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Scythian Archers

SUMMARY

In Athens the so-called “Scythian Archers,” who may or may not have been from Scythia and who may or may not have been archers, served as a police force, keeping order in public gatherings (the Council, the Assembly, and the Agora) and perhaps authorized to use force against citizens under certain circumstances.

DEFINITION

In Athens the so-called “Scythian Archers” served as a police force. They were public slaves (δημόσιοι) who served as guards (φύλακες) or watchmen (ὑποπτοι) in the city. There is very little evidence that provides any details about these, and what evidence we have is either from the 5th century comedy of Aristophanes – which is difficult evidence to interpret – or from ancient scholarship from many centuries later.

The Suda, a historical encyclopedia from the 10th century CE has this to say about the word “archers” (τοξόται), in the context of classical Athens: “Archers: The public slaves, guards of the city, in number 1000, who formerly lived in the Agora, camping out in the middle, but later moved to the Areopagus. These were called ‘Scythians’ and ‘Speusinioi,’ from a certain Speusinos, one of the ancient politicians, who organized their affairs” (Τοξόται οἱ δημόσιοι ὑπηρέται, φύλακες τοῦ ἄστεος, τὸν ἀριθμὸν χίλιοι, οἵτινες πρότερον μὲν ὄκουν τὴν ἀγορὰν μέσῃν σκηνοποιησάμενοι, ὕστερον δὲ μετέβησαν εἰς Ἄρειον Πάγον, ἐκαλοῦντο δὲ οὗτοι καὶ Σκύθαι καὶ Σπευσίνιοι; ἀπὸ Σπευσίνου τινὸς τῶν πάλαι πολιτευομένων συντάξαντος τὰ περὶ αὐτοῦς) (Suda tau,772; see also Schol. In Aristoph. *Ach.* 54, which is almost identical except for saying “Peusinioi” and “Peusinus” instead of “Speuninioi” and “Speusinos”; also Hescythius, 1137; Schol. In Aristoph. *Ach.* 54; Schol. In Aristoph. *Ach.* 707; Schol. In Aristoph. *Lys.* 184; Suda omega,243; Suda tau,771).

ORIGINS OF THE SCYTHIAN ARCHERS IN ATHENS

In nearly identical passages, the orators Andocides and Aeschines describe the origin of these Scythian Archers in Athens. According to Aeschines, after the battle of Salamis in 490 BCE (source for date: *OCD*³), Athens “fortified the Piraeus and built the North Wall.... We also equipped three hundred cavalrymen (ἰππεῖς) and bought

three hundred Scythians (τριακοσίους Σκύθας ἐπριάμεθα)” (Aeschin. 2.173). Andocides reports this same event, but specifies that these Scythians were archers: “It was at this time that we first enrolled three hundred cavalry (ἰππέας) and purchased three hundred Scythian archers (τοξότας τριακοσίους Σκύθας ἐπριάμεθα)” (Andoc. 3.5). Both Aeschines and Andocides seem to distinguish these Scythian Archers from the archers of the Athenian militia. After mentioning the Scythians, Aeschines goes on to say, “We formed a corps of twelve hundred cavalry and a new force of as many bowmen” (χιλίους δὲ καὶ διακοσίους ἰππέας κατεστήσαμεν καὶ τοξότας ἑτέρους τοσούτους) (Aeschin. 2.174). Andocides likewise says, “we enrolled twelve hundred cavalry and as many archers” (χιλίους τε καὶ διακοσίους ἰππέας καὶ τοξότας τοσούτους ἑτέρους κατεστήσαμεν) (Andoc. 3.7). From this it would seem that the three hundred Scythian archers and the twelve hundred (unspecified) archers were two distinct bodies.

