

The Earliest Evidence for the Festival of Aias on Salamis

SEG 29:116 records the honors of the Athenian ephebes of 215/14 BCE and provides a fairly complete catalogue of the festivals in which these young men participated. Since its publication, historians have assumed that this fragmentary inscription offers the earliest evidence for the Aianteia, the festival of Aias celebrated yearly at his sanctuary on the island of Salamis (Tracy 1979; Mikalson 1998). However, the text as currently reconstructed mentions neither Aias nor his festival, but a procession carried out for Demokratia, the personification of the Athenian political order, and a foot race for an eponymous hero, identified by Tracy, the original editor of this text, as τῆι πῶνμωι τῆς [νῆσου--“the eponymous [of the island],” i.e., the nymph Salaminia, at line 19.

This paper will provide a firm foundation for what has thus far been an assumption. It argues that the eponymous hero mentioned in this inscription is Aias, the hero of the tribe Aiantis, and reconstructs line 19 as τῆι πῶνμωι τῆς [φύλῆς--“the eponymous [of the tribe].” Since the eponymous in the text has a masculine article (τῆι πῶνμωι), the inscription cannot refer to Salaminia, a nymph mentioned in other inscriptions and depicted on the island’s coinage, and so Tracy’s reconstruction (τῆς [νῆσου) must be rejected. By a close examination of the literary, epigraphical, numismatic and topographical evidence, other likely eponymoi connected with Salamis, such as Eurysakes, the eponymous of Aias’ shield, and Kychreus, the eponymous of the ancient polis of Salamis, are reviewed and ultimately rejected in favor of Aias. The positive case for Aias’ candidacy includes the observations that a) none but Aias can be satisfactorily reconstructed in the inscription; b) Aias was the only eponymous hero on the island who had a procession and gymnastic games held in his honor; and c) Aias was closely associated with Demokratia, whose cult statue I demonstrate stood inside the sanctuary of the hero in the new town of Salamis.

Finally, this paper concludes by integrating the (re)establishment of the Aianteia with the overall political and cultural program of the Athenian statesmen Eurykleides and Mikion (229-200 BCE). By honoring Aias as the eponymous hero of the tribe, the Athenians celebrated the recent reacquisition of their traditional freedom and the territorial and political reunification of Attika with the island of Salamis.

Bibliography

Mikalson, J. (1998) *Religion in Hellenistic Athens*.

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