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The Manumission of Greece at the Isthmian Festival of 196 BCE¹

The proclamation of Greece's freedom at the Isthmian festival of 196 is a most famous episode in ancient history. Among the many significant issues involved, this proclamation appealed to the traditional political slogan of Greek freedom², and the actual assessment of its function and meaning in this particular event lies at the heart of our overall understanding of the Romans' politics and policies in Greece³. Any treatment of such issues would clearly require discussing a large array of controversial aspects. But my concern in the present paper is much narrower in its primary scope. What I aim to show is that the very way in which Greece's freedom was announced was meant to turn this event, in the eyes of the Greek audience, into a symbolic large-scale replica of so-called Greek 'civic' manumissions. Thus, the episode would best be put on a par with the recurrence of the concepts and imagery of freedom and slavery within the diplomatic vocabulary of the time.

1. *The Manumission of Greece*

The momentous event of the Isthmian festival of 196 is described in virtually the same way by a number of sources, all of which ultimately rely on Polybius' account of the episode⁴.

¹ I wish to thank Albio Cesare Cassio, Donatella Erdas, Anna Magnetto, and Peter J. Wilson, who read and commented on this article at different stages of its development. Special thanks are due to John Thornton for his insightful remarks. I also wish to thank Sergio Knipe, who has improved the English of this article. I am solely responsible for any remaining factual errors or misjudgements.

² On this topic see especially DMITRIEV 2011.

³ A thorough discussion is provided by DMITRIEV 2011, 151-165 (a select bibliography on the episode is also provided by BURTON 2011, 224 and n. 107).

⁴ Plb. 18.46, Liv. 33.32, Plut. *Flam.* 10.4-10, App. *Mac.* 9.4, Iust. 30.4.17, Val. Max. 4.8.5.



Greeks from every region crowded Corinth's stadium⁵, for everyone could foresee that some important announcement concerning Greece's fate was imminent. Indeed, after Philippus' defeat at Cynoscephalae all Greeks were anxious to find out what the Roman plans for their country were. The Aetolian anti-Roman propaganda had rapidly gained popularity⁶, and not a few people came to believe that the Romans, not aiming at Greek freedom at all, simply wanted to substitute Philippus' domination with their own by leaving garrisons in strategic places⁷. The announcement at the Isthmian games was to provide an answer to all this. Having silenced the audience in the stadium, a herald declared that the Roman senate and Flamininus, who had just defeated Philippus and the Macedonians, were setting a number of Greek populations free, without any garrisons, and without subjecting them to any tribute, allowing them to restore their traditional laws. The names of the populations concerned follow. After the herald had finished, the crowd reacted tumultuously and a second identical announcement by the herald was required in order to make everybody sure of what had just been made publicly known.

Flamininus' choice of having Greece's freedom proclaimed in this fashion has often been described as a spectacular way of making the announcement⁸. And Polybius' vivid description of the event reinforced this opinion⁹. Some scholars also framed the Isthmian episode together with others which show the Romans' sensitivity to Greek agonistic culture¹⁰. All this is certainly very reasonable. But it seems to me that the intended symbolic overtones of the episode have been overlooked.

As a number of literary and epigraphical sources attest, all over ancient Greece one typical way of freeing slaves was by having a herald

⁵ According to Polybius (18.46.1), for instance, σχεδὸν ἀπὸ πάσης τῆς οἰκουμένης τῶν ἐπιφανεστάτων ἀνδρῶν συνεληλυθότων.

⁶ Plb. 18.45.6-8 ἐκ δὲ τούτων εὐθεώρητον ὑπάρχειν (sc. the Aetolians said) πᾶσιν ὅτι μεταλαμβάνουσι τὰς Ἑλληνικὰς πέδας παρὰ Φιλίππου Ῥωμαῖοι, καὶ γίνεται μεθάρμοσις δεσποτῶν, οὐκ ἐλευθέρωσις τῶν Ἑλλήνων. [7] ταῦτα μὲν οὖν ὑπ' Αἰτωλῶν ἐλέγετο κατακόρως [...] [8] πλεοναζούσης δὲ τῆς τῶν Αἰτωλῶν διαβολῆς καὶ πιστευομένης παρ' ἐνίοις.

