



# Greek Inscriptions: insights and resources in the classroom and beyond

by Peter Liddel

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## Introduction: the value of inscriptions

The learning of ancient history at every level – school, FE and HE – offers its students the opportunity of close engagement with ancient evidence first hand. We want our students to develop the ability to approach texts and artefacts with confidence, to place them in context, and to cultivate their own perspectives on ancient history through engaging with them. We need to teach them that this process – the antithesis (or even the antidote?) to the quick-fix of Wikipedia or the Google search – is crucial to the methodology of the historian and is at the same time an exciting way of thinking about the past. Close engagement with inscriptions is a way of getting to the core matters of ancient history. In this article I set out the insights and opportunities that the study of inscriptions offers to those getting familiar with Greek antiquity at the pre-university stage; I consider the obstacles that teachers and students face when trying to access them and also the opportunities that modern publications (digital and traditional) offer to overcoming them.

Among the pieces of primary evidence that are crucial to the interpretation of ancient Greek history, inscriptions – by which we refer to examples of writing incised on stone or metal objects – loom large. According to one recent estimate, there survive at least 200,000 inscriptions written in the Greek language which date to the period 800 BC – AD 600. From ancient Athens alone, there are around 20,000 in some state of preservation. State decisions of great relevance (treaties, regulations, honours) were written down on stone slabs of marble; they appeared also on a range of other metal and stone objects, adorning buildings, dedications and public and private monuments. Inscriptions stood in public places in Greece: they were written down in conspicuous locations, such as sanctuaries and marketplaces (*agorai*). They are the most important form of documentary information surviving from the ancient Greek world. As a form of evidence, inscriptions are unique: they combine written words, inscribed in antiquity for people to see, with physical presence. In this way events, phenomena and decisions were granted physical and monumental commemoration.

## History and inscriptions

At some point in the late sixth century, the Athenians started to write down some

of their official transactions on stone tablets. In the middle and later fifth century BC, they appear to have frequently written up on stone decisions concerning the organisation of their empire; they also wrote up on stone treaties and agreements with other states. These stones tell us a great deal about the Athenian treatment of their imperial subjects in the fifth century BC. For instance, were it not for the record of inscriptions, we would know little about the ways in which the Athenians behaved towards those allies who had revolted from their empire (see, for instance, LACTOR 1, 4th edition, 216A-B, 217, 218, 21) nor would we have a detailed view of their financial exploitation of these city-states (see, for instance, LACTOR 1, 4th edition, nos. 136, 137B, 138).

On an important level, inscriptions offer us factual details about the ancient past. They give information about treaties and cult practices; they preserve the names of politicians who proposed particular decrees and offer a view of the means by which those decisions were reached. They tell us about the style of commemoration of individuals (both men and women; citizens and non-citizens) and groups of citizens whose names were written up on casualty lists. In this sense, then, they offer snapshot perspectives on ancient history, preserving details that are skipped over without comment by the literary sources. Without the inscribed base of the



**Figure 1.** | Phrasikleia Kore, exhibited at the National Archaeological Museum of Athens.

magnificent statue of Phrasikleia from sixth-century Attica (Fig. 1), we would know considerably less about the commemoration of women who had died before marriage in archaic Attica.

While they tell us a great deal about daily life and its regulation, there is also a very important sense in which inscriptions were religious objects. The Athenians of the classical period set up their public decisions upon stone slabs in sacred places, most frequently the Acropolis: it seems very plausible that they were trying to make some kind of religious connection with their decisions. Of direct religious significance are the Athenian Tribute Lists. After moving the treasury of the Delian League to Athens in c. 454 BC, the Athenians started dedicating 1/60th of the imperial tribute to the treasury of the goddess Athena Polias. They wrote up the amounts dedicated in this way by each contributing community. Accordingly, it is possible to work out from these lists precisely what the Athenians received in any year when the amount was written down and survives.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most spectacular inscriptions from fifth-century Greece is the Serpent Column, a bronze column, moulded so as to represent intertwined snakes, offered by the Greeks to Apollo at Delphi as a thank-offering for their victories in the Persian Wars (see C. Fornara, *From Archaic Times to the End of the Peloponnesian War*, 2nd edition, 1983, no. 59; Fig. 2). The names of 31 Greek communities which contributed to the



**Figure 2.** | The Serpent Column.

war effort are incised upon the coils. The inscription still exists, and is set up at the ancient Hippodrome in Istanbul (it was removed by Constantine I to Constantinople in AD 324). The dedication of this column was an act of piety by the Greek states to the god Apollo as a thank-offering in recognition of his intervention in the Persian wars. But literary sources preserve a very rich account of the history of the inscription, telling us that it supported a golden tripod, and was appropriated by the Spartan regent Pausanias with a boastful epigram (Thucydides 1.132). In this case, our understanding of an inscription is enriched by the literary testimonia.

