

The One That Got Away: A Reassessment of the Agoranomos Inscription from Chersonesos (*VDI* 1947.2, 245; *NEPKh* II, 129)

Tønnes Bekker-Nielsen

The fragmentary *agoranomos* inscription from Chersonesos in the Char'kov University Museum (Fig. 1) is generally considered to be among our most important sources for the fish trade in ancient Chersonesos. The fragment in question had been in the possession of the museum for some time before it caught the attention of a junior curator, D.L. Grinman, in early 1941. He was unable to ascertain precisely where, when or in what circumstances the stone was originally discovered, or how it came to be in the collections of the Char'kov University Museum, but according to the legend on the rear of the slab, it had been found in Chersonesos (modern Sevastopol). When the German army seized Char'kov later in 1941, the museum was burnt down and



Fig. 1. The inscription in its present state (after Soročan, Zubar' and Marčenko 2001).

many of its records and exhibits were destroyed. Grinman, too, was killed. The inscribed slab was damaged by fire and broken in two. A pre-destruction photograph accompanies the first publication of the inscription by S. Semenov-Zuser in the *Vestnik Drevnej Istorii* (VDI) for 1947.2.

The height of the fragment is about 12.5 cm. The original size of the inscribed slab can be estimated as ca. 0.4 by 0.19 metres.¹ The text is a fairly conventional building inscription:

[Ἀγ]αθη̄ι τύχηι
 [Θεαγέ]νης Διογένους
 [ἀγορα]νομήσας ἐκ τῶν
 [ἰδίων τ]ῆν ὀψόπολιιν
 [ἱερα]τεύοντος Διο
 [--- Φι]λαδέλφου

“Good fortune. Theagenes son of Diogenes, *agoranomos*, from his own resources built an *opsopolis* while Dio... son of Philadelphos was priest”.

An ὀψόπολις or, more correctly, ὀψόπολις is obviously a place where ὄψον is sold. *Opson* has a wide range of meanings, all connected with food: it can mean “victuals”, “rations”, “cooked food”, “relish”, “delicacies” or “fish”. Semenov-Zuser concluded that the choice of the unusual word *opsopolis* was meant to indicate “a place where delicacies such as fish are sold along with delicate fish sauces, or ... where fish sauces are sold”.²

The hypothesis that Chersonesos had a market edifice entirely devoted to the trade in fish sauce was no doubt suggested by the large number of ancient fish-salting cisterns in the city. Our inscription seemingly confirms the existence of a Crimean fish processing industry operating on a massive scale, and has been cited in numerous later works. In Vladimir Ivanovič Kadeev’s influential monograph *Očerkii istorii ekonomiki Chersonesa Tavričeskogo v I-IV vekach n.e.* (*Studies in the Economic History of the Tauric Chersonesos in the First to Fourth Centuries of Our Era*), we read that “Evidence for the nature of the fishing industry is provided by the inscription honouring Theagenes son of Diogenes (2nd century AD), in which a specialized market for the sales of fish sauce is mentioned”.³ It reappears in the book *Ekonomičeskie svjazi antičnych gorodov Severnogo Pričernomor’ja v I v. do n.e. – V v. n.e.* (*Economic Relations in the Ancient Cities of the Northern Black Sea*), co-authored by Kadeev and Sergej B. Soročan, as “a specialized market for fish and fish sauces”,⁴ and most recently in the popularizing 800-page volume by Soročan, Zubar’ and Marčenko, *Žizn’ i gibel’ Chersonesa* (*Life and Decline of Chersonesos*).⁵ The market in question is tentatively, but convincingly, identified with a structural complex, the remains of which were found just south of the late antique basilica excavated by G.D. Belov in 1935. In the centre of the complex was a round structure of about 13 square metres.

Considering the key importance of our inscription, there is good reason to examine it closely within its geographical and chronological context. I will not question its Chersonesan provenance, but focus on the person and career of Theagenes, the office of *agoranomos*, and the structure described as an *opsopolis*.

Theagenes son of Diogenes

Theagenes, son of Diogenes, served as archon in the *polis* of Chersonesos in the year 129/130 AD, when his name was included among the city officials dedicating an honorary decree in favour of Dia[...], a citizen of Herakleia Pontike (*IOSPE I*², 359). Semenov-Zuser takes Theagenes to be the same person as the [...]enes, son of Diogenes, mentioned in our inscription, which on paleographical grounds may be dated to the early 2nd century AD.⁶ If this identification is correct, then Theagenes served as *agoranomos* at an early stage in his municipal career, later moving up to become archon.

