

AN ARCHAIC INSCRIPTION FROM SAMOTHRACE

ABSTRACT

The present paper introduces the earliest-known documentary inscription from Samothrace, tentatively dated to the late 6th century B.C. The document contains a name in the Ionic dialect, which serves as an additional argument that the Greek inhabitants of the island came from Samos.

In the course of our work on inscriptions in the Archaeological Museum of Samothrace, we noticed a small fragment of an Archaic inscription that had been stored in an *apotheke* since at least 1978 (Fig. 1).¹ It was not found in the American excavations (and hence has no inventory number) but was probably brought to the museum as a stray find and placed in the storeroom. Though very small, it is the earliest Greek documentary inscription that has turned up on the island, and therefore potentially of great importance for our knowledge of the early Greek colonists.

THE INSCRIPTION

Thin slab of grayish (probably Thasian) marble, broken on all sides but the smooth back and part of the smooth bottom. Recorded in 1978 in “*Apotheke* Shelf Catalogue,” p. 22, location D3, as “small fragment of Gr[ee]k inscript[ion].” No inventory number.

1. We are grateful to J. R. McCredie, director of the excavations in Samothrace conducted by the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, for permission to publish this fragment. We would also like to thank A. W. Johnston and A. J. Graham for their helpful discussion of the manuscript, and the editor and anonymous reviewers of *Hesperia* for useful comments.

H. 0.067, W. 0.11, Th. 0.029, L.H. 0.012–0.016 m

ca. 525–500?

1 [-----]· καὶ ΔΟ[-----]
 []–
2 [-----]· Ὀνησιμ[-----]
 vacat



Figure 1. Inscribed Archaic fragment from Samothrace. Photo K. Clinton, drawing N. Dimitrova

EPIGRAPHICAL COMMENTARY

At the beginning of each line there is a single midline dot, apparently an interpunct. Between the lines the right part of a horizontal stroke can be seen; it may well be a *paragraphos*.

Line 1: The right stroke of the alpha descends slightly below the cross-stroke, and ascends to meet the left stroke at a point that is not preserved but probably lies at the same level or slightly above the (missing) top of the vertical of kappa. The cross-stroke of the alpha meets the left stroke at the bottom of the line.

The delta is unambiguous.

The dotted omicron represents the lower part of a circle.

Line 2: The shape of the third letter is extraordinary: a left vertical stroke descending only as far as the midline horizontal stroke, then a right stroke descending only from the midline horizontal to just below the base of the line. Faint vertical lines can perhaps be discerned in the photograph (Fig. 1) below the left and above the right vertical; they cannot be confirmed on the stone, however, and therefore do not seem to be original guide lines. There are several marks on the stone that do not belong to the letter, including a short horizontal mark just to the right of the top of the left vertical and a shallow horizontal mark to the right of the bottom of the right vertical. It is certain that the cutter did not cut a traditional eta. If the cutter had wished to cut a traditional eta, it would have been natural to cut each vertical stroke from the top to the bottom (or vice versa) of the line, but the cutter stopped (or started) in the middle in each case and did not follow through.

COMMENTARY

This Greek document² is perhaps a financial document or a record of some sort, since the mark between the lines is probably a *paragraphos*.³ With so little preserved and so few early inscriptions in Samothrace, it is difficult to date the fragment, but the letter shapes seem to be consistent with shapes found elsewhere in the last quarter of the 6th century.⁴ It therefore represents our earliest documentary inscription in Samothrace.⁵ The unique letter form in line 2 must be interpreted as an eta,⁶ given the fact that the word in line 2 can hardly be anything but a form of the proper name Ὀνήσιμος.

The eta is of critical importance. It informs us that the dialect of the document is most probably Ionic: the Aeolic form would have been Ὀνάσιμος.⁷ The sigma is in fact an Ionic type.⁸

The identity of the Greeks who colonized Samothrace has been a matter of controversy since antiquity. Carl Fredrich, writing in 1909, concluded that the matter was uncertain but found the testimonia in favor of the Samians compelling.⁹ Otto Rubensohn and others, however, did not find them compelling.¹⁰

A new element entered the discussion on June 20, 1953, when Karl Lehmann, then director of the American excavations at Samothrace, discovered, in the vicinity of the Genoese Towers, a fragment of a 4th-century decree containing two Aeolisms (πόλιος τᾶς and ἐόντεσσι).¹¹ Fraser, observing that the decree must have been produced by an Aeolic city, concluded that there was a predominating Aeolic strain in the population,

2. Although non-Greek texts have been found in Samothrace (most notably *Samothrace* 2.1, no. 64), it is unlikely that the present document is non-Greek, since all of the preserved letters make sense as Greek words or parts thereof, while nothing in the non-Greek documents can be clearly recognized as Greek.

3. Cf., e.g., the *paragraphoi* in *IG I³* 386–387, 389, 430. *Paragraphoi* are quite rare in decrees.

4. See, e.g., Jeffery 1990, p. 307, no. 63 (Thasos, *IG XII.8* 356), pl. 58. If the marble is indeed Thasian, it contradicts C. Fredrich's hypothesis, *ad IG XII.8* 151, that Thasian marble was not used in Samothracian documents before the 3rd century B.C.

