



I Am a Scribe Who Writes Letters, and My Writing Gives Me Power: Variations on a Theme in the Ancient Mediterranean and Near East

Citation

Nagy, Gregory. 2020. I Am a Scribe Who Writes Letters, and My Writing Gives Me Power: Variations on a Theme in the Ancient Mediterranean and Near East. Classical Inquiries. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

Published Version

<https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/i-am-a-scribe-who-writes-letters-and-my-writing-gives-me-power-variations-on-a-theme-in-the-ancient-mediterranean-and-near-east/>

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42482315>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Classical Inquiries

Editors: Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone

Consultant for Images: Jill Curry Robbins

Online Consultant: Noel Spencer

About

Classical Inquiries (CI) is an online, rapid-publication project of Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies, devoted to sharing some of the latest thinking on the ancient world with researchers and the general public.

While articles archived in DASH represent the original *Classical Inquiries* posts, CI is intended to be an evolving project, providing a platform for public dialogue between authors and readers. Please visit http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries for the latest version of this article, which may include corrections, updates, or comments and author responses.

Additionally, many of the studies published in CI will be incorporated into future CHS publications. Please visit http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:CHS.Online_Publishing for a complete and continually expanding list of open access publications by CHS.

Classical Inquiries is published under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Every effort is made to use images that are in the public domain or shared under Creative Commons licenses. Copyright on some images may be owned by the Center for Hellenic Studies. Please refer to captions for information about copyright of individual images.

Citing Articles from *Classical Inquiries*

To cite an article from *Classical Inquiries*, use the author's name, the date, the title of the article, and the following persistent identifier:

http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

For example:

Nagy, G. 2019.01.31. "Homo Ludens at Play with the Songs of Sappho: Experiments in Comparative Reception Theory, Part Four." *Classical Inquiries*. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

Classical Inquiries

00285767

Studies on the Ancient World from the Center for Hellenic Studies

Home About People References The CI Poetry Project

[Home](#) » [By Gregory Nagy](#) » I am a scribe who writes letters, and my writing gives me power: variations on a theme in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East

I am a scribe who writes letters, and my writing gives me power: variations on a theme in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East

January 24, 2020 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

Comments off

2020.01.24 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. There is a story about a scribe who succeeded in seizing political power, at least for a while, precisely because he was a scribe. And this scribe could not have had even such a limited degree of success if he had not been a scribe. His name was Maiandrios son of Maiandrios, and his story is told by Herodotus, so-called father of history. According to Herodotus (3.120–128, 140–149), Maiandrios was a scribe working for a powerful tyrant named Polycrates, who once ruled over the Greek island-state of Samos, politically configured as one single colossal *polis* or city-state. In the era of this tyrant, as Herodotus remarks (3.139.1), Samos was the greatest of all the great cities of the Greek-speaking and non-Greek-speaking worlds combined. But all this greatness came to a violent end after Polycrates was treacherously captured and executed in 522 BCE by order of a Persian official named Oroites, satrap of Sardis, who at that point in time ruled over most of mainland Asia Minor in the name of the Persian Empire. At some later point in time, however, probably soon thereafter, the rule of this satrap likewise came to a violent end: Oroites was assassinated by order of Darius, new king of the entire Persian Empire. And then, soon after the deaths of Polycrates tyrant of Samos and of Oroites satrap of Sardis, Darius forcibly annexed Samos, making it part of his Persian Empire and installing Syloson, brother of Polycrates, as the new ruler of the island. It is in this context that Herodotus makes his remark (again, 3.139.1) describing Samos as the greatest of all cities—the greatest, that is, until the annexation of this Ionic Greek island-state by the Persian Empire. But there was a brief interlude, as Herodotus also remarks (3.142.1), of lingering greatness after the death of the tyrant Polycrates and before the Persian annexation of Samos by Darius. For a short time—it is not clear how short a time—the *kratos* ‘power’ that had once been held by the tyrant Polycrates, whose very name *Polu-krátēs* means ‘the man who has much power’, was now being held by Maiandrios, the scribe of the tyrant. I highlight the Greek word that Herodotus actually uses in this context (again, 3.142.1), *kratos*, when he refers to the ‘power’ held by a scribe in this era, around the middle of the first millennium BCE. Such power is comparable to some far earlier examples of scribal power, dating from the second millennium BCE and attested in a wide variety of locales throughout the Mediterranean and the Near East. And a symbol of such power, as I will argue briefly, is to be found in a related story, also told by Herodotus (3.41–43), about the *sphrēgīs* or ‘signet-ring’ of Polycrates.

Share This



Classical Inquiries (CI) is an online, rapid-publication project of Harvard’s Center for Hellenic Studies, devoted to sharing some of the latest thinking on the ancient world with researchers and the general public.

