

An Archaic Greek Inscription from Crete

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AN ARCHAIC GREEK INSCRIPTION FROM CRETE

THE Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities has recently acquired a semicircular bronze plate, resembling in form the 'mitra' or abdominal guard worn by Greek warriors, and inscribed on both sides in an archaic Cretan script (Reg. No. 1969. 4-21: Figs. 1-2, Pls. xiv-xv). The text is of outstanding interest, not only for its unique information on a rare subject, but also for the new linguistic and historical material which it provides.

Our warmest thanks are due to Mr. D. E. L. Haynes, Keeper of the Department, for first informing us of the bronze and giving us every assistance to study it, and to the Trustees of the British Museum for their generosity in permitting us to publish it, both here and in a fuller version in *Kadmos*, vol. ix (1970).

The inscription is cut in wavering lines running *boustrophedon* (alternately left to right and right to left) on both sides, A and B, of the bronze, which is 25.2 cm. long and *c.* 13 cm. (max.) high. As an abdomen-guard, the 'mitra' hung from the lower edge of the bronze corslet. Most known examples have been found either in Crete, or as dedications in a common sanctuary such as Olympia, where Greeks from all city-states met together. The conventional name 'mitra', used by modern scholars, is generally acknowledged to be incorrect.¹ This one must have been a very small and scanty protection, even in its prime. Presumably it was a dedication, which eventually was reused as a bronze plaque, on which an agreement was then inscribed, and the object in its new capacity was stored in the precinct once more. For this secondary use it was hammered flat, and a strip was cut off the top, slicing through two of the three holes whereby it had once been fastened on rings to the edge of a corslet.²

We date the inscription tentatively *c.* 500 B.C., judging by the state of development of certain of its letters (*eta*, *nu*, *goppa*, *upsilon*) in the local Cretan version of the archaic Greek alphabet. Within Crete itself the numerous city-states differed further over certain letter-forms, and from the very rare form of *omega* used here (also, in lesser degree, from the shapes of *vau* and *pi*) we conclude that it probably came from the area of Lyttos in central Crete, perhaps from the settlement Arkades (round modern Afrati).³ On balance this is not contradicted by the linguistic evidence. The dialect is basically the Doric of Crete (for a few important features peculiar to this inscription see below, p. 28 f.), but some forms such as θιοί, γενιά (with -ιο-, -ια- < -εο-, -εα-) seem to point to a provenance from central Crete. At the same time some differences in morphology and vocabulary exclude Gortyn, the central Crete town whose dialect we know best. Two words (ἔξ, ὄσοι) appear in the inscription in a

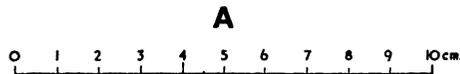


FIG. 1.

form somewhat different from that in which they are apparently attested in Lyttos (ῥῖς, ῥῶζοι). This cannot be given too much weight, since we cannot yet be certain of the reading, interpretation, and chronology of the Lyttos forms.

TEXT

A

Θιοί· ἔφαδε Δαταλεῦσι καὶ ἐσπένσαμες πόλις
 Σπενσιθίωι ἀπὸ πυλᾶν πέντε ἀπ' ἐκάστας θροπᾶ-
 ν τε καὶ ἀτέλειαν πάντων αὐτῶι τε καὶ γενιᾶι ὤ-
 ς κα πόλι τὰ δαμόσια τὰ τε θιήια καὶ τάνθρώπινα
 5 ποινικάζειν τε καὶ μναμονευφην· ποινικάζειν δὲ
 [π]όλι καὶ μναμονευφεν τὰ δαμόσια μήτε τὰ θιήι-
 α μήτε τάνθρώπινα μηδέν' ἄλλον αἰ μὴ Σπενσιθ[ι]-
 [ο]ν αὐτόν τε καὶ γενιάν τῶνυ, αἰ μὴ ἐπαίροι τ-
 ε καὶ κέλοιτο ἢ αὐτὸς Σπενσίθιος ἢ γενιᾶ
 10 [τ]ῶνυ ὅσοι δρομῆς εἶεν τῶν [υἱ]ῶν οἱ πλῖες
 μισθὸν δὲ δόμεν τῷ ἐνιαυτῷ τῶι ποινι[κ]-
 [α]στᾶι πεντήρουντά τε πρόφοος κλεύκιο-
 ς κηνδυ[.]ε[.]ς ἱκατιδαρκμιος ἢ καρ[?]π[?]-
 φς, δόμεν δὲ τὸ κλεῦφος ἐς τὸ μόρο ὄ-
 15 πω κα λῆι ἐλέσθαι· αἰ δὲ μὴ δοίη τὸ κλε[ῦφ]-
 [ο]ς αιδε[...].σ[ε. 3-4]α[...].εσδ[ε. 3]ς φόσμ-



