

Even today hundreds of thousands of inscriptions survive out of many millions once adorning squares, streets, temples and cemeteries of ancient cities. The universal nature of this phenomenon makes inscriptions the primary source in research of classical antiquity. This project deals with inscriptions, mostly in stone, made for display, unlike more utilitarian specimens, e.g. stamps on amphorae. Epigraphy, the academic discipline concerned with inscriptions, holds the opinion that the chronological distribution of inscriptions in stone was very uneven in the period from the inception of the alphabetic writing until the end of antiquity, i.e. from the 9th c. BCE until the 7th c. CE. This is a working hypothesis to be verified in this project with respect to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. In a way this endeavour follows in the footsteps of earlier studies of the chronological distribution of ancient inscriptions, even if they, for the most part, concentrated on Latin epitaphs from the Western Mediterranean. The reason for that is that epitaphs form the dominant part of all surviving Latin inscriptions. Our introductory research shows that nothing of this kind is typical of the Eastern Mediterranean. Therefore this project will count inscriptions within all important categories, such as decrees, honorific and votive inscriptions, and of course epitaphs. In the area under scrutiny here most surviving ancient inscriptions are in Greek, but this project will count inscriptions in Latin, Egyptian, Aramaic and other languages too, to better understand the phenomenon of shifting language prestige in the multiethnic world of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East in antiquity. Since the sheer number of surviving ancient inscriptions makes counting all of them impossible, the only manageable method in study of the chronological distribution of inscriptions is to sample the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East in order to estimate the chronological distribution in this vast area based on a number of case studies. The case studies will sample inscriptions in four discreet territories: 1) continental Greece and the Balkans, 2) islands (Rhodes, Cos, Crete, Delos, Cyprus), 3) Asia Minor, 4) Egypt, the Levant and the East. In every case study first all surviving inscriptions will be identified, their dates established, and then they will be tabulated in 25- and 100-years brackets. Finally the result of tabulating inscriptions will be shown as the epigraphic curve, or graphic presentation of the chronological distribution of ancient inscriptions. The maxima of the epigraphic curve mark the time of the greatest production of inscriptions for display, its minima the decline in the epigraphic production. A series of epigraphic curves drawn for different areas under investigation will lead to important questions on the epigraphic culture in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, whether there was one universal epigraphic culture in this vast territory, or rather a number of epigraphic cultures. If the second is true, further questions will be asked about factors determining the diversity of epigraphic cultures in this area. This project will find where in the Eastern Mediterranean the earliest epigraphic maxima can be identified and then try to verify the working hypothesis of the link between early epigraphic maxima and major temples. An attempt will be made to gauge the influence of major territorial powers (Persian empires, Hellenistic kingdoms, Rome) on the epigraphic culture in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The broad spectrum of epigraphic curves should allow us to understand a possible link between constitution and status of an ancient city and the scope of inscribing, thus verifying the hypothesis of significantly larger epigraphic production in free and democratic Greek cities than in cities ruled by oligarchs or subject to kings. Then the project will assess the influence of the pre-Greek epigraphic habit on the shape of the epigraphic curve in the Hellenistic and Roman age. Finally this project will study how Christianity, the religion dominating in the Roman empire from Constantine the Great on, effected the tendency to commission inscriptions in stone and to display them in public.