



Summary :

The Ionic was the dialect of the inhabitants of Ionia and their colonies. It shares many common elements with the Attic dialect, and for this reason there is often reference to an Attic-Ionic dialectal group. There were local variations, and we can distinguish between the eastern, central and western Ionic dialect. The heyday of the Ionians (mainly in the 8th cent. BC) imparted special vigour and value on the Ionic dialect, which is famous for being the basic component of Homer's poetic idiolect and the language in which Herodotus composed his history.

Date

Antiquity

Geographical Location

Ionia in Asia Minor and nearby islands of the eastern Aegean, colonies of the Ionian cities, Ionic-speaking Aegean islands, Euboean cities and their colonies

1. Categorization

The Ionic was one of the dialects of the ancient Greek language, identified mainly in the central part of the coast of Asia Minor ([Ionia](#)). It is classified by scholars as part of the Attic-Ionic dialectal group. The other groups, according to the established categorization, are the Arcado-cypriot, the Aeolic, the Doric, and the north-west Greek. The Attic-Ionic group (together with the Aeolic and Arcado-cypriot) is placed within the wider group of the eastern dialects, while the north-western and the Doric belong to the western group.¹

The Ionic dialect can be further distinguished into:²

- 1) Eastern Ionic: the dialect of the Ionic cities of Asia Minor (from Halicarnassus to Smyrna) and the neighbouring islands (e.g. Samos, Chios) as well as their colonies (mainly those in the Hellespont, the Propontis and the Pontic Sea). Local variations occur, i.e. the dialect of Chios featured certain Lesbian elements.
- 2) Central Ionic: the dialect of the Ionic-speaking islands of the Aegean (Paros, Naxos, Delos, Tenos, Amorgos, Thasos etc.).
- 3) Western Ionic: the dialect of Chalcis and the other Euboean cities, as well as the Chalcidean colonies in Magna Grecia (Cyme, Pithecusae), Sicily and the Chalcidice peninsula in Macedonia (Olynthus). The Eretrian dialect (as attested in inscriptions from Eretria and Oropus) features characteristic variations.

2. Morphological characteristics of the Attic-Ionic dialect

The basic morphological characteristics of the Attic-Ionic group³ –its distinguishing features– are:

- 1) The shift from long alpha (α) to eta (η): e.g., Dor.-Aeol. *νίκα, μάτηρ*, Ion. (and Attic) *νίκη, μήτηρ*. In the Attic dialect, this shift does not occur in all words, as the alpha is preserved after the vowels [e], [i], [r], e.g. Ion. *χώρα*, Att. *χώρα*.
- 2) The silencing of digamma (F) in the Ionic and the Attic dialect occurred earlier than in the other dialects. This old consonant appeared in Mycenaean Greek (e.g. wa-na-ka = Φαναξ). Apparently it was still in use when the epics were composed, as suggested by the fact that its restoration solves certain metric problems which have been posed in a significant number of Homeric verses (approximately 3,350). The letter F was abolished from the Ionic dialect in the 7th cent. BC, as can be seen in the verses of Archilochus (e.g. fr. 108W, κλῦ θ' ᾗ ναξ instead of κλῦ θι Φάναξ), while it is also attested in inscriptions composed in other dialects



as late as the 4th cent. BC.

3) The quantitative metathesis of vowel complexes: e.g. from the forms $\lambda\bar{\alpha}$ Φός, $\nu\bar{\alpha}$ Φός, $\bar{\alpha}$ Φός emerged the Attic-Ionic forms λεός, νεός, $\bar{\epsilon}$ ως (Hom. νηός, $\bar{\eta}$ ώς and in most other dialects $\lambda\bar{\alpha}$ ός, $\nu\bar{\alpha}$ ός, $\bar{\alpha}$ ώς).

4) Special morphological types, different from their equivalents in other dialects: e.g. the plural nominative of the personal pronoun (1st and 2nd person) ends in -εῖς ($\bar{\eta}$ μεῖς, $\bar{\upsilon}$ μεῖς), while in all other dialects it ends in -ες (Dor. $\bar{\alpha}$ μές, $\bar{\upsilon}$ μές, Lesb. $\bar{\alpha}$ μμες, $\bar{\upsilon}$ μμες).

