



The Display of Greek Epigraphical Texts in Athenian Museums:

Project Report

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Submitted 5th August 2013

Funded by IATL Student as Producer Research Fund

Abstract

This project explores the display of inscriptions in Greek museums, to see how the challenge of exhibiting epigraphic texts, which present particular problems for engaging the public, has been met by different institutions. Studying the presentation of Ancient Greek inscriptions in a Greek-speaking country, in museums which also provide for a large proportion of English-speaking visitors, enables a more layered investigation of the different approaches to the translation and interpretation of a monumental text, in an ancient language, in a museum setting. Engagement is found to be based on a dialogue between viewer and artefact, in which inscriptions need more help from labels and other media to be able to be responded to fruitfully.

Introduction

Sitting at the boundary between art and text, ancient inscriptions present particular problems for engaging the public. More than other artefacts, they need to be seen in their architectural context to be understood and are largely incomprehensible for the majority of visitors without an accompanying explanation. Inscriptions therefore show up particularly clearly some of the difficulties associated with displaying objects in a museum setting, and despite having been comparatively neglected in scholarship on the history of museum display, the problem of how to interpret them for visitors can tell us a lot about museum engagement in general. This project will aim to investigate the display of inscriptions in the wide variety of Athenian museums, and how the challenge of exhibiting texts had been faced by different institutions.

More museological attention has begun to be paid to inscriptions in recent years. There has been recent scholarship devoted to the history of epigraphic collections, for example Mayer i Olivé and Yasin.¹ More recently Kritzas, formerly of the Epigraphical Museum, Athens, and Rodà de Llanza have presented conference papers on increasing access to epigraphic collections, with a particular focus on the role of educational programmes and media respectively.² Alison Cooley of the University of Warwick is currently overseeing a project in this area of increasing access, entitled ‘Facilitating Access to Latin inscriptions in Britain’s Oldest Public Museum through Scholarship and Technology’, in collaboration with the Ashmolean Museum and the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents at University of Oxford (to be completed 2016). By examining how such initially inaccessible artefacts are currently being displayed, I hope that my project will contribute to this discussion over increasing access to museums and their objects.

¹ Mayer i Olivé (2009); Yasin (2000).

² Kritzas (2007a and b); Rodà de Llanza (2012).

Methodology

I visited as many museums in Athens that contained inscriptions as I could, particularly looking at the type of information included on labels, wall panels, and other media, and the general display environment including lighting and decor. I also thought about how the inscriptions were grouped, or whether they were more integrated within a display. I took my own photographs while there, and used these and my notes to write up the project.

I undertook this project while attending the British School at Athens' Postgraduate Epigraphy Course, which allowed me to speak to the conservator at the Epigraphical Museum about my own project, and gain further valuable insights into the decisions involved in display in a museum dedicated to inscriptions. As part of the course we also travelled to Marathon and Delphi, which allowed me to visit the museums there, which I had not anticipated beforehand. As the epigraphic displays at these museums raised some very interesting points, I decided to include them in my project.

Results

I will present here a selection of the museums, which offer examples of the main issues.

Epigraphical Museum

The Epigraphical Museum faces a unique set of challenges, as the only museum in the world dedicated entirely to inscriptions, and having the highest ratio of researchers to tourists of all the museums I visited. Here the display has two dimensions. It is firstly a library of stones, with smaller pieces laid out on shelves in the largest rooms for perusal by scholars, but largely out of reach of visitors. Against this three-dimensional catalogue, beginning in the hall, a series of colourful wall panels draw attention to a selection of stones that together form an exhibition, within the established collection (fig. 1). This means that the museum can function for both researchers and tourists simultaneously, highlighting a stimulating but not overwhelming selection of inscriptions for the more casual visitor, and brightening up the space, without disturbing the permanent collection. The catalogue which accompanies the exhibition discusses this challenging balance of old and new.³

³ Tzanekas (2007) 135



Fig. 1: Exhibition wall panels, with educational tables in front of the shelves. These panels help direct the visitor to the next part of the exhibition. Epigraphical Museum.

