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The key to Hermione?

Notes on an inscribed monument

Abstract

This article discusses an inscribed monument found during rescue excavations in the ancient city of Hermione. It provides an *editio princeps* for the one-word inscription and discusses the symbolism of its relief depiction of a temple key. The examination of the monument is followed by a discussion proposing a new perspective on how to approach the religious milieu of ancient Hermione.*

Keywords: Hermione, Hermion, Greek epigraphy, temple key, priestess, priest, funerary monument, honorary statue, Greek personal names, Greek religion, key-bearer, keyholder

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Introduction

It is the fate of many an ancient inscription to end up in a secondary context, be it as a building block for a later monument or placed in a corner somewhere in the company of stray stones. Outside the Ermioni city hall stand a few such pieces, among them a squarish monument. The stone was found in the modern city of Ermioni during rescue excavations conducted by the Ephorate of Antiquities of the Argolid. The find-spot lies in the vicinity of ancient Hermione's necropolis and one

of its city gates (*Fig. 1*).¹ A quick glance identifies this stone as a statue base, with its upper part damaged and so missing traces of feet, attachments, or other cuttings for a sculpture. However, the object was originally described to me not as a sculpture base, but as an altar. Indeed, an inscription, featuring a presumed name in the genitive case, and running horizontally on the front face of the stone befits such an object: ΔΕΞΙΟΥ. Was this then the altar of a hitherto-unknown deity called Dexios, or one of a god with this designation as his epithet? Considering that a relief depiction of what is usually understood as a temple key runs through the inscribed name (*Figs. 2, 3*), we should perhaps seek another interpretation. The inscription is perhaps more likely to be an anthroponym than a cult epithet? This article offers the *editio princeps* of this seemingly modest one-word inscription which nevertheless exhibits a panoply of challenges and problems in the interpretation of ancient sources. The monument in its entirety, i.e., the words integrated with the materiality of the monument, is the point of departure for an attempt at discussing the object in various possible contexts.

The inscribed monument

Rectangular monument of grey limestone streaked with white. Dimensions: height: 0.92 m; width: 0.57–0.65 m; depth: 0.65 m; letter height 0.025 (Ξ)–0.06 m (Υ).

The front side is worked smooth with marks of claw chisel still faintly visible. Its upper right corner is very damaged, otherwise the front is quite well preserved and features a one-

* I wish to thank the Director of the Ephorate of Antiquities of the Argolis, Dr Alcestis Papadimitriou, for the opportunity to publish this monument. I am also very grateful for the comments of Prof. Nikolaos Papazarkadas, Prof. Henrik Gerding, Dr Jesper Blid, and Peder Flemestad, as well as those of the anonymous reviewers, all of which made valuable contributions to my article. Any remaining mistakes are of course my own.

Editorial note: The section on Hermione, published in *OpAthRom* 14, comprises six articles: Papadimitriou 2021; Gerding 2021; Blid 2021; Klingborg 2021; Kossyva 2021; this contribution by Jenny Wallensten.

¹ The inscription was found in 2008 during rescue excavations in connection with sewage treatment works, in a deep trench under the main street entering Hermione from Kranidi. It appears to have been reused in a wall outside the city gate.



Fig. 1. Find-spot of the temple key monument in the vicinity of the city gate and the necropolis of Hermione. For the extent of the ancient necropolis, see Kossyva 2021, fig. 1; for the location of the city gate, see Gerding 2021, fig. 3.15. By Patrik Klingborg, basemap by Google, ©CNES/Airbus, European Space Imaging, Landsat/Copernicus, Maxar Technologies, Map data 2021.

word inscription carved on both sides of a relief depiction of a temple key (Figs. 2–4). The right side of the monument is very damaged, especially its upper left corner and its right side. Its surface is eroded, but there are still visible chisel marks and it is possible that it was once as smooth as the front side. The left side of the monument could not be closely examined due to its placement close to a metal fence. It is, however, clearly better preserved than the right side, with the exception of its upper left corner. The back side of the stone is in a very poor state of preservation, especially its upper part, upper right corner, and left side. It shows a whitish discolouration and heavy incrustations on its lower part. Claw chisel marks indicate that the original surface was once relatively smooth. The upper surface of the monument is uneven and rough.

INSCRIPTION

ΔΕΞΙΟΥ

(of) Dexios *vel* (of) Dexion

EPIGRAPHICAL REMARKS

The one-word inscription is easily legible, although the iota is somewhat faintly preserved and the endings of the horizontal strokes, especially of epsilon and xi, are quite eroded. In earlier photographs, epsilon and xi show hints of serifs (Figs. 3–4). The letters are clear but not especially carefully carved and they vary considerably in size from the small initial delta (0.027 m) and the xi (0.025 m) to the substantially larger final ypsilon (0.060 m). The individual letters are spaced relatively regularly with a 0.035–0.041 m distance between letters, with a somewhat larger distance between the letters on the right side. The inscription as a whole is not centrally placed (dis-

tance from left side to delta, 0.065 m, but distance from ypsilon to right side, 0.13 m). In fact, the inscription seems to adapt to the relief depiction, with three letters placed to the left, and three letters to the right of the temple key.²

The letters to the left of the relief seem to be executed with more attention than the ones to the right. The delta—not equilateral—is fairly small. It is aligned with the upper stroke of the second letter, epsilon, but placed well above the lower horizontal strikes of the following epsilon and xi. The lower horizontal epsilon stroke may slope downwards and show a possible serif, but its eroded state makes this uncertain (the same holds true for the lower horizontal stroke of the xi, left side). The middle hasta of epsilon is shorter than the upper and lower ones; the middle hasta of xi considerably shorter than the other horizontals (upper, 0.046 m; middle, 0.017 m; lower, 0.051 m). The xi is not aligned with the upper, nor the lower hasta of epsilon and features no vertical stroke.

