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UNKNOWN SOURCE ON ANCIENT STENOGRAPHY

Jaakko Suolahti

It is generally known that the Greeks already in the fourth century B.C. and the Romans during the Imperial Age used some form of stenography. Information concerning this has been carefully compiled.¹ There are, however, less well-known writings from late antiquity that may throw more light on the subject. One of these is a passage from a historical work by the Byzantine historian Agathias (536–581 A.D.) which probably is significant in the early history of shorthand.² In English it reads like this: "He (the lawyer) had men with him who had been taught to write quickly and to read back rapidly what had been written. There were also stern and serious assistants who were well versed in legal proceedings as well as vociferous criers and lictors. They were all chosen from among the officials of Constantinople".

Agathias describes the trial in Caucasia of a vassal of the Eastern Roman Emperor accused of murdering the Tatzian king, Gubatses, in 555 A.D. Agathias mentions that the festive formalities observed in the capital were strictly adhered to at the trial. Therefore, one could reasonably assume that stenographers were regularly present in the courtroom. There was, at any rate, a staff of stenographers in Constantinople who probably recorded courtroom speeches as well as trial proceedings. A relief of a legal agent preserved in the Ostia Museum may be enlightening. It depicts two officials, possibly stenographers.

The courtroom speeches presented by Agathias are clearly his own. This does not prove, however, that the speeches were not recorded, for historians of antiquity always prepared speeches in their own individual style and were apt to change the discourse in the process. Since Agathias states that the judge questioned the parties involved twice, it would seem that there was a record of the trial proceedings and that Agathias was acquainted with it. Regardless of how exact or inexact Agathias's description of events may be, his statement about the stenographers in Constantinople is surely true. He served as a lawyer in the capital city and was undoubtedly well acquainted with the legal process.

Thus, at least as late as 555 A.D., courtroom statements were taken down in shorthand. It is difficult to say when this custom became obsolete and shorthand was forgotten. Possibly it already occurred during the chaotic period of Byzantine history before the Isaurian Emperors.³ At any rate, it had happened before 1045

A.D., when legal education, now dependent on private enterprise, was reformed by the state. The shortened forms used in the tachygraphy of books was also a form of shorthand.⁴

The fact that Niebuhr does not mention stenography in his translation or comments is natural since even if it became known again as John Willis's discovery in 1602, Gabelsberger's new and better shorthand system did not begin to spread until after 1834, when he published his textbook.⁵

¹ O.W. Melin, *Stenografiens historia* I, Stockholm 1927, 17,26.

² IV:1 p. 206, 7–12. B.G. Niebuhr, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* III, Bonn 1828; 4.1.2: 6–8 R. Keydell, *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* II, Berolini 1967, pp. 123:

παρῆσαν δὲ αὐτῶ ἄνδρες γράφειν τε ἐς τάχος πεπαιδευμένοι καὶ ἐπιτροχάδην ἀναλέγεσθαι τὰ γεγραμμένα, ἄλλοι τε ὑπηρέται σοβαρώτεροι καὶ ἐμβριθεῖς καὶ δαημονέστατοι τῆς τῶν δικαστηρίων κομψείας κήρυκές τε μεγαλοβόαι καὶ οἱ τῶν μαστίγων ἐπιστάται. ἅπαντες δὲ οὗτοι ἐκ τῶν ἐν Βυζαντίῳ ἀρχείων ἐτύγχανον ἀπολελεγμένοι.

³ Melin, 24.

⁴ H.J. Scheltema, *Byzantine Law*, CMH 4 (1967) 71.

⁵ Melin, 25.