THE SEIKILOS EPITAPH

The Seikilos epitaph is the oldest surviving example of a complete musical composition, including musical notation, from anywhere in the world. The song, the melody of which is recorded, alongside its lyrics, in the ancient Greek musical notation, was found engraved on a tombstone, near Aidin, Turkey (not far from Ephesus). The find has been dated variously from around 200 BC to around AD 100.

While older music with notation exists (for example the Delphic Hymns), all of it is in fragments; the Seikilos epitaph is unique in that it is a complete, though short, composition.

Although the material is unique, it indicates that the Greeks had developed a musical system in the third or fourth century BC. It was probably only used by professional composers and choir leaders, while others learned the tunes by listening to them. Texts of plays, regardless of type, were often copied without music, so the lyrics with music like that of the Seikilos epitaph are extremely rare. There is no evidence that the Greek musical system survived into the Middle Ages, but texts from Byzantine times and the early Renaissance have added notations after the Greek system.

Above the lyrics (transcribed here in modern Greek font) is a line with letters and signs for the tune:

The Seikilos "score"
Translated into modern musical notation, the tune is something like this:

You could listen at this link in your hearings auditions.
Departamento de Música . IES Carlos Cano.

While you live, shine,

don't suffer anything at all;

life exists only a short while,

and time demands its toll.

The last two words on the tombstone are Σείκιλος Εὐτέρπη, Seikilos Euterpei meaning "(from) Seikilos to Euterpe"; so it means that it was probably dedicated from Seikilos to his wife Euterpe.

The Epitaph was discovered in 1883 by Sir W.M. Ramsay. The stone had been placed in a museum in Smyrna where it remained until the city was destroyed during the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922), but was lost. Later it was found in the possession of a Turkish woman who had had the base ground down so it would serve as a support for a pot in her garden. While the stele would now stand upright, the grinding had obliterated the last line of the epitaph. The marble stele is now located in the National Museum of Denmark (Nationalmuseet), in Copenhagen.