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Chapter 14

Why με? Personhood and agency in the earliest Greek inscriptions (800–550 BC)¹

James Whitley

Introduction: the view from Methana

The archaeological museum in Poros is not much visited. In summer, the harbours and jetties of Poros are crowded with yachts on their way from Athens to the islands of the Saronic Gulf and the Southern Argolid – Aegina, Poros, Hydra and Spetses. Few, however, stop to go to the museum. If you do you may very well miss this epigram (Fig. 14.1). Unlike the marble inscribed bases from Attica, where the inscriptions are highlighted in red (such as that of Kroisos² that addresses a passer-by; see Table 14.3) the letters here are very hard to read, and the stone itself (volcanic trachyte) very unsuitable for an inscription.³ It does not aid legibility (or at least our notions of legibility) that the letters are inscribed ‘boustrophedon’, as the ox ploughs. The inscription reads:

Ευμαρες με πατερ Ανδροκλεος ενταδε σαμα
Ποιφesanς καταθεκε φιλο μναμα φυιος εμεν

¹ This paper was first read at the 2019 CREWS conference in Cambridge, and a modified version subsequently given in Thessaloniki. I would like to thank all those who offered helpful comments on both occasions, and to Philippa Steele and Philip Boyes (Cambridge) and Sevi Triandaphyllou (Thessaloniki) for making my stay in both places such a pleasant one. Natalia Elvira Astoreca gave some helpful comments on an earlier draft, and I have benefited greatly from comments from the anonymous referee. But particular thanks, as ever, go to Anthony Snodgrass not only for his comments but for his continued encouragement of this line of reasoning. The illustrations have been greatly improved by Kirsty Harding.

² This is the inscription below the Anavyssos kouros; Jeffery (1962, 143–144 no. 57). Though neither εἰμί nor με are used here, the inscription (or rather the inscription-kouros complex) clearly ‘speaks’.

³ Deffner (1909, 354): ‘Ein Quaderstein aus Trachyt’; Premierstein (1909, 356): ‘Es ist eine Quader aus sehr grobkörnigem und löchlerigem vulkanischen Stein (Trachyt), h. 0.45 m, br 0.78 m, d. 0.45 m, auf allem Seiten gleichmässig bearbeitet.’ For the letter forms of the inscription see Jeffery (1990, 181 no. 1).

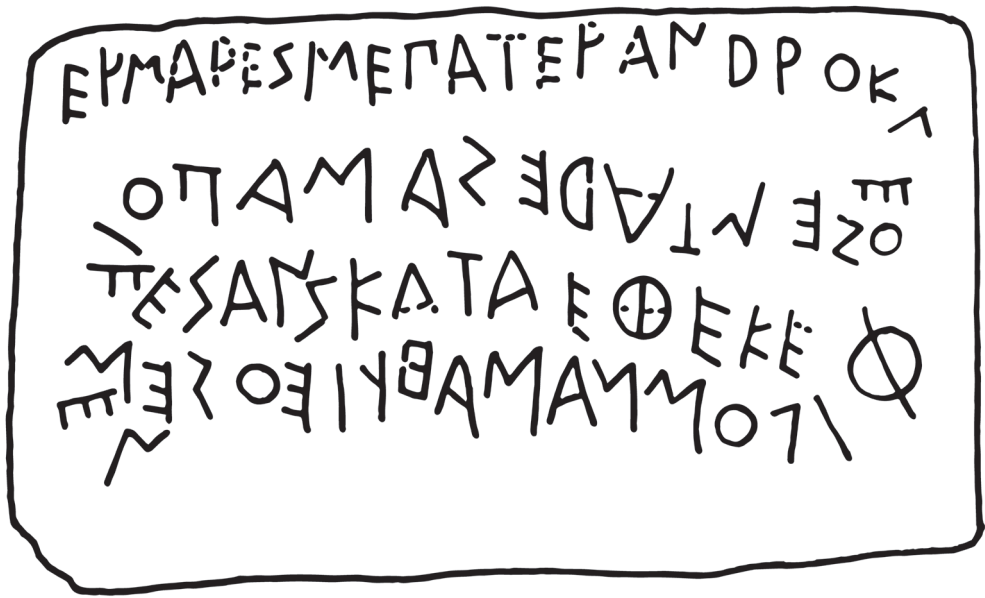


Fig. 14.1. Drawing of inscription on gravestone of Androkles, from Methana (Archaeological Museum Poros). Drawing after Jeffery (1990, pl. 32 1; redrawn by Kirsty Harding).

A rough translation might read:

Eumares, Father of Androkles, made me and set me up here as a sign and
To be a memorial of his dear son.

Now one way – the usual way – of interpreting this is as a gravestone (*Grabinschrift* or *Grabschrift*), an object that commemorates a person – an individual (Androkles) – who has died and has been set up by another person (Eumares) on the Methana peninsula. The purpose of the stone is to perpetuate their memory. Well that is certainly one dimension of its function – or perhaps we should say its agency. For what is – to modern ears and eyes at least – a little odd is that not one but three persons are brought together in this stone and its inscription. First, the father, Eumares who caused this stone to be inscribed; second his son, whom the inscription commemorates; and third the stone itself – the stone that speaks to us. To put it another way, there is a trinity of persons bound together by this inscribed stone.

It is these two features of this inscribed stone – that it acts (and so has agency) and acts as if it were a person (με) – that I wish to explore in this paper. The terms agency and personhood are however clearly *theoretical* terms. This fact may in itself cause difficulties. For there is an established etiquette in Classics (and Classical archaeology) that *theory* (even if known, or even acknowledged) must never be discussed – arguments must be presented as if the question were purely empirical.⁴

⁴ Though there are signs this may be changing; see Grethlein (2020).

I feel I must break with this convention, as a few words of explanation are called for. What do the terms ‘agency’ and ‘personhood’ imply?

