Literacy, Documents, and Archives in the Ancient Athenian Democracy

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Abstract

This article examines some trends in studies of ancient literacy, especially as they relate to the archives and inscriptions of classical Athens. While granting the symbolic significance of many ancient documents, it argues that recent studies of ancient literacy have been overly pessimistic in their assessment of the practical uses of written texts. A focus on the documents that lay behind Athenian inscriptions on stone shows that writing was used far more widely for both administrative purposes and for the preservation of official texts than the new model of ancient literacy allows.

In recent years ancient historians, approaching the subject from several different perspectives, have begun to question traditional assumptions about the nature of literacy and the functions of writing in antiquity. The advent of alphabetic writing in the Greek world of the eighth century is no longer viewed as a revolutionary development that changed the course of Greek history. Instead, the uses of writing are now believed to have developed slowly and to have had limited impact on Greek private and public life. William V. Harris, for example, has argued that the level of literacy nowhere advanced beyond ten or fifteen percent of the adult population in the Greek and Roman worlds. Rosalind Thomas focuses more specifically on ancient Greece and explores in detail the complex interaction of literate and oral modes of communication. Still others have offered new explanations for the invention of the Greek alphabet, examined tales in which writing is viewed as a tool of tyranny

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and oppression, and traced the gradual intrusion of literate practices into ancient Greek education.[1]

The functions of documents and development of archives, especially in ancient Athens, are important themes in several of these studies. A focus on Athens is readily explainable; not only do the Athenians, the "inventors" of democracy and philosophy, hold a special place in the historiography of western civilization, theirs is also the best documented of the ancient Greek city-states, and perhaps the only one about which conclusions, however tentative, can be reached about literacy, recordkeeping, and archival development. Ernst Posner devoted considerable attention to Athenian practice in *Archives in the Ancient World,* and this work remains essential reading.[2] But Posner did not probe too deeply into questions of preservation, accessibility, and the functions of documents; recent scholars do, and their conclusions are strikingly negative. Not only were fewer Athenians able to read or write than earlier scholars had assumed, written documents were also used in ways alien to modern conceptions of the written word as a practical tool for conveying and preserving information. The Athenians, it is argued, utilized written texts less for administrative purposes than for their symbolic value, and apart from inscriptions on stone, most documents were ephemeral. Long-term preservation was limited, and archival texts were seldom consulted. The foundation of the Metroon, a sanctuary of a goddess called the Mother of the Gods, as an archives building in the late fifth century signaled some advance on earlier archival practices, but even its holdings have been characterized as a crude collection of texts not deserving the label "archives."[3]

Reexamination of several issues related to Athenian recordkeeping, however, might moderate some of the more pessimistic conclusions found in the emergent model of ancient literacy. For this scholarship unnecessarily downplays practical aspects of Athenian recordkeeping while privileging features

[1] William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). On the origins of the Greek alphabet, see Barry Powell, *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Images of writing are explored by Deborah Steiner, *The Tyrant's Writ: Myths and Images of Writing in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). On the relationship between literacy and education, see Kevin Robb, *Literacy and Paideia in Ancient Greece* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). These works reflect the impact on ancient historians of much broader debates on the nature of literacy and its significance in different societies. For a review of these debates, see Thomas, *Literacy and Orality,* 15–28. For an excellent discussion of the relevance of this scholarship to archival history, see James M. O'Toole, "Toward a Usable Archival Past: Recent Studies in the History of Literacy," *American Archivist* 58 (Winter 1995): 86–99. All dates in this article are B.C.E. unless otherwise noted.

[2] Ernst Posner, *Archives in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 102–14.

[3] So Thomas wrote in an earlier work, *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73. This bleak picture is wholly endorsed by Jocelyn Penny Small, *Wax Tablets of the Mind* (London: Routledge, 1997), 54–56. For more optimistic accounts of Athenian archival practice, cf. W. K. Pritchett, *Greek Archives, Cults, and Topography* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1996), and James P. Sickinger, *Public Records and Archives in Classical Athens* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

that seem foreign to modern, western ideals. Athenian documents (and ancient documents in general) undoubtedly served many functions, including symbolic ones, and they often carried honorary, exemplary, and monumental value, as recent studies show. However, that the Athenians viewed written documents primarily in symbolic terms, failed to use them widely for practical purposes, and did not keep them for long periods of time are conclusions requiring further investigation. Some ancient evidence suggests that the Athenians used writing extensively for administrative reasons, and that they preserved some documents for extended periods of time, far more than the new model of ancient literacy allows. Misconceptions have arisen in part because scholars have not considered fully the evidence supplied by Athenian inscriptions. These texts are our best sources for many aspects of Athenian society, but their potential contributions to the study of literacy and recordkeeping remain largely unexplored. A full treatment of Athenian inscriptions falls beyond the scope of this article, but closer attention to just a few points can shed valuable light on the rich and complex nature of Athenian documentary practice.

