ATTIC INSCRIPTIONS: EDUCATION

TEACHERS' NOTES ON A-LEVEL CLASSICAL CIVILISATION

C. Greek Religion (H408/31)

The ancient Greeks lacked any authoritative 'holy book' which set out the norms of religious practice or belief. Inscriptions, however, are particularly informative on the subject of ancient Greek religion: a huge amount of our understanding on that subject derives ultimately from them and they must have played a vital role in guiding religious practice during antiquity. However, there is a paradox, given that, as Robert Parker (in his lecture on epigraphy and Greek religion at the *12th International Congress of Greek and Latin Epigraphy* held at Oxford in 2007) observes, attention to oral tradition (often unwritten) was vital to the practices of ancient Greek religion. Nevertheless, Greek inscriptions do illuminate some aspects of religious ritual: as Parker points out, many inscriptions underline the importance of discipline and good order in the religious sanctuary, the rights and duties of priests and priestesses, and set out the financial and administrative management of religious practices. Accordingly, the ritual information that they preserve often seems to have been included for administrative purposes.

Inscriptions tell us about the two areas of Greek religion that have traditionally been emphasised by scholars of the subject: (a) practice, which is the aspect of religion highlighted by scholars who follow the view of Emile Durkheim about religion as a social practice and enunciated, for instance, by Simon Price, who took the view that 'belief' was a Christian construct that did not exist in Greek religion and (b) belief in terms of ideas about reciprocity, oracles, divine retribution and the afterlife (something studied in recent years by scholars such as Thomas Harrison, in his book *Greek Religion: Belief and Experience*).

Athenian inscriptions are deeply relevant to study of ancient Athenian religion: a list of such inscriptions can be found in section 5 of Attic Inscriptions Online Papers no 10. Inscriptional information about religious practice survives in the shape of (a) sacred regulations and calendars of sacrifices written down on stone and (b) dedications made by individuals to the Gods. The former categories set out the details of how Athenians were expected to go about paying respect to the gods; the latter demonstrate aspects of that piety in practice while also having implications for our understanding of belief. Stephen Lambert (*AIUK* 4.1 (*British Museum. Cult Provisions*)) has recently republished the ancient Athenian inscriptions at the British Museum pertaining to religious regulation and Peter Liddel and Polly Low will publish the British Museum's inscribed Athenian dedications later in 2021. But as these notes make clear, aspects of other types of inscription, including decrees of the city and funerary monuments, are relevant to our understanding of religion.

In particular, they address the aspects of the specification dealing with the nature of the Olympian Gods (and non-Olympian cults including hero-cults), Rituals and Priests (especially the role of votives in both state and private contexts; the connection between aristocratic families and religious ritual; the role of women; the role of blood

sacrifice), Personal experience of the divine (in particular healing cults), Religion and Society (the links between politics and religion, the *Panathenaia* and its importance for Athens).

1. Religion and Decrees of the Athenian assembly

Slide 17. Regulations concerning the Eleusinian Mysteries, 475-450 BC. *AIUK* (*British Museum. Decrees*) 4.2 no. 1.

Some religious regulations were inscribed without reference to the body which introduced their provisions (see, for instance, the three cult regulations at the British Museum published in *AIUK* 4.1 (*British Museum. Cult Provisions*): discussed below). The Athenian city does seem to have had powers to manage religious practice, which is demonstrated in *AIUK* 4.2 no. 1, one of the earliest Athenian inscribed decrees, and the earliest evidence of cult regulation from the Eleusinion in the City. The inscription may have been issued by the Eleusinian *gene*, a descent group from which were drawn religious personnel for specific cults.

In this inscription, the city makes provisions for important aspects of the Mysteries: it is not clear whether it represents a 'codification' of current practice or innovation. It provides for the appointment of 'managers' (*epimeletai*) of the Mysteries.

