

ARCHILOCHUS' MESSAGE-STICK

ἐρέω τιν' ὕμιν αἶνον, ὦ Κηρυκίδη,
ἀχτυμένη σκυτάλη.

Archilochus, fr. 185

σκυτάλη· πῖναξ, δέλτος. ἔθος δὲ Λακεδαιμονίοις χρήσθαι σκυτάλη ἀντὶ τῶν
γραμματεῶν.

Etymologicum Magnum

The second line of the poem in which Archilochus related his fable of the fox and the ape was a source of perplexity to Hellenistic scholars. According to Athenaeus Apollonius Rhodius explained it by reference to the Spartan practice of winding official dispatches round a staff or baton: ὅτι δὲ λευκῷ ἱμάντι περιειλοῦντες τὴν σκυτάλην οἱ Λάκωνες ἔγραφον ἃ ἠβούλοντο εἶρηκεν ἱκανῶς Ἀπολλώνιος Ῥόδιος ἐν τῷ περὶ Ἀρχιλόχου.¹ This interpretation evidently failed to satisfy Aristophanes of Byzantium, who wrote a monograph (σύγγραμμα) περὶ τῆς ἀχτυμένης σκυτάλης,² but we do not know what his theory was, and Apollonius' view has held the field.

Later authors persistently explain the Spartan σκυτάλη as a scrambling device: a strip of leather would be wound slantwise onto the σκυτάλη, and the message written lengthwise; the strip was then unwound, and rewound by the recipient onto a staff of like thickness;³ hence, we are told, 'σκυτάλη came to mean "a Spartan dispatch"'.⁴

This account is not entirely satisfactory in itself, and a cryptographic interpretation of Archilochus' σκυτάλη has come to look increasingly implausible with a more widespread appreciation of the fact that in his day a written message was in itself a relative novelty; whatever date we adopt for the invention of the Greek alphabet,⁵ it is clear that Archilochus lived in a society still essentially oral. Where the ability to read and write fluently is rare, it is absurd to envisage a cryptographic system in regular use.⁶ We should moreover note that Aeneas Tacticus has nothing to say about this device in his chapter on secret messages (31), though had it been known to him he would surely have mentioned it, if only to criticise its defects. While perhaps worth considering as an *ad hoc* expedient,⁷ this was not a practice suitable for normal use, since once the principle involved is divined it takes little effort to decode the message. Nor indeed do any of the pre-Hellenistic references to σκυτάλαι in themselves suggest cryptography.

From fifth- and fourth-century authors we have four mentions of σκυτάλαι in

¹ A.R. fr. 22 Michaelis, Ath. 451d. Athenaeus produces this information in the course of a discussion of riddles, to support his interpretation of a perplexing fragment of Achaëus' satyr-play, *Iris* (*TrGF* i, 20 F 19). His explanation seems to me more ingenious than sensible; see below, supplementary note.

² Fr. 367 Slater (Ath. 83e); see Slater *ad loc.*

³ For a very clear account see Plu. *Lys.* 19; cf. Sch. Pi. *O.* 6.154, Hsch. s.v. σκυτάλη Λακωνική, Gell. 17.9.15.

⁴ So LSJ.

⁵ Most Hellenists would, I believe, favour an eighth-century date, not long before our first specimens: see further L. H. Jeffery, *CAH* iii² 1.819ff., A. Heubeck, *Archaeologia Homerica* x (Schrift) (Göttingen, 1979), 73ff. However, some Semitic epigraphists argue for a twelfth-century date: see J. Naveh, *AJA* 77 (1973), 1–8, *Early History of the Alphabet* (Jerusalem, 1982), pp. 175ff., F. M. Cross, *BASOR* 238 (1980), 1ff., E. Puech, *RBi* 90 (1983), 365–95 (esp. 391ff.); for a more moderate view see B. S. J. Isserlin, *CAH* iii² 1.816–18.

⁶ The much discussed *σήματα λυγρά* of *Il.* 6.168–9 are surely not some sort of code but simply a written message, felt to be somewhat alien to the heroic milieu and therefore camouflaged.