On the right side of the relief, the letter iota is quite eroded but its upper point seems aligned with the upper hasta of xi and its lower part may slope slightly to the left.³ The omicron floats above the (possible) bottom line, whereas the ypsilon extends well below all other letters. The upper hasta of the ypsilon create an open letter shape; the vertical hasta is long and reaches well below the bottom line.

² Dr Jesper Blid suggests that the letter cutter wanted to centre the text, but since the key turns to the left, he tried to rectify the asymmetry by increasing the distance between the letters on the right side (pers. comm.).

³ Faint cuttings by the middle of the iota, which may be taken as the middle hasta of an epsilon, are traces of the smoothing of the surface. These cuttings are made with a tool other than that used for the letters (Blid, pers. comm.).



Fig. 2. The monument today. Photograph by Jenny Wallensten.



Fig. 3. The monument c. 20 years ago. Courtesy of The Ephorate of Antiquities in the Argolid.

The available epigraphic corpus of Hermione is not extensive. Many recorded inscriptions have disappeared since their discovery and thus the dating of inscriptions based on local letter forms can (as always) only be indicative. More importantly, our one-word inscription does not feature many letters for comparison. However, the squeeze of a dedication to Demeter published by Jean Marcadé in 1949 shows similarities as regards the small, floating omicron, the shorter middle hasta of epsilon, the long iota, and the open ypsilon.⁴ Michael Jameson and the *Lexicon of Greek personal names (LGPN)* place the dedicator Euphoros and his inscription in the 4th century BC.⁵ Bearing in mind the uncertainty involved in dating inscriptions through letter forms, I suggest a date in the late 4th–3rd centuries BC.⁶

⁴ Marcadé 1949, 537. My colleague Peder Flemestad has pointed out to me the curiosity of the large ypsilon. He notes that in Jeffery's table of early letter forms of the east Argolid in *LSAG*, p. 174, has two types of ypsilon, and that only υ2 conforms to the present inscription, but that it is in a V-shape without the vertical hasta. Flemestad asks whether the vertical hasta of the ypsilon could be explained as a later addition in order to update the inscription, since the putative original V form of the letter seems to correspond in size to the other letters of the inscription. Did the *polis* or potentially a descendant of Dexios attempt to update the letter in some way? Or is the inscription in fact later? (pers. comm.). Because of the few letters of the inscription, this may remain a possibility, however, the similarity of the other letters to the inscription published by Marcadé makes me inclined to keep a date in the 4th century BC.

⁵ *LGPN* Εὐφωρος 3a; Jameson 1953, 152.

⁶ I warmly thank Prof. Nikolaos Papazarkadas for helpful discussions on the issue with me.

THE RELIEF

Centrally placed on the front face of the stone is a relief depiction of a twice-bent bar, 0.51 m in length, 0.02 m wide; featuring a curved bend turning towards the left. The depiction ends in a “double” knob, where a first oval-shaped protrusion is crowned by a smaller trefoil. The image may be identified as what is usually interpreted as a representation of a temple key.⁷ The present depiction is of an unusually elegant execution, to which I have found no good comparanda, suggesting that it should be accorded importance. No similar double knob is included in Alexandros G. Mantis' fundamental iconographic study from 1990, *Προβλήματα της εικονογραφίας των ιερειών και των ιερέων στην αρχαία ελληνική τέχνη*. The curved bend that turns upwards at an angle larger than 90 degrees finds its closest parallels in Mantis' drawings K 1, K 2, K 42–44, and K 50. The first two are based on metal votive keys datable to the

⁷ The type is often referred to as a “Homeric key” or less frequently “the Key of Penelope” (Connelly 2007, 92; Kosmopoulou 2001, 294; Scholl 1996, 137) although recent scholarship prefers the more neutral “temple key” (Karatas 2019, 2). In a recent article, which gives a preliminary overview of evidence for such objects in southern Italy, the author argues that objects identified as temple keys are ambiguous and that they may possibly have been used in textile production, especially for spinning as distaffs (Quercia 2017). After a discussion of the function of distaffs in Classical antiquity, the technical possibility of so-called temple keys as a textile tool is treated in light of extant specimens from southern Italy. The final remarks conclude by stating that the paucity of the collected data only allows for open questions and to stimulate further debate. I owe this reference to P. Flemestad.