While inscriptions can be useful as documents of ancient Greek life and political transactions, we have to be aware that they were objects liable to political manipulation by the humans – or human groups – who created them. The inscribed Decree of Themistocles (see C. Fornara, *From Archaic Times to the End of the Peloponnesian War*, 2nd edition, 1983, no. 55; also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Decree\\_of\\_Themistocles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Decree_of_Themistocles)) is an excellent example of such practice: while it purports to refer to the Athenians

co-ordinating a unified response to the threat of the Persians in 480 BC, in fact it appears to have been written up for propagandistic reasons in the second half of the fourth century BC – perhaps as part of the effort among Greek states to stir up resistance to the rise of Macedonian power in the 340s BC. Inscriptions, then, like any other text, should always be considered in the light of their context of production and intended audience.

## Greek Inscriptions in the Specifications

Yet despite all this promise, when one looks at the specified ancient sources for the new Ancient History A Level (and AS Level) qualification (<http://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/313570-specification-accredited-A-Level-ancient-history-h407.pdf>) one finds only very few Greek inscriptions: three of them are specified as relevant to the period study *Relations between Greek states and between Greek and non-Greek states, 492–404 BC*: the Thoudippos Decree (LACTOR 1.138), the Chalcis Decree (LACTOR 1.78), the Serpent Column (Fig. 2); one is specified for the depth study *The Politics and Society of Sparta, 478–404 BC* (a Spartan epitaph (IG 5.1.1124)). The specifications for *The Politics and Culture of Athens, c.460–399 BC* depth study specify no Greek inscriptions: when we consider that public writing and the epigraphic habit – as attested by inscriptions – formed such a significant aspect of popular fifth-century culture across the Greek world, we realise that there is a deep gap in the specifications.

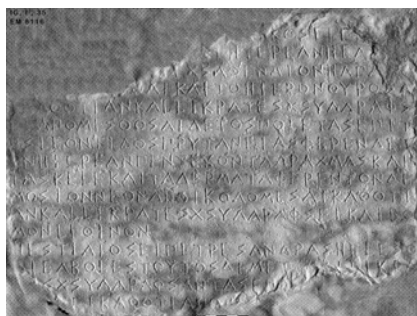
The lack of Greek inscriptions from the specifications is disappointing even when compared with the previous specifications for A Level Ancient History (which cited four inscriptions in the *Delian League to Athenian Empire module*). It is disappointing also when compared to the specifications for Roman subjects at Ancient History A Level, where the specifications are inscription-rich in the *The Julio-Claudian emperors, 31 BC–AD 68* period study and the *Ruling Roman Britain, AD 43–128* depth study.<sup>2</sup> All this is in spite of the fact that Greek inscriptions are of clear relevance to the subject criteria for Ancient History.



## How are inscriptions relevant to the subject criteria for Ancient History?

The DfE's published subject content for A and AS Level Ancient History ([https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/497229/Ancient\\_History\\_AS\\_A\\_level\\_subject\\_content.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/497229/Ancient_History_AS_A_level_subject_content.pdf)) sets out the Aims and Objectives of study. Among other requirements, they state that specifications in this subject must 'understand the nature of historical evidence from the ancient world and its scarcity to build an understanding of historical periods studied and the methods used in the analysis and evaluation of evidence'. Moreover, students are expected to 'develop an awareness and understanding of relevant historical debates and how these can be investigated'. In terms of Subject Content, specifications ought to require the study of 'relevant literary and material sources from the ancient world, as appropriate, as evidence for the historical events studied'. In terms of Knowledge, Understanding and Skills, students are required to 'understand the nature of historical evidence from the ancient world and the methods used by historians today in analysis and evaluation' and to use 'relevant and appropriate literary and material sources from the ancient world in order to support evidence-based arguments about the key events studied, including analysing the reliability and context of the evidence used'.

