postal service #3: ins and outs
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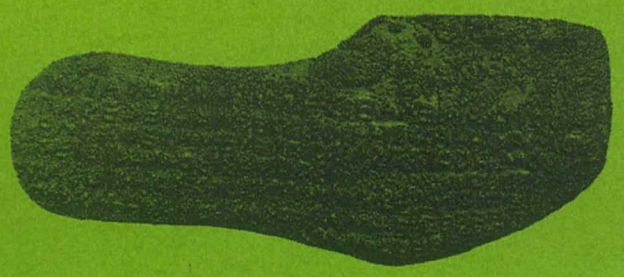

For instance you see, this is a builder's foot. Half of something followed by a person's name.

I meet the man from The Folklore Museum while we both wait for a bus. The museum in Vathy, on the island of Ithaca. He told me then, upon hearing that I like the written word, that I must also visit The Epigraphic Museum once I journey back to Athens. He told me now, he was off to Stavros with his drone—an 80-year-old man from a nearby town had asked him to film a road, a road that this older man had built himself five decades earlier. "How did he find you?" I ask. "Facebook." I laugh. He has a website too, for his aerial drone film work, "O-N-L-I-N-E-T-O-U-R-I-S-M dot com slash B-L-O-G." His "g" was very pronounced. He gets about 2000 hits a month, earns money through ads. "Is the road still functioning?" I ask. He says, "No. That's why we go by foot, worth the walk, and record looking from the sky."

I visit The Epigraphic Museum some weeks later, late on a Thursday afternoon. The museum can be accessed through the south doors of the building, on land that spans the edge of four streets: Tositsa, Patission, Vasileos Irakleiou, and Bouboulinas. Going down the steps I pass benches, trees (olive, a crocus flower!, a palm), cats lounging on slabs of warm stone: this is the outer courtyard. I wonder what it would be like to eat an orange from one of the orange trees nearby, lines of them in the garden next door. They speak in landscapes here.

I enter and am met with surprise. A suspicious entrant. “Are you looking for The Archeological Museum?” they ask, “…it’s upstairs.” “No,” I say. And they say, “Oh right, come through.” I am handed some papers: a photocopied map folded twice into a long pamphlet; a page of alphabets including those from Argos and Athens; a page of number systems; details of a temporary exhibition from years ago. I am the only visitor. Much stone.

The Epigraphic Museum was founded in the late nineteenth century CE to protect, preserve, study, and exhibit ancient inscriptions on stone. It holds the largest collection of ancient Greek inscriptions in the world. These are primary historical sources that inform understandings of the economic, political, religious, and social life of Greek antiquity. Mostly, they are non-literary written records, both public and private. Though the earliest Attic inscription—a graffito in two lines from the late eighth century BCE—some call a poem, a metrical composition, and some call a writing exercise.

I now review the records in my mind with the recall of small acquaintance, with the recall too of the wooly topography of a given room. For instance I see, then, near the end of my visit, in Room 9, a green foot. Peering through a magnifying glass within the central vitrine, I notice that this tablet in the shape of a human foot has protrusions of lines—letters, numbers—in horizontal formation, inscriptions in rows that follow the ridges eastward. These inscriptions are not on stone, but on patinaed bronze. The direction of the heel faces west, the ball to the east towards the sun’s set. The foot has no toes.

The green foot was found during an excavation in the beginning of the twenty-first century CE, where 136 inscribed bronze tablets were discovered in Argos, a city 100kms south-west of Athens, on a private plot, 48 Korinthou Street—now a pharmacy, near a bakery, opposite a specialised cellphone services point. They were found after a report was made from the excavation in preparation for the construction of a basement. The inscriptions were stored underground in ceramic vessels and stone chests, covered by heavy slabs.

| Chest 1 (oriented north-south) was empty,
- - - a chest (to the east of the first chest) was not investigated because it was on the boundary of a neighbouring property,
| Chest 2 (the third from the east) contained min. 60 bronze and two lead-inscribed tablets,
| Chest 3 (the fourth from the east) was empty,
| Chest 4 (the second from the east) contained one foot-shaped inscribed tablet. This foot.

The bronze tablets themselves are called *chalkei* (bronze) *telamones* (the ones who serve as carrier). These objects don't have a name per se, just a title for what they do. They each carry "simple texts", that is, financial accounts of civic or religious bodies: they record the deposits and withdrawals, the financial ins and outs. Such is writing, with its capacity to pin down the present. The present with its obligations and invitations, with its deposits of new thought and withdrawals.

The bronze foot was originally the model of a 0.32m long tectonic foot, a builder's foot, a measuring template. The foot's secondary use "served as the carrier" for an inscription of an account of the *hieromnemones* (the state's sacred secretary) concerning a fund named *hagemastikon*. A financial profile, footing the bill. It is from the first quarter of the fourth century BCE.

There is a marble relief stele, also from the fourth century BCE, just under 2.5m high and 0.2m wide, that was discovered in Athens on the Acropolis slopes, which depicts the inside surface of a large luxurious sandal. Carved on the sandal's sole is a male figure with his right hand raised, a typical gesture of respect. Underneath the sandal is a carved inscription which reads "Silon's Dedication".

Two possibilities:
| Silon could be the man on the sandal.
| The stele could also be associated with *hero epi blaute* (the hero on the sandal), who some scholars believe was a hero-doctor who belonged to the circle of *asklepios* (healing) and who had invented a type of orthopedic sandal for the treatment of specific feet conditions. He had been associated with the son of Asklepios Pedaleirios, a name which means "he who protects the feet".

Given the sandal, it is easy to invent the sandal maker.

I read that in the process of writing, the poet chooses the delicate sandal with which to adorn poetry's "naked foot". Foot-based prosody.

Before I walk out, I visit the inner courtyard upstairs. Lines of marble colonettes rim the square balcony. In its centre a tall pine points upwards, dozens of kestrels fly in and out in all directions tracing movements in dark flecks, M's marking the light of the sky. Meeting my memories halfway and as if searching for a landmark yes! it looks like the sun soon might set. I imagine the green ray at the horizon.

Sources

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