

ATTIC INSCRIPTIONS: EDUCATION
TEACHERS' NOTES ON A-LEVEL ANCIENT HISTORY

B. Depth Study: 'The Politics and Culture of Athens, c.460–399 BC'

Slide 13. Erechtheion Accounts, 409/8 BC. British Museum 1785,0527.1 ([JG I³ 474](#))

Relevant to: cultural and religious life in the age of Pericles (including building project)

This inscription post-dates the Periclean period but it reflects building activity that had been initiated during the Periclean period. The Erechtheion is among the most important buildings on the Athenian Acropolis: it was a temple which came to house the statue of Athena of the City (*Athena Polias*) and was the home to other cults, including those of Poseidon and Hephaistos. It is particularly well-known for its Caryatid porch. It is generally thought that the planning and construction of the Erechtheion began before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in 431 BC. Work on it appears to have been abandoned during the Peloponnesian War, perhaps at the point when the Spartans occupied Dekeleia in 413 BC.

At a time when their financial resources and military confidence were reviving, the Athenians decided to renew work on the Erechtheion in 409/8 BC, beginning with a review of the current state of the building. This inscription, part of which has been in the British Museum since 1785, records in great detail the care that the Athenians took to assess the current state of the construction work and the organisation of the work that was to be carried out. It shows that the Athenians thought in detail about measurements and even the types of materials (e.g. the mention of 'Eleusinian' stone in the non-BM part) that would be used to complete the work. The interpretation of some architectural elements named here, e.g. the *maschaliaia*, is debated: the word may be linked to the Greek word for 'armpit', *maschale*, and so it may refer to a corner-stone.

It seems likely that the Athenians wrote these details down on stone as part of their system of accountability and so that the details would remain on public display as the work was undertaken and so that contractors could not claim for work that had already been completed.

The BM part of this stone tells us mostly about architectural details. But other parts of this inscription (fragments which are still in Greece) describe also the men who worked on the building: both Athenian citizens and non-Athenian residents of the city (metics) appear to have worked alongside one another as sculptors. Slaves play a role too, as masons or carpenters. What is perhaps interesting here is that labour on this building would have cut across the boundaries of status: the work of artisans included citizens, non-citizens and slaves working alongside each other.

The role of *architekton* (foreman) was taken by a citizen. The inscription also gives us information about the day-wage of 1 drachma paid to the architect, sawyers and

labourers. Others were paid lower rates perhaps because they had worked less than a full day for a particular job.

The stone is on display in G19 of the British Museum.

Questions for discussion: why was constructing sacred buildings so important to the Athenians? Why did they pay so much attention to minute detail (democratic accountability between boards of officials or excessive officiousness)? Is it interesting that citizens work alongside non-citizens and slaves on this building?

Slide 14. Decree about temple building, 450-403 BC. British Museum 1816,0610.206 ([AIUK 4.2 \(British Museum. Decrees\) no. 6](#))

Relevant to: cultural and religious life in the age of Pericles

In the fifth century BC, the Athenians passed decrees in their democratic assembly concerning a range of matters: legislative changes, declarations of war, alliances, adjustments to the tribute and also decrees about the physical development of the city. Sometimes they decided to write them up on stone slabs, often putting these on the Akropolis. Some of them survive until today.

Frustratingly, this decree of the late fifth century is very fragmentary. But it tells us that the Athenians in the second half of the fifth century made a decree concerning work (line 11). It is not clear which building it relates to: possible candidates include the temple of Athena Nike, the Hephaisteion and the Erechtheion. There are two mentions of the *architekton* (more like a modern foreman rather than designer): can you identify them? Look out for the letters APXITE[KTON].

The stone is on display in G19 of the British Museum.

Question to consider: How legible are Athenian inscribed decrees? Who might have read them?

Slide 15 Sacrificial Calendar, 470-50 BC. British Museum 1816,0612.272 ([Attic Inscriptions in UK Collections 4.1 \(Cult Provisions\) no. 2](#))

Relevant to: cultural and religious life of Periclean Athens.

Ancient Athenians (and other Greeks) wrote down on stone slabs 'calendars' of sacrifices and religious celebrations offered to deities and heroes. This is one example from Athens: two others are held at the British Museum (see *Attic Inscriptions in UK Collections 4.1 (Cult Provisions)* nos 1, 2 and 3). Like many other examples of its type, the text lacks sufficient historical references for us to be able to date it precisely. But the shapes of the letters and the forms of spelling point to a date between about 470 and 450 BC.