To point out that inscriptions are relevant to these subject criteria would be to labour the point unnecessarily: to read inscriptions is an important part of understanding how ancient historians reconstruct developments in historical periods, how they advance historical arguments and how they treat literary sources critically. One cannot, for instance, understand the debates about the changing nature of Athenian imperialism without awareness of the inscribed decrees that have – after many years of debate – been dated to the period after the death of Perikles. Fifth-century inscriptions are vitally important to our understanding of both Athenian culture and Athenian democracy: the decree of c. 450 or 438 BC on the priestess of Athena



**Figure 3. | Squeeze (paper impression) of the Athenian decree on the priestess of Athena Nike.**

Nike (ML 44 = OR 137; see Fig. 3), for instance, constitutes the earliest piece of evidence for the appointment of a priestess 'from all Athenians' rather than from a particular *genos* or family, and is suggestive of a democratising process in Athenian religion over the course of the fifth-century BC; as Josine Blok suggests, there may be a link to Perikles' Citizenship law of 451 BC. The trickle of new discoveries (such as the discovery, in the excavations relating to the construction of the Athenian Metro system in the 1990s, of a new casualty list referring to Athenian interventions in mainland Greece in the last quarter of the fifth century) and new interpretations of long-known inscriptions (e.g. the dating of the treaty of the Athenians and the Segestans (ML 37) now firmly to the archonship of Antiphon in 418/17 BC) mean that modern historians are constantly led to re-formulate their interpretations of key events.

### What is the problem?

Why is it the case that Greek inscriptions are largely excluded from the specifications, despite their clear relevance to the subject criteria? One answer might be that it is very hard to get students to read them partly owing to their reputation: this has its roots in a negative tradition about them that has existed since at least the late nineteenth century. In his 1881 essay 'On Inscriptions in the Age of Thucydides', Benjamin Jowett complained of the 'evil tendency' of inscriptions 'to encourage the habit of conjecture, which has already been one of the great corruptions of philology'; what lay behind this perspective may not be quite so straightforward, and may be related to

his view that ancient history was a subject worthy of study primarily because it entailed reading extended passages of Thucydides in the original Greek. In his multi-volume *History of Greece*, George Grote criticised the German historian August Boeckh's use of inscriptions, making the same claims about the dangers of 'conjecture'; as with Jowett, it seems to be the case that a preference for Thucydides lay behind Grote's aversion to inscriptions. Furthermore, it is perhaps true to say that at some points in the twentieth century, the study of Greek inscriptions was dominated by arguments about letter-forms and problematic restorations, and that the reputation to which this gave rise has been rather damaging to their reputation. But as we shall see, the study of epigraphy has moved on.

Another answer may be to do with the nature of Greek history itself. In their long and elaborate historical accounts, the works of Herodotus and Thucydides transmit to the modern world continuous narratives that are in themselves challenging and engaging enough to fulfil key aspects of the subject criteria. Combined with Old Comedy and biography of the Second Sophistic, they enable learners to get a partial sense of Greek history and its debates without needing to think about inscriptions. Whereas the literary sources emphasise the Big Men and their reputations in Greek history, inscriptions bring out the long-term developments, and shine light on aspects of Athenian society in which the historians – preoccupied with politics and military affairs – are less interested. But the fact that inscriptions can tell us about identity, democracy, citizenship, the history of gender, and social life should be a reason to study them.

Perhaps another deterrent is that the study of inscriptions has the reputation of being off-puttingly 'hard', of being inaccessible to those without Greek, and challenging even to those with Greek; their often poor state of preservation means that their texts are often fragmentary or heavily reliant on restorations. The ongoing translation by scholars of inscriptions in source-books means, however, that inaccessibility is less of a problem; furthermore, in the past decade or so, significant new digital online, open-access, resources, have made

inscriptions accessible to a wider audience than ever before.

