

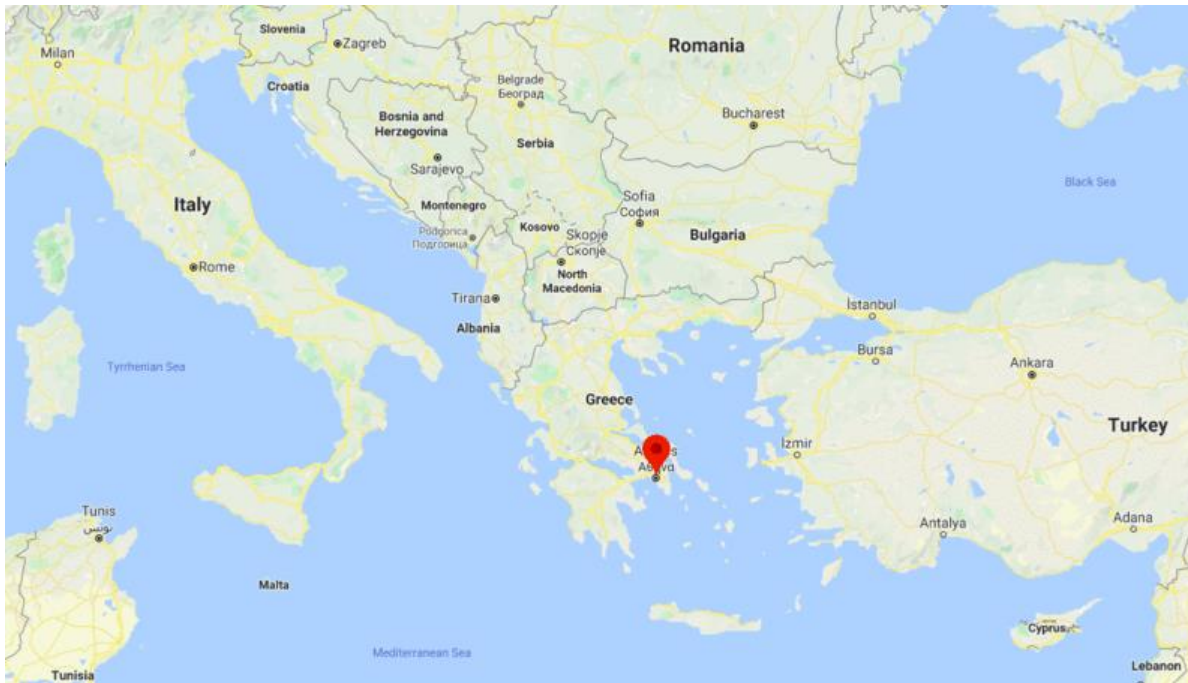
# Attic Inscriptions: Education

An Introduction to Ancient Athenian Inscriptions

# Greece



# Ancient Athens



## Classical era (479-323 BC):

Athens was an autonomous city-state, making its own laws and decrees. The wider territory of the city known as Attica.

End of Persian Wars and foundation of Delian League (478 BC).

Emergence of direct democracy (*demokratia*).

Population of citizens, slaves, resident non-Athenians (metics).

Coincides with extensive production of inscriptions.

# Athens and its inscriptions



- Extensive use of inscriptions (on stone and metal) in private (from seventh century onwards) and public (sixth century BC onwards) contexts.
- Some 20,000 ancient Athenian inscriptions on stone survive today.
- Relatively few inscriptions survive on metal.
- Many inscriptions brought to UK by travellers and collectors in modern times, especially in eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

[Decree about temple-building, 5<sup>th</sup> century BC](#)

# Uses of inscriptions in ancient Athens

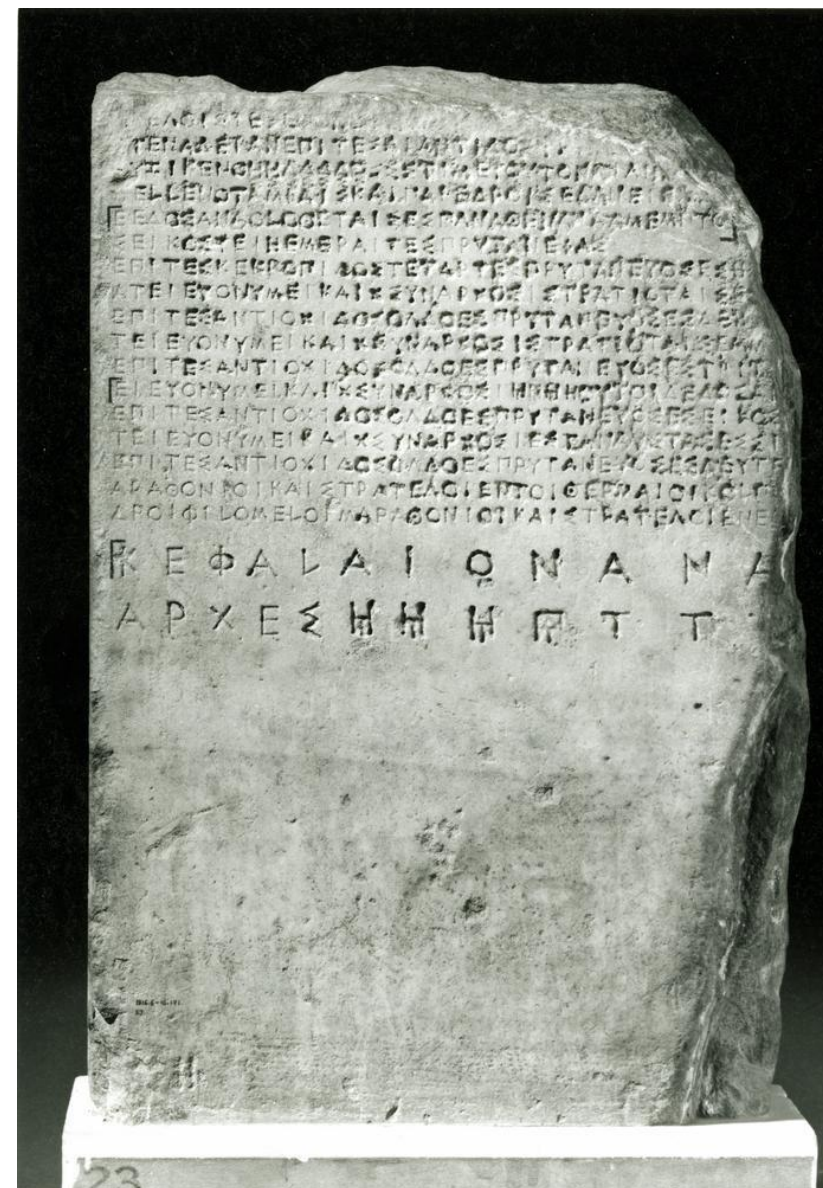
- Laws and decrees
  - Commemorating awards for individuals (honorific decrees)
  - Accounts and inventories
  - Sacred texts and calendars
  - Boundary stones
  - Commemoration of the dead
  - Gifts to the gods in the shape of votives.
- 
- *Stele* (plural *stelai*): a marble slab
  - Plaques with representations (e.g. Herakles dedication (right))
  - Herm: a block with inscribed head and genitals, representing the deity Hermes





