

‘The artists around Dionysus’

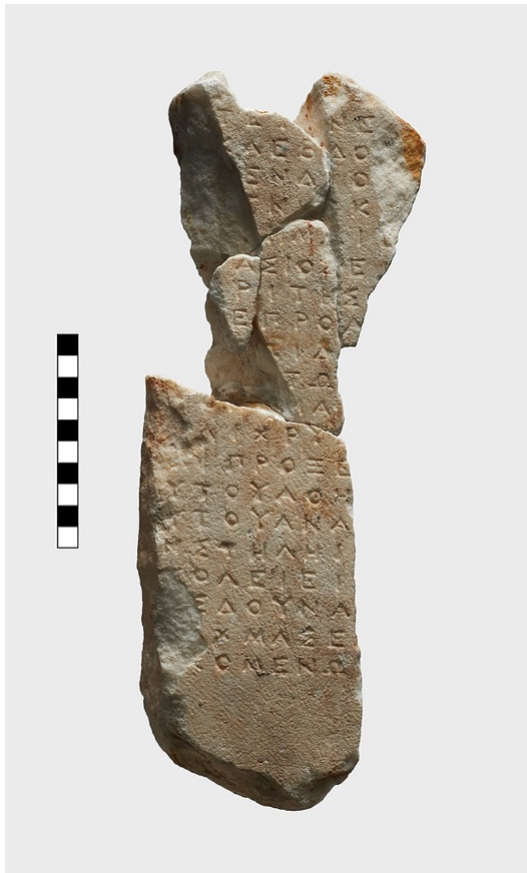
Artists, festivals and the importance of inscriptions

Euripides’ *Bacchae* premiered posthumously at the Theatre of Dionysus in 405 BCE, winning first prize in the City Dionysia festival competition. One of its key innovations was that the chorus was integrated into the plot of the play. The fifth century BC saw many changes in the form of drama as well as the growing importance of actors. Aside from prizes for the best tragedy, given since 447 BCE, there were new prizes established to reward exceptional actors at the Great Dionysia. Politically, the period following the premiere of the *Bacchae* was also a period full of political developments. At the end of the 4th century BCE, after the expedition of Alexander the Great, many Greek (and non-Greek) communities were united politically under Macedonian rule, and after 31 BCE, all of them under Roman rule. In this new world order, the number of festivals proliferated with new ones founded even in very remote areas on the margins of the Greek-speaking world. Consequently, cities and kings who organised those festivals could no longer rely solely on local performers for high quality performances and the organisation of such festivals became a lot more complex.

But how do we learn about all this information? Ancient literature gives us the scripts of the plays, but how do we know about all the important work and organisation behind staging a play? The answer is inscriptions; texts inscribed on a material (other than papyrus). Ancient Greeks inscribed on stone many aspects of their bureaucracy that would otherwise be lost to us, such as decrees honouring the winners of festivals, listing actors and sponsors (*choregoi*), documenting constructions of buildings, and other details central to the history of drama. As primary evidence, inscriptions are just as important as the scripts of the plays; they reveal information about artists and festivals that is not mentioned in literary sources; information about the social status of all those involved, their achievements and values, their organisation, and their position in society at large. In other words, inscriptions cast much light on important themes central to the study of ancient theatre and open up discussions and debate about its nature. In what follows, this essay will offer some examples that showcase how important the epigraphic record is for our understanding of ancient drama as well as the kinds of information it reveals.

Staging a play was no easy task. It required the movement of individual artists, but also of established groups (professionals of different specialisations, such as actors, directors, musicians, members for the *chorus*), who would have rehearsed before travelling and who would continue doing so on location. And we must not forget that plays were performed competitively, which means that at least two contestants (i.e. two different groups of artists) were needed. This, along with the fact that there were numerous contests in various locations, often far away from each other, attests to how difficult it must have been to secure good performers for a festival. From victory lists (inscriptions that preserve lists of victors in various contests, dramatic, artistic or athletic) we learn that, sometimes, events did not take place because the contestants did not arrive.

Securing enough good actors was particularly important for regions like Athens, which had a strong interest in preserving its theatrical tradition and prestige. We know this from the numerous inscriptions that the city erected to honour and reward good actors. For example, the following inscription of a decree passed by a special assembly of the City of Dionysia in 332/1 BCE stood in the Acropolis of Athens. This inscription recognizes an actor whose name has not survived (as the stone is damaged where the name was inscribed and only the first part of his father's name 'Onoma –' is legible) with exceptional honours, such as a gold crown and an inscription funded by the city. The city also bestowed the actor and his descendants the titles of *proxenos* and 'benefactor of the Athenian People'.¹



Text translation

[In the archonship of Niketes (332/1), in the eighth] |
 [prytany, of AntiochisX, for which] | Aristonous son of
 Aristonous of Anagyrous | was secretary. On the
 nineteenth of Elaphebolion, | the seventh of the prytany.
 Assembly | in the theatre of Dionysos. Of the presiding
 committee | Nikostratos of Kopros was putting to the|
 vote. The People | decided. | E- proposed: since
 | . . . [the actor (?)] . . . | . . .10 . . . | the . . . | the People
 shall decide: to praise | -son of On[o]ma- of – and |
 crown him with a gold crown; and he shall be |
 proxenos and benefactor of the | Athenian People,
 himself and his descendants | and to inscribe this decree
 | on a stone stele and stand it on the | acropolis; and for
 inscribing the stele | the treasurer of the People shall
 give 20 or 30 | drachmas from the People's fund for |
 expenditure on decrees.