Editor

Keith DeStone

[kdestone at chs.harvard.edu](mailto:kdestone@chs.harvard.edu)

Editor: Poetry Project

Natasha Bershadsky

[nbshadsky at chs.harvard.edu](mailto:nbshadsky@chs.harvard.edu)

Assistant Editor

Angelia Hanhardt

Web Producer

Noel Spencer

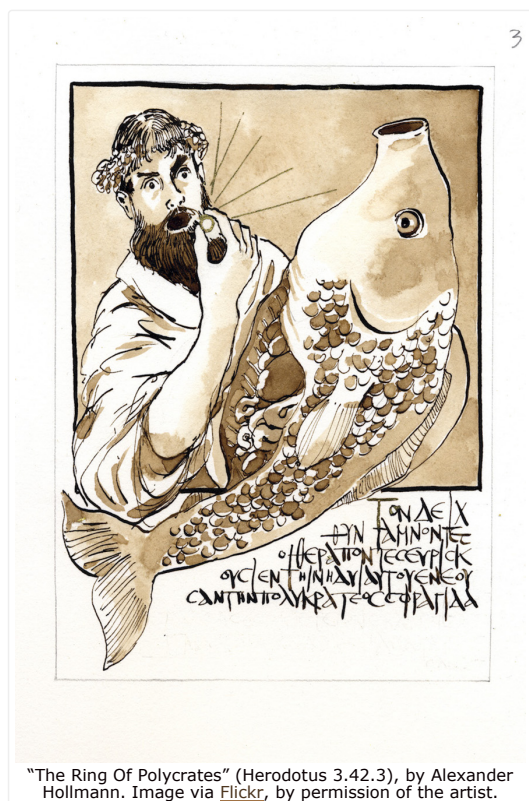
Consultant for Images

Jill Curry Robbins

Subscribe Now!

Subscribe to this site to receive email updates about the latest research—just one or two notices per week.

[EU/EEA Privacy Disclosures](#)



"The Ring Of Polycrates" (Herodotus 3.42.3), by Alexander Hollmann. Image via Flickr, by permission of the artist.

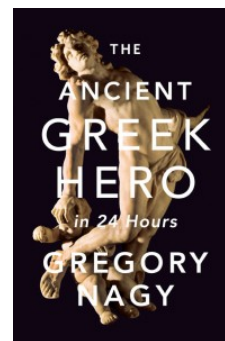
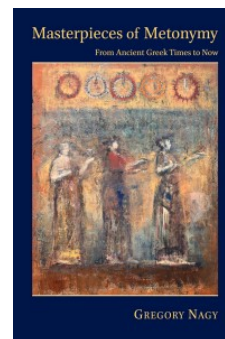
§1. In studying comparatively the story told by Herodotus (3.120–128, 140–149) about Maiandrios, scribe of Polycrates, I will not concentrate here on the actual history of the relevant events narrated by this ancient historian. That history is complex and still opaque in many ways, despite the numerous attempts of modern historians to elucidate what exactly happened and when (for a conscientious tracking of the relevant bibliography, which is vast, I recommend the article of Joseph Roisman 1985). Nor will I concentrate on the possibilities of political and ideological differences between Maiandrios and Polycrates—as claimed by Maiandrios in the narrative of Herodotus (3.142.3), where the scribe offers *isonomiē*, that is, an 'equitable distribution' of civic privileges, for the body politic, as it were, of Samos (I offer comments elsewhere, in [Classical Inquiries 2017.06.26](#) §54, about the politics and ideologies that shape the meanings of words like *isonomiē* and *dēmokratiē* in the sixth century BCE). Rather, my aim for now is simply to highlight the actual thinking of Herodotus about the power of scribes in a hierarchical society that got deeply involved in imperial politics. In any case, it is relevant that Herodotus goes on to narrate (3.142.4–3.143.2) how the proclamation of Maiandrios failed (on the questionable political motives of the scribe in this context, I recommend the incisive comments of Marcel Detienne 1988:77n177).

§2. In this context, I find it essential to recall the Ionic Greek word used by Herodotus in describing the profession of Maiandrios. This man was the *grammatistēs* or 'scribe' (γραμματιστής, 3.123.1) of the tyrant Polycrates, ruler of Samos. And, in this same context, I need to recall also another word that Herodotus uses—in this case while he is quoting what the brother of Polycrates, Syloson, supposedly said to Darius, new king of the Persian Empire, about Maiandrios, who was at that time, after the death of Polycrates, holding power in Samos: the soon-to-be next tyrant of Samos, Syloson, while speaking directly to Darius in asking for a transfer of power from Maiandrios to himself, refers to the scribe, without even naming him, as 'our slave' (δοῦλος ἡμέτερος, 3.140.5).

