The alphabetic inscriptions of Cyprus: epigraphic contribution to the reconstruction of the history of ancient Cyprus

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How to cite this paper: Kantirea, Maria, “The alphabetic inscriptions of Cyprus: epigraphic contribution to the reconstruction of the history of ancient Cyprus”, in the website: Kyprios Character. History, Archaeology & Numismatics of Ancient Cyprus: kyprioscharacter.eie.gr/en/t/AP (Accessed: 05/19/2021).

Published: June 7, 2015 Updated: June 7, 2015 Submitted in: Greek
Translated by: Bourogiannis, Giorgos
Edited by: Bourogiannis, Giorgos. Panagiotopoulou, Chryssa
Final editing: Markou, Evangeline

This paper is also available in: Greek

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The alphabetic inscriptions of Cyprus: epigraphic contribution to the reconstruction of the history of ancient Cyprus

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The alphabetic inscriptions of Cyprus in modern research

The epigraphic evidence known from ancient Cyprus consists of over 5,000 inscriptions: syllabic, Phoenician, alphabetic Greek and Latin. The first two groups are extremely important for the study of the linguistic, demographic and cultural history of Cyprus, from the Late Bronze Age to the beginning of the Hellenistic period (circa 15th-3rd century BC). The very few Latin inscriptions that date to the Roman times (middle 1st century BC-4th century AD) show, on a language level, the ways of communication and promotion of certain people, such as emperors, Roman magistrates and traders from Italy.

Based on historical criteria, this chapter aims to approach the corpus of almost 3,000 alphabetic inscriptions that are known from Cyprus, and to subsequently examine how these texts can contribute to the restoration of the island’s ancient history. This synopsis becomes even more interesting given the planned publication of these inscriptions in the 15th volume of *Inscriptiones Graecae (IG XV.2)*, of the Berlin Academy of Sciences. Noticeably, since the 1960s, Ino Nicolaou has been systematically publishing the new inscriptions in the annual journal of the Department of Antiquities (*Report of the Department of the Antiquities of Cyprus*), under the title “Inscriptiones Cypriae Alphabeticae”. Moreover, the epigraphic evidence from Salamis, Kourion and Kition as well as the inscribed pottery from the Nymphaeum of Kafizin have been published by T. Mitford and I. Nicolaou respectively (*I.Salamis*, 1974), J. Pouilloux, P. Roesch and J. Marcillet-Jaubert (*Salamine XII.2*, 1987), T. Mitford (*I.Kourion*, 1971), Th. Oziol (*I.Kition*, 2004), T. Mitford (*Kafizin*, 1980).

The rare alphabetic inscriptions of the Classical period

Although the 4th century BC is probably the most prolific period for syllabic inscriptions, it is also the time when the Greek alphabetic script becomes more popular. Agents of this
double cultural policy – use of the Greek alphabet and preservation of the Cypriote syllabary – were mostly the kings. So the construction of the sanctuary of Artemis Agrotera by the last king of Paphos, Nikokles (325-309 BC), is attested by a bilingual inscription, whereas in three alphabetic epigrams the divine ancestors (Fig. 1), the devoutness, and the imposing wall of Paphos are praised. It seems that the royal epigraphic habits were also adopted by some Cypriote aristocrats, whose burial monuments preserved their actions, as in the case of a bilingual inscription from Gogloi, mentioning the benefactions of Aristokrates.

Hellenistic epigraphy and the prevalence of the Greek alphabet

The linguistic and epigraphic variety that, at least since the Late Bronze Age, reflected the ethnic diversity and the political fragmentation of Cyprus, will gradually stop to exist in the Hellenistic period. At the end of the 4th century BC, Cypriote cities were abolished as the result of conflicts between the successors of Alexander the Great for the control of the East Mediterranean, when, in 294 BC, the island became part of the Ptolemaic Kingdom for almost three centuries.

The epigraphic evidence of the Hellenistic period reflects these dramatic changes. The new sovereigns turned Cyprus into an overseas territory and subsequently they appointed highly-ranked members of the royal court as rulers. The latter are epigraphically attested under the title “στρατηγὸς καὶ ἀρχιερεὺς τῆς νήσου” and also as “ναύαρχος” and “ἄρχων” from the 2nd century BC onwards. The bureaucracy of the Ptolemaic state and the arrival of mercenaries, in combination with the withdrawal from the political scene of the local royal families, seem to have favoured the dominance of the Hellenistic koine and subsequently the final prevalence of the Greek alphabet that replaced the old syllabic script (as well as the Phoenician script) from the official documents.