# Stone inscriptions

- The Athenians wrote their inscriptions on blocks made of a stone called 'marble'.
- They used marble from the quarries in the mountainous areas of their land.



Account of the treasurers of Athena, 415/14 BC (British Museum)

# Sources of stone: Mount Penteli, Mount Hymmetus





# Marble quarries at Mount Penteli



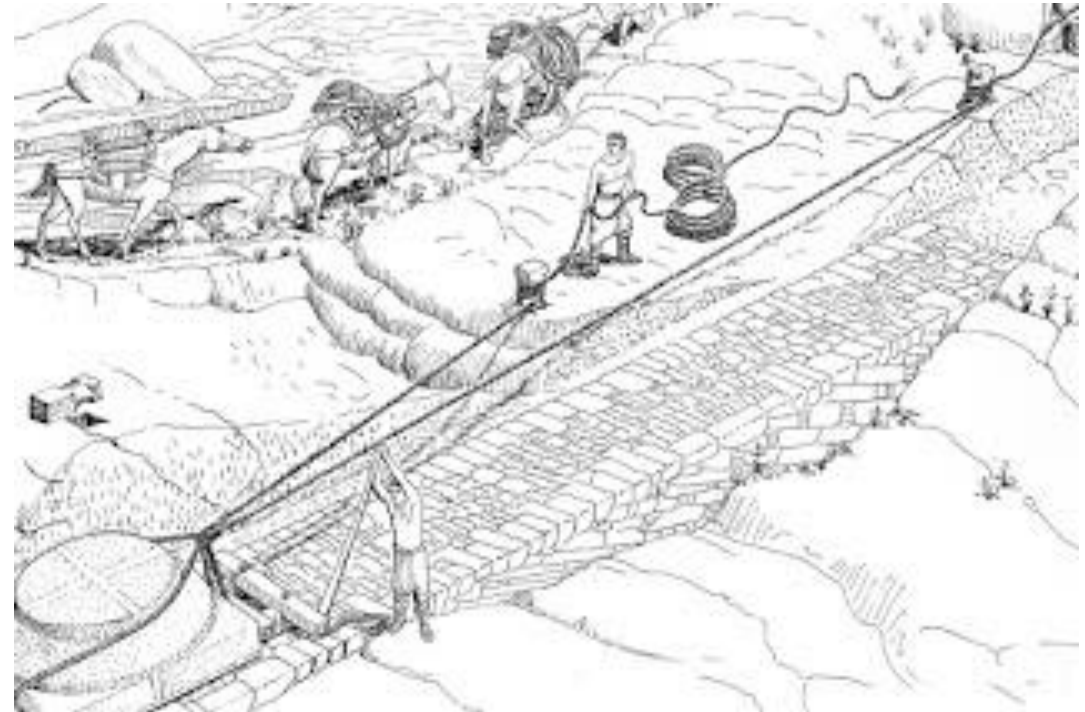


# Cutting marble at the quarries





Marble moved down the mountain 6 miles to central Athens using a specially-constructed road.





# The stone cut into blocks





# Writing inscriptions

Greeks used chisels and punches to write things down on hard surfaces.

Marble can be carved using metal tools, and it was a commonly used for inscriptions.

