

# The Marble Dedication of Komon, Son of Asklepiades, from Egypt: Material, Provenance, and Reinforcement of Meaning

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# THE MARBLE DEDICATION OF KOMON, SON OF ASKLEPIADES, FROM EGYPT: MATERIAL, PROVENANCE, AND REINFORCEMENT OF MEANING

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## Abstract

This paper concerns a marble dedicatory plaque inscribed in Greek in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Comprising six lines of exceptional lettering, it was dedicated on behalf of Ptolemy IV Philopater and Ptolemy V Epiphanes by Komon, son of Asklepiades, identified also as *oikonomos* in the region of the Greek settlement at Naukratis. The presence of marble is of great interest because of the rarity of its occurrence in Egypt. Initial testing of the stone was conducted by Norman Herz, University of Georgia, who suggested three possible quarries using isotopic analysis: Doliana, Thassos/Akropolis, and Afyon. The recent study by Donato Attanasio, Istituto di Struttura della Materia del CNR in Rome, includes MGS and EPR properties in the analysis. The results indicate (although attended by some doubts) that the marble is Dokimeion from Afyon or, perhaps, Altintas, thus contributing to further discussion of Dokimeion's range of signatures.

## Keywords

marble sourcing (Dokimeion), Greeks in Egypt, Ptolemaic inscriptions

The subject of this paper is the marble dedication of Komon, son of Asklepiades, to the gods Isis, Sarapis, and Apollo on behalf of the kings Ptolemy IV Philopater and Ptolemy V Epiphanes (Fig. 1). The dedication consists of six lines of text on a modest rectangular plaque measuring 17.7 cm high, 28.0 cm wide, and 2.2 cm to 4.8 cm deep, narrower at the top than at the bottom.<sup>1</sup>

Today the plaque (Inv. 89.2.652) is on permanent display in the Egyptian galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1889 it was given to the Museum by Joseph W. Drexel, who originally acquired it in Thebes together with another, similar, dedication, on limestone, naming Teos, son of Horos.<sup>2</sup> Both of these inscriptions are of interest because of the shared history of their acquisition, the question of their original provenance, and their formulaic texts; but the Komon inscription has the greater textual complexity, very careful lettering despite variation in letterform height, and, above all, is cut on marble. The marble is bright white in color as seen in the broken areas, while the inscribed face is more uniformly oxidized. In my initial examination I judged the grain size to be approximately 1 mm, with a distinctive sparkle. The stone appears to be more decayed on the left than on the right, affecting the preservation of some parts of the inscription. There is evidence of paint, preserved in the final upsilon of the patronymic and other serifs. The pointed chisel was used for finishing the surfaces, as seen especially on the back (Fig. 2); but all surfaces, including the back, are further smoothed. The top lateral face, however, is more finished than the bottom (Figs. 3 and 4). The inscribed face also shows a series of fine lines on its surface, indicating the polishing stage. While it is utterly simple in its presentation, my question has long been, is the plaque as simple as it first appears?

Marble is relatively rare in Egypt and its use is not heavy, certainly not the stone of choice for monumental building or statuary in Pharaonic times. But there were deposits known in three locations, all in the Eastern Desert, only one quarry among them seeming to have been worked in antiquity: Gebel Rokham, near the Wadi Mia. According to Barbara Aston, James Harrell, and Ian Shaw, "The only demonstrated uses of the Gebel Rokham marble are Eighteenth Dynasty sculptures, including several statues of Thutmose III and a few other objects from

1 Author's measurements. My initial study of the inscription was over three days, 30 November 2005–2 December 2005. The difference in depth of the stone from top to bottom is appreciable (more than 2 cm), and this would have reflected the manner of the original installation, probably set into a wall for viewing.

2 MERRIAM 1886; GARDNER 1888, 69, no. 22. See also METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART 1898, 33, no. 345.