4) The formation of the infinitive with the ending -ναι: e.g. εἶναι, δοῦναι. The formation of the infinitive is different in the other dialects, e.g. Lesb./Hom. $\bar{\epsilon}$ μμεναι, δόμεναι).

5) The 3rd singular form of the imperfect tense is $\bar{\eta}$ ν, while in all other dialects it is $\bar{\eta}$ ς.

3. Particular features of the Ionic dialect

It was generally accepted by the ancient historians that the Ionians were related to the inhabitants of Attica (Ἰστορέων δὲ εὐρισκε Λακεδαιμονίους τε καὶ Ἀθηναίους προέχοντας, τοῦς μὲν τοῦ Δωρικοῦ γένεος, τοῦς δὲ τοῦ Ἰωνικοῦ, Hdt. 1.56.),⁴ although in reality it is difficult to ascertain the descent of the people who colonised the coasts of Asia Minor.⁵ The historical and political conditions, however, favoured an exchange of features between the dialects of Ionia and Attica, due to the period of Athenian sovereignty over Ionia. The two dialects, however, remained clearly discrete.⁶

The characteristics of the Ionic dialect which distinguish it from the Attic are the following:⁷

1) The vowel complexes εα, εο, εω, εοι are not usually contracted (which is also the case in most other dialects, but not in the Attic): e.g. Ion. $\bar{\epsilon}$ τεα, γένεος, φιλέω, $\bar{\alpha}$ φικνέοιτο, Att. $\bar{\epsilon}$ τη, γένους, φιλῶ, $\bar{\alpha}$ φικνοῖτο.

2) The complex εο is written as ευ in Ionic from the 4th cent. BC onwards (although forms like μευ instead of μου, φιλεῦντας instead of φιλοῦντας are already found in Homer).

3) ο, ὀ (οι), ω, + α appear as ω (crasis), e.g. Ion. $\bar{\omega}$ νήρ instead of $\bar{\delta}$ $\bar{\alpha}$ νήρ. Similarly the complex οη, e.g. Ion. βοθέω, Att. βοηθέω.

4) In Ionic: σσ, ρσ, where in Attic ττ, ρρ respectively: e.g. Ion. γλώσσα, θάρσος, Att. γλώττα, θάρρος.

5) Differences in grammatical types, e.g. Ion. πόλις-ιός, βασιλεύς-έος, -κλής-έος, Att. πόλις-εως, βασιλεύς-έος, -κλής-έος.

6) The verbs ending in -μι are conjugated in Ionic as if they were contracted verbs: e.g. τίθημι Ion. τιθεῖ, τιθεῖν (Att. τίθησι, τιθέναι).

7) Suffix -ηιος, whereas in Attic -ειος, e.g. Ion. ἰερήιον, Att. ἰερεῖον. (The forms in -ηιος are earlier and are attested in other dialects as well, e.g. Lesb., Cret. and Ion. πρυτανήιον.)

8) Idiomatic forms of certain words, e.g. βόλομαι (instead of βούλομαι), ἰρός (instead of ἰρός) as well as ἰερός, μέζων (Att. μείζων), δέκνυμι (Att. δεικνυμι), κείνος (Att. ἐκείνος), ξυνός (Att. κοινός), καρτερός (Att. κρατερός), δημιουργός (Att. -ουργός), ἰστία / ἰστία (Att. ἐστία), $\bar{\eta}$ νεικα, $\bar{\eta}$ νικα (Att. $\bar{\eta}$ νεικα), ἰθύς (Att. εὐθύς).

4. Morphological characteristics of Ionic sub-dialects⁸



The eastern Ionic is characterised by the following features: a) psilosis, i.e. the loss of the rough breathing (*spiritus asper*), e.g. **ἄ π'** **ἔ κά** στου (instead of **ἄ φ' ἔ κά** στου), **κατά** περ (instead of **καθά** περ); b) in inscriptions dating from the 4th cent. BC onwards, the complexes **αο**, **εο** replace the complexes **αυ**, **ευ**, e.g. **ἄ οτό** ς (instead of **ἄ υτό** ς), **ἔ οργέ** της (instead of **ἔ υεργέ** της); c) short vowel in the subjunctive mode of the sigmatic aorist.⁹

Central Ionic retains the rough breathing in earlier inscriptions.

