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Grain for Cibyra. Veranius Philagrus and the 'great conspiracy'

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Skillful allusions were highly valued in ancient literature, particularly in the public rhetoric of the second sophistic. Unfortunately, we usually do not know *that* ancient readers were expected to deduce information or associate something with what they had read, let alone what. Even so, it should be helpful to keep in mind that documents of a public character with literary pretensions, such as inscribed honorary decrees, might be similar to literary works of their own time in this respect. In the following, I would like to suggest that an important inscription from Lycian Cibyra¹ can be better understood if we try to read between the lines, as an ancient reader might. My interpretation depends partly on a closer study of the text itself, and partly on my assumption that economic behaviour relating to the grain trade on a local level was more complex than it is sometimes thought. I will first try to illustrate this point, beginning with a famous document that concerns the grain supply of Pisidian Antioch. This inscription too contains hidden information but, thankfully, it has been recently discussed in detail by H.-U. Wiemer. For my purpose it will suffice to take his results just one step further.

Buyers and sellers in Antiochia. The governor Antistius Rufus writes to Pisidian Antioch: "Since the duoviri and decurions of the most splendid colony of Antioch have written to me that because of the harsh winter the market price of grain has shot up, and (since) they have requested that the people have the means of buying it, ... all those who are either citizens of the colony of Antioch or are inhabitants of it shall state openly before the duoviri of the colony of Antioch ... how much grain each person has and in what place, and how much for seed or for the annual allowance of his family he deducts, and the rest of the grain, the whole supply, he shall make available to the buyers of the colony of Antioch..."².

In this edict, the governor states clearly who would be directly affected by his instructions: all those who were "either citizens of the colony or inhabitants of it" were to declare and sell any surplus grain they stored. Plainly, the potential sellers were not necessarily grain traders by

¹ T. Corsten (ed.), *Inschriften Griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien, vol. 60: Die Inschriften von Kibyra I*, Bonn 2002 (henceforth: *IK Kibyra*), n. 41. First published by W. Henzen, *Annali dell' Istituto di corrispondenza archeologica* 24, 1852, 171-174. Corsten has revisited the stone. His reading provides an important correction in line 14 (πρῶσιν, not πρῶξιν), on which see op.cit., 56 (photo), 61.

² AD 92-93. Lucius Antistius Rusticus, AE 1925, n. 126; F. F. Abbott / A. C. Johnson, *Municipal Administration in the Roman Empire*, Princeton, N. J. 1926, 381-3 n. 65a; M. McCrum / A. G. Woodhead, *Select Documents of the Flavian Emperors*, Cambridge 1961, 139f n. 464. Transl. R. S. Sherck, *The Roman Empire: Augustus to Hadrian*, Cambridge 1988, 149f n. 107.

profession. All those who possessed more grain than they would need in that year were to sell it on the market on a certain date, also specified by the governor.

In a recent article, Wiemer has shown that the "emptores", the buyers to whom the grain was to be made available, were most probably likewise citizens and residents of the colony, that is, the consumers themselves, rather than professional merchants³. Another conclusion of Wiemer's enquiry into the circumstances of this edict is that it must have been issued in response to a regional rather than a widespread crisis. Which means that grain, if urgently needed, should have been available for import from not too far away.

Yet the governor does not mention this possibility, and this provides us with a valuable piece of information that is not actually included in this document but can be safely deduced from it: the heavy winter of ca. AD 90-91 in Pisidia had resulted in neither famine, nor food crisis, nor even genuine grain shortage⁴. Obviously, the effects of one bad harvest could be compensated for if people brought their grain to the market, and the governor expected the price to return to normal levels when local stocks were made available. The prices shot up because the locals in Antiochea held on to their grain in anticipation of better profits as the market price rose still further⁵.

