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ARISTOPHANES, *EQUITES* 947–59 AND THE ATHENIAN PUBLIC SEAL

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At *Ath.* 44.1, Aristotle mentions Athens' public seal (τὴν δημοσίαν σφραγίδα) as one of the symbols of political authority entrusted to the control of the ἐπιστάτης τῶν πρυτάνεων.<sup>1</sup> D.M. Lewis has argued that the earliest evidence for the existence of the seal is *IG* II<sup>2</sup> 1408.11–13, which Woodhead joined to *IG* II<sup>2</sup> 1388 and which ought therefore probably to be dated to 398/7 B.C.<sup>2</sup> The inscription in question is an account of objects kept in the Hekatompedon, including a wooden box (?) which contained anvils and dies used for striking coins (probably the emergency gold-issue of 407/6 B.C.) and which was sealed τῆι δημοσίαι σφραγίδι. Given the administrative continuity of the temple treasures, Lewis notes, it is “at least not unlikely that the public seal was already used before the end of the Peloponnesian War.” All the same, he ultimately insists that “we must profess complete ignorance of how long before 397 it was in use” (*loc. cit.* 33 and 34). I suggest that one further bit of evidence, identified already in the nineteenth century but allowed to drop out of the scholarly discussion of the question since then, probably confirms Lewis' hypothesis about use of the Athenian public seal in the Peloponnesian War years and in fact pushes the likely *terminus ante quem* for its introduction back into the mid-420's B.C.

At Aristophanes, *Equites* 947–48 (performed at the Lenaia in 424 B.C.), the old householder Demos, having finally grown angry with the behavior of his Paphlagonian slave, orders him:

καὶ νῦν ἀπόδος τὸν δακτύλιον, ὡς οὐκέτι  
ἐμοὶ ταμιεύσεις.

The ring the Paphlagonian is wearing is in fact not Demos' at all, as the old man quickly notes with horror (*Eq.* 951–53):

οὐκ ἐστ' ὄπως ὁ δακτύλιός ἐστ' οὐτοσί  
οὐμός· τὸ γοῦν κημεῖον ἕτερον φαίνεται,  
ἀλλ' ἢ οὐ καθορῶ.

Demos' ring ought to bear his personal mark, “a roasted fig-leaf stuffed with beef-fat” (δημοῦ βοείου, *Eq.* 953–54), whereas this one features a gape-mouthed gull sitting on a rock (*Eq.* 955–56). In the end, therefore, the old man removes a second ring (“a legitimate ring”) from his hand and gives it to the Sausage-seller, telling him (*Eq.* 959):

παρ' ἐμοῦ δὲ τουτονὶ λαβὼν ταμιεύέ μοι.

Personal signet rings were common in the Classical period and were used for a wide variety of domestic and business purposes.<sup>3</sup> All the same, as Müller-Strübing noted long ago, *Equites* is in general a very thinly veiled allegory about contemporary Athens: Demos Puknites (*Eq.* 42) stands for the people, particularly when in Assembly; the old man's property is the state and all its goods; his Paphlagonian slave is Kleon; and the Sausage-seller is an aspiring rival demagogue, struggling to win the master's favor. The most straightforward explanation of Demos' ring, which represents total authority over his household and bears a distinctive signet that encodes his name, therefore, is that it stands in for the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *IG* II<sup>2</sup> 204.39–40 (352/1 B.C.) ὁ ἐπιστάτης τ[ῶ]μ πρυτάνεων καταση/μη[νά]σθω τ[ῆ]ι [δημ]οσίαι σφραγίδι. For the functions of the ἐπιστάτης, see P.J. Rhodes, *The Athenian Boule* (Oxford<sup>2</sup> 1985) 23–24. X. *Vect.* 4.21 (350's B.C.?) mentions slaves ἐσημασμένα τῷ δημοσίῳ κημάντρῳ, but this is clearly a reference to branding or tattooing rather than to the state seal itself, although the remark does imply awareness of an official state symbol of some sort.

<sup>2</sup> D.M. Lewis, *Phoenix* 9 (1955) 32–34, in response to W.P. Wallace, *Phoenix* 3 (1949) 70–73. Wallace originally denied the existence of a state seal before the mid-4th century, but in *Phoenix* 9 (1955) 34, acknowledged the validity of many of Lewis' arguments. A.M. Woodhead, *JHS* 51 (1931) 139–63, esp. 149–54.