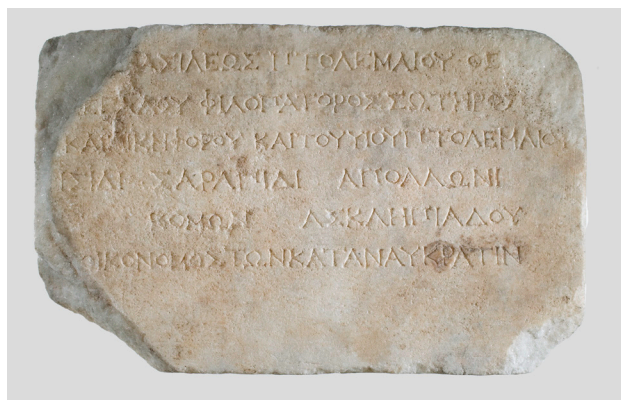


Fig. 1. The Dedication of Komon, son of Asklepiades. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lucy W. Drexel, 1889 (89.2.652)



Fig. 2. Back side of the Dedication of Komon. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lucy W. Drexel, 1889 (89.2.652)

the reigns of Akhenaten and Tutankhamun”.<sup>3</sup> Paul Stanwick gives one representative example of an Eighteenth Dynasty marble statue of Thutmose III from Deir el-Medina,<sup>4</sup> but there are actually more examples in marble for this king, as well as some objects later in the dynasty for Akhenaten, and Tutankhamun.<sup>5</sup> Alfred Lucas mentions the use of marble in Nineteenth Dynasty statuary as well, without specifying a quarry,<sup>6</sup> but unquestionably it is the

same. The evidence for Ptolemaic and especially Roman<sup>7</sup> use of white marble, however, is much more extensive, although Stanwick affirms that in the Ptolemaic Period, because of adherence to Egyptian tradition, it was not the norm: “Most preserved statues are made of granite or limestone . . . though a few are made of marble . . . like Greek-style works”.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, Aston, Harrell, and Shaw state that the white marble used in these periods “may be found to come from Gebel Rokham. Most of this stone, however, was probably imported from sources in the eastern Mediterranean”.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Lucas indicates, “Fragments of foreign marble from Greece have been found in excavations of Alexandria”.<sup>10</sup> In the Ptolemaic Period, therefore, use of marble may be considered a signifier for Greek identity in some capacity of the monument; and if this is true on the royal level, it would necessarily follow in a non-royal dedication such as that of Komon, written in Greek and particularly invoking, as it does, the royal nomenclature.

The identification of the marble, therefore, becomes an important point of entry to the meaning of the plaque and questions of its own provenance. Initial testing of the marble was conducted over ten years ago by Norman Herz at the University of Georgia, using stable isotopic ratio analysis.<sup>11</sup> Three possible quarries were suggested from the isotopic analysis: Doliana (69% probability), Thassos/Akropolis (62% probability), and Afyon (50% probability). Herz identified Doliana as the local quarry in the Peloponnese that supplied the marble for the Temple of Athena Alea at Tegea, but a construction-only quarry. Thassos/Akropolis he associated with the small quarries on the island of Thassos having dolomitic content. Afyon he identified as ancient Dokimeion in Western Turkey, where grain size also matched the “medium-coarse grained” description given by the MET and whose vast quarries were in operation mainly from

Period, he cites Pliny 31.11, whose description of the marble sounds exactly like Gebel Rokham.

3 ASTON, HARRELL, SHAW 2000, 5-77, especially 44. The quarry was studied by BROWN and HARRELL and published in ASMOSIA III (see below, n. 23).

4 STANWICK 2002, 40, n. 1: Cairo JE 43507A. The same statue is listed by ASTON, HARRELL, SHAW 2000, 44, and referred to as “a beautiful small statue of Thutmose III in white marble slightly veined in grey” by LUCAS, ed. HARRIS 1962, 415 and n. 1.

5 ASTON, HARRELL, SHAW 2000, 44.

6 LUCAS, rev. J. R. HARRIS 1962, 415, seems to avoid commenting on the Ptolemaic use of marble; for “marbles of Alexandria”, clearly during the Roman

7 *Ibid.*

8 STANWICK 2002, 34, where he states, “each material [granite or limestone] comprises about 30 percent of Groups A-F in the catalogue, excluding sculptor’s studies/votives”. On p. 97 he further explains that Groups A-E are Ptolemaic royal portraits arranged in a chronological order, including bases; Group F has pieces of uncertain date.

