

The Documentation of Stonework in the Ancient World

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Introduction

Stone has been used as a construction material since humanity first started to build. Its properties have not changed – granite quarried today is the same material as granite quarried in the ancient world. Indeed some ancient quarries are still in use, such as the marble quarries of the Apuan Alps in Italy, and the Greek rosso antico quarries [1]. On the other hand, the way stonework is designed and documented has changed somewhat over the centuries, an example being the development of stereotomy from the 13th century [2]. But there are some continuities, such as the preparation of full-scale drawings of stonework. This has been the norm since antiquity, from drawings inscribed on unfinished in situ stonework for the Greek temple of Apollo at Didyma (below), to those inscribed on medieval tracing floors (as at York Minster and Wells Cathedral), [3] to rolls of full-scale details provided for a stonework elevation in London in the 1980s, [4] to contemporary 1:1 BIM documentation.

Most of the extant construction documents from ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome concern stonework for monumental buildings. The documents include written descriptions (notably the Greek *syggraphai*), full-scale in situ drawings, and small-scale stone models. On a given project, all three will have been read together, but unfortunately, we do not have a ‘set’ of this kind. This paper outlines the nature of this documentation using some examples – it is not comprehensive.

Pharaonic to Greco-Roman Egypt

Construction stone was readily available in ancient Egypt. Harrell & Storemyr list 39 miscellaneous hardstone quarries (basalt, granite, diorite, porphyry etc), nine travertine quarries, 99 limestone quarries, and 38 sandstone quarries in Egypt, used from the prehistoric to Islamic periods. Hardstone was sourced from quarries mostly in the Red Sea Hills, requiring land transport, but travertines and limestones were extracted along the Lower Nile and sandstone along the Upper Nile, enabling river transport. Preference varied with time. For example, most of the hardstone quarries were used primarily in the Greco-Roman period (with the stone often exported?), whereas travertine usage was mostly Pharaonic [5].

Two written descriptions of stonework from ancient Egypt are in the form of annotations on a drawing and a model. One is below-ground, one is above-ground. From the floor plan on an ostrakon of the Tomb for Ramesses IV, KV 2, Valley of the Kings (1155-1149 BCE) is a description of the stonework that is repeated four times, describing the execution of the relief murals (unfinished in many tombs): ‘[The room] ... being drawn with outlines, graven with the chisel, filled with colours, and completed [6].’ From the stone base of a model for the temple gateway at Heliopolis, Seti I (1323-1279 BCE), made after the temple was completed:

The good god is making foundations for his father, Ra Horakhty. He made in the temple, which is of good quartzite, two pylon towers of white crystalline limestone, doors of bronze, a pair of flagstaffs of msdt stone, a pair of obelisks of bkhn stone established in Iunu, the horizon of heaven. The souls of Iunu exult at seeing them [7].

Many construction drawings of stonework survive from ancient Egypt [8]. Small-scale drawings for below-ground projects include sketches for the tomb of Ramesses IV, KV2 in the Valley of the Kings (Turin Papyrus 1885 recto), and

the tomb of Ramesses IX, KV6 (Cairo CG 25184) on an ostrakon, [9] a pillared chapel (London BM 41228), and ceiling patterns (Cairo CG 66260, 66261, 66263, 66265), all on ostraka [10]. For above-ground projects, the oldest drawing is a vault section on an ostrakon (Imhotep Museum, Saqqara, JE 50036) [11]. Otherwise above-ground project drawings all concern columns and include small-scale column sketches (Paris Louvre 3043 & E25334, New York Metropolitan Museum of Art MMA 23.3.34 & 35), on ostraka, and later (perhaps following Greek practice – below) full-scale in situ inscribed drawings of columns, capitals and cornices at the temple of Horus, Edfu, the temple of Isis, Philae, the temple of Mandulis, Kalabsha, and the quarry at Gebel Abu Fodah.

Small-scale models of stone columns and capitals from Egypt were common, with examples held in the Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Staatlichen Museen, Berlin (Saqqara, ÄM 1627 & 1629; Tuna el-Gebel, ÄM 20351 & 20351), the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (MMA 12.182.6), the Petrie Museum, London (UC69263, UC33425, UC28720, UC28721), Strasbourg (Philae, 1388), and Cairo (33.395, 33.396, 33.397) for example. Some are ceramic and crude and some are stone and precise. These models range in date from Pharaonic to Roman Egypt and indicate a consistent tradition in Egypt down the timeline. The Greek tradition of full-scale paradeigma (below) does not seem to have been adopted in the Hellenic and Roman periods.

