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EPIGRAPHICAL DISCOVERIES AT TEGEA:
A PRELIMINARY REPORT

During the excavation campaign in the sanctuary of Athena Alea at Tegea in June and July 2004, in the northern sector (grid squares C-D 8-9), some evidence came to light which is interesting from an epigraphical point of view.

In square D8 of the grid which subdivides the area of excavation (see the plan, *Fig. 1*) there are two large marble blocks (stratigraphical units D8/06 and /07) on which several incisions can be identified.

The material of the blocks (*Fig. 2*) is Dolianà marble, and their shape and dimensions allow us to presume with some assurance that they come from the Classical temple; this is evidently the case also for many other marble blocks found scattered in the excavated area, which were recovered and used after the collapse of the temple in the Late Antique period.¹ The Late Classical temple had in fact been in continuous use throughout the Roman period, as attested by Pausanias, but went out of use and collapsed at a not precisely established moment in the Late Antique period.²

The two blocks were later brought to grid square D8, presumably in the Byzantine period between the 11th and the 14th century A.D., when the area immediately north of the temple was put to use for burials:³ in addition to the numerous tombs which were found during the 1990–94 excavations, another deposition (s.u. B8/09) was brought to light during the excavations of the summer 2004.⁴ The blocks had been moved to their present position in the northern sector in order to construct a wall (s.u. D8/22)⁵ with an oblique course which delimited the area of the burials, which are all found to the west of this line. It

was constructed with second-hand materials, including a Hellenistic marble statue which was also found in square D8.⁶ The funerary purpose of the area seems to be confirmed also by some incised symbols on the southern block which can be connected with a religious context, although the archaeological evidence does not establish a precise date for the incisions. The only chronological support is provided by the *terminus post quem* given by the construction of the wall, which took place some time between the 11th and the 14th century A.D.⁷

The context of the discovery

There are traces of incisions on both blocks, but only on one, the southern (s.u. D8/06), was it possible to make a squeeze, which, moreover, had to be only partial: beside the figures which were thus recovered and are analyzed here, there are others on the eastern surface of the block, but because of their precarious state of preservation they could not be more precisely identified. It seems possible to suggest that one represented a Christian monogram, and another, on the upper surface of the block, a small asterisk.

The same situation applies to the northern block (s.u. D8/07), which has some incisions representing a circle with crossing lines on the top – perhaps also some sort of a Christian monogram – but the coarse and irregular surface has made any attempt at documentation fruitless.

It should be emphasized that the study of the incisions on the southern block should in any case be considered preliminary, because the squeeze was produced in very precarious conditions.⁸ For that reason the documentation and the observations which follow should only be

¹ They are listed as Blocks **800** and **801** in the block catalogue section **xix** (Pakkanen), 412–3.

² That blocks from the Classical temple were reused after the collapse is also demonstrated by the reshaped and recarved blocks used in many old houses in the village of Alea. For the destruction of the temple, see section **iii** (Luce), 49–54.

³ The chronology is established by the datable elements discovered with the burials. See section **iii** (Luce), 41–2.

⁴ See section **iii** (Luce), 40–4 for the burials discovered in 1990–94, and section **vi** (Tarditi), 99–101 for the tomb discovered in 2004; section **xxii** (Ingvarsson-Sundström) for the bone material.

⁵ See sections **iii** (Luce), 44, and **vi** (Tarditi), 101–3 for this wall.

⁶ See section **iii** (Luce), 44 for the circumstances of discovery, and section **xiv** (Sande) for the statue.

⁷ See note 2.

⁸ Since proper squeeze paper and carbon paper, indispensable for such operations, were not available, it was necessary to make use of a pencil and ordinary transparent drawing paper, which does not adhere well to the surface of the stone and consequently cannot reproduce it precisely. Unfortunately it has not been possible to return to the site later in order to carry out the documentation with proper means.