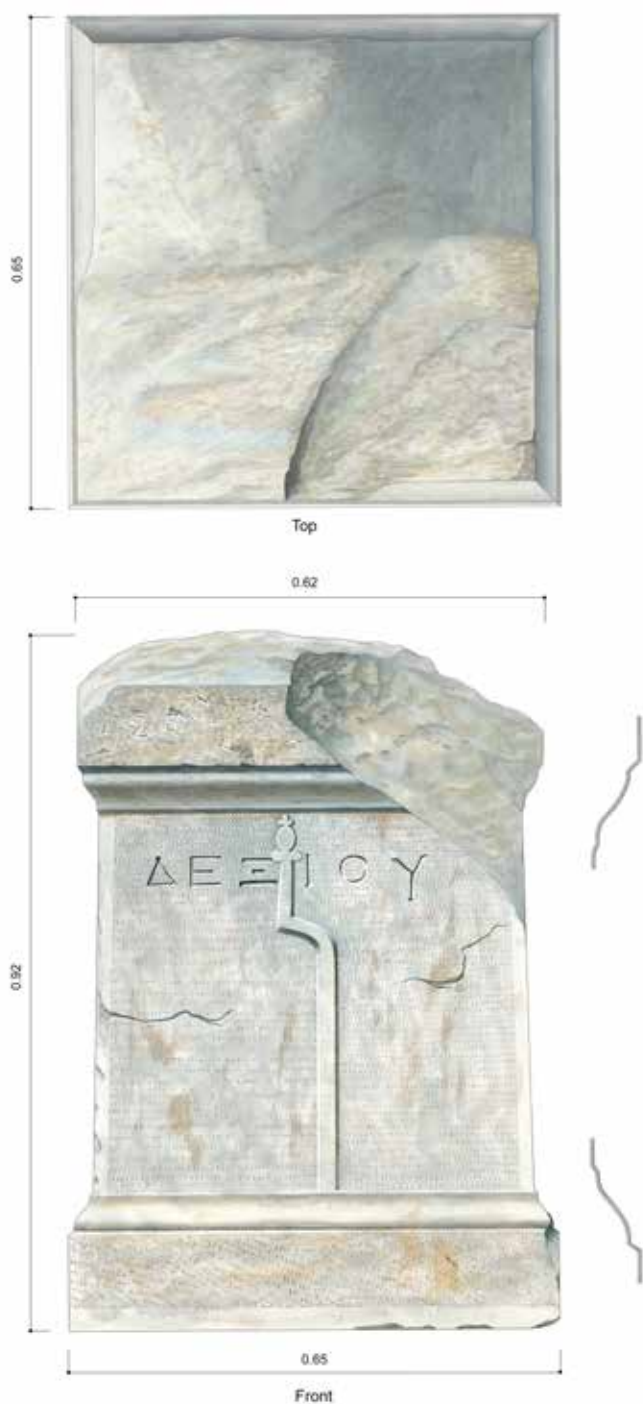


Fig. 4. The monument. Measurements are shown in m. Drawing by Jesper Blid.

5th century BC.⁸ The four latter examples are depictions of temple keys found in vase-painting, datable to 350/325 BC,

⁸ Mantis 1983, 146. K 1 is the famous bronze key found in the Sanctuary of Artemis at Lousioi. K 2 illustrates iron keys from the Sanctuary of Apollon at Halieis.

375/350 BC, 380/370 BC, and *c.* 370 BC respectively.⁹ We can furthermore note that Dr Jesper Blid, who has made a reconstruction of the Temple of Demeter Chthonia of Hermione (Blid 2021 in this volume) notes similarities between the

⁹ Mantis 1983, 63 I8, 62 I3, 67 Π11, 69 Π9.

chisel work on the temple blocks, dateable to c. 400 BC, and on this stone.¹⁰

Epigraphical, literary, and iconographical comments on the relief key

EPIGRAPHY

The carved temple key immediately calls to mind the office of the *kleidouchos*, the keyholder, as well as similar titles: *kleidophoros*, *kleiko-*, *klaiko-* or *klakophoros*. As a title attested in the epigraphic sources, it denoted both male and female priests as well as other cult officials of a large number of deities, the latter probably not tied to the same duties in all identified cases.¹¹ Overall, as Aynur-Michèle-Sara Karatas has shown, epigraphically attested *kleidouchoi* known from Mainland Greece and Delos are almost all male, although we note the dedication to Artemis of a *klakophoros* named Myrto in Apollonia.¹² In Delos, for example, we have proud families dedicating statues of their sons having held the title, and male *kleidouchoi* are also mentioned among other religious officials in documents from Athens and Elis. In contrast, women dominate the identified key-bearers of Asia Minor. The prestigious role of *kleidophoros* in the cult of Hekate at Lagina was however usually held by girl.¹³

We can furthermore note the existence of a different kind of key in a sanctuary context, used for *thesauroi*, offering boxes meant to hold coin dedications or fees. To hold the key for such an installation was, for example, one of the duties of the

“sacred men” of the Mysteries of Andania, and among the responsibilities of the priest and *prostatai* in the Sanctuary of Asklepios in Kos.¹⁴

LITERATURE

We can furthermore add that the literary sources also mention both male and female keyholders, sometimes literal keyholders such as in the case of priestesses in charge of a temple, sometimes in a more metaphorical sense. Euripides makes Iphigenia the priestess of Artemis, *kleidouchos* of the goddess, and Kallimachos narrates how Demeter takes the shape of her own priestess, appearing with a large key hanging on her shoulder.¹⁵ Hekate is *kleidouchos* in the Orphic hymn,¹⁶ Eros is referred to as *kleidouchos* of Aphrodite’s chamber, as is Aiaikos, judge of the dead. Athena herself was called *kleidouchos* of Athens in Aristophanes’ *Women at the Thesmophoria*.¹⁷

ICONOGRAPHY

Keyholders are also well-known from iconography. In an interesting contrast to the epigraphic evidence, images of male keyholders are rare. Among these few representations an Apulian krater now in the Louvre is noteworthy: it features Chryses carrying a key when trying to ransom his daughter; another example is a depiction of Hades holding the key to the gates of the Netherworld in the pediment of the famous Tomb of the Palmettes in Mieza. The upper part of a relief picturing a bearded man with a key on his right shoulder has been found in Argos.¹⁸ In addition, a fragmentary male figurine holding a key in his left hand, identified as Plouton by Mantis, has been found in Lokroi, and Rudolf Herzog found a keyholding male statuette in Kos.¹⁹ Pausanias described a table in Olympia, on which the crowns of the victors were displayed: this table is

¹⁰ Pers. comm.

¹¹ Karatas 2019, 6, 14; Zoubaki 2001, 126; Mantis 1990. For possible Bronze Age key-bearers, see Vermeule 1974, 71; Ventris & Chadwick 1973, 551 (ka-ra-wi-po-ro); Aura Jorro 1985, s.v. ka-ra-wi-po-ro; Karatas 2019, 5–6. Variety of Delian deities with *kleidouchoi* servants: Deonna 1938, 249.

¹² Karatas 2019, 15. Male *kleidouchoi*: Delos: see for example *ID* 1830 (150–100 BC), 1875 (c. 130 BC), 1876 (1st century BC), 1891 (106/105 BC), 1892 (96/95 BC). Attica, see for example *IG* II² 1944 (4th–1st century BC), 3798 (119/120 AD). Elis, see for example *IvO* 64 (28–24 BC), 65 (20–16 BC), and Zoubaki 2001, 126–127. For the collected epigraphic evidence, see Karatas 2019. For Myrto, see specifically Quantin 2004, 596–600 (3rd/2nd centuries BC = *SEG* 54 586, dedication of woman/girl *klakophoros* of Apollonia). Scholars do not always separate the respective characters of a *kleidouchos* and a *kleidophoros*/*klaikophoros*. Although it cannot be discussed within the present study, it seems to me that this would be a necessary and interesting exploration. Quantin 2004 opens the discussion, comparing “keeping” the temple key, and “carrying” the temple key (in a procession, for example). He believes that the two terms are not interchangeable, but related, perhaps the *kleidophoros* carries the key of the *kleidouchos* priestess?