<sup>3</sup> Robert J. Bonner, *CP* 3 (1908) 399–407; John Boardman, *Greek Gems and Finger Rings: Early Bronze Age to Late Classical* (New York 1970), esp. 212–26, 230–38.

Athenian public seal.<sup>4</sup> Müller-Strübing's main concern was to argue that *Equites* could be taken as evidence that Kleon served in an official capacity as Athens' chief financial officer, a thesis rightly rejected by Gilbert a few years later.<sup>5</sup> Gilbert for his part dismissed the reference to the ring in *Eq.* 947–59 summarily, arguing that because within the context of the play the Paphlagonian is Demos' steward, and because real Athenians sometimes entrusted seal-rings to such stewards, there is no reason why the passage should be interpreted as having any significance for the public history of Athens.<sup>6</sup> A generation later, Bonner, citing the authority of Gilbert, dismissed the Aristophanic evidence in a single line, and since then it has disappeared from the scholarly discussion of the question.<sup>7</sup> Gilbert's line of argument is not unreasonable, for nothing proves that *Eq.* 947–59 must be a reference to the Athenian state seal. All the same, Müller-Strübing's basic point remains a good one: in a patently allegorical play, it makes sense to look for allusions to real objects and institutions. Since we now know (as nineteenth-century scholars did not) that Athens had a public seal by 398/7 at the latest, therefore, and since, as Lewis pointed out, there is no *a priori* reason to assume that the seal was a fourth-century innovation and actually some reason to think that it was in use in the last decade of the fifth, no great stretch of the historical imagination is required to interpret *Eq.* 947–59 as an allusion to it. Nor is the fact that within *Equites* Demos' ring is controlled by whoever is for the moment the *προστάτης τοῦ δήμου*, whereas Aristotle tells us that Athens' seal was kept under the personal guard of the *ἐπιστάτης*, a substantial objection to this thesis. The underlying social and political reality is that the seal, like the keys to the temples in which the city's treasure and her official archives were preserved, which were similarly entrusted to the care of the *ἐπιστάτης* (Arist. *Ath.* 44.1), belonged to the Athenian people and represented the people's power over the state and all its goods.<sup>8</sup> In practical terms, therefore, the man who stood to the fore of the democracy controlled the seal, regardless of who had formal custody of it on a day-to-day basis.

No certainty is possible in matters of this sort. At the very least, however, *Eq.* 947–59 deserves mention in any discussion of the origins of the Athenian public seal, and the passage can be plausibly interpreted as suggesting that—precisely as Lewis hypothesized forty years ago—the seal was a well-known feature of official life in the city already in the mid-420's B.C. and perhaps even earlier than that.

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<sup>4</sup> Hermann Müller-Strübing, *Aristophanes und die historische Kritik* (Leipzig 1873) 135–49, esp. 141–42, following Valesius on Harpocraton s.v. *ταμίαι* (see Vol. II p. 484 of Dindorf's edition), and August Böckh, *Die Staatshaushaltung der Athener*<sup>2</sup> (Berlin 1851) 226–27.

<sup>5</sup> Gustav Gilbert, *Beiträge zur innern Geschichte Athens im Zeitalter des Peloponnesischen Krieges* (Leipzig 1877) 89–93. Cf. J. van Leeuwen, *Aristophanis Equites* (Lugduni Batavorum 1900) vii n. 2; Robert Alexander Neil, *The Knights of Aristophanes* (Cambridge 1901) ad *Eq.* 948–49.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert (above, note 5) 90–91. For the *ταμίαι* or *ἐπίτροπος* as manager of a household or estate, e.g. Ar. V. 612–14; X. *Oec.* 12.2–15.1; Arist. *Pol.* 1255b35–37; cf. Ar. *Ec.* 211–12.

<sup>7</sup> Bonner (above, note 3) 402. Neither Wallace 1949 (above, note 2) nor Lewis (above, note 2) mentions the passage.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. P.J. Rhodes, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia* (Oxford 1981) ad *Ath.* 44.1.