Fig. 1 Inscription fragment. © Agora excavations (inv.no. I 3364). <https://agora.ascsa.net/research?v=default>

From another, [very fragmentary inscription](#) dated between 340–320 BCE, we learn that an artist was rewarded for “never having backed out of the competition of the Dionysia”. In a different example, we read in Plutarch (46 – after 119 CE) that “Athenodorus was fined by the Athenians because he had not shown up for the contest of the Dionysia” (Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 29.3).

But inscriptions also reveal other aspects of festival organisation and the life of those artists. For example, during this period of political instability and change, the first associations of professionals that were involved in one way or another with theatrical and other artistic endeavours

¹ The full text of the inscription in English as well as the original in Greek can be found in the [Attic Inscriptions Online project webpage](#).

were developed. The Hellenistic period was characterised by the proliferation of such associations, which unified people of various backgrounds and geographical origins and whose identifying elements were often both secular and cult-related activity. Like the institutions of city states, these associations had an internal structure, with magistrates, finances, assemblies, regulations, etc.

It is not clear precisely when these associations first appeared – we know from inscriptions that one already existed in 278 or 277 BCE called ‘the artists (*technitai*) around Dionysus’, with Athens as its base of operations, but there were at least three others established in the course of the third century BCE: the ‘*koinon* of those around Dionysus from Isthmus and Nemea’, the ‘*koinon* of those around Dionysus from Ionia and the Hellespont, and an association in Egypt under the direct control of the Ptolemaic king.

We learn about the existence of these associations mainly from epigraphic evidence, but the related archaeological material and our knowledge about them are very limited. Just from the names of these associations, however, we can understand that they were regionally organised. Also, there is evidence that several associations could participate at the same time in multiple prestigious festivals. Occasionally, there were conflicts over spheres of influence, which led to tensions and dispute among the associations. Nevertheless, these associations developed and survived the continuous political changes of the Hellenistic Period, and adapted to the new world order when the Roman Empire conquered the whole of the Greek-speaking world. Eventually, they came under the direct control of the emperor, as the following decree of the artistic synod from 131-161 CE suggests.



TEXT TRANSLATION

“For good fortune | Decree of
the great sacred thymelic |
wandering synod Hadriana
Antonina, | of adherents from
the whole Empire of
Dionysus and |the Emperor
Caesar Titus Aelius
Hadrianus | Antoninus
Augustus Pius the new
Dionysus | . . .”

Fig. 2 Decree of ecumenical technitai of Dionysos © Trustees of the British Museum

Even though only a fragment of the inscription has survived, it actually provides plenty of information about artists and festival organisation.

Decree (ψηφισμα)	As an institution, the association had laws and regulations that were binding for its members. This reveals important information about the various processes behind the decision-making mechanisms of the union: a proposal was made, formally moved, became a preliminary resolution, and then passed on to the members to be ratified.
Sacred (ιερα̃ς)	The associations proudly displayed their piety towards the gods. We must not forget that a contest was a part of a religious festival and the play itself was, in a way, a religious service.
Thymelic (θυμελικῆς)	This term refers to the stage of the theatre (<i>thymele</i>) or the theatre as a whole; where artists practiced their trade, in other words. Dramatic competitions are often described as ‘thymelic contests’ in sources.
Wandering (περιπολιστικῆς)	Traveling was essential and a large part of the career of these professionals. Thus, it became a key signifier of the association’s official name.
Synod (συνόδου)	A term meaning ‘association’ or a gathering of group members.
Of the whole empire (τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς οἰκουμένης)	This term tells us about the global character of the association or the fact that members of the association could originate from all parts of the world.
adherents ... of Dionysus and the Emperor Caesar Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antoninus Augustus Pius, the new Dionysus	It is not only their art that united artists, but also the cult of the god of the theatre, Dionysus, whose protection this association enjoyed. After Romans conquered the whole Greek-speaking east, the various associations went under the direct control of the emperor, who was also worshiped as a deity – a new Dionysus, in this case!

