

Paragraphos, Not Obelos, in Codex Vaticanus

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There are serious problems with P. Payne's discussion of 'distigmai' in Codex Vaticanus, and more in particular with his identification and interpretation of so-called 'distigme-obelos' combinations. The 'distigmai' remain elusive and any 'distigme-obelos' is coincidental.

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This short note addresses a number of problems in a recent article by Philip Payne, published in this journal.¹ My conclusion is that Payne's views are almost entirely to be rejected. His recent article is actually the latest instalment in a series of at least six contributions, the earliest of which dates from 1995 and already mentions the 'bar-umlauts' Payne now calls 'distigme-obelos'.²

Payne's main contribution to research on Codex Vaticanus is to draw attention to the frequent occurrence of two combined dots in the margins of the manuscript. These dots are, if the now-current convention is followed, called 'distigme' (singular). There are hundreds of such 'distigmai' (plural) in the New Testament part of the manuscript. Payne further advanced the hypothesis that the distigmai signal places of textual variation: the person who put a distigme

1 P. Payne, 'Vaticanus Distigme-obelos Symbols Marking Added Text, Including 1 Corinthians 14.34–5', *NTS* 63 (2017) 604–25.

2 P. Payne, 'Fuldensis, Sigla for Variants in Vaticanus, and 1 Cor 14.34–35', *NTS* 41 (1995) 240–62; 'Ms. 88 as Evidence for a Text without 1 Cor 14.34–5', *NTS* 44 (1998) 152–8; 'The Originality of Text-Critical Symbols in Codex Vaticanus', *NovT* 42 (2000) 105–13 (with P. Canart); 'The Text-Critical Function of the Umlauts in Vaticanus, with Special Attention to 1 Corinthians 14.34–5: A Response to J. Edward Miller', *JSNT* 27 (2004) 105–12; 'Distigmai Matching the Original Ink of Codex Vaticanus: Do They Mark the Location of Textual Variants?', *Le manuscrit B de la Bible (Vaticanus Graecus 1209): introduction au fac-similé. Actes du Colloque de Genève (11 juin 2001). Contributions supplémentaires* (ed. P. Andrist; HTB 7; Lausanne: Zèbre, 2009) 199–225 (with P. Canart). Payne tends to answer his critics extensively. The exception is the excellent discussion by J. Kloha, *A Textual Commentary on Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Leeds: [s.n.], 2006) 499–520, to which Payne to my knowledge never reacted, though he refers to Kloha's work in 'Distigme-obelos', 616 n. 41.

next to a line did so in order to mark it as a place where a variant reading was known to him or her.

Here the problems begin. Though the hypothesis, first advanced in 1997, has found wide acceptance, it should be stressed that methodological control is difficult to achieve here. The margins of the New Testament part of Vaticanus do contain the distigmai, but never together with a variant reading. The suggestions current-day scholars can offer for identifying specific readings remain speculative. For this reason it would be extremely unwise to follow Payne's suggestion to attach in a critical apparatus a notation such as B̄ to specific variants.³ Because of their enormous number it is often not difficult to list at least some variant reading at any given location.⁴ Still, there are numerous places without a satisfactory candidate for the reading that might be hinted at by a given distigme.⁵ Payne explains away this difficulty by assuming that variants unknown today have to be at stake, but this solution is just an expression of embarrassment.⁶

The communicative value of the distigmai is an important issue as well. They signal something, but for whom? Since only the signs are there, who would be able to decipher them? And what purpose do they serve? An obvious possibility is that their meaning is comparable to signs such as the exclamation marks and triangles that some modern readers write in the margins of the books they – hopefully – own. In this scenario the markings may not have been intended to convey anything beyond personal notes or reminders, and their interpretation is not the reconstruction of a lost collection of once-shared knowledge, which is difficult enough, but the even more difficult cracking of a code intended to make sense to one individual only. The latter would be a nearly impossible task.

The situation is even more complicated, for so far an element has been taken for granted that is by no means obvious, namely the unity of the distigmai as a set.⁷ Are they from a single person, or group, and from a single brief period in time? It seems at least possible that the inverse is true, and that various persons

3 The suggestion is already made in Payne and Canart, 'Distigmai', 216, for the *Pericope de adultera* and for 1 Cor 14.34–5.

4 Statistical tests as conducted by J. Miller ('Some Observations on the Text-Critical Function of the Umlauts in Vaticanus, with Special Attention to 1 Corinthians 14.34–35,' *JSNT* 26 (2003) 217–36) offer the strongest indication that at least many distigmai have been entered as a reminder of the existence of some variant reading at their respective locations.