9 ASTON, HARRELL, SHAW 2000, 45.

10 LUCAS 1962, 415.

11 Letter from Norman HERZ to George WHEELER, 18 January 2006. Copy transmitted to author (10 May 2006 via Ann HEYWOOD).





Fig. 3.  
Top lateral face of the  
Dedication of Komon.  
Photograph courtesy  
of the Metropolitan  
Museum of Art, Gift of  
Lucy W. Drexel, 1889  
(89.2.652)



Fig. 4.  
Bottom lateral face  
of the Dedication of  
Komon. Photograph  
courtesy of the  
Metropolitan Museum  
of Art, Gift of Lucy W.  
Drexel, 1889 (89.2.652)

the first century BCE to the sixth century CE. Herz's final recommendation was for Afyon, informing the MET, "... the most probable source is Afyon, a popular quarry in Roman times for statuary".<sup>12</sup>

The recent study made in 2014 by Donato Attanasio at the Istituto di Struttura della Materia del CNR in Rome includes MGS (maximum grain size) and EPR (electron paramagnetic resonance spectroscopy) properties in the analysis. Attanasio opens the report by discussing MGS, which this time is scientifically calculated at 0.95mm.<sup>13</sup> The marble of the Komon dedication therefore qualifies as fine-grained, not medium-to-coarse; and from there Attanasio identifies six possible sites to consider: Carrera, Pentelikon, Hymettos, Dokimeion (Iscehisar with 3 groups), Dokimeion (Altintas), and Göktepe (with 2 groups).<sup>14</sup> The chart showing the five discriminant variables do not, as he puts it, "suggest any obvious fit for the Met sample. Isotopic data seem to indicate Docimium, but are contradicted by the low EPR intensity that would favour alternative provenances such as Hymettos or Göktepe".<sup>15</sup> Further quantitative statistical

analysis of the data was therefore conducted using linear discriminant function analysis and the five discriminant variables. The conclusion favors Dokimeion as the quarry, but it is not possible to make any differentiation between Iscehisar and Altintas. The problem still resides in the low EPR intensity of the marble plaque, but it can be justified. As Attanasio explains, "If Iscehisar is considered as a single group the sample is assigned to Altintas, where samples of lower intensity can be found..."

When Iscehisar is split into three varieties the low intensity group formed by quarries III and IV provides a better fit and Altintas becomes the second choice".<sup>16</sup> The refinements made in this analysis are extremely illuminating, and one can say heartening, because the favoring of Dokimeion does support what Herz also concluded.

We will return to the marble at the end, but the discussion now follows the inscription itself and the nature of this dedication. The content of the text may be said to divide into three parts (Fig. 5).<sup>17</sup> Part I, the first

12 *Ibid.*

13 Report dated 22 July 2014 ("Re-evaluation of the analyses carried out on a marble plaque (inv. 89.2.652) from the Metropolitan Museum of Art"), sent from Attanasio DONATO to Marsha HILL, 22 July 2014 by e-mail attachment, and forwarded to the author on 30 July 2014.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*

17 My own editing of the Komon text differs from BERNAND 1970, 749, only in the dotting of one letterform, the nu of Νικηφόρου in line 3 (we both dot the final upsilon of the patronymic in line 3) and the treatment of the spacing between words, which I consider to be a conscious choice and highly meaningful to the text, and one comma. My full editing and palaeographic analysis is intended to be part of a larger publication on Ptolemaic plaque dedications. My facsimile drawing (Fig. 5) provides evidence for the editorial and palaeo-