E

25

20 ος ἐπεστὰς ὡς ἀ[*c.* 4 ?]ἰ[*c.* 4 ?]λε[.]εκ[.]
 [?]σαι ἀπλοπία[.]α[.]αἰ μὴ αὐτοισ-
 ἰ[*c.* 3-4]πολ[.]αγεσημεν τῶι ὄσο-
 [μωι *c.* 7 ?]ε[.] τεμένια πε[.]ῶ-
 [*c.* 2 ?] τὸ Ϝῖσον λακὲν ὄσο[μωι ?]α[*c.* 4 ?]
 [*c.* 17 ?]α[*c.* 6 ?]

B

τὸ Ϝῖσον λακὲν τὸν ποινικαστὰν καὶ παρῆμε-
 ν καὶ συνῆμεν ἐπὶ τε θιγίων καὶ ἐπ' ἀνθρωπί-
 νων πάντε ὅπε καὶ ὁ ὄσομος εἶη καὶ τὸν ποινι-
 καστὰν, καὶ ὅτιμί κα θιῶι ἰαρεὺς μὴ ἰδιαλο-
 5 [*c.* 1-2] θύεν τε τὰ δαμόσια θύματα τὸ <ν> ποινικαστὰ-
 ν καὶ τὰ τεμένια ἔκεν, μὴδ' ἐπάγραν ἦμ[ε]-
 [ν] μήδε ρύτιον αἰλέν τὸν ποινικαστὰν, δ-
 ικα δὲ ὄτερόν κα λώληται ὁ ποινικασ[τ]-
 [ὰ]ς αἰπεροιαλοικρησεταιην ὄσο-
 10 μοι ἀδικα Ϝοι τέλεται, ἄλε δὲ οὐδὲ
 ἔν. δίκαια ἐς ἀνδρήιον δώσει δ-
 ἑκα πέλεϜς κρέων, αἶ κα ὄωι ἄλο[ι]
 [ἀπ ?]άρϜωνται, καὶ τὸ ἐπενιαύτιον, τὸ
 δὲ λάκσιον συνφαλεῖ, ἄλο δὲ μ[ηδ]-
 15 [ἐ]ν ἐπάνανϜον ἦμεν αἶ κα μὴ λῆι
 δόμεν. ἦμεν δὲ τὰ θιγία τ[*c.* 2]
 [*c.* 5-6]ίστωι.

TRANSLATION

A. Gods. The Datalais resolved, and we the city, five representatives from each tribe, pledged to Spensithios subsistence and immunity from all taxes to him and to his descendants, so that he be for the city its scribe and recorder in public affairs both sacred and secular. No one else is to be scribe and recorder for the city in public affairs, neither sacred nor secular, except Spensithios himself and his descendants, unless Spensithios himself, or else the majority of his sons, as many as be adult, should (thus) induce and instruct the city. (The city) is to give as payment annually to the scribe fifty jugs of must and [—] of 20-drachmai value (*or*, weight?), or ?fruits, and the must is to be given from whichever ?plot he wishes to take it; and if the must is not given [*c.* 22 letters] the kosmos in charge [*c.* 20] impunity [*c.* 1-2] if not ?to them [*c.* 17] to the Kosmos? [*c.* 9?] precincts [*c.* 7?] to have equal share [*c.* 35?].