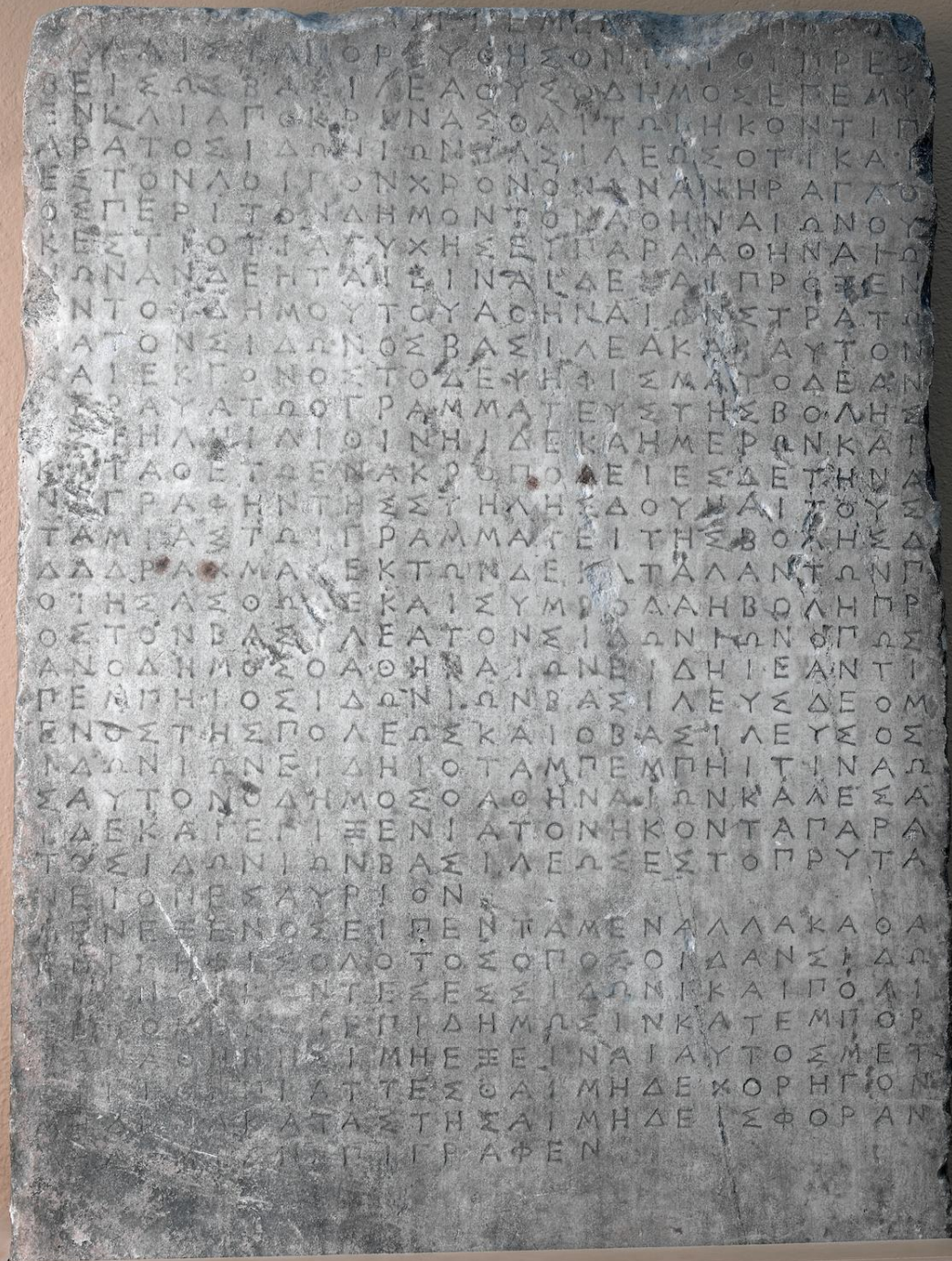


Here's a short [video](#) on making inscriptions.

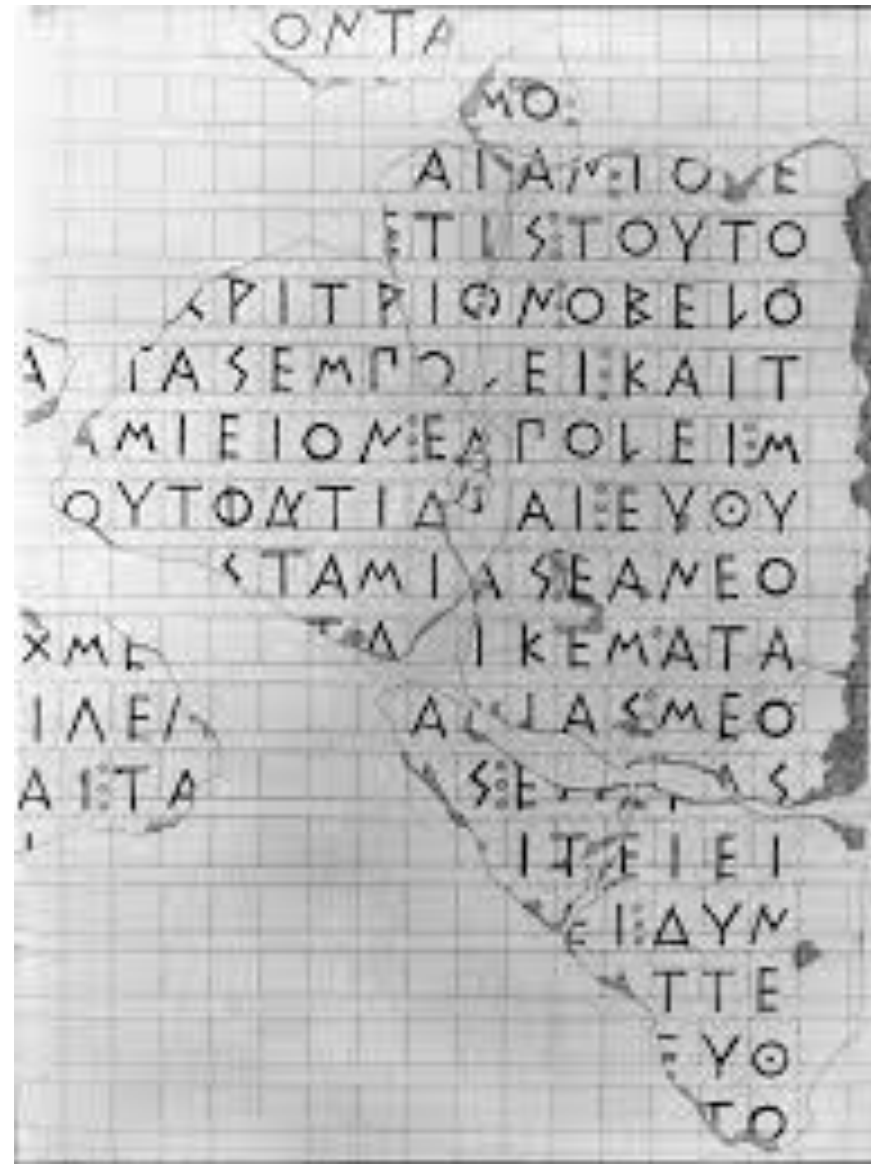


What do you notice about the way that this inscription is written?