In Western Ionic or Euboean the following particularities occur: a) **ττ**, **ρρ** as in Attic (not **σσ**, **ρσ**); b) **ξέ** νος, as in Attic (not **ξει** νος); c) **ου** instead of **αυ** in the words **τοῦ** τα, **ἔ νταῦ** θα; d) **-κλέης**, gen. **-κλέω**; e) proper nouns in **-ις**, gen. **-ιδος** (eastern and central Ion. **-ιος**).

At a local level, the Chian dialect exhibits the following special features, of Aeolian origin: a) 3rd plural **λά** βουσιν etc. (**ις** < **νς**); b) numerals which can be inflected, e.g. **δέκων**, **πεντηκόντων** etc. –cf. the Eretrian dialect, where the middle-vowel **-σ-** turns into an **-ρ-**, e.g. **ἔ** χουριν = **ἔ** χουσιν.

5. Ionic as a literary dialect¹⁰

The Ionians made great cultural advances from an early stage¹¹ and exceptional literary works were composed in the Ionic dialect, a fact which makes the study of the Ionic dialect intriguing. The language of literary works was certainly habitually 'mixed', incorporating elements from many different dialects. Nevertheless, it is clear that the language of the Homeric epics and the language of Hesiod is predominantly based on the Ionic dialect. This is also true for the language of the Homeric hymns, as well as for the surviving fragments of other poems of the epic cycle.

Ionia is the homeland of elegy and iambus: the chief exponents of these genres were [Callinus](#) of Ephesus, [Mimnermus](#) of Colophon, Archilochus of Paros, Semonides of Amorgos and [Hipponax](#) of Ephesus. [Anacreon](#) of Teos composed lyric poetry chiefly in the Ionic dialect, while, outside the confines of Ionia, the influence of the Ionic dialect is evident in the poetry of Solon of Athens, Tyrtaeus of Sparta and Theognis of Megara. When poetry was composed in iambic or trochaic metre, the language was Ionic, and the influence of the Ionic dialect on the iambic trimeters of Attic tragic poetry is profound .

The first forms of literary prose also were of Ionic origin. Here, one finds the works of the Ionian philosophers / logographers, like [Hecataeus](#) of Miletus (late 6th cent. BC –although his scant surviving fragments have been atticized), [Anaxagoras](#) of Clazomenae and [Heraclitus](#) of Ephesus, as well as the texts which have survived as works of the (Dorian) physician Hippocrates (469-399 BC). The philosophical poems of [Xenophanes](#), Parmenides and Empedocles are also written in the epic idiom. [Herodotus](#) composed his history in an embellished form of Ionic. Attic prose, which appears in the 5th cent. BC (with the texts of the Sophists), exhibits signs of Ionic influence.

The Ionic dialect was quickly influenced by Attic, which was increasingly gaining ground, so that by the end of the Classical era there are very few inscriptions in pure Ionic, while by the 2nd cent. BC the use of different dialects in local inscriptions has all but ceased. The Attic-Ionic (Attic being the predominant component) was finally established as the *koine* dialect. A form of this **koine** was the language disseminated as a result of the campaigns of [Alexander the Great](#) and his successors. This common dialect formed the basis for the emergence of the later Greek dialects.¹²

1. This is the classification proposed by Buck, C.D., *The Greek dialects* (Chicago 1955), p. 7, which is also the prevalent view. See also Palmer, L.R., *The Greek language* (London, Boston 1980), pp. 70-74 and Μπαμπινιώτης, Γ., *Συνοπτική ιστορία της ελληνικής γλώσσας* (Αθήνα 1985), pp. 95-98.

2. See Buck, C.D., *The Greek dialects* (Chicago 1955), p. 10. The distinction of Ionic into sub-dialects is already made by Herodotus, who distinguishes four variants within the Ionic dialect (Γλώσσαν δὲ οὐ τὴν αὐτὴν οὖ τοι νενομί κασι, ἄλλὰ τρὸς τὴν τε σσερας παραγωγῆ ὤν, Hdt.