## Resources for studying Greek inscriptions

Epigraphers are consistently among the first classical scholars to make their work accessible in an online, open-access form. The Packard Humanities Institute epigraphical database, a comprehensive source for Greek texts of epigraphical publications, once accessible only to owners of the PHI CD, is now open access; one can browse the epigraphical corpora and search for Greek terms (<http://epigraphy.packhum.org/>). The website of the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents (<http://www.csad.ox.ac.uk/>) is an important hub and starting-point for online epigraphical research (it contains an excellent database of images of squeezes – paper impressions – of inscriptions); it contains links to important resources such as Poinikastas (<http://poinikastas.csad.ox.ac.uk/>), a database containing references for the study of writing in the archaic period of Greek history. While the present author is constantly frustrated by his students' determination to use Wikipedia uncritically, he is happy to acknowledge that Wikipedia contains a number of very good pages on individual inscriptions, which should always be treated carefully and analytically!

When it comes to translations, there is a very rich seam of epigraphical material in published form. There is a wide range of translated inscriptions for the study of fifth-century Greek History

in Fornara's *From Archaic Times to the End of the Peloponnesian War* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1983). The LACTOR series is particularly strong when it comes to translated inscriptions, and in particular Osborne's LACTOR 1 (*Athenian Empire*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 2000) and LACTOR 5 (*Athenian Democracy*, 2015). Melvin Cooley's LACTOR 21 (forthcoming 2017) is the first sourcebook dedicated to Sparta and will translate many Spartan inscriptions into English for the first time. More detailed for fifth-century Greek inscriptions is Meiggs and Lewis' *Greek Historical Inscriptions* (revised edition, 1988), which will soon be replaced by Osborne and Rhodes' *Greek Historical Inscriptions 478-404 BC* (forthcoming; the fourth century equivalent, *Greek Historical Inscriptions 404-323 BC* is already available in hardback [2003] and paperback [2007]).

The resource, however, that is currently enabling the accessibility of inscriptions to all is Stephen Lambert's *Attic Inscriptions Online* (Fig. 4). This website provides, free of charge, translations of the inscriptions of the ancient city of Athens and its surrounding area, Attica. Its translations, based on the most recent scholarly readings of the inscriptions, are accompanied by a useful set of interpretative notes concerning historical controversies and information on their physical form and findspot. They are browseable by publication, and the website makes available already a great proportion of the inscriptions of relevance to the classical period (including the Chalkis and Thoudis decrees which are on the syllabus). It is possible to incorporate transliterations of key Greek words within the translations, which

means that even those without Greek can be led to consider the implications of precise Greek terms – such as *philotimia* – which are difficult to render into English. A search facility offers the possibility to search both transliterations, historical phenomena (e.g. 'sacrifice', 'battle', 'democracy'), and names. Links to online images of the inscriptions, that emphasise the physical aspects of these documents, are gradually being introduced. Very soon it will be the case that all the major fifth- and fourth-century Athenian inscriptions will be available, free of charge, in English translation to all.

One does not need to know Greek to understand and appreciate the physical aspects of inscriptions. We have already commented on the way in which the Attic Inscriptions Online project incorporates transliterations into its translations of inscriptions and may well lead learners to consider the potential that a knowledge of Greek – even a little – offers to those interested in understanding the Greek world in detail. The study of inscriptions, then, presupposes no prior knowledge of Greek. But we should not rule out the possibility of using inscriptions to assist the learning of Greek. Images of the Attic Stelai displaying the 1/60<sup>th</sup> of the tribute of the Athenian allies dedicated to Athena's treasury are readily available online, and could be used to assist learning the Greek alphabet in its fifth-century Attic form (as well as the intriguing Athenian use of alphabetic letters to signify numbers). But inscriptions could be used to introduce learners to the Greek language in a historically-engaged way: some years ago Graham Shipley and Eva Parasinou put together an introductory Greek course – entitled *Hellenizein* – which was based on engagement with simple Greek inscriptions; it was published in electronic form by the Higher Education Academy but is now available free of charge directly from Graham Shipley at Leicester or from the author of this article.

## The Physicality of Inscriptions

As observed above, one does not need Greek to appreciate the 'physicality' of inscriptions. It is possible to appreciate inscriptions by visiting them in museums: the British Museum, Fitzwilliam Museum

