

# THE ANCIENT CITY IN A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE: FEEDING THE ANCIENT CITY

## Grain for Athens: the View from the Black Sea

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For over a hundred years the academic literature has been preoccupied with the supposed constant need of Athens to import grain. Step by step, this idea, unsupported as it is by hard evidence, has faded and a more vivid picture of the real situation has emerged. Lack of grain was not constant but periodic, resulting from famine or some other disaster. Athens was not the only city requiring the import of grain from time to time. Most Greek states could expect a shortfall in food supplies once every five years or so.

The aim of this paper is not to discuss in general terms, yet again, the need of Athens for grain. I would like to look at areas outside mainland Greece from which the grain could have come; and even here I do not intend to discuss all regions (Sicily, Libya, Egypt, etc.) but to look at the problem from the perspective of the Black Sea. The obsession with the Black Sea as the principal source of the grain is deep-rooted and continuing. In the words of S. Burstein:

The depressing saga of the scholarship concerning IG 1.<sup>361</sup> is a prime example of one of the major problems of Greek historiography: the reluctance to reexamine long entrenched theories, in this case the importance of the Black Sea grain trade in the fifth century BC. Obsession with the Black Sea grain trade despite clear evidence that most of the century Athenian involvement in the region was extremely limited has had more unfortunate effects, however, than merely encouraging forced interpretations of texts such as IG 1.<sup>361</sup>. It also distorted understanding of an important aspect of Athenian foreign

policy by obscuring the fact that Athens did attempt to ensure her food supply by securing control of significant grain sources.

Another aspect of the problem is that modern scholars too often impose the situation existing in one century on another, or place burdens on written or epigraphical sources that they cannot carry. Herodotus (7. 147) indeed says that Xerxes saw ships conveying corn from the Black Sea passing through the Hellespont en route to Aegina and the Peloponnese. One should agree with T.G. Figueira that Aegina, mentioned directly in this passage, was the destination of the grain ships, not Athens as many would like it to be: Aegina frequently required grain in large amounts to feed its population.

There is no evidence of the export of grain in the Archaic period from the Black Sea to Athens or any other city. Although some Athenian pottery of the Archaic period has been found around the Black Sea, the amount is not large enough to demonstrate any serious Athenian interest in this region. Of greater significance, the pottery was not delivered by Athenians but, as the evidence shows, brought initially by Ionians and other East Greeks and, from the mid-6th century BC, by Aeginetans (who most probably were also responsible for the little Corinthian ware found in the Black Sea). In the Archaic period, the Ionian Greek colonies on the Black Sea were very small and their agricultural territories were also quite limited, unlikely to produce exports. Their physical appearance was less grand than in the Classical period, especially from the second half/end of the 5th century BC (see below). It has already been suggested that the grain might have been produced by the local population. This is unlikely: in the Archaic period the history of local peoples was somewhat turbulent. Their states or proto-states were not established until the end of the 6th-beginning of the 5th century. Most discussion of local society of the northern Pontus in the Western academic literature assumes that the people concerned were Scythians, as was the case in Classical Athens where all local peoples from the northern Black Sea were called 'barbarian Scythians' although many were not

Scythian at all. From one point of view, the territories populated by the Scythians were important: they included the rich, grain-producing steppes of the modern Ukraine. Even Herodotus says (4. 17) that ‘Above the Alazones live Scythian ploughmen, who sow corn not for eating but for selling.’ First of all, Herodotus is not an Archaic author; secondly, there is a huge difference between the Archaic and Classical Scythians. In the Archaic period most Scythian tribes were nomadic, so they cannot be expected to produce cereals. New studies demonstrate that most Scythian tribes adopted a pastoral way of life only from the end of the 5th and, especially, the 4th century BC. Some scholars had already noticed that the palaeobotanical evidence from the Archaic period clearly shows that the grain could not come from the Scythians. Recently it has been demonstrated that Scythian sites in the steppe-land region on and around the Dnieper began to grow surprisingly large amounts of grain at the end of the 5th century. This new data again highlights the contrast between the Archaic and Classical periods.

But these sites in the Dnieper basin are all in the hinterland of Olbia. We have no evidence that Olbia was exporting grain; on the contrary (see below) it had a continual need to import it and was the most likely consumer of what grain the Scythians produced.

All written sources talking of Athenian importation of grain from the Black Sea focus on the Bosporan kingdom, straddling the Cimmerian Bosphorus. Indeed, this is the one part of the Black Sea that could produce considerable quantities of grain thanks to its fertile lands, particularly the Taman Peninsula and the Kuban region, both considered to be grain baskets. Epigraphical and written evidence (see below) clearly indicates that Athens was importing grain from this kingdom only from the end of the 5th-beginning of the 4th century BC. But many scholars have assumed that this started earlier, before the Peloponnesian War. How likely is this?

