The Epitaphs of non-Greek Foreigners in Athens

Epitaphs are our best source for the lives of non-Greek foreigners living in classical Athens. They provide a useful counter narrative to the general viewpoint of Athenian-born writers and lawmakers, and consequently of many modern critics, who tend to see the city from the perspective of the adult male citizen.[1] In this paper I will explore the ways these epitaphs present the foreign origins of the individuals they commemorated and how they can inform our knowledge of the foreign community within Athens. Non-Greek resident aliens in Athens, while distinguishing themselves from full Athenian citizens, nevertheless tended to adopt Athenian values and Athenian perceptions about barbarian identity.

Epitaphs of Athenian residents of foreign descent are, it is true, a self-selecting category: the deceased did not have to specify their country of origin, though, at least in some cases, their non-Greek names act as a sign of their outsider identity. Yet some epitaphs clearly attempt to rehabilitate the foreign origins of the deceased in the eyes of an Athenian audience.[2] In looking at the evidence it soon becomes clear that most of these epitaphs, and therefore the deceased whom they commemorate, did not reject the Greek world-view altogether.

The majority of non-Greek residents in Athens would have been either slaves, manumitted slaves, or their descendants. Only a few of them could have expected to ever fully assimilate into the Athenian community as citizens. Grants of citizenship were voted either to specific individuals for their extraordinary contributions to Athens[3] or to groups during times of exceptional crisis.[4] It is a curious circumstance, then, that despite their virtually permanent status as an unpriviledged class, many of these current or former slaves seem to have accepted a double identity as foreigner and as resident Athenian. In some cases, the incentive of citizenship may have acted as a lure: thus Manes, a Phrygian, declares on his tombstone that he died during the Peloponnesian war, thereby indicating that his sacrifice for Athens could have merited him a grant of citizenship had he lived.[5]

Epigraphical evidence also shows, however, that foreign-born residents of Athens identified themselves within their own, smaller communities, distinct from the all-encompassing Athenian state. In this way a number of Phoenicians chose to to write their epitaphs bilingually, inviting a specifically Phoenician audience to view them.[6] As well, to cite Manes the Phrygian again, his epitaph calls him the "best of the Phrygians in spacious Athens"[7], pointing to a sense of shared identity among the Phrygian population within the larger bounds of the city.

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[1] The ancient literature is full of pride in Athenian self-definition as a separate Erechtheid race. Among modern works, see for example Cartledge (1993).

[2] IG II² 8918 or IG 10051.

[3] The bankers Phormio and Pasion are a well-known example from Apollodorus' *Against Stephanus*, [Dem.] 45. Many more are collected in Osborne (1981).

[4] Mass grants of citizenship were issued before the battle of Arginousai, for example, when there was a lack of manpower for the ships, or after Phyle. Osborne (1981).

[5] IG I² 1084. Balbina Babler (2005) has also argued that slaves and freedmen and women, such as Thracian nurses, may have retained a strong bond with the Athenian family they served.

[6] The stele of Antipater IG II² 8388 is perhaps the most famous example; some others are IG 8440 and IG 9035.

[7] IG I² 1084. Frugw~n o(\j a!ristoj e)ge/nat) e)n eu)ruxo/roisin)Aqh/na<i>j.

The epitaphs of non-Greek Athenians give us unique insights into a facet of the ancient city which we cannot learn from our mainstream sources. While evidence, such as decrees concerning resident aliens passed by the Athenian Assembly, necessarily operate from an elite, priviledged standpoint, epitaphs created for and by the non-Greek population of Athens provide us with an alternative vantage point on what it meant to be a Greek and an Athenian. Not only were these resident aliens an interested party in Athens' overall welfare, but they were also in dialogue with the values and cultural identity of citizen Athenians, which they appropriated and interpreted to formulate their own, mixed identities.

Babler, Balbina. (2005) "Fremde Frauen in Athen. Thrakische Ammen und athenische Kinger." Riemer, Ulrike, ed. Xenophobie – Philoxenie: von Umgang mit Fremden in der Antike, Stuttgart.

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Cartledge, Paul. (1997) The Greeks: A Portrait of Self and Others, Oxford.

Osborne, M. J. (1981). Naturalization in Athens, Brussels.