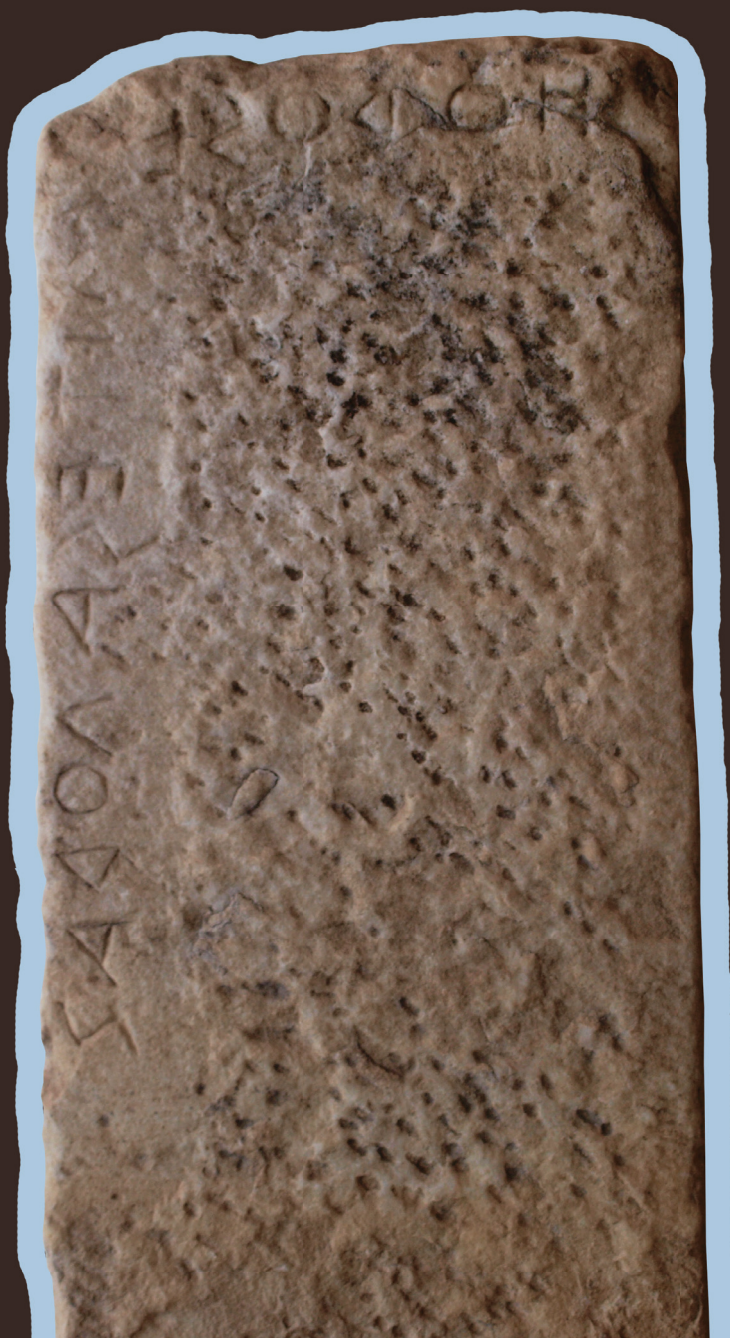


ANCIENT BOUNDARIES AND THE
ECOLOGY OF STONE

H O R O S



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POTTER



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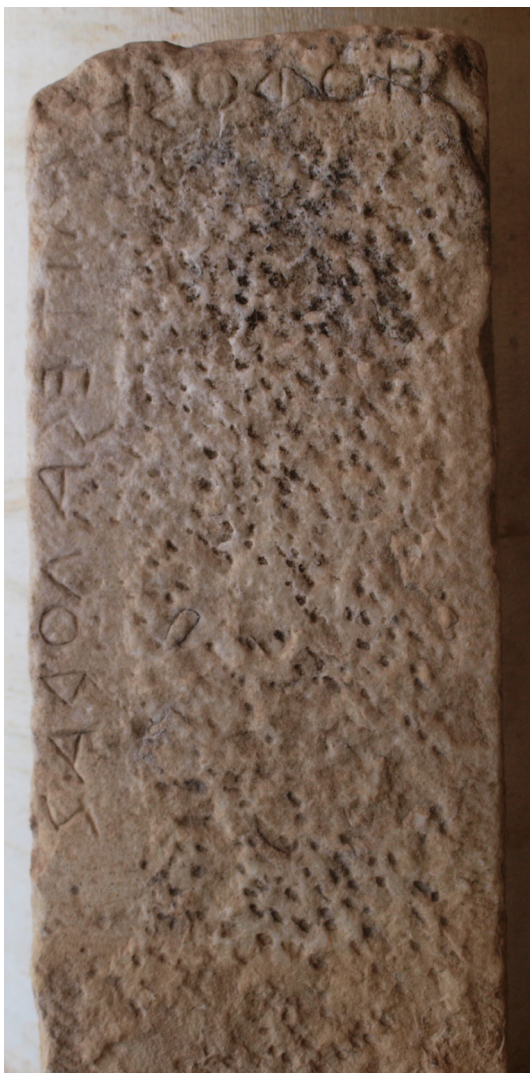


Fig. 8. ΗΟΡΟΣ ΕΙΜΙ ΤΕΣ ΑΓΟΡΑΣ [retrograde] 'I am the *horos* of the agora.' *Horos* stone discovered in situ in the northeast corner of the Ancient Athenian Agora, by the Tholos. IG I³ 1088 [I 7039] Photograph by M. Goutsourela, 2013. Rights belong to The Athenian Agora Museum © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.R.E.D.)

8. I Am the Boundary of the Market

If I must read into this work any single aim, it would be that it provides a material foundation for, in Levinas's words, 'interpreting human resistance petromorphically.'¹ To begin with, I have elaborated upon the very real limits to economic growth and progress that have existed and continue to exist in the matter itself, the natural resources we make use of in order to go about the tasks of producing and reproducing. This will already be known to many of my readers, so I hope that this excursion contributes by providing a basis for further resistance to the forces that seek to make use of our common material, ourselves included, to the profit of a few and to the detriment of all. While the limits are no doubt material they are also conceptual and they depend upon us; they are recognised or read into the material itself but always by us, or that failing it is we who have forgotten how to read what the world around us, populated as it is by humans and nonhumans of every walk of life, so adamantly tells us. So, if we listen to stone even today, perhaps we can hear the echo of ancient wisdom and relay it back into our present conditions to help us make a stand, as the stone did so long ago, in an act, this time of disobedience, defiance or noncompliance to work within the tyranny of an economic system that is structured around stripping dignity, pride and soul from us and every aspect of the world, organic and inorganic, human and nonhuman alike: 'I am the boundary of the market,' let us say, 'and this stops here.'

