"Hellenistic Inscriptions: When History Fails Us"

It is well known that the Hellenistic period lacks a continuous historical narrative like the one we find in the Classical age. In order to reconstruct the period from Alexander the Great to Cleopatra (336-31 BC), historians have turned to inscriptions, our most direct witness to the life and times of this enigmatic and complex world. This paper will offer a didactic strategy to engage undergraduate students (with little or no Greek language training) in the study of inscriptions.

At my university I offer a junior-level history course entitled 'Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic World'. Along with a short biography of Alexander the Great [Hamilton (1973)] and a survey of Hellenistic history [e.g., Walbank (1993); Green (2007); Errington (2008)], the centerpiece of the course is devoted to the study of epigraphical and papyrological texts [translated and accompanied by commentary, e.g., Burstein (1985); Bagnall & Derow (2004); Austin (2006)]. Students are assigned individual documents and are required to present their documents in class (as well as to submit a short written analysis of the content, context, and importance). In order to emphasize the importance of inscriptions in the face of sparse literary sources, I present an in-class practicum on the study of inscriptions, using an article from the Athenian Agora as a case study [Bugh (1998)]. First, however, I manufacture a fragmented unpunctuated text in English (in caps) on some well-known document in U.S. history (e.g., Declaration of Independence or the Lincoln's Gettysburg Address), and ask the students to restore the complete text. The exercise is both fun and preparatory. Several years ago I acquired a supply of block-cut Georgia marble and purchased a selection of different chisels from a professional outlet in California; with these in hand, I demonstrate the stonecutter's craft. Then I explain the use of squeezes (passing around a replica of the Agora inscription) and the step by step process by which an epigraphist examines the stone (stressing the importance of autopsy), establishes the preserved text, and works through a restoration to a finished text (with commentary and prosopography) suitable for possible publication. I also include a discussion of the latest advances in technology that have been applied to the recovery of faint or illegible letters on stone (e.g., lasers, digital image enhancement), using the Egesta Decree in the fifth century BC as a case study in the problematic use of lasers to settle issues of dating [Bugh (2006)].

At the end of this exercise, the students approach their specific inscription with added confidence, new skill sets, and a good deal more respect for the importance of epigraphy in the service of history.

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