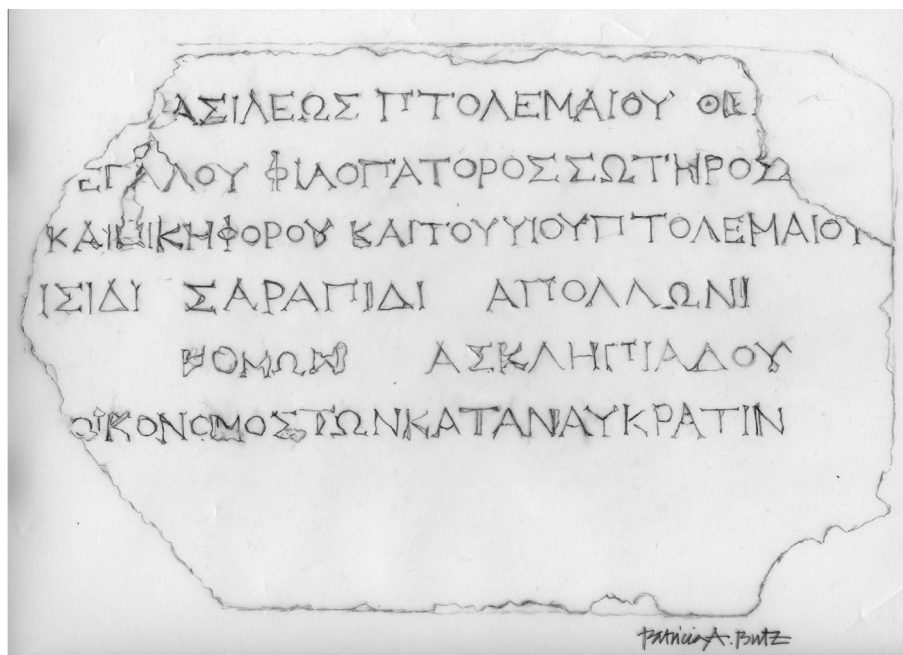


Fig. 5.  
Facsimile drawing of the  
Dedication of Komon (89.2.652).  
Original by author

three lines, constitutes the royal framework within which the dedication takes place: it is made on behalf of Ptolemy IV and his son Ptolemy V--not, and this is the important distinction, to them. The operative preposition is ὑπέρ, albeit restored. Part II is line 4, the dedication proper to the three deities receiving the dedication who are addressed in the dative: Isis, Sarapis, and Apollo. The last two lines compose Part III and concern the dedicator Komon, son of Asklepiades: Komon in the nominative, the patronymic in the genitive, the verb for the dedication understood, then the last line of the inscription amplifying Komon by giving his position as οἰκονόμος, followed by the important descriptor τῶν κατὰ Ναύκρατιν. These three sections are in extraordinary balance with each other and make the reader aware how the focus of the inscription moves around within a very strict formula and is set down physically with great skill. The inscription opens by fulfilling the propriety of giving the royal nomenclature first, then achieves the centralized location of the names of the deities, and finally reveals the dedicator, who comes forward at the end: the only name in the nominative, topped off with a biographical detail of highest significance. Indeed, it is the last line that has prompted more debate than any other part of the inscription because it has to do with the administrative level at which Komon was employed. Naukratis, the famous Greek settlement in the Delta and initial foothold of the authorized Greek population in Egypt under the Saite pharaohs, is in fact the last word of the inscription.

The inscription is extremely fine in its incision,

something I have argued elsewhere is possible only with a fine-grained marble.<sup>18</sup> Despite the control this implies on the part of the letter cutter, there is obvious differentiation in the height of letterforms, making an overall average height difficult to determine, and to a degree this holds true for the round forms as well, which conventionally are smaller. Indeed some major fluctuations within certain lines of text may clearly be observed, the second half of the second and third lines, for example, diminishing somewhat in height but managing to hold on to the end with no internal word division. These are long lines replete, as we shall see, with the epithets of King Ptolemy IV. By contrast, the single names of the three gods exclusively occupy Line 4: Isis, Serapis and Apollo are all very full in formation, some of the largest lettering on the stone, and generously spaced. The initial sigma of Σαράπιδι, for example, measures 11.4 mm high (1.14 cm). If we do settle on an average letter height, it should be 9.0 mm (0.90 cm) and the round forms, specifically the omicron, between 6.0 and 7.0 mm (0.70 cm). The tallest letterform in the inscription is the phi of Line 2, Φιλοπάτορος at 12.8 mm (1.28 cm), and it is instructive to see how it is grounded on the baseline: the vertical, serified on both ends, extending only into the upper zone, not symmetrically struck across the lens-shaped body of the letter. The phi in the following line is more than a millimeter shorter but is positioned the same way. A letterform that the cutter treats distinctively is the omega,

graphic commentary I make here.

