

Literary critics have created an elaborate typology of readers, including, for example, the ideal, the implicit and the resistant reader. In this paper I propose yet another sub-species, since in my view the audience of stone epigrams can best be characterised as “accidental readers”: whereas the reader of epigram books consciously chooses to read the poems presented in a given collection, the reader of an inscription will, in most of the cases, be someone who just happens to pass by. The fact that such a traveler is often addressed as *xeine* or *parhodita* itself suggests that stone epigrams count on an accidental audience. The means by which they try to attract readers may lead to performative self-contradictions, since the common request to stop and read the inscription can only be received by people who have already stopped and are already reading the epigram.

I will examine how some of these poems reflect upon their textuality and take into account the particular circumstances of their reception. A 5th century inscription (CEG 286) begins, for example, by stating *pasin is' anthropois hupokrinomai hostis e[ro]ta* (I give the same answer to all men, whoever asks...) and thus mirrors the unchangeability of a text chiseled on stone (the answer has, indeed, been unaltered to this very day). Whereas that dedicatory epigram addresses any person whatsoever (*hostis*), an epitaph from Alexandria (GV 1312, 2nd c. BC) excludes right from the start illiterate people as possible readers by claiming that *boukoloï andres* and *mêlonomoi* may pass by without noticing the epigram. The two poems are not the only inscriptions to include self-reflexive statements; other texts that I want to discuss (e.g. CEG 108, 429, GV 350, 1312, 1625, 1729) similarly reflect upon the medium and mediation of inscribed poetry, the role of the reader and even the tradition of funerary epitaphs. I would like to argue that, despite their sub-literary status, stone epigrams have developed a self-consciousness that we might rather expect from book poetry (without wanting to deny that the majority of inscriptions are in fact characterised by ready-made formulae and stereotyped motifs).

I am particularly interested in the implications of the setting of inscribed texts and their dependency on the accidental reader. These matters have already been touched upon by P. Bing (“The Un-Read Muse” 2002), who suggests that inscriptions might have been ignored by the majority of passers-by, and most recently by D. Meyer (*Inszeniertes Lesevergnügen* 2005), who analyzes the strategies by which stone epigrams create their fictive authors and audiences. In my talk I extend their observations on the role of the reader and the poetics of texts that are written on stone. If we consider the fact that book epigrams constitute an extremely mobile genre and easily change their contexts, e.g. by wandering from single-authored collections into anthologies, the immobility of epigrams fixed to a monument seems all the more remarkable. And while the ancient metaphor that equates the reading of a poetry collection with a voyage conceives of the reader as a traveler through the book, the passer-by who comes across an inscription is, quite literally, a wanderer.

Hellenistic epigrams represent a strikingly self-conscious genre and it might help us to understand the semantics of this poetry, if we realize that self-reflexive elements are already perceptible in its lapidary origins. A stone “speaking with a silent mouth” (*aphtongô phtengomena stomati*, GV 1745) might not only answer questions that come to our mind when we see the monument, but also reflect upon its status as a medium and thereby transcend the alleged subliterariness of inscriptions.