

Kataskaptein – Interpreting Urban Destruction

Greek and Roman military narratives are riddled with descriptions of urban destruction. Such descriptions usually follow a familiar pattern: an army captures a city by force or voluntary surrender, then “destroys,” “burns down,” or “razes,” the urban center. This seems clear enough—a straightforward indication that a town was obliterated—but these episodes are actually problematic. Some modern scholars have questioned whether ancient armies were even capable of destroying entire cities, given the limitations of pre-modern technology.¹ Others have pointed out that many supposedly-destroyed cities continued to exist, an unlikely prospect if these towns had been wiped out.² To complicate matters further, precise details about urban destruction are sparse or nonexistent in the literary sources; it is left to the reader to imagine the pitiable fate of the vanquished community. Perhaps ancient audiences knew what to expect or imagine, but for us the matter is virtually opaque and presents several puzzles: what exactly was destroyed, and how was this accomplished? The verb *kataskaptein*, which Greek authors frequently invoke to describe urban destruction, provides some answers to these questions.

The LSJ renders *κατασκάπτω* as “destroy utterly” or “raze to the ground,” citing historiographical, literary, and epigraphic texts from Classical and Hellenistic times.³ But this is not a generic word for ‘destruction,’ and several clues in our texts indicate that it signals a specific activity. Some Greek authors, such as Aeschines (3.123), Diodorus (13.57.6), and Polybius (5.9.3), carefully distinguish *kataskaptein* from other kinds of destruction, such as

¹Anthony M. Snodgrass, *An Archaeology of Greece: The Present State and Future Scope of the Discipline* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 41-42: there is “especial doubt centered round the question of how far the military resources of the ancient world were capable of visiting *total* destruction on the whole surface area of a settlement.”

²Mogens Herman Hansen and Thomas Heine Nielsen, *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 122.

³H.G. Liddell and R. Scott et al, *Greek-English Lexicon, with a revised supplement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 911.

burning. Polybius, moreover, specifies that κατασκάπτω is in some way *more* destructive than simply setting fire to roofs. Describing the Macedonian destruction of sacred buildings at Thermum, Polybius writes “not only did [the Macedonians] destroy the roofs with fire, but they also κατέσκαψαν them to the foundations” (οὐ μόνον δὲ τῷ πυρὶ κατελυμήναντο τὰς ὀροφάς, ἀλλὰ καὶ κατέσκαψαν εἰς ἔδαφος). Polybius also uses the word to indicate the *dismantling* of structures. Describing Philip V’s destruction of Paeonium, he writes that the Macedonian monarch “κατέσκαψε the wall to the foundations” (4.65.4: τὸ μὲν τεῖχος κατέσκαψε πᾶν εἰς ἔδαφος”) so that he could use the stone to fortify Oeniadae.

A second clue to the meaning of *kataskaptein* is the use of the verb in non-military contexts. Plutarch, for instance, uses the word to describe workmen demolishing a Roman home in his *Life of Publicola* (10.3); and in a letter from Antigonus Monophthalmus to Teos concerning a planned synoecism with Lebedus, the verb *kataskaptein* is used to indicate the potential demolitions involved in the creation of a new, joint community (SIG 285.9). We also see *kataskaptein* employed to describe the destruction of both Athens’ and Megara’s Long Walls by the Spartans and Megarians, respectively (Xen. *Hell.* 2.2.23; Thuc. 4.109.1).

Thus in military and non-military contexts, *kataskaptein* has the narrow sense of ‘dismantling’ or ‘knocking down’ buildings; this has several implications for our understanding of “city destruction” in ancient warfare. First, if an ancient author uses *kataskaptein* to describe destruction, they may not be depicting wanton, random, or vandalistic violence. Instead, the verb choice suggests the non-incendiary demolition of buildings. Furthermore, given the limitations of pre-modern tools, this must have been a slow, laborious process; since it is unlikely that rank-and-file soldiers engaged in these onerous acts of destruction spontaneously or voluntarily, such destruction, if and when it occurred, must have been a deliberate, organized activity directed by

military commanders and officers. Finally, it is difficult to imagine an ancient army literally demolishing an entire city in this manner; however, the literary sources suggest that public buildings were the primary targets in cases of urban destruction, making this interpretation of *kataskaptein*—and the broader phenomenon of city destruction—far more sensible.

Works Cited

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