Sanctuaries and Banking Activities: Changes from the Hellenistic World to Roman Influences

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Unlike Eastern temples, Greek sanctuaries were not centers of production, but centers of financial activities. As the ancient Greek economy was based on private property, gods were owners, as were citizens too, but their heritage was entirely managed by the city. The city treated the property of the gods as public goods: by contract, it delegated the responsibility of exploiting the goods to individuals. This translated into sales of priesthoods, but also to the rentals of lands, houses, and shops that were the property of gods, as well as to bank lending activities.

However, in Roman times, the overall picture that emerged from the Roman vision of the Greek world was that of disorder and corruption.[1] As a matter of fact, the crisis caused by Mithridates and Sulla's destructions deeply impoverished and weakened economies, but on different scales in Greece and in Asia Minor. But did Roman order gradually replace Oriental disorder?

In Ephesus, in the middle of the 1st century AD, the proconsul of Asia, Paullus Fabius Persicus, prescribed a number of rules for the financial organization of the shrine of Ephesus.[2] These were done in order to fight corruption and to reorganize the finances of the city. In modern terms, this consisted of earmarking revenues in public accounting. What is emphasized in the edict is the especially Greek way of administration of a sacred chest: borrowing funds, the financial interaction between the sacred chest and the public finances, and the auctioning of priesthoods.

Almost at the same time (22 AD) in Rhodes, the community of Lindos organized a public subscription,[3] known as a *parakatathèkè.* This is a reserve from which the Lindians could draw throughout the year to carry out the expenses necessary for the activities in the sanctuary. Afterwards, they would reconstitute the reserve by repayment, without forcing the magistrate to emergency euergetism. This is the very Greek system, based on the close interaction between the sacred chest and the public chest (see for instance the same system on Delos).

Such a situation is exactly what the edict of Paullus Fabius Persicus would not have permitted. It is characteristic that such transfers of funds are called "debt" in the edict of the proconsul to Ephesus.[4]

Contrary to the Greek habit, the imperial power intended to limit as much as possible, not exactly the recourse of the city to credit, but rather the interaction between the sacred and the public funds. Of course, money lending in Greek sanctuaries did not disappear with the construction of the imperial power in the East. Therefore, the edict intended to prevent the mortgage of public or sacred incomes over several years. By doing so, it attempted to end something that looked like the construction of a system

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of deficit, namely an economic and financial system based on credit and involving both the city and the sanctuary.

Other texts show to what degree the Roman power was preoccupied by this question of credit and debt in Greek sanctuaries. The custom of the Roman imperial power was usually to allocate funds to a specific destination and to ensure the strict application of these assignments through legal penalties against offenders.[5] Expenditure was strictly directed by the Roman imperial power and no change was allowed in the destination of the sacred funds, since the necessities of imperial worship and contests had to be ensured. All additional expenditure must be based on the euergetism of magistrates (the *munera*). The so-called corruption of the Greek magistrates was often, in fact, the habit of using sacred or public money to finance some activities that should have been, from a Roman perspective, financed by the euergetism of the magistrate: buildings, restorations, embassies. On the contrary, the Greek system was much more flexible. The *diataxis* was the way in which the cities organized the distribution of income to precise destinations. This *diataxis* was under the control of civic administration, the *ekklesia,* and the *boulè;* this situation made it possible to readjust the expenditures as necessary.

Roman temples had income devoted to cult activities and private deposits but they were neither centers of credit, nor places for lending money. The Roman power had a different conception of temple funds and of their financial organization; in terms of Greek finances, it expressed this through ideological phrases which referred to corruption, disorder, and negligence. In the modern conception of public accounts, Roman power dealt with asymmetric fungibility in public accounting and it imposed strict spending control in a budget by destination. On the contrary, the Greek system was based on debt, and used the temple funds as a reserve of credit to circulate money. In the Roman system, the financial activity of the sacred chests was marginalized. This role was taken over by *negotiatores, argentarii,* and notables. There is no doubt that this system also ensured part of its growth. But it was certainly less democratic than the Greek conception of the circulation of funds.

The archaeological view of the Roman period in the East offers a picture of prosperity, but also a misleading impression of continuity. New buildings were continuously financed in Greek sanctuaries either by private funds, public money, or imperial donations. However, at the turn of the Hellenistic and imperial eras, the changes were dramatic in terms of economic performance.

Notes

[1] For instance Cic. Att. 6, 2, 4–5 and Plin.epist. 10, 18, 3.

[2] Wankel 1979, 91–121 no. 17–19.

[3] Blinkenberg 1941, 773–789 no. 419.

[4] Wankel 1979, 91–121 no. 17 l. 49.
[5] For instance Dig. 50, 8, 1, Ulpian.

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