

Hesperia Supplement 37

THEOROI AND INITIATES IN
SAMOTHRACE

The Epigraphical Evidence



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Cover illustration: Record of initiates from Thasos and Philippi on
marble plaque found in the Sacristy in Samothrace. Archaeological
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INTRODUCTION

The core of this work is an edition of all documents pertaining to sacred ambassadors (*theoroi*) and initiates (*mystai* and *epoptai*) in Samothrace. These documents, which constitute the majority of all Samothracian inscriptions, form a crucial body of evidence for the Samothracian Mysteries of the Great Gods, the most famous mystery cult in antiquity after the Eleusinian Mysteries. Despite the fame of the Samothracian Mysteries and their great popularity in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, there is still much uncertainty with regard to the identity of the Great Gods, the form of the Mysteries, and the function of several buildings in the sanctuary. The inscriptions edited here shed some light on these questions—more so than the monumental royal dedications and other Samothracian documents not included here. As direct sources of information they are especially valuable, as the literary evidence pertaining to the Samothracian Mysteries is often inconsistent and difficult to interpret. The entire body of evidence, literary and epigraphical, will be discussed by Kevin Clinton in *Samothrace 12: The Religion of the Sanctuary of the Great Gods*. The present volume presents the most significant epigraphical documents and the conclusions that can be drawn from them concerning the religious functions of the sanctuary and the people who came to experience the religion of Samothrace. The conclusions do not pretend to be exhaustive; it is hoped that this collection of epigraphical evidence will serve as a stimulus to further questions, and that the picture that emerges from the epigraphical evidence will provide a perspective helpful in assessing other evidence concerning the sanctuary, the city, and the cults of Samothrace.

The inscriptions from Samothrace have never been collected in a single edition. About three-fourths of them (including unpublished material) concern *theoroi* and initiates. Of the 113 documents published by Carl Fredrich (in *IG XII.8*) and Friedrich Hiller von Gaertringen (in *IG XII Supplement*), 68 concern *theoroi* and initiates. P. M. Fraser's edition of Samothracian inscriptions on stone (*Samothrace 2.1*) includes 91 documents found or acquired during the American excavations from 1939 through 1957, 47 of which concern *theoroi* and initiates (including nos. 6, 13, 17, 19; appendixes I, IIIA, IV; and nos. 62 and 63, the two prohibition inscriptions). Many new inscriptions have come to light since then; some have appeared in periodicals whereas others are published here for the first time.

The present collection contains all relevant published documents, with corrections and additions, and all relevant unpublished inscriptions that I was able to identify in the Archaeological Museum of Samothrace in the course of my examination of the fragments deposited there. My criterion for inclusion was that a fragment contain at least one name or meaningful word pertaining to the topic of *theoroi* or initiates. In addition to the documents from Samothrace, I have included two pertinent inscriptions of uncertain provenance (25, 29), and several from other sites associated with the Samothracian Mysteries, namely, Kos, Iasos, Priene, Rhodes, Tomis, and Dionysopolis (Appendixes I, II). The total number of inscriptions is 179, including 171 main documents, edited in Parts I and II, and the 8 inscriptions presented in Appendixes I and II, which are indirectly related to the topic.

My presentation of each document includes the following elements, in accordance with standard epigraphical publications: a physical description of the stone, bibliography, text, epigraphical commentary, and general commentary. Part I comprises documents concerning *theoroi* in Samothrace, and Part II, those concerning initiates. Each part is prefaced by a discussion of various problems associated with *theoroi* and initiates, respectively.

The most immediate and straightforward results were prosopographical. The study contains the most up-to-date lists of *theoroi* and initiates in Samothrace, including about 500 names corrected from previous publications and about 100 new names.¹ Even though a list of initiates was published by Susan Cole in 1984,² the list of *theoroi* presented here is the first of its kind. The total number of known *theoroi* is now estimated to be approximately 250, and that of initiates some 700, not including heavily damaged partial names. Fourteen new names of eponymous kings, the major Samothracian magistrates, have been added as well.

This new information naturally allows us also to change the map of cities that sent visitors to Samothrace (Figs. 1, 2). A couple of cities that sent *theoroi* have been added to those previously known, and two previously known have become doubtful. Seven new cities that sent certain or presumable initiates have been added, but two previously known must now be considered as only possible.

Another welcome by-product of this new look at the epigraphical evidence is that we have been able to define the functions of the *theoroi* in Samothrace with greater clarity. Counter to the traditional assumption that *theoroi* went to Samothrace to attend a special festival, perhaps the *Mysteria*, we now know that the city of Samothrace made them *proxenoi*, at least during the 2nd century B.C. and possibly the 1st; that they received various honors and were probably initiated; and that some of them set up dedications to the Great Gods. Only two documents (Appendix I.2 and I.3) mention festival attendance; they provide no evidence for a special festival of the Mysteries, but for the strong possibility that the *Dionysia* constituted the major Samothracian festival at which *theoroi* were present. In any case, *theoroi* must have visited the island for other reasons as well, as suggested in particular by Appendix I.4 and I.5.

With regard to the broader aims of this study, some results may be mentioned here. Document 26, for instance, gives valuable insight into

1. A new record of initiates found in 2005 provides several new names: Parmenios Zoilou Andrios, and the Alexandrians Philakes Pleistonymou and Pleistonymos Philakou; the publication of this document is forthcoming.

