

WRITING AND THE ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY

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There is no practice more characteristic of the Athenian democracy than writing. From its inception in 508/7 B.C., the Athenian democracy emphasized "published" records of its political decisions and activities, framed in the formal, uniform phrases that would characterize state documents throughout the history of the democracy. Over time, the rate of "publication" of inscriptions by the state increased. Laws, decrees, catalogues of magistrates, lists of war dead, financial records of various sorts—the Athenians of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. documented their political habits almost obsessively, compiling archives in perishable media as well as on durable marble. Documents kept on wood or papyrus have long since perished, but many of the inscriptions have survived. In fact, the number of fifth- and fourth-century Athenian inscriptions that have come down to modern times is unparalleled by any other ancient Greek state.

The temptation to explain the practice of writing with reference to the political system of the Athenians is irresistible. In the modern United States, of course, we understand writing and literacy to be prerequisites of democracy. If decisions are ultimately made by the people, the people must be informed in order to choose wisely. Documents should be accessible, and the people should be able to read them. By making texts

available, by educating individuals, the United States produces citizens. It is thus virtually second nature for us to imagine that reading and writing are political skills necessary for any mass participation in government. Such is the prestige of literacy today that it is difficult to conceive how a democracy, or indeed any complex society, could function without a high rate of literacy.

The context of writing in ancient Greece was quite different from our own, and so, consequently, were feelings about it. Modern Americans are reared to be a nation of readers, and we tend to understand texts primarily as things to be read. It is unlikely, however, that the majority of Athenian citizens could read the inscriptions that their democracy erected. The orality of Athenian society raises difficult questions: If few could read, why did the state bother setting up inscriptions? What is the political force of a generally illegible public document? How would an illiterate citizen understand an inscription? The Athenian attitude toward writing was ambiguous: on the one hand, it was regarded as intrinsic to democratic practice; on the other hand, it was mistrusted as a powerful weapon with great potential for abuse. What was the role of inscriptions and the attitude toward them in a predominately oral society? How can we relate this gap between letters and the unlettered to the positive and negative

political connotations of writing?

Many scholars have maintained that some rudimentary literacy was demanded of all Athenian citizens who participated in government. Procedures such as ostracism and the inscription of state documents, they argue, presuppose at least "name-signing" literacy from all. Some estimate a degree of literacy among Athenian citizens that is comparable or even surpasses that of contemporary industrial states, such as the United States. Yet based on comparative anthropological, sociological, and historical studies, it seems extremely unlikely that a majority of Athenian citizens could read. By modern standards, Athens was a traditional, agrarian society, and such societies are not known for producing large reading publics.

In addition, it is well known that the Athenian state did nothing to promote mass literacy: There was no state-subsidized education. In these circumstances, it is difficult to imagine how any significant number of Athenian citizens could have learned to read with any facility, if at all.

There are, to the contrary, many indications that Athenian politics and society of the fifth and fourth centuries were predominately oral. Virtually without exception, political practices—communication, deliberation, administration—were predicated on speech rather than on writing. Most of the vaunted Athenian literature, the famous dramas, poetry, philosophical essays, and histories, was written to be heard. Reading itself was an oral exercise, a social exchange, practiced aloud by individuals among groups of auditors, not a silent, private activity practiced in seclusion, as it usually is today.

Although many Athenians could not read, it was possible for inscriptions to communicate in other

ways. The physical appearance of state documents was very homogeneous, governed by rigidly standardized guidelines. The very consistency of public texts made them immediately recognizable as a class, visually comprehensible as public pronouncements in a manner that was independent of the public's ability to read.

The democracy had developed a distinctive "chancellery style" for inscriptions by the mid-fifth century; it differed from the lettering styles used by other, contemporary Greek states and was also readily distinguishable from local Athenian writing styles used for private documents, such as ostraka, vases, and the like. This "chancellery style" governed every aspect of the appearance of the public inscription. The proportions of the stone stelai, or slabs, on which inscriptions were carved, were fixed; the Attic dialect of Greek, with its own distinctive orthography and letter forms, was standardized for use in these texts; even the physical layout of the letters on the stone was standardized.

