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THE SIGMA ENIGMA

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At the recent international epigraphical congress in Rome¹ I presented a paper,² in which, *inter alia*, I had occasion to review the current state of the debate over the now notorious Egesta Decree (*IG* i³ 11). I was prompted to return to this vexed – and extremely important – issue not least by the cursory dismissal by Michael Vickers of my previous arguments against the archonship of Antiphon.³ I also felt a responsibility to ensure that what is now claimed as a final vindication of Harold Mattingly's long, brave stand⁴ may be seen to be much less convincing and decisive than is urged by the growing ranks of the Antiphonists. My intention here is to present these arguments in greater detail to a wider audience.

Also included in the programme at Rome was a fascinating paper by Charles Crowther,⁵ in which he described a project now in progress at Oxford at the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents. This project aims to make available in electronic form digital images of the Oxford squeeze collection, and the specific example chosen by Crowther to illustrate the technique is a squeeze of the Egesta Decree made in the 1930s, which, he maintains, 'has the advantage of reflecting the appearance of the stone as it was 60 years ago'. Although the result is claimed to be 'enlightening' I have to confess that, at least through the medium of the facilities available to me here in St. Andrews on a Macintosh Performa 475, I have no clearer insight into the crucial reading of the archon's name than I do on a photograph of similar vintage, once the property of Benjamin Dean Meritt and a few days ago passed on to me through the kindness of John Traill. Once again I am afraid that it is a case of those who have eyes to see will indeed 'see'; those who don't, won't.

More importantly, however, it was as evident among the Congress delegates as it is in the recent periodical literature that Mortimer Chambers' championship of Antiphon (418/17) as the name of the archon to be read in l. 3 of *I.G.* i³ 11 continues to gain credence, so much so that Vickers can declare that my 'arguments have been more than adequately countered by Chambers' and that the judgement of Jacques Tréheux that we now *must* read and restore 'Αντι]φών is beyond dispute.⁶ Even a scholar of the eminence and standing of Ronald Stroud seemed to imply, in his excellent survey of Attic Epigraphy,⁷ that the case for Antiphon now merits at least serious consideration.

I have no intention here to retrace my steps over old ground; that would waste the time and test the patience of readers perhaps already fatigued by the seemingly endless wrangle over this wretched stone. I desire rather to draw attention to the *fact* (for fact it is) that not only those who would claim to be

¹ XI International Congress of Greek and Latin Epigraphy, Rome, 18–24 September 1997.

² Entitled 'Fact, Fiction and Formulae in Athenian Decrees'. This has already appeared in the *Preatti*, Rome, 1997, pp. 203–9, and will appear later again in the definitive *Atti* of the Congress.

³ See *JHS* 116 (1996) 171–4.

⁴ It may be noted here that one of the main props in Mattingly's historical edifice viz. *IG* i³ 35, the Athena Nike decree, has had to be discarded. S. V. Tracy, in *Studies presented to Sterling Dow*, Durham, N. Carolina, 1984, 277–282, has demonstrated that the mason who cut this text also cut the accounts for the Athena Promachos, and so not long after 450; and Ira S. Mark, *The Sanctuary of Athena Nike in Athens: Architectural Stages and Chronology*, *Hesperia* Suppl. xxvi, Princeton, 1993, has demonstrated persuasively that the decree is to be associated with the Stage III *naiskos* of c. 448, not the Stage IV amphiprostyle temple of the 420s.

⁵ A Database of Digitised Images of Inscriptions, *Preatti*, 917–21.

⁶ Art. cit., (note 3 above) 171. At the time of writing Vickers probably did not yet have at his disposal my rejoinder in *CQ* 45 (1995) 237–240; nor does he seem aware of my remarks in *Ancient History Bulletin* 7 (1993) 49–53. I have, in fact, seen no published reply as yet to the issues I there raised.

⁷ 'The Progress of Attic Epigraphy to 400 B.C. in 1992–1997', a specific extended paper given at the Congress on the morning of 18 September.

expert in fifth century Attic epigraphy but many others also are still uncertain of the ‘reading’ of the archon’s name in *IG* i³ 11.

It would, of course, be invidious to name names – this is not a question of the cumulative weight of ‘authorities’, and a count of the numbers arrayed on one side or the other would likewise serve no purpose; mere numbers mean nothing. What *is* significant – if I may be permitted to state this simple truth once again – is that there is no 100% consensus as regards the crucial reading of the archon’s name. Without such a universal consensus what one scholar or group of scholars can ‘see’ is no better (or worse) than what another scholar or group of scholars can (or cannot) ‘see’.⁸

Michael Vickers, an enthusiastic adherent of the Mattingly–Chambers camp, has now reintroduced the Coinage (or Standards) Decree into the general debate on the relevance of three bar sigma in fifth century chronology. He is in no doubt that ‘the “law” that three-barred sigma disappeared from public inscriptions after 446 B.C. should now go out of the window, and dating by letter forms . . . with it’.⁹ I suggest, however, that we may do well to hesitate before thus abandoning the only significant dating criterion available to us for fifth century decrees without archon dates.