⁷ Cf. Herodotus' stories of secret messages, 1.123.3–4; 5.35.3–4; 7.239.3–4.

connection with messages. We may surmise that an allusion to Archilochus' metaphor was intended in the first of these, when Pindar (*O.* 6.92) addresses Aeneas, appointed to train the choir who are to perform this ode, as ἄγγελος ὀρθός, ἡνικόμων σκυτάλα Μοισᾶν, γλυκὺς κρατῆρ ἁγαφθέγκτων αἰοιδᾶν.⁸ We first meet a specifically Spartan σκυτάλη with Aristophanes, who makes a Spartan herald dissimulate his erection as a σκυτάλα Λακωνικά (*Lys.* 991f.); here σκυτάλα must mean an actual staff or baton, regarded as part of an official messenger's equipment,⁹ and it would be absurd to translate it as 'message, dispatch'. However, it has clearly taken on the latter sense when we meet it in Xenophon (*Hell.* 3.3.8): ἄγοντα τῶν Αὔλωνιτῶν τέτινας καὶ τῶν εἰλωτῶν τοὺς ἐν τῇ σκυτάλῃ γεγραμμένους. Thucydides' reference should almost certainly be understood in the same way (1.131.1): πέμψαντες κήρυκα οἱ ἔφοροι καὶ σκυτάλην εἶπον τοῦ κήρυκος μὴ λείπεσθαι. None of these passages indicates a cipher or code. We may note that Xenophon does not find it particularly remarkable that when a letter from the Spartan vice-admiral Hippocrates fell into Athenian hands it was apparently read without difficulty (*Hell.* 1.1.23): ἔρρει τὰ κάλα. Μίνδαρος ἀπεσσύα. πεινῶντι τῶνδρες. ἀπορίομες τί χρὴ δρᾶν. If this message was sent *en clair*, we might well wonder whether the Spartans were in general much concerned about the security of official documents; the episode surely offers a further argument against ascribing a regular cryptographic purpose to the σκυτάλη.

L. H. Jeffery, whose unrivalled knowledge of the early development of Greek script made her more alert to the problem than others had been, rightly questioned the traditional view of Archilochus' σκυτάλη; she suggested that he simply had in mind the practice of writing messages on leather rolls and winding them round a stick for convenience in transport, a practice which, she argued, was retained by the conservative Spartans when other Greeks had abandoned leather for papyrus.¹⁰ Archilochus may thus be supposed to draw attention to the *written* form of his message: '...die Epoche der Mündlichkeit geht damit zu.'¹¹

If this interpretation is correct, we must be struck by Archilochus' failure to elaborate the point more fully. In general early written poetry tends simply to mimic oral performance;¹² poets are shy about referring to script and writing materials. Archilochus might of course have been in advance of his time in his appreciation of the advantages of writing, whether for accurate communication over a distance or for the long-term preservation of his composition; but if so, we should have expected him to develop this idea more fully, so that Hellenistic scholars, who had the whole poem, would not have been perplexed by this casual reference to a sad message-stick. 'Die geradezu metaphorische Art, in der Archilochos das Wort σκυτάλη verwendet, deutet darauf, dass sowohl der Terminus als die mit ihm bezeichnete Sache in der griechischen Welt seit einiger Zeit ihren festen Platz haben'.¹³ Yet this early reference to written poetry remains curiously isolated until the seventies of the fifth century, when we begin to find frequent references to writing and reading in poetry and art;

⁸ On this passage see J. T. Hooker, *BICS* 32 (1985), 68.

⁹ This passage causes grave complications for the traditional cryptographic interpretation, as it seems to imply a practice tantamount to dispatching the code-books along with the encoded message. Admittedly, the scholia on *Pi. O.* 6.92 speak of baton and message-bearing strip being consigned to different messengers; but that sounds absurdly complicated. Of course, it might be argued that Aristophanes should not be pressed on such a point.

¹⁰ L. H. Jeffery, *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 57–8.

¹¹ W. Burkert, *MH* 29 (1972), 74–5 n. 4.

¹² Cf. W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London, 1982), p. 26; on the general question see Ø. Andersen, 'Mündlichkeit u. Schriftlichkeit im frühen Griechentum', *A&A* 23 (1987), 29–44.

¹³ Heubeck, *op. cit.* (n. 5), 150.

‘...the image of scribe and reader had apparently caught poetic imagination as well as the imagination of the vase painters for the first time’.¹⁴ If this is indeed a reference to poetry in a written form it appears to anticipate the development of literate habits of mind which we might otherwise suppose to belong to a considerably later period.