Some fifty years after Solon's reforms and his removal of the *horoi*, a stone calls witness once again to a limit. It announces itself as the economic limit of all transactions, 'I am the boundary of the market,'

1 Levinas (1987) 78.

HOPOΣ EIMI TΕΣ AΓOPΑΣ. In Ancient Athens the market-place (*agora*) was marked by the *horoi* which were engaged in drawing up the boundaries of this space. These stones mark the boundaries of any verbal and more than verbal exchange and they do this because not everything is exchangeable, not everything in short nothing—neither word nor thing, animal nor human—is essentially reducible to a single exchange value or substitutable by a collection of monetary units. Ascribing nonessential, nonesoteric worth to anything comes at a cost to the human soul. It should come as no surprise, then, that a limit was declared. And yet it was a limit that did not intend to stop these processes, but that took the need for marking limits onto itself in order that the processes could go on beyond such limits. As little as we know about the pre-Solonian *horoi*, we may make one assumption, that not one of them named itself. It is only within the boundaries of the late archaic *polis* that the stone rises up and gives itself a name, that the boundary (transgressed) reasserts itself, that the term enunciates its presence and the limit declares itself a place. In the shadow of the matter of self-proclamation, human works and deeds retire into the machinations of the market's forces because there is an external limit, a limit that takes upon itself the definition of the market. This limit is marginal, yes on the one hand, but it is also central to the *polis*. It frames the city and its work, which becomes increasingly powerful as it engages in the export and import of words, deeds and things, expanding the boundaries of its *agora* exponentially. Until, finally, it is the *agora* that comes to take precedence over the *polis*, Athens becomes an imperial city and philosophy is now taught and sold as a commodity all over the world.