One of the characteristic features of ancient Athenian democracy was its habit of displaying certain types of state documents on stone stelai—large rectangular slabs of marble. The oldest Athenian documents on stone date from the late sixth century, but the practice of inscribing official texts became increasingly common around the middle of the fifth century, and from that time onward the numbers and types of documents committed to stone grew steadily. Among the public texts set up in this fashion were honorary decrees by which the Athenians rewarded individuals, usually foreigners, who had rendered some type of service to them. Treaties and decrees governing Athenian relations with foreign states, especially those forming part of the fifth-century Athenian naval empire, were also common. The Athenians also recorded some financial documents on stone. Accounts associated with the construction of several fifth-century temples were published, as were annual inventories of dedications and sacred objects housed in the temples and sanctuaries of Athenian gods. Altogether, hundreds of inscribed documents survive from the classical period, and since many inscriptions must have been destroyed over the past two millennia, their original numbers probably reached into the thousands. Those documents that do survive usually exist only in fragmentary condition, but many can be reconstructed with a fair degree of certainty, and study of their contents has revealed much about Athenian political, economic, and social history that otherwise would be unknown.[4]

[4] The texts of Athenian inscriptions are published in the first three volumes of *Inscriptiones Graecae* (Berlin: William de Gruyter, 1885-), generally abbreviated *IG*. Texts are cited by their volume number and their individual number within each volume. Thus, *IG* I^3 105, refers to volume one, third edition, of *Inscriptiones Graecae,* text number 105. Unfortunately, the texts are not translated in a single work. Translations of many important fifth-century inscriptions can be found in Charles W. Fornara, ed., *From Archaic Times to the End of the Peloponnesian War,* 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

Epigraphists who spend their time studying inscriptions have traditionally assumed that these stone documents were copies of other, original records housed in archival collections. Athenian secretaries (*grammateis*), whose names are frequently given in inscribed documents, kept these archival records, which were probably written on sheets of papyrus or wooden tablets. When a particular document was thought to deserve wider publicity, a decision was made to publish its text on stone. A secretary made a copy from his records and gave it to a stone mason, who saw to the engraving. The purpose of the copy on stone was to disseminate the contents of the earlier original to a wider audience.[5]

One difficulty with this traditional view is the failure of Athenian sources to acknowledge the existence of archival originals. Instead, inscribed documents are frequently cited, even in situations where reliance on archival texts might be expected. For example, courtroom speakers sometimes refer to the stelai carrying particular laws or decrees relevant to their cases, while they seldom mention archival documents. Treaties, too, were similarly cited from their stone texts.[6] Not until the second half of the fourth century do sources mention the Metroon, and even then the Metroon and its archives are named only rarely. Ulrich Kahrstedt detected a chronological development in citation practice and inferred a similar development in recordkeeping techniques. References to fifth-century documents, he argued, almost invariably depend on an inscribed text. When citing fourth-century documents, however, orators and ancient authors do not identify the sources from which they obtained these documents. Kahrstedt explained this shift in practice by assuming that the permanent copies of most documents until the late fifth century were stone inscriptions. But when the Metroon was established as an archives building at the end of the fifth century, copies of state documents were automatically stored there. Thus, individuals who cited fourth-century documents did not identify the sources of these documents, since their texts could be assumed to have derived from the Metroon's archives.[7]

Gunther Klaffenbach, however, offered a different explanation for the frequent references to inscriptions instead of archival originals in ancient sources. Klaffenbach, a distinguished epigraphist, noted that citation of inscriptions rather than archival originals was widespread and not limited to fifth- or fourth-century Athens. The ancient Greeks, he concluded, simply did not draw a sharp distinction between originals and copies. The inscribed text of a document was

[5] Such a procedure is implicit in many studies of Greek inscriptions; cf. A. G. Woodhead, *The Study of Greek Inscriptions*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, 1981), 37; Gunther Klaffenbach, *Griechische Epigraphik*, 2d ed. (Göttingen, 1966), 52–55. For the function of inscriptions "to let everybody know the acts of governments," cf. B. D. Meritt, *Epigraphica Attica* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1940), 89–93.

[6] See Thomas, *Literacy and Orality*, 84–85, 135, with more documentation in *Oral Tradition and Written Record*, 45–50, 61–68.

[7] Kahrstedt made his arguments in an appendix, entitled "Anhang: Das athenische Staatsarchiv" (25–32), to his article "Untersuchungen zur athenischen Behörden," *Klio* 31 (1938): 1–32.

just as valid and authoritative as any archival version, even in cases in which the stone text was an extract from or abstract of an earlier original. Citation of documents on stone did not mean that archival versions of the same texts did not exist. It indicated only that the Greeks did not deem reliance on archival originals an absolute necessity.[8]

Klaffenbach's arguments won the day among ancient historians, and his work was among the principal sources of Posner in the chapter on Greek archives in *Archives in the Ancient World*.[9] But the new model of ancient literacy has again raised the issue of the relationship between inscriptions and archival texts, at Athens and elsewhere. Charles Hedrick, for example, in a survey of reading and writing in classical Athens, focuses exclusively on inscriptions. He argues that "for the first one hundred years of the democracy . . . texts were systematically made public only in monumental form," i.e., by means of inscriptions, and he points out that an archives building was founded only at the end of the fifth century.[10] Thomas likewise emphasizes the central importance of inscriptions in Athenian recordkeeping practice. Following Kahrstedt, she maintains that "it is quite probable that the inscription was the only official copy kept of a law or decree," down to the fifth century. Thomas, however, like Klaffenbach notes that inscriptions continue to be cited by Athenian orators and writers even after the Metroon's foundation as an archives building, and she elsewhere concludes that "the decrees and laws, prominently displayed around the Acropolis and agora, and mostly on stone, were perhaps the most important written records of the state."[11]

Both Hedrick and Thomas concede that documents written on materials other than stone existed at Athens, but they do not examine their uses in any detail. For them, inscriptions held a central position in Athenian documentary practice until the end of the fifth century, and even later. This is significant, because both scholars also maintain that Athenian inscriptions were primarily symbolic in function. Hedrick, following Harris, argues for widespread illiteracy at Athens, and he concludes that the inscribed texts of laws acted as prompts

[8] See Gunther Klaffenbach, "Bemerkungen zum griechischen Urkundenwesen," Deutsche Akademie der Wissenshcaften zu Berlin, Klasse für Sprachen, Literatur und Kunst, *Sitzungberichte* 6 (1960): 1–42, esp. 26–42, dealing with the functions of inscriptions. The comments of James M. O'Toole in "On the Idea of Permanence," *American Archivist* 52 (Winter 1989), 10–25, regarding the preservation of the information contained within a document versus the preservation of the original document itself seem relevant to ancient Greek attitudes toward inscriptions: the Greeks valued the content of a text more than its source.

