Preservation and use of documents: the μνημονικά γράμματα of Paros (SEG 33,679)

In order to illustrate the subject, I will briefly present an essential inscription for the study of archives in ancient Greek cities. It is a proposal of regulation from the city of Paros that is dated to 170 B.C. concerning the archiving of the μνημονικά γράμματα (memoranda documents) of legal acts between private individuals that were dealt with by μνημονεύς (memorandists) who played a notarial role in Paros (for a comprehensive commentary, cf. LAMBRECHT/MARKES, 1997). The inscription was engraved on a large stone block that was found in the Minoan Crete (ex. Knossos, Malia) and Mycenaean Greece (ex. Pylos, Mycenae). Since then, the archival system has evolved and a lot, and it now faces new challenges. The arrival of digital technology has changed our relationship with documents: it is now possible to store as many data as we want without physical storage limit, even those that will not be of any use in the future. However, the use of documents is precisely the condition for their archiving, not the result: we store documents because we use them, not the other way around. Blindly archiving data without operating any active choices and without transmitting the key to understanding those might result in an accumulation of documents that will not be readable and comprehensible in the future, both technically and intellectually.

The archival system in ancient Greece stood far from these issues. In ancient Greek cities, archives were used to preserve documents for both evidentiary and informative purposes, in daily practical as well as long-term retrospective uses. It would thus have contained public and private documents of current use, with temporary lifetime expectancy, and documents with a more permanent value, stored with no time limit. Archives were therefore at the centre of institutional and civic activity and were proof of the increasing importance of writing in a society that had long been dominated by oral transmission of knowledge.

Studying the archives of Ancient Greece has been made difficult by the loss of nearly all primary sources, due to the disappearance of the perishable supports on which documents were written. However, these are not the only historical uses of the Greek archives, as they can thus only be "reconstructed" through the traces that it left in ancient testimonies (literary, legal, epigraphical, papyrological, archaeological or iconographic) and which prove its existence. However, correctly understanding the written sources is particularly tricky, since there is, in these texts, a very large number of technical and polysemous words, which can have loads of different meanings depending on the context, period and place.

The goal of my PhD thesis is precisely to highlight the various aspects of archiving in the Greek world by studying the technical words related to them in the ancient written sources. Based on greek and latine literature, epigraphical and papyrological texts from c. 3rd B.C. to c. 3rd c. A.D., the study aims to develop a structured, systematic and functional lexicon. This tool will be used to identify the components of the Greek archival system, i.e. supports, types of documents, actors, procedures and places. While also providing easier access to the ancient sources and their study, the thesis is also a better understanding of the features and mechanisms of the Greek cities archives and of their place in the administrative and everyday life of Greek people.

In conclusion, this study brings forward a unique tool for identifying and examining the Greek archival system. This method is also of great help for preserving the documents, which are often destroyed or improperly stored. The study of archives is thus a necessary step towards the protection of these important historical sources.

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Modern and ancient archives

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