

ATTIC INSCRIPTIONS: EDUCATION

ANCIENT ATHENIAN INSCRIPTIONS FOR KS 3: TEACHERS' NOTES

The subject of these slides, which are intended to constitute an enrichment activity for KS 3, is Athenian inscriptions and how they came to be in the UK. There are four themes relevant to the national secondary curriculum:

1. Introduction to ancient Athenian inscriptions in the UK;
2. Why are ancient Athenian inscriptions important?
3. Reading Ancient Athenian inscriptions: (a) Words; (b) Numbers; (c) Images (with activities);
4. Ancient Athenian Inscriptions in the UK and the History of Medicine (with activities).

Parts 3 and 4 may be delivered separately; (a), (b) and (c) of Part 1 are also detachable. Links are embedded into the slides.

Notes on specific slides:

1. Introduction to ancient Athenian inscriptions

Slide 2: begins with ancient Athens, which was the most important city of mainland Greece during the classical period of Greek history (fifth-fourth centuries BC). Politically, it dominated the Eastern Mediterranean, and it was a centre for cultural achievements including writing, philosophy, drama, architecture and other forms of artistic expression.

Slide 3: the right side of the slide emphasises the colour of ancient Athens, which something lost in much of what survives of the ancient past. The scene is an imaginary one, showing an individual who might be the famous Athenian general Pericles addressing the people on the Pnyx Hill, venue of the Athenian democratic assembly in the classical period (fifth-fourth century BC). The acropolis is in the background, with the Parthenon and Propylaia visible.

Slide 5: shows some of the different uses of inscriptions in ancient Greece. Moving from left to right they are a monument honouring a trainer for a victory in his team's athletic contest; a grave marker for two priestesses or celebrants of the cult of Isis; a fragment of an Athenian inscription of the fifth century BC which gives us evidence for taxes (tribute) paid by Athens' subjects to the sacred treasury of Athena.

Slide 6: Cyriacus of Ancona: he was the first modern traveller to take an interest in ancient inscriptions. He was part of a broader awakening of interest in the fifteenth century AD in the ancient world: he can be thought of as an early Renaissance figure. He came from Ancona, which is a relatively short voyage to Greece. And his city had ancient inscriptions itself, such as the arch of Trajan, which likely provoked his own interest.

Slide 7: from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, wealthy British drew upon their connections and the UK's power to collect antiquities, e.g.:

George Wheler a botanist and epigrapher (that is, someone interested in inscriptions). After winning a legal battle to inherit the estate of a wealthy uncle, he gathered the funds to travel around Greece from 1675 to 1676, as part of his Grand Tour. He was accompanied by Jacob Spon, a French Huguenot doctor whom Wheler had met in Rome. Together they recorded more than 1000 inscriptions in their journeys, visiting Athens in June 1676. Apparently motivated by academic pride, Wheler donated his inscriptions to Oxford University. We have made a [video about Wheler and the other collectors of Athenian inscriptions now at the Ashmolean museum](#).

Lord Elgin: A large proportion of the ancient Athenian inscriptions in UK are classified as 'Elgin Marbles', that is, alongside the famous Parthenon marbles, those antiquities purchased from Lord Elgin in 1816 by an Act of Parliament and placed in the hands of the British Museum. Thomas Bruce, the 7th Earl of Elgin (1766-1841) is probably the most important single figure in the story of how ancient Athenian inscriptions came to the UK: he was responsible for shipping perhaps 100 of them to the UK in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Elgin was British Ambassador to the Porte at Constantinople from 1799 to 1803. His agent in Athens, Giovanni Battista Lusieri, conducted excavations in Athens and in 1801 famously obtained permit from the Turkish authorities to remove pieces of stone with inscriptions and figures. The story of the marbles includes their removal under the direction of Lusieri, the sinking of a ship containing part of the shipment of sculptures, their recovery, the arrest of Elgin on his way home through Napoleonic France in 1803 and his detention there until 1806. The marbles were displayed in London for the first time in 1807. Elgin, impoverished by an expensive divorce, went to great lengths to sell them to the British Government, who eventually purchased them from him in 1816 and placed them for safekeep in the British Museum.

Lady Ruthven: Two inscriptions in the National Gallery of Scotland were bequeathed in the 1884 will of Lady Ruthven of Winton Castle. The Ruthvens visited Athens in about 1819, where they made contact with other British (and British-linked) collectors and travellers. Lady Ruthven was herself well connected, and is said to have been in touch with Giovanni Battista Lusieri (famously, Lord Elgin's agent in Athens).

Slide 8: there are now inscriptions in a number of UK collections. Some are private, like Broomhall which is the family home of the Elgins; others are public museums, e.g. the Ashmolean in Oxford and the City Museum of Leeds. Some crop up on the auction market from time to time!

Slide 9: Our project publishes ancient Athenian inscriptions in UK collections on our [website](#).

Slide 10: we also have a [YouTube channel](#) on which we have made short videos about some Athenian inscriptions in the UK.

