

ALDO CORCELLA

POLLIS AND THE TATTOOERS

aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 109 (1995) 47–48

© Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, Bonn

POLLIS AND THE TATTOOERS*

In the year 1991, the *Paul Getty Museum Journal* (XIX, 136 no. 6) communicated the acquisition of a funerary stele decorated with the relief of a hoplite and a Greek inscription. The script was recognized as that of Megara, and the stele was dated to the early fifth century B.C. The inscription was reported in *SEG* 40 (1990) 404, then, with an evident improvement, by S. Follet in *Bull. ép.* 1992, 21 (p. 441) and in *SEG* 41 (1991) 413 (cf. no. 1883):

λέγῳ Πόλλις Ἀσῶπιχῳ φίλος ἡ-
υῖός : ὁ κακὸς ἐὼν ἀπέθανασκον
ἡυπὸ στίκταισιν ἐγδῶνῃ

A short commentary is appended (I implicitly correct some misprints): “The first line is not metrical. For στίκτης cf. Herondas, *Mime* 5.65, ‘tattooer’, Thracians? ‘I speak, I, Pollis dear son of Asopichos, not having died a coward, with the wounds of the tattooers, yes myself.’”

This commentary is susceptible of some improvement. φίλος υῖός, “own son”, is not quite obvious in a sentence in which the same Pollis is both grammatical subject and *persona loquens*: it is in fact a hexametric cadence, maybe clumsily adopted (cf. e.g. Hansen, *CEG* I 154). As for Pollis’s statement, οὐ is more naturally constructed with κακὸς ἐὼν to form a definition of Pollis’s character (cf. ἐσλὸς ἐὼν in *CEG* I 154): “I was no base man: ὑπὸ στίκταισιν I died”. The imperfect ἀπέθανασκον, in place of the usual (ἀπ)έθανον, is peculiar: with a plural subject, it would be iterative (cf. e.g. *Il.* I 383); here, the meaning seems to be that Pollis, ill-treated by στίκται, gradually “died out”.

Who are these στίκται? στίκταισιν can only be interpreted as the plural dative of στίκτης, the *nomen agentis* derived from στίζειν “to tattoo”, “to stamp”, “to brand” (for the meanings of this verb, see U. Fantasia, *Annali della Scuola Normale di Pisa* s. III, VI [1976] 1165-1175). I see, however, no good reason for referring this expression to Thracians: while στικτοί, *picti*, would be an appropriate antonomasia for them, στίκται is not. This word is, indeed, attested in Herondas V 65. A further occurrence can be found in the account of an Egyptian θησαυρός (*P. Phil.* 17.22, 2nd cent. A.D.), where – as the editor, J. Scherer, remarked – the στίκτης might be the same as the well-known ἐπισφραγιστής, the “stamper” charged with the duty of “sealing” the vaults of the granaries (A. Calderini, *Θησαυροί*, Milano 1924, 86–87). The στίκται who caused Pollis’s death should, however, be compared to Herondas’ στίκτης, the “tattooer”, whom Bitinna would call for in order to have her slave Gastron punished. In Greece, indeed, the imposition of στίγματα was a treatment reserved to κακοί like slaves or criminals, and in some cases to prisoners of war (see C. P. Jones, *JRS* LXXVII [1987] 146–151). Yet, Pollis was no κακός, but a brave hoplite. This explains the

* I am grateful to Prof. R. Merkelbach, who kindly gave me invaluable suggestions.

emphasis of his words. He had fallen into the hands of the στίκται and had to face a humiliating treatment: he was, maybe, questioned and tortured; in any case, his enemies tried to impose the marks of slavery on him. But *he* (emphatic ἐγώνη) was no base man (οὐ κακὸς ἔών)! Therefore, his enemies could not make a slave of *him*. “Under the hands of tattooers”, slavish people could submit and survive; *he* heroically resisted, until he died (ἀπέθνασκον imperfect).

Pollis’s words imply, in sum, an opposition between his own noble death and the base behaviour of other people. I would suggest that, at the time when the epitaph was written, this opposition had a particular point. In his narrative of the Persian wars, Herodotus uses a synonym of στίκται: in order to punish the Hellespont, rebellious to his authority, Xerxes would have sent some στιγεῖς, who symbolically “tattooed” the sea (VII 35.1). At Thermopylae, Xerxes’ tattooers could display all their ability: when the Thebans went over to the enemy, the στίγματα βασιλῆια were tattooed on their bodies (Herodotus VII 233). The historical authenticity of this episode has often been questioned (see e.g. R. J. Buck, *The Ancient History Bulletin* I [1987] 54–60). Yet, Pollis’s epitaph could witness to the veracity of Herodotus.

Pollis was from Megara. Now, in the war against Xerxes, the Megarians played an important role, which was commemorated and celebrated in many a poem (cf. D. L. Page, *Further Greek Epigrams* p. 213ff. ‘Simonides’ XVI; Simonides 11.37, ed. M. L. West, *Iambi et Elegi Graeci*²). Megarian ships were present at both Artemisium and Salamis (Hdt. VIII 1.1; 45); in spring 479, Mardonius moved from Boeotia and pushed as far as Megara, where the cavalry overran the country (Hdt. IX 14; Paus. I 40.2, 44.4; cf. Theognis 773ff.); after few weeks, the Megarians were badly defeated by the Theban horsemen at Plataeae (Hdt. IX 69). In a word, the Megarians had more than one occasion to clash with those Thebans who bore on their skins the infamous marks of their surrender to the Persians. It is not impossible, therefore, that the epitaph of a Megarian warrior could allude to the Persians as στίκται, thus mocking – and cursing – the hated Thebans too: while these slavishly accepted the “royal tattoos”, Pollis “was no base man: under the hands of tattooers, he died”.