[9] See Posner, *Archives in the Ancient World,* 100–101. For Klaffenbach's influence, see especially Alan Boegehold, "The Establishment of a Central Archive at Athens," *American Journal of Archaeology* 76 (1971): 24.

[10] Charles Hedrick, "Writing, Reading, and Democracy," in *Ritual, Finance, Politics. Athenian Democratic Accounts Presented to David Lewis,* edited by Robin Osborne and Simon Hornblower (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994): 157–74. Hedrick also regards the foundation of a state archives building as "a vaguely sinister watershed in the history of political reading and writing at Athens" (p. 173), but he offers no evidence supporting this conclusion.

[11] Thomas, *Literacy and Orality,* 86, 138.

or reminders of what citizens already knew; inscriptions were not actually read and served more as monuments than texts.[12] Thomas allows that inscriptions were sometimes read, but she too believes "they were often thought of primarily as symbolic memorials of a decision rather than simply documents intended to record important details for administrative purposes." Since, however, inscriptions were the "most important written records" of the Athenian state, public writing itself must have possessed primarily symbolic value. In Thomas's words, "rather than administrative record, public, exemplary, and monumental inscriptions were probably the most characteristic public use of the written word in the service of the classical city-state."[13]

But were documents made public only in "monumental" form in Athens until the late fifth century? Did inscriptions on stone really constitute "the most characteristic public use of the written word" in classical Athens? Were they, in short, "the most important written records" of Athens in any period? Inscriptions certainly were important documents, as their frequent citation in ancient sources demonstrates. And they almost certainly carried strong symbolic associations. But we must take care not to overemphasize their overall significance. The Athenians regularly recorded documents on wood and papyrus, and consideration of their use will cast serious doubts on the assumption that written texts failed to serve administrative functions, or that inscriptions ever constituted the primary documents of the Athenian state.

Athenian sources of the classical period mention documents made of papyrus infrequently. In a scene from Aristophanes' *Birds,* produced in 414, a character playing an Athenian official comes on stage evidently holding a papyrus copy of a decree in his hand. He attempts to issue orders to other characters, and he cites the decree he holds as the source of his authority.[14] A few years later, building accounts of the Erechtheion, a temple on the Athenian Acropolis constructed in the last quarter of the fifth century, contain an entry for the year 408/7 recording the purchase of two rolls of papyrus for making copies.[15] What these copies recorded is not specified, but they were presumably copies of the building accounts themselves; that is, in addition to the surviving

[12] Hedrick, "Writing, Reading, and Democracy," 168–73.

[13] Thomas, *Literacy and Orality,* 84–85, 140. I reserve for this note a brief comment on the criticisms, in my view often unjustified, leveled by Thomas against Posner's *Archives in the Ancient World.* Thomas repeatedly criticizes Posner for anachronism, and at one point accuses him of creating "a picture of reasonably effective and blandly modern archive-keeping in the ancient world . . . through quite well-meaning assumptions about the keeping of records when the evidence gives out, or through misinterpretations of what evidence there is." (p. 95) The only example she cites, however, is a *passing* remark of Posner about the organization of the private archives of Zenon. She does not address the principle of archival organization on which Posner was commenting in this instance, and the validity of his observation stands. Elsewhere (p. 135), Thomas accuses Posner of failing to recognize the archival capacity of wooden tablets in the ancient world. But Posner makes this very point on page 100!

[14] Aristophanes, *Birds,* 1024–5. For discussion of these lines, see Nan Dunbar, *Aristophanes. Birds* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 564–65.

[15] *IG* I^3 476, lines 289–91.

text of the building accounts on stone, copies of the same accounts were kept on papyrus. Finally, a decree of the year 403/2 instructs the secretary of the Council, the Athenian official usually charged with publishing decrees on stone, to deliver a papyrus copy of the decree to a citizen of Samos honored earlier in the text.[16]

A question raised by these examples concerns the degree to which they reflect isolated occurrences or typical practices. Since the evidence for much of Greek and Roman history is extremely limited, a danger always exists of generalizing too broadly from singular pieces of evidence, especially ones not corroborated by other information. As far as the use of papyrus documents at Athens goes, however, the known examples do not appear unusual or atypical. The character who holds a papyrus decree in Aristophanes' *Birds* plays an inspector, an Athenian official who enforced regulations throughout the subject-states of the empire. Inspectors are known from other sources, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that such officials normally carried with them papyrus copies of decrees containing their instructions, a practice Aristophanes mocks.[17] Likewise, the Athenians often granted honors to foreign benefactors; other honorary decrees do not mention the receipt of copies by honorees, but the texts of Athenian decrees are not entirely formulaic, and the practice of disseminating papyrus copies may have been too routine to merit regular mention. Finally, the keeping of accounts by state magistrates was a standard feature of the Athenian democracy. The most direct evidence for this practice are the texts inscribed on stone that still survive to modern times. But Athenian officials did not write directly onto stone. They kept accounts of their activities on other materials that were only later published on stone. Mention of papyrus in the Erechtheion accounts indicates that papyrus was one of the materials officials used in their daily activities.