2. Why are inscriptions important?

Slide 11: we come to the question of why ancient Athenian inscriptions are important to understanding the ancient Greeks. One reason is that they tell us about human

relations: in this case, a mother is commemorated alongside members of her family: her son Thymilos and her grandson Timokrates, as well as another person who has had his name added: Thrasykles. This suggests the closeness of a family group and that they may have been buried together in a family enclosure (*peribolos*). Teachers might consider how modern burial markers might also tell us about family histories.

Slide 12: inscriptions also tell us about politics and in particular the workings of the fifth century Athenian empire. This inscription tells us how the Athenians checked the amount of taxes their imperial subjects paid, ensuring that they wrote down the sums on a sealed tablet in advance of setting sail with the money to Athens. Similarly, modern documents are a way of understanding the history of diplomacy and warfare.

3. Reading Ancient Athenian inscriptions: (a) Words; (b) Numbers; (c) Images (with activities)

Slides 13 onwards: this is a reading task in the form of a wordsearch which introduces learners to the Greek alphabet and some etymology. A worksheet for the wordsearch can be found among the AIE KS 1 and KS 2 materials ([Resource 6b](#)).

Slide 14: the Athenians honoured Straton the King of Sidon in modern Lebanon. For more on this inscription, we have made a [YouTube video](#) about it. A proxeny decree like this bestows the role of *proxenos* to an individual. A *proxenos* would be the representative of another city's interests in their home city. So, after this award we would expect Straton to represent Athenian interests in the city of Sidon. It is striking that Sidon is a Phoenician, a non-Greek, but the Athenians treat him as an equal.

Slide 25: a task which introduces ancient Greek numbers. The thing to emphasise is that Greek numbers are no more difficult to learn than Roman numerals and that they work on the same principle.

Slide 33-34: introduces the iconography and works of art represented on Athenian inscriptions. Discuss what they can tell us as historical sources about how people lived but also what they say to us about commemoration and ways of mourning those who had passed. Bear in mind that funerary inscriptions would have adorned (alongside other monuments) family funerary enclosures (*peribolo*) that would have been sited across Athens outside the city limits and along roadsides.

Slide 33: left to right: a funerary marker for an individual called [Kollion](#). The motif here would have been painted and parts of its image have been restored by photography; Kollion was probably a man who died young and a child (a sibling?) reaches up to him; [Arkesis](#) is depicted holding a young baby: probably she was a midwife by profession or died in childbirth; this is a scene in which the deceased and living seem to clasp hands (*dexiosis*) and therefore demonstrate a bond which is lasting through life and death.

Slide 34: mythical animals are sometimes represented on funerary monuments. Sirens: they were associated in mythology with sailors being lured to their death, and this may reflect the circumstances of death of those they commemorate.

Slide 35, 36: the Athenians sometimes depicted gods and heroes on their inscriptions. In this case, they represent Athena, the hero *Demos* (the Personified 'People') and Menelaos (a Peloponnesian hero): accordingly, this may be the top of a decree setting out the terms of alliance between the Athenians and the Spartans.

Slide 37: this is a dedication, a gift to the gods made perhaps as a thank-offering for something good happening, adorned with the name of the dedicant. In this case, Polyaratos is depicted with a horse, suggesting he may have been a cavalryman and presumably wealthy. In the ancient Greek world horses were expensive to maintain and probably required ownership of scarce flat land. The interpretation of this dedication suggests that it was set up as a way of celebrating a victory in horse-racing contest.

Slide 38: Herakles. The plaque is a dedication commemoration of an athletic victory by the ephebes, or cadets of classical Athens. (Athenian male citizens at the age of 18 years undertook this service as part of their military training). The event at which the ephebes were victorious might have been the Antinoeia, festival games held by the ephebes in honour of Antinoos, the young lover of Emperor Hadrian. Or it might have been the 'Contest of Prowess' (*Peri Alkes*), which involved a contest between two teams of ephebes, called 'Theseidai' and 'Herakleidai' – perhaps the relief decoration indicates that the latter team was victorious.

4. Ancient Athenian Inscriptions in the UK and the History of Medicine (with activities).

Note: these slides are relevant to the study of the History of Medicine, which is widespread in History GCSE. For a list of Athenian decrees on AIO relevant to the history of medicine, see [Lambert, AIO Papers 10](#) section 12.

Slide 39: the next group of slides offers views of ancient Athenian medical practice through their inscriptions. One theme to discuss is how far they represent a similar or different world of medical practice to that which we experience in the modern world: the religious practices are rather different (though healing through religious practice exists in the modern world e.g. at Lourdes) but the reverence paid to medical practitioners is comparable.

Slide 40: this represents the Pnyx which in classical times was the site of the democratic Athenian marketplace. But in Roman times it became a sanctuary of Zeus 'The Highest'. It was the place where dedications were made by those who were seeking cures or offering thank-offerings for cures.

Slide 41: thank offerings in the shape of anatomical votives. These may represent the afflicted body parts or, in the case of the eyes, a representation of eyes with which the healing deity was witnessed.

Slides 42, 43: Jason was a physician. This is indicated by his austere expression and also the 'cupping vessel', which was used in antiquity to extract fluids from the body. Like the modern stethoscope, it is an indication of healing practice. The patient looks

ill, with ribs showing and a pot belly. He may be a child or, if he is bearded, a patient considerably smaller than a doctor represented as larger than life.