Grain as a traded commodity. A number of ancient sources report efforts to control the price of grain, and the edict of Antistius Rusticus discussed above is one among the many that have been associated with famines. But while bad harvests were "recurring and inevitable" in the ancient Mediterranean⁶, they need not automatically have caused food crisis, and they were not the only factor influencing the price of grain. We have ample evidence that in years when a city's domestic crop was average or above-average, the price of grain could also fluctuate considerably⁷. Some of the reasons why it did so were natural, but some were man-made, as various stratagems to make satisfactory profits were adopted by merchants. The best known literary attestation of such practices is Lysias' speech against the retailers of grain. In it, a prosecutor speaks against a group of retailers who face the death penalty if convicted. The

³ *Das Edikt des L. Antistius Rusticus: Eine Preisregulierung als Antwort auf eine überregionale Versorgungskrise?*, *Anatolian Studies* 47 (1997), 195-215.

⁴ See P. Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World*, Cambridge 1988 (henceforth: Garnsey, *Famine*), 3-7 on the „categorical error, committed frequently in the literature“ of describing every food crisis as a famine, and on the „boundary between famine and shortage“.

⁵ On speculation by non-professional traders Garnsey, *Famine*, 75-76.

⁶ P. Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge 1999, 23.

⁷ D. W. Rathbone, *The grain trade and grain shortages in the Hellenistic East*, in: P. Garnsey and C.R. Whittaker eds., *Trade and Famine in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge, 1983, 45-55.

charge against them is obscure in detail, but it seems that they were accused either of hoarding grain, or of operating a cartel, or both.

When the transport costs were affordable, grain traders profited from regional price differences. But since transports and communication were normally very costly, such strategies were best undertaken in cooperation with other traders, as the case of a notorious financial controller of Egypt under Alexander amply illustrates. This man had obviously supported a network of trade partners and informers who worked together to control certain markets, establishing the most profitable time and place to sell. Unsurprisingly, they did so in disregard of the needs of local populations⁸.

The price of grain could also be influenced by psychology, sometimes in ways that evoke the fluctuations of the price of oil today. In 67 BC, following pirate attacks on merchant ships, the price of grain in Rome rose dramatically, only to plummet on the very day Pompey was appointed to combat piracy. When he visited the city soon after, Pompey found the markets full of provisions⁹.

While grain could be preserved for four years or more and still be consumable, it was a perishable good, and small farmers with limited storage facilities did not hold onto grain for much more than two years¹⁰. Different types and qualities of grain stored with various success, transport costs varied, and a host of other factors made for considerable fluctuation in the price of grain from time to time and place to place. Such fluctuation gave ample scope for profit or loss, so that stored grain was more than surplus food, to professional and non-professional traders alike. It is generally assumed that the orator Dio Chrysostom suffered injustice from a mob that threatened to burn his house because it suspected him of hoarding grain. Whether the accusation was true we do not know. But the undeniable fact is that a crowd in his native city suspected Dio of speculating in grain. Rich citizens of Prusa were obviously expected to profiteer in that way, including a professional orator and famous herald of moral integrity and the simple life like Dio Chrysostom.

Occasionally, merchants, local notables and farmers held back their supplies to let the price rise. But it also seems natural to assume, as a number of people in Prusa obviously did, that those who had the financial resources might buy and store grain when the price was expected

⁸ Callisthenes: Dem. 56.7-9; Arist. Oec. 1352 a-b.

⁹ P. Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World. Responses to Risk and Crisis*, Cambridge 1988, 200-201; Cassius Dio 36.22-4; Cicero, *Imp. Pomp.* 44; Plutarch, *Pomp.* 26.2; 27.2; Appian, *Bell. Mith.* 14.93-6.