As often in the ancient world (and for that matter, in the medieval and modern worlds), the development of a distinctive script goes hand in hand with the emergence and self-definition of a government. A particular script will often be limited to a particular political sphere of domination or influence. So, for instance, the regime of Charlemagne promoted the Carolingian minuscule; the Third Reich assumed the Gothic appearance of the Fraktur. As a script is promoted by a government, so it serves as the official badge of the government that promotes it. In a very general way, then, the distinctive Attic chancellery style is a recognizable sign of the democratic government of Athens.

One of the most distinctive and easily recognized features of official Attic inscriptions is the

stoichedon style. The word *stoichedon* is an adverb meaning "in the fashion of rows." The text is inscribed in the pattern of a grid: the individual letters do not vary in size; there are no word, sentence, or paragraph divisions. Viewed as a whole, the text has (for connoisseurs, at least) an aesthetically pleasing, abstract appearance. But the stoichedon is not conducive to quick, easy reading. There is no attempt to organize the text into easily comprehensible visual units. The reader must ferret out words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, which have been dissolved into the regular, undifferentiated matrices of the stoichedon grid. It can be said, with some justice, that this is a style better seen than read.

In fact, the stoichedon style implies a certain kind of reading public. The organization of texts into semantic units by means of systematic word divisions, capitalization, punctuation, and the like began in the West in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries after Christ. This new, visual organization of the text accompanied, perhaps even made possible, the advent of the printing press, mass literacy, and modern internalized "silent reading." Texts without such visual aids, on the other hand, are characteristic of earlier medieval society, where literacy was quite restricted and reading took place orally, among groups of auditors. The stoichedon style, then, suggests a kind of audience and a mode of communication that differs fundamentally from modern readers and reading.

Beyond its standardized format, the physical character of a public inscription, its size and location, its simple presence conveyed certain meanings. Reading the frail, printed text of this essay, or the printed translation of the "Law against Tyranny," it is too easy to overlook the sheer weight and dimensions of an inscription, its architectural character. The physical presence of the inscribed stone in the inhabited urban space of

the ancient world is one of the most important and least recognized differences between an inscription and our texts. In the modern world, we have forgotten what habits inscriptions foster. Even some seventy years ago inscribed monuments, such as lists of those killed in World War I, were commonly erected in the squares of many American and European towns. Most of our texts today, however, be they newspaper articles or scholarly essays, exist nowhere except in the limbo of endlessly identical, mass-produced print media. The topographical specificity of the monumental text has been lost. Ancient inscriptions, in their various shapes and sizes, with their different silhouettes and applied decorations, are as much *things* as they are *texts*, and their size, decoration, and topographical disposition echo and confirm meanings beside and beyond the letters they bear.

The emphasis that the Athenian democracy placed on inscribing its documents on stone tablets and erecting them in public places is remarkable and undeniable. The documents, however, were not displayed simply to be read, or even to be read at all, but to be accessible: As many inscriptions say, they are erected "so that anyone who wishes can inspect them." As M. I. Finley pointed out, in the absence of a "reading public" the inscrutable letters carved in marble stood as unequivocal reminders of public action, as silent but eloquent assertions that democratic power is not founded on secrets or deceit but is available to all. For the many citizens who were illiterate, it was not necessary to read the inscriptions; their monumental, physical presence was enough.

For the first one hundred years of the democracy, public documents were published only by inscribing them in stone and setting them up in the public space of the city. Then, at the end of the

fifth century B.C., an archive was established in the Agora, in the Metroön, where records were kept on papyrus and other perishable materials, such as wooden planks. There probably was more or less complete public access to these archives; nevertheless, their establishment marks a vaguely sinister watershed in the history of political reading and writing in Athens. No longer were all public texts kept in monumental format, preserved as a matter of course as a part of the urban environment, where any casual passerby could see them, walk around them, or lean on them. Henceforth, some texts were kept out of sight.

When words are set down in writing, they seem to become fixed, unalterable, "carved in stone," so to speak. The ancient Athenians often thought of writing as providing a kind of egalitarian standard. Divorced from the dynamic, mercurial interplay of oral exchange, written proclamations are static and cannot be changed at will by the influential, powerful, or wealthy. Euripides provides a classic statement of this attitude. In one of his plays, he has Theseus, a mythical founder of Athenian democracy, say: "When laws have been written, both the weak man and the wealthy have an equal legal case, and the weaker if he is slandered may sue the more fortunate, and the weaker man, should he be in the right, defeats the strong man" (*Suppliants*, lines 433-37). The independence of written words from the give and take of oral society is not entirely benign, however. Protectors can easily become tyrants. Written laws can serve to equalize weak and strong, mass and elite, or they can be abused by the few to oppress the many.