¹³ Karatas 2019, 29. For an overview of key-bearers in the cult of Hekate in Lagina, see 27–34. For epigraphic attestations of female *kleidophoroi*, see for example *IStratonikeia* 707–710, 712.

¹⁴ *IG* V.1 1390 ll. 89–95, with excellent commentary in Gawlinski 2012; Deshours 2006. For the Asklepieion on Kos, see *LSCG* 155, 159, 163 & 164; Parker & Obbink 2001, no. 4a, 237–243. I thank Peder Flemestad for drawing my attention to these keys.

¹⁵ Eur. *IT*, 131, 1463; Callim. *Hymn* 6, 44. The term used in Kallimachos is *κλειδα*, Doric for *κλειδα*, see Stephens 2015, 284. She is thus not specifically referred to as a keyholder, but in fact appears as one, i.e., a priestess with her temple key.

¹⁶ Hymn. Orph. Musaios, l. 7.

¹⁷ Eur. *Hipp.* 541, with Barrett’s comment: “the person who holds the keys of a place controls admission to it; here Eros holds the keys of Aph.’s chambers because *ἔρως*, sexual desire, is the necessary antecedent to the *ἔργα* Ἀφροδίτης. (Similarly, Persuasion holds the same keys at Pi. *P.* 9.39(...)).” Barrett 1964, 261; AP *παράτρ.* 236; Ar. *Thesm.* 1142. Sommerstein 1994, 231 suggest this could be a cult title of Athena, but this has been refuted by other scholars.

¹⁸ Piteros 1995, 91 = *SEG* 48 411. A date in the 4th century BC is proposed.

¹⁹ Louvre Museum K1, the unique vase image of Chryses as key-bearer (cf. Mantis 1990, 83); Mieza: Rhomiopoulou & Schmidt-Doumas 2010, 75 pl. 9; Lokroi: Mantis 1990, 35, pl. 6b (I thank an anonymous reviewer

said to feature the image of Plouton holding a key, for “they say that what is called Hades has been locked up by Pluto, and that nobody will return back again therefrom.”²⁰

Furthermore, certain of the previously mentioned inscriptions are assumed to have been accompanied by images of key-bearers: three bases of what have been assumed to be statues of *kleidouchoi* have been found in Delos.²¹ However, the large temple key, i.e., a bar, twice bent either straight in 90 degrees or slightly curved, is certainly the attribute *par excellence* of the Greek priestess as responsible for the locking and unlocking of the temple and so the safeguarding the treasures within.²² The iconography of the key-bearing priestess is securely established by the late 6th or early 5th century BC.²³ There are numerous examples of keys identifying priestesses in especially South Italian vase-painting, and often in representations thought to be connected to dramatic performances.²⁴ Often these priestesses are identified as well-known figures from myth, such as Io, *kleidouchos* of Hera, or Theano, Athena’s priestess in Troy.²⁵ In fact, Hera herself is also a key-bearer; she appears literally armed with a key in gigantomachy scenes, thus becoming a prototypical key-bearer for her priestesses.²⁶ Priestesses carrying their temple key as an identifier are also depicted on votive or decree reliefs,²⁷ and perhaps free-standing honorary statues

as well. The Classical sculptors Pheidias and Euphranor were both credited with famous large-scale images of *kleidouchoi*, probably to be identified with images of priestesses.²⁸

Furthermore, carved temple keys as symbols of priestesses also adorned grave monuments of different types. Series of such monuments have been identified from Boiotian and Attic contexts, and single examples are known from Argos, Smyrna, and Taras; all datable from the 4th to the 1st centuries BC.²⁹ During the Classical period the priestess herself is usually pictured. Sometimes she is the deceased, sometimes she appears among the close relatives of the departed. A priesthood must have brought much prestige for these women, as indicated by the inclusion of their professional attributes even when they are not the focal point of the relief.³⁰ As Joan Breton Connelly notes, the term priestess, *hiereia*, appears rarely on Classical (Attic) grave stelai; instead visual cues were used, such as the temple key or other symbols of the specific cult in question. Later, in the Hellenistic period, at least in Athens and Thebes, the temple key has become such a clear symbol of female priestly office that it can be carved without an accompanying image of the priestess, in Athens on *kioniskoi* and in Boiotia on so-called funerary altars.³¹

for highlighting these three references); Kos: Herzog 1901, 136. See overall Mantis 1990, 82–96.

²⁰ Paus. 5.20.3, transl. Jones & Ormerod 1926.

²¹ Marcadé 1957, 50, 53, 54. *ID* 1892 (p. 53) shows cuttings for the feet of a bronze statue. Of course, if portrait statues of the *kleidouchoi*, we know nothing about their appearance or attributes.

²² Connelly 2008, 189 (“...temple-key, the pre-eminent signifier of female priesthood”), 191; von den Hoff 2008, 117; Zombaki 2001, 126–127; Lissarague 2000, 60; Scholl 1996, 136–137.

²³ Karatas 2019; Fletcher 2017, 495; Connelly 2007, 92.

²⁴ Connelly moreover proposes that actors playing priestesses held large keys to communicate their identity (2008, 191; 2007, 98–103), cf. Karatas 2019, 10. Karatas 2019, 8–9 lists two Attic vessels with female key-bearers: Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 08.417 and Museo Nazionale di Spina T. 1145). Cf. Quercia 2017.