There may thus be room for doubt about this interpretation of Archilochus’ phrase; I suspect that his *σκυτάλη* is not the novelty it has generally been supposed to be. If we disregard the cryptographic preoccupation of ancient scholars, we find in their discussions of the *σκυτάλη* some curious details which correspond very closely to practices observed more recently among illiterate and preliterate peoples; this testimony, which has not received as much attention as it deserves, rather suggests that Archilochus’ message-stick has nothing to do with writing, but is a relic of the old oral culture in which he and his audience grew up.

Among the various attempts to clarify Pindar’s *σκυτάλα Μοισᾶν* offered by the scholia on *O.* 6.92 we have the following note (Drachmann i. 190): οἱ δὲ ὅτι ξύλον τι στρογγύλον, ὅπερ εἰς δύο ποιοῦντες τὸ μὲν ἥμισυ κατεῖχον αὐτοὶ (sc. οἱ Λάκωνες), τὸ δὲ ἕτερον ἐδίδουν τῷ ἀρμοστή τῷ ἐκπεπομένῳ εἰς τινα πόλιν· εἴτα εἰ ἐβούλοντο δηλώσαι αὐτῷ περὶ ἀπορρήτων κτλ. Here the specific detail of the *split* stick is most significant. What is described evidently corresponds, at a more exalted level, to the familiar use of tally-sticks in financial transactions, attested both at Sparta and elsewhere in Greece (Photius s.v. *σκυτάλη* = Aristot. fr. 509 Rose, Dioscurides *FGrHist* 594 F 5): Διοσκουρίδης δὲ ἐν τοῖς περὶ νομίμων τοὺς δανείζοντας ἐν Σπάρτῃ διαιρεῖν σκυτάλην δύο παρόντων μαρτύρων καὶ γράφειν τὸ συμβόλαιον ἐν ἐκατέρῳ τμήματι, καὶ τὸ μὲν ἐνὶ τῶν μαρτύρων διδόναι, τὸ δὲ δι’ ἑαυτοῦ ἔχειν. ἔχρωντο δ’ αὐτῇ καὶ ἀλλοίως, ὥς Ἀριστοτέλης ἐν τῇ Ἰθακησίῳ πολιτείᾳ μβ. This cannot have been common practice in fourth-century Greece, or Aristotle would not have thought it worth comment.

Nor, it seems, was it familiar in thirteenth-century Venice, since Marco Polo, unaware of the extensive use of tally-sticks among his English contemporaries, found the custom noteworthy when he met it in Yunnan.¹⁵ Commenting on this passage, Sir Henry Yule relates an interesting episode in the career of his one-time superior Sir Arthur Phayre:¹⁶

In the year 1863 the Tsaubwa (or Prince) of a Shan province adjoining Yunnan was in rebellion against the Burmese Government. He sent a messenger to a British officer with a letter tendering his allegiance, and, accompanying his letter, was a piece of bamboo, about five inches long. This had been split down the middle so that the two pieces fitted closely together, forming a tube in the original shape of the bamboo. A notch at one end included the edges of both pieces, showing that they were a pair. The messenger said that if the reply was favourable, one of the pieces was to be returned and the other kept. I need hardly say the messenger received no written reply, and both pieces of bamboo were retained.

Here, surely, we have a close parallel to the Spartan practice with official dispatches; the purpose of the cane is not to assist in deciphering a scrambled message, but to provide authentication. To the literate mind cane credentials may

¹⁴ R. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship* (Oxford, 1968), i.25f.; cf. P. E. Easterling, *JHS* 105 (1985), 3–6, Johansen and Whittle on Aesch. *Suppl.* 179. The most striking of the literary references is undoubtedly Eur. *Erechtheus* fr. 160.6–7 Austin (369.6–7 N.) δέλτων ἀναπτύσσοιμι γάρυιν, ᾧ σοφοὶ κλέονται; cf. *Hipp.* 451ff. (where it is interesting that Phaedra’s nurse refers to *written* works as a normal source for knowledge of legend; see further Barrett *ad loc.*).

¹⁵ 2.50. On tally-sticks in mediaeval English book-keeping see M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307* (London, 1979), pp. 95–6, Plate viii.

¹⁶ *The book of Ser Marco Polo*, ed. Sir Henry Yule and H. Cordier³ (London, 1903), ii.96.

seem slightly comic; but sticks are cheap enough, and the system offers better protection against forgery than a written document would have done without a seal.