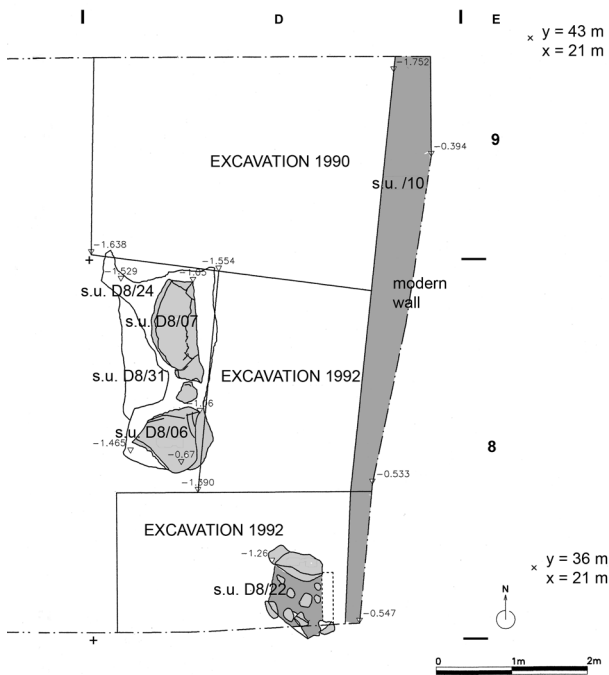


Figure 1. Plan of the squares D8-D9 at the medieval level, with the blocks D8/06 and /07 which bear incisions. (After Tarditi section vi, Fig. 7)

considered as a point of departure for future study of the incisions on the two blocks in the northern area.

The technique of the incisions

All the incisions which were identified on the southern block are located on its south-eastern surface. (Fig. 3) The incisions were executed with two different techniques, both frequently used for rock carvings: a *graffito*, carved, and a *martellina*, hammered. The *martellina* technique produces uncertain and irregular lines, and was probably executed by a not particularly pointed stone object; this can be identified by the points created by the object. The *graffito* technique is precise and characterized by fairly deep grooves, perhaps created by a metal tool; these lines are continuous, with a thinner line on the inside indicating the groove.

Some representations can be made out immediately by an initial examination of the photo⁹ (Fig. 3): to the left a three-armed Byzantine cross can be seen, while a figure in the shape of a Greek *pi* appears to the right, with something like two birds above it. The figure is covered by other lines, both straight and curved, which may perhaps be understood as circles with crossing lines; their interpretation has no safe, external confirmation (see below).

⁹ Looking at the photo and the squeeze of the incisions it is impossible to ignore the differences between them; certain elements that are visible on the photo do not appear on the squeeze. This situation is caused by the difficult circumstances when the documentation was made. Consequently both must be considered in order to understand the hypothetical reconstruction proposed here.

As one can see from the squeeze (Fig. 4), the hammered technique was used for most of these figures, while the carved technique was used for the horizontal arms of the cross, the horizontal stroke of the *pi* symbol, and most of the circles with lines inside. Considering that the circle was aligned with the right-hand vertical leg of the *pi* symbol, apart from its possible symbolic value, it is possible to address the question of the overlaps, which in this case helps to establish a relative date of the various phases of the incisions. The hammered incision of the right-hand leg of the *pi* symbol is earlier than the rest of the circle with the lines inside; it is evident that the carved grooves overlap the pre-existing, hammered line. Consequently, the *pi* symbol must have been executed before the circle.

The incisions on the southern block provide no further evidence for a relative chronology,¹⁰ and offer none for an absolute date. For this reason it is necessary to turn to Early Christian and Byzantine funerary iconography for comparisons which may shed some light on the question.

The incisions on the southern block: phases, and observations on the symbol value

Before proceeding with the analysis and the interpretation of the symbols on the blocks, it may be useful to attempt to establish which and how many phases of incision it is possible to identify on the southern block using the observed cases of overlapping figures.

The first phase can be established as the execution of the *pi* symbol, perhaps coinciding with the cross which appears on the left side of the block.

A second phase is apparent in the figures of birds above the *pi* symbol and in some of the lines, both straight and curved, which overlap them.

With a close look at the photo (Fig. 3) and the squeeze (Fig. 4) from the southern block one can observe several circular figures enclosing straight lines that cross in the centre of the circle. A close examination of the incised surface has shown that this symbol was repeated several times on the southern block: in addition to the most evident circle with lines inside overlapping the *pi* symbol (see below), there are two more whose outlines are only partially executed; they are hastily and superficially made, and are not even complete.

The first circle, of rather modest dimensions, is located between the two vertical legs of the *pi* symbol. Only one quarter of the circle can be seen (above right on the photo and on the squeeze), and a carved line going south-west to north-east.

The presence of a third circle with lines inside can only be considered as hypothetical: to the right of the left-hand

¹⁰ This observation concerns the incisions on the block, not the relocation of the block itself; since the date of the reuse is safely established in the 11th–12th century A.D. (see section vi, Tarditi, 102), this gives a useful *terminus post quem* for the incisions. See above.



