

M. L. WEST

AN ALLEGED MUSICAL INSCRIPTION

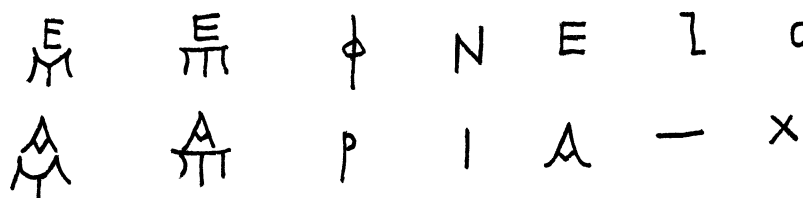
aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 93 (1992) 27–28

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## AN ALLEGED MUSICAL INSCRIPTION

D.Themelis has recently devoted some pages to two inscriptions, one new, the other published long ago, which he believes to consist of musical notation.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the new inscription, at least, this interpretation can be definitely refuted. It is a marble tablet measuring 93 x 50 cm. It comes from Laurion, and the date suggested is the first century A.D. The text is as follows.



These are not musical but numerical and metrological symbols. Translation:

50,000	5,000	500	50	5	1/2 (drachma)	1/12 (dr.)
10,000	1,000	100	10	1	1/6 (dr.)	1/48 (dr.)

The signs for the thousands are of a rare type attested in a handful of documents between the late fourth and the first century B.C.<sup>2</sup> The sign for 1/2 is a variant of the more usual sign  $\perp$  or  $\perp$ .<sup>3</sup> The other fraction-signs are straightforward.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of the inscription is obscure to me. The two series from 50,000 to 5 and from 10,000 to 1 recall similar series in oracular and religious texts recently discussed by Walter Burkert.<sup>5</sup> The commercial fractions, however, strike a more profane note. Nor do they continue the mathematical series correctly:  $1/2 = 0.5$ , but then we ought to have  $1/20 = 0.05$ , and in the second line 1 ought to be followed by  $1/10$  and  $1/100$ . However, they do seem to represent an attempt to continue the series with successively smaller fractions. The sage has simply used symbols current for subdivisions of the drachma and obol, going

<sup>1</sup> 'Zwei neue Funde altgriechischer Musik aus Laureotike und aus Pelion', *Die Musikforschung* 42, 1989, 307-324.

<sup>2</sup> B.Keil in O.Rubensohn, *Elephantine-Papyri*, Berlin 1907, 84; V.Gardthausen, *Griech. Palaeographie*<sup>2</sup>, Leipzig 1911-13, II 370. The signs for the myriads are more common, and they remained in use to the end of antiquity. Cf. W.Larfeld, *Hb. d. gr. Epigraphik*, Leipzig 1902-07, I 426; O.Guéraud and P.Jouguet, *Un livre d'écolier du III<sup>e</sup> siècle avant J.-C.*, Cairo 1938, 44 and pl. X; H.Harrauer and P.J.Sijpesteijn, *Neue Texte aus dem antiken Unterricht*, Vienna 1985, nos. 144, 151, 152, 164 (first to seventh century).

<sup>3</sup> See Gardthausen, II 373.

<sup>4</sup> See Larfeld, I 417f., II 545f.; PSI 763. 28ff.; Guéraud-Jouguet, 45 and pl. X; Harrauer-Sijpesteijn, 144. I am indebted to Dr. R.A.Coles and Dr. J.R.Rea for putting me on the track of them.

<sup>5</sup> VDI 1990, 155-160: (i) 7 - 70 - 700 - 7,000 in a mystical text on a bone tablet from Berezan, sixth century B.C.; (ii) 3 - 30 - 300 in Jupiter's revelation of the destiny of Rome in Virgil, *Aen.* 1. 265ff.; (iii) 60 + 60 + 6, the number of the Beast in Revelation 13. 18; (iv) 9 + 90 + 900 + 9,000 + 90,000 demons of sickness in the Avestan *Vidēvdāt* 22. 2, 6, 9.

down to the minimal chalkous (X), instead of being fastidious in his arithmetic and having to find notations for unfamiliar fractions.

The other inscription discussed by Themelis<sup>6</sup> is wholly unintelligible. I can offer no elucidation, but only remark that it is unlike any known musical document in format and makes no musical sense. I am not disposed to believe that it has anything to do with music. Possibly it is in some form of cryptography.<sup>7</sup>

#### ADDENDUM

Klaus Maresch has very kindly drawn my attention to W.Brashear's article in ZPE 50, 1983, 97-107, where (103-5) two very similar texts are discussed: a late Ptolemaic ostrakon (Bodl. Gr. inscr. 2939) and a wooden tablet of the third century A.D. (in Michigan; published in JHS 41, 1921, 219). Each contains two number-series based on  $5 \times 10^n$  and  $1 \times 10^n$  and going down to fractions of the drachma. These provide the closest parallels to the Laurion inscription.

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M.L.West

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<sup>6</sup> Volos Museum E-927; N.G.Giannopoulos, *Θεσσαλικά προελληνικά ἐπιγραφαί*, Athens 1908, 32-40.

<sup>7</sup> For Greek cryptography see Gardthausen, II 298ff.