Unlike papyrus, documents made from wood enjoyed a much longer and much better attested history at Athens. The laws of Drakon and Solon, two lawgivers who promulgated new laws for the Athenians in the late seventh and early sixth centuries, were preserved on objects called *axones* and *kyrbeis*. The physical appearance of the *kyrbeis* continues to puzzle scholars, but most agree that the *axones* were squared wooden beams or planks on whose faces the laws were recorded. These beams were called *axones*, a word meaning "axles," because the ends of each beam were pivoted and placed within a frame in such a way that they could be rotated. This mode of construction is significant, for it implies that access to the laws written on each face of the *axones* was a concern to those who wrote the laws down. We know that in later times Athenian magistrates swore to administer justice according to the city's laws when they took office. The administration of justice thus required some knowledge of the contents of

[16] *IG* II² 1, lines 61–2.

[17] On the inspectors, see Russell Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 212–13, 585–87.

the city's laws, and this was best achieved by consultation. The design of the *axones* may indicate that the Athenians had some such consultation in mind when their earliest laws were first recorded.

Legislative enactments continued to be displayed on wooden boards well into the fifth century. Several honorary decrees dating from the second half of the fifth century call for their double publication. One copy of each decree was to be inscribed on a stone stele set up on the Acropolis, and another copy was to be published on a wooden board and displayed at the Bouleuterion, the building where the Athenian Council, the chief executive body of the Athenian state, met.[18] The wooden texts have not survived, and we have learned of their existence only from the surviving copies of the same decrees that were set up on stone. But their existence raises an interesting question. How common was publication of laws and decrees on wooden boards during the classical period? If we focus on stone inscriptions alone, we might be tempted to dismiss the attested instances as exceptional in nature. But, as we shall see further below, the surviving laws and decrees inscribed on stone in the fifth century are not fully representative of the legislation enacted by the Athenians: not all decrees enacted by the Athenian Assembly were published on stone. Display of decrees on wooden boards may have been more common, while publication on stone was perhaps reserved only for a select number of texts whose contents were deemed worthy of more permanent and monumental display.[19]

Wooden tablets certainly played a role in publicizing the agenda of meetings of the Athenian Assembly and items of pending legislation. Aristotle relates in his treatise *Constitution of the Athenians* that the *prytaneis,* a subcommittee of the Athenian Council, "prescribed" what the Council was to handle each day and where it was to meet; they did the same for meetings of the Assembly.[20] The Greek verb translated here as "prescribed" is *prographein.* It literally means "to write beforehand," but it is regularly used by Greek authors to describe the publication of notices on wooden tablets.[21] How detailed notices of Assembly and Council meetings were we do not know; Aristotle does not specify whether each

[18] *IG* I^3 56, 78, 155, 165 *add.* On the significance of these inscriptions to archival practice, see most recently Pritchett, *Greek Archives, Cults, and Topography,* 26–27.

[19] In some cases copies on stone may have supplemented copies on wooden texts, as seems to have been the case with the honorary decrees discussed in the text. If, however, only publication on wood was alone specified in other decrees, references to this practice would have been lost when the wooden texts were themselves taken down or destroyed. The survival of only stone copies of decrees conveys the impression that stone was the material of choice for preserving and display Athenian legislative enactments. But that impression may be mistaken, and we cannot rule out the possibility that wood, and not stone, was the principal medium by which the texts of Athenian decrees were displayed during the classical period.

[20] Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians,* 43.3–4.

[21] See, for example, Aristophanes, *Birds,* 448–50, which uses the verb *prographein* to refer to the display of lists of citizens called up for military service on wooden tablets (*pinakia*). Other uses of *prographein* are discussed by Adolf Wilhelm, *Beiträge zur griechischen Inschriftenkunde,* Sonderschriften des Österreichischen Archäologischen Institutes in Wien, Bd. 7 (Vienna, 1909), 179–81.

item of business was summarized briefly or outlined in detail. Texts of proposed laws, however, were displayed in some detail during the fourth century.[22] This practice is first attested to at the very end of the fifth century, when the Athenians undertook a full-scale revision of their existing laws. During the fourth century, publication of proposed laws was a legal requirement, and failure to display a proposal is included among the grounds for attacking a law as unconstitutional.[23]

Wooden boards also advertised other types of official announcements. The Athenians lacked a standing army and navy, and when they went to war or sent out military expeditions, lists of citizens liable for service were posted on wooden tablets at the monument of the Eponymous Heroes, a collection of statues located in the heart of the Athenian marketplace; these lists also designated the destination of the expedition and the number of days of provisions required.[24] The Athenians also exhibited notices of lawsuits pending before their courts.[25] Some of these were displayed at the monument of the Eponymous Heroes, but others were exhibited at the offices of judicial magistrates or at the courts where trials took place. A fourth-century speech mentions an indictment posted before the office of dockyard superintendents, who oversaw shipping and commercial disputes, and a papyrus recently studied by Ronald Stroud mentions texts of lawsuits displayed at the Aiakeion, a sanctuary near the Athenian Agora that also served as a lawcourt.[26] Neither of these passages mentions wooden boards explicitly, but judicial notices were not publicly exhibited on stone with any frequency; that the texts were displayed on wooden boards is a reasonable assumption.

The Athenians also recorded documents not intended for public display on wood. Judicial magistrates, for example, kept records of lawsuits coming before them on wooden tablets, if we may trust a passage of Aristophanes' *Clouds*.[27] Citizenship lists were maintained in the same way. The city-state of Athens was made up of about 140 smaller villages called *demes,* and Athenian citizenship

[22] In the fourth century, the Athenians distinguished two types of legislation. Decrees (*psephismata*) were measures calling for specific actions which sometimes had limited validity; these were enacted by the Assembly. Laws (*nomoi*) were usually general measures with more lasting validity and were enacted by boards of lawmakers whose appointment was approved by the Assembly. While texts of proposed laws were publicly displayed on wooden boards, there is no evidence that full texts of proposed decrees were also exhibited, unless their full contents were published in the agenda of meetings of the Assembly.