Figure 2. The two blocks (units D8/06 – /07) seen from the north-east. (Photo: Ch. Tarditi)



Figure 3. The south-eastern surface of the southern block (s.u. D8/06): incisions. (Photo: Ch. Tarditi)

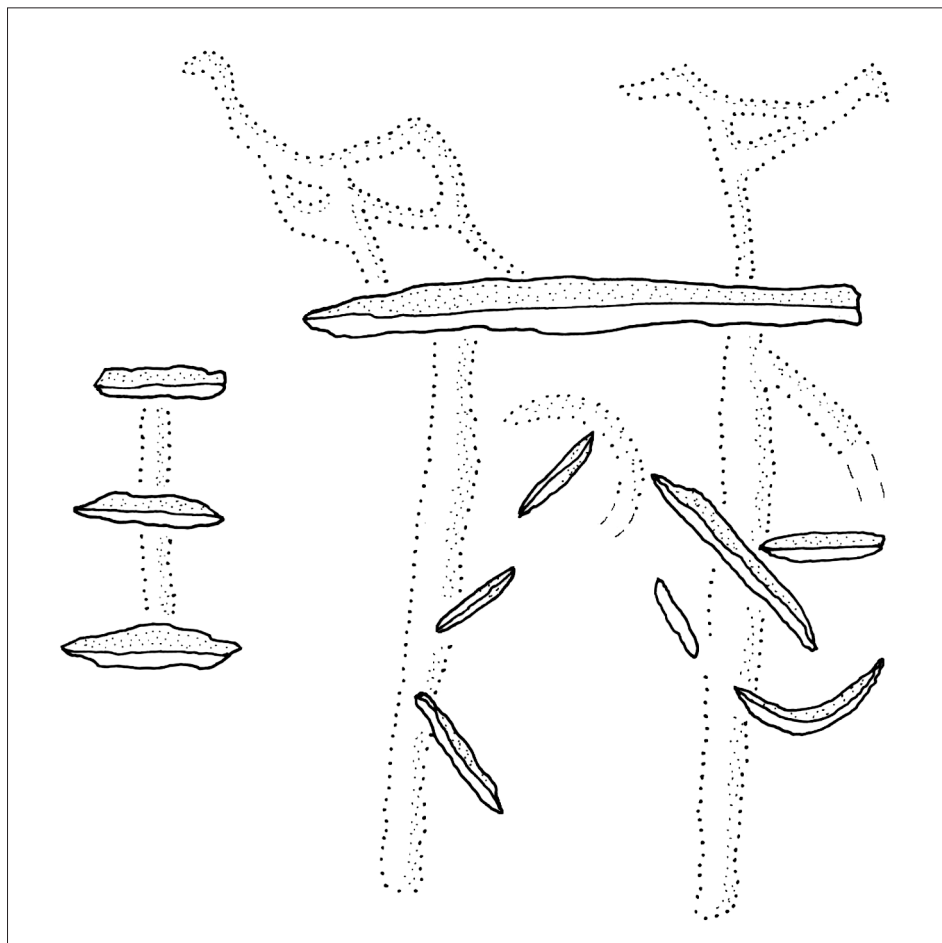


Figure 4. Preliminary drawing of the incisions on the southern block (s.u. D8/06). Scale 1 : 2. (Drawing: Nicolardi)

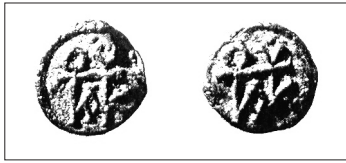


Figure 5. Monogram 441 (obverse and reverse). Scale 1 : 1. (After Zacos and Veglery 1972.I.1, 430 no. 441, pl. 57)

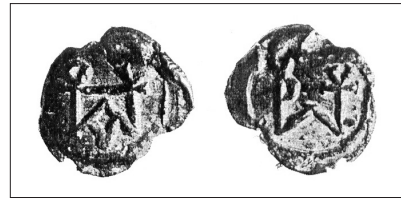


Figure 7. Monogram 448 (obverse and reverse). Scale 1 : 1. (After Zacos and Veglery 1972.I, pl. 57 no. 448)

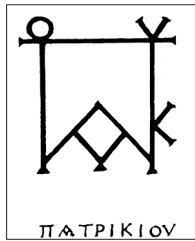


Figure 6. Probable construction of the monogram 441. (After Zacos and Veglery 1972.I, pl. 239 no. 360)

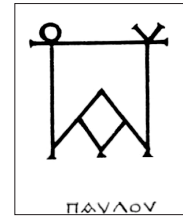


Figure 8. Probable construction of the monogram 448. (After Zacos and Veglery 1972.I, pl. 239 no. 374)



Figure 9. Incised symbols on a reused block in the northern wall of the village church. (Photo: Ch. Tarditi)

