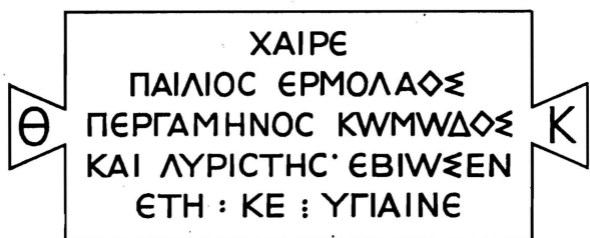


A Greek Inscription found in Malta

On the 27th November, 1951, at a little distance outside the ditch which marks the walls of the Roman town of Melita (now Rabat-Mdina), in an area covered with Roman tombs, a huge stone was found measuring 60 in. in length, 27½ in. in height and 19½ in. in breadth (152.4 cm. × 73.6 cm. × 53.3 cm.). It is a funerary altar with a simply decorated mensa and sides. The back has no decoration and its surface is rough. When excavated the altar was found in a place where the rock was cut to allow of its being placed against it and between it and the wall of rock there was an empty space of a little depth, clearly indicating that the space must have been filled by some architectural structure of a nature slight enough to be completely destroyed at a later date. The front part is considerably decorated and bears the following inscription:



In English: Hail—P(ublius) Ailius Hermolaos, a comedian and harp-player from Pergamon. He lived 25 years. Farewell.

The inscription is written in Greek because Hermolaos was Greek and, presumably, also because Greek along with Latin was up to a point the language of culture of Roman Malta at the time.

On the left-hand side of the inscription, in the triangular space, there is the letter Θ and in that on the right there is the letter Κ. They stand for *θεοῖς καταχθονίοις* which is a Greek translation of Dis Manibus, which, in the abbreviated form D.M. is so often found in Latin sepulchral inscriptions. On the left-hand side of the inscription there is a comedian's mask and, underneath it, an actor's scroll. The lyre on the right-hand side of the inscription points to Hermolaos's proficiency in the playing of that instrument. The hanging decoration surmounting the inscription is either just a decorative element or, perhaps, a decorative wreath with which actors might be crowned. Underneath the inscription there is a hammer and a plectrum used in playing on the musical instrument.

The funerary altar must have been raised in imperial times, in the second century, possibly at the time of Hadrian. The rounded ε, ς, ω for E, Σ, Ω suggest that.

An interesting complementary feature is the fact that a few ashes and remains of broken glass were found not inside or behind the altar but underneath it. Presumably a little space was dug underneath the altar and a glass jar containing the ashes was put in it; in time the altar, by its sheer weight, pressed upon and broke the glass container.

From the discovery of this inscription one or two deductions of an historical nature may be made. In the second century A.D. social life in Roman Malta must have been developed to a considerable extent for drama (and possibly Greek drama) to be enjoyed and appreciated. Although no traces of Roman or Greek theatres have as yet been found in Malta, dramatic entertainments may have been held in the capital city or at least in the private houses of well-to-do people. The name P. Ailius Hermolaos suggests a Greek freedman, perhaps of the Emperor Hadrian (whose full name was P. Aelius Hadrianus). The taking of non-imperial names by

freedmen was relatively infrequent in the second century, and the fact that Hermolaos was an artist points to the same conclusion.

Besides, the place where the funerary altar was found should indicate the place from which one of the Roman roads leading out of the old city started. A number of tombs were also found in the neighbourhood, and there is ample evidence that in Roman Malta cemeteries were built just outside the city gates as in other Roman cities.

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FIG. 1.—INSCRIPTION FROM RABAT-MDINA. ROMAN VILLA MUSEUM, MALTA