The “Marathon Stone” in New York

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In 1923 the Greek government presented the upper part of an inscribed marble grave stele to the College of the City of New York (CCNY). The gift was arranged through the efforts of Dr. John Huston Finley, third president of City College (1903–13), who came upon the stone while walking from Marathon to Athens. The official presentation of the gift was held in New York City on Thursday, November 22, 1923, in an elaborate ceremony at City College attended by various officials of the college and M. Tsamades, the Minister of Greece in Washington. The stele, dubbed the "Marathon Stone" in the official program of the ceremony, was set up in Lewisohn Stadium, where it stood for fifty years, until that facility was demolished in 1973. It was then crated and stored in the basement of the engineering building for twenty years. In 1993 it was placed on loan to the Metropolitan Museum, where it was put on display in the Greek grave stele gallery in August 1994 (Figures 1, 2).

The association with Marathon and the installation of the stele in Lewisohn Stadium reflect the enthusiasm for the modern race, created to approximate the distance from Marathon to Athens (ca. 26 miles). According to the tradition preserved in Plutarch and Lucian, both writing in the second century A.D., a messenger sent from the battlefield at Marathon to announce the victory over the Persians in 490 B.C. ran to Athens, delivered his message, and expired on the spot:

Again, the news of the battle of Marathon Thersippos of Eroidai was brought back as Herakleides Pontikos relates; but most historians declare that it was Eucles who ran in full armor, hot from the battle, and, bursting in at the doors of the first men of the State, could only say, "Hail! we are victorious!" and straightway expired. (Plutarch, Moralia 347 c.)

Plutarch does not refer to Pheidippides, the individual usually associated with Marathon. That name is given by Herodotos, who wrote some six hundred years earlier, within a generation or so of the battle. The run credited to Pheidippides in this earlier tradition is far more arduous:

And first, while they were yet in the city, the generals sent as a herald to Sparta, Pheidippides, an Athenian, and one, moreover, that was a runner of long distances and made that his calling. This man, as he said himself and told the Athenians, when he was in the Parthenian hills above Tegea, met with Pan; who, calling to Pheidippides by name, bade him say to the Athenians, "Why is it that ye take no thought for me, that am your friend, and ere now have oft been serviceable to you, and will be so again?"

This story the Athenians believed to be true, and when their state won to prosperity they founded a temple of Pan beneath the Acropolis, and for that message sought the gods’ favor with yearly sacrifices and torch-races.

But now, at the time when he was sent by the generals and said that Pan had appeared to him, this Pheidippides was at Sparta on the day after he left Athens. (Herodotos, Book VI, 105/6)

The distance of this run, from Athens to Sparta, was about 150 miles. In recent years it, too, has been recreated for a small number of runners under the name “Spartathlon.”

The stone was originally discovered and published in 1873; it is included in the corpus of Greek inscriptions (Inscriptiones Graecae) as I.G. II² 7292.² The stele was found near the church of Saints Constantine and Helen at the north end of the village of Nea Makri, then called Xylokerisa, at the south end of the plain of Marathon, just south of the Brexisa marsh (Figure 8).³

It is the upper part of a white marble stele, apparently Pentelic marble. Broken below and along the front at the top, it is rough-picked at the back and heavily weathered. Though only the top part is preserved, the width (0.725–0.75 m) and thickness (0.43 m) suggest that the piece is among the largest known Attic grave stelae. A molding consisting of a shallow ovolo over a fascia over a larger ovolo originally ran around both sides and across the front but is now missing along the front. On top there is a large dowel hole...
Figure 1. The "Marathon Stone." Marble, H. 1.36 m, W. 0.725-0.75 m. New York, The College of the City of New York. On display at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, L.1994.82
(0.11 m wide, at least 0.06 m front to back, by 0.135 m deep), fed by a long pour channel from the back (0.015 m deep by 0.04 m wide by 0.23 m long).

