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A New Gymnasiarchal Inscription from Lakonia

Introduction

The inscription, soon to be inventoried by the Ephorate of Antiquities of Lakonia, was found by Waterfield in the foundations of a building in a bank on the beach at modern Πλύτρα (*Plytra*), Lakonia, or more precisely in the part of *Plytra* known locally as *Κόκκινες* (*Kokkines*).¹ The beach there forms a rough S-shape, with the lower and upper bars of the S being on an east-west alignment. The inscription was found on the top bar, towards the end of the visible ancient remains, at a height of about 1.5 m above sea level, in the bank at which the sand-and-shingle beach terminates.

Kokkines is the site of the ancient town of Ἄσωπός (*Asopos*), a member of the Eleutherolakonian League.² Foundations of a church and other greater or lesser buildings are apparent, and thousands of pottery and tile fragments litter the beach and neighbouring fields. Asopos was destroyed by earthquake or subsequent tsunami c. 370 CE – probably the huge earthquake whose destructive force was mentioned by Zosimus (5.6), which separated the rock of Monemvasia, for instance, from the mainland. Geological studies confirm the horror of this series of 8.5 magnitude earthquakes, which marked the start of what is known as the ‘Early Byzantine tectonic paroxysm’,³ and indeed quite a bit of ancient Asopos is best viewed through a diving mask.⁴

Inscription

A base of local green-grey layered calciferous sandstone, damaged at the top left and bottom right (fig. 1); sides smoothed, the back left rough, and signs of later reuse on the top and bottom of the stone; l. 0.51, w. 0.26, th. 0.095 m. A square indentation in the upper surface (0.13 x 0.13 m) once held a dedication (fig. 2).⁵ Letters uniform in height but unevenly spaced; lett. h. 0.02 m; traces of guidelines.

late 1st c. BCE/early 1st c. CE

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1. We are grateful to Nigel Kennell for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper; also to the editors of *Grammateion* for their assistance, especially to Eleni Zavvou for her remarks.

2. Pausanias 3, 21.7. On the location, see E. Kourinou and Y. A. Pikoulas, ‘Ἐπιγραφή ἀπὸ τὸν Ἄσωπό (Πλύτρα) Λακωνίας’, in *HOPOS* 7 (1989) 125-127, and G. Shipley in M. H. Hansen and T. H. Nielsen (eds), *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis*, Oxford 2004, 575 (s.v. Kyparissia).

3. P. A. Pirazzoli, ‘The Early Byzantine Tectonic Paroxysm’, *Zeitschrift für Geomorphologie*, suppl. n.s. 62 (1986) 31-49; J. Woodward (ed.) *The Physical Geography of the Mediterranean*, Oxford 2009, 471.

4. See P. Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History 1300 to 362 BC*, London 1979, 15: ‘Submarine remains suggest a land-shift of at least two metres.’ See also E. Hadjidaki, N. Lianos and M. Edwards, ‘A preliminary report on an underwater survey at Plytra, South Laconia, Greece: 1980’, *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology and Underwater Exploration* 14.3 (1985) 227-236. The famous submarine Bronze Age site of Pavlopetri is not far away down the coast.

5. There is a bad break at the back of the indentation, where a chunk of stone is missing, but the dimensions of the original are clear enough.

Dorotheos son of Theophilos (dedicated this)
to Hermes, after having been gymnasiarch.

In line 1, the horizontal and beginning of the right diagonal are all that remain of the delta; the serifs and lower parts of circular strokes confirm omega.

Commentary

Several points of historical interest arise. The inscription corroborates the report of Pausanias (3, 22.9) that there was a gymnasium at Asopos, as might have been expected from the size and importance of the extant remains.⁶ A gymnasiarchy might also be inferred from the Augustan-period honorific inscription from Asopos for Gaius Julius Eurykles who had donated olive oil in perpetuity (*IG V 1, 970*). The new text shows that the tradition of local pride and display was strong enough for Dorotheos, son of Theophilos, to commemorate the completion of his gymnasiarchy with a dedication to Hermes. But the relative crudity and poverty of the inscription suggest that pride outran resources.

Does the location of the find indicate the location of the town's gymnasium, which is otherwise unknown? Lacking other clues, perhaps not: the stone weighs about 25 kg, and so could have been moved quite a distance from its original location. The building in the foundation of which the inscription was found is perhaps ruled out as the gymnasium by the consideration that the stone was placed in an undignified position upside-down – though perhaps it would have been below ground and not visible.

When Hermes was one of the triad of deities presiding over gymnasia (along with Heracles and the Dioscuri), and when even the Venus de Milo was a gymnasiarch's dedication to Hermes,⁷ there is no need to give this aspect of our inscription further context. But it does make it impossible to tell whom the original statuette would have depicted. Even a sundial could be a gymnasiarch's dedication to Hermes.⁸

Both Dorotheos and Theophilos were common names at all periods of Greek history, and in all regions,⁹ so they cannot help with dating. Nor are there any other external and objective data that could cast light, such as information about the gymnasium at Asopos, or a calendrical date on the inscription. Nor are there any points of prosopographical contact between this inscription and others from Asopos (*IG V 1, 968-974*), or elsewhere in Lakonia. Dating single inscriptions on the basis of their lettering is extremely unreliable,¹⁰ but our inscription is of a late Hellenistic-early Roman style with broken-bar alphas, rectangular mus, and serifs. There are no later flourishes such as apices, elongated letter forms, or cursive forms, which might suggest an earlier rather than later date, but one might also suspect

6. See E. Zavvou, Νέα στοιχεία για τις λακωνικές πόλεις της δυτικής ακτής της Χερσονήσου του Μαλέα, *Πρακτικά του Ζ' Διεθνούς Συνεδρίου Πελοποννησιακών Σπουδών*, vol. II, Athens 2007, 425-430; *Archaeological Reports* 54 (2007-2008) 38. On the gymnasium, see C. Trombetti, *Il ginnasio Greco: Genesi, topografia e culti dei luoghi della paideia*, Oxford 2013, 96-97.

7. See e.g., B. Ridgway, *Hellenistic Sculpture II: The Styles of ca. 200-100 B.C.*, Madison 2000, 167-168. Other gymnasiarchal dedications to Hermes include: *IG V 1, 938* (Lakonike, Kythera); *IG V 1, 1410* (Asine, Messenia); A. D. Rizakis, *Achaïe* III 62 (Pharai, Achaïa). The practice was extremely widespread, both geographically and temporally.

8. A. Łatjar, Greek Inscriptions in Polish Collections, *ZPE* 125 (1999) 147-172, no. 57.

9. See *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*, Oxford 1987-.

10. See e.g. the remarks of B. McLean, *An Introduction to Greek Epigraphy of the Hellenistic and Roman Periods from Alexander the Great down to the Reign of Constantine (323 BC-AD 337)*, Michigan 2002, 42-45.

deliberate archaizing, an attempt to achieve dignity in a provincial town.¹¹ Nevertheless, a comparison with other inscriptions suggests a date in the 1st c. BCE or 1st c. CE.



Fig. 1. Inscription: front face.



Fig. 2. Upper surface of inscribed block.

11. See in general M. L. Lazzarini, *L'arcaismo nelle epigrafi greche de età imperiale*, *AION* 8 (1986) 147-153.