The museum also runs an educational programme which can be tailored to schoolchildren, students or the disabled.⁴ Two tables are set up in one room (fig. 1) which display fragments of inscriptions at various stages of being reconstructed or recorded, which can be used to explain the journey of a fragment to the children, before they have the chance to reconstruct a jigsaw puzzle of an inscription themselves. On the tour the children are encouraged to find their home regions on the enormous tribute lists (fig. 2), an activity which establishes personal links with Athenian history.



Fig. 2: Reconstructed Athenian tribute lists. Epigraphical Museum.

⁴ Kritzas (2007a).

There is a folder with a numbered floor plan and copies of all the editions of the inscriptions contained in the relevant room (fig. 3), which can be carried around to help interpret the inscriptions, although it contains only transcriptions, not translations. There is a fascinating comparison in the Modern Greek half of one label in this room, between what survives of the text in front of us, and what we know the text originally said from a passage in Plutarch. This comparison is not included in the English version however. There is also a label to an inscribed altar which tells us that this altar was mentioned by Thucydides; details such as these, linking to big historical names, can enliven an inscription and help a visitor to engage with it.



Fig. 3: Room 11, examples of early Attic inscriptions. The guide is on a stand to the left. Epigraphical Museum.

I was shown two different ways of displaying stelai (fig. 4). The old method involved setting into concrete, which was sturdy but difficult to move, and made the display inflexible. The conservators have developed a new way of setting up a stele, by slotting it into a specially tailored base, from which it can easily be removed if it needs to be transported elsewhere or the display altered. Reconstructing a stone for display is important for both researchers and tourists, who are better able to appreciate the original appearance of the monument. The conservator also makes and paints exact copies of key inscriptions so that they can be exhibited elsewhere, replicating the exact patina of the stone; one of the inscriptions in Museum's own collection is itself a copy, the original having been moved to the new Acropolis Museum. In order to carve a marble copy commissioned by the Megaron Mousikis, a special chisel had to be created for the job. Damage to the original was included

in the copy, except one larger crater to the front that was judged to be unaesthetic, and left smooth. Different lighting is needed depending on whether the inscription is an original or a copy, to most clearly display the text.



Fig. 4: Old and new methods of displaying stelai. Epigraphical Museum.

Acropolis Museum

Research in the new Acropolis Museum was hindered somewhat since photographs are forbidden to be taken in the relevant galleries. The museum is designed to imitate the journey up to the Parthenon, so the finds displayed on the first floor are ranged across the space, while some monuments protrude out onto the walkway that leads up to it (fig. 5), reflecting the experience of walking among these dedications on the Acropolis. This meant that the dedicatory inscriptions were largely integrated into the wider displays, shown more in context with other dedications. The honorary inscriptions formed a more distinct set and were displayed together on the other side of the gallery (fig. 6), while on the second floor epigraphic accounts relating to the building of the Parthenon formed an introduction to the metopes and frieze.



Fig. 5: View over the first gallery, sloping up to the first floor. Acropolis Museum
 (Photo: ‘The New Acropolis Museum’ (2013) <http://upscaletypography.com/?p=1012>)



Fig. 6: North side of the first floor gallery; the majority of the honorary decrees are grouped just beyond the marble head. Acropolis Museum. (Photo: Acropolis Museum, ‘From the 5th c. BC to the 5th c. AD’ <http://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/content/5th-c-bc-5th-c-ad>)

On the first slope, the labels did not translate the text but explained what the text said, for example: “Inscription marking the entrance to the Sanctuary of *Blaute* and *Ge* (personification of the Earth) *Kourotrophos*”.⁵ This gloss on *Ge* does not appear in the Modern Greek version. A label to an inscribed temple treasury box meanwhile includes a phrase that occurs only in Modern Greek that refers to a correspondence with the modern church;⁶ this detail seems to be relevant only for a Greek-speaking, Greek Orthodox rooted audience, for whom this would be an interesting point of connection. Furthermore the

⁵ Label for EM9561.