Agoranomoi

In Classical Athens, the task of the *agoranomoi* was to supervise the market. We meet them in several of Aristophanes' comedies; in the *Acharnians*, Dikaiopolis appoints *agoranomoi* to maintain order in the marketplace and keep undesirable persons away; in the *Wasps*, Myrtia threatens Philokleon with the *agoranomoi*.⁷ In the *Politics*, Aristotle writes that "first among the offices of the *polis* is that dealing with the *agora*",⁸ and in the *Athenaiôn Politeia*, he lists the number of such magistrates in Athens: ten *agoranomoi* (five each for the markets of Athens and Peiraieus), ten *metronomoi* or inspectors of weights and measures, thirty-five *sitophylakes* or overseers of the corn trade, ten market superintendents – a staggering total of 65 persons, all chosen by lot to oversee trading in the two main markets of the city.⁹ Like the markets of Athens and Peiraieus, that of Olbia had five *agoranomoi*, who are recorded in several dedications to Hermes Agoraios.¹⁰

In later Greek literature, *agoranomos* is used as a gloss for the Roman term *aedilis*, and vice versa. When Dion Cassius, refers to Caesar's term as aedile in 64 BC, he uses the term *agoranomia*.¹¹ In Republican Rome, the aedile was charged with the upkeep of temples and public buildings as well as keeping order in the marketplace. In the Roman *cursus honorum*, the aedileship followed the quaestorship and provided an opportunity to improve one's chances in the competition for a later praetorship or consulate. Success and popularity, however, were not gained for nothing: a Roman aedile was expected to provide benefactions, building projects and games out of his own resources.¹²

Similarly, small towns had their ambitious aediles and *agoranomoi*. Lucius, the protagonist of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, describes his encounter with one

of these in Hypata, the main city of Thessaly.¹³ The persons are fictional, but the gently ironic portrait drawn by Apuleius no doubt resembles many real-life *agoranomoi*.

Lucius has arrived in Hypata and goes to the food market, *macellum*, where he finds many different fish on sale. He haggles for a while with an old fishmonger over a fish priced at one hundred sesterces and succeeds in getting it for eighty. Leaving the market, he runs into Pithias, a former schoolfellow from Athens. Pithias has done well for himself and is now an important local magistrate: "I am a *curator annonae* and an *aedilis*. If you come to buy food for your supper, let me show you where to get it at the right price". But Lucius has already done his shopping and shows his fish to Pithias. "What did you pay for that?" – "Twenty denarii" – "What!" cries Pithias, "you have been shamefully cheated. Show me where you bought this fish". They go back into the *macellum*, where Pithias rebukes the fishmonger at length: "Is that how you behave to strangers, and especially to our friends? How dare you sell this worthless fish at such an inflated price?"

Fortunately, there are magistrates like himself to protect the consumers: *sub meo magisterio mali debeant coerceri*, "under my authority, evildoers shall be restrained". So to set an example, Pithias takes the basket from Lucius, turns its contents out on the pavement and orders his *lictor* to trample the fish to a pulp. "There", says Pithias with satisfaction, "I certainly showed the old fool who is in charge here". And then he departs, leaving Lucius standing in the *macellum* with neither fish nor money.

Apuleius writes in Latin and identifies Lucius' friend as *aedilis*, but since the story takes place in Thessaly, his title would have been *agoranomos*, and it is in his capacity as overseer of the market that Pithias proceeds to assist Lucius, to the latter's cost.

Another example of the small-town *agoranomos* is Sosikles, whose career is known to us thanks to an inscription of 108/109 AD, when he held an ephebarchate in the Bithynian city of Kios,¹⁴ having previously served as *agoranomos*, gymnasiarch, priest of Herakles, politarch and first archon – presumably in that order.¹⁵ The Chersonesan career of Theagenes, son of Diogenes, followed a similar pattern: when we first meet him he is *agoranomos*, later he attains the archontate. He presumably held several intermediary magistracies that are unknown to us. In Classical Athens, being an *agoranomos* did not mark out a man for a political career, but in the Greek cities of the early imperial period, the post of *agoranomos* was an important first step on the way to higher offices. The *cursus* of Sosikles is typical of his times; in Bithynia nearly all recorded archons of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD held the office of *agoranomos* at a previous stage of their career.

