

To Write in a Culture of Sound: The Influence of Orality on Archaic Inscriptions

This paper questions the extent of the influence of song culture on archaic funerary and dedicatory inscriptions. I consider the influence of oral tradition on early written text and also the observations made by euphonist scholars on Hellenistic epigrams (cf. especially Neoptolemus in Gutzwiller: 2010). This paper therefore has two parts: 1) I compare the formal conventions of epic poetry and Attic funerary and dedicatory inscriptions, tracing the influence of song culture on the inscribed text, and 2) I draw support for my argument from Hellenistic euphonist theory which studied patterns in compositions from previous musical traditions (cf. Gutzwiller: 2010, Janko: 2000, Porter: 2010).

It has been noted that archaic funerary and dedicatory inscriptions incorporate the structure and language of early song (Ford: 2003). To what extent did the oral performance of epic song influence these archaic “texts”? I suggest that although the large majority of the archaic Greek audience was illiterate (Harris: 1989, Marrou: 1965), the listeners would be able to pick up on verbal cues in the language of the inscriptions which would trigger a certain cultural register reminiscent of epic song. The inscriptions share the honor and weighty significance of epic poetry, and the formulaic repetition characteristic of oral epic finds a formal echo in the repetitive character of archaic inscriptions. Lord and Parry’s theory of composition-in-performance is therefore an important influence on this paper as well. Whether inscription or epic performance, the audience would take note of key phrases that held certain cultural significance (Foley: 1991).

Scholars have shown that Alexandrian epigrams retain the convention of archaic inscriptions (cf. Fantuzzi and Hunter: 2004, Gutzwiller: 2010, Robb: 1994). In a second part, my presentation traces how the performance aspect of these archaic inscriptions inspired poets in the Hellenistic period experimenting with the same genre. My research into this field comes from a “Hellenistic” point of view, as the structures of early “texts” can be traced through the aesthetics of reading (cf. Porter: 2010, Svenbro: 1993). Euphonist scholars studied patterns of composition and performance, and I compare the results of their theory to archaic inscriptions, looking for the influence of song, which they noted, on this genre of early Greek written text.

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