Echoes of a Minoan-Mycenaean scribal legacy in a story told by Herodotus

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citable link</td>
<td><a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42640963">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42640963</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Use</td>
<td>This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Classical Inquiries

Editors: Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone
Consultant for Images: Jill Curry Robbins
Online Consultant: Noel Spencer

About

Classical Inquiries (CI) is an online, rapid-publication project of Harvard’s Center for Hellenic Studies, devoted to sharing some of the latest thinking on the ancient world with researchers and the general public.

While articles archived in DASH represent the original Classical Inquiries posts, CI is intended to be an evolving project, providing a platform for public dialogue between authors and readers. Please visit http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries for the latest version of this article, which may include corrections, updates, or comments and author responses.

Additionally, many of the studies published in CI will be incorporated into future CHS publications. Please visit http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:CHS.Online_Publishing for a complete and continually expanding list of open access publications by CHS.

Classical Inquiries is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Every effort is made to use images that are in the public domain or shared under Creative Commons licenses. Copyright on some images may be owned by the Center for Hellenic Studies. Please refer to captions for information about copyright of individual images.

Citing Articles from Classical Inquiries

To cite an article from Classical Inquiries, use the author’s name, the date, the title of the article, and the following persistent identifier:
http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

For example:

§0. This posting for 2020.01.10 picks up from where I left off in the posting for 2020.01.03, where I analyzed some aspects of ongoing research by experts who study the practices of scribes using the Linear A and Linear B scripts in the Minoan and Mycenaean worlds of the second millennium BCE. There I focused on a scribal practice, as reconstructed by these experts, of writing on perishable material, either parchment or papyrus, and then attaching a clay sealing to such a piece of writing, which may now be read only by an intended reader who is authorized to undo the sealing. The mentality of sealing a document meant to be read only by an authorized recipient is of course well attested cross-culturally, over vast stretches of time and space, and I show in the introductory illustration for my essay here a most familiar example. It comes from the bureaucratic traditions of postal service in modern Europe, and I show here just one picture from among the thousands of other such pictures I could have picked. It is a photograph of what is called in German a Päckchen and in French a petit paquet, a 'little packet'. Here you see it—a Russian example of a packet containing materials all safely sealed and tied with string. And my point is, experts have found Minoan-Mycenaean versions of such a bureaucratic practice. But I also have another point to make: the same kind of practice can be traced forward in time, from the Minoan-Mycenaean world of the second millennium BCE, all the way into the post-Mycenaean world of the first millennium BCE. A case in point comes from a story told in the fifth century BCE by the historian Herodotus about something that happened a century or so earlier, 522 BCE, at Sardis, nerve center of the western reaches of the Persian Empire. The story involves Persians, not Greeks, but the wording used by Herodotus in telling this story involves a special use of a Greek word that we can translate as 'scribe', grammatistēs. This special use, as I will argue, resounds as an "echo" of Minoan-Mycenaean scribal practice—where a sender seals a special text, written on perishable material, which is meant to be read only by (or to) the recipient.

§1. As we saw in the posting for 2020.01.03, the word for 'scribe' in the Greek language as spoken in Cyprus around the middle of the first millennium BCE was διπθηράοιης/diptheraioiphos, which means, etymologically, 'parchment-painter', derived from a combination of the noun dipthērē 'leather, parchment'...
with the verb aleiphein 'dab' in the sense of 'paint with a brush-pen'. As I argued in that posting, relying on further arguments presented in an earlier essay, Nagy 2011, §25, we can reconstruct a Mycenaean heritage for the use of this Cypriote word for 'scribe'. And, as I also argued in the same posting for 2020.01.03, we can reconstruct the same Mycenaean heritage for the noun διφθέρα/diphthērā in the sense of 'parchment' as used in the Ionic dialect of Ionian Greeks living in Asia Minor— and, here, too, this usage can be dated around the middle of the first millennium BCE. Our source, as I already noted at the very beginning, is Herodotus, who lived in the fifth century BCE.