The Hellenistic inscriptions of Cyprus can be divided to three main categories: votive, inscriptions cut on the bases of statues in honour of the Ptolemies, and inscription on burial kioniskoi. An interesting collection of the first category consists of more than 300 inscribed vases of different shapes and sizes (bowls, lekanae, amphorae, candelabri etc.) found at the Nymphaeum on the top of Kafizin hill, some seven km southeast of Nicosia. Most of these vases were dedicated to a man named Onasagoras, son of Philounios, “κουρεὺς δεκατηφόρος”, at the end of the 3rd century BC. They bare stereotyped and repetitive alphabetic inscriptions in Greek and some syllabic and digraphic inscriptions to the Nymphe of the sacred cave (Fig. 2).
Except for the stone altars that bear the name of Queen Arsinoe and that were found almost all over Cyprus [Fig. 3], the Ptolemies were usually honoured with statues, the bases of which preserve official as well as cultic epithets. These statues stood at the agorae and sanctuaries and were dedicated mostly by royal officers with administrative and military duties. These men, just like the kings and the queens, were honoured for their favour and benefactions by the Cyproite cities, as well as by the “technites of Dionysus”, i.e. by the actors and the musicians who, in parallel to the cult of Dionysus, they also served the cult of the Ptolemies, and by the mercenaries (Cilicians, Pamphylians, Cretans, Thracians etc.) stationed at Cyprus and organized in ethnic koïna. Their frequent epigraphic attestation and the use of a protocol, according to which the members of the royal family were honoured by the highly-ranked officials, and the latter by the military koïna, echoes the pyramid-shaped social hierarchy of the Ptolemaic state, in which the right of self-promotion was confined to the kings of Alexandria and to the members of their court.

The former conclusion becomes even more interesting if one thinks that no less than 200 inscriptions relate to these people, whereas during the same period, inscriptions that refer to Cypriotes – the burial kioniskoi not included – are no more than fifty. Most of them are dedications to deities made by worshippers who either thank the gods or ask for their favourable intervention for themselves and their children. In these inscriptions, the object of the offering is rarely mentioned. Therefore these inscriptions, together with the far more numerous burial ones, provide a good picture of the written monuments of the Cypriotes, during the Hellenistic period. Noticeably, although the cities as administrative centres were maintained, the few relative references to the local authorities in the texts of Cyprus reveals the centripetal tendencies of the Ptolemaic dominion and the bureaucratic character of the Alexandrian administration.

However, during the two last centuries of the Hellenistic period, a new Cyproite aristocracy started to emerge in the political scene and in the inscriptions, mentioned as ἄρχοντες, γραμματεῖς, γυμνασίαρχοι, ἄγορανόμοι and ἱερεῖς. Their appearance is perhaps the result of the gradual transformation of the island, from the middle of the 2nd century BC, into an area of (self-) exile for personae non gratae of the royal family of Alexandria. Initially, Ptolemy VIII Physcon and his brother, Ptolemy VI, then Ptolemy IX Soter II and his brother, Ptolemy X Alexander I turned the traditional overseas possession into a small personal state of some sort. This temporary regime favoured the social promotion of Cypriotes that were loyal to the new leaders, capable of undertaking some duties. At the turning of the 2nd century BC, Onisandros, son of Nausikrates, became secretary (γραμματεὺς) of Paphos,
while in his capacity as a lifelong priest of Ptolemy IX Soter II founded a *Ptolemaeion* at his place of birth. His social evolution was completed with the grant of the title “συγγενής τοῦ βασιλέως” and even more with his appointment as director of the Library of Alexandria, when his patron regained his throne in Egypt in 88 BC, ten years after his stay in Cyprus. The case of the powerful trader Silamos from Salamis, son of Timarchos, may be viewed as indicative of the international contacts of some Cypriotes at a time when Rome had started to emerge as a decisive political factor in the East Mediterranean. Settled at Delos for commercial reasons, he and his children were given the right of citizen of Taras (South Italy), while epigraphic attestations from Cyprus show that in his own homeland he managed to maintain a fragile balance between the hostile brothers Ptolemys IX Soter II and Ptolemy X Alexander I, as well as with the Roman representatives.

