

THE ‘TREATMENT’ OF A BOX IN DELPHI: A UNIQUE USE OF THE WORD ἱΑΣΙΣ

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Abstract: The inscription *CID* II.34 presents a unique use of the word ἱασίς, which commonly means ‘treatment mode’ or ‘therapeutic method’ in medical terminology. It is applied here to an archive box and has been accordingly translated, until now, as ‘repair’. However, a comparison with a passage from Theophrastus suggests that the term may refer, in this particular context, to a preventive measure designed to protect the box and the documents it contained from humidity and decay.

Keywords: Repair, archive, Delphi, preservation, furniture

The inscription *CID* II.34 (345–343 BC) from Delphi mentions a ‘box’ (ζύγαστρον) which, for the amount of one drachma and three obols, has undergone some ‘repair’.¹ This is, in any case, how scholars have so far translated the word ἱάσιος, genitive of ἱασίς. Van Brock noticed that this inscription is the only known evidence in the ancient literary and epigraphical record of the use of ἱασίς with the supposed meaning of an actual ‘repair’.² In its most regular use in common medical terminology the word means ‘treatment mode’ or ‘therapeutic method’; by the time of the author of the *Mochlicon* it had already evolved towards a slightly different meaning, i.e. the treatment itself. Also, in non-technical language, the term is used metaphorically as a ‘remedy to a situation’ or simply as ‘recovery’.³ According to Bourguet, editor of the Delphic account, this anomaly is comparable to that of the rare use of ἄκεσις as ‘repair’.⁴ LSJ mention the existence of this alternative definition of ἱασίς, but it is, as expected, supported solely by our inscription. One can also mention a unique use of ἱασθαι in the *Septuagint*, in which a broken altar is ‘repaired’, ἱάσατο τὸ θυσιαστήριον τὸ κατεσκαμμένον.⁵ As we will see below, extending the study to the derivatives of ἱασίς might shed new light on the question.

First, we need to tackle the problematic issue of the meaning of ζύγαστρον.⁶ This rather uncommon word has been variably translated as ‘chest’, ‘box’ or ‘cupboard’. It appears three times in an inventory from Epidaurus (ζυγάστριον)⁷ and once in another inventory from Thespiae (in the Boeotian form δύγαστρον);⁸ but the highest incidence of the term, with no fewer than 12 inscriptions, is found at Delphi.⁹ The importance of the object to the life of the sanctuary is explained by the lexicographers; the place where archives were stored, customarily called a

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¹ *CID* II.34 col. 1.56–57: ζυγάστρου ἱάσιος δρα[χμὰ], ὀβολοὶ τρεῖς.

² Van Brock (1961) 64, n. 1. It is also the only case of a ζύγαστρον undergoing some intervention in Delphi. Thus it may have been a common expression there. We cannot tell.

³ For the different meanings of ἱασίς, see van Brock (1961) 55–64.

⁴ Bourguet (1932) 111. The case of ἄκεσις is quite similar to the one of ἱασίς, though the history of its different uses is more complex: van Brock (1961) 105–11.

⁵ 3 *Reg.* 18.32.

⁶ About this particular piece of furniture, see especially Brümmer (1985) 8–9; Andrianou (2006) 568–71.

⁷ *IG* IV² 118.61, 63, 64.

⁸ Feyel and Platon (1938).

⁹ With the meaning ‘archive box’: *CID* II.31.49; 34 col. 1.54; 56 col. 2.25; 46 A.8–11; 49 fr. C col. 2.8–9; 50 col. 2.7–8; 55.19–20; 62 col. 2 fr. A.20–22; *CID* IV.22.12; with the meaning ‘archive’: *CID* II.113.20–21; in expressions meaning ‘archive attendant’: *CID* II.32.39; 109 fr. A.14; 110. 33–34.