§2. According to Herodotus (5.58), this word διφθέρα/diphthērā was used by the Ionian Greeks of Asia Minor with reference not only to 'parchment' but also to 'papyrus', βύβλος/bublos (5.58.3). And, as I noted at §3 in my posting for 2020.01.03, Herodotus adds a most telling observation: he says (again, 5.58.3) that the Ionian Greeks of Asia Minor in his day, that is, in the fifth century BCE, actually referred to papyrus as διφθέρα/diphthērā—although they used parchment only in situations where papyrus was not available. In other words, whenever scribes had access to papyrus, they would not need to use parchment. And such was the case, Herodotus is saying, in his own era, that is, in the middle of the post-Mycenaean first millennium BCE. But why should Ionian Greeks in Asia Minor use a word that transparently means 'parchment' when they really mean to say 'papyrus'? The answer, as I already proposed in my posting for 2020.01.03, has to do with the prestige of the word διφθέρα/diphthērā with reference to scribal writing, and such prestige can be traced back to the Mycenaean era.

§3. If I may propose a crude analogy observable in my own time, I note that readers who subscribe to the online edition of the New York Times can often catch themselves saying, inadvertently, that they have just read something in the "newspaper"—even when they have been reading the online version, not the version printed on paper.

§4. Similarly in the case of scribal practices going back to the era of Minoan-Mycenaean bureaucracies flourishing in the second millennium BCE, I do not rule out the possibility that sealings could have been attached not only to parchment but also, at least occasionally, to papyrus. But of course the actual technology used for the sealing of documents written on parchment and documents written on papyrus could have varied. I outline here, in the broadest possible terms, two scenarios as summarized by Helena Tomas (2010:124–125), with special reference to the work of Judith Weingarten (1993a) and Erik Hallager (1996 I pp. 135–145 and pp. 198–199):

§4a. Parchment. Text would be written on rectangular sheets that would then be folded, then refolded, and so on. A packet of such folded sheets of parchment would then be bound together with string. Then the bound packet would be sealed with a clay sealing that is pressed on the stringing that binds it. Such clay sealings are generally known as "flat-based."

§4b. Papyrus (here the reconstruction is less certain). Text would be written and then rolled up and tied with string. Hinging from the string would be a single-hole clay sealing.

§5. In the case of parchment, I must add, how much content can fit into a text written on it would depend on the thickness of the small packet that contains the foldings of a single sheet of parchment. In situations where only one folded sheet was used, we could arrive at a rough estimate for the size of a given text by considering relevant measurements made by Erik Hallager (1996 I p. 138), who estimates a width of 0.8 centimeters and a length of 1.2 centimeters as the average dimensions of the foldings for packets that fit the impression made by an average-sized flat-based sealing. In the case of the Hagia Triada flat-based sealings, the thickness tends to be minimal, as we see from photographs of the undersides of these sealings as analyzed by Walter Müller (1999:352).

§6. With these observations concerning the interchangeability of parchment and papyrus in place, I am ready to consider what I described from the start as an echo, found in a story told by Herodotus. In a moment, I will quote and translate literally a passage that is central to the story, Herodotus 3.128.2–5, where we read about the great prestige associated with sealed documents written on parchment or papyrus. In the story, as we will see, the material of the written document in question is papyrus, not parchment, but the prestige of the writing itself is connected with parchment, since the context of the story is directly relevant to Ionian Greeks, who as we have already seen spoke a Greek dialect, Ionic, which did not differentiate words for papyrus and for parchment. I have already cited the relevant formulation by Herodotus (5.58.3), who says that the word διφθέρα/diphthērā in the Ionic dialect (διφθέρα/diphthērē), which should mean 'parchment', not 'papyrus', could be used to mean 'papyrus' as well. For the Ionians in the era of Herodotus, any written document that was sealed, to be opened only by an authorized reader, could be a διφθέρα/diphthērā. And, in terms of my argument here, such usage reflects the heritage of Minoan-Mycenaean scribal traditions.