18 BUTZ 2010, vii; and referencing articles on the marble of the Hekatompedon Inscription in ASMOSIA III, 65-72, and ASMOSIA IV, 255-260.



Fig. 6. Line 1, detail of the omega from the genitive βασιλέως. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lucy W. Drexel, 1889 (89.2.652)

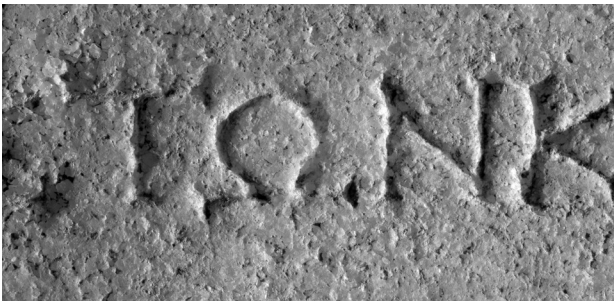


Fig. 6a. Line 6, detail of the omega from the genitive τῶν. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lucy W. Drexel, 1889 (89.2.652)

and one outstanding example of unusual ductus for the omega occurs early in line 1, the genitive for βασιλέως, with three, possibly even four separate strokes clearly visible, especially the swing of the letterform on the right half-circle (second stroke), flowing into the serif; a more conventional, “axial” ordering of the strokes is found in the τῶν of line 6 (Figs. 6 vs. 6a). The facsimile drawing shows this and other variations including the phi as well.

I would not call this differentiation in size and formation irregularity, not for this inscription. The cutter has great flexibility and the palaeography reflects the textual content in striking ways. Going back up to the first three lines, the epithets for Ptolemy IV are four in number and densely packed: θε[οῦ] [μ]εγάλου, Φιλοπάτορος, Σωτήρος, Νικηφόρου. These epithets are perfectly and deliberately culled. The first epithet articulates and secures acknowledgement on the part of Komon of the divinity of his king<sup>19</sup>; the second utilizes the

personal epithet for Ptolemy IV and his queen Arsinoe III, although her name is not on the stone; the third is ancestral, referencing the Lagid founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty, Ptolemy I Soter, and the fourth, without question references Ptolemy IV’s Victory at Raphia, fought on 22 June 217 BCE. Ptolemy V, after this brilliant constellation of epithets pertaining to his father, is simply called “his son”. We could argue which of them is the more powerful, and this is the sophistication of the inscription because Ptolemy V in a very real sense appropriates all of the preceding epithets as well. The dating of this dedication becomes all but absolute, precisely because their names are joined. Ptolemy V was born in 209 BCE and his father died in 204 BCE. At the time of Komon’s dedication, therefore, they were both alive, and that is the five-year time span allotted for the date.<sup>20</sup> The packing of the three lines, all equal in density, was meant to be that way. They constitute half of the inscription, the longest of the three sections, and they get the message of the power and continuity of the dynasty across very strongly.

The contrast with the names of the gods in the next line is striking. We have mentioned the size and separation of these datives on the stone, but the selection and ordering of these deities is likewise very carefully done. Isis and Sarapis (Figs. 7 and 8) constitute a divine couple. Moreover, Sarapis, who occupies the center of the line, is uniquely linked to the Ptolemaic Dynasty in that he was made manifest under Ptolemy I Soter, and consequently changed the religion of Egypt and the Mediterranean world. I use the concept of “made manifest” to tie Sarapis directly to Ptolemy V as well, who is himself Epiphanes. Apollo, the last of the three, reinforces the solar aspect of Sarapis, this time with its Greek ethos (Fig. 9).

