

THE POLYGONAL WALL

Dominique Mulliez – In 200 BC precisely, were first engraved on Apollo's sanctuary walls, especially on the great polygonal wall, the Delphic manumission records, which make up the largest collection of texts we know of in Delphi, and possibly in the entire Hellenic world. It consists of nearly 1300 documents, representing contracts, because emancipation in Delphi took the form of a sales contract, as if it were property, land, a house or an animal. So, what does a contract contain? First comes a record of the date, the name of the parties, the object of the sale, that is the slave, with details of gender, origin, sometimes age and profession; then the price is fixed, the transaction value, the slave's new status is defined, guarantee clauses are set out and the contract ends with a list of witnesses.

A slave having no legal capacity was literally a non-person, unable to draw a contract, which is a legal document. So the trick used in Delphi was to entrust Apollo with the purchase of the slave. Obviously, it was the slave who paid. A slave could, with a job, or in return for services, gradually build up savings, which would enable him to pay for his freedom. At the end of the procedure, it can be said that Apollo is the slave's legal owner, the slave enjoying the benefit of freedom.

This very simple and general format saw the addition of a number of clauses. Among these clauses is *paramone*, increasingly in use from the first century BC, which imposes on the slave a duty to remain in service to his master until the latter dies. This *paramone* clause becomes even more stringent from the end of the first century BC and during the first century AD, with slaves having to provide master's descendants with any children who survived infancy, thus ensuring a renewal of labour. This mechanism is a clear indication that emancipation, far from being philanthropic in nature, is the best way to perpetuate and support slavery.

The inscription of manumission documents, especially on the polygonal wall had legal value. For a sale to be deemed valid in Antiquity, two conditions had to be met. The first was that payment had actually been made. Payment of the sum recorded in the contract ensured transfer of property. But transfer of property also had to be binding on third parties. Advertising the transaction made it binding on third parties, and advertising took the form of a permanent inscription on the wall.

These contracts are also very interesting because, in theory, they only affect the fate of one individual, that of a slave who suddenly becomes free, against payment. We can truly say that, in Antiquity, freedom has a price. But the real value of the documents is not in the individual transactions taken singly, but their mass production. We are in the paradoxical situation where private contracts, relating to the most despised elements of the population, form the basis for recording three centuries of the city of Delphi's history. The whole of Delphi's timeline, for the period from 200 BC to 100 AD, is in fact based on manumission records.

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