Would it be easy to read this inscription if you knew Greek?



# Stoichedon style

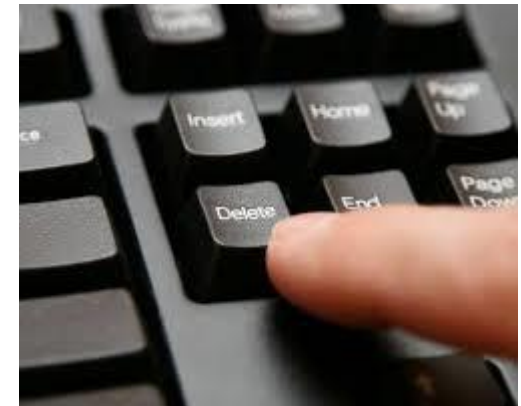


Drawing of a stoichedon inscription by P.A. Butz, showing checkerboard layout in *The Art of the Hekatompedon Inscription and the Birth of the Stoichedon Style*



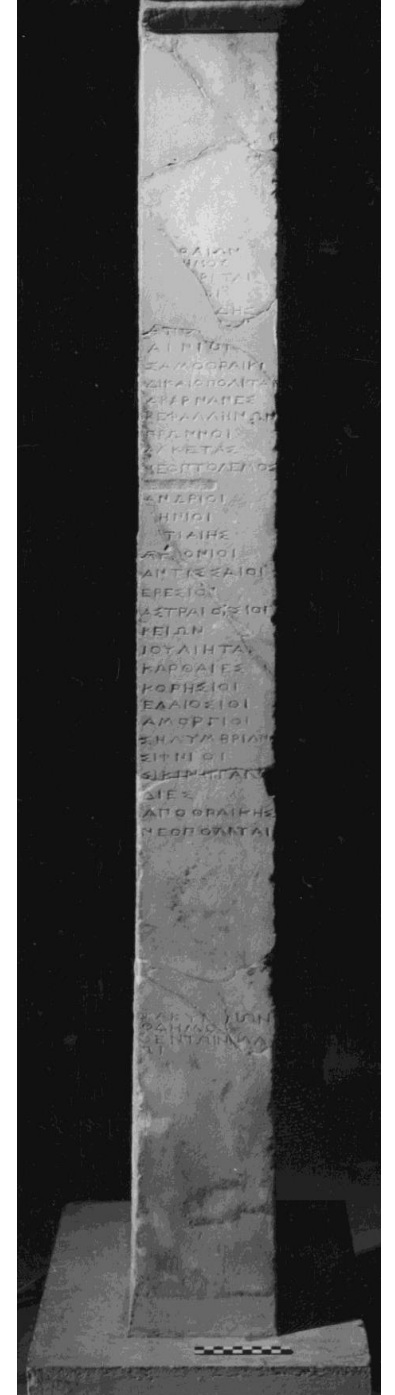
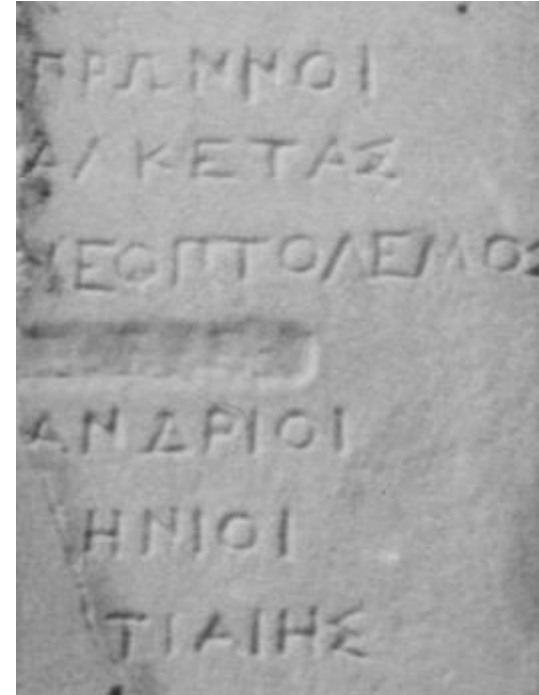
# Mistakes

- When we make a mistake we cross things out, use a rubber, or press 'delete'.
- How did the ancient Greeks deal with mistakes?



# Mistakes

- It is hard to correct mistakes on an inscription.
- Sometimes we can see that mistakes have been chiselled out on ancient inscriptions.
- Sometimes the Athenians would chisel out words when they changed their mind about something.



# Left-to-right; right-to-left

- Most ancient Greek inscriptions read left-to-right, like we do.
- But some ancient Greek inscriptions read right-to-left.
- Can you think of other languages that read right-to left?





# An unusual form of writing:

## *boustrophedon*

- Some inscriptions were written 'like a cow turning': this meant that they started off from the left side of the stone, but then changed direction at the end of each line!