⁷ Plb. 18.46.1-2 πολλοὶ καὶ ποικίλοι καθ' ὅλην τὴν πανήγυριν (sc. the Isthmian festival of 196) ἐνέπιπτον λόγοι, [2] τῶν μὲν ἀδύνατον εἶναι φασκόντων Ῥωμαίους ἐνίων ἀποστήναι τόπων καὶ πόλεων, τῶν δὲ διοριζομένων ὅτι τῶν μὲν ἐπιφανῶν εἶναι δοκούντων τόπων ἀποστήσονται, τοὺς δὲ φαντασίαν μὲν ἔχοντας ἐλάττω, χρεῖαν δὲ τὴν αὐτὴν παρέχεσθαι δυναμένους, καθέξουσι.

⁸ See e.g. BADIAN 1958, 73: «Flamininus staged his greatest *coup de théâtre*».

⁹ PFEILSCHIFTER 2005, 297: «selbs wenn man einiges von Polybios' emphatischen Bericht abzieht, bleibt eine immense Wirkung auf die Zeitgenossen».

¹⁰ See KYLE 2015, 262-263.



announce their manumission in assembly places (especially at the theatre) during major public festivals¹¹. An explicit (though indirect) Polybian instance of this custom is to be found in Plb. 5.76.5, where the liberation of Logbasis' slaves is described with the words κηρύξαντες τοῖς δούλοις ἐλευθερίαν. I deem it very likely that for the proclamation Flamininus consciously chose to draw upon this custom¹². For in the herald's speech we have in Polybius (and in Plutarch and Appian after him) one reads that the Roman senate and Flamininus ἀφιᾶσι ἐλευθέρους the Greeks¹³, and the expression with ἀφίημι and ἐλεύθερος is technical in so-called 'civic' manumissions, as both literary and epigraphical sources largely attest¹⁴. Once we take all this into account, the opposition drawn between Flamininus and Xerxes in Alcaeus' epigram AP 16.5¹⁵ appears to be more than just a rhetorical commonplace because, while the latter went to Greece to enslave the country, the former brought its slavery to an end¹⁶. Finally, it should also be considered that Flamininus' subsequent celebration in the whole of Greece as σωτήρ and ἐλευθέριος¹⁷ – both epithets of Zeus Eleutherios¹⁸ – would clearly fit within the same context. For Zeus Eleutherios was not only

¹¹ See now the thorough discussion provided by ROCCA 2015.

¹² Not by chance, after the Isthmian festival Antiochus' ambassadors went to Corinth to praise Flamininus and the Roman commission, but they were urged to tell the Seleucid king to keep away from all free Greek cities of Asia Minor and to withdraw from all former Ptolemaic and Macedonian possessions in Greece, because οὐδένα γὰρ ἔτι τῶν Ἑλλήνων οὔτε πολεμεῖσθαι νῦν ὑπ' οὐδενός οὔτε δουλεύειν οὐδενί (Plb. 18.47.2).

¹³ This content of the announcement is identical in Polybius' and Plutarch's accounts of the event. Appian alters it a little. The Latin sources present the *status* of the Greek populations by using Roman juridical terms (i.e. *liberos immunes*). For the possibility that Flamininus adapted the original *senatus consultum* to a form more suitable for the Greek audience, see BADIAN 1958, 87 and DMITRIEV 2011, 3 and 280.

¹⁴ See e.g. Xen. *Hell.* 1.6.15 and Arist. *Rhet.* 1373b 18. For a discussion of various epigraphic examples see also ROCCA 2011, 258 and n. 3 (with previous bibliography on the distinction between 'civic' and 'sacral' manumission), ROCCA 2015, 23-24 and 27, and ZELNICK-ABRAMOVITZ 2005, *passim*. The translators of Polybius, Plutarch, and Appian fail to notice this detail.

¹⁵ Alc. AP 16.5 ἀγαγε καὶ Ξέρξης Πέρσαν στρατὸν Ἑλλάδος ἐς γᾶν, | καὶ Τίτος εὐρείας ἄγαγ' ἀπ' Ἰταλίας· | ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν Εὐρώπα δούλον ζυγὸν αὐχένι θήσων | ἦλθεν, ὁ δ' ἀμπαύσων Ἑλλάδα δουλοσύνας.

