glossary available (Fig. 25).

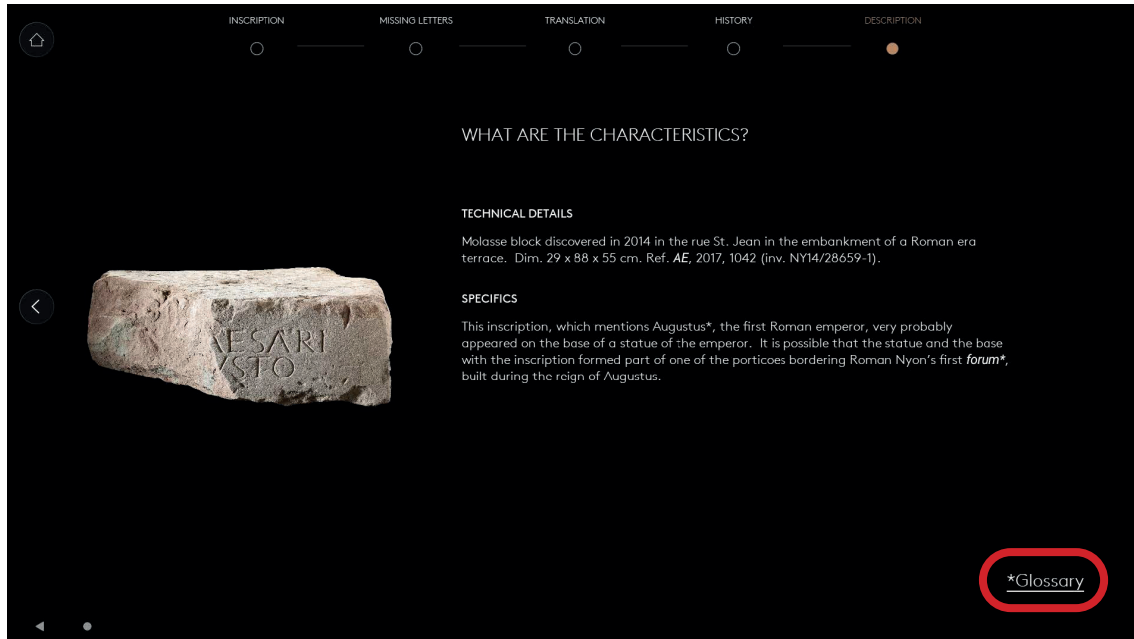


Figure 24: Basic data and specifics. © Point Prod, Genève. Photography by R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

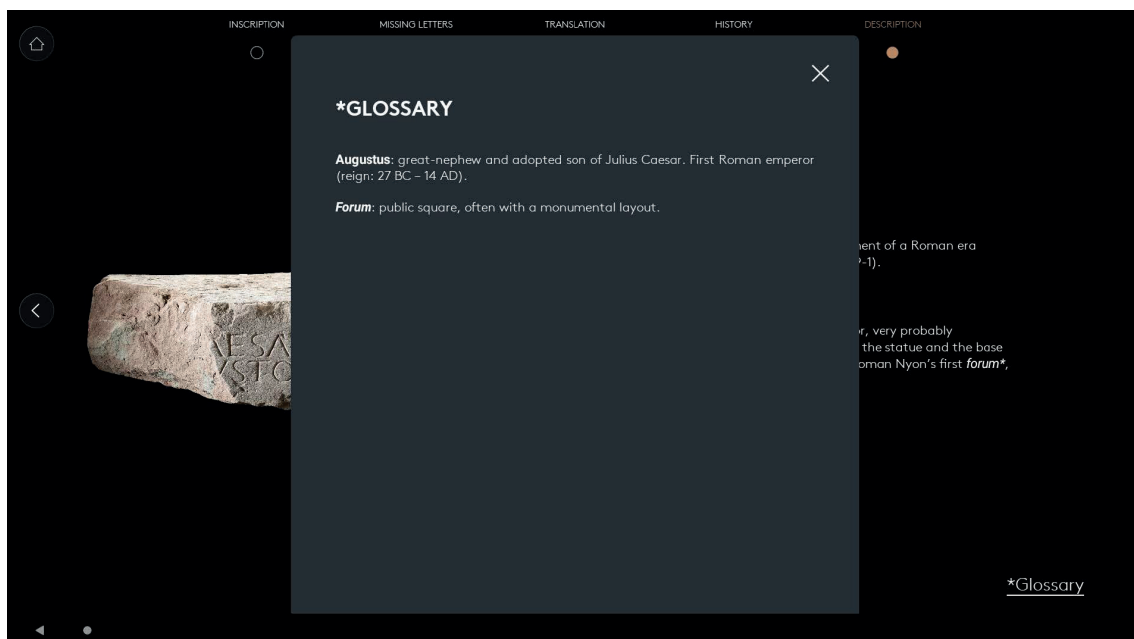


Figure 25: Superimposed glossary with further information. © Point Prod, Genève. Photography by R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

#### 4. Stories told of and by Nyon's inhabitants

The statue base of Quintus Severus Marcianus (Kolb 2022, 27–28 no. 21) is a good example of how we pick up peculiarities and try to make the most of the uncertainties (Figs. 26–28). The parts of the text we have chosen to deal with in the historical commentary are highlighted in Figure 27 and 28 in yellow. We also produced a fictional dialogue between old Marcianus and his granddaughter.