THIS EXAMPLE OF BOUSTROPHEDON TEXT WAS  
AIDEPKIW EHT ROY YLIACIFALS NETTIRW  
ARTICLE ON THIS OX TURNING METHOD OF  
COVERING A WALL IN TEXT HTIW A GNIREVO  
GREECE AND ELSEWHERE

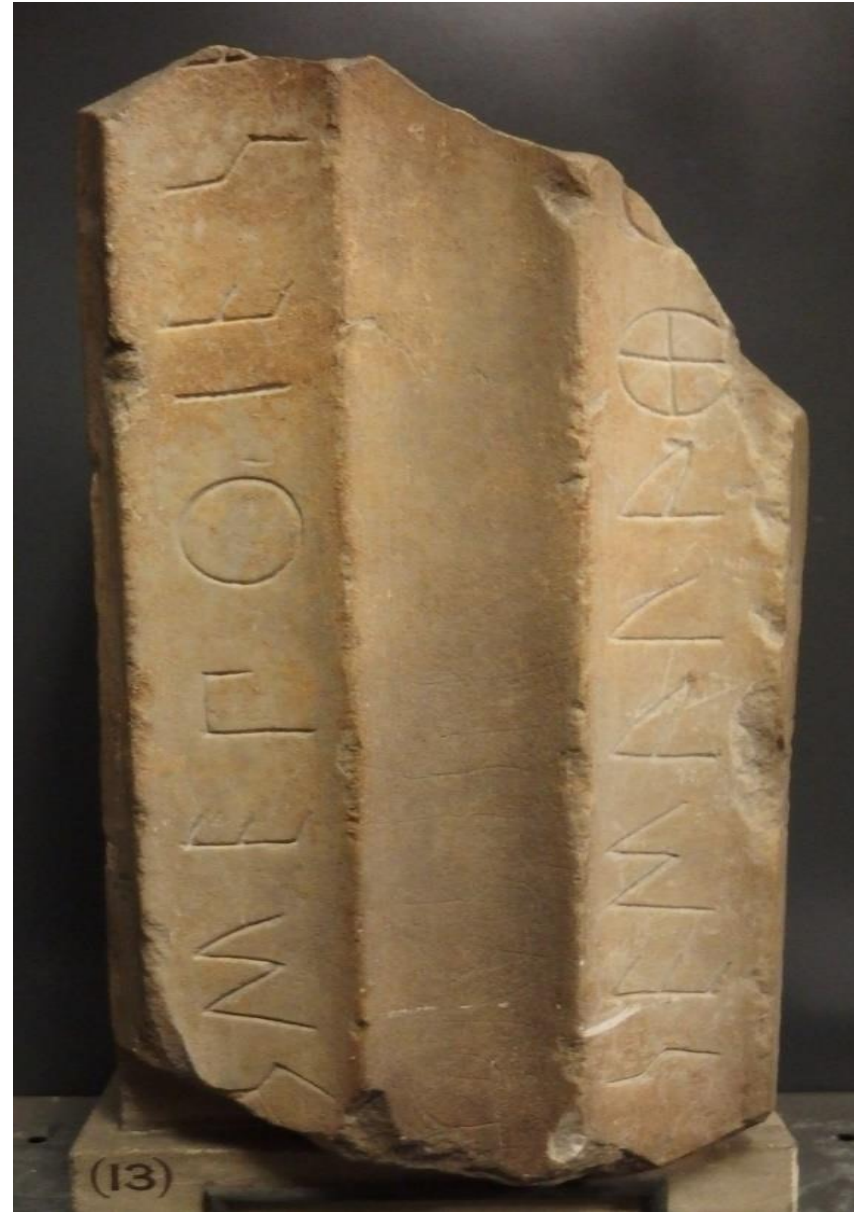
ΘΑΝΟΔΙΚΟ  
ΚΟΜΙΟΤΙΜΕ  
ΡΑΤΕΟΣΤΟ  
ΗΥΥΟΚΟΡΠ

*Ionic Greek inscription in boustrophedon,  
Sigeion stela*

# Vertical writing

A few Greek inscriptions are written from bottom to top: in this case the letters are written along the flutes of a column.

This style is known as *kionedon*.



# Where did the Athenians set up their inscriptions?

- In public spaces, especially sanctuaries, e.g. the acropolis





# Where did the Athenians set up their inscriptions?

- Grave inscriptions in family enclosures (*periboloi*)