The Bosporan kingdom was established in ca. 480 BC. Until the end of the 5th-beginning of the 4th century, the kingdom itself was in turmoil. Rulers sitting in the capital, Panticapaeum, were preoccupied with the forceful absorption into their

kingdom of other Greek cities in the eastern Crimea and on the Taman Peninsula. In the eastern Crimea the greatest resistance to the tyrants of the Bosporan Archaeanactid dynasty came from Theodosia and Nymphaeum. These cities were forcibly incorporated in the Bosporan kingdom by Leucon I (389/8-349/8 BC), a member of the Spartocid dynasty which had come to power in 438/7 BC. Whilst on the Taman Peninsula, Phanagoria, capital of the Asiatic Bosporus, resisted Panticapaeum and did not succumb until the beginning of the 4th century. Strabo (7. 4. 6) provides some very interesting information, telling us that 'Leucon... once sent from Theodosia to Athens two million one hundred thousand medimnoi [of grain].' This would not have been possible in the 5th century BC when Theodosia was outside Bosporan control.

There is another important point to be made. The agricultural territories of the various Bosporan cities were not able to produce grain in the huge quantities (400,000 medimnoi of wheat annually - over 21000 tons) that Demosthenes claims they exported to Athens. The Kuban region adjoining the Taman Peninsula, populated by the local Maeotians, Sindians, Dandarii etc., was very fertile. It was Bosporan policy to incorporate these peoples in the kingdom. Once again, this was not accomplished until the reign of Leucon I, but this time peacefully. Archaeological material and inscription demonstrate that these peoples, especially the Sindians, became Hellenised during the 4th century BC, and that the Bosporan kings established their own settlements/residencies in these territories, for example Semibratnee (most probably ancient Labrys). Thus, all aspects of the local situation rebut the conventional view of the grain-rich Bosporus until the 4th century. Even if we turn to Athenian pottery found in the Bosporan kingdom (and if we consider it to reflect Athenian interest in the region), the peak for the Classical period comes in the last decades of the 5th and the 4th century. The number of imports declines markedly around the middle of the 4th century.

Practically all the information we have about 4th-century grain exports from Bosporus to Athens comes from Demosthenes and a few honorary decrees that

commend Leucon and his two sons, Spartocus II and Parisades, joint rulers of the kingdom (a decree dating from 346 BC, IG II<sup>2</sup>212), for their promise to provide wheat for export to Athens. (The first inscription has not yet been found but we know of it from the second.) The information Demosthenes provides in his court speeches has been discussed many times. One detail is very striking: the very close relationship with the Bosporan kingdom and grain exports from it are largely events from the lifetime of Demosthenes, and it is he who constantly mentions them. Can this be explained by his own circumstances: his ancestors were from the Bosporan kingdom and he maintained close relations with his kindred there and with the ruling family. Indeed, in one of his speeches, Aeschines (Against Ktesiphon) used this fact against Demosthenes, even questioning his eligibility to be an Athenian citizen. From this point of view, those scholars who question the astronomical quantity of grain allegedly coming to Athens from the Bosporan kingdom are correct to do so in view of Demosthenes' own involvement in this business and the personal benefits he might derive from it: he had a direct interest in exaggerating the scale of things, like any good politician. There is no question that grain from the Bosporan kingdom did come to Athens, but only from time to time as circumstances demanded, for example in the famine of ca. 360 BC.

Returning to the 5th century, there is nothing to indicate that grain from the Bosphorus was reaching Athens until the reign of Satyrus I (433/2-389/8 BC), father of Leucon I. We have few details: the only firm evidence is the Athenian decree of 346 BC (mentioned above) honouring Leucon's sons, where lines 44-49 say that the decree is to be set up near a similar decree honouring Satyrus and Leucon. Lines 20-24 also state that these new rulers offer to Athens all the privileges previously bestowed on it by their father and grandfather, and in return demos renews to them all the privileges previously given to Satyrus and Leucon. Other sources for the 5th century are confusing and unreliable. Pericles' expedition to the Black Sea, as well as the ATL for 425 BC, which contains the names of Black Sea cities, need to be used with extreme caution: they pose more questions than they answer.

The grain trade between the Black Sea and Athens is but the commercial side of a broader relationship. Previously I mentioned that the Black Sea Greek colonies in the Archaic period were small affairs. Even their physical appearance differed from that expected in the Classical period. Until the last quarter of the 6th-beginning of the 5th century there are no traces of stone architecture or of designated areas such as temenos, agora, etc. Domestic architecture consisted of pit-houses and semi-pit-houses. Even sanctuaries were of earthen construction. Very few of the colonies had fortification systems.