¹⁰ P. Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply*, 54. Cf. T. W. Gallant, *Risk and Survival in Ancient Greece. Reconstructing the Rural Domestic Economy*, Cambridge 1991, 94-98.

to rise, thus triggering a grain crisis. Civic magistrates, *agoranomoi*, *sitophylakes* or *sitones*, were instructed to safeguard against such practices, or at least to minimize their effects. Given the realities of political life in the cities of the Roman empire, the citizens who undertook such tasks, as magistrates or benefactors, were themselves members of the few elite families that regularly stood to benefit from grain production and trade. They had at their disposal the cash needed to alleviate a shortage when it became acute, and their help usually came in the form of interest-free loans for the purchase of grain. The type of munificence most frequently mentioned in honorary decrees for benefactors in times of grain shortage is having provided such ἄτοκα δάνεια.

Honours for Veranius Philagros. Let me now turn to our inscription from Lycia. It preserves one of several honorary decrees issued for an important citizen of Cibyra in the first cent. AD, Quintus Veranius Philagros. The document was inscribed in the theater of the city, where it is still to be seen today. The decree begins by naming Philagros' most important service to his community at that time, which was also the immediate motive for bestowing the present set of honours: at his own expense, he had carried out four embassies to the emperors in Rome, succeeding "on important issues"¹¹. Following an account of Philagros' earlier, or less vital, services to the city in the middle section of the document (lines 4-10), the decree returns in the last section (lines 11f.) to his embassies, to highlight the two most important things achieved through them. It closes with a reference to the honours bestowed, described in the concluding line as the ἀριστέως τειμαί.

The document, then, has a circular structure, beginning and ending with the embassies and the honors voted for them. But apart from this basic feature, its structure presents difficulties for the modern reader. For the most part, it consists of a series of textual elements linked with καί¹². Only in line 10, at the point where the enumeration of earlier benefactions ends and the decree returns to the subject of the embassies, does a variation occur: here the transition is marked by δέ, introducing a relative sentence (ὃ δέ...) that precedes for emphasis the section it relates to¹³. The last section is clearly set apart from the preceding lines through this simple literary device. All other connections are introduced with a plain *kai*, and it is not always clear whether a *kai* is followed by additional information pertaining to a benefaction just

¹¹ L. 3-4: περὶ μεγάλων πραγμάτων ἐπιτυχόντα.

¹² One καί in each line of the middle section, ll. 3-9, in the last section in l. 13.

¹³ ἡτημένον and the infinitives depending from it, ἀπεσκευάσθαι and γείνεσθαι.

mentioned, or whether it introduces a new benefaction. In short, we are not in a position to reconstruct the list of Philagros' *euergesiai* with certainty¹⁴.

In some cases, however, it is clear that the text includes details of benefactions that were of secondary importance: we are given the exact number of slaves Philagros had been able to secure for the city, and the name of an estate he won in court (l. 6); we are informed of the exact size of a donation he made for a banquet (l. 8); and we hear something of the terms on which the beneficiaries of a loan had been chosen: they had been nominated by the *demos* (l. 9). It would then seem rather odd if the text contained no indication whatsoever as to the nature of a "great conspiracy" that "harmed the city severely", mentioned in l. 10. This conspiracy Philagros is said to have broken up, apparently on his own, or at least mainly through his own efforts, to judge by the wording of this passage (l. 9-10). Surely, breaking up a great conspiracy was an important accomplishment. But after mentioning the enigmatic *sunomosia*, the decree returns immediately to Philagros' two principal achievements as an ambassador, which, if we follow the current interpretation¹⁵, were much less impressive: one was the removal of a corrupt Roman official who appropriated the rather modest sum of 3000 denarii per year. The other resulted in the set-up of a local grain market. The transition between these two is provided by a simple *kai* (l. 13), and most scholars¹⁶ prefer to see no connection between the two matters, or indeed between the two and the suppression of the *sunomosia* that had preceded them in the inscription. A closer look at them may suggest otherwise.

Disgrace for Tiberius Nicephoros. The first of Philagros' successes as an ambassador concerns a man named Tiberius Nicephoros, whom scholars universally assume to have been a Roman functionary, a fiscal officer or procurator¹⁷. The honorand had persuaded the emperor Claudius to remove this man, and the expression used to refer to his removal is noteworthy.