Like Chambers, Vickers assembles a barrage of impressive-looking figures and calculations, which, unless subjected to careful scrutiny, may, by their ‘scientific’ veneer, confirm the impressions of those already converted to the new orthodoxy, as well as win over a few more of those now relegated to the ranks of ‘waverers’.

As is well known, the Standards Decree, from which Mattingly originally launched his attack on dating by letter-forms,¹⁰ has been variously dated in a range from the early 440s to as late as 415 B.C. A dating later than 445 has, however, been considered problematical because of the occurrence of three bar sigma in the fragment in Attic script found at Cos.¹¹ Datedating of the Egesta Decree, and the consequent abolition of this pernicious criterion, would, of course, remove this problem. But on what other grounds might we feel justified in bringing down the date of the Standards Decree?

Vickers adduces the copy of the decree found at Hamaxitos in the Troad,¹² and, with initial commendable caution, urges that this would ‘*appear* (my italics) to be confirmation of a late date for this measure’. For, as we can see from Thucydides 3.50.3, Hamaxitos was not embraced into the Athenian Empire until after the Mytilene revolt in 427 B.C. But the conclusion does not necessarily follow, since it can reasonably be argued that, regardless of the date of the original passage of the Standards decree, this copy was simply set up at the time of Hamaxitos’ entry into the Empire.¹³ There is no special pleading here; it is a natural assumption to make from the terms of the decree as we can reconstruct them from the various extant fragments. A copy is to be set up in the agora of each member state. Those who entered later will have met this requirement *on entry*.

Vickers also brings into consideration the bearing on the date of the Standards Decree of sundry ‘anomalous sums in Attic currency’ i.e. amounts whose totals as expressed on the Attic standard may

⁸ Let us not forget that Chambers himself has stated (*Classical Journal* 88 (1992) 30) ‘The measurements must yield to the photographs as the decisive element.’ Thus everything depends on what one can ‘see’.

⁹ Art. cit., 174.

¹⁰ *Historia* 10 (1961) 148–69.

¹¹ See M. Segre, La lege ateniese sull’unificazione della moneta, *Clara Rhodos* 9 (1938) 151–78.

¹² The fragment was originally published by Elmar Schwertheim, Ein Dekretfragment aus dem 5. Jh. v. Chr. aus Hamaxitos, VI. *Araştırma Sonuçları Toplantısı* (1988), 283–5. It was H. B. Mattingly, *Klio* 75 (1993) 99–102, who identified the text as a copy of the Standards Decree.

¹³ Cf. D. M. Lewis, The Athenian Coinage Decree, in I. Carradice (ed.), *Coinage and administration in the Athenian and Persian empires* (*The Ninth Oxford Symposium on Coinage and Monetary History*: B.A.R. International Series 343), Oxford 1987, 56.

actually reflect currencies other than Attic silver. ‘Anomalous weights in the sources can often be read as, for want of a better term, “round” weights in another standard.’¹⁴

As a preliminary to a discussion of such anomalous figures among payments in the Tribute Lists, Vickers adduces evidence from literary and epigraphical sources of anomalous weights of certain gold and silver vessels. He cites, for example, the two phialai of Lycian workmanship at issue in [Dem.] *Against Timotheus* (49.32) which weighed 237 drachmai, an ‘anomalous’ figure in Attic currency but one which can be rendered as the equivalent of 180 Persian sigloi at 5.66 grams, on the basis of a drachma of 4.30 grams. Likewise, the loan of 1,351 dr. 2 obols mentioned in the same speech (49.6) can be made to produce 1,025 sigloi at 5.67 grams. Furthermore, Vickers points to the fact that, of the vessels dedicated in the Parthenon, those whose weights are given in anomalous sums of Attic drachmai can readily be converted into ‘round’ numbers of darics and sigloi.

But what is the relevance of such nice equivalences either in the case of the Parthenon vessels or in the case of the silver objects listed in *IG i³ 383*, an inventory drawn up in 429/8 of silver items in the care of the treasurers of the Other Gods?¹⁵ On the basis that some of the weights of these objects can indeed be rendered as ‘round’ weights in Persian sigloi¹⁶ on a standard between 5.65 and 5.67 grams to the siglos, Vickers is of the opinion that, even though the objects could have been made many years earlier than the time of the inventory, ‘so much silver (nearly 65 kg) in Athenian shrines apparently made on an alien standard suggests that the Standards Decree was not yet in force’. Unfortunately, all this dazzling arithmetic is entirely irrelevant, for the conditions of the Standards Decree had no application whatsoever to objects listed by weight as dedications in treasuries.

We can therefore with justification simply disregard this part of Vickers’ case and confine our attention to an examination of the allegedly anomalous figures in the Tribute Lists. Even here such a respected authority as the late David Lewis had declared himself only too well aware of how ‘fancy’ one’s arithmetic could get in this complex area,¹⁷ and Harold Mattingly too spoke of ‘delusive mathematics’.¹⁸ Vickers, however, while fully aware of the ‘undoubted snares along the way’, rounds off his paper with a review of the anomalous figures in the Tribute Lists and the possible correlations between Attic and non-Attic silver.