[23] For discussion of Athenian law-making procedures, see Mogens H. Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 161–78. Failure to display a proposal is adduced as an argument against a measure's constitutionality by Demosthenes 20.91–92; 24.17–27.

[24] Aristophanes, *Birds,* 448–50. In another play, Aristophanes describes the reaction of a citizen who finds his name so displayed (*Peace,* 1180–84).

[25] The testimonia are now conveniently collected by Alan L. Boegehold, *The Lawcourts at Athens,* vol. 28 of *The Athenian Agora* (Princeton: American School of Classical Studies, 1995), 236–37.

[26] For display of a lawsuit's text by the dockyard superintendents, see Demosthenes 57.3–4. On the display of legal notices at the Aiakeion, see Ronald Stroud, "The Aiakeion and Tholos of Athens in *POxy* 2087," *Zeitschrift fur Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 103 (1994): 1–9. Stroud notes that it is not clear whether the notices displayed at the Aiakeion are ones of pending suits or ones recording judgments already issued.

[27] Aristophanes, *Clouds,* 768–72. Boegehold, *The Lawcourts at Athens,* 240–41, discusses several other uses of tablets in Athenian lawcourts.

depended on membership in one of these *demes*. The *demes* themselves kept lists of members called *lexiarchika grammateia*—"lexiarchic tablets"; young men were registered into these when they reached the age of eighteen, and these tablets were consulted when questions arose about an individual's status.[28] A list of citizens enrolled in the Athenian cavalry was also kept on a wooden tablet called a *pinax*. Service in the cavalry was limited to wealthier citizens, and the list was updated annually. Aristotle describes how in his day cavalry officials brought the tablet before the Council, which conducted a review of the cavalry. The names of new members were added, while those no longer fit to serve had their names erased.[29]

Financial records were also kept on wood. Lists of state debtors were stored on the Acropolis on wooden tablets, as several sources testify.[30] In addition, officials called "sellers," who leased contracts for collecting taxes, running state-owned mines, and working publicly owned land, recorded the names of lessees and the amounts they owed on whitened boards. This information was erased when payments were made.[31] Payments were collected by officials called "receivers," who noted on a wooden tablet the funds collected and how these were allocated to state officials. The tablet's contents were read out to the Council the day after disbursements were made so that allegations of malfeasance related to the allocation could be addressed.[32] Individual magistrates and boards of officials also kept financial accounts on wooden tablets. We have already seen that the building accounts of the Erechtheion of 408/7 contain an entry recording the purchase of papyrus by the officials overseeing the temple's construction. The same accounts also mention the purchase of two wooden boards on which these officials wrote out their accounts. A later entry from the same year records the purchase of four more wooden boards, perhaps for the same reason.[33]

Use of wooden tablets for accounting purposes invites further comment. The accountability of public officials, especially in financial matters, was a basic principle of Athenian government. In the fourth century all officials who handled public money had to submit accounts for audit throughout the year and when they left office. But the procedure was undoubtedly older, and officials

[28] On these *deme* registers, see David Whitehead, *The Demes of Attica, 508/7- ca. 250 B.C.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 97–104; Hansen, *Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes,* 96–97. Demosthenes 57, the speech *Against Euboulides* which dates from 346, illustrates consultation of the contents of one *deme* register when questions arose about a citizen's status. It must be noted, however, that the contents of the register were not (in this case) regarded as decisive.

[29] Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians,* 49.1–2. For discussion, see Glenn Bugh, *The Horsemen of Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 53–55.

[30] See, for example, Demosthenes 25.69–70; 58.19, 48.

[31] Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians,* 47.3–4.

[32] Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians,* 48.1–2.

[33] *IG* I^3 476, lines 190–92, 291. This inscription is terribly fragmentary, so purchases of additional writing materials may have been recorded in portions of the text now lost.

called "auditors" are attested to already in the 450s. From the references to wooden tablets and rolls of papyrus in the Erechtheion building accounts, it is clear that texts on these materials played a significant role in the process of accountability. Unfortunately, we cannot know with certainty what precise role these documents played or when their use was instituted. We might suppose that officials kept daily records of their financial activities on wooden tablets throughout their term in office. When the time came for these accounts to be audited, officials copied their accounts from wooden tablets to sheets of papyrus, which were then examined by the public auditors and perhaps deposited archivally.[34] Some accounts were ultimately inscribed on stone, but publication came only toward or at the end of a much longer process. The accounts on stone were probably the most visible texts, but in administrative terms they were of secondary importance and derivative by nature. The real business of accountability, by which officials kept track of income and expenses and had their conduct examined for evidence of embezzlement, involved documents made from wood and papyrus.[35]

This brief survey makes clear that writing had an administrative role in Athenian democracy. It should also nullify claims that the public role of writing at Athens was limited largely to exemplary and monumental texts carved on stone. Magistrates received papyrus copies of official texts whose contents were of some concern to them, and these documents offered them the authority they needed as they carried out officially assigned duties. Public officials also kept records, financial and otherwise, of business they handled on wooden tablets and possibly papyrus, records that were later audited by others. Legislative, legal, and military matters were disseminated to the public at large by means of publicly displayed documents on wood. And several public bodies, from the Athenian cavalry to the individual *demes* that made up the Athenian state, maintained lists of their members that were consulted and updated on a regular basis. These uses of writing do not mean that oral practices ceased to function. They do indicate that the written word served administrative functions in the Athenian state. How much contact Athenian citizens had with wooden and papyrus documents is difficult to say, but those who took an interest in public affairs and held public office must have been familiar with some of their uses. The climate of Greece has prevented the survival of these documents, and we must rely on scattered allusions in literary and epigraphical sources for knowledge of their existence. But the greater durability of stone, and the consequent survival to the present day of inscriptions alone, should not cause us to exaggerate their importance or devalue the significance of documents recorded on other media.

