

ATTIC INSCRIPTIONS: EDUCATION

TEACHERS' NOTES ON A-LEVEL CLASSICAL CIVILISATION

A. Invention of the Barbarian (H408/23)

The notion of the Invention of the Barbarian is one that is founded particularly strongly on perceptions and descriptions of non-Greeks that appear in the literary texts and the ceramic evidence of vase-painting. But ancient Athenian inscriptions offer a rather different perspective on the ways in which Greeks interacted with non-Greeks, sometimes suggesting harmonious co-operation which appears to have by-passed ideologies or prejudices about ethnic identity. They may support the view of Athens as a diverse and cosmopolitan society, which has been set out in recent work, particularly that of Kostas Vlassopoulos (in an article entitled 'Free spaces: identity, experience and democracy in classical Athens', *Classical Quarterly* 57 (2007) 33–52, offering a refreshing alternative to citizen-oriented studies of classical Athens.

Two Athenian inscriptions in the UK seem particularly relevant and tell us about Athenian relations with the Phoenicians of Sidon, a non-Greek people of the eastern Mediterranean who were at this point settled in modern Lebanon. The Sidonians formed by far the largest Phoenician community in Athens and were often engaged in trading, concentrating around the Piraeus from the fifth century BC onwards.

Slides 3 and 4. Athenian Proxeny Decree for Strato of Sidon, 388/7BC. [AIUK 11 \(Ashmolean Museum, Oxford\) no. 1](#)

This is one of [five inscriptions acquired by James Dawkins on a visit to Athens in 1751 and donated to the University of Oxford](#) on his death in 1757. He found it on the Acropolis, a common location for inscribed decrees to be set up in the fourth century BC, which may have given the decree some sort of divine protection by presenting it as a dedication to the deities.

This decree of the Athenian assembly honoured Straton, King of Sidon, a Phoenician kingdom within the Persian Empire, by making him the proxenos (hereditary friend and representative) of the Athenians in Sidon. It provides important insights into the Athenian relationship with Phoenicia and the Persian empire and its treatment of resident foreigners ('metics'). The background to the decree is presented in the early parts of the inscription: an Athenian embassy to the Persian king had passed through Sidon and received substantial aid from Straton, who then sent an envoy to Athens, which prompted this decree.

The decree makes reference to the use of tokens (*symbola*) to facilitate relations between Strato and the Athenians. These were objects, such as tablets or knucklebones, which were broken into two pieces, one of which was taken by each of the parties. The unique shape of the break acted as proof of identity, when the two pieces were fitted back together. They were originally used in the Greek world to guarantee long-distance relationships that were intended to last a long time, such as multi-generational guest friendships (cf. Herodotus 6.86). They are reminiscent of

'indentured agreements' which were used in contracts throughout mediaeval and modern British history.

An amendment to the decree exempts Sidonians from various financial obligations to which metics (resident foreigners) at Athens were normally liable, while they were 'visiting' Athens. It is unclear whether this exemption applied to Sidonians who settled in Athens permanently. Either way, the exemption granted by this decree was a significant privilege and put them on a par with citizens in terms of non-payment of tax. By the late fourth century, the Sidonians had their own 'association' in Athens and often erected funerary monuments in the Piraeus. It is unclear whether this Sidonian community already existed at the time of this decree or developed as a result of it.

[The inscription is a subject of a video on the AIO YouTube channel.](#)

Slide 5. Bilingual Marble Stele, fourth century BC. British Museum 1861,0726.1

This tall grave marker is surmounted by an elaborate acanthus decoration and two rosettes; it is of a style that is well-attested among ancient Athenian grave-markers. It contains one Greek inscription and another in Phoenician, the language of the people of that name who lived in modern Lebanon.

Bilingual Phoenician and Greek inscriptions from Athens provide evidence for the interactions of this community within a Greek-speaking city in which they are proudly identified as Phoenicians but with Greek credentials. In this case as in others, the name of the Phoenician was 'translated' into Greek.

Questions for consideration: is it interesting that an Athenian-style monument was inscribed in two very different languages? (And that physically the monument was resolutely Athenian in style?) What might this say about ancient Greek interactions with non-Greek peoples and non-Greeks' interaction with Greeks? How might the audience of this inscription differ from that of the Athenian decree for Strato?

Slide 6. Honours for Euagoras of Salamis of Cyprus. [AIUK 4.2 \(British Museum. Decrees\) no. 6](#)

Two things are worth considering here: first, Euagoras' role in Greek inter-state relations. At some point probably in the late fifth century the Athenians had [granted King Euagoras of Salamis in Cyprus the status of an Athenian citizen](#), probably as a result of his having supported the Athenians in the later stages of the Peloponnesian war after the Persians had sided with the Spartans. In 394/3 BC the Athenians passed further honours, including praise, a crown and statue for the same man. He had been an ally to the Athenians at the start of the fourth century against the Spartans.

Second, ethnicity: there was a substantial Phoenician population in Cyprus, but Euagoras was part of a dynasty which identified as Greek, claiming descent from Aiakos son of Zeus and Teukros the son of Ajax who, after he captured Troy, went to Cyprus and settled Salamis. The identity of Euagoras as a Greek was relevant to good relations which he had with the Athenians.

Question for discussion: how relevant was Greek identity to Athens' interstate relations? How might Cypriots have conceived of their identity?