¹⁶ See line 4: ὁ [*sc.* Flamininus] δ' ἀμπαύων Ἑλλάδα δουλοσύνας. One should also note the recurrence of the freedom slogan and the extensive use of the verb *liberare* and cognate forms in Flamininus' speech against Nabis of Sparta in 195 (see Liv. 34.32.3-4-6-8-13).

¹⁷ One is reminded here of Flamininus' acclamation in Corinth in 194 as *servator* and *liberator* (Liv. 34.50.9).

¹⁸ See WALBANK 1967, 613-614.



addressed as the divinity protecting Greek civic freedom, but as the god of slaves and freedmen too¹⁹.

The fact that the Isthmian declaration of 196 took place in the stadium, and not at the theatre as was often the case with manumissions, does not affect the present argument. To begin with, the Isthmian festival was probably intentionally chosen by Flamininus²⁰. And since this was an especially gymnastic festival, the gathering of the audience in the stadium, rather than at the local theatre, is no surprise²¹. One could even speculate a bit further. In Corinth, as we learn from Pausanias (2.1.7), the theatre was a short distance away from the stadium²². As a consequence, one might argue that the decision to have the Greeks gathered in the stadium and their freedom proclaimed there was due to the huge number of people who had arrived in Corinth, an element all our sources are very keen to highlight²³. Be that as it may, on a more general level the precise location of the announcement, whether the stadium or the theatre, should probably not bear any particular weight. For originally the key reason for choosing an assembly place during a festival in order to announce a slave's manumission was simply to make the largest available audience witness the liberation which was being made public. A theatre provided a useful location for this, but the evidence we have clearly proves that it was by no means the only convenient place²⁴.

¹⁹ See BÖMER 1991, 113-115.

²⁰ As DMITRIEV 2011, 280 rightly points out, the Roman choice of a Corinthian festival was also due to the fact that «this city's history had been closely intertwined with the use of the slogan of freedom».

²¹ It ought to be borne in mind that we also know of assemblies taking place (just occasionally or on a regular basis) in the stadium (see, for instance, the case of Athens and the evidence collected by GILMAN ROMANO 1985, 454 and n. 58). For the interactions between drama and athletics in the Greek world see LARMOUR 1999.

²² In Hellenistic cities there are also cases in which the theatre and the stadium formed a single complex (see GILMAN ROMANO 2016, 318).

²³ According to GEBHARD 1973, 30, in the lower cavea of the theatre «approximately 1,550 persons could have been accommodated, with room for many more on the slope above». Even doubling the figure of those potentially attending the event (i.e. counting those sitting on the slope), there would probably not have been enough space for the huge crowd of people gathered at Corinth from all over Greece that Polybius describes. On the contrary, it is easy to imagine that the stadium was larger than the theatre. For the position of Corinth makes likely that the Isthmian festival usually attracted a large audience, probably one even larger than those of other major Panhellenic festivals (see DILLON 1997, 112). This may well have been a further reason for Flamininus' choice of having Greece's freedom proclaimed during this particularly convenient occasion.

²⁴ See also RÄDLE 1969, 14-16 and Rocca 2015: 20-21. Plutarch's account of the Isthmian episode displays some theatrical vocabulary in the broadest sense, but this is



2. Freedom, slavery, and liberation at the time of the Macedonian Wars

The symbolic interplay with manumission customs at the Isthmian proclamation of 196 is no surprise, for it participates in the rhetoric of freedom, slavery, and liberation that was recurrent at the time of the Macedonian wars.

On the one hand, this was a useful anti-Macedonian theme. Greece's δουλεία under the Macedonians is explicitly stated by the Aetolian Chlaeneas in Polybius²⁵, and δουλεία is also said to be Sparta's condition in those years, when the city was subject to the tyranny of Nabis²⁶. It is worth adding that with regard to the event that occurred in the spring of 194, when Roman slaves previously sold by Hannibal in Greece were made free and given to Flamininus as he was about to sail back to Italy with the army, Livy²⁷ notes that it would have been very odd for those who had made Greece free to become its slaves.

