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A TRAGIC MOTHER AT *SGO* 09/01/03, 7

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In a recent volume of this journal Enrico Emanuele Prodi proposed an alternate reading for *SGO* 09/01/03, 7 (Kios; 3rd–2nd c. BCE).¹ I print first the version of the line published in all editions since the *editio princeps* of Le Bas, and then Prodi’s novel suggestion:

μήτηρ δὲ ἐν οἴκοις, ἃ τάλαινα, ὀδύρεται

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Prodi’s reading removes the Doric article, which is conspicuous in an epitaph that is otherwise composed in “unimpeachable Attic”, replacing it with an exclamatory address to the third person subject. While noting that “dialectal instability is well attested in Greek verse inscriptions”, he cautions that such variability “should not be presumed without good evidence”.² Such prudence is philologically sound. I venture here, however, to provide some good evidence that a mother and her grief for the deceased is emphasized elsewhere in Greek verse inscriptions through recourse to a dialectal register shift to Doric coloration, and thus that it is equally possible, if not more so, to retain the reading of the *editio princeps* on sound literary grounds.

In support of his reading, Prodi correctly recognizes that the epitaph as a whole echoes the language, style, and meter of tragic lament, which combine to create a welcome environment for the use of the exclamatory particle ᾶ (attested a total of twelve times, excluding repetitions, in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides). This is suggestive; however nowhere in the tragedians is the exclamation ᾶ τάλας or ᾶ τάλαινα attested (the tragedians much more commonly use the exclamatory particle ὦ/ῶ in combination with τάλας/τάλαινα) – that particular phrase is only found twice, as Prodi notes, at Semon. 7.76 W² and B. 16.30. Conversely, there are numerous instances in Attic tragedy of the combination of the Doric feminine nominative article and τάλαινα. As a substantive, the phrase appears once in Sophocles and six times in Euripides.³ In Euripides the phrase is several times associated with wretched mothers. Hecuba, the epitome of a mournful mother, describes herself in these terms in a monody from the *Trojan Women* (ll. 290–291), and, most notably, the chorus of Argive mothers in Euripides’ *Suppliant Women* (l. 924) collectively describe themselves as wretched (ᾶ τάλαινα) now that they no longer possess someone to nurse them in old age (ἐγὼ δὲ γηροβοσκὸν οὐκ ἔχω).

But tragic parallels alone are not evidence enough to argue for a preference of the reading of the *editio princeps* over that of Prodi. Such generic echoes must be augmented by evidence of dialectal variance. In other words: are there other miserable mothers in Greek verse epitaphs, whose tragic affiliations coincide with a dialectal switch to Doric? Yes. In an epitaph for a certain Zosimos from Erythrai (*SGO* 03/07/17; 2nd c. BCE), composed in a predominately Ionic color, the poet suddenly switches to Doric with the mention of the deceased’s miserable mother (ll. 5–6 ἃ δὲ τάλαινα | θρῆψαμένα σποδιήν εἰς πόλιν ἀγάγετο), whose identity (and bereavement) is reinforced through the enjambment of the Doric participle and the presence of the augmented Doric verb ἀγάγετο. Set amongst all of these Doric words associated with the emotional state and actions of his mother, Zosimos’ ashes (σποδιήν) notably retains the Ionic coloring prominent in the rest of the epitaph. Again from Erythrai in *SGO* 03/07/11 (1st c. BCE/CE), the poet first introduces the deceased’s mother in an Attic colour (ἡ μήτηρ πανόδυρτος), only to later modify her with the doricized participle ὀδυρομένα placed in emphatic final position in the concluding line of the epigram. Though lacking associated tragic diction, the mother of the fallen soldier Philonides commemorated in *GVI* 944 = Bernand 66 (Naukratis; late Hellenistic) is similarly marked out by the use of Doric (ἃ δέ με γενομένα | αὐτὰ καὶ δέχεται τόδ’ ὑπ’ ἡρίων) in an epigram which draws extensively from epic. Though the evidence

¹ Prodi, E. E. 2017. *SGO* 09/01/03, 7. *ZPE* 201: 40.

² Prodi 2017 40.

³ For ᾶ τάλαινα, cf. Soph. *El.* 1183; Eur. *Andr.* 534, *El.* 1206, *El.* 1284, *Med.* 1286, *Supp.* 924, *Tro.* 290–1.

is limited, these inscribed epigrams from different times and places in the Hellenistic world nevertheless suggest that the poets of Greek verse inscription utilized dialect in a nuanced fashion to imbue their verses with a tragic echo of the former wails of lamentation which may well have been uttered before these silent stones.⁴ I argue, then, that there is good evidence, in this instance, to consider the dialectal variance to be a purposeful and meaningful attribute to the literary expression of the epigram.

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⁴ See also Dickie, M. W. 1994. An Epitaph from Stratonikeia in Caria. *ZPE* 100: 109–118, who suggested (117) that the sudden appearance of Doric features in the final sentence of an epitaph from Carian Stratonikeia was associated with “the plangent tone of lamentation”, though here the Doric variance is not associated with the grief of a mother.