

The Relationship between mothers and children in the Delphic Manumission Inscriptions

This paper investigates a set of twenty-nine manumission inscriptions from the Delphic corpus and argues that the presence of the mother-child relationship within these inscriptions significantly benefits the freedwomen and children within their new freed community.

The Delphic manumission records are the largest corpus of manumission inscriptions in the ancient world comprised of 1,237 manumitted slaves (Zelnick-Abramovitz 2005). In 1889, Pomtow first documented Delphic manumission records which were carved into the “Polygonmauer” on smoothed polygonal blocks comprising a retaining wall under the Temple of Delphi; others were carved in the base of prominent public monuments by the side of the Sacred Way (Pomtow 1889). The primary collections of manumission records for the Delphic inscriptions are Die Delphischen Inschriften, in Hermann Collitz’s Sammlung der griechischen Dialekt-Inschriften Volume II, and Daux’s Fouilles de Delphes, Volume III. This large corpus includes one hundred and thirty-three multiple manumission inscriptions from the last two centuries B.C.E., within which a total of three hundred and twenty-three enslaved men and women are freed (Hopkins 1978).

From their initial publishing, the manumission inscriptions at Delphi have enjoyed a rich scholarly history. In his 1978 book, *Conquerors and Slaves* Hopkins offered a detailed analysis of gender, conditional slavery, and origins of slaves. More specifically, his chapter “Between Slavery and Freedom,” and Zelnick-Abramovitz’s 2005 book note the unique presence of a mother-child clause among Delphic manumissions as the only consistently stated relationship between enslaved persons, but do not analyze the anomaly further. Building upon the last two contributions, this paper offers a detailed analysis of the aforementioned Hellenistic multiple

manumission inscriptions, focusing on the twenty-nine ones that free a mother and at least one of her children.

Throughout my analysis, I define the mother-child relationship or mother-child clause as a type of multiple manumission, which explicitly states the maternal relationship between the enslaved persons freed. Such a clause is present in the case of Nicaea and Isthmus, a mother and son pair manumitted between the years of 156-151 B.C.E. and reads, “*αἰ ὄ[v]ομα Νικαία...καὶ τὸν ὑὸν αὐτᾶς Ἴσθμόν*” (SGDI 1689).

In Section 1, I evaluate the manumitted mothers and children using features of epigraphic evidence, such as place of origin, freedom price, conditions of manumission, number of children, and date of manumission, in order to understand the individual’s previous slave community and the freed community that they would be entering. Drawing information from the inscriptions is necessary since “the abundant evidence on slaves’ manumission notwithstanding, we seldom learn about their status after manumission.” (Zelnick-Abramovitz 2009). The same is true in Delphi, where there are a significant number of manumission inscriptions providing ample evidence for the process, but not about life after enslavement. However, my close examination of the set of twenty-nine manumission inscriptions provides enough evidence to make assumptions about the freed lives of both mother and child. In Section 2, I propose that stating such a relationship within the bounds of a manumission contract is beneficial to both the mother and child. The inclusion of the mother-child clause affects the status of the enslaved persons and most especially of the children within the freed community. An official document stating the child’s early manumission and the freed status of his or her mother would positively affect the standing of the child within the freed community. In Section 3, I explain other possible implications of the mother-child clause such as the mother’s relationship to the master, and

consequently the master's potential parentage to the children freed in the inscription. Sexual relationships between male owners and female slaves occurred frequently in antiquity, and the unions regularly produced children. The inscription permanently defines the status of the owner's now free children, limiting or in some cases granting rights to some inheritance.

Such a study lends itself to further research not just on mothers and children in Delphi, but also the manumission inscriptions in the Greek world as a whole.

Works Cited

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