5 The dissertation by E. Gravely (*The Text Critical Sigla in Codex Vaticanus* (Wake Forest, NC: [s.n.], 2009)) contains an appendix that lists known variant readings at distigme locations. Besides many places without known variation, there are many others where a completely uninteresting spelling variant is given.

6 'Originality', 109 n. 25.

7 Despite the fact that Payne singles out fifty-one distigmai as matching the original colour of Vaticanus ('Distigmai', 204), and hence 'penned as part of the original production of the codex' (209), he considers the distigmai that show a different colour to have been reinforced and part of the original set as well (214–16).

entered distigmai in the long history of the manuscript. In that case, the problems involved in the interpretation, or decoding, of the distigmai would only be compounded.

Related to these questions is the problem of dating. Essential to Payne's argumentation is an early date for the distigmai, even contemporary with the production of Vaticanus itself. He maintains that they – or at least most of them – were entered by the original scribe. However, his demonstration of this antiquity is not conclusive. Its main pillar is similarity in ink colour, described as 'apricot'. In reality the dots show various colours, and are so small that conclusions cannot be certain.⁸ Having seen the manuscript itself and not only the expensive facsimile or the high-quality online images does not alter this fact.

Neither does the occurrence of distigmai in another manuscript from the fifth century constitute proof of their antiquity, for two reasons: in LXX G, the manuscript to which Payne refers, the signs may be more recent as well, and even if it could be shown that they are early there, such a datum would only imply that distigmai *can* be early, not that they invariably *are*.⁹

Payne's most recent *NTS* article gets more specific, by including the so-called paragraphoi of Vaticanus in his discussion. In the manuscript, as in many others, some sort of section division is found, in two ways: (1) by means of spacing in an otherwise continuously written text; (2) by means of paragraphoi, small bar-shaped markings below (part of) the first letter of a line extruding into the left margin of the column. To judge by their nature, spacing is introduced by the original scribe, whereas in Vaticanus the paragraphoi seem to be later. Payne now moves to a special set of markings created by him, namely instances where a distigme at the left of a column coincides with such a paragraphos. Such occurrences in a text with numerous distigmai and numerous paragraphoi are to be expected, and their total number of about thirty is well within the range of statistical probability. Payne would not deny this, but he still singles out a set of eight of these coincidences and christens them 'distigme-obelos symbols'.¹⁰ For these places, and for these places alone, he takes what everyone would regard as a paragraphos, and reinterprets it as a so-called obelos, that is, a mark that signals words or lines for omission.

As an aside, it should be mentioned that more than a sixth of the distigmai are found not at the left but at the right of the text column. This is typically the case for

8 Payne repeatedly refers to personal inspection of the manuscript (e.g. 'Originality', 107).

9 Interestingly, a far later use of distigmai, namely as a reference system between text and marginal notes, can be observed in min. 1780, at f. 168^r (1 Tim 1.1–2.3). Here distigmai and notes are clearly even later than the original thirteenth-century hand. I thank Tommy Wasserman for bringing this manuscript to my attention.

10 This class of eight places actually constitutes a refinement of Payne's earlier position. As early as 1995 he wrote about twenty-seven instances of 'bar-umlaut' in Codex Vaticanus ('Fuldensis', 251 etc.), eight of which have now become a category on their own.

those distigmai attached to the rightmost column of right-hand pages, or, in other words, to the sixth column of the manuscript's openings. Payne now only considers cases where paragraphos and distigme are physically close, that is, when the distigme is found at the left of the column. This observation alone points to a degree of arbitrariness in Payne's selection.¹¹

In any case the term 'distigme-obelos' should be abandoned as soon as possible, for it denotes a text-critical marking that does not exist but is only the fruit of Payne's imagination. His argumentation at this point is highly problematic. To begin with, the function of the obelos at these places would only be additional, since most of the eight paragraphoi singled out by him occur at places where there is also a space in the text, which then as often is reinforced by a paragraphos. Further, there is no clue for concluding that a paragraphos doubles as an obelos.¹²

Surely, Payne thinks he has found such a clue in what he regards as significant differences in length of the horizontal strokes, but here all sorts of alarm bells should go off since we are talking only fractions of millimetres in a text that is handwritten. The assumption of a conscious, consistent and recognisable system in such naturally variable phenomena ought to be a non-starter. Indeed, on closer inspection the differences turn out to be insignificant. And that is even if one overlooks another basic error. Payne applies his measurements only to the small set where paragraphoi and distigmai go together, but if these combinations are coincidental to begin with – which he assumes as well for at least most of these – then not only the variations in length of the paragraphoi that happen to be accompanied by a distigme should have been taken into account, but those of all. In this far larger set the lengths of the paragraphoi vary considerably, even beyond the range Payne finds for his small subset, and as a matter of course this variation carries no meaning at all.¹³

Problems also beset Payne's *interpretation* of the presumed obeloi, and his dealing with 1 Cor 14.34–5, the text that matters most to him. In the other

11 In his earliest article Payne did discuss these instances ('Fuldensis', 256–7). For the twelve places he mentions (forgetting Mark 7.13–14 1287 C 14), he deduces that the distigme refers to additional words in eight of these. In all but one (Matt 3.15–16 1237 C 30) it relates to an addition of at least two words, though the interpretation of the distigme at John 7.52 (1361 C 3) is dubious, for it is one line too high to possibly refer to the *Pericope de adultera*. As is usual, Vaticanus is referred to with page, column and line.

