

ATTIC INSCRIPTIONS: EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION FOR TEACHERS

1. General Introduction

The ancient Athenians, like many other ancient Greek communities, used stone inscriptions to monumentalise accounts of their public and private activities. They deployed them to address an audience of humans and divine entities, to commemorate great achievements, to record public decisions, and to remember the dead. This tendency, known to scholars as the Epigraphic Habit (a term brought into scholarly circulation in the Roman context by the historian Ramsay MacMullen and applied to the ancient Athenian historical context by Charles Hedrick) has left behind a legacy of many thousands of inscriptions (some 20,000 survive from ancient Athens alone).

Such inscriptions offer a wealth of insights into the ancient world and its peoples. They combine texts with images; their physical nature (what they looked like, where they were set up, why they were written up on stone) is something that must be taken on board when considering them. They offer perspectives which are missing from the literary sources and sometimes they contain versions of the past which lead us to ask new questions about the accounts of Thucydides and other writers. In Athens in particular, they offer views of private life (especially the significance of gender and the nature of Athenian society) and the functioning of public institutions.

As evidence for the ancient world, inscriptions naturally bring with them challenges: many of those preserved are worn or damaged, missing chunks of their original writings or surviving only as fragments. The modern study of inscriptions (known as epigraphy), undertaken by historians and epigraphers (experts in inscriptions) has taken great strides in [joining together previously broken stones](#) or restoring original texts. There is sometimes lively debate about the letters or words that may originally have appeared, and many questions about ancient inscriptions remain unresolved.

It is sometimes challenging to work out the date of inscriptions: ancient Greeks, for obvious reasons, did not use 'BC' or 'AD' dates in their writings. Sometimes we can work out the date of an Athenian inscription on the basis of its reference to the city's *archon* (magistrate) who gave his name to the year (that is, the *archon eponymos*) and took up office in the mid-summer. For instance, Themistokles held the archonship from mid-summer 493 BC to mid-summer 492 BC, so an inscription that mentioned him as *archon* could be dated to the year 493/2 BC. Inscriptions that lack reference of the *archon eponymos* can be dated on the grounds of their textual content (reference to events, individuals or documentary phrases); those lacking these features can sometimes be dated on the basis of the type of Greek alphabet used, the shapes of letters or even the style adapted by the letter-cutter: for more on this, we recommend Chris de Lisle's video 'How to Date an Athenian Inscription' on the AIO Youtube Channel.

2. Inscriptions in the Classroom (KS 4 and 5)

- Inscriptions are an excellent way to introduce (ancient) history to students. They allow snapshots of ancient civilisations, often focussing on individuals (male and female) who were out of the limelight and were neglected by our relatively elite literary sources.
- As material objects with physical attributes, they offer a view of the ancient world alternative to that of the literary sources: accordingly, presented appropriately, they may appeal to a wide range of learning styles.
- They are particularly useful for a wide range of learners: their relative conciseness and free-standing nature makes them accessible to all; the open-access availability of AIO means that students have the opportunity to conduct independent research using the website). Moreover, inscriptions suit those students who enjoy paying close attention to detail: looking carefully at words and phrases can underscore sophisticated comprehension of important historical issues.
- A teacher might introduce an inscription and deliver context, then allow one group of students to work on key questions in groups; other students may benefit from more guided discussion.
- Ancient Athenian inscriptions in UK collections would make a good topic of an Extended Project Qualification (EPQ). Eventually all these inscriptions will be published on the [Attic Inscriptions Online website](#). Ask students (especially those at A-level) to use this website to research into the inscriptions.
- A guide to the use of AIO in teaching can be found in [AIO Papers 10](#).

3. Teaching ideas (KS 4 and 5)

- Consider using the Introduction to Athenian Inscriptions as an introductory class for those who have never encountered inscriptions previously.
- Consider the 'type' or 'genre' of inscription: is it public or private? Was it set up by a family or by the Athenian state? This is really important for our interpretation of them!
- Ask students to explain why the ancient Greeks wrote down inscriptions on stone. For whom were they writing them: an audience of humans or an audience of the gods? (And does this change from one inscription to another, depending on where they were originally set up?)