This use of *σκυτάλαι* as *σύμβολα* does not, however, seem to provide an adequate explanation for the extension of the term to mean an official dispatch. But ancient scholars appear to have believed that *σκυτάλαι* could themselves bear a message. Hesychius, s.v. *σκυτάλη Λακωνική* offers this note: ἐπὶ τῶν ἀγγελιαφόρων τάσσεται. ἔθος γὰρ ἦν ἀρχαῖον τὸ χρῆσασθαι ταῖς σκυτάλαις <ἀντι>¹⁷ τῶν παρ' Ἑλλήσι γραμματείων καὶ βιβλίων (cf. *EM* s.v. *σκυτάλη*, quoted *ad init.*). Some substance is added to this by the preceding note on *σκυτάλαι*: πίνακες ἐφ' οἷς ἡ Δίκη γράφει τὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀμαρτήματα. Sticks do not offer a very inviting writing surface, but *γράφει* need not mean 'write', and I suspect that Dike is pictured keeping a score for each of us, marking a slight incision for minor theft, cutting further for unfilial behaviour, and carving a deep notch for murder; compare Aeschylus' image of the goddess making her record on wax tablets (which would leave more scope for consideration of motive and mitigating circumstances).¹⁸

Notched sticks as mnemonic aids for conveying messages are attested from Australia, North America, West Africa, China, Mongolia, and South-East Asia; they were also used in ancient Scandinavia.¹⁹ The stick would be incised in the presence of the messenger, to whom the meaning of each notch was verbally emphasised. We ought not to find it particularly surprising if, as Hesychius appears to indicate, this was once Greek practice.

To Isocrates the Spartans seemed to attach insufficient importance to literacy: οὔτοι δὲ τοσοῦτον ἀπολελειμμένοι τῆς κοινῆς παιδείας καὶ φιλοσοφίας εἰσίν, ὥστ' οὐδὲ γράμματα μανθάνουσιν (*Panath.* 209, cf. 251). This is not unprejudiced testimony, and its evidential value has been much debated.²⁰ But there is no doubt about Spartan conservatism, which must in itself have delayed a proper appreciation of the manifold advantages of script and of the importance of fluency in reading and writing. It would not be surprising if the Spartans retained a preference for transacting business by word of mouth in situations where the superiority of written documents had long seemed self-evident to Athenians; but the Spartans themselves might have argued that an oral message was more secure, since there was no danger of its falling into the wrong hands.²¹ If Spartan conservatism led to the retention of

¹⁷ Suppl. Vossius.

¹⁸ γράφουσα] τὰμπλακίματ' ἐν δέλτῳ Διός (fr. 281a.21 Radt), cf. *Eum.* 275, E. fr. 506 N. See further Hopkinson on Callim. *Cer.* 56.

¹⁹ See further D. Diringer, *The Alphabet*³ (London etc., 1968), i.7f., ii.12 (Plate a). A rather elaborate development of this device (combining the notched stick with the conventions of the symbolic message exemplified in the Scythian ultimatum to Darius (Hdt. 4.131–2, Pherecyd. *FGH Hist* 3 F 174)) is thus described by Terrien de Lacouperie (*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* N.S.17 [1885], 421): 'When the Li-su are minded to rebel, they send to the Mo-so chief (who rules them on behalf of the Chinese government)...a stick with knife-cut notches. Some symbols are fastened to it, such, for instance, as a feather, calcined wood, a little fish, etc., etc. The bearer must explain the meaning of the notches and symbols. The notches may indicate the number of hundreds or thousands of soldiers who are coming; the feather shows that they arrive with the swiftness of a bird; the burnt wood, that they will set fire to everything on their way; the fish, that they will throw everybody into the water, etc., etc. This custom is largely used among all the savage tribes of the region. It is also the usual manner in which chiefs transmit their orders.'

²⁰ See further F. D. Harvey, *REG* 79 (1966), 624–7, P. Cartledge, *JHS* 98 (1978), 25–37, T. A. Boring, *Literacy in Ancient Sparta* (Leiden, 1979).