The same sensitivity is afforded line 5: Komon’s own name (Fig. 10), which is very short and contains two rounded forms, omicron and omega, inviting natural compression, still manages to occupy its own space despite some damage to the area as well. But his own patronymic, as seen clearly on the drawing, rivals those of the gods in size (Fig. 11). This I find perhaps the most extraordinary part of the inscription. The visual message is “Father-loving” and hence twin to the king’s own epithet. It even prompts the question, did Komon carve this himself? It would not be the first time an official in the Egyptian scribal tradition may have done so.<sup>21</sup> The start

19 More specifically, this epithet is brilliantly split, with θε[οῦ] closing the second line and acting as the visual “partner” of βασιλέως, literally framing and protecting both sides of Ptolemy’s own name. The word [μ]εγάλου opening the third line is a form of enjambment and heralds the three standard epithets to come.

20 BERNAND 1970, 749, no. 13.

21 While radically different in date, the stela of the sculptor Userwer, Twelfth Dynasty of the Middle Kingdom, is such a work referenced in ROBINS 2008, figs. 111, 116, and 117. Robins states on p. 103, “It is tempting to speculate that Userwer was making this stela for himself but did not complete it before he died” (caption to fig. 111).





Fig. 7. Line 4, detail of the dative Ἰσιδι. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lucy W. Drexel, 1889 (89.2.652)



Fig. 8. Line 4, detail of the dative Σαράπιδι. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lucy W. Drexel, 1889 (89.2.652)



Fig. 9. Line 4, detail of the dative Ἀπόλλωνι. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lucy W. Drexel, 1889 (89.2.652)



Fig. 10. Line 5, detail of the name of the dedicator Κόμων. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lucy W. Drexel, 1889 (89.2.652)



Fig. 11. Line 5, detail of the dedicator's patronymic Ἀσκληπιάδου. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lucy W. Drexel, 1889 (89.2.652)

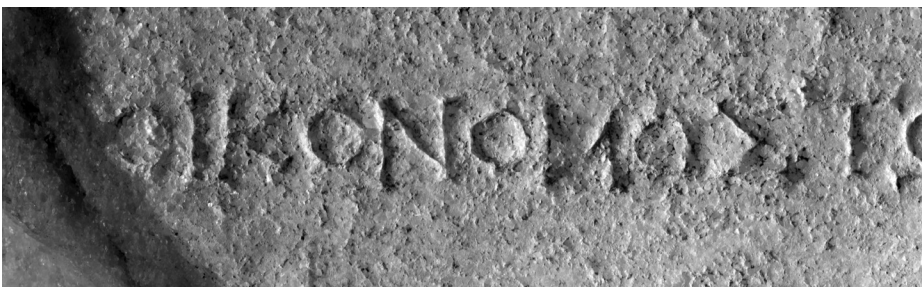


Fig. 12. Line 6, detail of οἰκονόμος. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lucy W. Drexel, 1889 (89.2.652)



Fig. 13. Line 6, detail of κατὰ Ναύκρατιν. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lucy W. Drexel, 1889 (89.2.652)

of the last line follows the more diminutive treatment of Komon's name just above, then opens up full scale to the end with τῶν κατὰ Ναύκρατιν. This last line I have already mentioned as the most debated in the inscription for two reasons: 1) how the terminology for the position Komon held (Fig. 12) relates to the nature of his authority in the Ptolemaic administrative system and 2) how that authority concerns the location of Naukratis (Fig. 13). According to André Bernand, οἰκονόμος translates at some level of administrative stewardship as opposed to ταμίας, which has been used by some scholars to describe Komon's duties. Bernand makes clear that the latter is a treasurer, hence occupied with financial management and security.<sup>22</sup> The plural genitive τῶν is also examined, whether it should be thought of as masculine plural, relating to the individuals or inhabitants of Naukratis; or neuter plural, relating to the resources or items of reckoning of Naukratis under Komon's jurisdiction. Bernand prefers the neuter plural and concludes by stating: Personellement, interprétant τῶν comme un neutre, nous voyons là l'indication du territoire de Naukratis. Komon nous paraît donc être intendant des propriétés de l'État situées dans la région de Naukratis. S'il est fonctionnaire royal, on s'expliquerait mieux que cette pierre le mentionnant ait pu, ce qui n'est pas prouvé, provenir de Thèbes, car ses fonctions ne le retenaient pas toujours à Naukratis. D'autre part, il avait un intérêt bien compréhensible à faire cette dédicace au nom du souverain régnant.<sup>23</sup>

Bernand's last remark is fully in accord with my own analysis of the first three lines of the dedication: Komon has every reason to spend half of the inscription on the names of his rulers, especially if he is a royal official. It also explains why, even though Bernand catalogued the plaque together with the inscriptions of Naukratis, he himself recognizes the provenance of the plaque could actually be Thebes where Drexel bought it in 1907. Significantly, there is no ethnic following the patronymic to link Komon in that way to Naukratis.

