

Dexileos' Dates Deconstructed (*IG II² 6217*)

This paper revisits the inclusion of both birth and death dates on the Dexileos Cenotaph (Athens, Kerameikos P 1130). Unearthed in the Athenian Kerameikos in 1863, this stele has become one of the most iconic remnants of ancient Greece. Its fame can be attributed to the well-preserved relief depicting the young Dexileos mounting a horse and about to strike a defenseless, naked foe. This iconography exemplifies aspirations of elite Athenian households for private commemoration, separate from the collective domain governed by the *patrios nomos* (Clairmont 1983, 19; Morris 1992, 143–44).

The presence of such an aristocratic image at the heart of the democratic polis has caused much discomfort. To explain it, scholars have turned to the appended inscription and to a unique feature: the inclusion of both birth and death dates (*IG II² 6217*). After providing the full name of Dexileos, the epitaph states that the young horseman was born in the archonship of Teisandros (414/3) and died in that of Euboulides (394/3). A prevailing interpretation contends that these dates emphasize that Dexileos had no part in the oligarchic coup of 404 (e.g. Strauss 1986, 124; Bugh 1988, 139; Németh 1994, 101; Spence 1993, 219; Low 2002, 111; Fields 2003, 123–24; Hurwit 2007, 39). The stele has thus been taken to convey “mixed messages”: the image shows a strong elite self-representation whereas the epitaph confirms alliance with the democratic polity (Ober 2003, 241; Osborne 2010, 250; Arrington, 2015, 233).

However, despite the great acceptance of this interpretation, it grapples with several methodological problems. First, young age alone at the time of the coup was insufficient to defend elite Athenians from accusations of pro-oligarchic tendencies. Isokrates, for example, records an accuser who criticizes a defendant, saying that although he was too young in 404, his

disposition nonetheless chimes with that of the instigators (20.11). Moreover, the fact that Dexileos himself did not take part in the coup says nothing about the potential participation of other members of his immediate family. In Lysias, we find a defendant who stresses not only his own youth during the coup but also his family's disassociation from the Thirty (26.21–22; cf. 10.4). Defense against such accusations had to be made on the level of the household, not individuals. Finally, and most importantly, the interpretation explains only half of the picture: if the intention was to show that Dexileos was a mere child in 404, there was no need to register the year of death as well.

The inclusion of both dates ultimately intends to communicate that Dexileos died at the young age of nineteen or twenty. This aligns with the well-established concept of the “beautiful death,” reminiscent of Achilles' resolution to die at a young age in war rather than living a long life at home. The Dexileos Cenotaph does not render a hidden democratic message that had to be deciphered through calculation. Its communication is straightforward and unambiguous: Dexileos was an elite man who died a heroic death in battle at a young age, like the Homeric heroes of old. The construction of this monument in the Kerameikos shows that, notwithstanding scholarly expectations, aristocratic ideology was still present in Athens' civic landscape, even after the restoration of democracy.

Bibliography

Arrington, N.T. (2015) *Ashes, images, and memories: the presence of the war dead in fifth-century Athens* (Oxford)

Bugh, G.R. (1988) *The horsemen of Athens* (Princeton)

- Clairmont, C.W. (1983) *Patrios nomos: public burial in Athens during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.: the archaeological, epigraphic-literary, and historical evidence* (Oxford)
- Ensoli, S. (1987) *L'heróon di Dexileos nel Ceramico di Atene: problematica architettonica e artistica attica degli inizi del IV secolo a.C.* (Rome)
- Fields, N. (2003) 'Dexileos of Thorikos: a brief life', *AHB* 17.3-4, 108–26
- Hurwit, J.M. (2007) 'The problem with Dexileos: heroic and other nudities in Greek art', *AJA* 111.1, 35–60
- Low, P. (2002) 'Cavalry identity and democratic ideology in early fourth-century Athens', *The Cambridge Classical Journal* 48, 102–22
- Morris, I. (1992) *Death-ritual and social structure in classical antiquity* (Cambridge)
- Németh, G. (1994) 'IG II-III² 5222; 6217 und die athenische Reiterei nach dem Sturz der Dreißig Tyrannen', *ZPE* 104, 95–102
- Ober, J. (2003) 'Tyrant killing as therapeutic stasis: a political debate in images and texts', in K.A. Morgan (ed.), *Popular tyranny: sovereignty and its discontents in ancient Greece* (Austin, TX) 215–50
- Osborne, R. (2010) 'Democratic ideology, the events of war and the iconography of Attic funerary sculpture', in D.M. Pritchard (ed.), *War, democracy and culture in classical Athens* (Cambridge) 245–65
- Spence, I.G. (1993) *The cavalry of classical Greece: a social and military history with particular reference to Athens* (Oxford and New York)
- Strauss, B.S. (1986) *Athens after the Peloponnesian War: class, faction, and policy, 403–386 BC* (Ithaca, NY)