Agency and personhood: parallel debates in anthropology and classics

First agency, a term that has been widely used in archaeology since the 1990s. My use of this term is, in most important respects, the same as the sense that Alfred Gell used it (Gell 1998a). Of course Gell’s approach has been much discussed since then, notably by Classical scholars and art historians (Osborne and Tanner 2007). We are now some decades away from his ground-breaking book, and many might argue that ‘things have moved on’. Certainly there are alternative perspectives that can be applied to the relationship between humans and things; Bruno Latour’s ‘actor network theory’ (Latour 2005) and Ian Hodder’s ‘human thing entanglement’ (Hodder 2011) fall into this category. There have also been attempts to synthesise these approaches (particularly in order to understand the material basis of cognition), notably by Malafouris, who even discusses Linear B (Malafouris 2013, 68–77). But I am not the only classical scholar (see Grethlein 2020) to have found Gell’s overall approach to be the most *useful* one.⁵

In Gell’s view it is not only animate persons but animate things that can possess the power to *act*, and indeed can be held responsible for their actions. Both animals and things can be treated as agents (as well as unseen forces such as spirits). Even modern humans have a tendency to treat things – things that we in our more rational moments know to be inanimate – *as if* they were persons (that is as animate beings). So things can act, and can act either benevolently or malevolently. If you need an example of how something (which we know to be inanimate) can be treated as if it were animate (that is, as if it possessed a degree of agency), then just think of how you feel (and what you say) when your car, computer or mobile phone suddenly fails you. Have you never cursed it for its malevolence?

If you have, you will understand how humans, animal and things are caught up in webs of agency, such that things can be treated either as extensions of a person (what Gell calls the distributed person; 1998a, 96–154) but also as persons in their own right (as in the example of our gravestone). Agency is thus logically linked to personhood.

Personhood is a more complex issue, if only because there are two quite separate personhood debates. The first (and best known) stems from anthropology and originally arose in the discussion of Melanesian persons. The issue was raised specifically by Marilyn Strathern, who distinguished Euro-American *individuals* from Melanesian *dividuals*.

Far from being regarded as unique entities, Melanesian persons are as *dividually* as they are *individually* conceived. They contain a generalised sociality within. Indeed, persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite side of the relationships

⁵ I am using ‘useful’ here in the sense used by the Rev. W. Awdry in the *Thomas the Tank Engine* series (‘A very useful engine’). I am not, nor have I ever been, a utilitarian.

that produced them. The singular person can be imagined as a social microcosm'. (Strathern 1988, 13)

These ideas of personhood were taken up enthusiastically by British prehistorians who thought they could detect *dividuals* in the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age of Britain. The distribution of body parts in Neolithic chambered tombs such as Wayland's Smithy and West Kennet Long Barrow (Piggott 1962) was meat and drink to the view that prehistoric Britain had much in common with 'traditional' societies in the ethnographic present. For example, prehistorians had long known that the body parts in different chambers within West Kennet Long Barrow in Wiltshire were not only divided up by age and sex (such that all adult males were kept together in one chamber, and all adult females in another) but also jumbled up in such a manner as to make it difficult (if not impossible) to distinguish between distinct *individuals*, that is to determine which bone belonged to which person. This difficulty in identifying individual skeletons seemed to indicate that dead persons were viewed as a collective – socially defined *dividuals* – rather than as bounded, discrete persons. It is for this reason that the main book on 'Personhood' has been written by a British prehistorian, Chris Fowler (2004). Joanna Brück (2004) goes further and maintains that single (individual) grave in Early Bronze Age Britain (such as the classic Beaker grave, with tanged arrowheads, beaker and wrist guards) are not necessarily graves of *individuals*.

That British prehistorians have been perhaps the most enthusiastic adopters of notions of personhood however creates its own problems. For, perhaps inadvertently, they have deepened what I would call the 'ontological divide' in the human sciences.⁶ This is the divide between those who study 'people like us' (Euro-Americans) and those who study 'people unlike us' (prehistoric and traditional societies). And British prehistorians have – again inadvertently – reinforced the idea that what separates one class of society (the historical, the individualist) from the other (the prehistoric, the ethnographic, the *dividualist*) is literacy in general and alphabetic literacy in particular.

As with agency so with personhood: the question has proven more complex than originally thought. If Melanesian persons are 'partible' *dividuals* then Indian persons seem to be 'permeable' ones (Busby 1997); no anthropologically defined form of personhood (whether *dividual* or *individual*) seems to fit the Inka case (Wilkinson 2013). Chris Fowler (2016) at least is perfectly alive to these problems and has begun to reappraise the terms '*dividual*' and '*individual*' as *modes* rather than essences of personhood. And Strathern never quite said (though she has been often taken as saying) that everyone from Papua New Guinea always acts as '*dividuals*'. As Li Puma (1998) pointed out, personhood is partly performative: in a Melanesian setting the dimension of personhood that matters is that of the *dividual*; yet young people from

⁶ I am using this term in the French sense, in preference to the rather drab (and misleading) phrase 'Humanities and Social Sciences' common in UK universities.

New Guinea are perfectly able to function as individuals in a Western (Australian) setting. Dividual/individual does not then form an ontological divide between ‘Westerners’ and ‘primitive’ people.

It was not anthropologists however who first talked about notions of what we would now call personhood. Similar debates arose within Classics (Whitley 2018, 183–189). Back in the 1940s and 1950s two scholars, one Anglo-Irish, one German, raised similar concerns about early Greek persons (though neither talked about personhood, or the dividual). E.R. Dodds in his classic *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951, 1–27) spent a lot of time explaining ‘Agamemnon’s apology’. For Agamemnon, as we all know, does not apologise for his taking Briseis and thus instigating the long sulk of Achilles in any way that we would recognise – that is in any way an individual who was also the locus of agency and responsibility ought to behave. Agamemnon says ἐγὼ δ’ οὐκ αἰτιός εἰμι (Hom. *Il.* 19.86–9) ‘I was not responsible – it was this madness [ate] that Zeus sent down to me that caused me to act in this way’.

That the ‘Homeric’ person was not necessarily conceived as the principal locus of agency and responsibility is also indicated by another *façon de parler* – the tendency of Homeric heroes to talk, not about themselves, but about their parts (heart, liver and so forth, as Odysseus does in Hom. *Od.* 20.18). In a similar vein (and at a similar time), Bruno Snell (1975, 17) noticed that early representations of the human body were not so much representations of a body as a totality but an assemblage of features – and an assemblage of parts moreover where objects we would regard as external to our body (e.g. shields) were as integral to our person as our own limbs, torso and head. Both Dodds and Snell then realised that what we might call personhood in early Greece was quite distinct both from our notions of ‘the individual’.

