

Did the Amphipolis Tomb Commemorate Hephaestion?

By Andrew Chugg, Author of *The Quest for the Tomb of Alexander the Great*

Introduction

The archaeological team responsible for the recent excavation campaigns at the Amphipolis Tomb gave a lecture on 30th September 2015 in which they presented evidence which they argued indicates that the monument was built on the orders of Alexander the Great to commemorate his Deputy and close personal friend Hephaestion Amyntoros. The objective of this article is firstly to explain their rather intricate arguments and secondly to provide a preliminary evaluation of their credibility.

The Evidence

The new claims are based on a pair of inscriptions not in fact found at the Amphipolis Tomb itself, but dredged from the River Strymon just south of Amphipolis in the early 20th century. However, the inscriptions are scratched onto the faces of marble blocks, which with a very high degree of certainty originally formed part of the circular *peribolos* wall of the Amphipolis Tomb. Each inscription appears to occupy the face of a block that was exposed when it was incorporated into that wall. Each inscription has the Greek letters ΑΡΕΛΑΒΟΝ followed immediately by a complex cluster of strokes and marks, which the archaeologists have suggested constitutes a monogram comprising the letters of Hephaestion's name in Greek: ΗΦΑΙΣΤΙΩΝ (Figures 1 & 2). They have further suggested that three of the letters in the monogram reading ANT form a kind of sub-monogram within the full monogram (Figure 3).



Figure 1. Photo of one of the two "Hephaestion" inscriptions

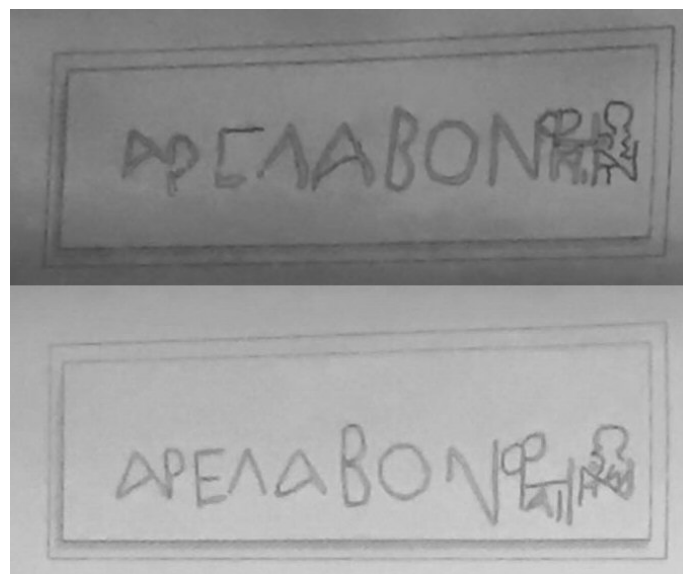


Figure 2. Transcriptions of the two "Hephaestion" inscriptions presented by the archaeologists



Figure 3. How an ANT monogram seems to form a part of the overall Hephaestion monogram

The archaeologists propose that we should read these two inscriptions as ΠΑΡΕΛΑΒΟΝ ΗΦΑΙΣΤΙΩΝ, meaning “received by Hephaestion” and they interpret them as formal records of the contract to erect the Amphipolis Tomb in memory of Hephaestion, which should both be dated to the time of the construction of the monument.

Against the argument that the inscriptions might have been added to the blocks after they were removed from the *peribolos* wall of the Amphipolis Tomb, the archaeologists make two particular points. Firstly, they suggest that they have found the same Hephaestion monogram scratched into the centre of one of the painted rosettes that decorate the ceiling of the chamber in which they uncovered the Persephone abduction pebble mosaic in September 2014 (Figure 4).

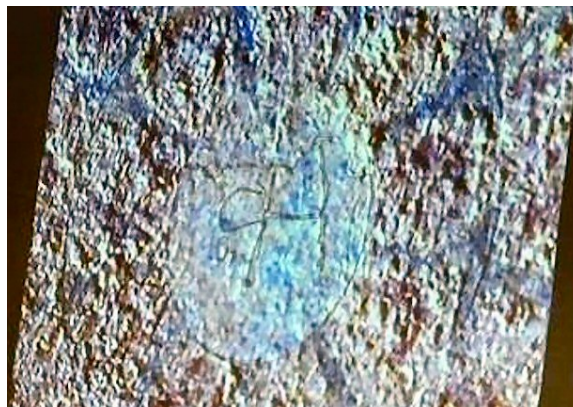


Figure 4. The rosette “Hephaestion” monogram from above the mosaic in the Amphipolis Tomb

Secondly, they argue that they have found the same ANT monogram (but without the encompassing Hephaestion monogram) in four places carved upon blocks of the *peribolos* wall that remain in place (Figure 5). Furthermore, they point out that a very similar ANT monogram appears on some coins issued by Alexander’s general Antigonus Monophthalmus, who later became the ruler of a large area of Asia Minor and Syria (Figure 6).