B. The scribe is to have equal share, and the scribe too is to be present at and to participate in sacred and secular affairs in all cases wherever the Kosmos (i.e. the board of kosmoi?) may be; and the scribe is to make the public sacrifices to whatsoever deity a priest does not ?conduct its own (sacrifices), and is to have the precincts (*or*, 'the precinct-dues'), and there is to be no ?seizure, and the scribe is not to take any security, and (*unintelligible*), but otherwise, nothing at all (*or*, 'it shall be invalid'). As lawful dues to the andreion (= men's club) he shall give ten axes' (weight) of dressed meat, if the ?others also make offerings, and the

yearly offering also, and shall collect the portion, but nothing else is to be compulsory, if he does not wish to give it. The sacred matters are to be (reserved) for the senior member.

The translation reveals the problems raised by many of the words in this text, doubtful or hitherto unattested. A commentary and discussion is offered in *Kadmos* ix. We give here, briefly, our general conclusions on the meaning and importance of the inscription.

This is the earliest surviving full record of the creation of a high technical office in a Greek city.⁴ A city-name which would produce the ethnic *Dataleis* is unknown.⁵ This, and the unusual formula of the preamble, suggest that the place itself was the ancient Arkades, and the *Dataleis* were the *startos* (clan) from whose members the body of *kosmoi* (the governing body of a Cretan city, the equivalent, roughly, of the Athenian archons) was elected in this particular year.⁶ It had been decided that the administration of the city's affairs needed the services of a permanent 'scribe and recorder', an obvious candidate, one Spensithios, being available. The office was to be of life tenure, and hereditary in his family, unless the family chose to renounce it. His status was to be equal to that of the *kosmoi*. He was not merely to be present at their meetings as a recorder, but to take part as a member. As a further status-symbol, he was to be given charge of what may have been in fact the 'poor relations' in the city's cults—newly introduced, lesser deities; each of the old-established cults of the city would already be the hereditary charge of a top-ranking family, in the normal pattern of Greek aristocratic government. Attached to the precincts in his charge were certain perquisites and/or duties (the unattested words here baffle us as yet). As payment, he and his heirs who succeeded him in this office got immunity from taxes and free subsistence in the *andreion* (public mess of the citizens), though he was required also to contribute as dues certain luxuries (?), as other members presumably did. He also received an annual payment in kind (towards feeding his household), of which only the must (new wine) can be certainly deciphered.

The verb *φοινικάζειν* and the *nomen agentis* *φοινικαστής* were hitherto unattested, and are of great interest. Herodotos asserted (5. 58) that the alphabetic letters were brought to Greece by Kadmos the Phoenician, and hence the Greeks called them 'the Phoenician things', τὰ φοινικήια, a word first attested at Teos in Ionia, c. 470 B.C.⁷ In the Cretan text we take *φοινικάζειν*⁸ to mean literally 'to do the Phoenician thing', i.e. 'to do φοινικήια', 'to write'. Spensithios was 'to write and record' (μνημονεύειν). The office of *mnemon* existed already in archaic Greece, but it properly means to record in the memory. Presumably the new factor here was the writing down, and hence the official's title was *φοινικαστής* only; the part played by memorizing would be taken for granted as subsumed.

The main duty of the *φοινικαστής*, we assume, was to formulate properly the decisions taken by the *kosmoi* and the Council, and ratified by the citizens, which were to have the force of decrees or laws; and as a participant in the meetings, he

would, of course, have played his part in making those decisions. He would then draft the text on the wall of the main precinct, or on a bronze plaque, or on whatever medium was customary in each case, and a mason or bronzeworker would then incise over the draft. We can hardly believe that this city was illiterate



B

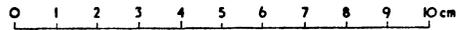


FIG. 2.

before c. 500 B.C., but it may not have had enough public business hitherto to need the services of a paid, full-time official. Perhaps it had kept its records in the primitive way, in the memory of a *mmenon*, to be called on when necessary.