²⁵ Io as Hera’s (first) priestess, Aesch. *Suppl.* 291–292; *FGrH* 2 F6; the previously mentioned red-figure hydria, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 08.417. Some scholars identify the key-bearing woman with Hera herself, Mantis 1990, 33. Theano, see for example the famous prayer episode: Hom. *Il.* 6.300; red-figure amphora, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum 724 (261); red-figure hydria, London, British Museum F 209. For a recent collection of the evidence, see Karatas 2019. Karatas furthermore shows that in the realm of vase-painting, all mythical figures represented as key-holders are mortal. I thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

²⁶ Mantis 1990, 32–34: Attic red-figure krater, London, British Museum E 469 (Mantis 1990, pls. 7b–c); Attic red-figure krater, Basel, Antikenmuseum (Mantis 1990, pl. 8).

²⁷ Scholl 1996, 138–139; Mantis 1990, 40. Honorary or decree stele, see for example Berlin, Antikensammlung Sk 882, with Pilz 2013, 158, n. 12; Keesling 2012, 495, n. 88; Connelly 2008, 189–190, fig. 3. Lambert cautions that this may be a dedication commemorating honours, Lambert 2007, 130. For the identity (divine or not) of the key-bearer in a votive relief from Lebadeia, now in the Athens, National Archaeological Museum inv. 3942: Mantis 1990, 35–36, 40; Karouzos 1967, 135 inv. 3942;

Thönges-Stringaris 1965, 63, pl. 30.1; Nilsson 1950, 615–616; Walter 1939, 66, n. 68.

²⁸ Connelly 2008, 191, who proposes that the well-known base of the statue of the priestess Lysimache once carried a portrait of the woman as a key-bearer; cf. Palagia 1980, 40–41 with valuable references.

²⁹ Karatas 2019, 10–13, table 2 lists 13 stelai datable from the 4th century BC to the Imperial period: Connelly 2007, 227–253; Dillon 2002, 80–82; Scholl 1996, 136–142; Mantis 1990, 28, 44–45; Kosmopoulou 2001, 292–299. Argos: Mantis 1990, 34, mentions a grave monument found in secondary context in Argos, identified as that of a priestess of Hera Argeia, and featuring the key and a sceptre as symbols, perhaps of goddess and priestess alike; its connected inscriptions are published as *IG* IV 642 and mention an Archegetis or ‘its connected inscription is published as *IG* IV 642 and mentions an Archegetis’, depending on singular or plural for ‘inscription(s)’. (Hera?, see below note 47). The same stone is referred to as an orthostat from a temple by Karatas 2019, 26. Taras: Princeton University Art Museum, inv. 1985–84. It is not strictly a tombstone, but belongs to a funerary monument. The date of the relief can be inferred from associated pottery. This pottery has previously been dated to 330–150 BC, but has in some cases been lowered (Connelly 2007, 103; Lippolis 1996, 493–507); Smyrna: *ISmyrna* 10, BM inv. 1772.0703.1. The key is Laconian, which is a *bapax*, but the woman’s dress is that of a priestess of Isis and thus clearly identifies her as a religious official (Karatas 2019, 12).

³⁰ Among relatives: Athens, National Archaeological Museum Γ 6167 (Mantis 1990, pl. 13b). Connelly 2008, 192; Kaltsas & Shapiro 2008, cat. no. 88; Scholl 1996, 147–148.

³¹ Connelly 2007, 227; Kosmopoulou 2001, 294, n. 140. See for example Athens, National Archaeological Museum Γ 1727; Athens, Epigraphic Museum EM 11144, EM 11183, 11614; Thebes, Archaeological Museum Inv. 400, 402. It is to be noted that among the inscriptions featured on the twelve identified stelai, only two mention the priesthood (*IG* II² 6288, *IG* VII 7677).

The Hermione monument

A FUNERARY MONUMENT ...

The first interpretation that offers itself is that the Hermione stone is a funerary monument of a priestess. Judging from vase and relief iconography, the key as a symbol for a priestess was widespread throughout the Greek world and even though a *hapax* in this city, its appearance in Hermione should not surprise us.³² Although only three examples of grave monuments with carved keys representing the priestess's office have been found outside Attica and Boiotia, one of them has been identified in nearby Argos (the other two in Smyrna and Taras, as previously mentioned). The find-spot, in the vicinity of the ancient necropolis (Fig. 1), could be a further indication of its funerary character.

However, the name on our stele appears not to be of a priestess, but of a man, Dexios. This is a name found three times within the Hermione epigraphic corpus. Dexios is mentioned in a list of initiands: once as father of Hemero, then as father of Kosmos, and a third time as father of Pyron and Kerdon.³³ How are we to interpret this unusual combination of a temple key and a male name on a presumed tombstone?

... OF A WOMAN ...

If indeed our stone is a funerary monument for a woman, then perhaps Dexios was not the given name of the deceased? The word is carved in the genitive, perhaps it is a patronymic, or the name of the husband of the departed priestess? In my opinion, this is not probable for two reasons. First of all, judging from previously identified examples, a patronymic or the name of the spouse were not necessary elements of epitaphs of priestesses. There are several known funerary temple key monuments which present the priestess only by her given name, probably because of the high status brought to the woman by the priesthood and perhaps indicating the independent agency allowed to a priestess, as lately noted by Connelly and other scholars.³⁴ Moreover, in cases where the epitaph of a

priestess does include the name of a father or husband, this is not placed as the largest and most central word. The given name of the priestess is usually presented first, followed by the other designations, usually on separate lines.³⁵ Secondly, in the case of a patronymic or spouse's name, the given name of the woman is missing. An important practical question then arises: where would this have been placed? In the present state of preservation, no trace of another inscribed word is visible. Even allowing that the woman's name once was added in now faded paint, there is no obvious place for a second name (male or female).³⁶

Perhaps the problem could be solved by introducing a supposed *hapax*. More attractive as an explanation for the name in the genitive would be that it is, in fact, not that of a male name, but of a female neuter name: Dexion.³⁷ Dexion is not attested as a female name, but makes perfect sense in Hermione in relation to the attested identified men called Dexios.³⁸ However, although epitaphs presenting the name of the deceased in the genitive have been found in many Greek cities,³⁹ this does not appear to be the case in Hermione, where (albeit few preserved) epitaphs mention the name of the deceased in the nominative or with a *χαίρε* greeting formula.⁴⁰

... OR OF A MAN?