¹⁴ It is clear, for instance, that after mentioning the four embassies in the beginning of the document, the first *kai* that occurs, in line 3, does not introduce a reference to another benefaction, but links instead to the positive results of those embassies. On the other hand, it is not at all clear how the connection following that is to be understood. We do not know where Philagros' service as a public advocate took place. If he had represented the city in Rome, the section beginning with ἐγδικήσαντα could contain details of his activity as envoy to Rome. In this case, the *kai* in line 4 would introduce an illustration of his activity as representative of the city in the imperial court. But Philagros may just as well have acted as a public advocate in a local or a provincial court, in which case lines 4-6 would refer to court cases unrelated to his travels to Rome. Similarly, we cannot know for sure whether he made his *epidosis* of 15 000 Rhodian drachmae (l. 7-8) in his capacity as imperial priest (l. 6-7), as was often the case, or independently of his term in this office, in which case the *kai* in line 7 would introduce a benefaction taking place subsequent to his priesthood.

¹⁵ See the discussion of earlier scholarship in Corsten 60-62 (...).

¹⁶ W. H. Waddington, M. Alpers, T. Corsten.

¹⁷ See the discussion of earlier scholarship in *IK Kibyra* 60-61.

Ἀποσκευάζομαι means *to displace* or *dispose of*, always with clearly negative connotations; *get rid of*, *drive away*, or *do away with* are good translations for this word¹⁸. Used in an official document that was intended for monumental publication, this seems an unlikely - an unusually strong - expression for referring to a Roman functionary, even a corrupt one. One would expect ἐκβάλλω or ἀνακαλλῶ, in any case a more neutral word to describe Claudius' recall of an imperial official¹⁹. In fact, I see no reason to make of Nicephoros a 'real' Roman, thereby excluding the possibility that he was a local man just like Philagros. It has been assumed that he was a Roman fiscal officer or a procurator because πρόσσειν often refers to tax collection. According to this explanation, Nicephoros exacted a sum of 3000 denarii each year, which he kept, instead of remitting it to the fiscus. Scholars have taken πρόσσοντα here to mean "exacted a tax"²⁰, in which case one must assume λαμβάνοντα to be pleonastic, or take it as a gloss for "misappropriate"²¹, a rather forced conclusion²². It is much more natural to understand πρόσσειν in this context as "demand, exact, press for payment"²³. Far from being pleonastic, λαμβάνοντα would be a necessary supplement to πρόσσοντα in this context: he demanded *and received* 3000 denarii a year.

I suggest that the key to understanding why the city disbursed this sum each year might be provided in the final section of the document. Philagros motivated the imperial administration to help regulate the corn trade in Cibyra. The emperor decreed that a certain amount of grain was to be sold out of every iugum of land, and that those transactions were to take place on the market²⁴. This measure is referred to in l. 10-11, jointly with the expulsion of Tiberius Nicephoros, as ἀναγκαιότατον, *most needed*, or *urgent*. Obviously, there had been some sort of grain crisis in Cibyra, but, strangely we hear nothing of it.

Unless, that is, we see Tiberius Nicephorus as a local man and the 3000 denarii as money extorted from the city through his *hetairia* by means of manipulating, or the threat of manipulating, the grain supply. 3000 denarii is not a particularly noteworthy sum. But

¹⁸ See now *DGE (Diccionario Griego-Español)* ἀποσκευάζω A II 3.

¹⁹ M. Alpers, *Das nachrepublikanische Finanzsystem*, Berlin 1995, 269, n. 921, is right in rendering ἀπεσκευάσθαι as "sich vom Halse schaffen". On the other hand, Nicephoros was troubling the city, not the emperor. Ἀποσκευάζομαι is therefore better understood as passive instead of middle; Philagros asked the emperor that Nicephoros *be forced out, driven away*. In the phrase ἡτημένον ἀπὸ ... Καίσαρος, ἀπό + gen. obviously stands for παρά + gen.