²¹ Possibly the belief that the Spartan *σκυτάλη* primarily served a cryptographic purpose arose from misunderstanding of just such a defence of traditional practice. Reluctance to put

a form of *aide-mémoire* obsolete in other parts of the Greek world, it would have been natural to regard the device as peculiarly Spartan, and when even the Spartans came to abandon it, the use of the term *σκυτάλη* to designate a written official communication (in a Spartan context) well illustrates the persistence of preliterate idiom, for which we may easily find parallels in modern English: we continue to 'audit' accounts, to 'hear from' those who write us letters, and refer to legal documents as 'deeds'. Thus linguistic conservatism veils fundamental change. It does not seem particularly surprising if observers to whom the communicational *σκυτάλη* was no longer familiar except as a Spartan eccentricity failed to distinguish two functions of the herald's message-stick: as one of a pair and by pre-arrangement, a *σκυτάλη* might serve as its bearer's credentials; incised *ad hoc*, it could remind him of his message.²²

We are not, however, here concerned with Spartan custom for its own sake, but for its possible bearing on Archilochus. If there is a case for supposing that his *σκυτάλη* has nothing to do with script, it is prudent to acknowledge that the precise significance of his metaphor may be beyond conjecture. Communicational devices which do not depend on writing tend to rely heavily on symbolism and/or situational context, and to the uninformed observer are likely to suggest either a pre-arranged code of extraordinary elaboration or the vagaries of *la pensée sauvage* at its most bizarre. To a traveller unfamiliar with single-track lines a brief attempt to explain why the engine-driver needs a baton to proceed from one station to the next might easily leave the impression that this railway *σκυτάλη* is a kind of amulet or talisman, exemplifying the survival in outlying areas of thought-ways once prevalent throughout the British Isles; but so long as no-one unused to this practice is likely to be left in charge of a train, a short stick serves to express the right of way as effectively as any document. Information about the distinctive practices of an oral milieu is likely to survive, if it survives at all, only haphazardly, and our picture of the functions of a message-stick may be seriously incomplete; Archilochus' choice of metaphor may rest on assumptions which elude us. Moreover, once we abandon an interpretation of *σκυτάλη* which implies a written text, we can no longer take it for granted that the poem was intended to be wholly intelligible beyond the poet's own circle, familiar as they will have been with the personalities involved and the situation to which this *αἶνος* appeared appropriate. But the following approach may be worth exploring.

As has often been recognized, there must be a connection between Archilochus' image and the vocative *Κηρυκίδη*. The latter is most probably to be understood as a comic patronymic;²³ we should dearly like to know how the person so addressed had qualified for this sobriquet, but as regards its precise significance and the relationship between its bearer, the wider group indicated by *ῥμιν*,²⁴ and Archilochus

proposals in writing would have been in accordance with the Spartan character for deviousness; cf. Hdt. 9.54.1, E. *Andr.* 445–53 (with Stevens's n.). See also Clanchy, op. cit. (n. 15), 211–12. A further idiosyncratic Spartan use of *σκυτάλαι* in correspondence is mentioned in the sch. on Pi. *O.* 6.92, but sounds like mere speculation: ἄλλοι δὲ ὅτι ἐχρῶντο πλατείας σκυτάλαις οἱ Λάκωνες ἐγγράφοντες αὐταῖς τὰς ἐπιστολὰς καὶ ἐγκλείοντες εἰς σκύτινα ἀγγεῖα καὶ οὕτω σφραγίζοντες.

²² I suspect that the leather strip interpreted by Hellenistic scholars as the message-bearing part of a Spartan dispatch simply served as a protective cover or carrying case.

²³ Cf. *Αἰσιμίδης* (fr. 14.1), *Σελλήϊδης* (fr. 183); see further M. G. Bonanno, 'Nommi e soprannomi archilochei', *MH* 37 (1980), 65–80 (esp. 78–9).

²⁴ For the change from sg. to plur. cf. fr. 13, which starts *Περικλέες* (1) and continues with *ὦ φίλ'* (6), but concludes *ἀλλὰ τάχιστα τλήτε, γυναικεῖον πένθος ἀπωσάμενοι*.

himself, we must admit defeat. The herald's *σκυτάλη*, as we have seen, might either authenticate his message, or represent it in tangible form; the latter function seems more likely to be relevant here. Ordinary *σκυτάλαι* are mute, insensate things, incapable alike of grief or joy; *ἀχνυμένη* surely indicates that the metaphor applies to a person, the contradictory qualification marking the difference between reality and similitude.²⁵ Thus, though our MSS. leave it uncertain whether Archilochus intended *ἀχνυμένη σκυτάλη* or *ἀχνυμένη σκυτάλη*, we are probably entitled to disregard the latter²⁶ and assume that the object of comparison is either 'Kerykides' or Archilochus himself. On the former interpretation we might wonder why, if Archilochus thought a reference to 'Kerykides' sorrow appropriate, he did not deem the point worth a little elaboration, whether on the lines of 'serves you right' or 'hard luck!'. Taken as a nominative, the phrase may be understood as a prefatory apology. By presenting himself as a message-stick Archilochus implies that he is agent, not principal; his *αἶνος* does not simply express his own fancy or prejudice, but conveys a message entrusted to him by others.²⁷