Relief keys carved on tombstones have hitherto only been attested as symbols for female cult officials. An identification of the inscription as an epitaph of Dexios would thus turn our stone into the first (to my knowledge) securely

of Theomnasta, nominative, *IG VII 2021* = Archaeological Museum of Thebes inv. 400; funerary altar of Euphantis, nominative, *IThesp. 756* = Archaeological Museum of Thebes inv. 402.

³⁵ See for example stele of Nikomache, Pireus Museum 217; *Kioniskos* of Habryllis, Athens, National Archaeological Museum 1727; *Kioniskos* of Mneso, Athens, Epigraphic Museum EM 11144; *Kioniskos* of Malthake, Athens, Epigraphic Museum EM 1116 14; *Kioniskos* of Theophile, Athens, Epigraphic Museum EM 11183.

³⁶ An earlier photograph seems to show a possible sigma on the kymation; was the name of the woman carved here? It does not appear to be the same lettering however and would then belong to another inscription altogether. Furthermore, Clarisse Prêtre, expert in Argolid epigraphy, has informed me that this kind of limestone often presents cracks that look like letters (pers. comm.). I warmly thank Dr Prêtre for discussing the matter with me.

³⁷ I owe this clever suggestion to Nikolaos Papazarkadas and thank him for valuable comments.

³⁸ Names ending in -ion appear from the 5th century onwards, especially designating women, as shown in a seminal study by Florian Réveilhac (Réveilhac 2017).

³⁹ Lafi & Bru 2016; Sourvinou-Inwood 1996, 151–156, 161 on Attica and certain other cities with an “intertextual frame” of epithets, where the genitive belongs with and refers to the *sema* of the deceased.

⁴⁰ *IG IV 736–740*. The meaning of the genitive and the nominative may of course ultimately have been the same, see Sourvinou-Inwood 1996, 164–165.

³² Although known vases with key-holding priestesses are of Attic and South Italian production, the vessels surely were exported to other locations.

³³ *IG IV 731*; Martha 1879, no 2. The identification of such lists as presenting *mystai* of Demeter was made by Boeckh, *CIG* 1207, 1211 and is followed by Peek 1941, 69–71; Perlman 2000, 165. Δέξιος: *LGPV* III Δέξιος nos. 3, 4, 5. Δέξιος 3 is dated 2nd–1st centuries BC with a question mark. The name is attested in nearby Epidauros as well, *LGPV* III Δέξιος no. 2.

³⁴ Connelly 2007, 23, 195, 197–221, esp. 217–221, and passim. No mention of father or husband: stele of Polystrate from the Kerameikos gives the name of the deceased priestess in the nominative without mention of father or husband (Kerameikos Museum inv. I 430/P1142; I thank the anonymous reviewer for highlighting this monument); funerary altar

identified tomb monument for a man featuring the temple key as his symbol. Theoretically, this is of course a possibility. Possibly, there are even comparanda from nearby Argos: an unpublished fragment of a stele depicting a male figure carrying a key over his right shoulder also features the inscription of a name in the nominative, Νέων.⁴¹ The excavator Christos Piteros identifies Neon as the man represented on the stele, and interprets him as pictured holding a religious office as *kleikophoros*. This, then, could be a funerary monument for a man who while alive held a key-bearer's role, something which could lend support to the interpretation of the Hermione monument as a tomb monument of a man with the key as his symbol. However, this possible Argive *hapax* remains uncertain. Other possible interpretations of the stele and its iconography are possible, but then we are left without comparative material for a funerary interpretation of the Hermione stone. Perhaps Neon is indeed represented as a key-bearer, but not a funerary stele? It is also conceivable that the name does not designate the representation. Perhaps Neon dedicated the stele to someone else, a pictured key-bearing *heros Kleikophoros*? Another option is that we stand in front of an image of the Lord of the Underworld, Hades, or Plouton. Both are usually represented as mature, bearded men.⁴² I mentioned above two representations of a key-bearing Hades (from Mieza, 300–250 BC, and Lokroi, 4th century BC); these can be complemented with literary sources where Hades/Plouton as key-bearer controls the access to—and makes sure that no one gets away from—the Underworld.⁴³

We should however remind ourselves that, in contrast to the Argos fragment, the Hermione monument does not feature a representation of a key-bearing man (or woman), just the relief key. Furthermore, the problem with a name in the genitive in the context of other known epitaphs of Hermione still remains: the custom seems to have been to use mainly the nominative for the name of the deceased.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF MONUMENT?

The difficulty of reading the relief key and the name together as a funerary monument makes it worth exploring the path indicated by the Argive Neon stele: perhaps the Hermione stone is not a funerary monument at all? The overall shape of the monument as preserved could be that of an altar as well as that of a statue base, for example. Unfortunately, the state of preservation of the upper part of the monument does not give

any clues about its original use, and again its inscription and iconography must provide the point of departure.

Statue base

An interpretation of the stone as a base of a votive or honorary statue is in my opinion not probable, since the genitive immediately causes trouble again. The names of the dedicator and the recipient deity are given in the nominative and the dative in standard dedicatory language, and if on an honorary statue, one would expect the name of the portrayed person to be carved in the accusative or the nominative (and the dedicant again in the nominative).⁴⁴ Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, as of yet no votive gift or base for a priestess's (or other key-bearer's) honorary statue is known to have featured a relief key as a symbol.⁴⁵ Furthermore, what remains of the upper part of the monument seems to be irregularly cut, also indicating that the block was not conceived as the base for a statue.⁴⁶

Altar

As noted in my introduction, the monument has been thought to be an altar of a god (i.e., not a “funerary altar” of the Boiotian kind). If so, the combination key-name does not become easier to understand. It was standard practice to use the genitive when/if inscribing the name of the divine owner of an altar upon the altar itself.⁴⁷ Our genitive is however not the name of a known divinity, nor is Dexios attested as a cult epithet.