What made the office attractive to would-be local politicians was that, while its function – i.e. supervision of the market – on the face of it might seem quite ordinary, it invested the holder with quasi-judicial powers: an *agoranomos* could impose penalties on the spot for infringement of the market regulations,

and might be called upon to act as arbitrator in disputes over prices. Judge and arbitrator were characteristic elite roles, the domain of the city's political class.¹⁶ In addition, the decisions of the *agoranomos* were taken in the market, in the full public view. The office of *agoranomos* thus provided an ideal venue for a local politician to demonstrate his capacity for decision-making and arbitration, and his implicit qualifications for higher and more demanding offices. Pithias' pronouncement – *sub meo magisterio* ... – might sound pompous to our ears (and to Lucius'), but this is precisely the sort of message that an aspiring local politician wished to convey to his fellow-citizens.

An *agoranomos* who was unusually ambitious, or unusually rich, could go one step further by making a financial contribution. The post of *agoranomos* was usually an *archê* rather than a *leitourgia*, and its holders were not expected to contribute from their own resources. Some might, however, do so, donating money to alleviate a food crisis in times of grain shortage, or for embellishing and extending the market buildings. Such benefactions would earn an *agoranomos* the gratitude of his fellow-citizens and put him well ahead of his competitors for higher office. The nature of Theagenes' contribution is underlined by the phrase ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων, "from his own resources". But what exactly was it that Theagenes built, or gave, ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων?

Opsopolis

The text reads ὀψόπολιν, which could be a misspelling of either ὀψοπόλιον or ὀψόπωλιν. Assuming that -ην preceding the word are the last two letters of an article, the neuter ὀψοπόλιον is ruled out and we are left with ὀψόπωλιν, the accusative singular of ὀψόπωλις, that is to say, a market for ὄψον. The word is rare. In the *Life of Timoleon* by Plutarch, composed in the early 2nd century AD, we read how the deposed tyrant Dionysios II of Syrakousai leads a dissolute life, "loitering about in the *opsopôlis* or sitting in a perfumer's shop".¹⁷ This appears to be the only example of the word in the extant literary record.

In Classical Greek, *opson* had a range of meanings: "food" in general, "relish", "luxury food" or "delicacy" – and thus "fish", since fish was both a delicacy and expensive. In Plutarch's context, it might mean either "fish" or "luxury food", since both carry negative moral connotations that would be appropriate to the occasion.¹⁸ In a Crimean context, "fish market" is a translation that easily comes to mind, but Semenov-Zuser points out that if Theagenes wanted to identify himself as the donor of a fish-market, he could have used the more straightforward term *ichthyopôlion* – the word used in the Protogenes decree from Olbia of the 3rd century BC.¹⁹ There are two possible explanations for the occurrence of this otherwise unknown term, *opsopôlis*, in Chersonesos. The first is that it denotes an institution that was unique to Chersonesos and not found in other communities; the second that it refers to an institution that is known from other places, but by a different name.

The first line of thought is followed by Semenov-Zuser. He takes *opson* as referring not to fish in general – in which case we would expect *ichtys* – but to processed fish and fish sauce or relish, which also fall within the wider definition of *opson*. “In our inscription, this form of the word can be read *opsop(ô)lis*, a place where delicacies, i.e. fish, are sold, but at the same time together with delicate fish sauces. Together they reveal to us the correct translation of *opsopôlis*: “fish market” or, even better, “market stalls for the sale of sauces”.²⁰ The interpretation of Semenov-Zuser was followed by Kadeev, and the hypothesis of a specialized market for fish sauces in Chersonesos gained authority. It seemed reasonable enough that a city with a large fish processing industry also had a large trading area for the finished product. On closer reflection, the logical connection between fish processing, *opsopôlis* and *agoranomoi* is less convincing. The existence of a retail market for fish sauce reflects not the productive capacity of the processing industry but the extent of consumer demand for their products and thus, in the last analysis, the size of the urban population. If there was a retail market for fish sauce in Chersonesos, then why is no such market known from much larger urban centres such as Alexandria or Rome?