The upper part of the stele is decorated with floral rosettes in relief, two on the front and one on each side; they are double, eight-petaled rosettes, measuring 0.21–0.226 meters across. They are rendered in a detailed, naturalistic manner when compared to the highly stylized versions on many stelai. The spaces between the individual outer petals are well defined, giving the rosettes a knobby, articulated outline. Both sets of petals are shown as convex and bulging out slightly, and they are decorated with a continuous line of incision parallel to their outer edges. The outer petals are also incised to create the impression of a central crease. The closest parallels for these various features are found on the stele of Epikrates, son of Kephisios, of Ionidai, which is only slightly more elaborate in having a central crease on the inner row of petals as well (Figure 3). Also similar in general appearance though slightly different in the details is the stele of Leon of Sinope, a useful parallel as the letter forms of the inscriptions on the two stelai are similar as well (Figure 4).
Below the rosettes parts of six lines of text are preserved:

"Ελπίνης
Ελπινίκου
Προβαλσίος
Ευνικοῖς
[Ἐ]λπινῖνα
Προβαλσιοῖς

The first three lines preserve the name of Elpines, son of Elpinikos, of Probalanthos, in well-cut letters about 0.065 meter high (omicron: 0.05 m). Below are parts of the name of the brother of Elpines, Eunikos, son of Elpinikos of Probalanthos, in letters less carefully cut, shallower, and somewhat smaller (0.05–0.055 m). The second name was presumably added later.

The stele has suffered somewhat since its discovery. All the letters of lines 1–6 were visible when found, except for the first iota of line 6. In addition, much of the word: "Προβαλσιοῖς" is reported in a separate line above both the rosettes and our line 1. It seems probable that this, too, was added after the original name of lines 1–3. Two considerations suggest this. First, in the early publication this line is reported as being less carefully cut than lines 1–3. Second, there is 0.21 meter between the upper moldings and the top of the rosettes, a space that will not permit three lines of text, which would require about 0.295 meter. Only two lines—thereby presumably requiring the omission of the patronymic—take up 0.18 meter and would therefore fit. From the other examples it seems that the primary name, or a single name, can appear either above or below rosettes. On our stele, the primary name would seem to be Elpines.

Of the two brothers, Elpines may be known from another source. His name appears in Eleusis Museum no. 40 (I.G. II² 1702), which is a list of names, probably of magistrates, from Eleusis. Two other instances of the name Eunikos are known from Probalanthos Athens, Epigraphical Museum no. 11802 (I.G. II² 7295) and Athens, Acropolis no. 1090 (I.G. II² 876), but they cannot be associated with our Eunikos; I.G. II² 7295 has a different patronymic and I.G. II² 876 dates to the late third century B.C.

The stele can be dated only on the basis of general appearance and letter forms, which are subjective and generally unreliable criteria. The forms of the letters, the curving strokes of the K, L, and S, and the slight thickening of the ends of many of the strokes suggest a date not far from the middle of the fourth century B.C. for the original inscribing of the name of Elpines.

This brief note is not the proper place to elaborate on this, but these grave stelae need further careful analysis in an attempt to identify workshops. The style of the rosettes, the style of the letter forms, and the style of the sculpted figures found on many such stelae represent separate criteria that could be studied independently and then correlated for associations with one another. Groups of sculptors, masons, and letterers might well cluster, much the way certain potters and vase painters are known to have worked together in Athens.

This type of grave stele was in common use in the Classical period. There are numerous parallels for stelae with rosettes carrying additional family names as time went by: I.G. II² 6609, of the family of Phormos of Kydantidai (Figure 5), and I.G. II² 6008 (Figure 6) of the family of Koroibos of Melite, are two good examples. If the form of the Marathon Stone was typical, its scale was not. The stele of Phormos (see Figure 5) is 0.63 meter wide at the bottom and 0.32 meter thick; it

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Figure 5. Grave stele of Phormos of Kydantidai. Marble, H. 4.02 m. W. 0.58–0.60 m. Athens, Kerameikos (photo: author)
stood at least 4.00 meters high. The Marathon Stone measures 0.72 meter at the top and is an extraordinary 0.43 meter thick. These proportions suggest that the stele may have stood as high as 5.00 meters. The massive dowel hole in the top indicates the placement of a substantial crowning element, most probably a sculpted palmette. Several such palmettes are known (Figure 7), ranging in height from 0.97–1.40 meters.5

Allowing for such a finial, the total height of Elpines's stele would have been some 6.00 to 6.50 meters.

