

The Treasures of Athena: Hoarding Processes in the Sanctuaries of Athens and Argos

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The Greek sanctuary was a complex, multi-layered system, whose impact on ancient Hellenic economics was indeed vast. Since it influenced the entire management of public funds, it thus became an essential element for the polis' financial life.

In fact, Greek sacred areas hoarded huge amounts of money and valuable objects that were preserved inside temples in order to physically hoard the circulating gold, silver and copper. This was done to establish a permanent deposit belonging to the gods and, to a certain degree, to the whole urban community.

As for Athens, the *tamiai* entitled to manage the *chremata* of Athena on the Acropolis are attested epigraphically starting from 550 BC, as stated in the inscription that registers their responsibility in collecting the funds and dedicating them in the *temenos*.¹

From 434 BC to 300/299 BC the treasurers of the Athenian Acropolis annually listed the contents hosted in the Acropolis' temples by drawing up texts known as 'inventory lists', whose relevance is twofold. Firstly, they clearly show that Athenians considered the resources kept on the Acropolis to be an important financial resource of their empire. These could be used both for sacred needs and civic ones, such as the construction of public structures,² or the expenses connected to the Peloponnesian war. Moreover, the inventories of the Parthenon mention the presence, inside the edifice, of the assets of Athena, but also of other deities: Artemis, Apollo, Demeter and Kore, Zeus, Asclepius, Aphrodite, Dionysus, Hephaistos and the Dioskouroi.

The presence of various gods in the Parthenon's inventories could derive from the transfer of the treasures pertaining to the main sanctuaries of Attica to the Acropolis sanctuary, thus suggesting the progression towards a more centralized economic system. Indirect proof of such a transfer can be identified in the Kallias decrees inscription (fig. 1),³ which establishes the creation of the treasure of the 'Other Gods' (i.e. other than Athena) by removing their funds from the *hieropoioi* of the Attic sanctuaries who hitherto had managed them.⁴ The operation is clearly connected to the distinction between regional sanctuaries that implemented forms of continuous economic levy and consequent deposit in the *temenos* (whose treasures were moved to the Acropolis of Athens), and other sacred areas with minor revenues, more specifically connected to local situations.

Therefore, in the 5th century BC, an overall re-organisation of the system of levy, management, and control of the sacred resources took place in Athens. This was marked by an increasing concentration of the funds available for collective use, whose progressive definition can be reconstructed through the epigraphic documentation.

The centralization of resources within the Acropolis was part of a structured and organized plan, whose goal was to create a public treasure to be used to for the expenses



Fig. 1: Kallias Decrees (IG I³ 52), Paris, Louvre Museum.

that, for the first time, a metropolis like Athens needed to cover, with its complex political system and military requirements.

The same process likely took place, on a smaller scale, also in other regions of the Hellenic world. As an example, it is possible to consider the case of Argos. The presence of the treasure of Hera (worshipped in her extra-urban sanctuary) is documented in the treasure of Athena (within the urban *temenos*), inter alia, by the epigraph of the *Aliaia*. This epigraph decrees that the money belonging to the treasure of Hera should be removed from the temple of Athena to finance the Corinthian war.

In Argos, the usage of sacred resources for public expenses is clearly documented by epigraphic sources. An inscription⁵ from the sanctuary of Athena, dating back to 575–550 BC, explicitly declares that the *chremata* belong to the goddess and that no one is allowed to use them outside the sanctuary. The only exception is for the public magistrates, which means that divine properties are ultimately conceived of as a State treasure. The so-called ‘small palace inscription’⁶, from the mid-5th century, deals with the usage of Athena’s *chremata* by the *Bola*, and forbids anyone from accusing the public magistrates for their usage of the divine funds. The public magistrates are authorised

to make use of the *hiera chremata*, if needed, by taking them from the *tamiai* in charge of their management.

Hence, the sacred treasure lies between divine and human possession, and the whole sanctuary is characterized by a religious nature, as well as a civic dimension.

The situation pertaining to the mentioned sanctuaries that emerges from the texts clearly indicates that the main sacred area of the *polis* often preserved a huge amount of hoarded assets and acted as the chief economic reserve to cover consistent public expenses, in addition to religious ones. It often made money available by melting down precious objects.

Besides, it indicates that the establishment of more complex forms of government and the administration of the State entailed the creation of a multi-level network of sanctuaries. This resulted in the establishment of a centralised organisation of public wealth, having its centre in the sanctuary.

Notes

¹ IG I³ 510.

² For example, the walls connecting the city to the harbour.

³ IG I³ 52.

⁴ A, ll. 18–19.

⁵ SEG XI 314.

⁶ IG IV 554.

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Fig. 1: from <<https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/decree-kallias>> (13.02.2019).

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