

The Relationship between the Theseus Myth and the Acquirement of Athenian Citizenship: Re-examining the Athenian Honorific Decree for Telesias of Troezen (IG. II² 971)

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ABSTRACT

From the sixth century BCE, the Athenian Acropolis was a place for the display of public inscriptions relating to the administration of the Athenian body. In 140/139 BCE the monument of the honorific decree for Telesias was erected there. The dedication consists of a relief sculpture depicting Theseus lifting the rock, and the inscription of the honorary decree, which tells us that Telesias and his ancestor from Troezen were given Athenian citizenship. The relief could thus suggest the qualification and acquirement of citizenship.

Why was the theme of the Theseus myth chosen for the representation of the public decree for Telesias? This paper discusses the social background of the representation of the Myth in the Hellenistic era, and demonstrates an example of the political use of Greek ritual. This myth could suggest the initiation of Athenians from boyhood to manhood and the acquirement of Athenian citizenship since fifth century BCE.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Athenian Acropolis is one of the most popular sanctuaries in ancient Greece. It is here that temples for gods and shrines for heroes were built. The sanctuary was a place for the display of monuments and inscriptions dedicated by Athenians. The honorific decree for Telesias of Troezen was dedicated into the Athenian Acropolis in 140/139 BCE. This decree consists of an inscription and a relief; the inscription reaffirms Athenian citizenship of a man named Telesias from Troezen based on citizenship having been given to his ancestor in the last decade of the fourth century BCE. The theme of the relief relates to the citizenship of Telesias and his ancestor. In this presentation I would like to re-examine this decree.

2. THE ATHENIAN HONORIFIC DECREE FOR TELESIAS OF TROEZEN

Relief-sculptures of honorific decrees for foreigners represent generally three symbols of the polis where the honoured persons were born¹⁾. These symbols are gods, animals, and the main exports of the polis. When a relief of an honorary decree for a foreigner represents a god or goddess, the relief hints that the name of the polis where the honoured person grew up derived from that of a god or that the god was worshipped in that polis. A relief of an honorary decree from the Athenian Acropolis represents Apollo sitting on the Ompharos. Apollo is the city god of Apollonia and indicates that the honoured person came from that polis. Artemis and a dog are depicted on another decree. Artemis was worshipped enthusiastically in Eretria and her colonies; on the relief she was depicted as the symbol of Eretria and her colonies and suggests the honoured person came from there. In another relief a horse suggests the honoured person had nomadic roots and came from Thrace. Some honorary decrees depict a sphinx and amphora, which was used for transport and storage of wine, suggesting that the wine was made in the island of Chios, and that the honoured person came from there.

The relief of the honorary decree for Telesias of Troezen depicts a myth of the Athenian legendary hero Theseus. This relief is quite rare among documentary reliefs, as it is the only surviving example which represents a mythical scene. In the scene Theseus lifts a massive oblong rock in order to take a sword and boots. As in other documentary reliefs, this scene should hint at the contents of the inscription and at Telesias' place of birth.

While the inscription reaffirms mainly that Athenian citizenship was given to an ancestor of Telesias from Troezen and honours he received as an Athenian citizen, the document also records Telesias' long career as an Athenian dignitary and the honors he received as an Athenian representative. He could only have held these honors after naturalization in Athens and thus relatively late in his life²⁾.

3. THESEUS MYTH OF THE GNORISMATA

Theseus is a legendary hero and an Athenian King. In the myths relating to him, he battled against the enemies of Athens and against bandits. In the island of Crete he killed the minotaur; in Thessaly he and his friend Peirithos battled against drunken Centaurs who tried to rape Thessalian women at a local wedding ceremony; in Athens he fought against Amazons who had invaded his city.

After the foundation of the democratic constitution at Athens in 507/506 BCE, the myth of the young Athenian hero Theseus enjoyed great popularity. The hero was exuberantly represented in relief sculptures on public architecture, and on Athenian ceramic vase paintings. The myth tells of young Theseus' travels from Isthmus to Athens along the Saronic gulf, and his duels with bandits along the way.

After the Persian invasion of Athens, a new Theseus myth was expressed in Athenian visual arts. Theseus was born in Troezen and was nurtured by his Troezenian mother Aithra. His Father was Aegeus, the legendary hero of Athens. Aegeus placed boots and a sword under a rock for his child as a token (Gnorismata). When Theseus became sixteen years old, he lifted the rock and took what Aegeus left for him. Bearing the sword and boots, he departed to Athens. The relief represents this deed.