The spoken word seems ideally democratic, immediate and transparent to all. Insofar as all are members of the same community, none are excluded from oral communication. Furthermore,

speech apparently emanates immediately from conscious will and is an infinitely adaptable tool of representation. If confusion arises in conversation or debate, positions can be altered, attitudes adjusted, to suit the circumstances and the audience. If opponents misconstrue a statement, whether willfully or by error, their interpretation can be immediately corrected and controlled by the author.

Writing, unlike speech, is obviously not comprehensible to all members of the community. In addition, when once words are fixed on stone or papyrus, they cannot modify themselves according to the situation. They become dull, stupid—unable to respond. Removed from their author, they can give only one answer, always the same. So the written text is susceptible to abuse by the unscrupulous and the ignorant. Plato critiques writing for precisely these reasons, concluding:

When words are once written down, they are tumbled about everywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and they do not know to whom they should speak, and to whom not; and if they are maltreated or abused, they always lack the help of their father; they cannot defend or help themselves. (*Phaedrus* 275d)

The written word is an alien thing, external to human consciousness and will. Even the laws of a democracy, once set in letters, are dislodged from the oral decision-making processes and the circumstances that generated them. No longer dependent for their power on popular will, they float free, an authority without an author, and can be appropriated by any who desire.

Writing, then, can be a democratic or a tyrannical force. It was perceived as both by the ancient Athenians. The only safeguard against the abuse

of the laws lay in bridging the gap between oral and written expression. Plato makes just such an argument when he claims that writing is a destroyer when used as a substitute for memory; that it only has positive value when it interacts with human consciousness, when it serves as a supplement to memory, a reminder, a prompt (*Phaedrus* 276d-278b). Demosthenes, in the more political context of a speech written for a public trial, makes a similar point:

And what is the strength of the laws? If one of you is wronged and cries out, will they run up and be at his side to help him? No. Letters are only written things, and they would not be able to do this. So what is their power? If you support them and make them ever powerful to help one who needs them. So the laws are strong through you, and you through the laws. (Demosthenes 21.224)

Thus the democratic power of writing lies not in its distant, authoritarian intelligibility, but in the active, social interaction of citizens, literate and illiterate, with the vague, inscrutable hieroglyphs that remind them and reassure them of what everyone already knows.

SUGGESTED READING:

M. I. Finley, "Censorship in Antiquity," *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 July 1977 (translated into Italian with expanded notes: Belfagor 32 [1977] 605-22)

W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, Harvard 1989

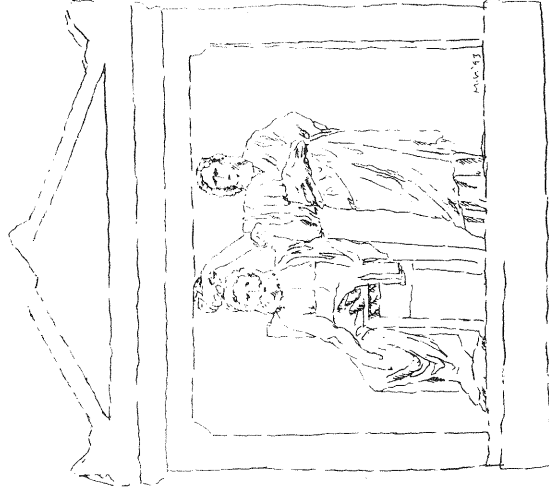
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for Lysias (circa 410 BCE) evoked, obliquely and anachronistically, for Plato's contemporaries circa 360 BCE a short-hand reference for *poiētes logon*, as if Lysias' written prose were a stand-in for Isocrates and other fourth-century speech writers. For Isocrates, *poiētes* had a double sense, both "skilled craftsman" and "poet," as he prided himself for composing "rhythmically and musically" "with rather poetic and elaborate phrasing" and "pleasing harmonies."¹ Socrates absorbs elements from both sides of the debate: his criticisms parallel Alkidamas' against written speech (although Socrates calls himself an *idiotēs*), but like a *poiētes* he speaks *metrios*, "with measure." He further separates himself from both by insisting that all speakers must speak with prior knowledge about their subject and about the souls of those receiving the speech.