The Roman epigraphy

The final integration of Cyprus to the Roman Empire, after the abolition of the Ptolemaic state (30 BC), was marked by changes in the epigraphic customs of the island. The Cypriotes were now taking an oath of loyalty to the emperors, who appear as benefactors, constructors of aqueducts, roads, and of some more symbolic monuments, such as buildings within sanctuaries. The most important corpus of building inscriptions echo the characteristic Roman taste for monumentality by praising Trajan as a founder, given that his name always appears in nominative form regardless of whether the cost of the construction was covered by an imperial donation or by the city’s treasury. This corpus comes from the sanctuary of Apollon Hylates close to Kourion, which at the beginning of the 2nd century AD went through a large-scale architectural phase. Inscriptions from Roman Cyprus portray an intense athletic and cultural life that was particularly associated with the imperial cult and with the introduction of Roman-type contests, such as gladiatorial games.

Contrary to the Hellenistic period, what is characteristic of the epigraphic material of Roman Cyprus is not the appearance of Roman officers sent to rule the island for the sake of the senate – noticeably, although over fifty proconsuls are epigraphically attested, very few statue bases preserve their career – but the presence of the members of the local ruling class. Similar in their content with those of other eastern provinces, the dedicatory and honorary inscriptions of Cyprus reflect the usual Greco-Roman ideals of political behaviour – devoutness, generosity, patriotism – as the base of a statue in honour of the affluent Roman citizen, Servius Sulpicius Pancles Veranianus, that
lists his benefactions towards the city of Salamis. Prosopographic studies that are mostly based on inscriptions attest to the political and religious activities of affluent Cypriotes – often connected to each other with marriages – who served as priests of the imperial cult, became Roman citizens and some of them, in the 3rd century AD, may even have been members of the senate.

No more than 80 Latin inscriptions are hitherto known from Cyprus. They are mostly dedications of emperors, Roman officers, businessmen from Italy (πραγματευόμενοι or negotiatores) and soldiers, as well as a few bilingual milestones (miliaria). This small number of texts shows, as was expected, the rather limited diffusion of Latin language in a Greek-speaking Roman province of the East.

A special category of Cypriote monuments: the inscribed funerary columellae

A few hundreds of burial inscriptions represent almost fifty per cent of the Greek alphabetic texts from Cyprus [Fig. 5]. These monuments are rather uniform with regard to their material (stone) and the text. Almost all of them are inscribed on cylindrical columellae. This homogeneity is probably related to their manufacture techniques (with the use of lathe) and they have a rather stereotyped and repetitive phrase that consists of the name of the deceased in vocative or nominative form and the burial greeting “χαῖρε”. Whereas in the Archaic and Classical period funerary texts were inscribed on slabs and stelae sometime decorated with pediments and reliefs from the beginning of the Hellenistic period, the new type of these cippi was adopted in Cyprus, a change that probably reflects social changes. Such monuments are known from many parts of the Hellenistic world but it is still uncertain whether their introduction in Cyprus was directly from Macedonia or, more likely, from Egypt and Alexandria in particular. Given the absence of any related criterion in the epigraphic texts, it is practically impossible to date them with accuracy, at least before the completion of the linguistic and typological examination of these columellae.

The epigraphy of the Late Roman and of the Early Christian period

The corpus of inscriptions that belong to the last centuries of the Roman Empire (4th-6th century AD) reflect the Romanisation and Christianisation of the island, under the cultural influence of Asia Minor and particularly of Syria, especially after the administrative
reformation of the Empire under Diocletian and the affiliation of Cyprus with the diocese of the East with Antioch upon Orontes as its centre.

Preference for monumentality and the established Roman habit of the announcement of building projects are confirmed by the inscriptions, as in the case of those referring to the reconstruction and embellishment of the baths of Salamis-Constantia (5th-6th century AD),\(^{30}\) to the construction of an aqueduct by Bishop Plutarch at the same city (first half of 7th century AD),\(^{31}\) and especially to the establishment of churches and their decoration with mosaics.

Accompanied by explicit inscriptions, the iconographic subjects of the mosaic floors of luxurious private and semi-public houses at Paphos [Fig. 6] and at Kourion, reflect the cultural world of the Cypriote ruling class – both secular and ecclesiastical – and reveal the influence of the religious syncretism and neoplatonic philosophy, that is typical of this period. Influences from Syria can also be detected in the epigraphic habit of mentioning Biblical texts from the Psalms and the Gospels, hymns and liturgical texts on mosaic floors and wall-paintings, as well as on dedications made for the fulfilment of a wish or for divine protection.\(^{32}\)

The few burial inscriptions of this period seem to maintain the same structure with the corresponding pagan texts. Typical of this period is the use of the cross (†) that replaces letter X of the greeting “χαῖρε” and perhaps the replacement of the epiclesis “χρηστέ” by the word “Χριστέ”. However, there are few Christian inscriptions dating before the 5th century AD, when the church of Cyprus gets extorted from the Episcopacy of Antioch and becomes autonomous (AD 431), perhaps due to difficulties related to their dating.\(^{33}\)