Small-scale stone construction models from Egypt of buildings or parts of buildings were less common (unlike votive models) and include an underground tomb at the pyramid of Hawara, Dahshur [12] and another small tomb (Petrie UC57155). Above ground we have two pyramids from Memphis and Dahshur (Petrie UC16519 & UC14793), the floor of a columned hall at Tod near Luxor (Louvre E 14762), a multi-part model of the contra-temple of Soknopaiou Nesos, Dime es-Seba, Fayyum [13], a water tank (Petrie UC14530), a hydreuma (Petrie UC75646), and altar steps (Cairo 33.401).

Greece

Construction stone was widely available and widely used across Greece, from the red marble used at Minos (Crete) onwards. In the Greek period, construction projects used local stone as much as possible, given difficulties of transport. While the white marbles of Pentelikon (at least 30 quarries active in antiquity) and Hymettos are perhaps best known, and convenient to Athens (an ancient road linking them was found in 2009), white marble was also available on Naxos, Paros and Thasos. Polychromic (grey, green, pink and so on) stones were available, but their use peaked for export in the Roman Imperial period as more exotic materials were sought by architects. However, the most widely used construction stones were the less glamorous limestone – ‘the bread and butter of construction activities through Antiquity’ – and sandstone [14].

At least 40 written Greek construction contracts survive, in whole or in part, in the form of inscribed texts (syggraphai) on stone steles, describing the required work in some detail [15]. They included contractual material (the parties, payments, penalties and so on), quantities, layout, and specifications. Five specified the stone quarries to be used most in Attica (Table 1). These were IG II2 1666 A&B for the Prostoon at Eleusis, IG II2 1685 for the sanctuary of Asclepius at Athens, IG II2 1668 for the naval tackle store at Zeia, IG II2 1665 for tripod plinths at Kynosarges, a suburb of Athens, and IG II2 1680 for the Prostoon at Eleusis. The marble from the Pentelikon quarries was favoured for column capitals, which entailed intricate carving.

One of these, IG II2 1666 A&B, is complete but was never let, being replaced by a series of subsequent contracts. Nevertheless, the inscription is very informative about the prescriptive nature of Greek stone specifications (Table 2). This inscription covered separately the quarrying, rough cutting, storage, transport to site, carving, hoisting and laying of 19 different stone units: kanonides, triglyphs, metopes, cornices, plinths, capitals, thresholds, gable blocks, roof tiles, foundation stones, paving, and stylobates. As Table 2 indicates, common requirements were that stones be sound, white, stainless and unbroken. Workmanship is repeatedly specified in terms of tight, unbroken and flush joints and straight

level tops, with the stones generally clamped, dowelled, and lead poured around. The apergon referred to was a temporary protective skin of stone. For some units cutting and carving relied on an anagraphe provided by the architect. Excavation for the foundations was also included. For this project, the city was to provide the lead, iron clamps and hoists. Some quantities and sizes were left unresolved (for larger foundation stones), but generally quantities and sizes were given throughout. The repetitive nature of the inscriptions resulted in some internal conflict, in terms of the quantities given and the work to be done. For example, two capitals are to be quarried but three were to be carved and installed, 42 stylobates are quarried and 44 are carved and installed, two corner stones are transported, carved and installed but not quarried, and four capitals are quarried and transported but not carved or installed. No doubt these errors would have been resolved during execution.

Table 1: Stone types specified in 5 syggraphai

	Location, date BCE	Penteteikon	Hymettos	Eleusis	Megaris	Aktitēs	Agryleikon	Aegina, Saronic Gulf
IG II2 1665	Athens, 400-350	Capitals	-	Orthostats, 'grasping stones'			Foundations	-
IG II2 1666 A&B	Eleusis, 356	Capitals, metopes, cornices, pilasters, gables, roof tiles	-	Stylobates, corners	-	Foundations, euthynteria	-	Kanonides, triglyphs
IG II2 1668	Piraeus, 347-6	Capitals, lintels, pilasters, columns	Pilasters, thresholds	-	-	-	-	-
IG II2 1680	Eleusis, 350-300	Capitals	-	-	-	-	-	-
IG II2 1685	Athens, c.300	Capitals	Columns, pilasters	-	-	-	-	-

This prescriptive approach to stonework quality was the norm. But another syggraphai, IG II2 3073, for a temple at Lebadeia (no later than 220 BCE), specified the stonework for the steles and foundations both prescriptively and in terms of processes – the specific tools and ephemerals to be used. It may have only been describing normal practice, but no other syggraphai did this. The first part of the inscription described the inscription of the syggraphai themselves, and related processes such as cleaning the steles with nitron (also used as flux in glass production, according to Pliny the Elder [16]) and painting and washing out the letters. Other syggraphai mention the preparation of inscriptions (e.g. IG XII, 9 191, for draining a swamp at Ptechai), but rightly left the processes to the contractor. The second part described the processes of levelling and smoothing stonework in detail, specifying chisels of several kinds, and olive oil and the mineral miltos, or red lead, for levelling. Again, other contracts left these matters to the contractor. The specification of processes is deprecated today and was not usual then [17]. This technique may have been used here as skill sets had been