Undeniably this poem would bring little pleasure to the addressees, but by a widespread convention things may be said in verse which could not be uttered in a more direct form; expression in a poetic medium renders acceptable complaints and criticisms which would be intolerably offensive if communicated more directly.²⁸ Animal fables often serve a like function. With the image of the poet as a message-stick we see a measure of extra insurance against the imputation of personal hostility; I leave it to others to determine whether ἀχθυμένη is any more sincere than the conventional expressions of regret with which nowadays those with unpalatable decisions to communicate present themselves as the reluctant mouthpieces of superiors whom they know to have been entirely guided by their advice.

Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1418b23ff.) adverts to Archilochus' tendency to distance himself from sentiments which might give offence by putting them in the mouths of others (cf. fr. 19, 122). Here, I suggest, his picture of himself as an embodied but reluctant message-stick was similarly designed to deflect ill-feeling on the part of those to whom his *aiyos* was addressed.

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTE: ACHAEUS F 19

Ἀχαιὸς δ' ὁ Ἑρετριεύς γλαφυρὸς ὦν ποιητὴς περὶ τὴν σύνθεσιν ἔσθ' ὅτε καὶ μελαίνει τὴν φράσιν καὶ πολλὰ αἰνιγματωδῶς ἐκφέρει, ὥσπερ ἐν Ἰριδι σατυρικῇ· λέγει γάρ

λιθάργυρος
ὅλην παρηωρείτο χρίματος πλέα
τὸν Σπαρτιάτην γραπτὸν {κύρβιν} ἐν διπλῷ ξύλῳ
{κύρβιν}.

τὸν γὰρ λευκὸν ἱμάντα βουληθεὶς εἰπεῖν, ἐξ οὗ ἡ ἀργυρὰ λήκυθος ἐξήρτητο, Σπαρτιάτην
 γραπτὸν ἔφη κύρβιν ἀντὶ τοῦ Σπαρτιάτιν σκυτάλην. (Ath. 451cd)

²⁵ For the converse oxymoron cf. *ἀναιδὸς ἄγγελος* (Aesch. *Suppl.* 180, *Sept.* 82), of the cloud of dust heralding an approaching army, *ἄγγελος ἀφθογγος* (Thgn. 549), of a beacon summoning to battle. On such apparently paradoxical kennings see further I. Waern, *THE OSTEIA: the Kenning in Pre-Christian Greek Poetry* (Uppsala, 1951), pp. 55–8, Johansen and Whittle on Aesch. *Suppl.* 180.

²⁶ The dat. seems, in any case, practically untranslatable, though the difficulty is sometimes veiled by such translations as 'grievous' for ἀγνυμένη.

²⁷ His fellow-citizens, presumably; I shall resist the temptation to suggest a scenario.

²⁸ See further R. Finnegan, *Oral Poetry* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 224–8.

The controversy surrounding the term *κύρβις*²⁹ seems to have stifled doubt as to the soundness of Athenaeus' interpretation of this fragment. But it is surely most unnatural to take the lines to mean, as he proposes, 'the oil-flask hung *from* the Spartan *kurbis*'; without his guidance we should suppose that the oil-flask hung *beside* the other object. There seems no reason why a message-stick should not be carried, as an aryballus normally was, by a string or thong on the left wrist;³⁰ the messenger's hands would thus be left free, and the danger of mislaying a vital document reduced. Athenaeus was, I suspect, bemused by the fascination of Spartan cryptography; but his interpretation foists on Achaëus a frigid conundrum more likely to be relished by Hellenistic intellectuals in an unbuttoned mood than by the contemporaries of Sophocles. The device of using a peculiarly Attic term, to denote an object felt to be distinctively Spartan is much more interesting.*

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²⁹ Cf. A. Andrewes, *ΦΟΡΟΣ: Tribute to B. D. Merritt* (edd. D. W. Bradeen and M. F. McGregor, New York, 1974), pp. 26–8.

³⁰ See further A. S. F. Gow, *CQ* 34 (1940), 113, C. H. E. Haspels, *ABSA* 29 (1927/8), 216–23.

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