Of course, the presence of a local fish processing industry might give rise to a wholesale market where local producers met foreign merchants. Two 2nd century inscriptions from Tanaïs on the Don²¹ may refer to such an institution,²² but both use the standard term for a wholesale market, ἐμπόριον. It is not clear whether wholesale trade came within the jurisdiction of the *agoranomos* and even less clear why a politician embarking on a municipal career should sponsor an institution that would benefit a small circle of traders, most of which (i.e. the buyers) were not citizens of the Chersonesan *polis*.

So much for the first possible explanation. The second is that *opsopôlis*, “a place where food is sold”, is used here for the type of urban food market familiar throughout the Roman world and known in Latin as a *macellum*.²³ This building type is first attested in Rome in the 3rd century BC and eventually spread to all parts of the Empire. For our purpose, it is significant that most of the *macella* in Asia Minor were constructed during the 2nd century AD. The authoritative study of the *macellum* is the monograph of the same title by Claire de Ruyt,²⁴ who identified some eighty Roman *macella*. They range in size from 400 square metres upward, but are built over the same basic plan: a square surrounded by shops, sometimes also by a colonnade. The defining characteristic of the *macellum*, setting it apart from the *forum* or *agora*, is the provision of a water supply and washing area, generally located in the centre of the square but sometimes in an adjacent building.²⁵ A water supply and the possibility of cleaning not only the produce itself but the shops and trading area are indispensable to a food market. De Ruyt notes that in *macella* which have a porticus in front of the shops, the pavement is invariably raised in relation to the central square, in order that dirty water and waste from the washing area will not spill out into the porticus. The

pavement can easily be washed down and the water swept into the central court.²⁶

From the earliest time, fish was among the commodities sold in the *macellum* at Rome; in the *Rudens* of Plautus (mid-3rd century BC) the fisherman Gripus ("net") talks of fish being brought into the *macellum* for sale²⁷ and the first Roman *macellum* occupied the former site of the fish market.²⁸ When Lucius came to Hypata and wanted to buy fish for his supper, he went into the *macellum*. Transferring the trade in perishable products foods as fish and meat from the *forum* or *agora* to a purpose-built food market had obvious advantages, not only for the fishmongers and butchers, but also for the vendors and citizens in the marketplace who would no longer have to put up with the flies and smells associated with the fish and meat trade.²⁹

There was no Greek gloss for *macellum*. Greek writers were generally content to use a Hellenized form of the Latin word, *makellon*. In the first letter to the Corinthians, for instance, Paul lays down that Christians may eat all the foods that are offered for sale in the *makellon*.³⁰ In several Greek inscriptions, *agoranomoi* are directly associated with the *makellon*. An inscription from Magnesia mentions an *agoranomos* exercising his functions ἐν τῷ μακέλλῳ,³¹ and from Tegea, another inscription commemorates how the *agoranomoi* have restored the porticus of the *makellon*.³²

The opsopôlis of Chersonesos

Grinman, Semenov-Zuser and Kadeev interpreted the *agoranomos* inscription from Chersonesos in a wide perspective, drawing on parallels from the whole of the ancient world. What is proposed here is an interpretation of the text in its specific context: geographically limited to Asia Minor and the northern Black Sea region; chronologically to the 2nd century AD. The institution of the *macellum* or specialized food market was a familiar one in the cities of the Roman Empire, and during the 2nd century AD, it spread to northern Greece and Asia Minor. It would not surprise us to find a *macellum* in an important city such as Chersonesos, and if we follow Soročan, Zubar' and Marčenko in identifying the building complex next to the basilica as the *opsopôlis* of Theagenes, we find that their description – a market area surrounding a central, circular pavilion – strikingly resembles the standard form of the *macellum*.

It is easy to understand that an ambitious municipal politician, Theagenes, son of Diogenes, would want to endow his native *polis* with a purpose-built food market, in other words, a *macellum*; and equally obvious that he wished to advertise his euergetism by means of an inscription on the building. The 2nd century was, however, also the time of the Greek literary revival known as the second sophistic. We are told by Dio Chrysostomos that the Greeks of Olbia – and presumably of other North Pontic cities – took pride in their Hellenism and had preserved a somewhat archaic language. In the cultural environment of the northern Black Sea and the early 2nd century, Theagenes

wished to emphasize his Hellenism. By rejecting the Latin derivative *makellon* in favour of the genuinely Greek *opsopôlis*, he demonstrated his cultural and ethnic orientation. By using a word that was unfamiliar to the average reader, he demonstrated his erudition and social standing.

