

SHORTER NOTES

THE DEATH OF EPHIALTES

There are certain ‘facts’ which every schoolboy knows. Every schoolboy knows, for instance, that at the Battle of Hastings King Harold was killed by a shot in his eye from an arrow; and Sir Frank Stenton’s demonstration that he pretty certainly wasn’t has done little to shake this conviction.¹ Not every schoolboy, perhaps, but every undergraduate who studies the history of ancient Athens knows that Ephialtes was murdered. After all, that is what the books tell him. Thus in Meiggs/Bury we read that ‘Cimon’s chief antagonist Ephialtes was murdered’; this is echoed by Forrest and Davies, to name just two authors of recent standard works. Hignett even knew the weapon the murderer used: ‘the dagger of the assassin removed him in the hour of his triumph’.² There are many other examples I could cite, but *μακρηγορεῖν ἐν εἰδόσιν οὐ βουλόμενος ἔασω*.

What is the evidence? So far as I know, it is as follows.

The Aristotelean *Athenaion Politeia* (25. 4), explicitly followed by Plutarch (*Pericles* 10. 7–8), says that he was secretly done away with (*δολοφονηθείς*) by his political enemies through the agency of one Aristodicus of Tanagra. Diodorus (11. 77. 8) says only that he died one night and nobody knew how his life ended: *τῆς νυκτὸς ἀναιρεθείς ἄδηλον ἔσχε τὴν τοῦ βίου τελευτήν*. Finally, Antiphon (5. 68), writing about 415 B.C. and hence of our informants the closest to the event, attests that up to that time the murderers of Ephialtes had never been uncovered. It is worth setting out this passage from *On the Murder of Herodes* in full. Euxitheus, the defendant in this trial, was alleged to have killed Herodes, or had him killed. They had both been passengers in a ship which had had to heave to off the coast of Lesbos to shelter from bad weather. After dining and wining ‘not wisely but too well’, Herodes had gone ashore. He was never seen again, nor was his body found.

As I know from report, there have been similar cases in the past, when sometimes the victim, sometimes the murderer, has not been traced; it would be unfair, were those who had been in their company held responsible. Many, again, have been accused before now of the crimes of others, and have lost their lives before the truth became known. For instance, the murderers of one of your own citizens, Ephialtes, have remained undiscovered to this day; it would have been unfair to his companions to require them to conjecture who his assassins were under pain of being held guilty of the murder themselves. Moreover, the murderers of Ephialtes made no attempt to get rid of the body, for fear of the accompanying risk of publicity – unlike myself, who, we are told, took no one into my confidence when planning the crime, but then sought help for the removal of the corpse.³

And that is all we know. What seems to be clear enough is that Ephialtes went to bed one night apparently in good health and was found dead in his bed the next morning. We hear nothing of stab-wounds, and I would venture to suggest that Antiphon’s account, together with that of Diodorus, can be taken to show that his body bore no obvious marks of physical violence. Almost certainly, when allegations spread that he had been murdered, he was said to have been poisoned or smothered.

¹ *The Bayeux Tapestry*² (Phaidon Press, 1965), pp. 22–3.

² J. B. Bury, *A History of Greece*⁴ (1975, ed. by Russell Meiggs), p. 213; W. G. Forrest, *The Emergence of Greek Democracy*, p. 224; J. K. Davies, *Democracy and Classical Greece*, p. 72; C. Hignett, *A History of the Athenian Constitution*, p. 213.

³ I have borrowed K. J. Maidment’s excellent Loeb translation here.

Such allegations were easily made, and almost impossible to refute, especially at times of high excitement when the 'victim' was well known to be acutely disliked in some quarters or an awkward obstacle or threat. Again, there is no need to multiply examples *praeter necessitatem*: one thinks of the stories that Aemilianus was murdered – presumably by poison – at the height of his opposition to the Gracchan Land Commissioners in 129 B.C. (one version even implicated his wife, Tiberius Gracchus' sister Sempronia); and the corpses of Livia's alleged victims if laid end to end would reach pretty well from the Janiculum to the Aventine. Modern forensic science would almost always be able to determine the truth of such suspicions.⁴ But the ancient world was backward in this field. There is not the slightest evidence that any individuals or individual were ever arraigned on the charge of having murdered Ephialtes. Why not, if there was even the slightest *prima facie* evidence that would stand up for five minutes in a court of law? Ephialtes did not lack eloquent friends – Pericles among them – or popular support. Those friends would presumably have wished to see his murderer(s) brought to justice, or at least have welcomed the chance to bring the enemies of reform into public disrepute.

There is no reason why Ephialtes should not have died of a heart-attack, or a cerebral occlusion, or suchlike. Most of us know of cases of sudden and quite unexpected death from such a cause. Certainly, we must allow that the mere fact that stories that he was murdered were put about and remembered, even if they could not be substantiated, attests that they could seem plausible, and underlines the heightened passions of the time and the magnitude of the issues which were felt to be at stake. But, following Mark Twain's advice, I would not myself want to hang a little yellow dog on that sort of evidence.

Brasenose College, Oxford

DAVID STOCKTON

⁴ Not invariably. Some years ago, the Home Office pathologist, Dr Francis Camps, told me that he had had to conduct one of his earliest post-mortems in a small shed attached to a village police station. When he had finished his dissecting and turned to gather up his specimens, he found that they had all been eaten by a mangy stray dog which had quietly slipped in from the next shed by an unlatched door. He reported this in some embarrassment to his then chief, the great Sir Bernard Spilsbury, who simply said: 'Ah, yes – should have warned you about that. Happened to me once. Never mind, keep a sharp eye on the dog.'

ROBORTELLO'S 'CONJECTURE' AT AESCHYLUS, *SUPPLICES* 337

At *Supplices* 337, as part of the increasingly tense stichomythic testing between the Danaids and Pelasgus, the Danaids utter an emotional question, which reads in all the MSS, that is M and the apographa Ma, Mb, Mc, Me, Md(E):¹

τίς δ' ἂν φίλους ὄνοιτο τοὺς κεκτημένους

τίς Me *εφίλους* Mb

The whole verse has exercised editors and commentators, the variously attempted readings filling eight lines in Wecklein's *Appendix* and another three in Dawe's *Repertory*. But the main issue has been that of the verb. Here, while a few commentators,

¹ None of the MSS assigns the verse; there is almost complete modern consensus that it should go to the Danaids (or their leader), but Wilamowitz gives it to Pelasgus.