In his edition of this inscription, Lambert underlines three specific points about its significance:

(a) Whereas tenure of responsible public office was usually at Athens limited to adult male citizens, there was one important exception: priestesses. In this case the priestess of Demeter at Eleusis was the senior priestess of the Eleusinian cult, and she seems to have had significant financial responsibility for the management of the cult.
(b) The decree perhaps harnesses the Mysteries as a vehicle for the projection of Athenian prestige in the inter-state scene, especially in its arrangements for a Panhellenic sacred truce which put the Mysteries on a par with the Olympic truce.
(c) The city appears to have closely managed arrangements for initiation into the Mysteries and especially the fees charged in order to obtain the required sponsorship from an insider.

Points for discussion: what does the inscription say about the management of Athenian religion, the role of priests and priestesses and the prestige of the Eleusinian Mysteries among the Greeks?

Slides 18 and 19: Athena (and others) depicted at the head of decrees. *AIUK* 3 (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) no. 2 and *AIUK* 4.2 (British Museum. Decrees) no. 10. Both 350-25 BC

When the Athenians wrote up decrees of their assembly on stone they set them up in religious places (such as religious sanctuaries or, in the case of Athens, the Akropolis, a network of sanctuaries). They sometimes added depictions of the gods and/or

heroes on reliefs above the writing. At one level these reliefs clearly functioned as visual signals, complementing the text. In a general sense, an invocation of the Gods was something that drew attention to the subject matter of a decree. Demosthenes, the fourth-century orator, wrote (*Letters* 1.1): 'I assume that it is right for anyone who is embarking on any serious discussion and task to begin first with the gods.'

Moreover, there is modern discussion, about what exactly the reliefs represented and their relationship to the inscribed texts: perhaps, as Mack has recently proposed (*Annual of the British School at Athens* 113 (2018)), they signified a sort of analogy between human and divine activity, with the gods 'setting an example' to humans. He suggests that collective public authority at Athens was thought of as underpinned by divine agency and observes that this 'idea that gods might have a role in legitimating political power is hardly surprising from a wider historical perspective or, indeed, from a Greek perspective, given that, in the *Iliad*, Agamemnon's authority as a king, symbolised by his sceptre, was derived from Zeus'. Alternatively, the reliefs perhaps indicated that the written inscriptions were directed at an audience not only of human readers but also of the Gods. But they would also imply something profound about the commitment of the parties to a decree or treaty embellished with images of the deities.

The **British Museum** relief (**Slide 18**) depicts a standing Athena with helmet and spear, named on the epistyle above, crowning a male human figure who is depicted in much smaller scale. It can be inferred that the relief is from the top of an Athenian Assembly decree honouring at least one man; parallels would suggest he was a foreigner. Athena in such scenes represents, or personifies, the city of Athens, though this depiction clearly also goes beyond mere symbolism, asserting divine agency in the honorific process. The substantive part of the inscribed decree is lost; all that remains is the heading 'Gods', which may strengthen the implications of divine agency.

In the **Fitzwilliam** monument (**Slide 19)**, the only inscriptions that are preserved (fragmentarily) are the labels at the top above the relief. The first figure on the relief is Athena with a shield; the label for the second does not survive, but it may have been the personification of Demos ('the People'). The label above the third figure, in military dress, is partially preserved and might be read as 'Me[ne]laos', mythical king of Sparta in the Trojan War (a conflict in which Athens and Sparta had been allied).

It has been suggested that the decree might date to 331 BC, at which time Athens came very close to joining in an anti-Macedonian revolt led by the Spartan king Agis ([Plutarch] *Moralia* 818E). In the event Athens did not join the revolt, and Agis was defeated by Alexander (the Great) of Macedon's deputy in Europe, Antipater, at Megalopolis the following year; but it is quite plausible that Athens passed a decree (e.g. perhaps one honouring Spartan envoys) in the context of Athenian diplomacy with Sparta at this time, and Sparta would appropriately have been represented on such a decree by the figure of Menelaos.

A video about the Fitzwilliam inscriptions is available on the AIO Youtube channel.

Points for discussion: how and why did the Athenians represent Athena on public documents?