§7. In my quotation and translation of the relevant story by Herodotus (3.128.2–5), I will be highlighting the word γραμματιστής, which means 'scribe' in the Ionic dialect, as we learn from an earlier passage in Herodotus (3.123.1), where the word refers to an Ionian Greek man named Maiandrios, official scribe of Polycrates. Until around 522 BCE, this Polycrates was the tyrant of the Ionian island-state of Samos, which was part of a confederation of twelve Asian Ionian states known as the Ionian Dodecapolis. The importance of Maiandrios as the official γραμματιστής 'scribe' of this Ionian tyrant has been carefully studied by Marcel Detienne (1988:73–81), and the role of such a scribe is comparable, I argue, with the roles of scribes in the bureaucracies of the Mycenaean Empire. The meaning of this word γραμματιστής in the Ionic Greek dialect used by Herodotus, I should add, is comparable with the later meaning of the same word in the usage of Plato. As we see from a study by Mario Veggetti (1988:389–391), the γραμματιστής in Plato's thinking was an expert in γράμματα or alphabetic writing who understood the letters of the alphabet the same way as a divinity would understand the stoikheia or 'elements' of the cosmos—since the

grammatistès supposedly derives his craft from the scribal practices of ancient Egypt, where writing itself was invented by the ibis-headed god of scribes, Thoth.

§8. Having outlined the meaning of the Ionic word *grammatistès* ‘scribe’, I will now quote and translate the text of the relevant story as told in the Ionic dialect used by Herodotus (Herodotus 3.128–5), where we will observe the political significance of this word in a Persian context. But the subtext of this significance, as we will see, is an Ionian Greek context.

§8a. The Greek text: {3.128.2} Λαχών δὲ ὁ Βαγαῖος ποιεῖ τῶδε· μυβλία γραφόμενος πολλὰ καὶ πέρι πολλῶν λέγοντα ἡμιγλώτιων σφρηγίζει σφί ἐπέβαλε τὴν Δαρείου, μετὰ δὲ ἔχων τάστα ἐς τὰς Σάρδις. {3.128.3} Ἀπικόμενος δὲ καὶ ὁ Ὀροῖτης ἐς Ὄροις ἐλθὼν τῶν βυβλίων ἐπὶ ἔκκοσον περιαίρεξμένου ἐδίδοι τῇ γραμματοσφραγίσει τῇ βασιλῆι ἐπιλάτεσθαι (γραμματιστὰς δὲ βασιλέως οἱ πάντες ὑποχρεούτοι έχον διαφωτισθήσεσθαι) ἀποπειράτοσιν δὲ τῶν δορυφόρων ἐδίδοι τῇ μυβλία ὁ Βαγαῖος, εἰ δὲ ἐνδεχόμενο ἀποίδοσιν ἀπὸ Ὀροῖτης. {3.128.4} Ὄρεων δὲ γραφόμενος τὸ τε μυβλία σεβόμενος μεγάλως καὶ τὰ λεγόμενα ἐκ τῶν βυβλίων ἐπὶ μεζώναις, διὸ ἄλλο ἐν τῷ ἔνθεο τάστο: "Ἀν τὴν Πέρσαν, βασιλείας Δαρείου ἀπαγορεύει ως μὴ δορυφόρειν Ὀροῖτην." Οἱ δὲ ἀθανάτικες τοίοτα μετακόνισιν εἰς τὰς αἰχμάς. {3.128.5} Καὶ ἔπες τοῦτο σφάλμα ὁ Βαγαῖος πειθομένων τῷ βυβλίῳ, ἐνθαῦτα δὲ ἐπικορίες τὸ τέλεσθαι των βυβλίων διδοὺ τῇ γραμματοσφραγίσει ἐν τῷ ἐνέγραψε: "Βασιλείας Δαρείου Πέρσας τοίς ἐν Σάρδισι ἐνετέλεσε κτείνειν Ὀροῖτην." Ὁ δὲ δορυφόροις ὡς ἱκουσίων τάστα, σπασάμενοι τοὺς ἀχίνδας κτείνουσι παραπάτη τοῖς ὀφθαλμῶς τῶν Σάμιων τίσιες μετηλθόν.