Rome

In the early period, Rome sourced its stone locally, [24] but as the Empire grew, so did the range of quarries used. Stone was imported by sea from Egypt, for example, even at the risk of losing a cargo of 50-foot (14.8 m) columns for the Pantheon in Rome [25]. The online Stone Quarries Database lists 792 quarries across the Empire but notes that ‘there must have been hundreds if not thousands of other quarries that have yet to be documented in any way [26]’. Stone types listed include marble, limestone, sandstone, granite, gypsum, travertine, alabaster, schist, basalt, porphyry, volcanic tuff, quartzite, conglomerate and lava.

Only one construction specification survives from Rome. For a porch in an existing wall at Puteoli, 105 BCE, this describes prescriptively a range of materials and work, including stones and stonework, albeit briefly. The relevant extracts are as follows [CIL 12.698 (author’s translation)]:

... Make the width p 6, height p 7. From this wall, project two antae towards the sea forwards, length p 2, thickness p 1 ¼. ... For the same, make the furthest garden-wall, the existing wall, (and) the (new) wall with coping of height p 10.

For the same, the existing entrance-door entering into the site and the windows which (are) in the wall near that site are (now) wall, (and) must be filled in.

And place upon the existing wall near the road an uninterrupted coping. And all the walls and copings which (are) not (coated) with beach-sand will be rendered with lime (plaster). ... No heavier rough quarry stones may be laid than rough quarry stones (of) dry weight p 15, nor make corner stones higher (than) [4.5 unciae]. ...

As for Greece, full-scale drawings of stonework were prepared during the construction process. Likewise, most were inscribed into the architectural fabric, in situ. Examples include a drawing of entasis and another of a column profile at the theatre of Aphrodisias in Asia Minor; a pediment elevation, an arc elevation, a plan of the orchestra and cavea, a courtyard plan and an arch elevation at the temple of Jupiter at Baalbek, Lebanon; [27] details of the Pantheon at Rome, inscribed in the paving near the Mausoleum of Augustus; an elevation of an arch and a rosette and other patterns now at Santa Maria di Capua Vetere; elevations of a pediment and entablature at Bziza, Lebanon; elevations of entablature and a column at Pergamon; and elevations of a roof crown and arch and pediment at the temple of Bacchus, Baalbek. We also have a portable inscribed drawing of a volute, from Thysdrus, Tunisia [28].

Stone construction models from around the Roman Empire dealt with whole buildings, and so were small-scale. They include a model of the temple of Luna at Ostia (Museo d’Ostia Antica 189), a thermal bath at Taormina (Akademischen Kunstmuseums der Universität Bonn, B 298), the adyton for Temple A at Niha, Lebanon, [29] the stairs of the Great Altar at Baalbek, Lebanon, [30] the stadium at Villa Adriana, Tivoli (Museo Didattico di Villa Adriana, Tivoli, 4714/A&B), and the open-air theatre at Baalbek [31]. It can be assumed that the Romans followed the Greek practice of built-in full-scale paradeigma for column capitals and the like.

Conclusion

The documentation of stonework for prestige buildings in the ancient world came in the form of written descriptions, drawings and models. All could have been prepared for a project and will have been read together. The initial contractual document was typically a written description, for Greece at least. They will have been prepared on portable but ephemeral materials such as papyrus but, from Greece, copies of the syggraphai inscribed in stone for public display survive (along with many other kinds of inscriptions).

Some of the drawings were small-scale and some were full-size. Small-scale drawings were not to scale, often in the form of sketches, and were drawn on ostraka, which have survived, and on ephemeral materials, which generally have not. Full-size drawings were inscribed in stone on or near the site, during the construction process. Those on site were often inscribed on the walls in a temporary protective layer of stone which was removed in the finished project – those that survive do so only because some projects were unfinished.

Some of the models were small-scale and some were full-size. In the Egyptian tradition, small-scale models of capitals were also often ‘sketches’, roughly made, often in clay, but some were very precise, to scale, and durable being carved in stone. Sculptors could have enlarged them using callipers or grids without too much difficulty. In the Greek tradition, full-size models of stone capitals and the like were prepared by the architect or master carver, and subsequently copied and then incorporated into the works.

Today stone masonry is one product in thousands used in the construction of a modern building, but the element of prestige remains. Recently it has rarely been used structurally, being largely reserved for non-loadbearing lining, flooring, cladding and benchtops. Fixings are phosphor bronze or stainless steel, rather than brass, iron and lead, and the design and specification of stone and stonework is scientific, referencing international standards such as EN 771-6 and Eurocode 6 [32]. But interestingly, loadbearing stonework might be making a comeback [33].

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