The key could however conceivably be the symbol of the owner of the altar. Altars could carry the symbol of the owner-god: the masks of Dionysos, or the eagle of Zeus are examples that come to mind.⁴⁸ Might the key be such a visual indication

⁴⁴ Ma 2013. Lazzarini 1976, 59, 119–120 mentions a genitive formula for dedications in Archaic Greece. She recognizes the difficulty of making the difference between a genitive indicating ownership (the object of XX) and that of a possible dedication (the dedication of XX), and the evidence she presents is limited.

⁴⁵ Marcadé 1957, 50–54; Plassart 1928, 119, 126, 131, 132, 138. *Kleido-uchoi* themselves could perhaps also dedicate the statue of the god they served: Quantin 2004, 596, and certainly other objects: *ID* 1894 (*EAD* 11, 119–120): banquet couches, table. Perhaps the key carved on the Hermione monument speaks against its use as a base for the statue of a key-bearer: the key would have been held by the portrait statue or the title mentioned in the accompanying inscription; an additional carved key would have been superfluous?

⁴⁶ Jesper Blid, pers. comm.

⁴⁷ Ma 2013, 20–21.

⁴⁸ Satyric mask and ivy garlands on altar of Dionysos, in the Sanctuary of Dionysos Eleuthereus, Athens (late 1st century BC); wine cup and grape garlands on an altar of Dionysos Kathegemon in Pergamon: *SEG* 29 1264 (late Hellenistic): thunderbolt on altar of Zeus Katabates in Kos (undated): *SEG* 43 526; eagle on altar of Zeus Bennios in Appia (un-

⁴¹ Piteros 1995, 91.

⁴² Furthermore, although Hades often is reclining and bare-chested, both can be depicted as standing chiton-clad as is the man on the fragmentary stele from Argos: Roberts 2020, 43.

⁴³ Mantis 1990, 35–36.

of divine ownership? Perhaps the main city goddess, Demeter, was believed to be the *kleidouchos* of Hermione, as Athena of Athens? Perhaps Hades, a known *kleidophoros* who under the name of Klymenos held an important part in the local pantheon of Hermione?⁴⁹ And what of the *heros* Klaikophoros, attested in neighbouring Epidauros and Troizen, as well as at Messene: should he not have a key as his symbol? Both Emily Kearns and Karatas suggest that this divinity protected the entrance of a sanctuary. Perhaps the *heros*, anonymous in other inscriptions from nearby cities in the Argolid, was called Dexios here? Or, standing by the gates of a sanctuary, by an altar to the Klaikophoros, should we read δεξιού! as an imperative asking a prospective visitor to raise his or her right hand in honour of the gods before entering the shrine?⁵⁰

In fact, the key, both as votive object and symbol is connected to many gods whose worship is attested in Hermione. Hera is for example a goddess connected to keys, as the protectress of marriage and the household.⁵¹ In nearby Argos, worshippers dedicated bronze keys to Hera and a 4th-century coin of Argos shows the head of Hera on one side, and a temple key on the other.⁵² Artemis is another deity known to have received votive keys, as did Apollo, for example in the nearby city of Halieis.⁵³ Another member of the Hermione

pantheon, Iphigenia, is both called keyholder in tragedy and pictured with keys,⁵⁴ and yet another goddess whose cult is attested in Hermione, Eileithyia, regularly received keys as dedications, probably because symbolically she kept the keys to an easy birth.⁵⁵

Clearly, what this survey of key-bearing or key-receiving deities shows, is not a possible divine owner of an altar, but the polyvalence of the key as symbol. As a practical object, it locks and opens a door; metaphorically, it controls childbirth and the gates of the netherworld.⁵⁶ As a votive gift, it was deemed suitable for male and female gods alike. But the fact that it appears in association with such a multitude of deities makes it too general a symbol to indicate ownership of an altar, when “read” on its own, without accompanying inscription or context.

Key vs. inscription

These discussions of what the monument seems not to be has not solved the conundrum of a relief key and an inscribed name in the genitive, which are difficult to understand together and carved on a large squarish stone, the upper surface of which is in a poor state of preservation. In fact, possibly any attempt to combine them in order to understand simply leads to a dead end. Perhaps we should separate at least key and inscription? It is in fact quite possible that the key was carved in a first phase, with the name added later. This would explain why such a carefully executed key⁵⁷ is paired with less elegant lettering; the letters do seem to adapt to the key, but the key and the inscribed name do not match as if executed together in an original layout. Naturally, the name of a deceased, priestess or not, could have been written on the stone with painted letters, long-gone. But since the temple key stretches vertically over the entire front side of the stone, effectively creating a line dividing the surface in two, there is no obvious place for it.⁵⁸

dated): *SEG* 26 1370; eagle on altar of Zeus Atabyrios, 1st/2nd centuries AD: *SEG* 51 1547; altar of Artemis with bow and arrow, Epidauros (Roman-Imperial?): *SEG* 56 438.

⁴⁹ Paus. 2.35.9–10: Klymenos was a human of mythical times according to the Hermionians, but Pausanias did not believe their story. He knew Klymenos to be a surname of Hades. Klymenos had a strong presence in the important Sanctuary of Demeter Chthonia, Hermione’s main goddess (for a reconstruction of Demeter’s temple, see Blid 2021 in this volume). He had a sacred building and a *chorion* inside the sanctuary, and the *chorion* of Klymenos featured a chasm, through which, according to the Hermionians, Herakles once brought up Kerberos.