The examples above demonstrate the importance of inscriptions for understanding Greek drama and some key aspects of festival organisation and competition. Organising festival and dramatic contests was a very complex and demanding task, which required good coordination among a number of people with various specialities. In this context, actors, other artists and a number of professionals associated with staging a play came together to form associations that helped them to navigate these complex pressures and obligations, but also to worship Dionysus, in whose honour and under whose protection these associations stood. After all, if *Bacchae* warns us of anything, it is not to anger Dionysus!

Study questions

1. In this link (<https://www.atticinscriptions.com/browse/byoriginallocation/theatre-of-dionysus/>) you can find translations from some of the numerous inscriptions that were set up in the theatre of Dionysus. Why do you think they were set up in that location and what effect this might have created?
2. Like figures 1 and 2 above, often the inscriptions that have survived are very fragmentary, revealing only part of the original information. Do you think they are useful, nevertheless?
3. What means or methods do archaeologists and historians use to ‘decipher’ ancient, fragmented texts such as the above?
4. Actors and other artists came together to form associations that would help them navigate the various, complex socio-political changes of the Hellenistic and Roman period, but also to ask and ensure various privileges for its members. What kind of privileges might those be?
5. The following map from the [Connecting Contests project](#) of the University of Groningen, shows all the known (to us) locations, where the actor Tiberius Julius Apolaustos won contests between 180 and 192 CE. It appears that his performances involved significant travel. Can you think of all the practical and logistical problems that an artist could have because of extensive traveling?

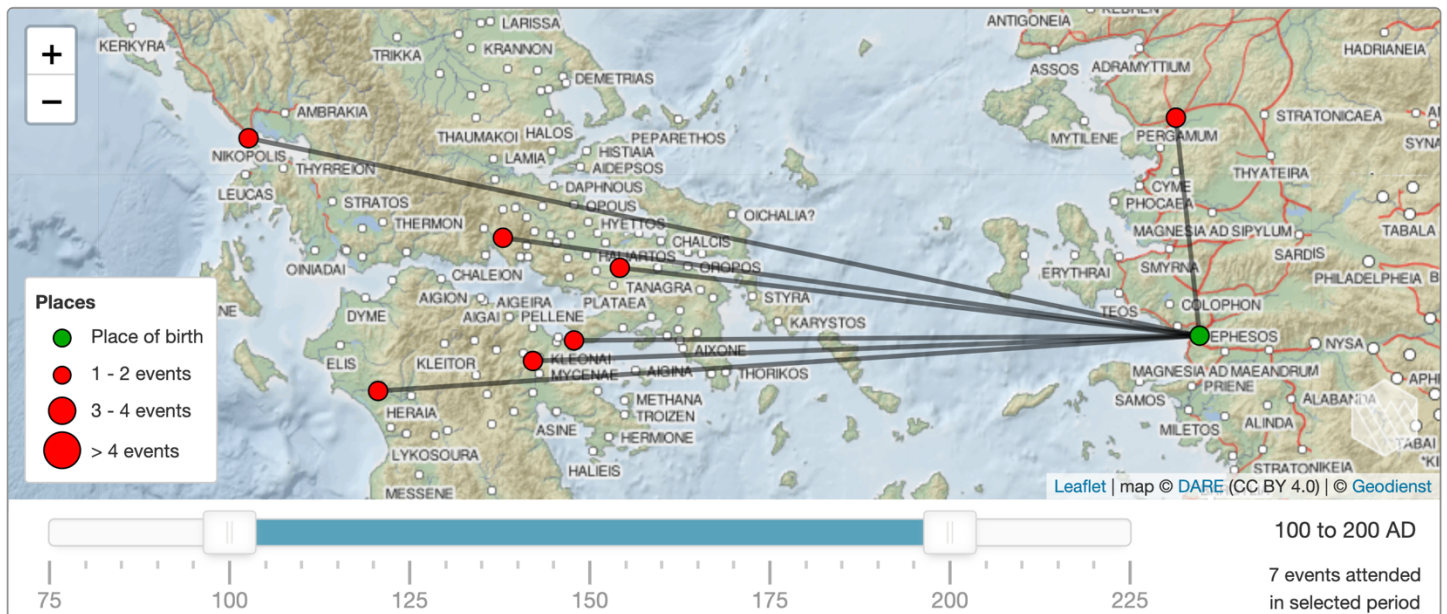


Fig.3 Map showing the documented victories of Tiberius Julius Apolaustos from Ephesos in theatrical contest. Source <http://www.connectedcontests.org/database/persons/621>

Useful online resources

[Attic Inscriptions Online](#) database, where you can find translated texts and commentaries of inscriptions that were found in Athens.

[Archaeology in Greece Online](#), an indispensable tool for researchers in all disciplines who wish to learn about the latest archaeological discoveries in Greece and Cyprus, Archaeology in Greece Online/Chronique des fouilles en ligne is a richly illustrated topographical database with a mapping feature to locate field projects within sites and regions.

[The Epigraphic Landscape of Athens](#), a project whose objective is to show the relationship between public inscriptions and urban space in ancient Athens.

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