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THE SHAPE OF THE ATHENIAN ORCHESTRA IN THE FIFTH CENTURY:
FORGOTTEN EVIDENCE

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The past three decades have seen much controversy over whether classical Greek drama was performed in a theatre with a circular or a rectangular orchestra. Having become increasingly popular among drama-specialists (and near-orthodoxy in the German academic community), the thesis of the “rectangularists” has been energetically challenged by two important recent publications.¹ The sole purpose of my remarks is to bring to attention and discuss an important piece of evidence which has not been invoked in this debate. It was known to Pickard-Cambridge², but wholly unproblematic, as it was tacitly assumed to corroborate what was the uncontested view of the time: a circular orchestra.

Among the poetic excerpts at the beginning of book 4 of Stobaeus’ anthology (IV 1,27 (Περὶ πολιτείας) p. 7 f. W.–H.) there is a quotation from Heniochus, whom the Suda (η 392 Adler) classifies as a κωμικὸς τῆς μέσης κωμωδίας and who therefore ought to belong to the fourth century.³ I quote the fragment in full (*fr.* 5 KA with excerpts from KA’s apparatus):

ἐγὼ δ’ ὄνομα τὸ μὲν καθ’ ἐκάστην αὐτίκα
λέξω· συνάπασαι δ’ εἰσὶ παντοδαπαὶ πόλεις,
αἱ νῦν ἀνοηταίνουσι πολὺν ἤδη χρόνον.
τάχ’ ἄν τις ὑποκρούσειεν ὅ τι ποτ’ ἐνθάδε
5 νῦν εἰσι κἀνέροιτο· παρ’ ἐμοῦ πεύσεται.
τὸ χωρίον μὲν γὰρ τόδ’ ἐστὶ πᾶν κύκλω
’Ολυμπία, τῆνδὶ δὲ τὴν σκηνὴν ἐκεῖ
σκηνὴν ὄραν θεωρικὴν νομίζετε.
εἶέν· τί οὖν ἐνταῦθα δρῶσιν αἱ πόλεις;
10 ἔλευθέρι’ ἀφίκοντο θύουσαί ποτε,
ὅτε τῶν φόρων ἐγένοντ’ ἐλεύθεραι σχεδόν.
κᾶπειτ’ ἀπ’ ἐκείνης τῆς θυσίας διέφθορεν
αὐτὰς ξενίζουσ’ ἡμέραν ἐξ ἡμέρας
ἀβουλία κατέχουσα πολὺν ἤδη χρόνον.
15 γυναῖκε δ’ αὐτὰς δύο ταραττέτον τινε
ἀεὶ συνούσαι· Δημοκρατία θατέρᾳ
ὄνομ’ ἐστὶ, τῇ δ’ Ἀριστοκρατία θατέρᾳ,
δι’ ἃς πεπαρωνήκασιν ἤδη πολλάκις.

6 μὲν πᾶν τόδ’ ἐστὶν ἐν κύκλω cod. Voss. 7 τῆνδὶ δὲ Valck.: τὴν δ’ εἰ δὲ S 8 νομίζετε Grotius: -ται S (cf. Men. Dys. 1)
15 αὐτὰς Grotius: αὐτὴν S δύο ταραττέτον Meineke: δὴ ἔταραττέτον S: δὴ ἔταραττέτην Kock

[“In a moment I will tell you each name one by one. Altogether, they are different cities which have been foolish for quite some time now. Someone will probably interrupt and ask what they are here for. He will find out from me. This area here, all in a circle, is Olympia, and as regards this building over

¹ S. Scullion: *Three Studies in Athenian Dramaturgy*. Stuttgart/Leipzig 1994, chapter 1, esp. 38–41 and D. Wiles: *Tragedy in Athens. Performance Space and Theatrical Meaning*. Cambridge 1997, chapter 2. Both monographs amply document the history of the debate. The most recent “rectangularists” are P. v. Moellendorff: *Grundlagen einer Ästhetik der Alten Komödie. Untersuchungen zu Aristophanes und Michail Bachtin*. Tübingen 1995, 112f. and H. R. Goette: *Griechischer Theaterbau der Klassik – Forschungsstand und Fragestellungen*. In: E. Pöhlmann (ed.): *Studien zur Bühnendichtung und zum Theaterbau der Antike*. Frankfurt 1995, 9–48, esp. 22–30.

² A. Pickard-Cambridge: *The Theatre of Dionysus in Athens*. Oxford 1946, 166 and Kassel–Austin on line 6.