Slide 20. Honours for the girls who worked on the robe for Athena (108/7 BC). *AIUK* 1 (Petworth House) no. 1

The main fragment of this inscription is built into the modern base of a statue of Artemis in the 'Marble Hall' of Petworth House in West Sussex. It contains parts of two decrees of the Athenian citizen Assembly. They both relate to the rituals surrounding the new robe (*peplos*) which was presented to the statue of Athena on the acropolis of Athens at the city's principal religious festival, the Panathenaia. The central scene of the Parthenon frieze in the British Museum (which dates more than 300 years earlier than this inscription) is thought by some scholars (such as Robert Parker and Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood) to represent the presentation of the robe.

The peplos robe was a rectangular woollen cloth. In the *Iliad* the women of Troy present a peplos made by women of Sidon to Athena in her temple on the acropolis (6.86-98 and 269-311) and comparable rituals are attested historically both in Athens and elsewhere in the Greek world. Athena's robe was decorated with mythical scenes and was an important symbol of Athenian identity.

The inscription records honours awarded in 108/7 BC to the teenage girls (*parthenoi*) who had worked on the robe. The *parthenoi* for that year had made a silver bowl to commemorate their piety in their work and the decree records how they were granted the permission that they had sought to dedicate it to Athena. They were granted the privilege of foliage garlands and to have their names written out on the inscription that was to be set up by the temple of Athena *Polias* on the Akropolis.

These girls were adolescents from the upper echelons of Athenian society. A period of service weaving the peplos will have provided them with acculturation in the characteristically feminine task of textile-making in a context that enabled them to mix with daughters of other elite families and to garner public prestige and visibility in the context of the city's major festival. The inscription suggests how the Panathenaia festival, like other religious events served more than religious functions, such as the reinforcement of the role of the elite young women. It supports the view of religion as very much tied up with the expression of social practice.

A video about the Petworth House inscription is available on the AIO Youtube channel.

Discussion: How is this inscription relevant to our understanding of Greek religion? (It shows a civic acknowledgement of a religious rite. It shows civic support and praise for girls performing a religious role. It suggests the significance of the Panathenaia that such attention goes to the makers of the robe for Athena. It indicates the important role women had in religion.)

Related issues to consider: How far can religion be separated from politics in Ancient Athens? Was the Panathenaia more of a religious festival than a civic one? To what extent were women excluded from religious life? How far was participation in religion merely a matter of prestige, rather than devotion?

2. Religion and Dedications

The specifications include BM 1867,0508.117 (**slide 21**). This is a Roman-era dedication in the form of a thank-offering to Asklepieios and Hygieia probably from Melos bearing the inscription: 'Tyche [dedicated this] to Asklepios and Hygieia as a thank offering'. Details about it can be found in the BM Collections online. However, as it is not an Athenian inscripiotn, it is not included in these notes. But the practice underlying it is commonplace and existed in Athens too: a number of comparable items in the shape of votives depicting body parts are represented in the collections of the British Museum (**see Slide 22**) these appear to have been set up on the Pnyx Hill in central Athens in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD at the sanctuary of Zeus The Highest (*Hypsistos*). During the imperial period the sanctuary, which in the classical period had been the venue of the Athenian democratic assembly, served as a healing shrine. Individuals would make dedications on stone representing body parts that were afflicted by disease. As Bjorn Forsen (*Hesperia*, 1993) argues, these dedications were placed within niches cut into the bedrock of the retaining wall of the sanctuary.

In this case, the term 'vow' (*euche*) used to describe them may indicate that these objects were set up as gifts to the deity to thank him for an act of healing. Alternatively, they may have formed the fulfilment of a pledge to make a future dedication if the God was perceived as healing the affliction. We might add that votive eyes need not necessarily refer to a dedicant's diseased eyes, but might allude to the eyes with which the dedicant saw a vision of a deity, or to the eyes of the deity him- or her-self.