According to C. Sourvinou-Inwood, this mythical deed has two meanings, and the following includes passages quoted from her paper. By lifting the rock, Theseus could qualify as *“a man strong enough to face danger, go to Athens and assume the responsibilities of his position.”* Also Theseus was *“officially qualifying as Athenian, since this allowed him to take possession of the gnorismata or identification, which his Athenian father had left for him”*³⁾

4. TYPOLOGY

Extant five attic red figure vase paintings, seven relief sculptures, and eleven Gems represent the Gnorismata myth of Theseus. According to Sourvinou-Inwood these representations could be categorized into 4 types⁴⁾: Type 1. Theseus lifting a not very oblong rock which is laid horizontally on the Gnorismata; Type 2. Theseus pushing a large oblong rock which is laid horizontally on the Gnorismata; Type 3. Theseus is pushing a massive heavy rock; Type 4. Theseus is pushing an oblong rock which stands vertically over the Gnorismata. The honorary decree relief for Telesias from Troezen belongs to type 2. This type was in existence by at least 420 BCE. The earliest example is the so-called Sabouroff Lekythos, categorized into type 4, dated to around 470/460 BCE. Although the movements of Theseus are characteristic of Type 1, the oblong shape of the rock is

common to type 1, type 2, and type 4. Particularly the pose of Theseus and the shape and size of the rock in type 2 and type 4 can be identified. In other words, there is a close resemblance between the depiction of the Sabouroff Lekythos and that of the honorary decree for Telesias. So, it is plausible that type 2 was developed under the strong influence of type 4. Sourvinou-Inwood even suggests that “*If we interpret the shape of the rock in type 3 as a heavier, provincial version of rock in type 4, all the four types could perhaps be considered as being under the influence of one basic type out of which they may have developed through individual artistic experiments on the size and the position of rock*”⁵). Although lack of decisive evidences, F. von Duhn and Sourvinou-Inwood considered that a round sculpture, which represents the basic type, was made in Athens between 480 and 450 BCE⁶).

5. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 508/507 BCE, Athenian Democracy was established. In 490 BCE the Athenians gained a miraculous victory against the Persians at Marathon. Although the Persian king Xerxes directly attacked Athens and destroyed the city and the Athenian acropolis in 480/479 BCE, the battle of Salamis ended in a decisive victory for the Greek allies. Athenian women and children were evacuated to Troezen just before the Persian invasion, based on the Delphic oracle told by Pythia. The so-called Themistokles Decree excavated from Troezen tells us more details of this evacuation. Although the inscription was dated to fourth century BCE, the decree was issued by the Athenian boule on the eve of the Persian invasion. I would like to quote from the decree:

To entrust the city to Athena the Mistress of Athens and to the all other gods to guard and defend from the Barbarian for the sake of the land. The Athenians themselves and the foreigners who live in Athens are to remove their woman and children to Troezen. ... The old men and the movable possessions are to be removed to Salamis. The treasurers and the priestesses are to remain on the acropolis protecting the possessions of the gods. (E. M. 13330; Jameson, Michael, 1960.)

Just after the Persian invasion another Theseus myth relating to Troezen began to enjoy popularity among Athenians: Theseus visited the bottom of sea in order to prove that his parents were Poseidon and the Troezenian woman Aithra. This myth was not only represented in attic vases and in wall paintings in decorated the shrine for Theseus, the *Theseion*, but was also mentioned in poems written by Bacchylides.

The myth of his adventures to the bottom of the sea could hint at his kinship and ties with his Troezenian mother and his birthplace, while his kinship with Poseidon could symbolize Athenian naval supremacy as head of the Delian League⁷). Around 476/475 BCE Athenian politician and general Kimon brought a bone of Theseus from the island of Skyros back to Athens⁸). The Athenians received it with splendid processions and sacrifices, and a state cult for Theseus, a *Theseia*, was founded for him⁹).

6. CONCLUSIONS

The Gnorismata myth was already represented in Athens in 470/460 BCE. The honorary decree relief for Telesias hints at the qualifications for and acquirement of his Athenian

citizenship and also at his birthplace. The iconography of the relief derives from another iconography developed in 470/460 BCE at the latest. In Conclusion, I would like to make the following point: the Gnorismata myth could hint at the qualification and acquirement of Athenian citizenship already in place in 470/460 BCE. If the citizenship was hinted at in this myth, it could perhaps symbolize the same Athenian young soldiers who just gained Athenian citizenship and military supremacy as in another Troezenian myth of Theseus.

NOTES

- 1) Maeno 2007, 176-178.
- 2) Osborne 1982, 189-191 D102.
- 3) Sourvinou-Inwood 1971, 99-100.
- 4) Sourvinou-Inwood 1971, 107.
- 5) Sourvinou-Inwood 1971, 107-108.
- 6) von Duhn 1877, 172; Sourvinou-Inwood 1971, 109. Cf. Paus. 1, 27, 8. The round sculpture of bronze which represents this myth has been dedicated into the Acropolis.
- 7) Shapiro 1982, 296-297.
- 8) Pult. *Thes.* 36; Plut. *Cim.* 8; Paus. 1, 17, 6.
- 9) Ekroth 2010, 154 n. 63. Several researchers addressed that a state cult for Theseus in Athens could be founded after Kimon brought back Theseus' bones to Athens.

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