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A MEGARIAN MYSTERY

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Megara Archaeological Museum, inv. 162 – nothing is recorded of its provenance beyond the fact that it entered the Museum from the old collection in the Gymnasium.¹

Marble, preserved dimensions 30.5 x 22.0 cm; 8.2 cm thick. Traces of modern cement. The rear is smooth. All the sides are roughly finished, most of them breaks, but the right side does seem to be original, since the inscribed lines always end with the end of a word, and there is a marked *vacat* at the end of l. 9. This suggests that the stele may be a re-used architectural block, rather summarily trimmed at the preserved right edge.



Fig. 1. Photograph A. Syrkou

The lettering normally has rough serifs. There are variations in letter forms, especially nu, lambda and upsilon. Epsilon and sigma are lunate, theta has a full central horizontal, phi is composed of two near circles. – III–IV AD?

	]φ.[
	]αξιο[
	]τα αυτοις
4	]ισει τοσαντας
	]ω εαυτων δια
	]σιγονων τον τε
	]α ταν τε Σικελιαν
8	]ς Ελλανικους τε και
	]εχεσθε τας αρετας
	]ωστου[

1. The second preserved letter is set very close to the phi, but must be omicron or theta, just possibly omega. – 5. The first letter is almost certainly omega rather than omicron. – 6. Enough is preserved of the first letter to demonstrate sigma; therefore the second must be iota. – 9. The central hasta of the initial epsilon is preserved. – 10. The first letter should be omega, since there is no trace of complete rounding at the top. Most likely to be read]ως του[

Commentary

It is immediately clear that the whole has an epigrammatic flavour though seemingly in prose. Beyond that, however, interpretation is severely hampered by not knowing the length of line, which one might think considerable in view of the difficulties of teasing out a grammatical structure, e.g. the two occurrences of τε.

2. -αξιο- gives perhaps a minor hint of the tenor of the text, though little more can be said.

4. Or]ις ει? If we have part of one word the likelihood that we have a verb in the future tense is perhaps slightly higher than a dative singular, but only when one considers the following τοσαντας.

¹ Permission from the Ephoria to publish this piece was ceded to me by Dr. Angeliki Syrkou, who has published other pieces in the Museum in *Horos* 17–21 (2004–2009) 349–359. I thank both her for her help and the Museum staff for their courtesy. M. E. Pérez Molina, *Index Verborum in Inscriptiones Megarae et Coloniarum* (Hildesheim, 1991) readily demonstrates the unusual character of the text, with only one substantial word in this text, ἀρετή, appearing there.

6. Again there is the possibility that the first set of letters could belong to two words, *Ἰσι γονῶν*. A reference to races or generations might then fit well with the mention of Sicily and Hellanikoi later on. If taken as a single word the options are few indeed, limited to *τελεσστιγόνων* and *όρεσστιγόνων*, either of which introduces an epic tone to the text which is otherwise not clearly visible, save perhaps in the slightly rhetorical phrase in line 9 and the Doric dialect (see below).

7–8. Lack of any control of the length of line is particularly frustrating at this point. How is Sicily connected with “Greeks”, or “Greek [masculine plural noun]”? and in what context? The *τε* in 7 certainly is a hint that the relevant phrase or clause there could continue until somewhere near the mention of Greeks, but little more. More importantly, with whom are “Greeks” linked by the *τε καὶ* – non-Greeks, barbaroi, Romans?

9. In the ‘international’ context of the previous lines it is tempting to take *ἀρετή* in a military sense, and as a partitive genitive – “of their prowess” – rather than accusative plural, though again it is a balance of probabilities.

The verb is presumably a compound from either *ἔχω* or *δέχομαι*. It is either second person plural or infinitive; the latter would be a rare form (very rare at Athens – L. Threatte, *The Grammar of Attic Inscriptions* II, Berlin 1996, 469, §66.051), but is in fact found in a Megarian text that is of relevant interest, *IG VII* 53; Boeckh had already suggested that the latter shows that the Megarians adopted -ε for -αι prematurely² (“Mature igitur barbaris vitiis laborasse Megarensium scriptura videtur”), while Wilhelm’s re-discovery of the stone suggests a date in the fourth or fifth century.³ The letter forms of our much tidier fragment might support a date as late as the fourth century, but the Doricisms would then be very much out of place, unless an earlier text, in prose, is being quoted. Indeed, though the bulk of *IG VII* 53 has Doric forms, its ‘late Roman’ prescript is in Ionic. Alternatively, if on morphological grounds we prefer to see the second person plural here, it would indeed be an unexpected form in a prose text.

Overall, there are too many uncertainties, even clashes, of genre or interpretation, to prefer any single line of interpretation of the theme of the text. A literary style seems reasonably assured, and a military context probable. The mention of Sicily and “Greeks” is the sticking point. At Megara we might expect the former to hint at the colonies of Megara Hyblaea and Selinus; any more generic reference to the island at the date of inscription is perhaps made less likely by the Doric spellings. The preserved epigraphic record from Megara contains no relevant parallel, but we can at least point to two other Megarian texts of the broad Roman period which do refer to the myth-history of the polis: the Persian Wars ‘dossier’, noted above, *IG VII* 53 (of which this is not a fragment) and 52, the Orsippos epigram. If the present text is of a similar genre we could see a reference to Sicily in the events of 480, with Greeks being victorious over the two major non-Greek peoples, were it not for the fact that Megara Hyblaea no longer existed at the time and Selinus fought on the ‘wrong’ side. Should we go as far in our interpretation of this difficult fragment as to see a revisionist myth-history being propagated in the later Roman period by means of an actual (and presumably substantially earlier) or newly constructed dialect text?

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² A. Boeckh, *De Simonidis Cei in Megarenses epigrammate lapide servato* [C. I. G. No. 1051], *Gesammelte kleine Schriften* iv, Leipzig 1874, 125–133, esp. 127–8.

³ A. Wilhelm, *Simonideische Gedichte*, *JÖAI* 2 (1899) 221–244, esp. 236ff. (= *Kleine Schriften* II 1, 15–38, esp. 30ff.).