IDENTITY OF THE SCYTHIAN ARCHERS

Aeschines and Andocides both say that Athens originally bought “Scythians,” people from Scythia, the territory to the north of the Black Sea (Aeschin. 2.173; Andoc. 3.5). It is possible that the Scythian archers did not always consist entirely of ethnic Scythians. A “scholion,” or hand-written note in the margins of a manuscript of Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* says the Athenians “used to call the public

slaves ‘Scythians’” (Σκύθας γὰρ καὶ τοξότας ἐκάλουν τοὺς δημοσίους ὑπηρέτας), which leaves open the possibility that the name may also have applied to those who were not Scythians (Schol. In Aristoph. *Lys.* 184).

It seems clear that the “Scythian Archers” were at least foreigners, not Athenians. Jokes in Aristophanes’ comedies often involve the Scythian Archers’ foreign accents (Aristoph. *Thes.* 1002):

Scythian Archer: But what’s your name?

Euripides: Artemisia.

Scythian Archer: I will remember it. Artemuxia.

The joke is that the Scythian archer, with his foreign accent, cannot pronounce the Greek name Artemisia.

THE FUNCTION OF THE SCYTHIAN ARCHERS

The literary accounts of the Scythian archers come primarily from the 5th century comedy of Aristophanes, and his treatment may be exaggerated or otherwise altered for comic effect. However, certain conclusions can be drawn from his plays. The Scythian Archers’ major role in Athenian society was to act as policemen for Athens. In Aristophanes’s plays we see them performing crowd control. In *Ecclesiazusae* a character mentions “the archers dragging more than one uproarious drunkard out of the market-place” (ἀγορά) (Aristoph. *Eccl.* 143). In Aristophanes’s *Knights* the Prytaneis (often called “magistrates” in translations) and the Scythians usher a man

out of the Council (Aristoph. *Kn.* 665). We also find scenes of Scythian archers beating disorderly people, sometimes with whips. In *Thesmophoriazusae*, the Magistrate (“Prytanis”) says to a Scythian archer, “A sound lash with your whip for him who attempts to break the order” (Aristoph. *Thes.* 923). The Suda includes a quotation from Athenian literature that describes an “archer” beating a man: “I was distraught and had to wipe away tears when I saw a old man being beaten by another man, an archer” (Suda omega,243). This last passage comes to us without context, and so we do not know of the victim was being “disorderly” or not. Although the title “Scythian Archer” suggests that they carried bows and arrows, there is no literary evidence showing these public slaves using such weapons. The only weapons mentioned in the passages above are (non-lethal) whips.

Aristophanes also presents several scenes in which Scythian archers arrest people. In the *Acharnians*, the Magistrates (or “Prytaneis”) are attempting to have the character Amphitheus (the name is translated “Godson” in some translations) arrested by the Scythian Archers, (called “Officers” in this translation) (Aristoph. *Ach.* 54; see also Schol. In Aristoph. *Ach.* 54).

Herald: Officers!

Godson: Triptolemus and Celeus, see my plight!

Dicaeopolis: Oh Magistrates, gentlemen, this is out of line, arresting the man who wanted to help us get a treaty of peace, a chance for armistice!

In *Lysistrata* a Scythian archer confronts the title character, saying, “Arrest this woman! Whoever’s on this outing I’ll arrest” (Aristoph. *Lys.* 445). We also see the Scythian archers handcuffing or tying up offenders. In *Lysistrata* line 434, the Prytanis calls for the Scythian archers, saying, “I’m calling a policeman. Arrest this woman, put the handcuffs on....Go on and grab her. And you there, help him out. Hog-tie this woman!” In the *Thesmophoriazusae*, the Prytanis says, “Officer [in Greek, ‘Archer’ (τοξότη) – LB], arrest him, fasten him to the post, then take up your position there and keep guard over him” (Aristoph. *Thes.* 923).

Although there is evidence for a jail (δεσμοκτήριον) and a jail-warden (ὁ τοῦ δεσμοκτηρίου φύλαξ) in classical Athens, we do not have any evidence connecting the Scythian Archers with it (see, for example, Plat. *Crito* 43a).



Elizabeth Baughman

SECONDARY WORKS CITED

S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth edd., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd Edition (Oxford, 1996) [OCD³].