³ See Kassel–Austin test. 1 and H.-G. Nesselrath: *Die attische mittlere Komödie*. Berlin/NY 1990, 61.

there imagine that you see the building for the envoys. Well then, what are the cities doing here? Performing sacrifices to celebrate their freedom they once came here when they had been liberated, I dare say, from the tributes. And then from that sacrifice onwards thoughtlessness ruined them, entertaining them day by day and mastering them for quite some time now. A couple of women constantly cause uproar among them, always being with them. The one is called Democracy, the other Aristocracy. Because of them they now have often been behaving as if they were drunk.”]

Beyond issues related to theatre archaeology this is fascinating evidence on several counts: metatheatre and the use of theatrical space; prologue technique; the history of the chorus in the 4th century (a chorus of πόλεις?); and the question of whether and how fourth-century comedy can still be political.

For my present purpose lines 6–8 are crucial. The exact interpretation of τὸ χωρίον τὸδε and σκηνή is difficult. It is natural to assume that the σκηνή of the theatre serves as the σκηνή θεωρική, if only for technical convenience (staging entries, for instance), but a separate temporary structure in the orchestra cannot be excluded. What is the χωρίον? It is obvious what it is *not*: the theatre as a whole, for in lines 6–8 the poet clearly differentiates between the area of the audience and that of the actors. χωρίον must denote the orchestra, as the actor was surely making clear by a deictic gesture. This orchestra is circular.

Does this settle the issue of the shape of the 5th-century Athenian orchestra once and for all? If it were 5th-century evidence it probably would, but as things stand it cannot, on two inter-related grounds: date and location. I will not dwell on the minutiae of the evidence related to dating, as they are discussed with characteristic rigour in an important publication by R. Hunter (this journal 36, 1979, 35 n. 61), who comes to the conclusion that “a date in the first quarter of the fourth century fits all the evidence best, but any confidence would be misplaced.” From the viewpoint of theatre archaeology there is, of course, more leeway. If the Heniochus-fragment were to bear on the question of the shape of the 5th-century orchestra, it would have to be prior to the re-building of the theatre under Lycurgus at some point in the 330s or early 320s. This is not certain but rather likely in the case of a poet whom the Suda categorizes as a κωμικὸς τῆς μέσης κωμωδίας.

The second problem in addition to the date arises from the mobility of 4th-century drama.⁴ The objection is the following: how can we be sure that the information actually refers to the theatre in Athens and not elsewhere? Let it be granted, for the sake of argument, that the play from which this excerpt is preserved was performed at a time when the Athenian Theatre of Dionysus, in all probability, still retained the orchestra in which the plays by the great 5th-century playwrights had been staged. Still, it may be argued, the fragment is not conclusive evidence, because by the 4th century it simply cannot be assumed that the answer to the question “Where was this play performed?” is most naturally “in Athens” or “in Athens and elsewhere”.

This is a serious problem, which even the extraordinary topicality of the fragment cannot resolve. Olympia as the venue for the reconciliation of πόλεις is surely pan-hellenic enough not to exclude *a priori* a performance in Asia Minor or Megale Hellas. Indeed, the only place of performance that can be discarded with reasonable confidence is Olympia itself. The other big potential clue is the mention of the liberation from φόροι (line 11). It is, of course, very tempting to take them as the hated φόροι of the Delian League - hated enough to necessitate a change of nomenclature to συντάξεις when the League was re-launched in the fourth century (Theopompus *FrGH* 115 F 98) – and to link the fragment with the establishment of that very re-launch, the Second Athenian Confederacy, in 379–77. The fragment as a whole would make perfect sense in this context, as Wilamowitz was the first to suggest.⁵ If this were true, it would be wrong to infer from the mention of the politically charged term φόρος that the play

⁴ On this fascinating topic see O. Taplin: *Spreading the Word Through Performance*. In: S. Goldhill/R. Osborne (edd.): *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy*. Cambridge 1999, 33–57, esp. 34–43.

⁵ U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf: *Menander. Das Schiedsgericht (Epitepontes)*. Berlin 1925, 145 n.1.

could not have been staged at Athens. The term was not discredited to such an extent as to be avoided in public political discourse between Athens and her allies: the preserved Athenian “charter” of the alliance, similarly to the Heniochus-fragment, does mention φόρος as something negative which future members of the league will be exempt from (IG ii.² 43, 23 = Tod no. 123, 23). On the contrary, if Wilamowitz is right, Athens would be the prime candidate for *the* (or at least *a*) place of performance, because from its inception the administrative centre of the new alliance was Athens where its συνέδριον was situated. That said, the term φόρος for “tribute” is general enough to allow for all sorts of other historical contexts.⁶ Moreover, the role of the ladies Δημοκρατία and Ἀριστοκρατία, who infatuate the cities like ἑταῖραι⁷ and may well have been *dramatis personae*, allows for various scenarios: if they are of significance in the course of the play at all, does Δημοκρατία outdo Ἀριστοκρατία (which would chime well with an Athenian performance context)? Does Ἀριστοκρατία prevail, or are both superseded by a third party (Μοναρχία?) (either of which dénouements would count *against* an Athenian performance context⁸)? These are speculations, but I make them to demonstrate that in the absence of further information (esp. which are the πόλεις of line 2?) a link between Heniochus’ comedy and the Second Athenian Confederacy, extremely reasonable as it is, is far from being certain.