Let us then examine in some detail the particular instances which are alleged to betray payments in non-Attic silver and so antedate the passage of the Standards Decree:

1. Abydos: in 444 Abydos paid 4T.315 dr., representable as 19,000 sigloi at 5.50 grams. However, given the uncertainties surrounding the payment record of Abydos at this period, calculation of its full payment is extremely hazardous. The odd 315 dr. may simply represent arrears of tribute. Again, the payment in 429 of 5T.3,260dr., representable as 26,000 sigloi on the same standard, should be seen as only *part* of the total paid. In List 26, Abydos is among the cities ‘which furnished pay out of the Hellepontine tribute’, and it is plausibly restored in the same group in List 25.¹⁹ When the 2740 dr. paid directly to maintain Athenian forces in the area are added in, Abydos is found to be paying its full assessment, the non-anomalous sum of 6T.
2. Cyzicus: as Vickers notes, since electrum was the local coinage, tribute might be expected to be paid in this medium, and we might further expect this to be reflected in sums divisible by 24. So, in 428, the

¹⁴ Art. cit., 172.

¹⁵ These are presented in Vickers Table 1: Objects in the Temple of the Other Gods at Athens. (There was, of course, no such Temple, simply a treasury.)

¹⁶ Though I can’t help wondering if ‘one-third of ten thousand sigloi’ (the weight of the four *karchesia* in vv. 68–71: 4395 dr. 1 ob. @ 5.67 grams to the siglos = 3,333.33 sigloi) is a significantly rotund figure.

¹⁷ Cf. art. cit. (note 13 above) 62.

¹⁸ See H. B. Mattingly, *The Athenian Coinage Decree and the assertion of Empire*, in I. Carradice (ed.), *Coinage and administration in the Athenian and Persian empires* (see note 13 above), 65.

¹⁹ See ATL I, 453–4.

tribute of 8T.1,680 dr. produces 2,070 electrum stater (49,680 divided by 24). However, although the 429 figure of 8T.3500 dr. does not lend itself to division by 24, it need not be represented as 40,000 sigloi at 5.54 grams. For not only is it (in my opinion) a sufficiently 'round' figure in Attic silver, but it also happens to equal $8\frac{7}{12}$ T. Fractions of twelfths are surely acceptable in Attic currency.²⁰

3. Byzantium: granted that by manipulation of the right factor selected Byzantium's payments in 429 and 428 can be made to yield the apparently significant figures of 100,000 and 70,000 sigloi respectively, it should not be overlooked that, like Abydos and some other Hellespontine cities, Byzantium in 429 (as restored) and 428 paid part of its tribute directly to Athenian forces. The 21T.4,740 dr. paid in the earlier year is thus only the balance sent to Athens, not the total assessment; and the 15T.90 dr. of 428 represents only the part paid as *misthos*.

4. Cos: Mattingly had noted that, in the spring of 431, Cos 'paid only part of its tribute and the anomalous amount in Attic currency (3T.4,465 dr.) suggests at least partial payment in non-Attic silver'.²¹ Vickers attempts to develop the point by noting that, at 5.49 grams, 4,465 dr. = 3,500 sigloi, and that furthermore the *whole* payment (3T.4,465 dr.) = 17,500 sigloi at 5.52 grams. In other words, the *whole* amount may have been paid in non-Attic silver. An alternative explanation, which has the virtue of avoiding the otherwise inevitable massaging of the weight factor, is to conclude that what we have here is simply a partial payment of the normal Coan assessment of 5T at this period.²²

It remains to add that, even if some payments *were* made in non-Attic silver contrary to the requirements of the Standards Decree, this does not require us to draw the inference that, at the time of such payments, the Decree was not yet in force. The simple fact that a law or regulation is not religiously observed is no sure proof that it does not exist. Furthermore, it is more than likely that, in times of urgency or where there was a shortage of readily available Attic silver, it may simply have been impossible to comply with the requirements of the Decree. An inconvenience and mild irritation, no doubt, to the Athenians, but less of an inconvenience than a flat refusal to pay up at all. In times of crisis, in particular, would not the Athenians have gratefully accepted whatever was offered?²³

Conclusion

I see no compelling reason, therefore, either from the existence of the Hamaxitos' copy of the Standards Decree or from arithmetical virtuosity in Tribute List calculations to conclude that the date of the Decree must be brought down to the 420s. Nor, as I have briefly indicated at the commencement of this paper, have I as yet found myself as an entirely lone voice in the wilderness preaching against the candidature of Antiphon as the archon of *IG* i³ 11.

I continue therefore to urge that, although ultimately further decisive evidence may perhaps indeed force us to abandon the dating criterion of three bar sigma, until such time as that evidence is forthcoming we should continue to show due respect for the limitations which it imposes on us in determining the chronology of fifth-century Athenian decrees.

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²⁰ Cf. also the payments of 2,500 dr. by the Carian towns Euromus and Casolaba. 25 *minai* are $\frac{5}{12}$ T.

²¹ See *Klio* 75 (1993) 102.

²² Note the erratic payment record of Cos in the second assessment period.

²³ Let us not forget that payment in electrum was perfectly acceptable.