

# The Athenian Cavalry Archives of the Fourth and Third Centuries B.C.

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WE HAVE HAD NO EVIDENCE HERETOFORE that ancient record administrators faced and ably solved the problem of setting up, controlling, and servicing name files of considerable size. Such evidence has now become available, thanks to two surprising discoveries that have brought to light the archives, or at least part of the archives, of the Athenian cavalry of the fourth and third centuries B.C.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years underwater archaeology has contributed much to the exploration of the past. What might be termed "well-archaeology" has emerged as an almost equally important and no less hazardous activity, for wells have become veritable treasure-troves of the archaeologist.<sup>2</sup> In 1965, German archaeologists recovered 574 lead tablets of the third century B.C. from a well within the courtyard of the Dipylon, the double-gate leading into the city of Athens from the north. Diagnosed as archives of the Athenian cavalry, these tablets were published and splendidly commented on by Karin Braun of the German Archaeological Institute.<sup>3</sup> Four years later, a smaller number of similar tablets of the fourth and third centuries B.C. were rescued from a well at the edge of the excavated section of Athens' Market Square by the Agora staff of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. This material has been deciphered and analyzed by John Kroll, now of the Department of Classics of the University of Texas at Austin, Texas. His detailed study awaits publication in *Hesperia*, the journal of the

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Homer A. Thompson for calling my attention to these discoveries which greatly enhance our knowledge of ancient archives keeping.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, the well in the Palace of Nimrud in Mesopotamia has yielded to M. E. L. Mallowan and his colleagues the oldest ivory and wood tablets we have. See my *Archives in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> "Der Dipylon-Brunnen B.: Die Funde," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung* 85 (1970):129-269. On pages 205-35, a complete list of horse owners, including color, brand, and value of their horses, is given. Specimens of the lead tablets are reproduced on tables 83-92. Table 53 shows the well during the excavation, a rather perilous undertaking. The Dipylon tablets were discovered in the course of the German excavation of the Kerameikos section. Its results are summarized by Ursula Knigge, "Der Kerameikos von Athen," *Antike Welt*, Fourth Year, no. 4 (1973):2-20.

Athens school.<sup>4</sup> Through his great kindness, I have been privileged to obtain a copy of his manuscript and to present here briefly the results of his research which, in my opinion, have clarified to the complete satisfaction of the archival mind the nature and purpose of both the Dipylon and the Agora records. For permission to refer to the unpublished Agora tablets and to make use of Kroll's manuscript, I wish to thank T. Leslie Shear, Jr., director of the Agora Excavations.<sup>5</sup>

We now have before us the remnants of by far the largest name file of ancient times, consisting of well-nigh 700 lead tablets of uneven size. Tightly rolled or folded up, they contain the following information: the name in the genitive of the owner of a horse; the horse's color and brand, if any; and its value stated in drachmas, with 1,200 drachmas as the highest evaluation given. Normally, only the name of the owner appears on the outside; the other data is relegated to the interior of the tablet and could not be read unless the tablet was unrolled or unfolded. A number of tablets are palimpsests; that is, the original entries were erased and replaced by new data.

In interpreting these unique records, Braun and Kroll had to proceed from what is known about the organization of the Athenian cavalry. During the period from which the tablets stem, the cavalry consisted of squadrons (*phylai*), named after the ten, later twelve, *phylai* (tribes) from which the cavalymen came, and officered by the phylarchs, while the entire force was under the command of the hipparchs. The men, not ordinary horsemen but Athenian knights,<sup>6</sup> received a regular subsidy toward the maintenance of their mounts and a loan toward their acquisition. This loan they had to pay back when they left the service because of age or disability. It stands to reason, and we know specifically from an inscription of 282/1 B.C. that fitness and performance of the cavalry were tested at regular inspections (*dokimasiai*), and that, in addition, the value of each horse was determined by means of an annual appraisal, called *timesis*.

Evidently the Dipylon and the Agora tablets are the products of this evaluation process. Rightly Karin Braun surmised that her Dipylon tablets did not constitute an integral body of records, because among them there could be identified on the basis of size, shape, handwriting, and textual format certain quasi-organic groups.<sup>7</sup> She also discovered that occasionally the same man appeared as the owner of several horses—in the case of a certain Charias, possibly eleven—which seemed to indicate that the tablets originated over a number of years.<sup>8</sup> Kroll has gone much further. He separated the Agora records into groups

<sup>4</sup> Kroll's manuscript is entitled "An Archive of the Athenian Cavalry." His brief report on the tablets is found in the *American Journal of Archaeology* 76 (1972):218.