§3. The degrading here of the social status of Maiandrios is evidently linked to the fact that he was a professional scribe. But this degrading cannot be linked to a more fundamental fact, that Maiandrios was educated in the writing and reading of letters. When I say *letters* here, I have in mind not only 'messages written from sender to receiver', as the word is ordinarily used today in English, but also, more generally and literally, the 'letters' of the Greek alphabet, called *grammata* in the era of Maiandrios the scribe. What made such a scribe a professional was not the fact that he was educated in the use of letters but, rather, the fact that this education was put to use in the service of social superiors who had authority over him. And though we need not and even should not assume that the superiors in all such situations were themselves not educated in writing and reading, it was nevertheless the professional scribes, not their social superiors, who were put in charge of writing authoritative texts and reading them out loud. Thus, by way of performing these scribal tasks, the scribes derived their own authority from their superiors. And the authority that came with writing texts and reading them out loud would still depend on the authorized persons who gave authority to what was written and what was read out loud by the scribes.

§4. For us today, an ancient scribe's competence in *grammata* 'letters' may at first seem merely mechanical, even if he were transmitting something elevated, like high literature. But the mechanical competence shown by the scribe would nevertheless have great prestige if it was authoritative, and such authoritativeness could even seem glamorous. I use the term *glamorous* here in the light of this word's

Now Online



Top Posts & Pages

Seven Greek tragedies, seven simple overviews

The Last Words of Socrates at the Place Where He Died

About a defeat of the Centaurs, and how to imagine such an event in Olympia

Most Common Tags

Achilles Aphrodite Ariadne Aristotle
Artemis Athena Athens Catullus

Commentary

Comments on Comparative

Mythology Daphnis and Chloe Delphi

Diodorus of Sicily Dionysus etymology

Eurystheus Gregory Nagy H24H HAA travel-

study Helen Hera Herakles

Herodotus Hippolytus Homer

Homeric epic Iliad

Indo-European Library of Apollodorus

mimesis Minoan-Mycenaean civilization Mycenaean

Mycenaean Empire Odysseus

etymology, which is most telling. With reference to medieval Western European traditions about the prestige of literary authority, Jan Ziolkowski (2009:433) points out that the English word *glamor* itself derives, by way of Anglo-Norman French and Middle Scots, from the Latin *grammatica*, which derives in turn from Greek.

§5. But what about situations where a scribe is writing 'letters' or *grammata* not in the general sense of transmitting 'literature', high or low, but in the specialized sense of transmitting 'messages from sender to receiver'? Then the content of such messages becomes as authoritative as are the persons who send and receive the *grammata*. In other words, the importance of the senders and of the receivers can range from lowly bureaucrats to exalted rulers, and their authoritativeness can vary accordingly.

§6. For an example of a highest-level exchange of *grammata* between sender and receiver, I turn to another story told by Herodotus (3.128.2–5). This story, which I analyzed already in [Classical Inquiries 2020.01.10](#) §§7–9, tells about the assassination of Oroites, satrap of Lydia, by an agent of Darius, new king of the Persian Empire. The agent who plans the assassination, named Bagaïos, arranges for a set of texts to be written on papyrus by a scribe on behalf of the sender, who is ostensibly Darius, and then Bagaïos carries these texts to the intended receiver, who is Oroites. Upon receipt of the texts, which had been sealed for transmission, the scribe of Oroites is now to unseal each text, one at a time, and then read out loud what the text says. But the public reading that the scribe is performing here for Oroites gets to be heard not only by this satrap of Sardis but also by a thousand bodyguards who attend Oroites. As Alexander Hollmann points out in a most incisive analysis (2011:195, 231–233), what each text says is notionally being said by Darius himself, since each one of the texts had been sealed by stamping the sealing with a *sphrēgīs* or 'signet ring' belonging to Darius. As the story of Herodotus makes clear, Oroites as receiver of texts ostensibly sent from Darius had access to his own scribe, called a *grammatistēs*, who was to read each text out loud on his behalf as the receiver, just as Bagaïos had a scribe write each text on behalf of the sender. As Hollmann also points out, the seal of Darius gives voice to the king himself as the scribe keeps unsealing the texts one by one and reading each one of them out loud. When the scribe unseals and reads the last of the texts handed over to him by Bagaïos, the time has come for the assassination of Oroites: the unsealed voice of Darius, read out loud by the scribe, orders that the satrap of Sardis be killed by his own bodyguards, who hear the voice authorized by the *sphrēgīs* or 'signet-ring' of their king and now act on it.