[34] Archival deposition of the accounts of state officials is well attested to in the Hellenistic period, but the practice may be much earlier in origin. See Sickinger, *Public Records and Archives*, 122–27.

[35] For an excellent discussion of Athenian accounting practices, and the significance of wooden tablets, cf. John K. Davies, "Accounts and Accountability in Classical Athens," in *Ritual, Finance, Politics. Athenian Democratic Accounts Presented to David Lewis*, 201–12.

Two points, however, related to the keeping of documents on wooden tablets and papyrus by the Athenians, may require further discussion. The first concerns the dating of the evidence. References to official documents on writing tablets and papyrus begin to appear only in the late fifth century, the very period many scholars have identified as crucial in the development of Athenian literacy, when Athens made the move from a predominantly oral to a more literate society. In earlier times, it might be argued, public writing had been restricted to monumental texts on stone, and only toward the end of the fifth century did the uses of writing expand more widely in public affairs. References to documents on wooden tablets and papyrus could be viewed as reflecting this shift, whereby the practical uses of writing gained ground in the late fifth century.[36]

This argument is weak. It is certainly true that many of the documents kept or displayed on wooden tablets and papyrus are first attested in sources dating from the late fifth century. But it is equally true that our sources for most aspects of Athenian society first appear in the very same period, a fact that renders arguments about chronological development extremely tenuous. We cannot exclude the possibility that the practical uses of writing evident in our sources—keeping accounts, publicizing meetings of the Assembly, maintaining lists of *deme* members and cavalrymen—go back to much earlier times. Indeed, papyrus texts are depicted on Attic vases as early as the late sixth century, and wooden tablets are first illustrated in the same period.[37] More important, perhaps, are three statues from the Athenian Acropolis which portray secretaries or scribes, each holding a writing tablet in his lap. Who these officials are is uncertain, but they point to some awareness of recordkeeping or note-taking on writing tablets before 500.[38] Similarly, two Athenian vases, one dating from the late sixth century and the other from the 470s, portray scribes using writing tablets in connection with individuals who appear to be cavalrymen. Do they show an early form of the registration of cavalry members described by Aristotle more than a century later? The exact subject of these depictions, unfortunately, cannot be ascertained, but their early date should caution us against attributing too much significance to the literary evidence, in which documents on wooden tablets and papyrus are first attested to only at much later dates.[39]

[36] On the transition of Athens from an oral to a literate society, see Eric Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Robb, *Literacy and Paideia.* Thomas, *Literacy and Orality,* 96, suggests that Athens became "document-minded" only in the fourth century. According to Hedrick, "Writing, Reading, and Democracy," 173, the end of the fifth century saw a movement toward viewing written texts "as a content, as a thing to be read," and away from their earlier, monumental qualities.

[37] On depictions of writing on papyrus in Attic vase painting, see Henry Immerwahr, "Book Rolls on Attic Vases," in *Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance Studies in Honor of Berthold Louis Ullman,* edited by C. Henderson, Jr. (Rome, 1964), 1: 17–48.

[38] These statues are mentioned by Harris, *Ancient Literacy,* 50, note 23.

[39] For an excellent discussion of these images, see Bugh, *Horsemen of Athens,* 14–20; the vases are illustrated in his figures 1 and 2.

A second point concerning wood and papyrus documents concerns the length of time documents on these materials were preserved. Those advocating minimalist interpretations of Athenian recordkeeping might concede extensive administrative functions for writing, possibly even from early times, but they could argue that Athenian documents on wood and papyrus were ephemeral and perishable. Public notices were displayed on wooden boards for short periods of time, and other documents, like those recording the names of state debtors or others owing money to the state, were erased or destroyed as soon as they had outlived their usefulness. Thus, although other materials were used, stone inscriptions were the only permanent or long-term texts of most documents, and this made them the "most important" documents of the Athenian state, at least until the foundation of the Metroon and possibly even later.[40]

Such an argument has considerable merit, as the life of many documents written on wooden tablets was undoubtedly short. But here too we must guard against sweeping generalizations. We know too little about Athenian documents on papyrus to draw broad conclusions, positive or negative, about their long-term survival. The rolls of papyrus mentioned in the Erechtheion accounts, for example, could have been destined for archival deposition, where their texts might have survived indefinitely, and if papyrus was employed for similar purposes by other officials, the quantity of "permanent" written records on papyrus would have been quite extensive. Even documents on wooden tablets could enjoy lives of considerable duration. The ultimate fate of the *axones* of Drakon and Solon is unknown, but Plutarch claims to have seen some fragments of Solon's *axones* in the first century C.E., and it is not unlikely that they were still intact in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E., centuries after their creation.[41] In addition, leases for sacred lands were regularly granted for periods of ten years, and Aristotle says explicitly that these leases were recorded on whitened wooden boards.[42] These may have been erased as payments were made, but their existence for up to ten years hardly qualifies them as ephemeral.

Lists related to military service could also be kept for long periods of time, despite being recorded on wood. In a speech written by the orator Lysias and dating from the late 390s, an Athenian named Mantitheos responded to charges that he had served in the cavalry under the Thirty Tyrants, an oligarchy that ruled briefly at Athens in the year 404/3. A list of Athenians who served in the cavalry that year, written on a wooden board, evidently survived to the time of the speech, and Mantitheos's opponents claimed that his name was recorded

[40] On the obliteration of documents as characteristic of ancient archives, see Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Record,* 52–60, 82–83; *Literacy and Orality,* 137–40.

[41] On the survival of Solon's laws, see most recently Sickinger, *Public Records and Archives,* 24–33.