But, on the other hand, the rhetoric of slavery and manumission was useful for Rome's opponents too. Before the Roman intervention in Greece, in Plb. 9.37.7²⁸ the Acharnanian ambassador Lyciscus (responding to

common for assemblies too (let us think of Cleon's speech in Thuc. 3.38.3-7; for Polybius see CHANIOTIS 1997, 229-231).

²⁵ Plb. 9.28.1 ὅτι μὲν οὖν, ὧ ἄνδρες Λακεδαιμόνιοι, τὴν Μακεδόνων δυναστείαν ἀρχὴν συνέβη γεγονέναι τοῖς Ἑλλησι δουλείας, οὐδ' ἄλλως εἰπεῖν οὐδένα πέπεισμαι τολμῆσαι. But this applies to the Macedonian population too (see Plb. 36.17.13 Μακεδόνες μὲν γὰρ ὑπὸ Ῥωμαίων πολλῶν καὶ μεγάλων ἐτετεύχισαν φιλανθρωπιῶν, κοινῇ μὲν πάντες ἀπολυθέντες μοναρχικῶν ἐπιταγμάτων καὶ φόρων καὶ μεταλαμβάνοντες ἀπὸ δουλείας ὁμολογουμένως ἐλευθερίαν). Shortly after Plb. 9.28.1 the origin of Greece's slavery is traced back to the Diadochi (Plb. 9.29.6 οἱ δὲ τυράννους ἐμψυτεύοντες οὐδεμίαν πόλιν ἄμοιρον ἐποίησαν τοῦ τῆς δουλείας ὀνόματος).

²⁶ See e.g. Plb. 4.81.13 πικροτάτης δὲ δουλείας πείραν ἔλαβον (sc. the Spartans) ἕως τῆς Νάβιδος τυραννίδος, οἱ τὸ πρὶν οὐδὲ τοῦνομα δυνηθέντες ἀνασχέσθαι ῥαδίως αὐτῆς, Liv. 34.41.4 *serua Lacedaemon relicta*, Plut. *Flam.* 12.1 καὶ προέμενος (sc. Flamininus) τὴν Σπάρτην ἀναξίως δουλεύουσιν (sc. under Nabis).

²⁷ Liv. 34.50.5 *ne ipsis quidem honestum esse in liberata terra liberatores eius servire*. Livy and the other sources for this episode are collected by ECKSTEIN 1990, 71 n. 80.

²⁸ Plb. 9.37.7-8 τότε μὲν γὰρ ὑπὲρ ἡγεμονίας καὶ δόξης ἐφιλοτιμείσθε πρὸς Ἀχαιοὺς καὶ Μακεδόνας ὁμοφύλους καὶ τὸν τούτων ἡγεμόνα Φίλιππον· νῦν δὲ περὶ δουλείας ἐνίσταται πόλεμος τοῖς Ἑλλησι πρὸς ἄλλοφύλους ἀνθρώπους (sc. the Romans), [8] οὓς ὑμεῖς δοκεῖτε μὲν ἐπισπᾶσθαι κατὰ Φιλίππου, λελήθατε δὲ κατὰ σφῶν αὐτῶν ἐπεσπασμένοι καὶ κατὰ πάσης Ἑλλάδος.



Chlaeneas' words – see above) foresees that the Greeks will fight for their own freedom against people (the Romans) who will try to force them into slavery²⁹.

The slavery-freedom τόπος comes to the surface again during the Syrian war too. In a decree from Iasos (*I. Iasos* 4, dated by Blümel³⁰ to between 195-193 and now by Fabiani³¹ to between 196/5 and 195/4), issued to honour Antiochus III and Laodice III, the Seleucid king is praised for having freed some Greeks³², and in particular the city of Iasos itself³³. Blümel rightly underlined the topical nature of this praise³⁴, and following a remark by Hicks and J. & L. Roberts he reminds that in Liv. 37.17.6 people from Iasos call their being subject to Antiochus a *servitus regia*. This is of particular interest for the present discussion too. For in a passage of Livy (34.58.10-11)³⁵ Flamininus contrasts Antiochus' aim to enslave the Greek cities with the *patrocinium* of Greece's freedom that Rome had provided in the past (i.e. during the Macedonian wars). Given the opposition with the *servitus* that Antiochus wished to impose on the Greeks, the Roman *patrocinium* might be seen to aptly define the relationship of a former master with a *libertus*.

