

Rescuing Local History: Inscriptions and the Island of Thera

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The south Aegean island of Thera (modern Santorini) is famous for both its compelling beauty and its celebrity in recent decades as the “Pompeii of the Aegean”. Known in remote antiquity as *Kalliste*, “most beautiful”, the island’s stunning topography and equally sensational archaeology share a common link in the same event: the catastrophic eruption of the Theraian volcano in the Late Bronze Age, an eruption that buried the thriving settlement near the modern village of Akrotiri, and that resulted in the formation of the modern-day caldera and the spectacular cliffs surrounding it. The remarkable archaeological discoveries at Akrotiri, together with the dramatic landscape of the island, have made Santorini a tourist haven, and its blue-domed, white-stuccoed churches have become a veritable trademark of Greece itself.

Yet the glamour and renown of Santorini, and the intense interest in it on the part of both the tourist industry and scholars of the prehistoric Aegean (not to mention New Age Atlantis enthusiasts), serve only to highlight the poverty of our knowledge about the island in the historical period. Thera occupies the most negligible of places in the ancient historical record. The authors of antiquity - historians, poets, travel writers - mention the island only rarely, and the few notices we do have in the literary record offer only a meager and tantalizingly fragmentary glimpse of Thera’s history.

Epigraphically, however, the island is a place of tremendous wealth and variety, and its inscriptions make Thera the perfect model for the epigraphic recovery of local history. Some of the oldest of all Greek inscriptions are to be found on the rocks of Thera, as well as some of the most perplexing (not to mention some of the rudest). Furthermore, the epigraphic contribution to recovering Theraian history is not limited solely to inscriptions found on the island itself. The rare and enigmatic appearances of Thera in the epigraphic record of other states (notably Athens) present one of the great challenges in reconstructing the local history of Thera. Inscriptions can thus play a most significant role, compensating for the absence of literary evidence, particularly in the case of an island with such a rich epigraphic legacy. Well over a thousand Theraian inscriptions survive, from a period extending over a thousand years - from the Archaic Age when the alphabet was still a new and startling invention, to the period of the Roman Empire, when Thera formed a tiny and insignificant part of the cosmopolitan Mediterranean world.

The largest single groupings of the Theraian inscriptions are grave-markers or simple names scratched into the rocks of Mesa Vouno, the main settlement of ancient Thera in historical times. But even such humble inscriptions as these have something to contribute to the reconstruction of the island’s history. One early grave marker, for instance, bears a number of names, perhaps of members of the same noble family (*Inscriptiones Graecae* xii.3 762). Three words in particular dominate the center of the stone: Rheksanor, Arkhagetas, and Prokles. The name “Arkhagetas” (if it is a name) is quite an unusual one, and appears nowhere else in the Aegean. It has been argued, therefore, that it may be a title rather than a name, and that it should be applied to either Rheksanor or Prokles (or both). As a title, it may mean something approximate to

“king”; Plutarch uses the term *archagetai* to refer to the Spartan kings, and tradition held that Thera was a Spartan colony (and we know from other inscriptions that Thera also made use of the peculiarly Spartan-style magistrates known as “ephors”). Whether or not this interpretation is correct, the stone offers tantalizing food for thought on the political constitution of Archaic Thera.

Humbler still than the grave inscriptions are the graffiti of Thera, though perhaps “humble” is not really the right word, given the boastful tone of some of this material. Mesa Vouno is an extremely rocky site, and the rocky surfaces of the mountain spine on which the settlement was located must have had the same irresistible appeal as a cinder-block wall. Numerous “unofficial” inscriptions from the southeastern end of the site inform us that men by such names as Pheidippidas and Timagoras and in particular one Krimon (who seems to have been possessed of considerable stamina) evidently used this uncomfortable spot for a variety of sexual antics, which were subsequently recorded in somewhat unedifying language for posterity (*IG* xii.3 536ff).

Rather more official in nature are the public decrees and religious dedications. Inscriptions such as these make major contributions to our picture of the social history of the island, and help us to construct a more reliable picture of the political constitution of Thera than we can gain from the enigmatic Arkhagetas-stone. One inscription from the fourth century BC, for example, tells us that the Theraians, like the Athenians, had an *ekklesia*, an assembly of the people (*IG* xii.3 *supplement* 1289). Unfortunately this particular inscription is so fragmented that we cannot really extract from it a comprehensive sense of the responsibilities and privileges of the Theraian assembly. That it is most unlikely to have wielded the same authority as the assembly of democratic Athens is suggested by one of the meager scraps of literary evidence we have for Thera’s constitution. Aristotle (also a fourth century source) remarks in his discussion of political constitutions that “it is not a democracy when the free are few and govern the many, who are not free, as is the case...in Thera” (*Politics* 1290b8). Aristotle unequivocally declares that the Thera with which he was familiar was not a democracy. While that seems to be at odds with the epigraphic reference to an assembly of the people in the fourth century, we shall see that other epigraphic evidence suggests that the history of Thera in the Classical period - a history that left virtually no trace in the literary record - was constitutionally far from stable.