The implications of Dodds’ and Snell’s work were not taken up by the next generation of scholars. Snell’s suggestions survived, in attenuated form, in the long and inconclusive debate within Classical Archaeology about the significance of the ‘Dipylon Shield’ – the convention by which warriors in the Late Geometric times were depicted as having bodies shaped like ‘Boeotian’ shields.⁷ But the broader implications (for example for our understanding of the ‘I’ or ‘ego’ of Archaic poets such as Archilochus⁸) were lost sight of.

Speaking objects: *oggetti parlanti*

What has all this to do with inscriptions? Inscribed objects that ‘speak’ to us in the first person (using either εἰμί or με) such as the Methana inscription (Fig. 14.1) are common in Archaic Greece. So common a phenomenon are they, so familiar are they to scholars, that there is a special term for them – *oggetti parlanti*, speaking objects

⁷ It would be tedious to list all the references in this long debate. The key article is Hurwit (1985). Haug (2012, 19) brings out its relevance to Snell’s thought, and Whitley (2018) places this debate in the overall discussion of personhood.

⁸ But see now Crielaard (2017).

(Burzachechi 1962). Their familiarity has also led to their neglect. For this tendency of early Greek inscriptions to speak to us in the first person is odd if looked at from a comparative perspective. Unlike other peoples (and scripts) discussed in this conference, Greeks of Archaic and Classical times did not think that their script had a divine origin – that it was a gift from the gods; they did not think that the ‘I’ of an inscription was a *divine* voice, since they knew that they had borrowed their letters from a neighbouring people, the Phoenicians (Hdt. 5. 58; see Jeffery 1990, 1–5; Rollston 2010, 20–41).⁹ Nor did this habit arise as a result of diffusion. *Oggetti parlanti* are not, as far as I know, a major feature of early Phoenician/West Semitic inscriptions, though there are a few inscriptions that use this formula in West Semitic or Aramaic. The best-known Semitic ‘alphabetic’ inscription that employs this formula [‘I am Mesha’] is neither West Semitic (*i.e.* Phoenician) nor Aramaic but Moabite (Rollston 2010, 52–54). The early Phoenician inscriptions we do find in the Early Iron Age Aegean – such as the ninth century inscribed bowl from tomb J in the Tekke cemetery near Knossos (Szzyrmer 1979; Rollston 2010, 36–37), and the late eighth century Semitic graffito from Eretria (Kenzelmann Pfyffer *et al.* 2005, 76 no. 66) – do not make use of this formula (see Table 15.4). We cannot then attribute the Greek habit of using εἰμί or με to a straightforward diffusion of practices from the Levant.

From this Levantine perspective it is then striking how common and widespread ‘speaking objects’ are across the Greek-speaking Mediterranean. Examples dating to the late eighth and early seventh century include ‘I am the cup of Qorax’ from Rhodes (Copenhagen 10151; Jeffery 1990, 347 and 356 no. 1) and ‘I am the cup of Tharios’ from the Athenian Agora (Athens Agora P4663; Jeffery 1990, 76 no. 4; Lang 1976, F3). This practice is found not only in the new finds from Eretria and Methoni I will be looking at below but also in perhaps the most celebrated of early Greek alphabetic inscriptions, ‘Nestor’s cup’ from Pithekoussai, whose inscription begins ‘I am the cup of Nestor’. This graffito, inscribed after firing on an East Greek cup found in a cremation grave of a young adult or adolescent male, is central to any discussion of the earliest use of the alphabet.¹⁰ For it is this inscription that underpins Barry Powell’s (1991a) revival of Wade-Gery’s (1952) ‘Homeric’ explanation for the origins of the Greek alphabet, namely that it was specifically adopted to transcribe Homeric, or at least hexametric, verse.

⁹ By late Hellenistic and Roman times this consensus had shifted a little. While both Diodorus (Diod. Sic. 3.67.1) and Pliny the Elder (HN 7.56.192) repeat the tale that Cadmus brought ‘Phoenician letters’ to Greece, both also mention (Diod. Sic. 5.57; Plin. HN 7.56) other tales which suggest that ‘writing’ (if not the alphabet) may have had a divine origin.

¹⁰ For its archaeological and (possibly) sympotic context, see Buchner and Ridgway (1993, 212–23); Murray (1994). For the *editio princeps*, Russo (1993). For other discussion see Jeffery (1990, 239 no. 1) and Whitley (2017, 76–82). The inscription is on a Late Geometric cup (or kotyle) long thought to be ‘Rhodian’, though recent petrological (Villing and Mommsen 2017) and stylistic (Kerschner 2017) analysis has cast doubt on this attribution. The cup (and similar chevron skyphoi, such as an inscribed example from Eretria (Johnston and Andreiomenou 1989)) may have been made in Kos.



Fig. 14.2. Three sides (2a, 2b and 2c) of Tataie's aryballos from Kyme (Cumae), British Museum BM GR 1885, 0613.1. Photo author (permission from British Museum), reconfigured by Kirsty Harding.

The inscription on 'Nestor's cup' appears to be a joke of some kind, at least if we take this ceramic cup to be an allusion to an epic one.¹¹ Absurd jokes persist on many early *oggetti parlanti*, particularly my favourite, Tataie's lekythos from Cumae/Kyme – 'I am the lekythos of Tataie, whoever steals me will be struck blind' (Fig. 14.2).¹² And speaking objects too persist: 'Nikandre' (Athens NM 1) and 'Euthykartides' (Delos Museum A728) set me up, say two seventh-century dedications found on Delos;¹³ '-archis dedicated us' and 'Geneleos made us', say two of the inscriptions that accompany a well-known group of sculptures from the Heraion of Samos of around 550 BC;¹⁴ 'I am the mark of Phrasikleia and I will be called a maiden forever' says

¹¹ It is not necessary here to follow Powell (1991a, 163–166) in arguing that this inscription is an allusion specifically to the elaborate vessel decorated with gold bosses described in the *Iliad* (*Il.* 11.632–7). There still could be 'humour in the contrast between the clay vessel and the elaborate artefact suited to an epic hero' (West 1994, 11) if the 'tradition about his [Nestor's] wonderful cup belonged ... to the poetry, less sophisticated than the *Iliad*, which celebrated the exploits of his youth' (West 1994, 14; see also Faraone 1996). If so there is no reason to take 'Nestor's cup' as a *terminus ante quem* for the composition of the *Iliad* (as Powell does; see Lowenstam 1997, 48–49).