The manumission symbolism of the Isthmian episode of 196 squares well with the evidence just collected. To my mind, this spectacular proclamation was meant to give concreteness and vividness to an otherwise merely verbal declaration of Greek freedom, and to fully satisfy the Greeks' need for an answer with regard to the Romans' plans for Greece after Philippus' defeat. This theatrical proclamation was designed to allow the Romans to gain control over the emotions of the Greek public³⁶.

²⁹ On this passage see further THORNTON 2010, 58-59 and n. 73, who underlines that, beside the metaphorical allusion to political submission, Lyciscus also mentions, or alludes to, actual episodes of enslavement of Greeks by the Roman army.

³⁰ BLÜMEL 1985, 23.

³¹ FABIANI 2015, 209, 267-268.

³² See line 45: [τι]νάς (sc. Greeks) δὲ ἀντὶ δούλων ἐλευθέρους πεποικηκός.

³³ See lines 47-48: τὴν δὲ ἡμετέραν πόλιν πρότερόν τε ἐγ δουλείας ὀυσάμενος ἐποίησεν ἐλευθέραν.

³⁴ BLÜMEL 1985, 25: «Antiochos hat einige Hellenen aus Sklaven zu Freien gemacht: dies gilt gerade für Iasos, das er aus der 'Sklaverei' Philipps V. in die 'Freiheit' der Seleukiden überführt hat. [...] Es handelt sich um eine politische 'Parole', ein Schlagwort, das jede Partei gegen den Gegner benutzte».

³⁵ Liv. 34.58.10-11 *si sibi Antiochus pulchrum esse censet, quas urbes proavus belli iure habuerit, avus paterque nunquam usurpauerint pro suis, [11] eas repetere in servitutem, et populus Romanus susceptum patrocinium libertatis Graecorum non deserere fidei constantiaeque suae ducit esse*. On these episode see further the discussion of MA 2002, 99.

³⁶ On this and other aspects of the theatricality of Hellenistic politics, see especially CHANIOTIS 1997.



3. Parallels for the Isthmian episode of 196 (?)

Announcements appealing to the already traditional slogan of Greek freedom are common throughout Hellenistic history. There is plenty of evidence of diadochoi, epigonoι, and later Hellenistic kings issuing written decrees in which they declare Greek communities free³⁷. The vocabulary which defines the status of the freed communities is quite fixed and closely paralleled in the Isthmian declaration of 196 too³⁸. However, in no single case does one find anything even vaguely comparable in form of delivery and displayed symbolism to what occurred at the Isthmian games of 196³⁹.

A parallel for this episode, albeit only a partial one, would be provided by Aratus of Sicyon's freeing of Corinth from Antigonos in 243⁴⁰. There are a number of similarities. Both events took place in Corinth⁴¹. Aratus declared the city's freedom when entering in the local theatre, and was welcomed by the cheering Corinthian population. However, beside the fact that Aratus had just seized Corinth at night while Flamininus organised a (long-awaited) public announcement at a major Panhellenic festival, a number of further important elements mark a striking difference between the two episodes. First of all, nothing in the way in which Aratus declared Corinth free is in line with Greek manumission customs. He did not have freedom proclaimed by a herald (just after the fight against the Macedonian garrison, Aratus entered the theatre still wearing his armour and announced freedom himself), nor did he make any use of the technical vocabulary of manumission⁴². Second, while after Philippos' defeat the Romans declared their (apparent) will to abstain from imposing their control over Greece (as some people feared – let us think here of the aforementioned rapidly spreading διαβολαί of the Aetolians about the Romans' plans for Greece), Aratus defeated the Macedonian garrison in Corinth so that the freed city could join the Achaean League, as he hoped it would. In other words, while

³⁷ An exhaustive discussion is provided by DMITRIEV 2011, 112-141, who collects all relevant episodes. The formula regularly features words and concepts such as ἐλεύθερος (ἐλευθερία, ἐλευθερώω, ἐλεύθερος + ἀφίημι), ἄφρουρητος, and αὐτόνομος (αὐτονομία).