- Consider whether there is a likely relationship between public inscriptions and democracy. Writing public documents out on stone may be important to the dissemination of public decisions and in ensuring accountability (both in terms of recording responsibility for a decree; and in terms of the handing over of one set of financial accounts to a new set of magistrates at the end of the year).
- Private inscriptions, especially funerary monuments and dedications, may have been set up as a way of making a statement about the status or wealth of a deceased individual and their family.
- How important is legibility to their audience? What do they say about rates of literacy? Or about Athenian habits of punctiliousness/officiousness during the period of democracy and empire?
- Consider the location of inscriptions (as a way of introducing students to understanding the relationship between the *asty* and *chora* and the concept of the *polis* as a whole):
 - Where were public inscriptions were set up and why? Many state documents were set up on the Athenian acropolis, a cluster of religious sanctuaries at the centre of Athens. Others were set up in the Athenian agora or at other locations in the city-centre (*asty*); other documents were set up in the demes of Attica or even sanctuaries on the edges of Athenian territory (the *chora*).
 - Where were funerary monuments set up? Most of them were erected in family funerary enclosures (*periboloi*) situated within cemeteries or alongside roads either in central Athens or in Attica.
- Consider the likely financial cost of inscriptions:
 - Why make an additional investment by committing a decree to stone? (As Lambert has argued, inscription of Athenian public decisions is selective).
 - Why adorn a family funerary enclosure (*peribolos*) with inscriptions naming certain deceased individuals? Again, funerary monuments are likely to be selective and would have commemorated those whose lives or deaths may have seen as meriting an inscription.
- Consider physical aspects of inscriptions (see also below):
 - Why do some inscriptions bear images but others don't?
 - On funerary inscriptions, can we identify the deceased person? People who are seated on Athenian funerary monuments may be granted some kind of especial status, but it is not always clear that they are the primary deceased person.
 - What is the significance of the hand-clasping (*dexiosis*) gesture? And the unveiling (*anakalypsis*) gesture? (See especially the [stele for Epigenes and Melisto at Lyme Park](#)).
 - State documents sometimes bear depictions which illustrate interaction between divinities or heroes. The view of William Mack is that these act as a sort of analogy between divine and human action.

- Ask students to write mini-biographies of the individuals featured in the funerary monuments. They might want to draw inspiration from AIO or AIUK publications or even literature that they have read as part of the syllabus, e.g. the work of Thucydides, Homer, or one of the Athenian dramatists.
- Ask the students what attitudes these inscriptions suggest the ancient Athenians had towards other human beings, their ideas about gender; age and youth; outsiders and foreigners; animals and mythical creatures. What do they say about human responses to death?
- Discuss the ethical question: is it right that these inscriptions should be at the British Museum or in other public or private collections? Bear in mind that many of them at the British Museum are part of the Elgin collection which the UK Parliament purchased from Lord Elgin in 1816 and then placed in the British Museum. What role do the UK collections play in disseminating information about inscriptions to the wider public, and what educational function do they play at, for instance, the BM?
- Field trips to see Greek inscriptions: it may be possible to arrange field-trips to particular museums to see Greek inscriptions (especially Leeds, Great North Museum, BM, Ashmolean, Fitzwilliam, National Gallery Scotland, National Trust properties at Lyme, Petworth, Mount Stewart). We have created resources designed to support visitors to specific collections at the Ashmolean and British Museum, which are available on request (peter.liddel@manchester.ac.uk) or from the Museums directly.
- But if this is impossible, then it may be helpful to visit a place with modern inscriptions such as town centres or parks with civic statues and dedications or a local graveyard: in these contexts, aspects of commemoration can be seen which may be more or less analogous to ancient Athenian practices. Observations can also be made about the legibility of stones and phenomena such as [weathering \(which may be relevant to students of physical sciences\)](#), vandalism, repair, adjustments to inscriptions, etc.