5. But not the earliest inscription, the honor of which belongs, apparently, to the inscribed names of Agamemnon, Talthybius, and Epeius on an Archaic relief now in the Louvre, *IG XII.8* 226, dated by historians of sculpture to ca. 550 B.C. Jeffery (1990, p. 299) calls that inscription "a fine example of

eastern Ionic lettering." For a full discussion of its date and Samothracian provenance, see Graham 2002. Unfortunately, like the present document, it was not found in an archaeological context, and we therefore lack decisive proof that it was located on Samothrace in antiquity.

Cf. Lehmann-Hartleben 1943, pp. 130–134, with a good photograph of the relief, pl. IX; he interprets the relief as an underworld scene. The central part of the sigma in the relief is not dissimilar to the sigma in the present fragment, but its upper stroke is more open and its upper and lower strokes are more angularly joined to the contiguous strokes than in the present fragment. The relief's alphas have a curving right stroke, and the left and right strokes descend below the middle stroke.

6. A. W. Johnston calls our attention to the unusual eta in a graffito on the underside of a lekane found in the Agora: *Agora XXI*, p. 13, C 18, pl. 5. There the second vertical of the eta

apparently is not drawn in one case (in φησιν), while in two cases the eta as aspirate is correctly formed.

7. Proto-Greek long alpha in a context such as this becomes eta only in Attic-Ionic (written as epsilon in the Attic alphabet).

It is theoretically possible that a foreigner of Ionic origin was listed in an Aeolic document. The dialectal features of names are usually retained in documents written in a different dialect; cf., e.g., for Ionic names in Aeolic inscriptions, *IG XII.2* 15, 18. Identifying Onesimos in the present document as a foreigner, however, is only a remote possibility, since the natural assumption is that the whole document is Ionic.

8. Cf. sigma 3, Ionic Dodekapolis, in Jeffery 1990, p. 325.

9. *IG XII.8*, p. 37.

10. Rubensohn 1892, pp. 212–214. For references to earlier discussions, see Fredrich, *IG XII.8*, and Rubensohn 1892.

11. *Samothrace* 2.1, no. 1.

while acknowledging also an Ionic element.¹² Similarly, Lehmann, noting that the Greek dialect was Aeolic, considered this an indication that the Greek settlers came from “northwestern Anatolia or Lesbos, regions closely related to Samothrace by legend and archaeological evidence alike.”¹³

John Graham, in a recent article in this journal, pointed out the fragility of Fraser’s argument that the decree was issued by Samothrace.¹⁴ Although the decree mentions in lines 2–3 τᾶς πόλιος τᾶς Σα[μοθραίων] (as restored by Fraser), and although there is no Aeolic city whose name begins in Sa- (as Fraser pointed out), we need not conclude with Fraser that this is a reference to the issuing city; there is no reason why the city of Samothrace could not be named in a decree of another city.¹⁵ Thus, there is no obstacle to the assumption that this decree belongs to the category of decrees passed by a city in honor of another city or in honor of one or more of another city’s citizens, in gratitude for some benefaction, and a copy of it sent to the city so honored. (The present fragment, as noted above, is perhaps part of a financial document or record, i.e., not the sort of document that a foreign city would send to Samothrace.)

Graham convincingly demonstrated, after a full discussion of the modern archaeological evidence and the ancient evidence on the origin of the Greek settlers on Samothrace, that the consensus of the ancient literary sources in favor of Samos is “not contradicted by any good evidence or arguments, and we should therefore accept that the Greek colonists of Samothrace came from Samos.”¹⁶ Especially important testimonia that the original settlers were Samian can be found in Antiphon, *Or.* 15 (*FGrHist* 548 F5a), “On the Tribute of the Samothracians”;¹⁷ Heracleides’ epitome of the Aristotelian *politeia* of the Samothracians (*FGrHist* 548 F5b);¹⁸ and Pseudo-Scymnus, *Periegesis* 679–680, 690–695.¹⁹ In addition, Herodotus (8.90.1–3) reports that a Samothracian ship was included among the Ionian ships fighting on the side of the Persians.

Although we cannot be completely certain that the inscription presented here is Samothracian, since it was not found in an excavated context,²⁰ a Samothracian provenance can be presumed in the absence of evidence to the contrary; the inscription cannot, for example, have come from Thasos.²¹ If it is indeed from Samothrace, it provides further evidence that the Samothracian dialect was Ionic, and that the Greeks of Samothrace came from Samos.

12. *Samothrace* 2.1, p. 3. Ionic element: *Samothrace* 2.1, no. 5, line 8, the month Maimakterion.

13. Lehmann 1998, p. 19.

14. Graham 2002. We are deeply grateful to Professor Graham for allowing us to read the manuscript of his article in advance of publication.

15. This was already pointed out by Bernard 1964, esp. p. 92, n. 1.

16. Graham 2002, p. 239. The name “Samothrace,” or in Homer “Samos”

or “Thracian Samos” (*Il.* 24.78, 753; 13.12–13), apparently was not given to the island by the Samians.

17. *Samothrace* 1, no. 40.

18. *Samothrace* 1, no. 41.

19. *Samothrace* 1, no. 58.

20. Professor McCredie has pointed out at least one important object found on Samothrace that came from Thasos, namely a large marble ovolo from an Archaic building. At least two inscriptions from the mainland were

built into a Byzantine structure in Samothrace. The opposite flow seems also to have occurred: for reliefs apparently from Samothrace now in Thasos (published in *ÉtThas* XV, pp. 87–89, nos. 18–22), see Mantis 1998.

21. Omicron in Thasian inscriptions down to approximately the last quarter of the 5th century stands for the long vowel (omega).

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