Using fancy language for everyday phenomena carries a risk that the reader will not understand the message, but Theagenes was on safe ground in this respect: for one thing, *opson* was a familiar word and the composite *opsopôlis* easily understood; for another, if we are correct in assuming that the inscription was placed on the building itself, even the semi-literate would know what kind of building Theagenes had donated.

Conclusion

The interpretation of the *opsopôlis* mentioned in the inscription as a *macellum* supports the identification of the *opsopôlis* with the building complex south of the basilica, and thus in this respect confirms our current conception of the economic history of Chersonesos. On the other hand, numerous other foodstuffs beside fish, for instance meat and poultry, might also be sold in a *macellum*. *Macella* are found across the Roman world in cities that no doubt had a large retail trade in fish, but also in other cities far distant from the sea, such as Tegea. A *macellum* is not a “specialized market for fish sauces” and the presence of a *macellum* in Chersonesos provides no evidence for or against the role of fish salting and fish processing in the economy of the city.

Notes

- 1 Semenov-Zuser 1947, 244.
- 2 Semenov-Zuser 1947, 246.
- 3 Kadeev 1970, 5.
- 4 Kadeev & Soročan 1989, 91-92.
- 5 Soročan, Zubar' & Marčenko 2001, 620-621.
- 6 Semenov-Zuser 1947, 244. Semenov-Zuser notes that Theagenes may also be mentioned in *IOSPE I*², 361 and 386, but these texts are too fragmentary to cast any further light on the career of Theagenes, if indeed it is he who is mentioned in these inscriptions.
- 7 *Ar. Ach.* 723, 824, 968; *Vesp.* 1407.
- 8 *Arist. Pol.* 1321b12-14 (6.8.3).
- 9 *Arist. Ath. Pol.* 51.1.
- 10 *IOSPE I*², 128, 129, 685.
- 11 Dion Cass. 37.8. Cf. Plautus, *Capt.* 823-824, where the *aedilis* is equated with an *agoranomos*.
- 12 For the games and building projects sponsored by Caesar during his term as aedile, see Suetonius, *Caesar* 9.
- 13 *Apul. Met.* 1.25-26.
- 14 Also known as Prusias ad Mare, modern-day Gemlik on the southern shore of the Sea of Marmara.

- 15 *IK* 29, 16. Cf. Apollonios, who was gymnasiarch at Kallatis in the mid-1st century AD, having previously been *agoranomos* (*I.Callatis*, 31)
- 16 Cf. Pliny, *Ep.* 7.30, complaining about the numerous persons who want him to act as their *iudex* or *arbiter*.
- 17 Plut. *Tim.* 14. For the date, see C.B.R. Pelling, *DnP* 9.1161, s.v. Plutarch.
- 18 Luxuries, cf. Aischines, *In Tim.* 1.63; fish: Theophrastos, *Char.* 6. For the semantic evolution of *opson*, see Davidson 1997, 27-30.
- 19 Semenov-Zuser 1947, 245; *IOSPE I²*, 32.
- 20 Semenov-Zuser 1947, 245.
- 21 *CIRB* 1242 (spelled ἐνπό-), 1243.
- 22 It is probably significant that in two closely similar inscriptions, *CIRB* 1245 and 1247, the building work is stated to be for the benefit “of the city and the merchants” (τῇ πόλει καὶ τοῖς ἐμπόροις).
- 23 *Macellum* is often rendered as “abattoir” or “slaughterhouse” (by analogy with modern Italian *macelleria*) and *macellarius* as “butcher”, but a better translation would be “food market” and “food trader”, see Frayn 1995, 108.
- 24 De Ruyt 1983.
- 25 De Ruyt 1983, 312-313.
- 26 De Ruyt 1983, 314.
- 27 Plaut. *Rud.* 979: *in macellum pisces prolati*.
- 28 Frayn 1993, 65.
- 29 De Ruyt 1983, 160.
- 30 *1 Cor.* 10.25.
- 31 De Ruyt 1983, 107; *I.Magnesia*, 179.
- 32 De Ruyt 1983, 193.