³⁸ See DMITRIEV 2011, 180: «Flamininus likely refined the senatus consultum (which proclaimed the Greeks to be “free and under their own laws”) into a declaration that sounded more familiar to the Greeks: the latter were to be “free, ungarrisoned, untaxed, and under their own ancestral laws”».

³⁹ See FERRARY 1988, 83-88 for the discussion of likely Hellenistic antecedents.

⁴⁰ An account of this episode may be found in Plut. *Arat.* 18-23.

⁴¹ See above n. 20.

⁴² Aratus' symbolic act was to give back to the Corinthians the keys of the city that had previously been taken away by Antigonos (Plut. *Arat.* 23.4).



the Romans apparently renounced their newly gained possibility to exercise control over Greece, and to do so actually performed its manumission⁴³, Aratus freed Corinth from a third party, as he did not come into possession of the city to be manumitted.

Conclusions

Bearing in mind what has been argued thus far, Flamininus' decision of having Greece's freedom spectacularly announced by a herald by using manumission formulas looks much more meaningful than had hitherto been noted. And it must certainly have struck the Greeks as such too. As Dmitriev has recently emphasised, "the Greek audience reacted so positively to the declaration of Flamininus [...] because his declaration used the concepts of 'freedom' and 'autonomy', which were familiar to them, and they thus immediately understood his message"⁴⁴. The same considerations apply all the more so to the manumission symbolism that was put on display in Corinth.

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⁴³ See also FERRARY 1988, 81-82. Indeed, and despite all promises and the declaration of 196 itself, the Romans handed control over parts of Greece over to the Achaean League and local rulers, modified constitutions, and retained Chalcis and Demetrias (though not for long), the two other remaining fetters of Greece apart from Corinth.

⁴⁴ DMITRIEV 2011, 3-4.



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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to decode the intended symbolism that lies behind the proclamation of Greece's freedom at the Isthmian festival of 196. This proclamation displays meaningful similarities with Greek manumission customs, in both its delivery (a herald's announcement at a gathering place) and vocabulary (technical use of a formulaic expression with ἀφίημι and ἐλεύθερος). This intended symbolism squares well with the traditional τόπος of slavery *vs* freedom, which was very commonly exploited throughout the Macedonian wars and which is explicitly applied to Flamininus' role in Greece, most notably in Alcaeus' epigram *AP* 16.5. But although Greek freedom is a familiar theme, especially during the Hellenistic age, there is no truly satisfactory parallel for the Isthmian episode. Arguably, the Romans chose a particularly theatrical and emotional way to announce Greece's freedom in order to effectively win control over Greek public opinion.

Keywords: Flamininus, Isthmian games, Greek freedom, Manumission, Polybius

Scopo di questo contributo è decodificare il simbolismo che sta dietro alla proclamazione della libertà della Grecia alle Istmiche del 196. Questa dichiarazione mostra somiglianze significative con la consuetudine greca della manomissione, tanto nell'atto di liberazione (annuncio di un araldo in un luogo di ritrovo) che nel vocabolario (uso tecnico di un'espressione formulare con ἀφίημι e ἐλεύθερος). Questo simbolismo voluto è in linea con il tradizionale τόπος schiavitù *vs* libertà, che era ampiamente sfruttato durante le guerre macedoniche e che è esplicitamente applicato al ruolo di Flaminino in Grecia, in particolare nell'epigramma di Alceo (*AP* 16, 5). Sebbene la libertà greca sia un tema familiare, specialmente in età ellenistica, non esiste tuttavia un parallelo veramente soddisfacente per l'episodio istmico. Probabilmente, i Romani scelsero un modo particolarmente teatrale ed emotivo per annunciare la libertà della Grecia per ottenere un efficace controllo dell'opinione pubblica greca.

Parole chiave: Flaminino, giochi Istmici, libertà greca, manomissione, Polibio