[42] For the procedures, see Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians,* 47.2–5. For discussion, including references to leases of up to twenty-five years duration, see Michael Walbank, *Inscriptions: Horoi. Poletai Records. Leases of Public Lands,* vol. 19 of *The Athenian Agora* (Princeton: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1991), 162–63.

on it. A decade later, another speaker referred to the same document and implied that his opponent, Evandros, was also named in it.[43] Both references to this list of cavalrymen are problematic. Mantitheos suggests that the list including his name was inaccurate, and the later speaker's claim that service in the cavalry under the Thirty Tyrants barred an individual from holding elected office may not be true. For our purposes, however, what matters is the tablet's survival for more than twenty years. Its publication on stone was not necessary to ensure its preservation.[44]

Inscriptions themselves, however, offer the best evidence against the view that the only enduring texts of Athenian documents were those preserved in monumental form, i.e., by being inscribed on stone, even before the Metroon's foundation. Hundreds of inscriptions preserving laws, decrees, financial accounts, and other public documents survive from ancient Athens. The earliest, as I have already noted, date from the late sixth century, but their numbers increase from about 450. The types of documents represented within the pool of surviving inscriptions display some curious characteristics. Just under 250 Athenian laws and decrees on stone survive from the period before 404/3. Many of these are so damaged that their subject matter cannot be determined, but of the rest, an extremely large number are decrees awarding honors to individuals, usually foreigners, who had performed a benefaction for Athens. Treaties, alliances, and other types of documents related to foreign affairs are also well represented, as are measures concerned with Athenian cults and religious matters. But only nine of the inscribed laws and decrees of the fifth century deal primarily with domestic matters of a nonreligious nature; that is, very few laws or decrees concerned with the powers of secular public officials, the rights of citizens, the qualifications for political office, or the general administration of justice are represented among the surviving inscriptions on stone.[45]

What can be made of the skewed distribution, in terms of content, of Athenian laws and decrees? To some extent the preponderance of honorary decrees and decrees concerning foreign relations must reflect the actual volume of legislation devoted to such matters. The Athenians commanded a vast naval empire from the 470s, and their citizen-assembly played an active role in

[43] For discussion of this tablet in these speeches, see Bugh, *Horsemen of Athens,* 129–30, 141.

[44] It could be suggested that the tablet mentioned in these speeches did not date from 404/3 but was in fact a later forgery, thus negating the tablet's value as evidence for the extended preservation of texts on wooden tablets. But even Mantitheos does not question the tablet's dating from the year 404/3; he only claims that its contents have been altered. The possible survival of a wooden document for decades is not disputed.

[45] I have counted 240 Athenian laws and decrees on stone before the year 403/2, as published in *IG* I^3. My calculations (which must be regarded as extremely tentative pending further study) of their distribution by content are as follows: 68 honorary decrees (28.33%); 54 treaties and other decrees concerning foreign affairs (22.5%); 33 decrees concerning religious matters (13.75%); 13 sacred laws and calendars (5.42%); 9 laws or decrees concerning domestic, nonreligious matters (3.75%); 63 decrees or laws of unknown contents (26.25%). For similar observations on the distribution of the fifth-century Attic inscriptions, see Henry Immerwahr, *Attic Script* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 121–22.

its administration; thus, decrees on foreign policy and awarding honors to foreign benefactors were frequently passed. But the Athenians also legislated on domestic issues throughout the fifth century, and more frequently than the inscriptions alone would suggest. Aristotle describes a series of laws enacted in the 450s by which the Athenian democracy became more open. One law made the archonship, the chief magistracy of the state, accessible to citizens belonging to a lower property class. Another established a board of traveling judges, so that justice could be administered outside of Athens itself. And in 451/0, the statesman Pericles sponsored a law by which Athenian citizenship was restricted to individuals whose parents were both full-blooded Athenians.[46] The inscriptions of the mid-fifth century, however, contain no trace of these or similar types of measures. It might be supposed that the Athenians simply kept no written records of them. That would be odd, because the Athenians had written laws since the late seventh century, and it is unlikely that they stopped recording legislative acts in a period when literate practices were advancing. Likewise, there is no tradition that the Athenians preserved or transmitted the contents of legislative acts by memory alone. Aristotle's knowledge of these measures must therefore depend on a written source. It is possible that Aristotle learned of them through inscriptions, and that these inscriptions, and others with similar contents, have been entirely lost since Aristotle's time. But why one category of inscriptions—those preserving laws concerning judicial and internal political affairs—should have disappeared so completely, while other classes survive in greater quantity, is extremely difficult to explain.

A simpler explanation for the absence of certain types of documents from the epigraphic record of the fifth century is that the Athenians did not automatically inscribe all laws or decrees on stone. They kept written records of legislative business but published only certain types of measures—honorary decrees, decrees concerning foreign affairs, and legislation governing state religion—in monumental form. Inscriptions, therefore, did not preserve the only official copies of state documents in the fifth century. Even legislative measures from categories well-represented among surviving inscriptions were not always inscribed. At its height the Athenian empire included hundreds of cities, but only about fifty decrees governing relations with these cities are preserved on stone, and of these only about thirty are treaties with individual states. The Athenians certainly maintained treaty relations with others, and inscriptions preserving such treaties undoubtedly have been lost over time. But destruction can hardly have been so absolute. The Athenians probably published on stone only a relatively small number of their treaties with foreign states, while the vast majority were recorded, displayed, and preserved on other materials.[47]

[46] Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians,* 26.2–4.