⁶ Label for Π66-67.

italicised words are those that appear in the text itself; it is not just the case that all the technical or foreign words are italicised, as we can see in the former example from the lack of italics for ‘Ge’, which does not appear in the text itself. This is a pattern throughout many of the labels in this gallery, and seems to be an attempt to help the visitor identify a few words in the inscription for themselves. Another identifies the dedicant as “...odoros”,⁷ which encourages the viewer to locate the broken word on the monument, as does the explanation of a currency symbol and where it is located in the treasury box text.⁸ The labels try to give the viewer hints with which to penetrate the wall of text on the original monument, and find meaning for themselves.

The labels for the inscribed votives on the first floor offer full translations in Modern Greek and English, which allows the original texts to speak more directly. The Modern Greek side of the labels also contains transcriptions of the Ancient Greek text with line marks above the translation, which further encourages scrutiny of the monument by assisting interpretation of the difficult-to-read letters. The assumption is however that this will not be of benefit to the English-speaking audience, whose own translation is not as easily compared as the Modern Greek translation is with the transcription, thanks to the layout of the label. The view seems to be that a Greek-speaking viewer will be more interested in the physical text, the ancestor of their language, than the English-speaking viewer, who will simply want to know what it means, being less likely to understand the unfamiliar alphabet.

A display screen was nestled amongst the inscribed honorary reliefs further round on the first floor, which could be used to explore the inscriptions further. For twelve of the surrounding inscriptions one could magnify an image to view up close, alongside miniscule and magiscule copies of the text with editorial notes such as the catalogue numbers and references. Six of the twelve included translations into Modern Greek and English. The wall panels around this gallery, although quite solid chunks of text without colour or images, provided good contextual information about the Ancient Greek culture of epigraphy, and referred towards the end to inscriptions on show nearby in different directions, which encourages viewing and movement around the display.

There is evidence on numerous stones of the removal of their former accession numbers, previously painted in ornate red numerals, antique in themselves. This suggests an attempt to remove all traces of the afterlife of the stones, which is still a part of their history; it makes Classical Athens the only visible history on display, in the same way that the Acropolis itself has been stripped of its post-classical additions. This is particularly interesting when we consider the presentation of the Parthenon marbles, which the design of the Museum revolves around. The Acropolis Museum is usually said to show rupture, highlighting the missing marbles, while in their own Parthenon display the British Museum shows continuity:⁹ it stresses the later history of the Parthenon, in order to suggest that their ownership of the marbles is a legitimate part of that history. However in the case of the stripped-back inscriptions we see the Acropolis Museum also stressing a kind of continuity,

⁷ Label for EM6425.

⁸ Label for Π66-67: “This is followed by a symbol defining the sum: † (1 Attic drachma)”.

⁹ For example, Rees-Leahy () 186.

making the claim, in contrast to the British Museum, that the world of classical Athens is the most important part of the city's history, and that this world has survived untouched in modern Athens. Even the display of inscriptions, then, has perhaps been caught up in the longstanding battle between the museums' competing claims to ownership.

Archaeological Museum of Kerameikos

This small museum is found in the Kerameikos, the ancient cemetery of Athens. It is made up of four sides of compact galleries that all look onto a central covered courtyard, where the bulk of the inscriptions are displayed (fig. 7). This area is quite different to the old image of inscriptions left to decay in museum courtyards, suggesting a lesser importance to visitors.¹⁰ Here the inscriptions are made the centrepiece, visible from every part of the museum; the courtyard must be entered to complete a circuit of the galleries. This covered courtyard creates a light and airy environment while keeping the inscriptions protected from further damage. There is a balance of monuments with and without images to reflect a good range of epigraphy, and some are displayed still with the lead setting visible, which helps to understand how the stelai were originally set up.