<sup>5</sup> I am also indebted to Shear for referring me to the relevant part of his report "The Athenian Agora: Excavations of 1971," *Hesperia* 42 (1973):176-78, which deals with the Agora tablets.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>7</sup> "Der Dipylon Brunnen," pp. 204-5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 200 and 203.

of the same kind; pulled in related Dipylon tablets; traced a man's horse, identified by brand and color, through these groups; and noted its progressive depreciation. This procedure enabled him to establish the chronological sequence of most of his groups and thus to attain insights that throw new light on the nature and role in administration of both the Agora and the Dipylon files.<sup>9</sup>

From Kroll's subtle and to me completely convincing analysis, it appears that the tablets were compiled annually on the "phyle level" as a precise and up-to-date appraisal of the value of the horses. Every year, Kroll suggests, the accumulation of the preceding year was "retired," whereupon in some instances the entries on them were obliterated and the tablets, like magnetic tapes, reused. Normally, the tablets were not unfolded or unrolled in order to get at the inside appraisal of a horse's value.<sup>10</sup> That was done when a cavalryman lost his horse in battle, in which case he could not be required to repay the loan he had obtained. By tracing a man and the horse he rode through a number of years, Kroll also came to the amusing conclusion that Athenian cavalrymen enjoyed replacing their horses by better or younger ones. "There is," he aptly remarks, "an obvious analogy here with the motives that govern the ownership of automobiles" in the United States.

Essentially, a year's accumulation seems to have served as an official insurance register, designed to cover a cavalryman against loss when his horse came to grief; and so, although only rarely consulted, the tablets had to be easily accessible. That the requisite records were created in a flexible system comparable to a modern card file testifies to the know-how and practical sense of Greek recordkeepers, as does the use of lead as a durable writing medium.<sup>11</sup> We can assume that the tablets were kept in jars or leather bags, a jar or a bag for each *phyle*, and stored in the *hipparcheion*, the headquarters of the commandants of the cavalry, which presumably was located in the not-yet-excavated area of the Herms. From archaeological evidence it appears that 26 of the Agora tablets were dumped down the well after the middle of the fourth century B.C. The remaining 84 tablets and the 574 Dipylon tablets were disposed of in the same fashion during the third quarter of the third century B.C. Why were they kept as long as they were, if only the records of the last evaluation were needed for the purpose the tablets were to serve? I think that typical administrative inertia kept the custodians of the tablets from getting rid of those that had become

<sup>9</sup> See the sections headed "Tribal Series" and "Purpose of the Evaluations" of his article when it is published.

<sup>10</sup> Kroll refers to two tablets on which in the course of a year "the description and value of one horse are replaced with description and value of another," although the name of the owner was retained. The tablets must have been pulled for the purpose of amending the entries.

<sup>11</sup> In his footnote 29, Kroll cites examples of the apparently not-infrequent use of lead for writing purposes, a use of which I had not been aware before. He owes some of his references to Anne P. Miller, "Studies in Early Sicilian Epigraphy: An Opisthographic Lead Tablet," unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1973.

noncurrent. What finally prompted them to take action we do not know. According to Braun, the third-century tablets were dropped down the two wells when, during the Chremonidean War, Athens had to surrender to King Antigonos II Gonatas of Macedonia after a two-year siege in 282 B.C. But did the tablets really contain "top secret" information that had to be kept from falling into enemy hands?

Most of us have seen pictures of Athenian horsemen riding in procession as they are shown on a frieze on the exterior of the Parthenon cella. Gerhart Rodenwaldt has called this frieze "a hymn in praise of the Athenian cavalry."<sup>12</sup> For us as archivists, this glorification of Athenian youth on horseback may have acquired a special meaning, now that we know that there is written evidence, although of a somewhat later period, that perpetuates the record of those serving in the Athenian cavalry more than 2,000 years ago.

<sup>12</sup> *Akropolis* (Munich-Berlin, n.d.), p. 43.