12 Payne points to Jas 4.4 (1428 C 22) to show that at least some horizontal bars cannot be interpreted as paragraphoi ('Fuldensis', 255; also 'Distigmai', 200), but that conclusion is incorrect, and is (again) induced by focusing exclusively on the conjunction of distigme and paragraphoi. A study of all paragraphoi yields many more that mark divisions less obvious to modern scholars, at odds with modern editorial practice. See also Miller, 'Observations', 221 with n. 14.

13 Just a few random examples of a relatively 'long' paragraphos without distigme at the same line include 1236 B 9; 1238 B 27; 1238 B 31; 1239 B 5; 1241 B 9; 1252 C 13; 1255 C 31; 1256 B 17; 1257 B 3; 1258 A 1.

seven places the presumed obelos would have an unusual meaning, namely to signal the presence not of an omission but of an addition in some other manuscript. And even here his listing of the possibilities is not convincing. At Mark 5.40 (1284 C 12) he gives ἀντὸς δὲ Ἰησοῦς as an addition after κατεγγέλων ἀντοῦ in *f*¹ etc., but in those manuscripts ἀντὸς δὲ Ἰησοῦς actually substitutes the following ἀντὸς δέ.¹⁴

Only in 1 Cor 14, then, would the presumed obelos have its usual meaning of marking a portion of the text as absent elsewhere. Such a lack of methodological control is astonishing. One cannot build a pattern on seven instances with an inverted meaning and one with the common one, especially if the last instance is the entire point of the demonstration. To make matters worse, the distigme in 1 Cor 14 is actually one line too high, namely next to the last words of v. 33. The paragraphos here shows the break between τῶν ἀγίων and αἱ γυναῖκες, which moreover coincides with a colon.

There actually exists a plausible interpretation of this particular distigme, unrelated to the paragraphos and to the following verses. Whereas the common Greek text is ὡς ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις τῶν ἀγίων, some Greek manuscripts (F G etc.) have an additional διδάσκω.¹⁵ The distigme here could just be a personal reminder by someone who compared the Greek text of Codex Vaticanus with a manuscript such as F 10 and had found this additional διδάσκω ('in my view'). If so, it is only related to the end of the line and thus the end of 1 Cor 14.33.

This short note has not been written in order to refute or disparage the case that the *mulier taceat* passage in 1 Cor 14 might be an interpolation. That discussion has its own scholarly merits and weight. My purpose here has been more limited: Payne aims to construe objective external evidence for the existence of manuscripts now lost that did not contain 1 Cor 14.34–5. As shown, this effort fails in the case of Vaticanus. His argumentative steps and results should be rejected.¹⁶ A category of text-critical markings such as 'distigme-obelos' does not exist.

14 Payne, 'Symbols', 6. Ἰησοῦς could be seen as an addition to ἀντὸς δέ, but it is not a 'multi-word addition', and is not found at the location Payne indicates. Payne should have mentioned the addition of εἶδοτες ὅτι ἀπέθανεν in *f*¹³ etc. (recorded in Syn¹⁵, not in NA²⁸ or Ti⁸).

15 Miller ('Observations', 235) and Kloha (*Commentary*, 514–16) also give this possibility.

16 The only valid external argument is the transposition of 1 Cor 14.34–5 in some manuscripts. Of course, transposition itself is never proof of interpolation. It can only be invoked as part of a conjectural scenario, in which at an early stage of the transmission a marginal note in one manuscript was included at different places in subsequent copies. Moreover, the argument is only applicable to a specific interpolation conjecture (the omission of vv. 34–5), whereas several others have been proposed. See *The Amsterdam Database of New Testament Conjectural Emendation* (ed. J. Krans, L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte *et al.*; <http://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/nt-conjectures>) for more information.

In the case of Codex Vaticanus Payne has been on a combination of a right track and a wrong track from the beginning. He seems to be correct on the text-critical status of the distigmai, even though their date and the identification of variant readings are clouded in uncertainty, but he is consistently led astray by his interpretation of the coincidental combination of distigme and paragraphos.