Unlike an earlier boundary-stone inscribed with the words HOPOΣ : ΔΙΟΣ (retrograde) 'Horos of Zeus' (marking the extent of a sanctuary of Zeus), the boundary-stones of the market were not marked as belonging to any particular god.² In contrast, it states that it belongs to the market. Would we be correct, then, in assuming the *agora* was in the league of other sanctuaries? To some degree, perhaps, especially given the fact that at the central point of the *agora* stood the temple to the Olympian Gods among many other shrines and altars. And yet there is something that differentiates this stone from all the others, and that might give us a clue

2 Lalonde (2006).

as to why the *agora* is a space that simultaneously provides a sanctified place for exchange and evaluation and puts into question this very notion of the sacred. The *agora's* use as a place where exchange-value finds its home can be maintained only in the absence of any definitive terms of value. Indeed, when it comes to what is sacred about the *agora*, we are confronted before anything else by the name of its limits.

This *horos* does not merely describe the boundaries of the market; it is also inscribed as giving itself a name. It declares (to us) what it is in the nominative and where it belongs by virtue of the copulative 'I am' (EIMI). Why is the simple word *horos* not sufficient when it comes to the market? Why does this stone, of all stones, assume the task of speaking to us and of giving a name for itself, of telling us what it is and thereby making itself the subject of the market, a subject of belonging which however does not enter into the market, but remains on the edge for us to see before *we* enter? It tells us its name, and its name is 'boundary,' a boundary to be transgressed, and we transgress it. Upon this site where possession is always at issue, where everything is up for sale, the only thing that claims to belong there is the boundary itself, which remains nonetheless both marginal and defining. All the other meanings of the word *horos* are assumed in this single act of self-definition: it is there where we abstract the matter itself as an object of worth, where transgression between what is mine and yours is essential to the everyday functioning of the market, where language itself comes into question, and where time stretches in an eternal present suspended in the deferral of gratification (despite the copulative 'I am'). It is without doubt more than a fortuitous coincidence, this self-appellation of the stone on the margin of the very place where intercourse (*agoreuein*) is embodied by acquisition (*agorazein*).

Archaeological studies suggest that the *agora* was initially the place of social discourse and public speaking (*agoreuein* means 'to speak in public') and indeed the word *agora* on its own can be used to mean a place for public speaking. In any case, although by the classical period the *agora* was chiefly a site devoted to the exchange of goods, the etymological history of the *agora* was resurrected by sophists and philosophers alike occupying the site and putting into question generally assumed conceptions of goods and bads. Socrates himself frequented the *agora*, and in his trial claimed that he spoke nothing more

than the language of the market-place.³ The Stoics also take their name from their tendency to loiter about the stoas of the Hellenistic *agora* and engage in their discussions in this public place. If we accept these later examples as indicative, we could say that the *agora* was a place that was devoted not only to public speaking, but to a common task of definition; where what was discussed but not resolved were questions of meaning and value, the question of the city's common aims, customs and laws. The *agora*, then, was the very site of legal and economic disputation, whether as with Socrates that meant questions raised about the Just and the Good, or with Diogenes the Cynic the ridicule of rife acquisitiveness and the defacement of the value of currency (or any transitory beliefs). The raising of questions as such could take this position because here questions (with or without answers) were at home. For these questions to even be possible there had to be the precedent that the site was not foreclosed to the potential dangers of raising questions: concepts and activities in practice were not already definitive. Definitions as such had to be dubitable and even destroyed, we might say put out of use, in order that new definitions be attributed.