⁵⁰ *IG* IV².1 297, *IG* IV 768, both 3rd century BC (and Messene, *IG* V 1447, pre 191 BC). For an interpretation of the Klaikophoros as an underworld deity, see Legrand 1900, 201–202. Kearns 1992, 82, n. 19 sees the *klaikophoros heros* of Epidauros and Troizen as a “doorkeeper or guardian of the sanctuary”, and Karatas 2019, 27, suggests along the same lines that a monument to the Klaikophoros “may have been placed at the entrance of the temenos for the protection of the shrine.” *LSJ* s.v. δεξιόομαι. We can note that the monument was found in the vicinity of a city gate: did a *klaikophoros* guard this entrance?

⁵¹ Karatas 2019; Connelly 2007, 92; Baumbach 2004, 82; Mantis 1990, 32–34. For the interesting parallel between women in charge of the keys to the house, and the priestess’s care for the house of the god and its belongings, see Connelly 2007, 92.

⁵² Baumbach 2004, 81; Imhoof-Blumer 1883, 174, no. 96; Mantis 1990, 33–34; Milchhoefer 1879, 154–155; *IG* IV 642. A now lost relief, also from Argos, identified by Mantis as belonging to a grave monument for a priestess, pictured a sceptre and a temple key, along with parts of a name and the word Archagatis (feminine ending with iota). The epithet is used as a cult title for male deities (for example Asklepios in Paus. 10.32.12 and Apollo in Thuc. 6.3.), was it meant for Queen Hera in this case, with her symbols the sceptre and the temple key? It should be noted that Karatas 2019, 26, refers to the stone as an orthostat of a temple building.

⁵³ *ID* 1442, l. 56; *SEG* 42 282, 59 437; Mantis 1983, 146, K2; *IG* V.2 399.

⁵⁴ Karatas 2019, 8–9; Mantis 1983, 60–66; Eur. *IT*, 131. Iphigenia in Hermione: Paus. 2.35.1 (Artemis Iphigenia).

⁵⁵ Schaus 2014, 177. There is substantial evidence for the cult of Eileithyia: dedications to the goddess, statues of women set up in her honour, and epigraphic evidence of priestesses: Paus. 2.35.11; *IG* IV 699. It is noteworthy that Eileithyia’s sanctuary lay by the city gate where arrived the road from Mases, this should in principle be approximately where the monument was found, since the necropolis is thought to have flanked this road.

⁵⁶ For the symbolism of the key in relation to the Underworld, see Paus. 5.20.3 and Legrand 1900, 202.

⁵⁷ The knob handle is to my eye more elaborate than any other documented example, sculpted or painted.

⁵⁸ And we should certainly consider the later result of the combination of the key and the name as possibly significant: even if the name was carved at a later stage, once present on the stone, for the beholder the two elements are tightly interwoven as if underlining the relationship between human and office, or even human and god. I thank Peder Flemestad for discussing the matter with me.

Physical context

Then what about the physical context? Could it lend support to any of our three main lines of interpretation: funerary monument, altar, or statue base? The stone was, as mentioned above, found in rescue excavations, probably in a secondary context as reused in a wall outside the city gate. Unfortunately, this find-spot also allows for an ambiguous context, since it lies in the vicinity both of a city gate and of the ancient necropolis. Whereas a city-gate context would rather support the interpretation of the monument as an altar or an honorary statue,⁵⁹ the necropolis area would of course indicate that the monument was of a funerary character.

Let us now return to the temple key relief. Quite likely, it adorns the funerary monument of a priestess, an honorary base, or something similar to tombstones or tomb altars found in Athens and Boiotia. The find-spot may corroborate this: the stone was found in the vicinity of Hermione's large necropolis, close to one of the city gates and thus along one of the roads. If the find-spot of the monument is close to its original placement, it would once have commanded a very visible location.

The Hermione monument highlights the complexity of interpreting the remains of the ancient world. Taken one by one, the inscription and the relief are both perfectly understandable. The word *Dexiou* is easily legible and there is no doubt that the object portrayed in relief is what we refer to as a temple key. But taken together, they break the mould of a standard interpretation, which would have been the monument of a priestess, because we seem to have a male name where comparanda tell us we should have a female one. Perhaps an identification of the character of the object would have been provided by what was once on top (traces of an altar installation, or even ritual, or cuttings for a statue) or by the original placement (in a sanctuary, by the city gate, or in the cemetery), but unfortunately, we have neither. The state of preservation of the monument will not allow for the final word on our temple-key monument, but opens up further discussion on the local cults of Hermione as well as on the methodological difficulties of interpreting even seemingly straightforward ancient evidence.

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⁵⁹ As mentioned above, note 55, the Sanctuary of Eileithyia lay by the city gate, a statue by her temple or other cult site may have carried the image of a (key-bearing?) priestess or the goddess herself. For statues of priestesses before the Temple of Demeter Chthonia in Hermione, see Paus. 2.35.8.

Abbreviations

- CIG* = A. Boeckh 1828. *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum*, Berlin.
- FGrH* = F. Jacoby 1926–1927. *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker*, T. 2, Berlin.
- ID* = *Inscriptiones de Délos*, Paris 1926–1972.
- IG* = *Inscriptiones Graecae*, Berlin 1895–
- ISmyrna* = G. Petzl, *Die Inschriften von Smyrna I* (Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien, 23), Bonn 1982.
- IStratonikeia* = M. Sahin 1982. *Die Inschriften von Stratonikeia 2.1: Lagina, Stratonikeia und Umgebung* (Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien, 22), Cologne.
- IThesp.* = P. Roesch 2007–2009. *Les Inscriptions de Thespies*, Lyon.
- IvO* = Dittenberger, W. & K. Purgold 1896. *Die Inschriften von Olympia*, Berlin.
- LGNP* = *A lexicon of Greek personal names*, Oxford 1987–
- LSAG* = L.H. Jeffrey 1961. *The local scripts of Archaic Greece*, Oxford.
- LSCG* = F. Sokolowski 1969. *Lois sacrées des cités grecques*, Paris.
- LSJ* = H.G. Liddell, R. Scott & H.S. Jones, 1996. *A Greek-English lexicon*, Oxford.
- SEG* = *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, Leiden & Amsterdam, 1923–

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