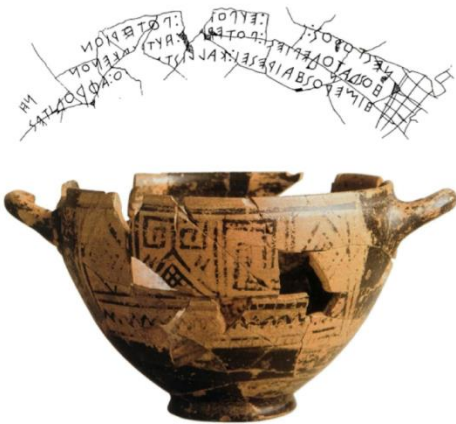


Nestor's Cup in context; combining archaeological and literary approaches to place an inscription and an artefact into its wider social context in the Greek world of the 8th Century BC.



Νέστορος [...] εὔποτ[ον] ποτήριο[ν]·
ὄς δ' ἂν τοῦδε πίησι] ποτηρί[ου] αὐτίκα κῆνον
ἕμερ[ος αἶρ]ήσει καλλιστ[εφάν]ου Ἄφροδίτης.

(?) Nestor's cup, good to drink from.
Whoever drinks from this cup, him straightaway
the desire of beautiful-crowned Aphrodite will seize.

Nestor's Cup, found in 1954 on modern Ischia, remains an enigma to archaeologists and historians; a cup designed for the Symposium and found in the grave of a male child sealed around 700 BC, it displays one of the earliest known inscriptions in the Greek alphabet. This alphabet was adopted from the Phoenicians in the 8th Century BC, and this 3-line inscription is mostly complete and is written in verse in the Euboean dialect. Ischia was known as Pithecussae at this time and was the earliest trading post established by the Greeks in the Western Mediterranean. It was home to a mix of cultures and ethnic groups, including Etruscans, Italian tribes, Phoenicians, and the Greeks themselves. The cup was made in Rhodes, in the Eastern Aegean, and the writing was added later, on top of Geometric style decoration. The Euboean Greeks were proactive in trade in the early Archaic period, and this inscription can be compared with other early Euboean inscriptions.

This cup is a product of the interconnected world that the Greeks were developing at this period, making it significant to scholarship on colonisation. This interconnected world also

confuses our ability to analyse the influences the inscription draws upon, as they may have been varied, and cross cultures.

The name Nestor as the first word of this inscription has generated the most interest in previous scholarship, which is mainly literary in focus. The style of the inscription has caused two opposing views to develop; some (Hansen, 1976) argue that it is a joke appropriate to the drinking parties it was designed for, while others (Faraone, 1996, West, 1994) believe its intent is serious, either a curse or a love potion. The link to the character of Nestor known to us from the Iliad is an uncertain but alluring facet to the inscription.

I will approach this in a more holistic way, using archaeology and anthropology to understand the social context of the artefact, and reviewing previous work on the literary aspect to put the inscription in perspective. I argue the grave's occupant is deserving of as much attention as the literary connections of the inscription.

The main archaeological analyses of the cemetery at Pithecussae do not relate the inscription to its surroundings (Buchner, 1971, Ridgeway, 1992). Stephanie West does use the wider context of the burial to illustrate some of her arguments, and her paper is the most holistic analysis of the inscription. However, while she poses many questions, she does not draw much inspiration from the unusual nature of the burial she details.

In my research, I will build on the work of these academics who have considered the literary style of this inscription and I will use archaeological evidence to corroborate and complement the existing theories regarding who might have written it, and why. The lack of previous scholarship on the relationship of Nestor's Cup and its inscription to the burial context it came from is the reason I think my research would be of value in this field.

The primary question I would like to answer is why this cup and this inscription ended up in the grave of a child/early adolescent. Its symposiastic context seems inappropriate to burial and the grave of this individual is closer to an adult's grave than a child's, when compared to others in the cemetery at Pithecussae.

My methodology will be to start general and briefly analyse the wider Greek world in the late 8th Century BC, the evidence for trade and cultural exchange that is necessitated by trade. I will summarily analyse the cemetery at Pithecussae and comparable sites, like the cemeteries at the slightly later colonies of Cyrene and Massalia, and at Al Mina. This will show how these cemeteries reflect the Greeks' engagement with local populations all over the Mediterranean.

Moving on to the more specific, I will compare this young boy's grave with others in the cemetery, noting also the significance of its location, and whether the graves are arranged in familial/tribal ways. I will question if this is an elite burial, and in this vein, pay heed to the name Nestor, and if such a name might have belonged to the youth. Most importantly, are cups, and other various articles used at ancient symposia, buried with specific types of people? And if so, what does their presence in this young boy's grave tell us about his social status?

Only after using archaeology and general evidence for the Greeks' activities at this time would I turn to the cup itself. The use of Euboean script, the cup's provenance (made in Rhodes), and the other artefacts Nestor's cup was buried with evoke an impression of the cultural context. Given that this cup was likely inscribed for a purpose other than burial, I will research the institution of the symposia in the 8th Century BC, to shed some light on the context of these lines.

After this general research, I will use the existing literary scholarship, and anthropological ideas such as rites of passage in an attempt to link this grave's contents to its owner.

I hope to gain significant insight by researching in this holistic way for the 6 weeks allowed to me in the first summer of the Laidlaw Programme, and would like to visit the museum in Ischia where the cup is currently on display and the cemetery where it was found. Travelling to visit the archaeological site and museum at Ischia would underpin this research project and is the cost I would ask for the Laidlaw Programme to fund, while the rest of the research should be possible with access to the TCD library. A short trip to a specialized classical or archaeological library, such as the Bodleian (University of Oxford) may also be required.

Thank you.