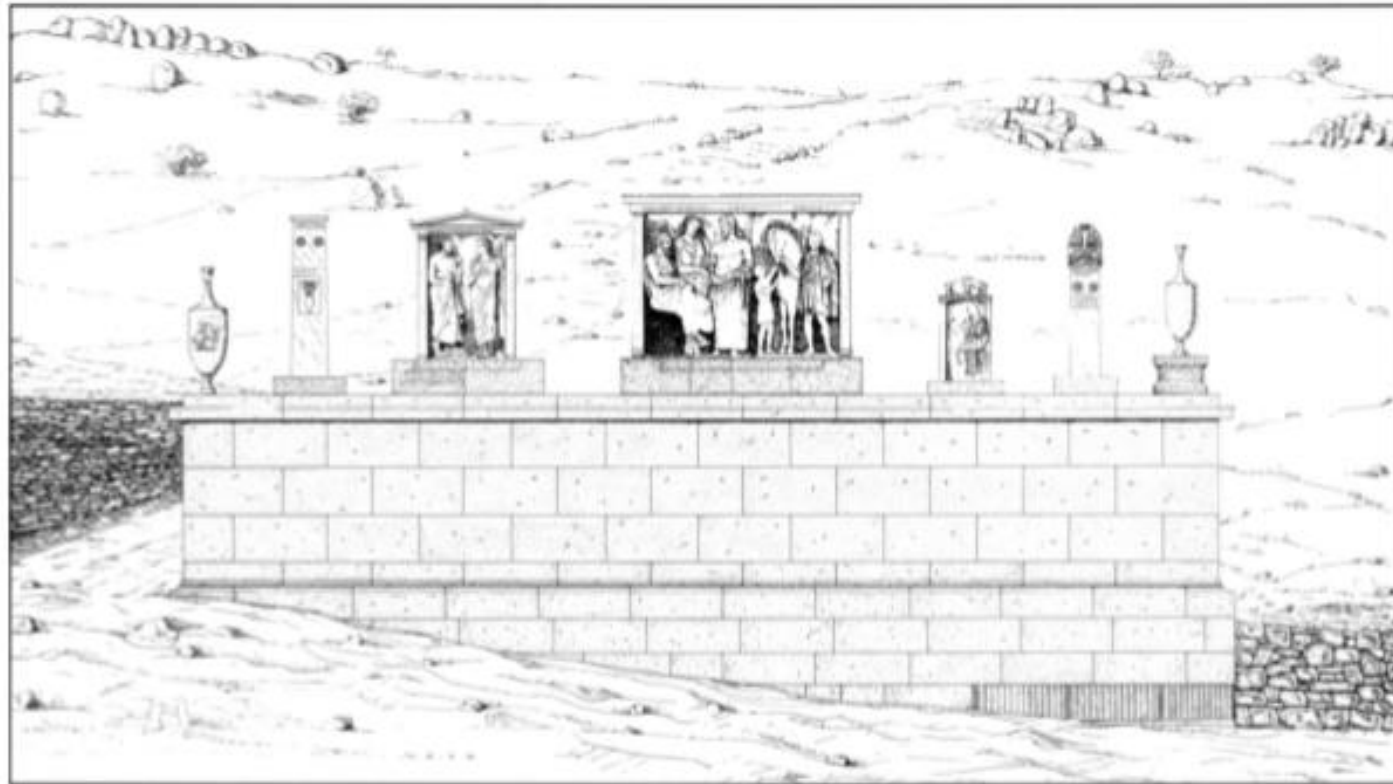


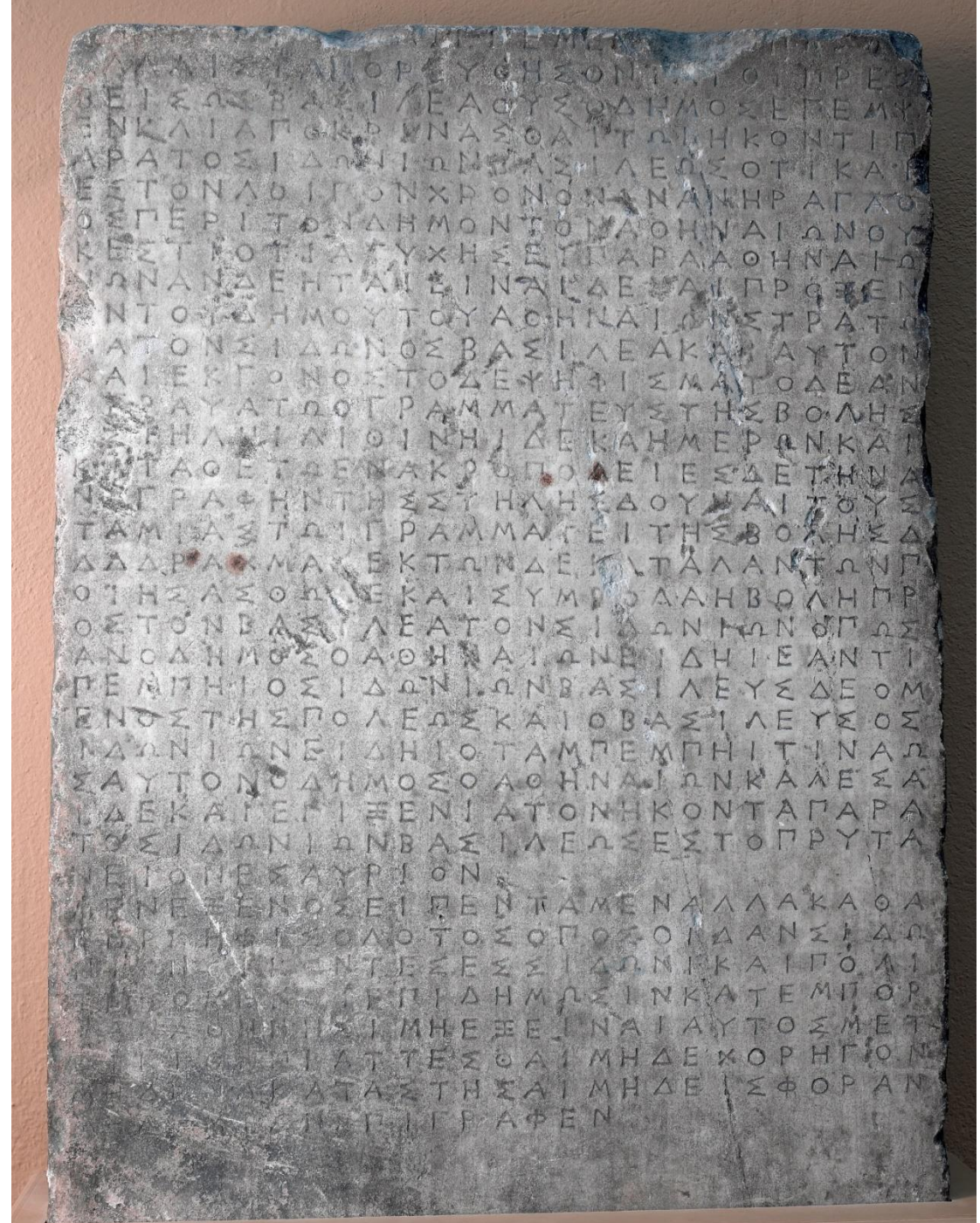
Fig. 10. Reconstruction drawing of the tomb of Hierokles, Rhamnous (Petraikos 1999, vol. 1, fig. 288).

# Athenian inscriptions

E.g. public decisions in the shape of decrees, such as the [award for Straton of Sidon](#), c. 396-86 BC.

A public record of a democratically-determined decision?

A heightened honour to have a decree written on stone?