²⁰ "Erheben" (Nollè); "einziehen" (Corsten).

²¹ Nollè, *Epigraphica Varia* 273: "in die eigene Tasche gesteckt".

²² There are several words that could mean to misappropriate money, but λαμβάνω is not necessarily one of them. Particularly if πρόσσοντα was used in the sense "received a tax", we would not expect λαμβάνω here, but rather - for example - νοσφίζομαι or ἐξιδιάζομαι, maybe σφετερίζω or ιδιοποιῶ.

²³ *LSJ* πρόσσω VI.

²⁴ Earlier interpretations based on reading πράξιιν instead of πράσιν in line 14 have been proven erroneous by T. Corsten, *IK Cibyra*, p. 60-61. The Σ is preserved and well visible on the photograph, *ibid.* p. 56.

supposing Nicephoros extorted this sum each year before loosening his grip on the local grain market, such a "conspiracy" could very well be described as τὰ μέγιστα λυπούσα τὴν πόλιν (I.10).

It cannot be rigorously proved, but it seems that Nicephoros was operating what we would call today a cartel. A cartel is a "secret, verbal and informal" agreement to fix prices or limit supply²⁵. If we wanted to describe such a practice in Greek, the word *sunomosia* would be a good choice. On the other hand, *sunomosia* is also a perfectly good alternative for *hetairia*, when referred to in a negative context²⁶.

No doubt there were corrupt officials in the Roman empire. On the other hand, there is no reason to assume that local magnates always used their wealth, clientele and influence to benefit their communities. If trading in grain offered ample opportunity for gain, we must expect such people to have profited from it, on occasion to the detriment of their own or neighbouring communities. A powerful man could gain control over the local market by purchasing large quantities of grain from local peasants; he could prevent clients from selling their surplus, thus substantially affecting prices; finally, he could coordinate his activities with other traders to achieve maximum gain. In all three cases, we might expect him to exact a 'compensation' for eventually allowing the market to operate free of his manipulation, which is what Nicephoros apparently did.

Whatever the details of Nicephoros' manipulations, Cibyra had not been able to defend itself against them for years, and the governors of Asia²⁷ had either been equally ineffective, or had not been asked to intervene. Veranius Philagros was most likely the initiator of a plan to seek help directly from Rome, a plan he was willing to carry out at his own expense, and by accepting the risk - and the honour - of a journey to the capital. After the successful outcome of his embassies, the city issued a decree in Philagros' honour. In the version of this document that was destined for publication on stone, the city included an explicit mention of Nicephoros' name, thus subjecting its long-time enemy to public and permanent humiliation, while it underlined Philagros' merit. As opposed to Nicephoros, Philagros, the perpetual priest of Virtue²⁸, provided 100 000 drachmae, apparently as interest-free loans²⁹. As already

²⁵ See the website of the British Office of Fair Trading, www.offt.gov.uk; cf. W. Goode, *Dictionary of Trade Policy Terms*, Cambridge 2003, 56.

²⁶ Δ. Δημητράκος, *Μέγα Λεξικόν τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς Γλώσσης*, Ἀθήνα 1952, συνωμοσία 3, cf. *LSJ* συνωμοσία II.

²⁷ Or those of the new province of Lycia. It is not clear whether Cibyra was included in the new province. In a newly discovered text preserving the treaty of 46 BC between Rome and the Lycian Federation, the boundary is drawn much further to the south, along a line from Phaselis through Choma to Telmessus. See S. Mitchell, *Papyri Graecae Schøyen* 2004 (forthcoming).

²⁸ ἄρετή, I. 2.

mentioned, such loans are frequently attested in connection with food shortages, and here they are immediately followed by a reference to the 'conspiracy'. Once more, however, we stand before a simple *kai*-connection that does not permit the linking of Philagros' benefactions to a grain crisis, or indeed a grain crisis created by Tiberius' extortion, beyond doubt. His loans may be connected to the grain crisis, but we cannot exclude the possibility that they had been issued in response to a different problem.