¹² Tataie's aryballos from Kyme (Cumae), now in the British Museum. BM GR 1885, 0613.1 (Jeffery 1990, 240 no. 3; Powell 1991a, 166–167). For seventh century Kyme, see now D'Acunto (2017, esp 314–317).

¹³ Nikandre: Athens NM 1 (Jeffery 1990, 303 no. 2); and Euthykartides (Delos Museum A728; Jeffery 1990, 304 no. 3)

¹⁴ For the sculptural group, see Freyer-Schauenberg (1974, 106–130) and Clemente (2010; latest reconstruction); for the inscriptions, one reads ΑΡΧΗΣ ΙΜΕΑΣ ΑΝΘΕΚΕ ΤΗΙ ΗΗΦΗΙ, the other ΙΜΑΣ ΕΠΟΙΕΣΕ ΓΕΝΕΛΕΟΣ see Freyer-Schauenberg (1974, 122–123) and Jeffery (1990, 341 no. 7).

perhaps the best known *kore* in Archaic Greece¹⁵. And ‘Amasis made me’ say five vases by the Amasis painter (Beazley 1956, 152 no. 25), a formula (such-and-such made me) which has a direct bearing on how we understand the ‘artistic personalities’ and ‘hands’ of Athenian black- and red-figure vases (Whitley 2018).

The last three examples all date to the middle of the sixth century BC. The things that say ‘I’ are then a widespread, persistent and long-lasting feature of the uses of the Greek alphabet throughout the Archaic period. Classical scholars have become accustomed to this formula and so no longer find it odd. Familiarity has taken away their radical *alterité*. For these inscriptions cannot function simply as texts – for, if they are only texts (that is things to be read), who is it who speaks? Who is the ‘I’ or the ‘me’ in these inscriptions if the gravestone of Methana or Phrasikleia is not in some sense a *person*? Such inscriptions then cannot work as abstract *texts*; they can only function when mutually entangled with particular things and particular people – they represent a particular form of human-thing entanglement (*sensu* Hodder 2011) characteristic of much of early Greece (Whitley 2017). The new alphabetic script then made it possible to treat objects as persons – it helped to inscribe agency. With this in mind let us turn to the four major deposits of early inscriptions that have come to light in recent years.

Early sanctuaries and the cups that speak: Methoni, Eretria, Hymettos and Kommos

‘Speaking objects’ are a prominent feature of four major deposits with early inscriptions (Methoni in Pieria in Macedonia, Eretria in Euboea, Mt Hymettos in Attica and Kommos in southern Crete), three of which (Methoni, Eretria and Kommos) have only come to light in recent years. The archaeological character of these deposits is worth emphasising. In all of them inscriptions on drinking vessels are particularly common. Three assemblages are clearly associated with early sanctuaries. At Eretria the sanctuary of Apollo Daphnephoros has good early evidence, not only for the extensive use of drinking vessels, but of the feasts that accompanied animal sacrifice (Verdan 2013). Though there are no faunal reports from the deposits around the Altar of Zeus on Mt Hymettos (Langdon 1976), strong arguments have been put forward for these and other ‘peak sanctuaries’ being the loci of ‘feasting with the gods’ in Early Iron Age Attica (Van den Eijnde 2018, 67–75). The hearth-temple at Kommos in Crete not only has cup deposits associated both with temple A (ca 950–800 BC) and temple B (800–600 BC); it also has copious deposits of animal bones that indicate some kind of feasting took place here (Reese 2000; Shaw and Shaw 2000). These three

¹⁵ The inscription from Merenda has long been known (Jeffery 1962, 138–9 no. 46; 1990, 78 no. 29). It was only with the discovery of the statue in 1972 (Mastrokostas 1972) that this inscription could be related to the funerary, polychrome sculpture of a *kore* we can call Phrasikleia. This allowed the image and text to be related to one another (Svenbro 1993, 8–25). Six other sixth century inscribed bases from Attica (seven out of 68 in Jeffery 1962, nos 6, 21, 32, 40, 54 and 62) also speak to us in the nominative and the first person.

early sanctuary deposits then provide a social and religious context for the use and purpose of some of the earliest Greek alphabetic inscriptions, one that links them to ritualised commensality. They appear in sanctuaries at a time when sanctuaries were primarily loci for ‘feasting with the gods’ rather than ostentatiously ‘giving to the gods’ (Van den Eijnde 2018).

What of the latest of these finds, those from Methoni? These were discovered in the lower deposit of an *apothetis* or dump in a rectangular shaft or *hypogeio* (Tzifopoulos *et al.* 2017, 366; cf. Bessios *et al.* 2012). The archaeological context is therefore clearly a secondary one. Pottery comprises a number of transport amphoras, but the most common shapes amongst the painted pottery are kraters, oinochoai and various kinds of drinking vessels. These include Late Geometric ‘bird bowls’ probably from an East Greek workshop, Euboean (and local imitations of Euboean) Late Geometric high-necked skyphoi, Corinthian (or Corinthian-style) kotylai and some Lesbian plain wares (Tsifopoulos *et al.* 2017, 367 figs 31.6–8). One could call this assemblage ‘symptotic’¹⁶, but I would argue that its connections rather lie with other sanctuary deposits that support the Van den Eijnde (2018) thesis. And, at late eighth century Methoni, it is again the cups that speak: ‘I am of Hakesandros’ says the graffito on a late eighth century Euboean skyphos (Bessios *et al.* 2012, 339–343 no. 2) and ‘I am of Philion’ says the one on a small mug from Lesbos (Bessios *et al.* 2012, 337–339 no. 1).¹⁷ The inscriptions from Eretria are generally too short to decipher and show signs of experimentation. But here too one drinking cup speaks ‘I am of –lchadeo[s]’.¹⁸ The eighth to seventh century inscriptions from Mt Hymettos include several examples (at least three) of ‘I am of Zeus’, and one saying ‘someone wrote me’¹⁹. Of the 74 inscriptions from Kommos only a few make any sense. Of those that do however two follow this pattern – ‘I am of Nikagoras’ and ‘I am of –tadas’ (Csapo *et al.* 2000, 114 no. 17 and 117–118 no 27 respectively).