Provenance brings us back to the marble for the conclusion. There is one drawback to the Dokimeion identification that does not have to do with the substantive analysis of the marble: that is chronology. As stated above, Dokimeion was active from the first century BCE through the sixth century CE and considered, therefore, a major Roman quarry throughout imperial times. Evidence for tooling has been one of its contributions to marble studies; and fifty years ago Angelina Dworakowska discussed evidence for the use of the saw for cutting

thin slabs in Roman times from these quarries.<sup>24</sup> Hellenistic use is not ruled impossible, but the end of the third century BCE, the date of the Komon inscription, is definitely early. I have considered another possibility for the marble, that instead of being imported from Greece it could have been native, obtained from Gebel Rokham if in use during the Ptolemaic period.<sup>25</sup> The quarry and its topographical associations with the Wadi Mia in the Eastern Desert were studied in a publication by V. Max Brown and James Harrell in *ASMOSIA III*, and the probable Roman use was discussed: The Romans were surely aware of the ancient marble quarry and, given their great interest in this type of stone, would have worked the site. This seems all the more likely given that this was the only ancient source of white marble in Egypt. The marble thus obtained was probably only used in Egypt as such stone was already abundantly available elsewhere in the Roman empire. In terms of both its isotopic character (Table 4) and brucite content (Tables 2 and 3), this marble appears to be compositionally unique among the known white marbles in the Mediterranean region.<sup>26</sup>

Nothing more definitive is said about the Ptolemaic period, however, and this area is worthy of further investigation and the testing of actual objects as well. Brown and Harrell do give the isotopic analysis for six different subsamples from the Wadi Mia, the delta-13-carbon ranging between 3.18 and 3.54 with a mean of 3.45, and the delta-eighteen-oxygen between -11.47 and -12.25 with a mean of -11.91.<sup>27</sup> While the Komon dedication may answer visually to some aspects of the coloration and fine-grained descriptions of the Gebel Rokham marble,<sup>28</sup> the isotopic analysis is very different:

24 DWORAKOWSKA, trans. KOZLOWSKA 1975, 133 and n. 99.

25 DE PUTTER, KARLSHAUSEN 1992, 110. De Putter and Karlshausen do not rule out the possibility of Ptolemaic and Roman usage of the Gebel Rokham quarry either.

26 BROWN, HARRELL 1995, 221-234, especially 231.

27 *Ibid.*, Table 4.

28 DE PUTTER, KARLSHAUSEN 1992, 108-109 and pls. 54e-f, plaquettes 20-21, which show the strong white marble with additional white and grey streaks, sometimes with yellow and beige bands and small marks of grey or black. The opacity would certainly be considered desirable by the Egyptians in my opinion, but the brilliance of the marble is also mentioned by HARRELL 2013, accessed 04/23/2015. He describes the Gebel Rokham marble as "white with even brighter white veins" (p. 6) and shows an outstanding color image of it, literally "white on white" (p. 13). The MET plaque has certain of these qualities.

22 BERNAND 1970, 775.

23 *Ibid.*, 776.



2.41 for carbon and -5.06 for oxygen were the figures obtained for the isotopic analysis performed by Norman Herz. It seems that the marble for the plaque cannot have come from Egypt, attractive as that alternative might be. It therefore must have been imported and probably from Dokimeion, which now requires much more study for its Hellenistic role as a quarry. Most importantly, the dedication marks Komon as a Greek in a complex and heterogeneous society by two important means: his use of the language and his choice of marble, with the inscription perhaps of his own workmanship, certainly of his direction.

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