Figure 5. One of the four ANT monograms on the *peribolos* wall of the Amphipolis Tomb



Figure 6. A silver coin bearing the ANT monogram and possibly minted by Antigonos Monophthalmus in the name of Philip III

The archaeologists noted that it is recorded by reliable historical sources (Arrian and Diodorus) that Alexander the Great ordered that elaborate monuments and temples be erected to the memory of Hephaistion in the months just prior to Alexander's own death in June 323BC. Hephaistion had died suddenly at Ecbatana in Persia in early November of 324BC. Alexander ordered that a funeral pyre 200 feet tall be built for his deputy in Babylon, where he held the funeral in May 323BC, cremating his friend on the vast bonfire and sacrificing a total of 10000 beasts in his honour. But since Alexander himself died too soon to complete any stone monuments for his friend, the archaeologists infer that Antigonos undertook to put Alexander's plan for a memorial to Hephaistion into effect at Amphipolis in the years following his king's death. It is a beguiling story of loyalty beyond the grave, but can it be true?

Historical Problems

The first difficulty lies in a degree of conflict with the historical background. The Amphipolis Tomb must have cost tens of thousands of kilograms of silver and taken years to build. But Alexander died only months after Hephaistion. His Last Plans (*Hypomnemata*) specified the completion of Hephaistion's monuments at an enormous cost and he had asked that temples be built in major cities to honour Hephaistion as a hero. However, within a week or two of Alexander's death the army voted at an assembly in Babylon that the king's Last Plans should not be funded. Who then would have dared to defy the army by continuing to fund Hephaistion's monuments after such a decisive vote? Furthermore, who would even have cared enough about Hephaistion's memory to spend so much money on a monument for

him after Alexander's death? Hephaestion had been notorious for his rows with Alexander's other generals, specifically including Eumenes and Craterus, and his relations with Olympias, Alexander's mother, had been antagonistic.

The answer to the conundrum according to the archaeological team is that it was Antigonus, who took up the responsibility for bringing the commemoration of Hephaestion to fruition. However, Antigonus was not in a very powerful position in the years immediately following Alexander's death. In fact at one point he was forced to flee from Asia and seek refuge with Antipater, who was then ruling in Macedon. It was not until the conference at Triparadeisus in 320BC that he began his rise to become the pre-eminent general in Asia and it was not until he had finally defeated Eumenes in 317BC that his dominance was assured. Significantly, also, he never ruled in Macedon or Amphipolis. And why build a monument to Hephaestion at Amphipolis anyway? Amphipolis has no known historical connection with either Antigonus or Hephaestion.

However, the core problem for the archaeologists in validating their interpretation of the inscriptions is the need for them to exclude alternative explanations of the evidence. Currently it is clear that there are alternative explanations that are more readily credible than the Hephaestion monument theory in the light of the conflict between that theory and the historical record.

Alternative Explanations of the Evidence

The suggested Hephaestion monograms are far from being the only ancient writing that has been found on the group of marble blocks from the Amphipolis Tomb that were dredged from the River Strymon a century ago. In fact there is a very large amount of graffiti-style Greek lettering that was scratched onto these blocks in ancient times (and also some that is more recent). These blocks have been closely studied since the 1930s, so many of the graffiti inscriptions have already been published in papers by Professor George Bakalakis, by Stella & Stephen Miller and by Antonios Keramopoulos. A few examples are shown in Figure 7. These graffiti resemble the Hephaestion graffiti in many ways. But it is clear that most if not all of these graffiti were inscribed after the blocks were removed from the *peribolos* wall of the Tomb, because many of the letters are on faces of the blocks that would not have been exposed when they were still built into the wall. So one obvious alternative explanation for the Hephaestion inscriptions is that they are just ancient graffiti added after the destruction of the monument like virtually all the others on the same set of blocks. More is needed to show that the Hephaestion graffiti are exceptional and it may be added that since these blocks have been lying around in the open for a hundred years, even 20th century pranksters cannot readily be ruled out. Every alternative must be considered in order to build confidence.

More difficulty stems from the fact that the photos of the Hephaestion monograms as so far presented are quite unclear. Only the largest letters are easily decipherable. The smaller letters in the archaeologists' transcriptions of the inscriptions vary significantly between the case of one monogram and the other. It is unusual that some letters are barely a fifth the height of others. The archaeologists have noted that they have consulted several epigraphists (experts in ancient writing) in reaching their current interpretation, but they have not named these epigraphists and the opinions of other epigraphists are needed as to whether alternative interpretations are possible. It appears to me likely that some of the detail of the monograms will be open to alternative interpretations. It would especially seem likely that the rosette monogram will be open to alternative interpretations, since only candidates for the eta and phi of Hephaestion's name are at all clear in the current photos

and because many things could be symbolised by a monogram comprising just these two letters. If any sensible alternative interpretation of any of the monograms is feasible, then the hypothesis that the monument was dedicated to Hephaestion will be rendered untenable.