The decision to write these details down on stone may reflect an ambition to formalise practice or it may reflect actual reform of practices. In the inscription we read of the

type of sacrifices that would be offered to the different heroes and deities. The *Plynteria* was an important festival celebrated in the month of *Thargelion* every year during which the statue of *Athena Polias* (Athena of the City) was stripped of its robes so they could be washed. The offering to *Hermes* at lines 29-33 perhaps represented a kind of end-of-year party by youthful gymnasium users who supplied their own animal(s) for sacrifice and roasting on spits (*obeloi*).

The Athenian calendar of months was designed in origin primarily to regulate religious observance, and calendrical specifications feature prominently in inscriptions providing for religious rituals, including this one. The year started notionally or actually at the first new moon after the summer solstice. Months, all of which were named for religious festivals, had either 30 or 29 days. The sequence of the months was: Hekatombaion, Metageitnion, Boedromion, Pyanopsion, Maimakterion, Posideon, Gamelion, Anthesterion, Elaphebolion, Mounichion, Thargelion, Skirophorion.

Now in store at the British Museum. There is a video about this inscription and two other cult regulations at the British Museum on the AIO Youtube channel.

Question: what do sacrificial calendars show us about ancient Athenian religion? Why would they write them down on stone?

Slide 16. Ordinances of the deme Skambonidai, 475-50 BC ([AIUK 4.1 \(British Museum. Cult Regulations\) no 3](#)):

Ancient Athenians (and other Greeks) wrote down on stone slabs ordinances relating to sacrifices and religious celebrations offered to deities and heroes. This is one example from the Athenian deme of Skambonidai in the city centre: two others are held at the British Museum (see *Attic Inscriptions in UK Collections* 4.1 (Cult Provisions) nos 1, 2 and 3). Like many other examples of its type, the text lacks sufficient historical references for us to be able to date it precisely. But the shapes of the letters and the forms of spelling point to a date between about 475 and 450 BC.

The inscription includes instructions for festivals and sacrifices on a number of different occasions. Among the festivals it mentions are the *Dipolieia* (a festival of Zeus on the acropolis) and the *Panathenaia* (the most prominent of the festivals celebrating Athenian identity, which also took place on and around the acropolis). It includes detail about responsibility for the cult activities (the demarch, that is the mayor of the deme, seems to pay an important role) and the division of meat and skins among members of the community: sometimes meat was allocated to specific groups (e.g. metics, who were resident foreigners in Athens); at other times it was sold to make a profit for the cult; the skin (useful for leather making) was to belong to the demarch.

The decision to write these details down on stone may reflect an ambition to formalise practice or it may reflect actual reform of practices. In the inscription we read of the type of sacrifices that would be offered to the different heroes and deities on different occasions and details about how the sacrifices were shared.

Now in store at the British Museum. There is a video about [this inscription and two other cult regulations at the British Museum on the AIO Youtube channel](#).

Question: what do written ordinances show us about the practices of ancient Athenian religion? Why would they write them down on stone? Could they be viewed as a way of formalising practices hitherto which had been regulated by oral tradition?

Slides 17, 18. *Relevant to: democratic institutions.* In the [Proxeny decree for Straton of Sidon](#) (possibly 387 BC), an amendment proposed by an individual named Menexenos suggests that the main decree had been “non-probouleumatic,” i.e. formulated in the Assembly, rather than being based on the Council's proposal. This, and the fact that it was thought appropriate to inscribe the details of an amendment, shows that the decree was the subject of active debate in the Assembly.

While this inscription dates from the classical period, the attention of learners should be pointed to the fact that, strictly speaking, it falls just outside the prescribed period of the component: given the specifications' additional requirement to analyse what we can learn from the sources, teachers and students should acknowledge that conclusions drawn from this document must be extrapolated back to the fifth century BC.

For Ancient History there is an additional requirement to analyse what we can actually learn from the sources so teachers and students may need to think more carefully about the selection and use of such material.

Slide 19. No single inscription fully illustrates the decree-making process of the Athenians, which involved contributions from individuals, the council, and deliberation at the assembly. A short explanation can be found of the decree-making process in Stephen Lambert's [Attic Inscriptions in UK Collections 4.2 \(British Museum: Decrees\), pages 7-8.](#)