The question then arises – how representative was such a form of words in the inscriptions from these sites? Is ‘I’ or ‘me’ the most common formula? Table 14.1 presents some raw statistics.

At first glance, inscriptions using either ‘εἰμί’ or ‘με’ are not that common, and do not form a majority of these early graffiti. But if we exclude non-alphabetic signs (which form 40.12% of the inscriptions), and short alphabetic inscriptions (*i.e.* those with single, double

¹⁶ There is now a debate about what counts as ‘symptotic’ – whether the practice of couched dining defines the symposion, or whether any set of institutionalised drinking practices employing cups and having the krater at its centre is a symposion (Węcowski 2014).

¹⁷ Other possible εἰμί inscriptions on cups from this deposit include ‘I am of Epigenios’ (Bessios *et al.* 2012 343–4 no. 3) and ‘I am of [someone]’ (Bessios *et al.* 2012, 350 no. 7). For discussion see Tsifopoulos *et al.* (2017 371–373) and Janko (2015).

¹⁸ Kenzelmann Pfyffer *et al.* (2005, 59 no. 1). The other ‘εἰμί’ inscription is on the neck of a Late Geometric jug ‘I am of the lebes’ (Kenzelmann Pfyffer *et al.* 2005, 70 no 44). Eretria is also home to a number of other early inscriptions, including one written on an East Greek vessel very similar to ‘Nestor’s cup’ (Johnston and Andreiomenou 1989).

¹⁹ Langdon 1976: (i) p. 15 **4a** εἰ]μί το Διος το ...; (ii) p. 15 **6** Διος εἰμ[ί ...; (iii) p. 20 **29c** το Διος εἰμί
ας δε μ’εγραφ[σε]ν

Table 14.1. Inscriptions with *εἰμ* or *με* from Methoni, Eretria, Mt Hymettos and Kommos: raw counts

Site/sanctuary	<i>εἰμ</i>	<i>Με</i>	Other intelligible	Double or more letters	Single letters	Signs	Total
Methoni	4	0	1	12	8	166	191
Eretria	2	0	3	14	18	23	60
Mt Hymettos	4	1	51	0	110	4	170
Kommos	2	0	3	9	49	2	65
Totals	12	1	58	35	185	195	486

Information from Bessios *et al.* (2012) (Methoni); Kenzelmann Pfyffer *et al.* (2005); Verdan (2013, vol. 2 31–32) (Eretria); Langdon (1976) (Mt Hymettos); and Csapo *et al.* (2000) (Kommos)

Table 14.2. Inscriptions with *εἰμ* or *με* from Methoni, Eretria, Mt Hymettos and Kommos expressed as percentages

Site/sanctuary	<i>εἰμ</i>	Totals	As % of total	Total ‘intelligible’ inscriptions	Intelligible inscriptions as % of total inscriptions	Eimi as % of all intelligible Inscriptions
Methoni	4	191	2.09	5	2.62	80
Eretria	2	60	3.03	5	8.33	40
Mt Hymettos	4	170	2.35	55	32.35	7.27
Kommos	2	65	2.7	5	7.69	40
Totals	12	486	2.47	70	14.4	17.14

Information from Bessios *et al.* (2012) (Methoni); Kenzelmann Pfyffer *et al.* (2005); Verdan (2013, vol 2, 31–32) (Eretria); Langdon (1976) (Mt Hymettos); and Csapo *et al.* (2000) (Kommos)

or triple letters) of which no sense can be made (45.27% of total) then inscriptions using the ‘*εἰμ*’ formula form 17.14% of all *intelligible* inscriptions.²⁰ This pattern is particularly marked in the earliest of these deposits – at Methoni and Eretria, where they form 80% and 40% of the total number of intelligible inscriptions. Table 14.2 sums up the picture.

The use of the first person is then a very marked feature of the early Greek inscriptions from the two earliest of these deposits – Methoni and Eretria – and is common in the other two. All these deposits are linked to commensality in sanctuaries. More generally these discoveries underscore that the phenomenon of *oggetti parlanti* is present from the very beginning of Greek alphabetic literacy. A very large proportion of early Greek alphabetic inscriptions speak to us in the first person. In many regions of the Greek-speaking Mediterranean this practice persists for a very long time – well into the fifth century. Is this then a peculiarly ‘Greek’ practice, given the rarity of this formula in early Semitic inscriptions? Well no, for two reasons. One is that the Greek-speaking Cypriots had adopted quite a different script and felt no need to change it until Hellenistic times (Steele 2013). And the second is that there is a very great exception to this particular rule in the Archaic Aegean – Crete.

²⁰ I follow the original publications in determining which inscriptions are intelligible and which not. If these philologists and epigraphers cannot make sense of them then neither can I.

about ancient literacy (Harris 1989). In this metanarrative, non-alphabetic scripts yield to the alphabet and literacy gradually ousts orality. While I am certainly not against making use of archaeological evidence to discern different forms of literacy in the Greek-speaking Mediterranean I must underline the point that my argument is not primarily concerned with literacy. I agree with Rosalind Thomas (1992) that literacy is linked to orality – the one does not *displace* the other; I argue that these links are best investigated through trying to look at patterns of human-thing entanglements (Hodder 2011), and to do so through the theoretical prisms of agency and personhood. With this in mind let us leave Crete and return to the wider Greek world.

In the Beginning, who is it who speaks?

In most of areas of the Greek speaking Mediterranean *oggetti parlanti* remained common (even on public inscriptions) well into late Archaic times. Sixth-century examples can be found from all over the Greek world (Whitley 2017, 82–90). From Pantikapaion on the coast of the Black Sea a (Lesbian?) oenochoe proclaims ‘I am the prochous of Mynios’ (Μυννιος εμι προχος; Jeffery 1990, 480 T). Speaking objects do not disappear with the end of the Archaic period. ‘I am the boundary of the Agora’ say the two late Archaic *horos* stones from Athens (Lalonde *et al.* 1991, nos H25 and H26). And the purpose of these inscriptions remains the same – namely to ‘personify’ objects. This then is my chief point: the alphabet was invented to personify *things*, to endow them with agency.