Discussion: How is this relevant to the study of Greek religion? It fits within the context of healing sanctuaries and demonstrates an example of personal experiences in Greek religion. It shows an example of a healing cult beyond Asklepios. These inscriptions give the opportunity to discuss epithets and the variety of roles gods had (in this case, Zeus the Highest). It shows a challenge of polytheism – who do you worship if you are ill?

Slide 23. Ephebic dedication commemorating victory at Eleusis, 158/9 AD. *AIUK* 11 (*Ashmolean Museum, Oxford*) no. 7

The plaque is a dedication in honour of an athletic victory at Eleusis by the ephebes, Athenian cadets experiencing the training undertaken by male citizens on the cusp of adulthood, which involved military and athletic training, guarding the Piraeus, patrolling the Athenian border, and participation in religious and commemorative rituals throughout Attica.

The event at Eleusis at which the ephebes were victorious might have been the Antinoeia, festival games held by the ephebes in honour of Antinoos, the young lover of Emperor Hadrian. Or it might have been the 'Contest of Prowess', which involved a contest between two teams of ephebes, called 'Theseidai' and 'Herakleidai' – perhaps the relief decoration indicates that the latter team was victorious. The possibilities on this front are discussed by Chris de Lisle in his edition of the inscription at *AIUK* 11 (*Ashmolean Museum*) no. 7. You can find a video about this inscription here.

The relief depicts Herakles reclining on a lion's skin under a tree. His bow and quiver hang from a branch and his club leans against the tree. The motif, representing well-

earned repose after labours, was common throughout the ancient world. At some point, the relief has been snapped in half horizontally, Herakles' face has been carefully removed, and his genitals may have been removed as well.

Discussion: What does this votive reveal about the nature of hero cult? Does it thank Herakles him for a victory? If this was to commemorate a victory of the 'Thesidai' over the 'Herakleidai,' what does this tell us about the significance of hero cults for ephebes? Why would ephebes (cadets) make such a dedication to Herakles to commemorate a sporting victory?

Slide 24. Dedication to Pan and the Nymphs, 350-330 BC. *AIUK* 9 (Brocklesby Park) Appendix

This marble tablet with sculpture in relief represents Hermes leading three Nymphs towards a group of worshippers. Behind them, at the extreme right side of the scene, is the head of a personification of a fountain or river (perhaps the river-god Acheloos, the father of the Nymphs: Plato *Phaedrus*, 263d); above them sits Pan, depicted with beard, pointed ears and goat's legs. There are five worshippers and a smaller figure (perhaps a child or, more likely, a slave) who leads an animal towards a stone altar, probably for sacrifice. Animal sacrifices were widespread in Greek cult practice and they were thought as a way of appeasing or maintaining good relations with a deity; usually the edible parts of the meat were distributed among the community and the inedible parts were burnt as an offering to the gods.

Pan and the Nymphs were associated with (and worshipped at) cave sites. In Menander's *Dyskolos*, Pan refers to the Nymphs who 'share my shrine' (line 37), and at least nine caves in Athens and Attica can be linked with worship of Pan and the Nymphs. The precise findspot of this object is unknown, but it is possible that our relief originally stood in, or just outside, one of the many caves of Pan and the Nymphs in Athens. For discussion, see Peter Liddel and Polly Low, *AIUK* 9 (*Brocklesby Park*) Appendix.

Pan was worshipped at Athens after the Persian wars. According to Herodotus (6.105-6): 'Before they left the city, the Athenian generals sent off a message to Sparta. The messenger was an Athenian named Pheidippides, a professional long-distance runner. According to the account he gave the Athenians on his return, Pheidippides met the god Pan on Mount Parthenium, above Tegea. Pan, he said, called him by name and told him to ask the Athenians why they paid him no attention, in spite of his friendliness towards them and the fact that he had often been useful to them in the past, and would be so again in the future. The Athenians believed Pheidippides's story, and when their affairs were once more in a prosperous state, they built a shrine to Pan under the Acropolis, and from the time his message was received they held an annual ceremony, with a torch-race and sacrifices, to court his protection.'

