

Continuity and innovation, variety and experiment in early Greek writing

Can we apply the concept of anchoring innovation?

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Much discussion of the Greek alphabet in its infancy has concentrated on its radical nature, what it made possible, and how it changed society, rather than any anchoring mechanisms for such new 'technology'. It is therefore particularly interesting to seek to apply the 'anchoring innovation' hypothesis to the earliest stages in the use of Greek alphabetic writing. This paper will examine some of the very earliest instances of informal 'graffiti' (on sherds) in the 8th.c. B.C., including very recent finds, asking what anchoring mechanisms there might have been, looking at possible precursors in early Greek society, and considering the relevance of the theory in a society where it is difficult to define certain social groups. It will then consider the earliest inscriptions, dedications, and the very earliest written messages inscribed on stone by the still developing poleis from the mid 7th.c.. It will consider non-written modes of activity – in worship, trade, governance etc., which might affect the meaning of the new writing – and possible emulation of non-Greek practices as mechanisms of 'anchoring'.