Fig. 7: The internal courtyard of the Kerameikos Museum.

The labels often include translations, and where they do there is also a transcription of the text, keeping to the same lines as the stone, that overlaps the Modern Greek and English (fig. 8a). They also sometimes point out interesting features such as the use of two different languages, or that a name was added later. Similarly to the Acropolis Museum, fragmentary names such as "...os", "...]kles" and "Tyr[...]" are included which inspire the viewer to seek out what remains. While the labels were attractive and well-laid out, they were positioned

¹⁰ Kritzas (2007b) 14

quite low down, which made it more difficult to read them and compare with the stone at the same time. I also found this to be a problem at the National Archaeological Museum, especially on some of the very tall monuments (fig. 9).



Fig. 8a: An example of a label with shared transcription and individual translations. Kerameikos Museum.



Fig. 8b: The same label with corresponding inscription. Kerameikos Museum.



Fig. 9: Inscribed monument with label close to floor.
National Archaeological Museum.

The rest of my findings from the National Archaeological Museum, the Byzantine and Christian Museum, the Benaki Museum, the Delphi Archaeological Museum, the Archaeological Museum of Marathon, and even the small museum of finds from Athens' 'Eleftherios Venizelos' airport, will be made available in my extended report.

Conclusions and outcome

The displays of inscriptions in the museums I visited convinced me that engagement is about a dialogue between viewer and object, mediated by a label, but that it is only a dialogue if the viewer can uncover or grasp something about the object themselves and gain satisfaction from this comprehension. This is the problem with labels to inscriptions that do not encourage some reading of the text. I felt that the most effective labels were those that contained pointers to the original text, to enable the viewer to 'translate' the information gained from the label back to the monument, and make the connection themselves.

The ideal effect could be one of annotation, pointing out interesting features but with the monument remaining the main source. Features to be highlighted could be names, words understandable from English, erased lines, mistakes, the effect of the geology of the stone, and so on. Rodà de Llanza also suggests the source of the material, the carving techniques, different hands, forgeries, personal histories and anything that compares the past with the present, for example the issue of elections and propaganda, to provoke curiosity.¹¹ This is

¹¹ Rodà de Llanza (2012) 208-13.

where the development of augmented reality could prove important, as it would be hard to create this ‘annotated’ effect in real life without cluttering the display. Technology could be a way forward, for museums with the resources; educational programmes have also so far proved effective ways of communicating this information. The importance of appropriate lighting, for either the originals or copies, to best make potentially worn-away letters stand out, should not be overlooked as a factor in helping the texts to communicate more clearly.

Another issue is when the label is quite far away from the text on the stone. Often they would be well below, almost on the floor, in small writing. Not only does this make reading it uncomfortable, but it treats the epigraphic text as if it is purely a work of art in a gallery that can speak for itself: interpretation or mediation is instead crucial with inscriptions. While integration with other sculptures can help rebuild a sense of context, the inscriptions need extra help from labels and other media to convey as much meaning to the visitor as a more instantly ‘translatable’ artistic or decorative image.

This conclusion was by chance supported by a statement made by a non-specialist on a trip to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. After working out a little of the text of an inscription (Anglo-Saxon era Latin this time) using the translation on the label, they commented: “I like it when you can work out what it means; it makes it more interesting, more real.” I believe this is the experience that museums should be aiming to recreate, to encourage a dialogue between visitor and artefact. Deciphering the importance of this for epigraphic texts exposes the importance of dialogue for museum objects as a whole; it usually just comes far more naturally with an image or piece of art. I believe that understanding this can help us to focus museological design more clearly, and thereby improve museum engagement.

A fuller report is to be published on the Classics Department webpage and publicised through official social media channels. I have also produced an A1 size poster for display in the department itself. This should ensure that those within the department, university and beyond can find out about the project and have full access to my findings.

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All photographs are my own unless otherwise indicated.