Application for Digital Humanities Seed Grant

Summer 2013

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Filling in the blanks: The Attic Stelae

Dave Musicant and I would like to apply for one week of funding for each of us this summer, as well as two weeks funding for a student.

The Attic Stelae are the extant fragments of a large set of inscriptions that recorded the sale of property confiscated from dozens of men who had been convicted of religious crimes in 415 BCE Athens. The story of these crimes, the hysteria they provoked, the many accusations (most demonstrably false) and the final outcome of the whole affair is a fascinating one that has figured both in my research and teaching for the last several years. We have numerous textual sources on the affair (most notably Thucydides and Plutarch, but also the legal defense speech of one of the men who was both accused and subsequently gave information against others: Andocides’ *On the Mysteries*). The Attic Stelae form the principal epigraphic evidence, and are of great use in confirming some of the evidence of the written sources.

On my last sabbatical I was working on a large project concerning the year 415 BCE, so I spent considerable time working with these inscriptions. At that time I translated them into English (while some parts of them had been translated, there was no translation of the full set of inscriptions). I became fascinated with many aspects of these unusual texts. From the perspective of the history of the event, the inscriptions are mainly valuable because they preserve the names of many of the men convicted. But they preserve many other kinds of information as well.

Their format, in general, lists in columns first the sales tax (a roughly one percent cut that went to the city), then the price (which went to the temple funds of the goddess Demeter, whose cult had been violated), and finally the item sold. Periodically there is a “total” recorded reckoning up the value of all the items from a given household, which is where we find the names of the convicted men.

Thus the inscriptions are a very rich source of a great deal of data on (e.g.) household items of wealthy Athenians and the prices such items could demand at auction. But the lists are very incomplete – the stones on which the lists were carved were broken into fragments and widely distributed, and only a small percentage of the total set has been recovered. In any given fragment only one or two of the original three columns of text will remain, and the fragments are not generally continuous.

Since I translated the inscriptions I have been looking for a way to make fuller use of them in my teaching and research. I therefore made a brief presentation about them to a group of humanists and computer scientists our DH team had assembled last term. After some discussion of the possibilities, Dave Musicant suggested that an algorithm like the one Amazon.com uses to “recommend” books might be employed to fill in some of the gaps in the inscription. Simplifying (which is all I can do at this point!) this might yield something like “people whose property included 10 panathenaic amphorae ALSO owned at least 15 Thracian slaves!” Working with this sort of algorithm might allow us to speculate about some of the missing data, or to draw larger conclusions about wealth and property distribution more generally. But it’s difficult to know exactly what kind of information we can get out of the extant data without starting to experiment.

The initial steps to trying something like this involved converting my translation into an Xcel spreadsheet; a student worker in Classics has already completed this task. I still have to go through it to make sure that the items align with the owners (where we have them), but this work is nearly done. Dave and I would like to devote about a week to the project this summer. Because the project is so experimental in nature we are just not sure of what sort of results it will yield, but we are envisioning an iterative process in which the early results may spark new questions and in turn new ways of excavating data.

Dave already has some students working for him on other projects this summer; he believes that one of these could take two weeks to devote to our data. (We will be able to forward the name along as soon as he has communicated with the students involved to see which of them would like to work on this project; all evidently have the requisite skills.)

I think that the project, if it works as we hope it will, will be of great interest to classicists and historians generally. But I also anticipate that it will allow me to make much greater use of the inscriptions in both Classics 110 and my Gender and Sexuality course. I even have ambitions of using the data in some kind of a Quantitative Reasoning Encounter (one of Carleton’s new graduation requirements).

But during the week of work we do this summer our goal is much more modest: purely to have enough time to devote to see whether or not the method will in fact yield results on the data we have. For that we think that one week of our time will be sufficient.

Please let me know if you need any other information about this project,

Clara Hardy

Dave Musicant