2. Cole 1984, appendix III.

INTRODUCTION

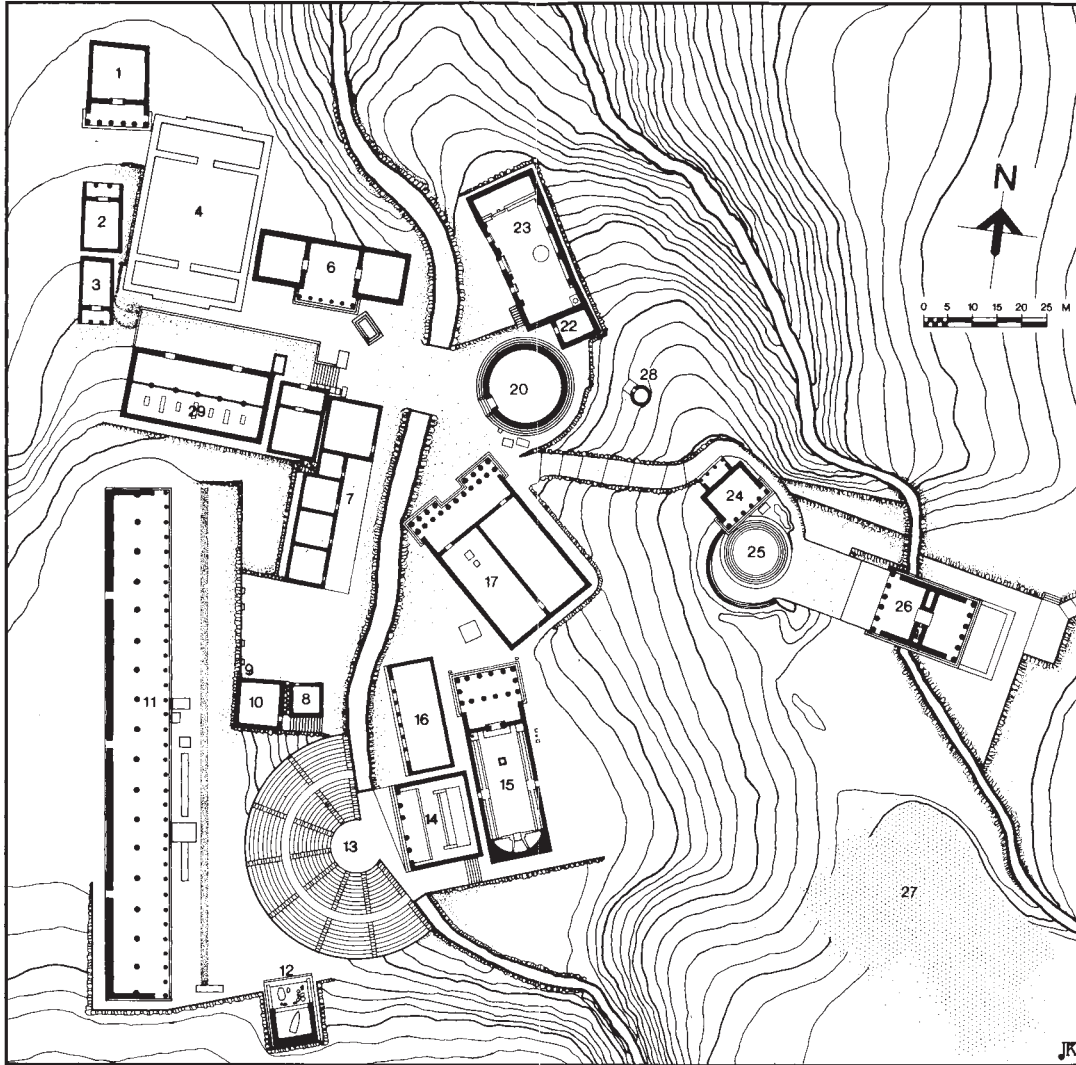


Figure 3. Plan of the Sanctuary of the Great Gods at Samothrace: (1–3) unidentified Late Hellenistic buildings; (4) unfinished Early Hellenistic building; (6) Milesian dedication; (7) dining rooms; (8, 10) unidentified niche; (9) Archaistic niche; (11) stoa; (12) Nike monument; (13) theater; (14) altar court;

(15) Hieron; (16) Hall of Votive Gifts; (17) Hall of Choral Dancers; (20) Rotunda of Arsinoe; (22) Sacristy; (23) Anaktoron; (24) Dedication of Philip III and Alexander IV; (25) theatrical area; (26) Propylon of Ptolemy II; (27) Southern Necropolis; (28) Doric Rotunda; (29) Neorion. Lehmann 1998, plan IV

the political history of both the Thessalian League and Samothrace in the middle of the 2nd century B.C., including Rome's war with Perseus and related events. It also challenges the traditional view that mainland Greece was extremely poorly represented by theoi in Samothrace.

As far as initiation itself is concerned, we learn much from 29, including the use of the term *Kabiroi* in documents regarding the Samothracian cult. The same monument offers a valuable detail about a little-known benefit of Samothracian initiation—a happier lot in the afterlife. This text, the only

one known to associate initiation at Samothrace with a happy afterlife, helps explain why the formula *mystai eusebeis* typically appears in Samothracian records of initiation. Furthermore, the documents concerning initiates supplement our understanding of their social status (among them we find slaves, freedmen, ordinary citizens, high officials, and kings); the dates of the initiation records (at least from ca. 180 B.C. until A.D. 186); the stages of initiation (preliminary purification, *myesis*, and *epopteia*); the existence of a special festival; and the display of initiation records in certain areas of the sanctuary (Fig. 3).

The documents presented here provide new and emend old information about the people who visited Samothrace as *theoroi* and those who were initiated into the Mysteries of the Great Gods. The monograph is intended for anyone interested in Greek religion and mystery cults, Greek and Latin epigraphy, prosopography, and Samothracian history and cult in particular.