# Athenian inscriptions

Other public records, like the record of loans made by the treasurers of the deity Athena to the city, now at the [British Museum](#).

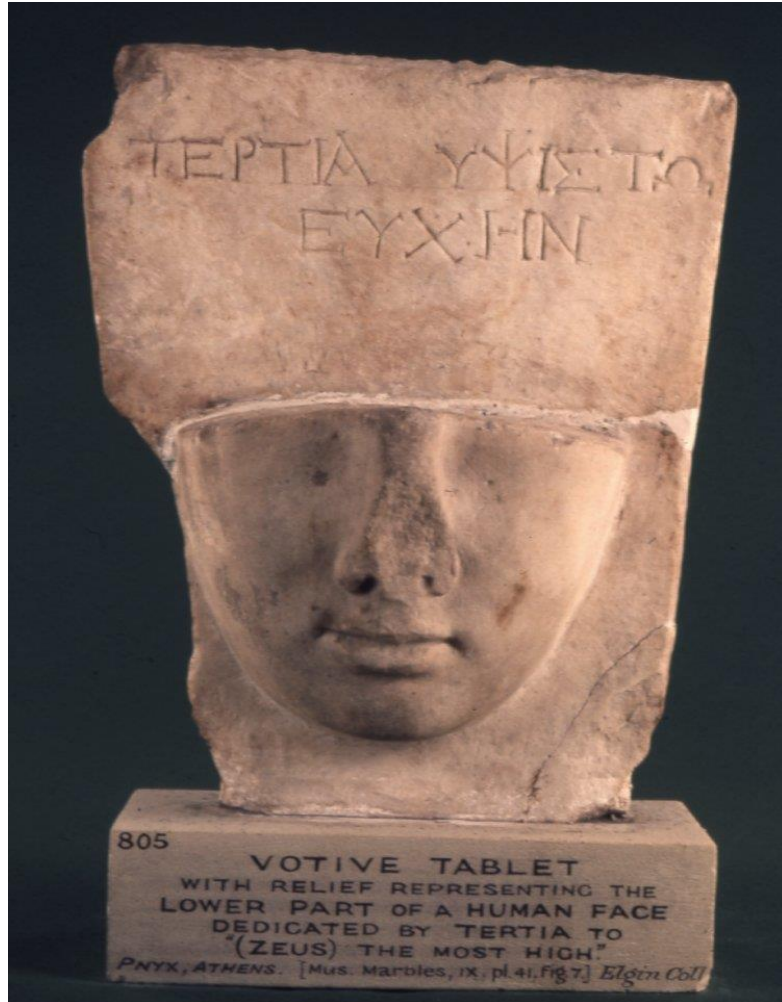
Written down for reasons of accountability? So that the gods would know?



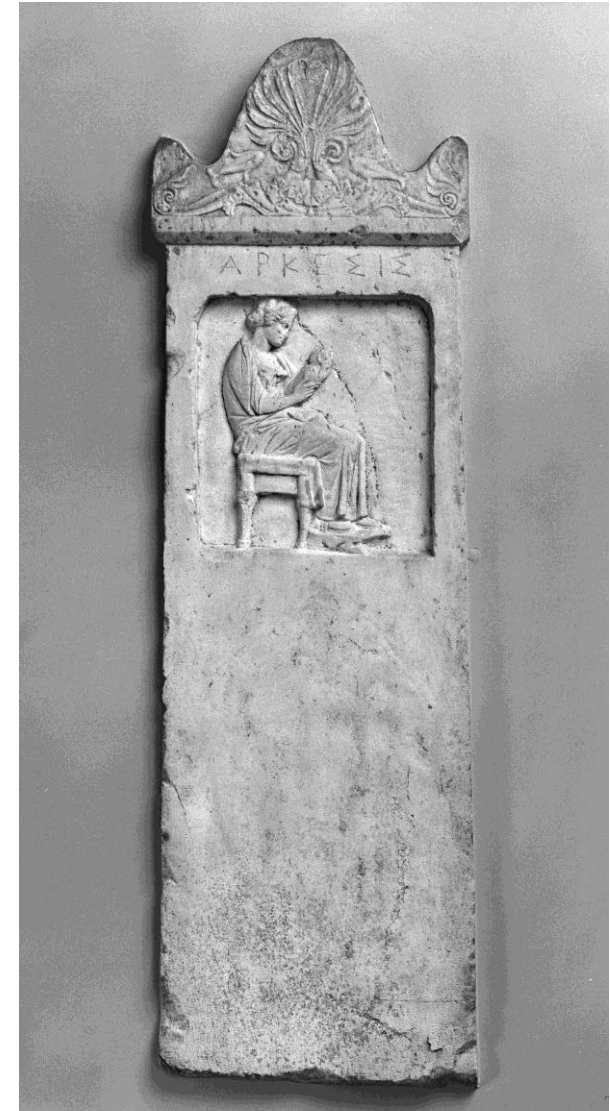


# Athenian Inscriptions: private contexts

Dedication of votive from Athenian healing sanctuary, 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD ([British Museum](#)).  
A gift to the gods?

