

# The Athenian *Ecclesia* and the Assembly-Place on the Pnyx

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**I**N EARLIER ARTICLES in this journal I discussed the question how many citizens the meeting place of the assembly on the Pnyx could accommodate and the question how the Athenians were seated during the sessions.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by H. A. Thompson's recent article about the Pnyx,<sup>2</sup> I take this opportunity to return to the subject, concentrating on three problems. (1) The quorum of 6000 and the size of the auditorium of Pnyx I (*ca* 460–400), (2) the connection between admission and payment for attendance in the second period (*ca* 400–340), and (3) the evidence for subdivisions of the auditorium of Pnyx III (after 340).

## I. Pnyx I and the Quorum of 6000

It is fairly certain that the total area of the auditorium of Pnyx I was about 2400 square meters.<sup>3</sup> The minimum space required for a human being attending a large meeting seems to be 0.4 square meters, a figure comprising the space filled by rows of benches (or cushions) and the space between the rows.<sup>4</sup> Consequently Pnyx I accommodated a maximum of 6000 citizens. In my opinion it cannot be a coincidence that the maximum attendance is identical with the quorum of 6000 prescribed in several laws;<sup>5</sup> but the connection allows of two explanations: either the quorum was fixed because 6000 was the maximum number of citizens that Pnyx I could accommodate, or Pnyx I was constructed with a view to the previously established quorum of 6000. Is it possible to make a choice between these two interpretations?

<sup>1</sup> "How Many Athenians Attended the *Ecclesia*?" *GRBS* 17 (1976) 130–32; "How Did the Athenian *Ecclesia* Vote?" 18 (1977) 134–35.

<sup>2</sup> "The Pnyx in Models," *Hesperia* Suppl. 19 (1982) 134–47.

<sup>3</sup> K. Kourouniotes and H. A. Thompson, "The Pnyx in Athens," *Hesperia* 1 (1932) 104; Thompson (*supra* n.2) 135.

<sup>4</sup> See Hansen (*supra* n.1: 1976) 131. The view is restated with fuller documentation in "The Athenian *Heliaia* from Solon to Aristotle," *CIMed* 33 (1981–82) 43f n.55.

<sup>5</sup> *Cf.* Hansen (*supra* n.1: 1976) 132.

The quorum of 6000 is known in the following cases: (a) ratification of a citizenship decree (introduced *ca* 370); (b) permission to propose and carry a *nomos ep' andri* (introduced in 403/2); (c) permission to apply for a reduction of sentence (not attested before 353); (d) ostracism (*ca* 507); furthermore, the panel of jurors appointed by lot each year amounted to 6000 citizens above thirty years of age (attested in 422).<sup>6</sup>

Thus the quorum of 6000 is attested for an institution introduced by Cleisthenes. But when was the Pnyx first used for meetings of the *ecclesia*? Originally the excavators connected the construction of Pnyx I with Cleisthenes' reforms (for historical reasons exclusively) and proposed a date of *ca* 500.<sup>7</sup> Recently, however, Homer Thompson has reconsidered the matter and argued (convincingly, in my opinion) that Pnyx I should be down-dated some forty years and assigned to the period around Ephialtes' reforms.<sup>8</sup> If Thompson is right, Pnyx I was constructed when the quorum of 6000 was already known, and the inference is that the auditorium was given its size of 2400 square meters precisely to allow a maximum attendance of 6000 citizens. So in this case architecture was adapted to the constitution and not *vice versa*. We can make one further inference. In connection with the *ecclesia* the quorum of 6000 is attested only for the fourth century. The literary evidence relating to the fifth century concerns exclusively the *dicasteria* and the *ostracophoria* (which was not a meeting of the *ecclesia*). The size of the auditorium of Pnyx I, however, is a strong indication that the quorum, in the first half of the fifth century, was applied not only to the *dicasteria* and the *ostracophoria* but also to the *ecclesia*. Some decisions (we do not know which) required the presence of a minimum of 6000 Athenians on the Pnyx. At that time, so far as we know, the Athenians were not so given to checking and counting as they were in the fourth century (when a ballot was requested in (a)–(c) *supra*). They were probably satisfied with a very simple device: when the auditorium was full they would know that the required quorum was present.