We do not see Spensithios, the first holder of the new office, as a lawgiver in the class of Solon or Zaleukos, called to establish a new constitution or a Code of Law, but rather as the equivalent of those anonymous experts who must have drafted the written laws surviving still in other Cretan cities (e.g. Dreros, Axos, Eleutherna, and—pre-eminently—Gortyn). He was presumably a citizen. The text nowhere implies that he is to be enfranchised, and an alien could not hold this office, for only a citizen, we assume, could belong to an *andreion*, offer sacrifices on the city's behalf, and have sons eligible to become *dromeis*.⁹

The philological and historical importance of the new information provided by this text is discussed in detail in *Kadmos* ix; we conclude here with a brief mention of some points.

Thanks to the Cretan 'mitra' the Greek lexicon is now enriched by at least

seven new words: the meaning of some of these remains uncertain (ἐπάγρα, λάκσιον, συνφαλεῖ), but the others may be interpreted without too much difficulty (ἐπενιαύτιον, πάντε, ποινικάζειν, ποινικαστάς). Other forms provide new information either of a phonological (e.g. κλεῦφος, ἀπλοπία *v.* the more usual γλεῦκος, ἀβλοπία) or of a morphological nature (e.g. θιήια) on the dialect of Crete. Finally, two words should be mentioned: the pronoun ὄνυ was so far attested only in Arcadia, in Cyprus and in two small Cretan towns, Eleutherna and Axos. It is now difficult to escape the conclusion that it is a pre-Doric survival. The conjunction ὥς had not yet appeared in the Doric of Crete, where it seemed to have been entirely replaced by δι: should we think here too of a pre-Doric feature?

On the historical side, in addition to the data concerning the new office, some gleams of light are thrown on, for example, the process of oligarchic government in archaic Crete; the nature of the office of kosmos; the working of the Cretan public messes; the monetary system here *c.* 500 B.C. (barter or coinage?); and the whole problem of the 'birthplace' (in Greece itself, or among the Greek traders settled on the Syro-Phoenician coast?), where the Greeks first learnt the alphabet from a North-Semitic people. On this last problem: the presence here of a verb φοινικάζειν 'to write' about thirty years earlier than the first attested example of φοινικήια 'letters' (Teos: see above) may well give further support to the theory long maintained by some scholars—notably Professor Margherita Guarducci, editor of the monumental *Inscriptiones Creticae*—that this birthplace was Crete. It is to be hoped that further archaeological evidence may finally solve the problem.

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¹ A. M. Snodgrass, *Arms and armour of the Greeks* (1967), 56.

² Snodgrass, *loc. cit.*

³ See M. Guarducci, *Inscriptiones Creticae*, 1. 5. Our text B, line 8, shows an apparently new letter-form (the 14th), meaning uncertain: possibly *beta*? On the large collection of decorated bronze armour from the Afrati area (many pieces bear short dedications with an *omega* of the same shape as that of our 'mitra'), which is now in the Fogg Museum, Harvard University, see Mitten and Doeringer, *Master Bronzes of the Classical World* (1968), pp. 45 ff., nos. 29–31, and for the definitive publication, A. E. Raubitschek and H. Hoffman (forthcoming).

⁴ Crete has provided four fragments of similar texts, but all are later in date, and the technicians concerned, where identifiable, are of lower status; cf. *IC* II. v. 1; II. xii. 9; IV. 79 and 144.

⁵ Dattalla occurs in a Hellenistic inscription

(*IC* I. xvi. 5, line 64) as a (probably western) boundary-point of the territory of Lato, east of the Lasithi plateau. We think this place unlikely to be our city, since (*a*) there is no clue as to whether it is a settlement or merely a geographic feature used to define the boundary, and (*b*) the local Cretan script of the area is unlike that of our text.

⁶ Cf. R. F. Willetts, *Aristocratic society in ancient Crete* (1955), 28, III ff.

⁷ Meiggs and Lewis, *A Selection of Greek historical inscriptions to the end of the fifth century B.C.* (1969), no. 30.

⁸ In our inscription, as in many others from archaic Crete, κ and π can also stand for χ and φ respectively.

⁹ i.e. 'runners', those who practised in the public gymnasium. This was a technical term in Crete for the young man eligible for citizenship on reaching maturity.



XIV. AN ARCHAIC GREEK INSCRIPTION from Crete (A)



XV. AN ARCHAIC GREEK INSCRIPTION from Crete (B)