This of course raises another issue. What kind of ‘person’ or ‘agent’ are we talking about here? Well it is unlikely to be a *divine* agent, since the Greeks agreed that they had borrowed their ‘Phoenician letters’ from another Mediterranean people. Writing, unlike fire, is a human invention. Were early Greeks then animists, in an anthropological sense? In a strong sense of the term the answer must be ‘no’ – that is if we are following Philippe Descola’s (2013) classification of human societies – or rather human/natural ontologies – into four types: animist, totemist, analogist and ‘naturalist’ (ourselves). In Descola’s terms the Greeks fall more easily into the ‘analogist’ category. Still early Greeks had a stronger sense of the potential ‘person-ness’ of both things places (naiads) and plants (dryads) than we do, if we follow Grethlein’s (2020) line of reasoning (which I do).

That the alphabet was adopted, in part, to personify things of course goes against some of the major theories that have been put forward concerning the origins of the alphabet. First amongst these is that the economy of signs, and the addition of vowels, allowed writing to transcribe first poetry in particular and speech in general. This is the theory first of Wade Gery (1952) and then of Barry Powell (1991a). Then there is the suggestion (Goody and Watt 1963; Havelock 1982) that, because the consequence of the introduction of such a script was the widening of literacy far beyond a scribal class, that too must have been its cause. Both of these theories are not completely wrong – but both infer causes (and indeed intentions) from consequences.

There is a more fundamental problem with these long-standing explanations; it is that they have emerged from within Classics and not from within archaeology. Classics is a subject whose primary competence lies in the exposition of ancient literature and ancient texts. The primacy of philology has therefore had an effect on what classicists take as being axiomatic, especially when it comes to the origins of those texts and the technology (script) that made them possible.

In the beginning was the word. These, the first lines of the Gospel of John, also encapsulate the logocentric assumptions that have underpinned debates about the origins of the Greek alphabet. These debates have been primarily philological, concerning the ‘fitness for purpose’ of various varieties of Greek script accurately to convey and transcribe the phonetic values of the Greek language. As well as being (inherently) logocentric, they also demonstrate a kind of institutional preference for ‘glottocentric’ (or ‘phonocentric’) explanations. Speech comes first and writing second, and the utility of any particular script can be evaluated in these terms. As Derrida (1976) has demonstrated this assumption goes back to Plato.²⁴ Plato frequently makes the analogy between the ‘elements’ (στοιχεῖα) of sound and the letters of the alphabet, it being assumed that there is a one-to-one correspondence between phonemes and graphemes, sounds and letters. The ‘origins of the alphabet’ – and what this implies about logocentric explanations for symbolic systems in general – is therefore an issue that is as much philosophical as empirical. These ‘Platonic’ assumptions about the origins not only of the alphabet but of writing *as such* crop up in curious places and (mis)-inform many current debates about the state of the contemporary world, not only in contemporary philosophy (e.g. Žižek 2017, 381–3) but even in recent novels (Binet 2017, 141–149).

In this paper I have tried to construct an argument based on different, non-logocentric principles, principles which are more archaeological and anthropological than they are philological and textual. I am not arguing against the notion that the most distinctive feature of the Greek alphabet was its economy of signs, signs that made it possible to transcribe speech. But I am arguing against the notion that these were the sole, or even primary, motivations of the earliest inventors, experimenters and users of this new ‘technology of the intellect’. This point should become clearer if we look first outside the Iron Age, and then outside the Mediterranean world itself.

Script and symbol: the view from the north

There is often an embarrassment of riches in early scripts in the earliest stages of the appearance of literate cultures. Middle Bronze Age (Middle Minoan) Crete now boasts four script or script-like symbolic systems in the earliest, so-called protopalatial phase; Hieroglyphic (in Knossos and Mallia); the so-called ‘Archane script’ (Decorte

²⁴ Plato *Cratylus* 424–7 & 434–5; *Theaetetus* 202E, 207C–D; *Sophist* 253A; *Politicus* 277E–278D; for discussion see Ryle (1960).



Fig. 14.3. Stone inscribed in both Ogham and Latin script, gravestone of FANONI MAQUTRINI, found at Fardel in Devon (England) British Museum 1861, 0209.1 and datable to the fifth or sixth centuries AD (photo courtesy British Museum). Photo reconfigured by Kirsty Harding.

Dumnonia (Devon) (Fig. 14.3). In the northeast of present-day Scotland (then Pict-land) Ogham and Latin scripts coexisted with at least one other socially significant, icon-based semiotic system – the Pictish Symbols (Forsyth 1997; Noble *et al.* 2018). These Pictish symbols very often have two elements – one more abstract, the other more pictorial (e.g. double-disc and Z rod, crescent and V rod, snake and Z-rod). Both these elements have been found combined in grammatically predictable combinations on a variety of inscribed stones and small objects in sixth to ninth century AD Pictland (that is Scotland north of the Firth of Forth and east and north of Argyll).

2018b); Linear A itself (at Phaistos); and the ‘script’ of the Phaistos disc. Of course, neither the ‘Archaic script’ nor that of the Phaistos disc may be scripts in the narrow sense – but they are certainly symbolic systems and existed side-by-side for some time. This raises the possibility that the uses of scripts and other symbolic systems may *complement* one another. That is different scripts (and different symbolic systems) may have had distinct and complementary purposes.