Be that as it may, Philagros appears no less than Nicephoros to have employed accumulated capital in financial enterprises, and there should be no doubt as to what earned him the present set of public honours: his successful denunciation of an unscrupulous fellow financier before the emperor.:

"[The people honoured] Quintus Veranius, son of Troilus Philagros, member of the tribus Clustumina, lifelong priest of Arete, who undertook at his own expense four embassies to the emperors in Rome and was successful on important issues, and acted as legal representative (public advocate or prosecutor) in many important public lawsuits, as a result of which a significant amount of money went into construction works in the city, and won in court (for the city) 107 public slaves and the estate Kom[.]ira, and became priest of Caesar Augustus and for several years bestowed upon the city for the banquet of the Caesaria a donation of 54

²⁹ J. Nollé, *ZPE* 48 (1982), 271-272, interprets the phrase δανείου δέκα μυριάδας χαρισάμενον οἷς ὁ δῆμος ἠθέλησεν as meaning that Philagros forgave the debts of those whom the city recommended, thus remitting a total amount of 100 000 drachmae. While Nollé's reading of χαρίζομαι in similar contexts is essentially correct, this particular phrase presents difficulties. Pleket, *SEG* 32 (1982), 1306, prefers to read "he gave by way of loan = he lent to those whom the demos proposed". Pleket argues that "in combination with the gen. δανείου, paralleled by διοδόματος in L. 7", χαρισάμενον is best understood as referring to the act of giving an amount of money. Indeed the main difficulty with Nollé's interpretation is that, as it stands, this phrase almost certainly refers to an amount of money that was divided among certain individuals proposed by the demos, as opposed to individual amounts that added up to 100 000 drachmae. Translated literally, the object of χαρισάμενος is "a loan of 100 000 Rhodian drachmae to those whom the people wanted". So the loan is referred to as a unit (δάνειον) that was subsequently divided among a number of recipients. Instead, Nollé's interpretation suggests a procedure by which the demos recommended to Philagros a selection of persons whose existing debts he might remit, and the sums he remitted amounted to a total of 100 000 drachmae. In fact this number presents a further difficulty. While it cannot be ruled out that individual remissions added up to this round sum by chance, or that the sum was rounded up by the editors of the decree, it seems more plausible that a round figure such as this represents Philagros' initial offer. The other sum donated by Philagros, 54 000 for the banquet, is also a round figure, whereas numbers representing the results of his actions in other fields seem accurately given, rather than round or rounded: 107 slaves, 75 modii of wheat per iugum of land. It seems more plausible, then, that the number 100 000 represent a sum that Philagros was prepared to make available for loans, and that the city indicated those most in need of such assistance. The reason why this act is referred to by means of the verb χαρίζομαι is in all probability to be seen as a consequence of a situation that we encounter frequently in honorary inscriptions: Philagros had apparently provided loans free of interest. The usual expression is ἄτοκος (frequently ἄτοκα) and it is regularly associated with loans provided in times of need, especially in times of grain shortage: cf. IG IX,2, 1104 (Thessaly); ISM (Istros) 1; IG XI,4, 1055 (Delos); IG XII, 5, 1011 (Ios); IG XII,9, 900a (Euboea); I.Didyma 12; I. Erythrai 18, cf. l. 39f.

000 Rhodian drachmae, and provided 10 000 Rhodian drachmae as interest-free loans to those whom the demos proposed, and broke up a great conspiracy that harmed the city severely. And - what constituted the most crucial achievements of his embassies - he asked of the emperor Claudius that Tiberius Nicephorus be driven away, who demanded and received of the city each year 3 000 denarii, and that (in the future) the sale of grain take place in the market, 75 modii (of grain) per iugum (of land) out of the whole territory, for which the city bestowed upon him the honors becoming to a most distinguished citizen (*aristeus*)".
