

Another “Glue of the Democracy”?: Public Building Contracts and Labor Market in Classical Athens

In this paper I reconsider the system of labor recruitment and remuneration in public building projects of classical Athens in the light of a specific terminological problem and argue that the choices of the city in this sector were strictly linked to the dynamics of the Athenian labor market. In my opinion the composition of the labor market is crucial to understand the social and economic impact of building projects in redistributing public money among the people and to what extent the perceived democratic nature of public works (e.g. Plu., *Per.* 12) was linked to this specific function.

Current scholarship assumes that in the 5th c. the city of Athens used to carry out large and complex projects by hiring the workers directly, usually by the day, or paying them by the piece of work done, thus splitting each project in a number of small portions assigned to many different workers. The large affluence of skilled workers due to the ambitious Periclean projects made possible and encouraged such a practice. This seems confirmed by the fact that in Attic sources the recruitment of workers for building projects is labeled as a transaction pertaining to the sphere of the μισθός (public officials assigning the works and individuals undertaking them are indicated respectively by the active and middle voices of the verb μισθόω and its compounds) (Martini 1997).

By contrast, in non-Attic sources of the 4th-2nd c., the terminology concerning the assignment and undertaking of building works belong to the sphere of the ὤνῃ (e.g. ἐργώναι, ἐργωνέω, ἐργολαβέω) and indicates the use of building contracts, through which large portions of works were “sold” to individuals through public auctions. The elaboration and use of building contracts is traditionally linked to small or remote places, such as Epidaurus, Delphi, and Delos,

where the availability of skilled labor and building material was scarcer than in large urban centers. In this context, building contracts allowed the commissioning bodies to attract and keep hold of qualified entrepreneurs with the promise of important and long-term jobs, as a response to the instable nature of this kind of skilled labor (Feyel 2006). Only in the 4th c., when skilled labor became scarcer even in Athens, the city opted for the contracting out of large portions of works to “big firms”, even if the terminology remained linked to the old practice (Davis 1937; Burford 1969; Schaps 1996).

However, with the aid of several pieces of evidence (Hdt. 5.62; *IG I³ 35*; *IG I³ 475-476*), I will argue that despite the peculiar terminology, forms of agreement with the same features of building contracts are attested in Athens from mid-5th c. on, and that their adoption doesn't seem related to the necessity to contract out larger or more complex portions of works. Moreover, I will argue that no significant change in the system of labor recruitment occurred in Athens between the 5th and 4th c. and that both direct hiring and building contracts were frequently employed even to complete different parts of the same project.

The number of large-scale building projects was not large enough, or so constant in time, to encourage the development of big firms capable of undertaking large works. In this respect the fragmentation of works and the diversification of systems of labor recruitment, with the combination of both direct hiring and building contracts, was the only logical strategy to respond to the fragmentation of the labor market and achieve the completion of works in the most cost-effective and efficient way.

The fragmentation of the labor market confirms that both in the 5th and 4th c. building projects performed the “democratic” task of redistributing public revenues among the people. However, I will argue that it was the increasing role of private wealth in funding public works

that in the 4th c. substantially changed the democratic nature and purpose of large building projects.

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