So, within this clearly demarcated area, defined off from the banal duties of everyday life, what was up for grabs was definition itself. In the act of public discourse, intentions, laws and words themselves are in dispute. Outside the *agora* where people go about their lives, language had a determined value, it was used in the courts, the theatres, the assemblies, in both town and country. But within the *agora* this use-value of language as such was put on hold, undetermined as the possibility of conferring new meanings, new standards and new linguistic rules. The *horos* drew up the boundaries of this task of redefinition. It provided the definitive limits within which there are no limits to discourse, intercourse and exchange. Every time we try to define a word or reform a law the very act of definition requires a beginning, a basis or a foundation, a language within which to work. We must use other words to define the one that is at issue, and yet no other word is discreet in itself or absolutely definitive, so that in the process the structure of language itself comes into question, just as we countermand the foundation of Law as such when we consider the formulation and applicability of a new law.

3 Pl.Ap.17C-D.

For this reason, Solon the lawgiver exiled himself so that he would not be called upon to explain or change the laws that he had undersigned. He exiled himself, thus making himself the basis of the law, the absent principle, the unquestionable *archē*. But what Solon did for the political system from afar, the *horos* did to the economy from within. What is exceptional about the *agora* can only be maintained because there is a limit that simultaneously restricts what is exceptional about the *agora* and makes it central to the community. This limit is simultaneously declarative, self-appellating and, significantly, material. It is neither law nor man, it is stone. And as stone it takes on the burden of defining the market-place, drawing up the limits and marginalising matter from the processes of exchange and perhaps giving a taint of the ideal to those processes within.

It is said that this stone provided an outline of an area into which those who had perpetrated unforgivable crimes such as patricide were not permitted to enter.⁴ These men were given the title *atimos*, they were dishonoured and were considered unclean in the ritual sense. Why criminals should thus be exiled from the market-place is a question that can be considered according to a conjunction between what we consider the sacred customs of the ancient world and the economic bias of the modern. That is to say that this extradition of the criminal cannot be explained away as an idiosyncrasy of ancient ritual and religion, unless we accept that the market-place itself is also a site of value for the sacred. But does this mean that the market itself is of sacred value, or that for any notion of value to take place within the market it must of itself have limits? What if, as the civic space closed off for the exclusive purpose of exchange (of words and things) it is deemed sacred insofar as it can be put to no other use? What can be seen is a co-determination between the stone '*horos*' and a boundary of social significance that, in a community without a clear cleft between sacred and secular, describes public spaces. Thus, the market can be understood as a site of holy value, which is however not wholly sacred.

René Girard has argued that traditional sacrifice was performed upon a substitute scapegoat.⁵ In the case of Athens, this stone might be said to offer itself up, by assuming for itself a name that belongs to the

4 *And.Myst.*1.76.

5 Girard (1989).

market (*tēs agoras*, ‘of the agora’) and permitting the boundary to be redefined upon its person. Although it thus becomes the defining subject (*horos eimi*) of the market, and the one object that cannot be subjected to the procedures that it contains, it does not, for all that, sacrifice its base form as stone. In the *horos* of the market, stone, mark and margin all meet at exactly that point where they undertake to separate what is *agora* with what is not: infinite exchange and intercourse within, and whatever is other, whatever is limited, defined and of pre-determined value without. And yet *horos* remains stone, and its inscription must have been written and someone must read into both the inscription and the placement of the stone a meaning that preceded both the position of the boundary and the prohibition of the word. This problem, the materialisation of meaning cannot help but point to whoever it is that is writing and reading.