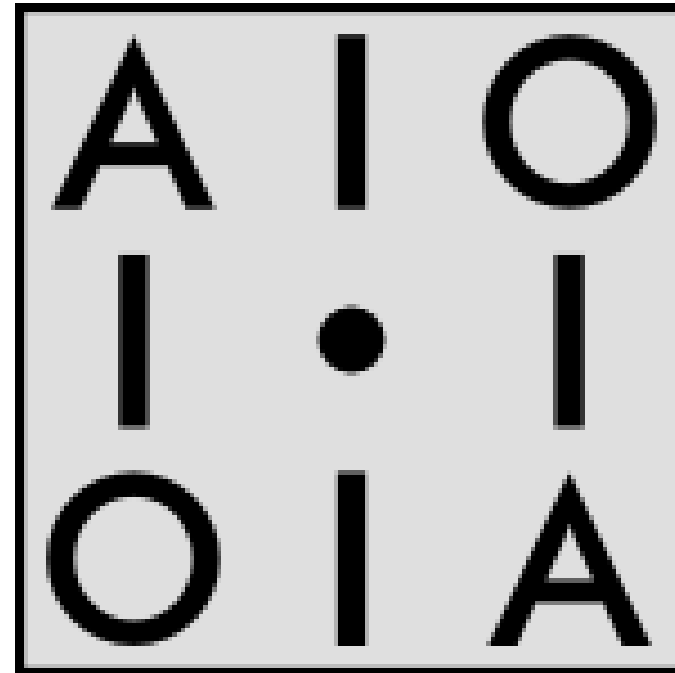


Grave marker of a woman called Arkesis: fourth century BC ([Lyme Park](#)).



# Attic Inscriptions Online website

Currently contains translations and commentaries on some 2000 ancient Athenian inscriptions.



# Attic Inscriptions in UK Collections



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in UK Collections  
**British Museum**  
*Decrees of the Council  
and Assembly*  
Stephen Lambert



## AIUK 4.2

AIUK vol. 4.2 (2020): **British Museum. Decrees of the Council and Assembly** - Stephen Lambert

This, the second part of our publication of the Attic inscriptions in the British Museum, contains new editions of the seventeen decrees of the Council and Assembly in the collection. All were acquired in Athens by UK aristocrats in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and are published here in most cases together with other fragments of the same inscriptions still in Athens. The inscriptions offer a series of illuminating snapshots of the policy preoccupations of Athenian citizens across the entire span of Athenian decree-inscribing, from the early 5<sup>th</sup> century BC to the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, and include important documents of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the Athenian Empire as well as characteristic inscriptions of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and Hellenistic and Roman Athens. Introductory sections discuss the history of the collection and locate the inscriptions in the context of Athenian decree-inscribing and Athenian history more broadly. In addition to significant new epigraphical findings this edition includes reassessments of several major inscriptions.

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Why are they inscriptions important to historians? (a) They tell us about human relations, social history and private affairs

The monument of [Aristophosa \(fifth century BC?\)](#), now at the British Museum, reads as follows:

*The gravestone of Aristophosa the mother of Amphenor and Diognetes and Thymilos.*

*And of Thymilos the son of Naukles. And of Timokrates the son of Amphenor.*

*Of Thrasykles.*



Why are they Important?  
(b) They tell us about public life, imperialism, politics, etc. An alternative to Thucydides!

[Kleinias' decree about tribute collection, 425/4 or later \(now at the British Museum\):](#)

*Let the city write on a writing tablet the tribute which it is sending, and seal it with the token and send it to Athens; and those conveying it shall hand over the writing tablet in the Council to be read when they hand over the tribute...*

3. The Inscriptions. 5 Decree Proposed by Kleinias Relating to the Tribute

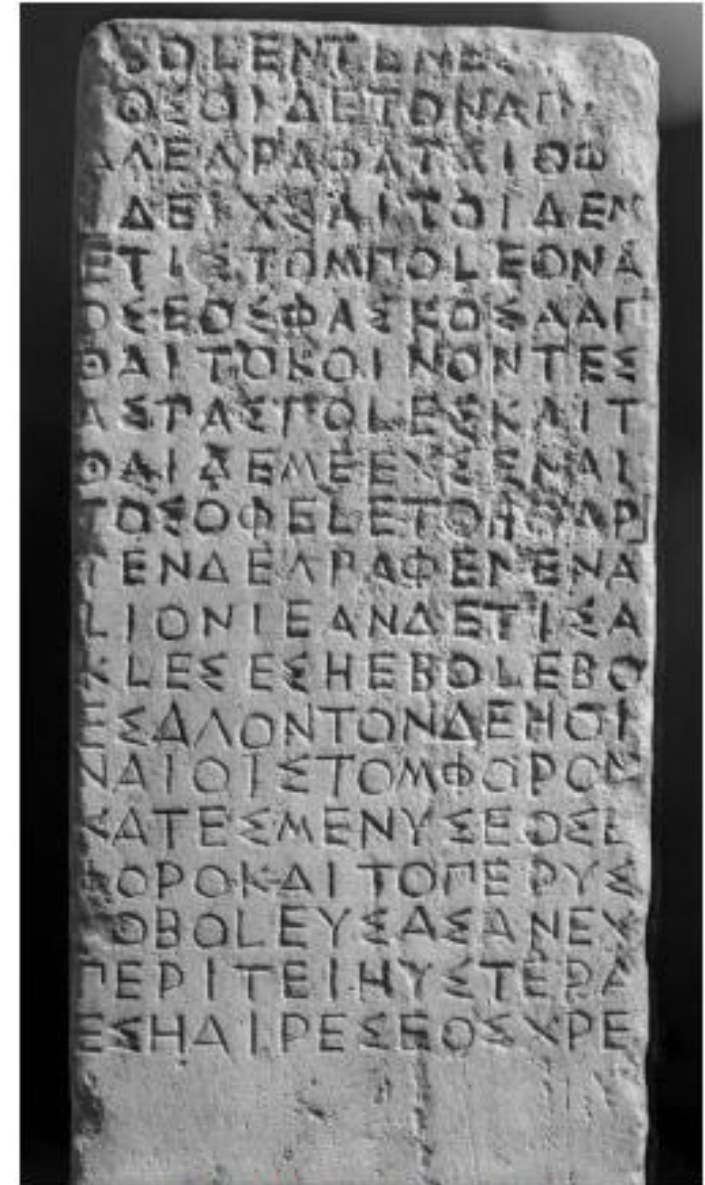


Fig. 5. 5 e © Trustees of the British Museum.



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