[47] Michael Walbank, *Athenian Proxenies of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Toronto: Samuel Stevens, 1978), 3–4, notes a similar discrepancy between the number of fifth-century Athenian proxeny decrees, a type of

The texts of several inscriptions support a hypothesis of limited publication and wider archival preservation. One inscription of the late fifth century preserves a series of measures concerning the powers of the Athenian Council and Assembly and part of an oath, possibly the oath sworn by new Councilors when they took office each year. The inscription is fragmentary and its measures are undated, but several phrases within its text are unparalleled in the late fifth century. Their presence has led scholars to conclude that the measures were enacted much earlier, probably in the late sixth century, and only inscribed a century later.[48] In what form the measures existed before their publication is unknown. Given, however, the almost complete absence of legislation similar in nature in the corpus of fifth-century inscriptions, the possibility that they were originally inscribed on stone stelai that were later destroyed seems unlikely. More reasonable is the assumption that they were initially preserved on a "perishable" material, such as wood or papyrus, and kept in some type of archival collection.

Another inscription dating from the 420s offers a less extreme but no less significant example of this practice. The stele preserves traces of four decrees outlining Athenian relations with Methone, a small city in Macedonia, and was set up in the year 423/2. But the first three decrees date from earlier in the 420s. The Athenians apparently had not inscribed the earlier decrees on stone when they were ratified, even though they concerned matters of foreign policy. How then were they preserved? Athenian secretaries can be associated with all four decrees, and each secretary presumably recorded and preserved a copy of the decree enacted in his time in office. When the Athenians decided to publish all four decrees in 423/2, they simply retrieved copies of the earlier ones from the records made and kept by these secretaries.[49]

The phenomenon of delayed publication illustrated in these examples demonstrates the perils of speaking of "stone" archives and of assuming that inscriptions preserved the only official copies of laws, decrees, or other types of Athenian documents in the fifth century or in any period. The evidence simply does not support such conclusions. It does suggest that official documents, whatever their contents, were never automatically inscribed on stone unless publication was specifically ordered. Not every law or decree contained such an order, but the Athenians still kept copies of their texts. That these texts were

honorary decree, and the number of cities in the empire. He suggests that publication of such decrees on stone may itself have been regarded as an "extra" privilege.

[48] The inscription is published as *IG* I³ 105. On its date, see Martin Ostwald, *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 31–40. On the possible archival preservation of the original texts, see Sickinger, *Public Records and Archives,* 57–60.

[49] *IG* I³ 61. On this inscription's significance to archival practice, cf. Russell Meiggs and David Lewis, *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions,* rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 178, concluding that "even important decrees concerning relations with other states could remain in the archives unpublished."

stored in archival collections cannot, of course, be proved. But the survival of documents for many years before their publication requires explanation, and a hypothesis positing preservation in some type of archive is compelling. In the fourth century, archival texts of laws and decrees were housed in the Metroon, the sanctuary of the Mother of the Gods, a building that acquired this function probably in the last decade of the fifth century. Where texts of unpublished Athenian laws and decrees were kept before the Metroon's foundation is less certain, but our ignorance of the location of these archives should not be construed as evidence for their non-existence.[50] The Athenians did have a public official, the secretary of the Council, whose duty was to record items of business that came before the Council and the Assembly. This secretary is attested to in inscriptions from the fifth century, where his chief responsibility was to see to the publication of decrees on stone. That duty, however, was not his principal task; it grew out of a more general responsibility for recording and keeping state records, many of which were never displayed in monumental form.[51] The earlier Methone decrees were probably retrieved from records of this secretary when they were published on stone, and the early regulations on the Council and Assembly may have been kept in the same or similar archives. In neither case did the initial failure to inscribe the measures hinder their survival. What we would like to know is how many other texts sat in archival collections but, unlike the Methone decrees, were never published on stone. Ultimately, this question is unanswerable. But to ignore even the possible existence of such archives means overlooking valuable information about archival development at Athens and the broader functions of writing in Athenian society.

The disappearance of virtually all Athenian archival documents renders any discussion of their history, form, and contents hypothetical, and it would be anachronistic to attribute to these archives a degree of organization, preservation, and sophistication they could never have achieved. Posner's *Archives in the Ancient World* might well be criticized for such anachronism, and recent scholarship is surely correct in calling attention to features of ancient archival practice that fail to fit the neat and tidy picture sometimes implied by Posner's work. But recent scholarship also tends to the opposite extreme in its emphasis on the symbolic, disorderly, and ephemeral nature of Athenian recordkeeping. These features did exist and they deserve further study. But they were not the sole or defining characteristics of Athenian recordkeeping. It is certainly conceivable, as revisionist views argue, that Athenian inscriptions possessed primarily symbolic value. Nonetheless, stone inscriptions were always only a part, and a relatively small one, of the official documents of Athenian

[50] The Bouleuterion, the meeting place of the Council, is regarded as the most likely candidate; see Posner, *Archives in the Ancient World,* 102–3; Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Record,* 74–75; Sickinger, *Public Records and Archives,* 81–83.

[51] On the secretaries of the Athenian state, see P. J. Rhodes, *The Athenian Boule* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 134–43.

society, and nonsymbolic functions of writing were far more extensive than a focus on inscriptions would lead us to believe. Since documents on wood and papyrus do not survive, the extent of their use and preservation will have to remain matters of conjecture. But study of surviving inscriptions and attention to practices like that of delayed publication, as discussed above, show how insights into uninscribed, archival texts can be attained, even in periods when some scholars believe no archives existed.[52] Future work will have to consider how extensive delayed publication was, and what this and other practices illustrated by Athenian inscriptions can tell us about the organization and consultation of other types of documents. The results will not negate the important advances made by scholarship in recent years. They will contribute to a better and more complete understanding of Athenian archival practice and archival history in general.

[52] For another example of delayed publication, in which an inscription of the 340s preserves documentary information dating back to 500, see Sickinger, *Public Records and Archives,* 41–47.