Q. Severus Marcianus was a council member (*decurio*) and took over several duties and offices. Mentioning his father's name in full (Fig. 27) is rather unusual, most often the father's first name is abbreviated. In all likelihood, this presentation of the father's name aimed to emphasise him, obviously a man of high reputation, within this local context. His son, the *praefectus arcend(-) latrocin(-)* had to combat brigandage. This is a rarely attested function much debated in scholarship (Berchem 1982; Grzybek 2002). It is not certain how to offer the abbreviated office-designation in full form (Fig. 28); and it is discussed whether the function was municipal or related to the imperial administration.



Figure 26: Statue base of Quintus Severus Marcianus. © R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

Q(uito) SEVERIO Q(uiti) SEVERI  
MARCELLI FILIO  
CORNEL(ia) MARCIANO  
DEC(urioni) COL(onia) IVL(ia) EQVEST(ri)  
AEDIL(i) PRAEFECT(o) PRO  
II VIRIS PRAEFECT(o)  
ARCEND(-) LATROC(in-)  
II VIR(o) BIS FLAM(ini) AVG(usti)

Q(uito) SEVERIO **Q(uiti) SEVERI**  
**MARCELLI** FILIO  
CORNEL(ia) MARCIANO  
DEC(urioni) COL(onia) IVL(ia) EQVEST(ri)  
AEDIL(i) PRAEFECT(o) PRO  
II VIRIS PRAEFECT(o)  
ARCEND(-) LATROC(in-)  
II VIR(o) BIS FLAM(ini) AVG(usti)

Figure 27: The father's name is highlighted in yellow

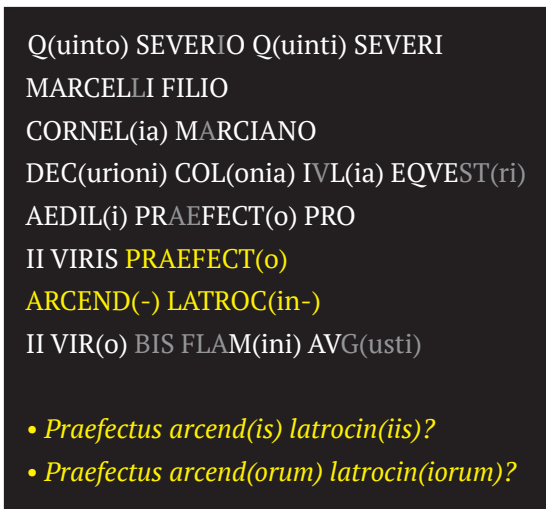


Figure 28: The *praefectus* who had to combat brigandage is marked in yellow

Inscriptions can provide information not only about outstanding men but also about eminent women. This is the case with the epitaph of Publius Annius Montanus (Kolb 2022, 22–23 no. 14; Fig. 29), dedicated to him by his daughter Annia Sabina, a priestess of the Roman empress (*flaminica Augustae*).

We decided to give Annia Sabina a fictional voice to explain her father's life and career in the *legio XXI Rapax* and in the colony. The function of the *interrex legionis* – which, according to some scholars, should be read *interprex legionis*, a professional interpreter of the legion (Speidel 2021) – is very difficult to understand. The debate concerning her father's position is still open. In our presentation, Annia Sabina refers to her father's duty in her story as a kind of family secret she cannot explain.

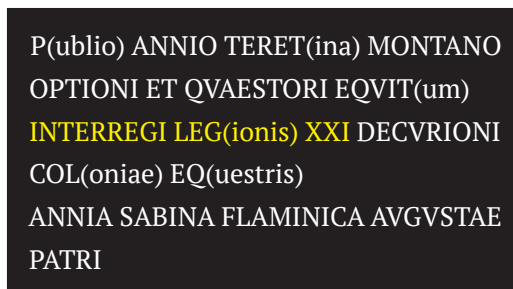


Figure 29: Epitaph of Publius Annius Montanus.  
© R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

Another funerary inscription is a double epitaph only partially preserved (Kolb 2022, 26 no. 19; Fig. 30). The right part of the block mentions Gaius Luconius Tetricus, who also held the position of *praefectus arcend(-) latrocin(-)*, the same rare office as the above mentioned Quintus Severius Marcianus. He also represented one or two of the presidents of the council (*pro II viro*) and later held the highest magistracy of the colony twice himself (*II vir*), and finally it is mentioned that he was a priest of the Roman emperor (*flamen Augusti*).

The left part was cut off later when the stone was put to secondary use. Only a single letter remains from the inscription of the first use in this area; it presumably mentioned Tetricus' wife. Again, we produced a fictional monologue of the deceased. Visitors can hear Tetricus speaking to his late spouse as both of them are already in the Underworld.

