Alcibiades in America: the Colonial Williamsburg origins of Virginia's Latin legend

In his 1838 Lyceum speech, Abraham Lincoln prophesied the rise of another Caesar, warning that, with the consolidation of the American regime, those who would seek glory could achieve it only in the destruction of the republic, since the work of creation was done. Little wonder, then, that his assassin's purported cry, '*sic semper tyrannis'*, lifted straight from the seal of Virginia, should have been connected in the public imagination with the Roman dictator, since it was the claim of Booth and the vanquished South that Lincoln had become precisely the man he warned against. The link between the Latin motto adopted at Williamsburg in 1776 and the death of Caesar is almost universally assumed in our own day, yet is almost certainly apocryphal: not only does the phrase not appear in any ancient sources, no postclassical sources connect the phrase uniquely with Caesar until the Civil War era. It is the argument of this paper that rather than constituting a chapter in the history of Caesar's reception, the origin of '*sic semper tyrannis'* lies in the reception of Alcibiades and the Sicilian Expedition in America. Further, Caesarian associations arise quite late, in part due to Lincoln's own reception of Caesar, and in part due to Booth's self-image as a latter-day Brutus. Lastly, specious etiologies of the phrase which have proliferated in recent years offer a lesson in the dangers of crowdsourcing in the digital humanities.

While both Wyke and Cole affirm the standard Caesarian derivation of the phrase, Cole suggests that the phrase was a generic commonplace [Cole 2009, p.421], while Wyke writes that 'the tradition is pseudoclassical, but I have not been able to pinpoint its origins' [Wyke 2012, p. 239]. A study of the Colonial Williamsburg origins of Virginia's seal, however, suggests that while sharing a certain resonance with sentiments frequently expressed in Plutarch , the phrase is most likely adapted from a Latin translation of Thucydides, an edition of which was owned by

Williamsburg jurist and classicist George Wythe, along with George Mason the main designer of Virginia's seal. Translating τοῖς γὰρ τυράννοις αἰεί ποτε διάφοροί, at 6.89.4, the Latin writes '*semper enim tyrannis fuimus infesti*', 'for we have always been hostile/dangerous to tyrants'.

The linguistic correspondence is more precise than any other extant source in Latin literature and, moreover, the context is compelling. Alcibiades is here excusing his past enmity towards Sparta and support of Athenian democracy by explaining that his people have long been by nature hostile to tyrants, and so he was compelled by tradition to act likewise, even while rejecting the popular demagoguery which led to his falling out of favor and the failure of the Sicily expedition. It is this context that is key: Americans of the early Republic had a surprisingly negative view of Alcibiades' uncle Pericles [Roberts 2011], associating him with democratic excess, while maintaining a surprisingly positive view of Alcibiades himself, admiring his martial virtues and seeing him less a rank opportunist than tragically flawed hero.

The Sicilian expedition was, for educated men of the age, long before Vietnam or Afghanistan, the quintessential graveyard of empire- a fact evidenced in a 1765 letter of George Mason, co-designer of Virginia's seal. The message of the seal, therefore, adopted after all at a time when victory and independence were far from certain, and questions of loyalty were at the fore, is thus not that tyrants inevitably receive their due, but that rebel Virginia, like Alcibiades, is by nature hostile to political tyranny, no matter the consequences, or charges of disloyalty, and yet prudently wary of democratic excess. Further, there is an implied threat: America will be Britain's Sicily, her imperial morass.

This reading thus suggests a change of agency in the phrase '*sic semper tyrannis*': rather than evincing a bloody end to oppressors, it conjures up a bloody-minded attitude in those who resist them, a reading bolstered by a survey of the phrase's usage in the pre-Civil War era. It will

be argued that the associations with Caesar's death emerge quite late, due largely to the reception of Caesar and Brutus by both Lincoln and his assassin, rather than being rooted in any historiographic tradition about the Ides of March, pseudoclassical or otherwise. Finally, a brief forensic examination of a putative source-phrase, the recently-coined (and counterfeit) '*sic semper evello mortem tyrannis,'* offers lessons in the dynamics of digital reception.

Bibliography

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