**The Deme of Probainthos**

As noted, the stele was found at the south end of the plain of Marathon (Figure 8). It was originally taken as evidence for the location of the deme of Probainthos, one of the 140 villages or urban districts that constituted the Athenian state. Probainthos was one of the demes which, with Oinoe, Marathon, and Trikorynthos, made up the early Marathonian Tetrapolis, four villages that occupied the plain and shared a political and religious association. After the Kleisthenic reforms of 508/507 B.C., it was separated administratively from the other three demes and assigned to the tribe Pandionis whereas the other three were assigned to Aiantis. Probainthos was a moderately large deme, accounting for about one percent of the citizen population of Athens, if we may judge from its contingent of five representatives sent annually to the boule (senate) of five hundred.

In recent years, the find-spot of the votive stele of Theogenes, son of Gyletos of Probainthos (Marathon Museum no. 17: *I.G. IIa 7296*), and the discovery of his family grave plot near Vrana (Figure 8), just south-
eas of the present Marathon Museum, have led most scholars to locate the deme center there, where numerous antiquities were found in the 1930s by G. Soteriades. If the center is to be located at Vrana, it remains to be considered whether the Marathon Stone carries any topographical information or not. Other antiquities have been reported around Nea Makri, including a Classical cemetery found in 1985 less than one kilometer north of the church of Saints Constantine and Helen. It may well be that graves of demesmen of Probainthos lined the road south out of the plain and that the territory of the deme extended from Vrana to Nea Makri, a distance of some three to four kilometers.

Alternately, the Nea Makri material may represent a separate deme, in which case the most likely candidate is the small coastal deme of Myrrinoutta of the Aigeis tribe.

Though the association with Marathon and the famous battle proves somewhat tenuous, the Marathon Stone of Elpines and Eunikos is still a welcome addition to the grave stele gallery as an impressive representative of a favored type of grave marker. The austere simplicity of the stele will have contrasted with the ornately carved crowning palmette. Furthermore, at about 6.50 meters in height, the stele was among the very largest of the more than ten thousand grave-stones known from Athens and Attica, from any period. It must have been an extraordinarily prominent feature of the landscape of eastern Attica when it was erected in the fourth century B.C.

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NOTES


3. On a visit to the plain on March 11, 1995, Alex Kalangis and I were unable to get a closer fix on the find-spot or the toponym "Dardea," preserved in the corpus. The present church of Sts. Constantine and Helen is a large neo-Byzantine affair built in 1963 on the site of the earlier chapel.

4. For the Epikrates stele (I.G. II 1, 6904), see A. Conze, Die Attischen Grabreliefs (Berlin, 1911–22) no. 1583, pl. CCCXXIX; and for the Leon stele (I.G. II 1, 10334/5), see ibid., no. 1518, pl. CCLXXVI.

5. For palmette finials, see ibid., nos. 1536, 1537, 1543–1545. There is a handsome example on display next to the Marathon Stone at the MMA; see ibid., no. 1539, and G. M. Richter, Handbook of the Classical Collection (New York, 1917) pp. 222–223. The other possible crowning element popular at this period—a siren—seems far less likely. Sirens are usually carved with a plinth of marble, which would require a large socket in the top of the stele rather than a dowel hole.


7. K. Eustratiou, in AΔ 40, 1985, Chronika (Athens, 1990) pp. 72–73, for the cemetery. Roads lined with graves: e.g., the road from the Dipylon to the Academy, the Sacred Way to Eleusis, or the road leading south from the deme of Rhamnous.