Alkidamas, born in Elaia near Pergamon in Asia Minor, came to Athens where he studied with Gorgias, as did his rival Isocrates; in time, he is said to have become the head of Gorgias' "school." What follows are excerpts from Alkidamas' "On those who write written speeches" (sections 27-28 and 33-34, respectively)²

(27) I do not think it is right (*dikaion*) that written speeches should be called speeches; rather they should be considered *images* (*eidola*) and appearances and imitations of speeches. And in a similar manner we could hold the same opinion of them as we do of bronze statues and of stone images and of *drawn images* (*egrammena zoa*). For just as these are imitations of real bodies and offer delight in viewing, they provide no use for our lives. (28) In the same way, written speech (*egrammenos logos*) has a single appearance and a single arrangement and offers certain astonishing effects when viewed from a book but, because it is immobile at the opportune moment, it provides no benefit for those who use it. Just as real bodies offer a far inferior symmetry compared to that of beautiful statues but provide many more benefits for work, so also a speech which is uttered straight from one's thinking on the spur of the moment is *ensouled and lives* (*empsychotos esti kai ze*) and follows upon the unfolding events and is similar to real bodies, but the written speech, while similar in nature to the image of speech, does not share in its immense vigor.

¹ Isocrates, "Against the Sophists" 16, "Antidosis" 47 and 189, respectively.
² For a text and a translation, see J. V. Muir, *Alkidamas. The Works and Fragments* (London, 2001). Muir believes, unlike some, that Alkidamas "took his ideas and philosophy either from a reading of the *Phaedrus* or directly from Socrates himself" (p. 62). The translation here is my own.

APPENDIX D: EXTEMPORANEOUS SPEECH AS ALIVE AND ENSOULED; POIĒTĒS LOGŌN

After Socrates compares *written* speech at 275d to painting (*zographia*) (painting appears to be alive, but it remains in complete silence when questioned and is unable to defend itself), he turns his attention to praise extempore speech, the legitimate brother of the bastard sibling, written speech. Then, in a phrase which has caused much confusion, Socrates describes improvised speech as "*written* with knowledge in the soul of *one who understands*." I discuss in the Interpretive Essay why it should be written at all (page 98). Socrates goes on to praise extempore speech for its ability to defend itself, an argument which Phaedrus has no difficulty in understanding: "You are referring to the speech of a person *who knows*, a speech *living and ensouled* (*zos kai empsychotos*), the written version of which would justly (*dikaion*) be called an *image* (*eidolon*)." Phaedrus' metaphorical language is all the more striking as it closely parallels the metaphors for extempore speech in a treatise written at the time of the *Phaedrus* by a rhetorician named Alkidamas. He, like Plato, is defending the value of extempore speech-making against the rising tide of professional speech writers. It would be nice to know which text came first, but in a certain sense it does not matter greatly. Whether Plato borrowed from Alkidamas, or vice-versa, Plato took the argument much further than Alkidamas does in his treatise. Alkidamas' polemic makes clear that at the time Plato was writing the *Phaedrus*, a debate was raging in Athens between a new school of writers, which included Isocrates, and traditional orators. Both sides of the debate called the writer of written speeches a *poiētes logon*, "a maker or crafter of speeches," while the extemporaneous speaker, judging from Alkidamas, called himself simply a *rhetor*, or orator. Considered from the point of view of this debate, one might suspect that Plato's use of *poiētes*

...

(33) Yet even so one shouldn't believe that we prefer the ability to extemporize over the art of writing when we exhort people to speak "at random." For we think that orators (*hetores*) must plan their thoughts in advance and arrange the order of their speech in advance but when it comes to the order of their words they must extemporize. For the benefit which the precision of scripted speeches provides is not so great as is the appropriateness of the occasion for directing the words spoken on the spur of the moment. (34) Therefore, the person who desires to be a powerful (*deinos*) orator, and not just an adequate *craftsman of speeches* (*poietes logon*), and who prefers to make fine use of the moment rather than to utter words and phrases with precision, and who is serious about gaining the good will of the audience as his ally rather than having their malice against him, and who wishes in addition to have a relaxed frame of mind and a ready *memory* (*mneme*) with no detectable *forgetfulness* (*lethe*), and who is eager to acquire the power to make speeches which corresponds to the needs of life, wouldn't such a person, if he always and on every circumstance gave thoughtful rehearsal to *extempore speaking* and regarded writing as *play* and a subordinate activity, be suitably judged by people of good judgment to be himself a person of good judgment?