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POLLIS AND THE TATTOOERS


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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):

\[\text{λέγω Πόλλαμις Ἀσωπίχος φίλος ἕ-}
\text{ιός ὃς κακός ἔδω ἀπέθανσκον}
\text{Ηυπὸ στίκταισιν ἐγὼν}
\]

A short commentary is appended (I implicitly correct some misprints): “The first line is not metrical. For στίκταις 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 ἕιός, “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, οὗ is more naturally constructed with κακός ἔδω to form a definition of Pollis’s character (cf. ἑσλός ἔδω in CEG I 154): “I was no base man: ὑπὸ στίκταισιν I died”. The imperfect ἀπέθανσκον, in place of the usual ἄπεθανον, is peculiar: with a plural subject, it would be iterative (cf. e.g. II. I 383); here, the meaning seems to be that Pollis, ill-treated by στίκταις, gradually “died out”.

Who are these στίκταις? 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 στικτοῖ, picti, would be an appropriate antonomasia for them, στίκταισι 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 στίκταις 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 κακοῖ 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

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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 ἐγὼν) was no base man (οὐ κακὸς ἐὸν)! 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 (ἀπέθανασκον 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 στιγμεῖς, 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 στιγματα βασιλεία 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*). 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 tattooes”, Pollis “was no base man: under the hands of tattooers, he died”.

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