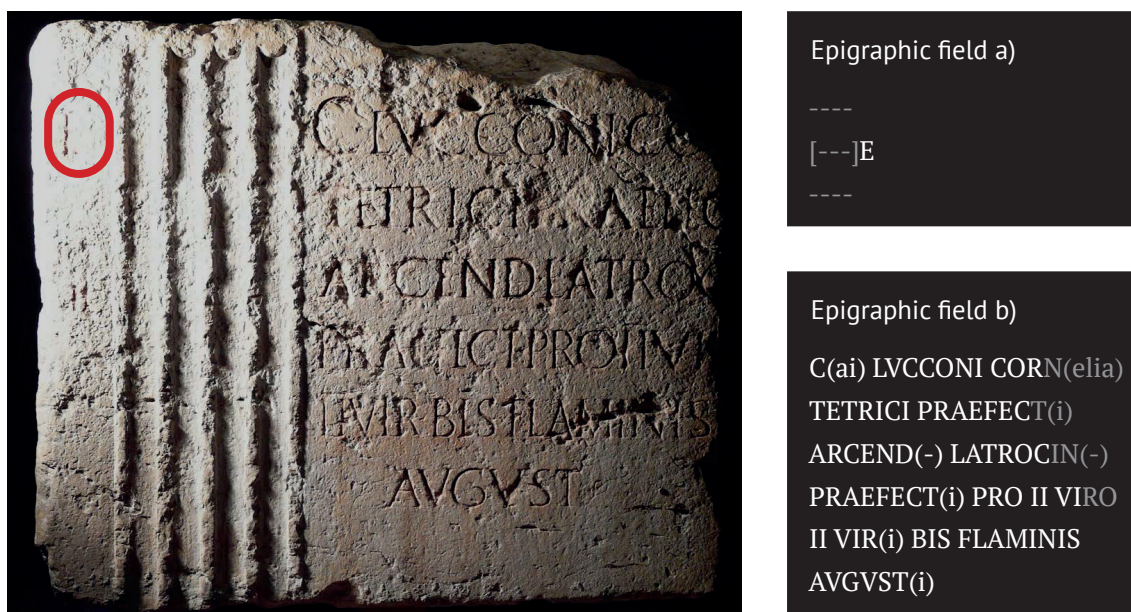


Figure 30: Double epitaph of Gaius Luconius Tetricus. © R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

The very large inscription dedicated to the emperor Trajan (98–117) (Fig. 31) was found in the excavations of the amphitheatre in secondary use (Kolb 2022, 17–18 no. 7). In this specific and exceptional case, we decided to invent and present a fictional dialogue between Trajan and his admirer and friend, the senator Pliny the Younger. It includes some excerpts from Pliny's praise of the emperor (*Panegyricus Traiani*) declaimed in the original Latin language so that visitors can get an idea of the spoken Latin in a lively way.



Figure 31: Inscription dedicated to Trajan. © R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

IMP(eratori) CAESARI DIVI NERVAE  
 F(ilio) NERVAE TRAIANO AVG(usto) GERMANICO  
 DACICO PONTIF(ici) MAXIM(o) TRIB(unicia) POT(estate) XV  
 IMP(eratori) VI CO(n)S(uli) V DESIGNAT(o) VI P(atri) P(atriciae)  
 EQVETR(es) PVBLICE

The last example of Nyon's rich epigraphic heritage is a small part of an inscription mentioning an equestrian officer (Eck 2021; Kolb 2022, 20–21 no. 11; Fig. 32). It is a real enigma, but scholars were able to resolve a good part of it. That is why we have included a film interview with Prof. Regula Frei-Stolba, who explains the details of the research.



Figure 32: Honorary inscription of an unknown equestrian officer. © R. Gindroz, La Croix-sur-Lutry

--- PROC(uratori) XX HER(editatium) ---  
 --- PROC(uratori) CHERSONENSI ---  
 --- PRAEF(ecto) COH(ortis) II RAETORUM ---  
 PATRONO

We have embarked on a new path with this exhibition at the Musée romain de Nyon, which not only offers plenty of space for the inscriptions of the Roman period but also meets the modern digital viewing habits of visitors – and we are thankfully for having been provided with the necessary resources.

Among other things, we try to give the former inhabitants a voice in order to familiarise this and future generations with the great and by no means ordinary cultural heritage of Roman Nyon. In doing so, we are not simply harmonising but giving an insight here and there into the difficulties of dealing with this Roman heritage. Nevertheless, everything is integrated into a narrative that creates distance through the necessary technology and does not offer identification. We are curious to see how this concept will develop over the coming years and decades, as there is still room for manoeuvre in the details of the presentation.

We hope that the information and stories we have selected about the people and texts, as well as the narratives and quoted speeches in modern languages and in Latin, will stimulate and lastingly promote interest in a distant past being a part of our culture and history.

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