Odyssey Olympia

Pausanias Phaedra Pindar Plato

Poetics Sappho Theseus weaving Zeus

Archives

Select Month

Users

Log in



BAGAÏOS DELIVERING HIS MESSAGES TO THE PERSIAN GUARD.

Bagaïos showing unsealed message (originally sealed with the seal of Darius) to the bodyguards of Oroites. *Cassell's illustrated universal history*, 1882, p. 247. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons. This picture, I should say, is historically inaccurate; I should also say, as I have said elsewhere about other such pictures, that we see here an example of facile orientalism.

§7. In a related story, also told by Herodotus (3.39–43), we see a comparable role for another *sphrēgīs* or 'signet-ring'. This one belongs to Polycrates, tyrant of Samos. Such a signet-ring would be used for stamping a seal on a letter. Such a letter, written on papyrus, *bublion*, is sent to Amasis, pharaoh of Egypt (3.42.4). In the letter, the tyrant reports to the pharaoh that he had deliberately thrown into the depths of the sea this signet-ring, but then the ring was accidentally recovered: it had been swallowed by a fish that was later caught by a fisherman. When the fish was served up for dinner and cut open, there it was again,

that same signet-ring. People assumed that this recovery of the ring would make Polycrates happy. But it made him sad instead, as he reports to Amasis in the letter he sends to the pharaoh—a letter he must have sealed with that very same signet-ring. In a letter sent at an earlier point from Amasis to Polycrates (3.40.1), the rhetoric of which has been acutely analyzed by Alexander Hollmann (2011:102–104), the pharaoh had advised the tyrant to make himself immune to any loss of his great good fortune in the future by giving up something he valued more than anything else in life. That something turned out to be the signet-ring. But now the pharaoh, when the letter is read out to him about the lost and then found signet-ring—a letter that must have been sealed by a stamping from that very same signet-ring—decides to put a stop to his contacts with Polycrates. The lost and found signet-ring signals the end of the tyrant's good fortune, and the prospect of bad fortune for Polycrates may have seemed ominously contagious to Amasis.

§8. The writing of letters from Polycrates of Samos to Amasis of Egypt—letters sealed by the signet-ring of Polycrates—would have been performed, I think, by Maiandrios, the *grammatistês* or 'scribe' of the tyrant. There would have been similar exchanges of letters, I also think, with other rulers as well. And I include here Oroites, the satrap of Sardis, who may even have lured Polycrates to his grisly death by way of such exchanges of letters. So, we can find some poetic justice—or, better, scribal justice—in the story about the death of Oroites himself, which could well be described as a death-by-*grammatistai*.

§9. In this study, I have focused on exchanges of letters between important personalities in the middle of the first millennium BCE. I close by noting that the patterns of such exchanges are comparable to patterns we find attested in earlier times, already in the second millennium BCE. I have in mind especially the correspondences of Hittite kings with Egyptian pharaohs, as also with kings or sub-kings of populations designated as *Ahhiyawa*.

Bibliography

Detienne, M., ed. 1988. *Les savoirs de l'écriture en Grèce ancienne*. Villeneuve-d'Ascq.

Detienne, M. 1988b. L'espace de la publicité: ses opérateurs intellectuels dans la cité." In Detienne 1988:29–81.

Hollmann, A. 2011. *The Master of Signs: Signs and the Interpretation of Signs in Herodotus' Histories*. Hellenic Studies 48. Washington, DC, and Cambridge, MA. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_Hollmann.The_Master_of_Signs.2011.

Nagy, G. 2017.06.26. "Mages and Ionians." *Classical Inquiries*. <https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/magoi-and-ionians/>.

Nagy, G. 2020.01.10. "Echoes of a Minoan-Mycenaean scribal legacy in a story told by Herodotus." *Classical Inquiries*. <https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/echoes-of-a-minoan-mycenaean-scribal-legacy-in-a-story-told-by-herodotus/>.

Roisman, J. 1985. "Maiandrios of Samos." *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 34:257–277.

Ziolkowski, J. M. 2009. "Cultures of Authority in the Long Twelfth Century." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108:421–448.

Tags: [Amasis](#), [Darius](#), [Herodotus](#), [Maiandrios](#), [Marcel Detienne](#), [Persian Empire](#), [Polycrates](#), [Samos](#), [Syloson](#)

Comments are closed.

« Ajax pulling at the threads of war, by George Wallace

Some missing links in my efforts to trace continuities as well as discontinuities in Minoan-Mycenaean scribal practices »



Classical Inquiries, edited by Keith DeStone, is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

[EU/EEA Privacy Disclosures](#) [Cookie Policy](#) [CHS GR Privacy Notice](#) [Digital Accessibility](#)

Classical Inquiries powered by [WordPress](#) and [The Clear Line Theme](#)