The most fruitful comparison to that of Archaic Greece however comes from somewhere far from the Aegean but much closer to home. In the early medieval period in Britain and Ireland there was a plethora of scripts and script-like symbolic systems (Forsyth this volume). The Anglo-Saxons adopted the Runic script for monumental inscriptions such as the Ruthwell Cross, and the Latin for manuscripts and some smaller objects (such as the Alfred Jewel, now in the Ashmolean Museum). The Latin script was used for ‘sub-Latin’ and perhaps Brythonic in Wales and southwest Scotland, the Ogham for Gaelic and Pictish in Ireland and Scotland respectively. Sometimes Ogham and Latin can be found on the same stone, as in this example from

The early Greek case is similar. For the alphabet did not appear in a symbolic vacuum. For one thing there was already a perfectly good script available for writing down the phonetic values of spoken Greek – the Cypriot syllabary (Steele 2013). Indeed the late Anna Morpugo Davies argued that the Cypriot script is, in purely phonetic terms, the best available script for conveying the sounds of spoken Greek (Morpugo Davies and Olivier 2012). The alphabet appeared (around 800 BC) when the Geometric style of pottery was still dominant throughout the Aegean (Coldstream 1968). This style can be seen as a symbolic system not unlike that of the Pictish symbols. Throughout the Aegean world but especially in Attica – certain motifs appeared in ‘grammatically’ predictable combinations that seem to relate to certain, achieved status grades (Whitley 1991, 116–162 and 191–193; 2015). In Attica the ‘cross-in concentric circle’ motif is first to be found on belly-handled amphoras for women

(Kourou 2002) and funerary kraters for men during the ninth century (EGII), and the motif is retained in the Late Geometric monumental kraters and amphoras of the late eighth century, the so-called Dipylon period (Bohen 2017). The decoration of Geometric pottery has, like the Pictish Symbol stones, its own grammar. That so many early inscriptions were inscribed on pots is not simply therefore a function of ceramics providing a common and convenient surface for inscriptions. A recent article by Binek (2017) draws attention to this interaction between Geometric principles of design and the quasi-Geometric ‘aesthetics’ of the inscription on the Dipylon oinochoe.²⁵ Just as the inscription on Tataie’s aryballos (Fig. 14.2) is *wrapped* around the vessel, hugging the SubGeometric linear decoration, so the writing on the Dipylon oinochoe follows the contours of the shoulder, and so complements the Geometric decoration of the vase (Fig. 14.4). This fact surely has a bearing on how narrative scenes were to develop in later, Archaic Greek art, where image and inscription often go together (Osborne and Pappas 2007).



Fig. 14.4. The Dipylon oinochoe, from the area of the Kerameikos cemetery, Athens. Athens NM 192. Circa 720 BC. Photo Wikimedia commons (adapted by Kirsty Harding).

²⁵ Athens NM 192; Jeffery (1990, 68–9 and 76 no 1). For a different interpretation of the inscription, see Powell (1988; 1991a, 158–162).

Table 14.3. List of Greek inscriptions mentioned in the text (not footnotes) of this article in order of their appearance

Name	Number or museum	Date BC	Transcription of Greek	Jeffery 1990	Other references
Methana	Poros museum	ca 600	Ευμαρες με πατερ Ανδροκλεος ενταδε σαιμα Ποιφεισανς καταθεκε φιλο μναμα ευιευος εμεν	181 no. 1	Deffner 1909, 34; Premerstein 1909
Kroisos (Anavyssos kouros)	Athens National Museum 3851	ca 500	Στεθι και οικτιρον Κροισο Παρα σεμα θανοντος Ιον Ποτ' ενι προμαχοις ολεσε Θορος Αρες		Jeffery 1962, 143–144 no. 57
Qorax (from Rhodes)	Copenhagen National Museum 10151	ca 700	Qoraxo ημι ρυλιχς	356 no. 1	
Tharios' cup (from Athens Agora)	Athens Agora P4663	ca 650	Θαριο ειμι ποτεριον	76 no. 4	Lang 1976, F3
Nestor's cup, Pithekoussai	Museo archeologico di Pitheculasae (Ischia, Lacco Ameno)	ca 720–700	Νεστορος : ε[ιυ?]: ευποτ[οv] : ποτερι[ο] : αυτικα κενον ι-ος δ' α<v> τοδε πι[ι]σαι : ποτερι[ο] : αυτικα κενον ι-μερ[ος ιαρ]σει : καλλιστε[φα]νο : Αφροδιτες	239 no. 1	Powell 1991a, 163–166; Russo 1993; West 1994
Tataie's aryballos, from Kyme (Cumae)	British Museum GR 1885, 0613.1	ca 680	Ταταιεις εμι λερυθος : ι-ος δ' αν με κλεφσει θυφλος εσται	240 no. 3	Powell 1991a, 166–167; D'Acunto 2017, 314–317
Nikandre from Delos	Athens National Museum 1	ca 650	Νικανδρη μ' ανεθεκεν ι-<ε> κηβολοι ιοχεαιρηι γορη Δεινοδικηρο το Ναι-σιο, εσοχος αληρον Δεινομενεος δε κασιγνετη Φι-ρατ-σιο δ' αλοχος v<uv>	303 no. 2	

(Continued)

Table 14.3. (Continued)

Name	Number or museum	Date BC	Transcription of Greek	Jeffery 1990	Other references
Euthykartides from Delos	Delos museum A728	620–600	Ευθοκαρτιδῆς μ' ἀνεθεκε: ἰο Νά-σιος; ποιεσας	304 no. 3	
Geneleos group from Heraion of Samos	Vathy Museum Samos	ca 560	ΑΡΧΗΣ ΙΜΕΛΑΣ ΑΝΕΘΕΚΕ ΤΗΙ ΗΗΡΗΙ, ΙΜΑΣ ΕΠΟΙΕΣΣ ΓΕΝΕΛΕΟΣ	341 no. 6	Freyer-Schauenberg 1974, 106–130; Clemente 2010
Phrasikleia, from Merenda in Attica	Athens National Museum 4889	ca 540	Σεμα Φρασικλειας κορε κεκλεσομαι αιει Αντι γαμο παρα θεον τουτο λαχος' ονομα	78 no 29	Jeffery 1962, 138–139 no. 46; Mastrokastos 1972; Svenbro 1993, 8–252
Amasis signature	Paris, Cabinet des Médailles 222 (from Vulci)	ca 550	ΑΜΑΣΙΣ ΜΕΠΟΙΕΣΣΕΝ		Beazley 1956, 152 no. 25
Methoni in Pieria (Macedonia)	Thessaloniki museum?	ca 730–700	1. Φιλιονος ειμι 2. ἡακεσανδρο ειμι		Besios <i>et al.</i> 2012, 337–343 nos 1 and 2; Janko 2015; Tsifopoulos <i>et al.</i> 2017
Hakesandros & Philion					
Eretria, sanctuary of Apollo	Eretria museum	ca 730–700	– ..]λχαδεοειμι		Kenzellmann Pfyffer <i>et al.</i> 2005, 59 no. 1; Verdan 2013
Mt Hymettos, Attica	National Museum Athens & Agora museum	700–600	1. 4a εἰ]μι το Διος το 2. 6 Διος ειμι]ι 3. 29c το Διος ειμι] ας δε μ' εγραφ[σε]ν	76, 3 a–c	Langdon 1976, 15–20, nos 4a, 6 and 29c
Kommos sanctuary, Southern Crete	Herakleion Museum	700–650	1. No. 17 Νικαγορα ε]ιμι 2. No. 27 -]ταδα ειμι		Csapo <i>et al.</i> 2000, 114 no. 17 & 117–8 no 27
Erpetidamos pithos from Phaistos, Crete	Herakleion Museum	ca 700	Ἐρπετιδαμο Παιδοπιας οδε	468 no. 8a	Levi 1969