- 1.142.3). Any categorization is conventional, however, because the picture which emerges from the inscriptions is more complicated, see *Brill's New Pauly*, columns 912-913, under "Ionic" (J.L. Garcia-Ramon).
3. See Buck, C.D., *The Greek dialects* (Chicago 1955), p. 142. Also, Thumb, A., *Handbuch der griechischen Dialekte* (Heidelberg 1959), p. 197; Palmer, L.R., *The Greek language* (London, Boston 1980), pp. 62-63 and Μπαμπινιώτης, Γ., *Συνοπτική ιστορία της ελληνικής γλώσσας* (Αθήνα 1985), pp. 98-100.
4. In Homer (*Il.* 13.689), the Ionians (Ἴωνες) are identified with the Athenians.
5. For the Ionians and their descent, some basic information is provided in *OCD*³, pp. 764-765, under "Ionians" (A.R. Burn, S. Hornblower); see also *Brill's New Pauly*, columns 908-909, under "Iones" (F. Gschnitzer).
6. There was, however, an earlier view that early Attic and the Ionic dialects were identical (see Strabo 8.1.2); Thumb, A., Scherer, A., *Handbuch der griechischen Dialekte*, 2. Bd. (Heidelberg 1959), pp. 196-197.
7. Thumb, A., Scherer, A., *Handbuch der griechischen Dialekte*, 2. Bd. (Heidelberg 1959), pp. 250-284. Buck, C.D., *The Greek dialects* (Chicago 1955), p. 182.
8. Thumb, A. Scherer, A., *Handbuch der griechischen Dialekte* (Heidelberg 1959), pp. 247-248 and Buck, C.D., *The Greek dialects* (Chicago 1955), p. 143.
9. On the east Ionic, in particular, see the recent monograph by Stuber, K., *Zur dialektalen Einheit des Ostionischen* (Innsbruck 1996), mainly pp. 136-138, 141; Stuber emphatically states that in the language of the inscriptions this form of Ionic does not appear so solid. Apart from the dialect of Chios, there are minor particularities in the dialects of Erythrae, Teos, Miletus, as well as the dialects of Phocaea, Ephesus, Samos and Priene.
10. For more details on this subject see Thumb, A., Scherer, A., *Handbuch der griechischen Dialekte* (Heidelberg 1959), pp. 202-244, with extensive bibliography.
11. It is telling that in the East the term *Jawan* (attested already in the early 1st millennium BC, as well as in the Old Testament, *Gen.* 10:2) is synonymous to 'Greek'. See also note 5.
12. See *OCD*³, pp. 653-654, under "Greek language" (A. Morpurgo-Davies).

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Sources

East Ionic, *IK Eph 1*, *SGDI* 5508-9

Central Ionic, *IG XII.V.2*, pp. xxiv

West Ionic, *SGDI* 5292

Quotations

THE STELE OF PHANODIKOS

Due to the predominance of the Attic dialect already in the Classical times, archaic inscriptions constitute the most important source for the study of the Ionic dialect. An interesting example for the comparison of the Ionic with the Attic dialect is the following inscription from Sigeion (the well-known "stele of Phanodikos"), 6th c. B.C. (*SIG I³ 2 = IG I³ 1508*).

Text A is composed in the (eastern) Ionic dialect and narrates that Phanodikos from Prokonnesos gives a mixing bowl and a stand for it and a strainer to the Prytaneion of the Sigeians. Text B is composed in the Attic dialect. The Ionic inscription was most probably executed at Prokonnesos, a colony of Miletus. The Attic version of the text must have been added later at Sigeion, which was already under Athenian rule, commissioned by a certain Aisopos and his brothers who are mentioned on the inscription and were possibly Attic settlers. (see images 1 and 2 in the audiovisual material section).

(Jeffery, L.H., *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece*, Oxford, New York 1990, pp. 366-367. Many thanks to the Jeffery Archive and the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents (CSAD), Oxford University for granting me permission to reproduce the inscription).