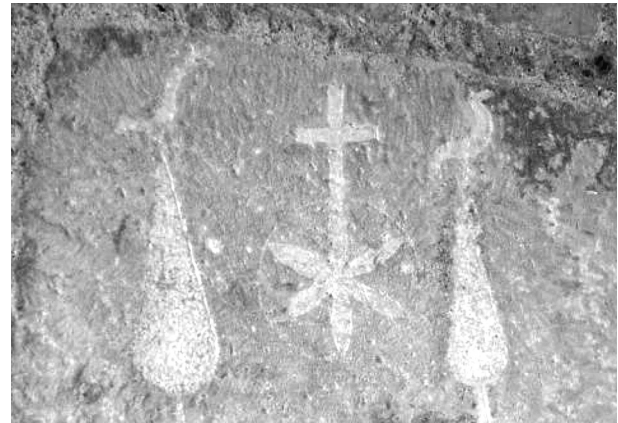


Figure 10. Incised symbols on a reused block in the northern wall of the village church. (Photo: Ch. Tarditi)

leg of the *pi* symbol one can see at half height two lines which converge toward that leg, but there is no trace of the external circle. That this was intended to be another circle with crossing lines, which was left unfinished for reasons unknown to us, is conjecture, but it is supported by considerations of composition: a third circle in this position in addition to the other two would create a symmetrical composition, frequent in symbolic and cultic representations.

At the present state of research it is impossible to be more precise, since, as already stated, the squeeze is not perfectly true to the original. It would for that reason not be correct to present too adventurous hypotheses concerning the lines overlapping the lower part of the *pi* symbol. The following considerations on this basis are consequently only hypothetical, though supported by some useful, but cautious comparisons.

As concerns the *pi* symbol, the closest comparisons for it are found on sealings. The incision closely recalls two monograms found on certain Byzantine sealings. The first (*Fig. 5*),¹¹ dated to the 6th century, has been analyzed and interpreted (*Fig. 6*)¹² as ΠΑΤΡΙΚΙΟΥ (“of Patrikos”), although another hypothesis would give it the meaning ΠΑΥΛΟΥ (“of Paulos”). The second (*Fig. 7*)¹³ can be interpreted with certainty (*Fig. 8*)¹⁴ as one of the monograms used for ΠΑΥΛΟΥ.

Although it is impossible to establish with certainty which of the two readings is correct, it is in any case reasonable to suppose that the monogram on the block

¹¹ Zacos and Veglery 1972.I.1, 430 no. 441, pl. 57.

¹² Zacos and Veglery 1972.I, pl. 239 no. 360.

¹³ Zacos and Veglery 1972.I, pl. 57 no. 448.

¹⁴ Zacos and Veglery 1972.I, pl. 239 no. 374.

represents the name of a deceased person and was incised on the southern block in the area of the Byzantine graveyard on the occasion of his funeral.

Concerning the figures of birds it may be useful to consider the incisions on two blocks that were reused in the northern wall of the church of Hagios Nikolaos, built in the early 19th century near the temple site. (*Figs 9–10*) The same symbols are repeated on the reused material in the church and on the block in the graveyard: on both blocks the birds appear, and (more clearly on *Fig. 10* than on *Fig. 9*) they seem to represent peacocks, symbols of the resurrection in Christian iconography. Above there are two figures that are similar to cypresses; these also belong to the funerary sphere.

The funerary purpose of the area seems thus further confirmed by this comparison, which might also imply some sort of intentional repetition of the symbols from the blocks near the graveyard on the blocks reused in the church. However, for the moment it is impossible to make any suggestion concerning their origin.

The last figure to be analyzed is the circle with inscribed lines. Here it is necessary to turn to epigraphy,¹⁵ which suggests that they should probably be understood as a monogram of Jesus Christ, as attested as early as

the 4th century A.D.¹⁶ and widely used in Late Antique and medieval epigraphy. The three lines inside the circle represent the initials of his two names: the vertical line is for the Greek letter *iota* (Ἰησοῦς), and the two lines crossing it form the Greek letter *chi* (Χριστός).

In conclusion, it is possible to presume that the presence of the deceased, buried in the graveyard fenced by the oblique wall (see above), was declared by the incised monogram with his name, Patrikios or Paulos, on one of the marble blocks brought from the temple. At a later date the monogram with the name of Jesus Christ, in several examples, and the two birds, probably peacocks, were added in order to recall the concepts of salvation and eternal life.

As for the dates, it is not possible to propose a precise hypothesis due to the lack of secure dating criteria; but within the period of the 11th to the 14th century, it seems more likely that the incisions were made in the early part.

Literature:

Testini 1980² = P. Testini, *Archeologia cristiana* (2nd ed.), Bari 1980.

Zacos and Veglery (eds) 1972 = G. Zacos and A. Veglery (eds), *Byzantine lead seals* I.1 (text) and I (plates), Basel 1972.

¹⁵ Testini 1980², 350–64.

¹⁶ Testini 1980², 356.

