

The Staircase to Nowhere and its Greek Inscription

Deep in the bowels of the new Gradel buildings is the so-called basement hub, a circular area from which doors, corridors and stairways go off in all directions to different parts of the development. One notable feature here, added more for the sake of symmetry of design than for any other reason, is the ‘Staircase to Nowhere’, a set of seven or so steps which do no more than go up to a small semi-circular area on which some natural light is shed from a window far above.

Quite early on in the design stage it was decided that this anomalous space should have some type of decoration, and when a brain-teasing or riddling inscription, ideally in an ancient language, was decided upon, I was asked to see what I could come up with.

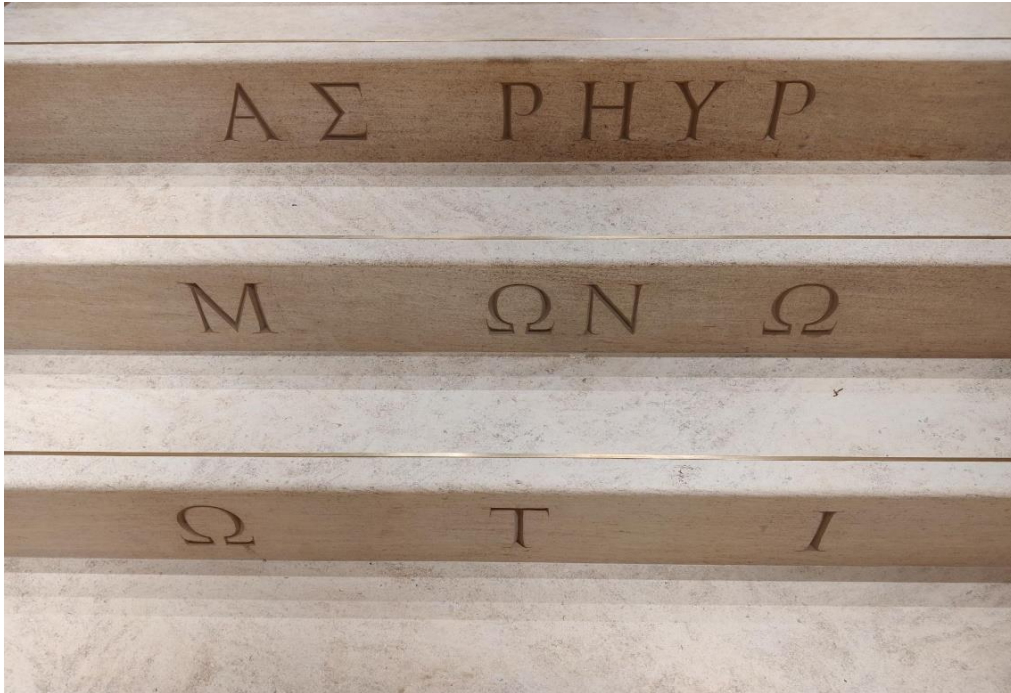
Initially I tried to do something in Latin, but after a couple of attempts that got me, appropriately enough, nowhere, I decided to have a go in Greek. Almost immediately things fell into place; my very first attempt was accepted, and the result, as beautifully carved by Fergus Wessel of Stoneletters, is what can now be seen *in situ*.

So, what does it actually say? Well, the whole design depends on the horizontal word ΟΥΔΑΜΟΥ (i.e. nowhere) which names the semi-circular space at the top of the steps. From this, cascading down to ground level, come seven vertical words, so that the whole eventually looks something like this:

```
Ο Υ Δ Α Μ Ο Υ
Υ Μ Ε Ν Α Π Π
Δ Α Ι Ε Τ Ο Ε
Α Σ Ρ Η Υ Ρ
Μ Ω Ν Ω
Ω Τ Ι
Σ Α Ο
      Ν Ν
```



Staircase (top), Gradel Quadrangles, New College, Oxford
This and following images © Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford



Staircase (middle), Gradel Quadrangles, New College, Oxford



Staircase (bottom), Gradel Quadrangles, New College, Oxford

In short, the horizontal word at the top names the space, and the vertical words (ΟΥΔΑΜΩΣ ΥΜΑΣ ΔΕΙ ΑΝΕΡΩΤΑΝ ΜΑΤΗΝ ΟΠΟΥ ΥΠΕΡΩΙΟΝ) offer timely advice about a question which shouldn't be asked; and, if anyone does, the answer is the word at the top!

More than this I don't want to say. A riddle ceases to be a riddle when its answer is known, and I've already given away more of the game than I ever intended, leaving the curious no more than a few Greek words to construe.

I didn't have to wait long for the proof that my brain-teaser was a success. At the grand opening ceremony on 13 April 2024, I stood incognito by the staircase, listening to the reactions of those who tried to make sense of it. It wasn't long before I heard two pretty venerable looking gentlemen, completely baffled, wonder whether 'the chap who wrote this really knows any Greek at all'!



Full Staircase, Gradel Quadrangles, New College, Oxford

Stephen Anderson
Rodewald Lector in Classical Languages
New College, Oxford