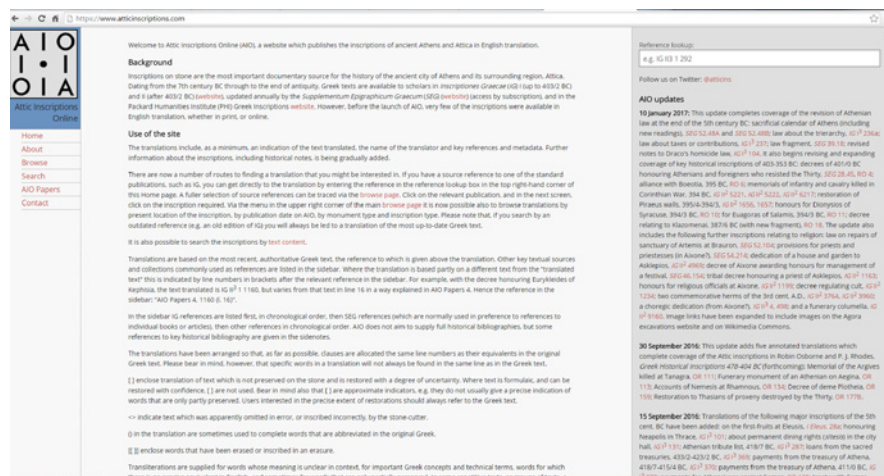


Figure 4. | Attic Inscriptions Online homepage

and Ashmolean Museum (and other collections too: for a work-in-progress list see [http://ukepigraphy.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/index.php/Greek\\_Inscriptions\\_in\\_the\\_UK](http://ukepigraphy.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/index.php/Greek_Inscriptions_in_the_UK)) have large collections of Greek (and Roman) inscriptions which can give viewers a sense of the physical manifestations of texts: what types of objects were they written on? Were they legible? Why were they written up on stone?

And if you do not live close to a collection of Greek inscriptions, villages and towns and cities across the UK are full of inscriptions: just as they were in the ancient Greek world they adorn buildings, in grave-monuments, on statue-bases, and other war memorials. The search facilities of the Imperial War Museum (<http://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/search>) and the War Memorials Online websites (<https://www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/>) offer an easy way to track down war memorials – many of them bearing inscriptions – in any area of the UK. We can encourage our students to think about what they say: when they were written up, why, and for whom? And does anyone read them or do passers-by think of them as mute stones?

## Conclusion

In contrast to the extensive literary sources for ancient Greek history, inscriptions offer snapshots of state action, of community decisions, and daily life. We live in a world where learners – by the

nature of the online experience, through blogs and wikis – are being constantly trained to digest gobbets of information and opinions; perhaps, in some sense, Greek inscriptions are attuned to this modern way of receiving information: many of them offer bite-size chunks of text which repay close scrutiny and careful analysis. There can be few better ways of training our students to think critically about the texts that they encounter, their producers, and their audiences.

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## Abbreviations:

ML: Meiggs, R. and Lewis, D.M., *Greek Historical Inscriptions to the end of the Fifth Century BC* (revised edition, 1988).

OR: Osborne, R.G. and Rhodes, P.J., *Greek Historical Inscriptions 478-404 BC* (forthcoming).

## Further Reading:

B. F. Cook, *Greek Inscriptions*, 1987.

C.W. Fornara, *From Archaic Times to the End of the Peloponnesian War*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1983.

P. Easterling, *Greek Scripts: an illustrated introduction*, 2001.

A. Missiou, *Literacy and Democracy in Fifth-Century Athens*, 2011 – discussing the wider implications of inscriptions for understanding writing and literacy.

## Electronic Resources:

Attic Inscriptions Online: a fast-growing site translating all inscriptions of ancient Attica: [atticinscriptions.com](http://atticinscriptions.com)

Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents: <http://www.csad.ox.ac.uk/>

Greek inscriptions: <http://epigraphy.packhum.org/>

Imperial War Museum: <http://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/search>

Poinikastas: <http://poinikastas.csad.ox.ac.uk/>

LACTOR (London Association of Classical Teachers: Original Records): <http://www.lactor.kcl.ac.uk/summ.htm>

UK Greek inscriptions: [http://ukepigraphy.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/index.php/Greek\\_Inscriptions\\_in\\_the\\_UK](http://ukepigraphy.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/index.php/Greek_Inscriptions_in_the_UK)

War Memorials Online: <https://www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/>

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<sup>1</sup>On the use of the Tribute Lists as historical sources, and their physical form, see LACTOR 1, 4th edition, pages 86-97.

<sup>2</sup>And there are no inscriptions specified in the new specifications for A Level Classical Civilisation, in spite of their obvious relevance to the modules on Greek Religion, Athenian Democracy, and Greek Art.