The only appearance of Thera in the historical record of the fifth century BC is a brief notice in Thucydides (2.9, 4), to the effect that in 431, at the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, the only Aegean islands to remain outside Athens’ naval league were the islands of Melos and Thera, both of which claimed Spartan ancestry. What happened to Melos - her brutal subjection at the hands of the Athenians in 416 - is one of the most famous incidents in Greek history. What happened to Thera, if it were not for the fortuitous evidence of inscriptions, would be completely obscure. This time the evidence comes not from inscriptions found on Thera itself, but rather from the immensely valuable Athenian tribute lists, and other documents recording relations between Athens and her naval empire. We know from Thucydides that Thera was still independent of Athens in 431; and we know from the tribute lists that the island had been absorbed into the empire at the latest by 426, and perhaps as early as 430 (*IG* i3 281, 282). The tribute lists do not tell us precisely how Thera came to “join up”, but another document, which brackets Thera and Samos together as paying some kind of extraordinary sum to Athens

that is not tribute, may suggest that Thera (like Samos) was paying a war indemnity: that, in effect, she was obliged to pay back to the Athenians the cost of her own subjection (*IG* i3 68). If Thera was indeed brought into the empire forcibly, we can only speculate as to why Thucydides neglected to mention this fact and chose to focus solely on Thera's fellow-Dorian Melos instead.

Like other members of the Athenian empire, Thera would have been liberated by Sparta's defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War. But the hostilities of the fifth century continued into the fourth, and Thera seems to have experienced in heightened fashion that ongoing tension between pro-Athenian and pro-Spartan loyalties, between oligarchic and democratic leanings, that bedeviled so many of the Greek states in the Classical period. Contributing in a most important way to the reconstruction of Theraian history in the fourth century are two significant inscriptions, again from venues other than Thera. The first is a public decree of Cyrene granting citizenship to Theraians resident in Cyrene, and as the rationale for this act referring to an event in Archaic history: the original foundation of Cyrene in the seventh century BC by colonists from Thera (*Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* ix 3). This inscription offers intriguing points of comparison with the historian Herodotus's romanticized account of Cyrene's foundation (4.150-158), the only extended literary narrative we have of an episode in Theraian history. Taken together, the testimony of Herodotus and the inscription from Cyrene provide a classic case study for the reconstruction of ancient history through the use of both epigraphic and literary sources. But the inscription also contributes, in its own oblique fashion, to the picture of later Theraian history. The Theraian request for new grants of citizenship in Cyrene in the fourth century suggests a new influx of Theraians to the north African state at that time, and the occasion of such an exodus from the island may have been faction and civil war, the struggle between democrats and oligarchs so widespread in the Classical period of Greece.

Such at least is the implication of the other fourth century inscription: the "stele of Aristoteles", the famous Athenian record of the foundation of their new Aegean maritime league (*IG* ii2 43). Listed on this inscription are the names of the allies of Athens in this sea league, and among them is a curious entry: "the people (demos) of the -raians". In spite of the missing letters (one of the occupational hazards of epigraphy), it seems very likely that the name we should read here is "Theraians". But what does it mean that "the demos of the Theraians" is a member of the league? Most of the other allies are listed simply as "the Chians" or "the Thebans". The peculiar designation attached to the Theraian name can only mean that the *democratic faction* of the island was a member of the new league; in other words, that Thera was suffering from factionalism, what the Greeks called *stasis*, which could perhaps have resulted in outright civil war between democrats and oligarchs.

We are no better informed from literary sources on the island's history when it comes to the Hellenistic Age. The only references to Thera in the literary record in the centuries after Alexander the Great concern the major eruption in the caldera in 197 BC, the eruption that resulted in the growth of the islet known as Palaia Kameni today. If it were not for the epigraphic record (which ironically makes no mention of this volcanic activity), we would be completely ignorant of one of the most significant facts of Theraian history: that for over a hundred years, the island functioned as a regional

Aegean headquarters for the Ptolemaic fleet. Numerous Theraian inscriptions from the third and second centuries BC attest to the fact that the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt maintained a significant foothold in the Aegean through their apparently peaceful occupation of Thera (*IG* xii.3 320, 327, 462ff. *et al.*). As a child, Ptolemy IV is even said to have been “brought up” on the island (*IG* xii.3 464). The military interests of the Ptolemies - in their struggles with the rival Hellenistic dynasties in Macedon and Asia - were of course the paramount reason for the Ptolemaic garrison on Thera, but the Ptolemaic presence was not without benefit to the Theraians. Two of the most dramatic of the Hellenistic inscriptions from Thera refer to nocturnal pirate attacks on the island, attacks thwarted by the garrison, but still successful enough to enable the pirates to carry off a number of captives, who were forced to remain with their captors (and adopt their ways) for years before being ransomed (*IG* xii.3 328 and *supplement* 1291).

Considerations of space preclude further discussion of some of the other fascinating Theraian inscriptions here. Nevertheless, I hope that these few examples have given some idea of the vital role played by epigraphy in the study of the ancient world, shedding light on both the history of obscure regions and dark periods in the history of better-known places alike.