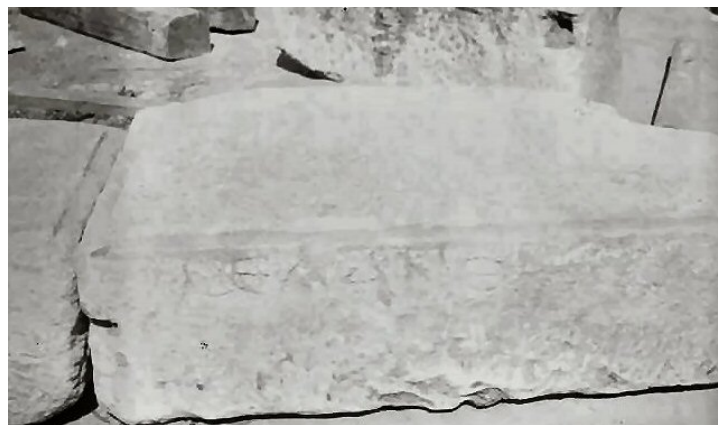


Figure 7. Ancient graffiti inscriptions on blocks dredged from the River Strymon in the early 20th century but originally from the *peribolos* of the Amphipolis Tomb.

It is worth highlighting a few reasons for particular concern as to whether the details of the interpretation of the monogram are correct. For example, according to the two transcriptions, the ANT part of the monogram is implemented quite differently in one case as opposed to the other: the first stroke of the alpha is part of the large eta in one case, but is a separate feature in the other. This variation in the formation of the ANT undermines its use to connect the Hephaestion graffiti with the genuine ANT monograms actually found on the *peribolos* wall of the Amphipolis Tomb.

It is also worth noting that the sigma in the monogram is upright in one case and rotated fifty degrees anticlockwise in the other. Furthermore, the iota beneath the eta is a long stroke in one case and a very short stroke in the other. These monograms are either the work of an extremely inconsistent inscriber or else some of the finer features of the monogram are based on over-interpretation of random chiseling of the block surface, for the exposed surfaces of these blocks have a finish of deliberate stippling. In fact there is more inconsistency in the smaller letters than in the larger letters, which suggests that the identification of the smaller letters has been more imaginative, because an inconsistent inscriber should have been equally inconsistent whether carving large or small letters. Unless and until the reality of the smaller letters and strokes can be unambiguously and independently verified, it is very uncertain whether these monograms really signify the name of Hephaestion at all.

Even if the Hephaestion graffiti can be verified to read as the archaeologists have transcribed them and if they are shown to be early features of the monument, it is still far from clear that they constitute formal contractual records of the dedication of the monument to Hephaestion. Given that the letters are poorly formed and the inscriber seems barely to have been literate, the presumption should be that they are not formal records associated with the builders of the monument. Alternative early visitors to the Tomb are better candidates. For example, thousands of Macedonian cavalrymen had served under Hephaestion on Alexander's campaigns and Arrian tells us that Hephaestion's division of the cavalry bore his name. If any one of these men visited this monument after he had returned to Macedonia, might he not have inscribed the name of his commander and his regiment as a record of his visit? Carving such graffiti was popular in antiquity just as it is today. The poor letterforms and dubious literacy of the Hephaestion inscriptions should incline us towards a graffiti explanation. For comparison, a formal inscription containing Hephaestion's name survives from the late 4th century BC on a sculpted block found near Pella in Macedonia and shown in Figure 8. It indicates the sort of standard that we should expect to see in any formal original inscription on the Amphipolis Tomb.

Furthermore, although the name Hephaestion was not very common in the Hellenistic period, nevertheless a few other Hephaestions are known to us. For example, there was an artist called Hephaestion, who laid a mosaic in one of the palaces of Attalus in Pergamon. His signature was found there: "ΗΦΑΙΣΤΙΩΝ ΕΠΟΙΕΙΣΕ" (Hephaestion made it).



Figure 8. The only previously known inscription to mention Hephaestion Amyntoros

Conclusions

I myself have written extensively about Hephaestion. The discovery of a genuine monument in his honour would therefore be a great thrill for me. But the head has to rule the heart in the evaluation of ancient evidence and the current evidence is clearly susceptible to more likely alternative explanations, whilst the idea that a monument on the scale of the Amphipolis Tomb could have been built for Hephaestion after Alexander's death conflicts gratingly with the historical record. Unless alternative explanations of these graffiti can be disproved, the Hephaestion hypothesis should be considered tenuous at best. At present it is merely a distraction from the far more significant issue of the identity of the burials. The real news at this time is that the archaeologists have established that the tomb was sealed before the Romans took over Macedon in 168BC, whereas last November they had suggested that it was sealed four hundred years later in the 3rd century AD. This early sealing date makes the crucial difference that the burials are now definitely going to be early and there is a good chance that they will turn out to be original. It continues to be clear that the fact that somebody went to so much trouble to seal this tomb means that those bones of a lady over sixty years old and two middle-aged men are immensely important.