(Continued)

Table 14.3. List of Greek inscriptions mentioned in the text (not footnotes) of this article in order of their appearance (Continued)

Name	Number or museum	Date BC	Transcription of Greek	Jeffery 1990	Other references
Law from Dreros, Crete	Syllogos of Neapolis, Crete	ca 640	θιός ολοιον. ἄδ' εραδε πολί" ἐπεὶ κα κομήσει, δέκα ρετίον τον ἄ- ρτόν μὴ κόμειν. αἱ δὲ κομησίε, ὁ[π]ε δικασίε, ἄρτόν ὁπῆλεν διπλεῖ κάρτόν ἄκρηστον ἦμεν, ἄς δύοι, κότι κομησίε μηδὲν ἦμην. Vacat ὁμόται δὲ κόσμος κοὶ δάμιοι κοὶ ἴκατι οἱ τὰς πόλ[ι]ο[ς] vacat.	315 no. 1a	Demargne and Van Effenterre 1937; Gagarin and Perlman 2016, 200–07 Dr 1
Gravestone from Chersonisos, Crete	Private collection, Koutoulouphari	ca 500	Τίμος ημι Ευαγρος μ'εστασε	316 no. 20	
Gravestone (1 of 3) from Kydonia	Archaeological Museum of Khania	ca 500	Αυτομεδεος εμι	316 no. 29a	
Dolphin rock from just N. of Itanos, E. Crete	Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge GR 1.1854	ca 500	Ἰμιον ἔγραφε με ...		Guarducci 1942, 158 no. 2 = IC III.7.2
Pantikaipaion (Crimea, Ukraine) Prochous of Mynios	Not clear	575–550	Μυνιος εμι προχος	480 T	
Boundary stones from Athens, Agora	Athens Agora	ca 500	χορος εμι τες αγορας		Lalonde <i>et al.</i> 1991, H25 & H26.
Dipylon oinochoe, from Dipylon cemetery Athens	Athens National Museum 192	ca 720–700	ι-ος νυν ορχεστον παντον αταλοτατα παιζει τοτοδεκλλμιν ...	68–9 & 76 no.1	Powell 1988; 1991a, 158–162; Binek 2017

I generally follow Jeffery in my transcriptions.

Table 14.4. List of Semitic inscriptions mentioned in text

Name	Museum	Date BC	Reference	Language & script
I am Mesha	Unknown	ca 800	Rollston 2010, 52–54	Moabite
Knossos Teke tomb J	Herakleion Museum	ca 850	Sznycer 1979; Rollston 2010, 36–37	West Semitic/ Phoenician
Eretria, sanctuary of Apollo	Eretria Museum	ca 720–700	Kenzellmann-Pfytter <i>et al.</i> 2005, 76 no. 66	West Semitic?

This brings us back to Homer. Powell (1991a) argued that the alphabet was invented to transcribe Homeric verse – a hypothesis that can only really work for the Greek alphabet and for none of the other alphabetic scripts used or adopted by other Mediterranean peoples in the Iron Age (De Hoz 2010). Recent scholarship on the date of the introduction of the alphabet however (*e.g.* Janko 2015) has tended to argue for a much earlier date than would have seemed possible twenty years ago; while much scholarship on the date of the Homeric poems have moved in the opposite direction (*e.g.* Nagy 1997; 2020; Lowenstam 1997; Martin 2020). The alphabet appears to have been adopted around 800 BC,²⁶ while dates for the definitive composition the Homeric poems have steadily moved later than 700 BC. This fact in itself undermines Powell’s argument (which depends on chronological coincidence; see now Gonzalez 2020). But Powell’s thesis does at least have the merit of bringing together two major, key questions in Classical studies (see Elvira Astoreca this volume). Scholarship on the ‘origins of the alphabet’, even at its most radical (*e.g.* Naveh 1982; 1988) has also been resolutely textual, as has most of the debate about ancient literacy (*e.g.* Harris 1989). It has been the main thrust of my argument that alphabetic writing is a material practice bound up with other practices – including the practice of pottery decoration. From the eighth century onwards decoration on Greek painted pottery becomes more ‘Homeric’ in the sense that recognisable figured scenes begin to appear. These scenes appear to represent, or allude to, stories from one of the two great epic cycles of Troy and Herakles (‘myth scenes’). But they do not seem to be ‘Homeric’ in the sense of depending on a near-definitive, established text of either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* (Cook 1983; Lowenstam 1997; Snodgrass 1998). That image and inscription went on to develop a symbiotic relationship in narrative scenes on later Greek painted pottery is perhaps something that we need to explore further – and explore moreover with all the theoretical resources in the armoury of archaeology and anthropology. Part of the explanation for this symbiosis between script and icon must require the use of the concepts of agency and personhood.

²⁶ This is partly as a result of new evidence from Gordion that suggests that the Phrygian script (closely related to the Greek alphabet) was already well established by 740 BC (Brixhe 2004; Liebhart and Brixhe 2009). For most scholars who still hold that the Greek alphabet derives directly (and not indirectly) from the Phoenician this must push the date of adoption further back in time, to 800 or even 825 BC (*e.g.* Janko 2015).