γραμματοφυλάκιον, is referred to as ζύγαστρον in Delphi.¹⁰ Colin describes the function of the ζύγαστρον as follows: ‘enferme[r] les tablettes qui représentent, au moins sous forme provisoire, les pièces de la comptabilité du temple.’¹¹ Several inscriptions describe these ζύγαστρα as being regularly carried to (ἐκφορᾶς) and returned from (παρφορᾶς) construction sites.¹² Accordingly, their shape must have been closer to that of ‘boxes’ or ‘chests’ rather than larger cupboards, as already noted by Coqueugniot.¹³ The exact shape of these pieces of furniture is still open to discussion, but the clear testimony of lexicographers and scholiasts leaves no doubt on the wooden construction of the boxes.¹⁴ This lightweight and resistant material was indeed most convenient for these ζύγαστρα to be easily carried.¹⁵ At the same time, they must also have been quite strong and equipped with locks, given the rather high amount of 22 drachmas and five obols paid for a new ζύγαστρον,¹⁶ as suggested by Roux.¹⁷ These structural issues are relevant to the interpretation of the supposedly unconventional choice of ἱασίς to express the ‘repair’ of the ζύγαστρα.

In comparison to the price paid for the new ζύγαστρον, one drachma and three obols is not much. It would have been interesting to compare this small amount with other similar fees in Delphi, but, unfortunately, as this is the only occurrence in the Delphian corpus of a box or chest being treated in any way, there is no direct parallel allowing us to draw such a comparison.¹⁸ Still, it may be useful to compare the price of the ἱασίς with the only other fees known in relation with the ζύγαστρα, namely their transport to and from the construction site. It appears that the price of the ἱασίς was about the same as for a one-way transport. Indeed, the ἐκφορά and the παρφορά together came to two drachmas and three obols¹⁹, three drachmas²⁰ or three drachmas and four obols and a half.²¹ Another indication is the salary of the architect (ἀρχιτέκτων) of the temple, which was two drachmas per day at that time.²² All these elements suggest that the ἱασίς of the box was a rather small job, not an important repair, especially if we consider that the payment of one drachma and three obols included the requisite materials.²³

Although it is possible that the ‘healing’ might have been intended metaphorically to express a physical repair, I suggest a more pragmatic analogy between the literal, therapeutic meaning of the term and wood preservation. As they are living objects, in most modern languages trees (and by extension wood as a material for construction) have to be *treated* to prevent them from developing *diseases*, which can or cannot be *cured*.²⁴ The same observation applies to ancient Greek; Theophrastus, the ‘Father of Botany’, already spoke of ‘tree diseases’, νοσήματα τῶν δένδρων.²⁵ The analogy was such in ancient Greek that several words were used to refer to both human and

¹⁰ Phot. *Bibl. s.v.*; *Etym. Magn. s.v.*

¹¹ Colin (1909–1913) 237.

¹² *CID* II.46A.8–9; 49 fr. C col. 2.8–9; 50 col. 2.7–8; 55.19–20; 62 col. 2 fr. A.20–21. In *CID* II.34 col. 2.25 we find only an εἰσφορά and in *CID* II.134 fr. B.1, κιβωτίων (‘box’, ‘chest’ or ‘coffer’) instead of ζυγάστρον.

¹³ Coqueugniot (2007) 295, n. 15.

¹⁴ Scholia Soph. *Trach.* 692; Phot. *Bibl. s.v.*; *Etym. Magn. s.v.*; Eust. *Il.* 13.706; *Suda s.v.*

¹⁵ The transportable nature of the ζύγαστρον is also attested by Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia*, in which ζύγαστρα are put on chariots and used to transport the treasure of Croesus (7.3.1).

¹⁶ *CID* II.34 col. 1.54–56: ζυ[γ]άστρου τιμὰ ἐν ᾧ τοι πίνακες δραχμαὶ ἵκατι δύο, ὀβολοὶ [π]έντε.

¹⁷ Roux (1979) 111–12.

¹⁸ In 250 BC, in Delos, Konon was paid four drachmas for the repair of a box containing the valuable objects of the *khoreutai* (*JG* XI 2.287A.49–50), but we have no idea whether this box was comparable in shape, size and material to the ζύγαστρα.

¹⁹ *CID* II.50 col. 2.7–8; 62 col. 2 fr. A.20–22.

²⁰ *CID* II.55.19–20.

²¹ *CID* II.46A.8–11. In *CID* II.34 col. 2.25, a single εἰσφορά probably costs one drachma (the word is completely restored). Georgoudi (1988) 235 comments that these transports required employees. Since we do not know the size or the weight of the ζύγαστρα, we can only guess how many men were needed. There must have been two at least.