§8b. My translation, preceded by a summary of the background.

§8b1. The background: a summary.

Darius, King of Kings, who in 522 BCE seizes power as ruler of the Persian Empire, decides to plan the assassination of Oroites, Satrap of Sardis. Herodotus is narrating how the King’s plan succeeds, and he views the assassination of Oroites as fitting punishment for what this Satrap had done to the Ionian tyrant Polycrates, ruler of the Ionian island-state of Samos, whom Oroites had captured and executed around the same time, 522 BCE. The motive of Darius in having Oroites assassinated is not directly connected, however, with Polycrates. Darius has his own reasons for killing Oroites, since this satrap had resisted the new king’s control. So, Darius wants the satrap assassinated, but the plan to kill Oroites is daunting, since this satrap is guarded by one thousand bodyguards or *dorúphoroi* ‘spear-carriers’. How to do it? Convening his most trusted followers, Darius asks which one of them will volunteer to travel to Sardis and contrive a way to get past the thousand bodyguards and kill Oroites. The followers all volunteer, and so a lottery is arranged for determining which one of the volunteers will undertake the mission.

§8b2. My translation.

And Bagaios, son of Arontes, wins the lottery. {3.128.2} Then Bagaios, having won the lottery, acted as follows. Having arranged-to-be-written-down *grapásasthai* several different writings-on-papyrus *bublía* that talked about several different matters, he placed on them the seal *sphrēgís* of Darius and then took them with him to Sardis. {3.128.3} When he got there and came face-to-face with Oroites, he stripped-off-the-covering *peri-hairísthai* from each one of the writings-on-papyrus *bublía* and handed them over, one at a time, for the royal-scribe *grammatistès basilēios* [of the Satrap] to read-out-loud *epi-légesthai* —you see, all of the Sutrapas *hυπ-arkhōi ‘governors’* of the King have royal-scribes *grammatistai basilēios*. By handing over the writings-on-papyrus *bublía* [for the royal scribe to read each one out loud] Bagaios was trying to test the bodyguards [= *dorúphoroi* ‘spearmen’], whether they would accept going over to his side and turning away from Oroites. {3.128.4} And, seeing that they were venerating *sêsthai* in a big way the writings-on-papyrus *bublía*—and in an even bigger way the things-said *legómēna* that were coming out of the writings-on-papyrus *bublía*—he handed over [for the scribe to read out loud] yet another one [of the writings-on-papyrus], and inside it were these words *épea*:

"Persians! King Darius forbids you to be-bodyguards *dorúphoreîn ‘spearmen’* for Oroites." Hearing this, they lowered their spear-points for him. {3.128.5} When Bagaios saw that they obeyed the writing-on-papyrus *bublión* with regard to this, he now felt emboldened to hand over the last writing-on-papyrus *bublión* last roll to the scribe *grammatistès* [for reading out loud], and in it had been written *e-γέ-grapto*: "King Darius commands the Persians in Sardis to kill Oroites." Hearing this the bodyguards [= *dorúphoroi* ‘spearmen’] pulled out their scimitars and killed him right away. Thus it was that vengeance for Polycrates the Samian overtook Oroites the Persian.

§9. As the Ionic wording of Herodotus indicates, a royal seal has sealed each one of the texts that the emissary has brought with him to Sardis. The undoing of each seal activates the writing that speaks to those who hear this writing being read out loud, and the writing itself, once activated, has the authority to translate into action whatever is being communicated between sender and receiver.

Bibliography


A Minoan-Mycenaean scribal legacy for converting rough copies into fair copies


Tags: Herodotus, Minoan-Mycenaean civilization, Mycenaean Empire, papyrus, parchment, scribal practice

Comments are closed.

Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.