By the late Archaic period/first half of the 5th century BC, the so-called pit-house phase of the Black Sea colonies came suddenly to an end. From this time a completely new period in the history of Pontic Greek cities commenced. If previously the colonies had not looked very Greek, now their physical appearance became typically Greek, as we understand it from our modern perspective, based on the official propaganda of the 5th-4th-century Athenian empire, exhibiting the characteristic features known in mainland Greece and from other areas of Greek colonisation. Major cities had designated areas such as an agora, temenos, etc., and fortification systems had appeared. All houses were built of stone/mud-brick. They were above ground, usually roofed with tiles, had cellars or semi-cellars, were rectangular in plan; some were of two storeys, and all followed the rules of Greek domestic architecture. Streets were paved with stones, pebbles and pieces of pottery. By the 4th century BC the city street systems were formed. Underneath the streets were stone drains. In major cities stone temples were built in the temenos, usually rich in architectural decoration. Town planning underwent major changes as well.

This complete change in the physical appearance of the Pontic Greek colonies requires explanation. I would link it not to new waves of colonists from Ionia, the common explanation, but to Athenian settlers. From the archaeological context, the first grand stone buildings appeared in about 480 BC and later. The vast majority of temples and other public buildings date from the second half of the 5th century BC. Can we make any connections with Athens? Indeed so. The first architectural signs of

major redevelopment on the Athenian acropolis belong to the 480s. All other buildings appeared thanks to the actions of Pericles. If we turn to Athenian pottery found around the Black Sea, the first peak is around 500-475 BC (the second to the end of the 5th-first half of the 4th century).

Thus, when all available evidence is considered, it seems that Athens really became interested in the Black Sea from the beginning of the 5th century BC, when Ionian domination of the Black Sea ceased thanks to political developments in Asia Minor. We can suppose that the first Athenians arrived in the Black Sea in the 480s-470s, bringing with them new types of urban development that had not been seen in the Black Sea colonies in the Archaic period. Two Black Sea sites provide very good evidence of the establishment of Athenian settlements in the 480s-470s BC: Apollonia Pontica in modern-day Bulgaria, and Pichvnari in Georgia. For many years, very extensive necropoleis have been excavated in both, demonstrating exactly the same burial rites as in Athens. A very intense phase of new building activity dates from the time of Pericles and especially from the end of the 5th century. Once again, the evidence suggests that, although Athenians first appeared physically in the region at the beginning of the 5th century BC, a close relationship between the Black Sea and Athens did not develop until the century's end.

The overall situation regarding grain around the Black Sea is not as favourable as it is generally assumed to be. Of course it varied over time. Polybius (4. 38. 4-6) makes it very clear that 'As for grain, there is give and take - with them [the Black Sea] sometimes supplying us when we require and sometimes importing it from us.' Inscriptions from Histria (ISM I, 1, 19, 54) show that city's permanent insecurity in supplying its own grain requirements. A special fund existed, raised from private donations and public subscriptions, to ensure that the city had constant financial resources to purchase a certain quantity of grain for its citizens. The fund was invested by advancing loans at interest to individuals, and the income derived used to buy grain when prices were low for release when prices were high, any further income being added back into the fund or used to repay subscribers, all

functioning for the general benefit of the citizenry. Similar funds are known in Teos and Lebedos and, more importantly, from the Athenian Grain Tax Law of 374/3 BC, whose purpose was to 'insure the existence of grain for the people', but these schemes differ in how the money for them was raised.

Olbia (IOSPE I<sup>2</sup>, 32, 25, 34, 240 + I.Olbia 28, 29, 123) too had problems in supplying its citizens with grain and established a similar fund to Histria's. At the same time, the eastern Black Sea (Colchis) was unable to produce grain because of its marshy terrain and the Greeks living there had to import grain. Not much is known about the Bulgarian Black Sea coast but all evidence indicates that this region was a grain importer as well. There is a similar absence of information about the southern Black Sea coast, however much of the terrain is mountainous, unsuited to growing cereals, let alone producing a surplus for export.

The Black Sea was a supplier of grain to Athens, but it was just one of several (Sicily, Egypt, Libya etc.), not the principal one. The only part of the Black Sea which could supply grain was the Bosporan kingdom. There is no evidence to suggest that such a trade existed until the time of Satyrus I, and it flourished only later, during the reign of his son Leucon I. At no stage was it continual, just as and when required to fill shortages in Athens. Some grain was delivered as a gift to Athens, where any surplus beyond what was required to feed the population was sold for profit. Athenians were exempt from customs duties at Bosporan ports; and Bosporan kings were honoured in Athens for their help. After the joint reign of Spartocus II and Parisades ended in 344/3 BC, we have no evidence to support the continuation of this grain trade. Thus, this trade and the special relationship between Bosporus and Athens lasted for about a century. The Bosporan origins and family connections of the politician Demosthenes definitely played an important role in this.