Somebody is obfuscated by the stone—somebody who took chisel to stone and assumed in this inscriptive work the assertion ‘I am the boundary,’ repeated again every time it was read, every time the boundary was crossed in recognition or defiance of what the stone said and someone entered the *agora*. Somebody drew up this boundary and in so doing permitted its readers to recede into stone. By making the stone the subject of the verb, the stone became an authority for human transgressions as well as limits. That original marker of the *I am horos* was eclipsed by the self-appellating stone, and the human subject returned to the nebulous priority of indefinability, an indeterminate cause that can introduce the work of the *agora* as accident (οὐκ ἀναγκαῖον ἀλλ’ ἀόριστον, λέγω δὲ τὸ κατὰ συμβεβηκός).⁶ Human responsibility is deferred by embedding the work of copulative naming in the soil and allowing the *agora* to go on by itself, unlimited by any more determinate human proscriptions. Nonetheless, we are included in these boundaries because we read and acknowledge a deferral of the limits of our actions. Today we have sacrificed our control of the market’s limits in an infinite deferral of responsibility. We are not beyond the bounds of exchange, but are all bound up in exchange, ‘everywhere in chains’ and continue to be so as long as we let the market determine the limits for itself.

As conceptual as it might sound the problem of limits, or now the absence thereof, is a very real problem and can be seen in how the market

6 Ar.Met.1065a25.

has evolved today, expanding beyond all possible earthly limits, literally beyond earthly limits in more ways than one. Now the wealthy exercise no limits in their hubristic behaviour or their desire for control over and forced compliance of desperate populations. Corporations themselves have become responsible for the same bodies that are instituted to restrict and limit the overweening activities of those corporations: for example, the FDA is funded by pharmaceutical companies, the WHO by vaccine entrepreneurs, MPs in national governments have stocks in the corporations that fund them in turn, mass media outlets receive grants from the companies they're supposed to be reporting upon, banks create the crises they then step in to solve and war is declared to create a market, selling weapons to both sides manufactured by the warmongers themselves. This behemoth of stakeholder capitalism, a kind of debauched ouroboros, is a figment of human imagination. As Aristotle said, money exists by custom and can be withdrawn by custom.⁷ Although it creates its own dependency, both addict and purveyor of toxic substances, nothing stands beside it, or underneath it except us and our willingness to enter into it or let it enter us.

The *horos* is, then, what drives us on to the task of finding limits and of raising the essential questions while simultaneously presupposing itself as the substantial limit that supports this task that had to start somewhere. Are we in a position to reject the market, to resist it? Can we hear an ancient voice calling us back to the matter of meaning? The copulative 'I am' takes the responsibility of its own marker, who merely inscribed what the stone meant to say. Even there where the limit and boundary are in question, deposed only to be replaced in a movement of ever-increasing momentum, where market forces, justice and philosophy work towards new determinations introducing new definitions, even there, on the margins an archaic limit remains, suspended by us and putting us in suspension, while it enforces its solid materiality and reminds us that matter does not cease to matter. Despite all our words and deeds, all those objects bought and sold there is a limit to the deferral of gratification encrypted in us as our nature, a

⁷ 'But as a representation of demand (*chreia*) money exists by social convention. And this is why money has the name *nomisma*, because it exists not by nature but by custom (*nomos*), and it is in our power to change its value and to render it useless (*achrēston*).' Ar.EN.1133a.

natural end that should stand as a warning that like our rare metals we will be used up. If there are no limits or boundaries in nature, it is then our responsibility and ours alone that could claim to separate us from nature and permit us to abuse it. In doing so, we face no other limit but ourselves, and this limit remains in us as our bond to the material—the knot in the subject—which we may use and abuse freely but whose terminal point is by necessity a return to nature. For the (re)production of words and things will always come up against this, our primeval limit, the intransigence of stone, the brute matter that makes us what we are. As Levinas said, ‘Resistance is neither a human privilege, nor a rock’s, just as radiance does not characterize a day of the month of May more authentically than it does the face of a woman. The meaning precedes the data and illuminates them.’⁸

8 Levinas (1987) 78.