It is probably fortuitous, yet one of the last – if not the last – ancient inscriptions of Cyprus (from a basilica at Soloi) is the most direct historical source about the Arabic raids of the mid-7th century AD,\(^{34}\) a critical incident that was associated with the eastern geographic and cultural horizon of the island.
List of illustrations

The images that follow are available in the digital version of the present article in the website Kyprios Character. You can view the images by following the link: kyprioscharacter.eie.gr/en/t/AP

Fig. 1: Statue base of white marble, found at Nicosia. Epigram in honour of Nikokles, son of Timarchos, last king of Paphos (end of 4th century BC). Cyprus Museum, Nicosia (INS GR 205).

Fig. 2: Inscribed lekane from the Nymphaeum at Kafizin (second half of the third century BC). Cyprus Museum, Nicosia (K 15).

Fig. 3: Stone altar of Arsinoe II Philadelphos from Soloi (circa 270 BC). Cyprus Museum, Nicosia (INS GR 168).

Fig. 4: Slab of white marble from the sanctuary of Apollo Hylates at Kourion. It belonged to the façade of the South Building and commemorates the construction of two rooms (exedrae in the inscription, circa 100 AD). Museum of Episkopi (Ι 152).

Fig. 5: Burial columellae from different parts of Cyprus (Hellenistic and Roman). Cyprus Museum, Nicosia.

Fig. 6: Inscription on a mosaic floor from the House of Dionysus, New Paphos (2nd-4th century AD).

Glossary

Cypriote syllabary or Cypro-syllabic script: writing system of Cyprus from the Late Bronze Age to the Hellenistic period. Each syllable was denoted by a specific linear sign or point.

Koinon: Military body in Ptolemaic Cyprus comprised of men with common ethnic background.

Koureus dekatephoros (κουρεὺς δεκατηφόρος): titles of Onasigoras inscribed on vessels from the Nymphaeum of Kafizin; the first one probably refers to the ceremonial cut and the dedication of hair to the deity; the second one to the quality of the collector of a tenth of
the taxes (or to the collection of taxes for ten years).

συγγενὴς τοῦ βασιλέως: the hierarchically first title of the court in Ptolemaic Alexandria.

candellabri: multiple lamps that rested on the floor, a form of chandeliers used for lighting large spaces.

cippi: grave altars.

columellae: kioniskoi, small columns that do not exceed human height.

Epigraphic collections


Endnotes

1 Funke 2013; Summa 2013.
3 *ICS* 1. See also *ICS* 212 (bilingual dedication to Stasikrates, king of Soloi).
4 Βοσκός 1997, 82-83, E 13, 84-85, E14 and 80-82, E12.
5 *ICS* 261. Cf *ICS* 304-305 (dedications of statues to the sanctuary of Apollo at Pyla).
6 Satraki 2012.
7 Mehl 2000.
8 *Kafizin*; Lejeune 2009.

A few hundreds of inscribed stamps that were found underneath the floor of the House of Dionysus at Paphos confirm the administrative transactions between the Hellenistic cities of Cyprus (this evidence is in course of publication by Ino Nicolaou).

13 Mitford 1961, 40-41, no 110.
14 Pouilloux 1973; Cayla 2006.
15 Hill 1940, 226-256; Badian 1965; Mitford 1980; Potter 2000.
16 Mitford 1960 (oath of the Cyrpiotes to Emperor Tiberius).
17 Kantiréa 2011.
18 Epigraphic attestations for the construction of aqueducts at Kyreneia during the reign of Claudius (Mitford 1950b, 17-20, no 9) and at Soloi during the reign of Nero (Christol 1986, 1-5 [*SEG* 36, 1264]).
20 Kantiréa 2013b. For the title κτίστης for Roman emperors, Pont 2007.
21 Kantiréa 2010.
22 Yon 2007; Kantiréa 2008; Fujii 2013.
23 For inscriptions of gladiators on the mosaic floor of a house at Kourion, Soren, James 1988, 192-193. For amphitheatres in Cyprus, Karageorghis 1969, 196 (Salamis) and Maier, Karageorghis 1984, 252 (Paphos).
24 Mitford 1980, 1298-1308.
29 These inscriptions have been published by Ino Nicolaou (Nicolaou 1963-2010).
30 *I.Salamis* 45-49: *Salamine* XIII.2, 202-204 and 208-211. See also Cayla 1997 (Paphos).
34 Gagniers 1985.
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