²² In the account where the ἱασίς is mentioned, the architect Xenodoros received 360 drachmas as a salary ‘from pylaea to pylaea’ (*CID* II.34 col. 2.67–70), which makes two drachmas on a daily basis.

²³ As was probably the case, since no supply of material is otherwise mentioned.

²⁴ Modern Greek carpenters speak of θεραπεία when they apply a treatment against woodworm.

²⁵ *Caus. pl.* 5.9.13. Pliny the Elder also says that tree medicine is similar to the human one (*HN* 17.43).

tree diseases. This is the case with *τερηδών*, which designates either bone cavities or woodworm infestation; in both cases, the term conveys the idea of corrosion or perforation.²⁶

Theophrastus describes the different types of small xylophagous animals. The *τερηδών* lives only in the sea²⁷, as opposed to the *σκώληξ* and the *θρίψ*, which are terrestrial worms. He then goes on to compare the effects of the *θρίψ* and the *τερηδών*: οἱ δὲ θρίπες ὅμοιοι τοῖς σκώληξιν, ὅφ' ὧν τιτραίνεται κατὰ μικρὸν τὰ ξύλα. καὶ ἔστι ταῦτα εὐΐατα· πιττοκοπηθέντα γὰρ ὅταν εἰς τὴν θάλατταν ἐλκυσθῇ στέγει· τὰ δὲ ὑπὸ τῶν τερηδόνων ἀνίατα, 'The *thripes* are similar to the *skôlikes*, which bore through wood little by little. Such harm is easy to remedy; for, when drawn into the sea, wood that has been smeared with pitch is watertight. On the other hand, the harm done by *terêdones* is irremediable.²⁸

Damages caused by *θρίπες* are εὐΐατα ('easy to remedy') while those induced by *τερηδόνες* are ἀνίατα ('irremediable'). Here are two derivatives of the ἱάσις family²⁹ that allow us to take a fresh look at the translation of ἱάσιος in our inscription from Delphi. Translating it as 'repair' implies that the box had already been damaged and that the ἱάσις consisted in nothing but replacing some planks and nails, which was not necessarily the case. It seems more likely that, if the ζύγαστρον had indeed been damaged, it was by the action of worms or other agents that can be assimilated to diseases. In the passage above, the tarring is probably meant as a remedy, an action performed after the damage is done. As Amigues notes, 'ceux-ci [the damages] sont réparables, car les insectes périssent une fois leurs trous bouchés au mastic ou par goudronnage, à condition toutefois que le bois n'ait pas trop perdu de sa solidité.'³⁰ However, it appears from different testimonies that wood treatment was also a routine preventive measure.³¹ The ἱάσις could indeed simply be intended to protect the wood as the box would undergo regular transport to and from construction sites and therefore be more exposed to the elements.³² Hence there is no reason to exclude the possibility that this treated ζύγαστρον is the one that is purchased one line above in the inscription.³³

The treatment was designed to protect the box but also – and perhaps even more – the documents it contained, as they needed to be kept away from humidity. In any case, the particular care paid to these administrative tools reflects their importance to the life of the sanctuary.

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²⁶ Skoda (1988) 301–04.

²⁷ Theophrastus refers here to shipworms, which are not actual worms, but molluscs: Amigues (1993) 76.

²⁸ *Hist. pl.* 5.4.5.

²⁹ Both terms are *hapax legomena* in Theophrastus. Elsewhere they are mostly used in a medical sense.

³⁰ Amigues (1993) 76.

³¹ Meiggs (1982) 467–71; Hellmann (1992) 338–39. To prevent worms from attacking the wood, Pliny the Elder advises rubbing it with cedar oil (*HN* 16.76). In

another interesting passage, Pausanias speaks about mixtures from Chaeronea: one is a *remedy* for pain for humans (ἀλγηδόνων ἰάματα ἀνθρώποις); the other, he says, is used to prevent the decay (σηπεδών) of wooden statues (9.41.7).

³² In Susa, bitumen has been found with imprints of baskets that may have been used for storing inscribed tablets: Connan (2012) 58.

³³ *CID* II.34. col. 1.54–56.

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