4. Notes on the physical aspects of inscriptions

- The Athenians used stone, usually marble, for their inscriptions. They appear to have known that it was a long-lasting medium that would outlive their producers. It was drawn from the quarries in Mt. Penteli and Mt. Hymmetus (See the Introduction slides for pictures of the quarries at Penteli). Sometimes they used bronze for selected inscriptions, but few of these survive (bronze inscriptions, like statues, tended to be plundered and melted down for their scrap value). Name-tags (*pinakia*) were inscribed on metal, and curses on lead.
- The condition of the inscriptions is mixed: some are virtually complete but others are fragmentary. Remember that most of them are at least 2400 years

old during which time there have been wars, the destruction of cities and the collapse of civilisations; many of them were hacked from their original settings in a cumbersome way; most of them have been transported across Europe in the nineteenth century after having stood unprotected from the elements for hundreds of years. Others may have been damaged by processes of weathering.

- The excavation records of these inscriptions are inconsistent in terms of level of detail. We know that most of them are from Athens. Sometimes we know the precise location in which they were discovered but at other times we are reliant on likelihood to deduce their original location, e.g. dedications on the Acropolis and other sanctuaries; grave monuments at the Kerameikos (an important cemetery of the Athenians). You will be able to find out more about the provenance of these individual inscriptions from the AIO website.
- Many of the original contexts of inscriptions are now lost but we have to do our best to envisage the context within which they would have been viewed during antiquity.
- A significant proportion of the inscriptions that we discuss here are funerary monuments and would originally have been displayed in family funerary enclosures (*periboloi*) cited in cemeteries outside the city walls or alongside roads. They are monuments that not only communicate information about the people that they commemorated or depicted but also expressed the emotions of those who had been close to them in life. High-quality monuments would have been created bespoke; cheaper monuments would have been 'off the shelf' stock representations.
- Another group of stone inscriptions surviving from Athens took the form of dedications or gifts made to the deities which would have been given in anticipation of some form of divine favour or a thank-offering for its dispensation.
- Most of the inscriptions are carved on white or grey marble. You should bear in mind that in many cases the letters would have been picked out in red paint: this would have made them easier to read.

5. Key vocabulary

- *Anakalypsis* (a gesture of unveiling)
- *Asty* (a city centre)
- Attica/Attic (Attica is the broad area of the city-state of Athens including the surrounding region and port; Attic is the adjectival form)
- *Chora* (the countryside area of the *polis*)
- Deme (one of the 139 constituent villages which made up the city of Athens in the classical period)
- Demarch: the mayor of a 'deme'
- *Demokratia*: democracy or 'people power'

- *Dexiosis* (hand-clasping gesture often found between adults on funerary monuments)
- *Euthyna*: an accountability test undertaken by Athenian magistrates at the end of their one-year offices
- *Hellenotamiai* (Athenian magistrates, literally = Treasurers of the Greeks, responsible for administering collection of tribute and later for Athenian state expenditure)
- *Isonomia*: equality before the law
- *Metic* (a tax-paying non-Athenian resident of Athens)
- *Monarchia*: monarchy
- *Oligarchia*: rule of the few
- *Peribolos* (a funerary enclosure)
- *Polis* (pl. *poleis*: city-state: in the classical period, city-states had the powers to pursue their own foreign policy and make their own laws and decrees)
- *Proxenos* (a person who represented the interests of a foreign city in their homeland)
- *Psephisma* (a decree, often of the Athenian assembly)
- *Stele* (pl. *stelai*: a slab of marble, often free-standing)
- *Xenia* (guest-friendship)

6. Links for Teachers

If you enjoyed using these resources, you may well find the [Ashmolean Latin Inscriptions Project](#) helpful, especially on Beginners' and GCSE Latin and Roman Life topics.

If you want to search for other objects at the British Museum, see their [Collections search page](#) and online teaching resources [here](#). The Ashmolean hosts [learning resources](#) also has a [search page](#) as does the [National Trust](#).

Further teaching resources for classical subjects are hosted by the Classical Association Teaching Board on their [hub](#). Note also [Maximum Classics](#) offering complete courses and material in support of introducing Classics at KS 1, 2 and 3.