In the light of this, what *does* the Heniochus-fragment contribute towards settling the vexed orchestra-question? If it pre-dates 330 and therefore the theatre of Epidaurus⁹, it is, together with the theatre of Megalopolis¹⁰, the earliest evidence for a circular orchestra anywhere in the Greek world. The difficulties of dating the fragment and the mobility of 4th-century drama, however, make it impossible to take the fragment as relating with certainty to the Athenian orchestra in which the 5th-century classics were staged. But there should be limits to playing the devil’s advocate here: Heniochus must be regarded as a fourth-century poet, the fragment would excellently fit an Athens-related historical context, preferably and most naturally in the first half or even quarter of the 4th century, and of all possible places of performance Athens is the prime contender.

Those who have been convinced by Scullion and Wiles will hail this as most welcome support for the circular orchestra which, they believe, is suggested by the extant archaeological record. Die-hard “rectangularists” will insist on the uncertainties of the Heniochus-fragment¹¹, although they may find it

⁶ E.g. Hdt. 1.171.2, X. An. 5.5.7, Plut. Antony 24.5, Pl. Alc. I 123a7ff., Diod. 14.10.2.

⁷ Note the sexual innuendo of συνοῦσαι (line 16).

⁸ Thus T.B.L. Webster: *Studies in Later Greek Comedy*. Manchester ²1970, 44 presses the point that lines 15–8 call for “some higher reconciling force”, Macedon in his view, and links the fragment with the establishment of the Corinthian League in 337. This date was advocated by H. Breitenbach: *De genere quodam titulorum comoediae Atticae*. Diss. Basel 1908, 39f., cf. A. Körte in *RE VIII* (1913) 284 s.v. Heniochos. Breitenbach supports it with the rather arbitrary identification of the protagonist of Heniochus’ play Πολύευκτος (a common name) with Πολύευκτος Σφήττιος, the anti-Macedonian politician and friend of Demosthenes, thereby turning Heniochus into a friend of Macedon. On the assumption of a date in the 330s we do not know what the liberation from the φόροι harks back to. It is very difficult indeed to imagine a comedy along these pro-Macedonian lines in Athens in the 330s (on which see C. Habicht: *Athens from Alexander to Antony*. Cambridge (Mass.) 1997, ch. 1, esp. 28).

The cult of Δημοκρατία, it should be noted, seems to have been particularly popular in the 330s, cf. Habicht 13f. and Kassel–Austin on line 16 with further lit., esp. A.E. Raubitschek: *Demokratia*. *Hesperia* 31, 1962, 238–43. But whether the cult was created at that time or as early as 403 (or shortly after) is, *pace* Habicht, not at all clear (Raubitschek 241 and R. Parker: *Athenian Religion. A History*. Oxford 1996, 228f.), and there is evidence for personified use of the noun in the late 5th and early 4th century already (Raubitschek 239 and Kassel–Austin on line 16). Personifications of political systems would therefore fit any period in the 4th century. Their occurrence in a 4th-century comedy at all remains, of course, highly remarkable regardless of the exact date of the fragment.

⁹ On its date see Wiles (n. 1) 39 n. 51 with further lit.

¹⁰ Quite certainly built in the 360s, see Goette (n. 1) 34f. and Wiles (n. 1) 36f. with further lit.

¹¹ They will also embrace the dating suggested by Breitenbach and Webster (n. 8) and argue that the circular shape of the orchestra is pointed out in the first place precisely because it is *novel*, or that the fragment does not refer to the Athenian orchestra.

harder to cope with the archaeological case which Scullion in particular makes carefully and in detail. Sceptics (like myself) who have qualms about inferring anything from a few stones of a retaining wall about the shape of the dancing area on the plateau thus retained will, I hope, be prepared to abandon their cosy agnosticism and go along with a shift of balance: the very sparse and tricky archaeological and literary evidence suggests that the Athenian orchestra of the 5th century is likely to have been circular.

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