The dedication was evidently made by a citizen of the Attic deme (village) of Phlya whose name is lost, save for the second element of his patronymic.

This tablet, the current whereabouts of which are unknown, is attested only by way of the illustration which appears in the *Museum Worsleyanum* (2 volumes, first published 1798 and 1803). All editions of the text and discussions of the relief are based on this depiction.

Point to discuss: why would an individual make a dedication like this? What would it say about the dedicant? Why depict this type of scene?

3. Inscriptions and Religious Regulations

Slide 25. Ordinances of the deme Skambonidai, 475-450 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 Attic deme (village) 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 that took place 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 [one of the constituent villages of Attica], 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 distribution of meat from religious sacrifices among the community is a phenomenon which reflects the social nature of religion and the fact that religious structures sometimes replicate the social divisions of the city.

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.

A much more detailed example of a sacrificial calendar preserved in a stone inscription is that from the Attic deme of Erchia (*AIO* 593) of 375-50 BC. It outlines details of the kind of sacrifices offered to heroes and deities throughout the year in a single medium-sized deme. It is a fascinating example of the genre which gives a sense of the range of cult activity, the types of sacrifices that were offered to deities and heroes as well as the annual dates and locations specified for them.

The Skambonidai inscription is now kept 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 and you can read more about them in Stephen Lambert's edition of them (*AIUK* 4.1 (*British Museum. Cult Provisions*)).

Discussion: How is this inscription relevant to the study of Greek religion? It shows the civic regulations of religious practices. It includes specific instructions for festivals and sacrifices. It regulates where religious authority lies. It details who receives the meat after sacrifices.

Questions to consider: To what extent was religion separated from politics? Who had religious authority? Why were religious practices recorded on stone? Why were sacrifices performed? For the meat and its nutritional value? A reflection of social structure?

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

4. Religion and Tombstones

Slide 26. Tombstone (stele) for Priestess Choirine, c. 375-50 BC. British Museum 2007,5001.1

On occasion funerary monuments included details about, or depictions of, those people who they commemorated. Choirine stands beneath the inscription of her name facing to her left in a sleeved chiton, peplos, and himation, wearing slippers and holding a large temple key in her right hand, signifying her role as a priestess. Her clenched left hand points forward in a gesture often encountered in votive reliefs showing devotees approaching a god, perhaps with small incense boxes clutched in their hand. The temple key was a conventional symbol of office as a priestess (*kleidouchos*, key-bearer), representing her function as custodian of the sanctuary (in contrast to a male priest, conventionally depicted holding a sacrificial knife).

We don't know which cult Choirine's priestesshood was associated with, but we believe that the stone originated from the area of Eleusis, to the west of Athens. For this reason, it has been suggested that she was a priestess of Demeter and Kore, whose cult activities were prominent at Eleusis.

Priestesses of Demeter were selected by lot from the *genos* (a family with particular hereditary religious office-holding privileges) Philleidai and held office for life. *Genos* priests sometimes have appropriate priestly names. 'Chorine' literally means 'piglet', and it may not be coincidental that the piglet was an important sacrificial animal, especially at Eleusis.

Priests and priestesses are one of very few 'professions' to be regularly depicted on Attic funerary monuments. One might think, in a funerary context, that this

phenomenon was associated with the religious aspects of funerary culture. It is however more plausible, as Robert Pitt suggests in his forthcoming edition of Athenian funerary monuments at the British Museum, to interpret it as a manifestation or extension of characteristic gender roles for citizens which are commonly commemorated on these monuments: the priestess was custodian of the god's 'house' in the same way as the housewife is custodian of her own home. Yet this monument suggests also that activity related to a priesthood was something that went beyond the set of normal expectations of a citizen, especially if Choirine was a member of an elite aristocratic *genos*.

The lack of patronymic (name of father) or demotic (name of deme) may indicate that the original placement of this monument in a family *peribolos* would have made these details superfluous.

Questions to consider: what is the significance of the key in the deceased's hand? Why would Choirine have been commemorated in this way? Was there a role for women in Greek religion?