<sup>6</sup> (a) Dem. 59.89, first attested case *IG* II<sup>2</sup> 103; (b) Andoc. 1.87, Dem. 24.59; (c) Dem. 24.45; (d) Philoch. *FGrHist* 328F30, Plut. *Arist.* 7.6; jurors, Ar. *Vesp.* 662, Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 24.3, Andoc. 1.17. Cf. Hansen (*supra* n.1: 1976) 124–30. As regards ostracism I follow Plutarch and take the 6000 to be a *quorum*. The literature on the subject is referred to in R. Thomsen, *The Origin of Ostracism* (Copenhagen 1972) 66. I believe that ostracism was introduced by Cleisthenes (Thomsen 60) and I am not impressed by the late Byzantine account of ostracism in *Vat.gr.* 1144 (cf. *AJP* 93 [1972] 87–91). It is in any case of no consequence for my argument if the law on ostracism was introduced or changed in 488/7.

<sup>7</sup> See Kourouniotes and Thompson (*supra* n.3) 109.

<sup>8</sup> Thompson (*supra* n.2) 136–37; the crucial piece of evidence is the *horos* of the Pnyx, assigned by letter forms to the mid fifth century.

## II. Pnyx II and Restricted Admission

The principal literary source for the attendance at the Pnyx in the second period (ca 400–340)<sup>9</sup> is Aristophanes' description of the women's coup d'état in *Ecclesiazusae*. In the *parodos* the women hurry to the assembly disguised as men. They say that if they are late the thesmothetes will not pay them the three obols (290–92), and so they hope to arrive in time to get a *symbolon* (296–97) and to oust the men coming from the city (300–01). What matters to the women is not to prevent the men from being paid but to get access to the *ecclesia* themselves and to exclude as many men as possible in order to control the majority when the vote is taken. The inference seems to be that the *symbolon* served a double purpose: it was both a ticket to the *ecclesia* and a token to be exchanged for the fee of three obols after the session.<sup>10</sup> This interpretation is supported by the subsequent dialogue between Chremes and Blepyros (372–477). Chremes states explicitly that he failed to obtain the fee because he was late (380–81). He refers to *miltos* in a way suggesting that it was used to exclude late-comers,<sup>11</sup> and his description of the meeting conveys the impression that he was a spectator and not a participant (e.g. 431–34). Thus we know from Aristophanes that *ecclesiasticon* was paid out only to some of the citizens who, early in the morning, walked up to the Pnyx with the aim of attending a session of the *ecclesia*. Second, there are indications in the play that those who failed to get a ticket (*symbolon*) were also refused admission to the *ecclesia*, whereas ticketholders were both admitted and paid. Third, since several types of

<sup>9</sup> Following R. A. Moysey, "The Thirty and the Pnyx," *AJA* 85 (1981) 31–37, I now assign the first rebuilding of the Pnyx to the restored democracy. Plutarch (*Them.* 19.4) may nevertheless be right in assigning the rebuilding to the Thirty, if we assume (as suggested by Moysey 35) that the Thirty *started* to rebuild the Pnyx as an excuse for making it unusable.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. also *Eccl.* 282–84 indicating a connection between admission and payment.

<sup>11</sup> 378–79, cf. R. G. Ussher's note, *Aristophanes Ecclesiazusae* (Oxford 1973) 129: "But here there is no question of reluctance: on the contrary the meeting is over (377) before it was scheduled to begin. It is thus best (with van Leeuwen and Coulon) to suppose that the archers used the paint to exclude those who (though coming early, 390 n.) arrive to discover the 'House' full. But it must be doubted whether such a situation would ever (outside comedy) arise." Basically I agree; but there is little doubt that the auditorium of the Pnyx was regularly full after the introduction of the *ecclesiasticon*, cf. 282–84 and Hansen (*supra* n.1: 1976) 130. Furthermore, we cannot rule out a different explanation of 378–79: *miltos* was spread around the auditorium when the *ecclesia* was opened in order to prevent participants from stealing away during the debate only to return just before the session ended so that they could hand back their *symbola* and receive the three obols. Since the session usually ran several hours, the sprinkling of *miltos* around the auditorium was a necessary device, but this morning it was ridiculous because the meeting was over before anyone would think of shirking.

decision required a quorum of 6000, at least 6000 must have been admitted and paid for their attendance. Now payment was probably restricted with a view to the quorum, and admission with a view to the capacity of the auditorium. If payment was connected with admission, the most likely explanation is that the auditorium of Pnyx II could accommodate 6000 citizens who were all paid, whereas late-comers were refused admission and failed to obtain the fee. Is this reconstruction compatible with the archaeological evidence?

According to the excavators the auditorium of Pnyx II covered *ca* 2600 square meters, some 200 more than Pnyx I.<sup>12</sup> But this enlargement does not necessarily imply an enlarged audience. We know that the Athenians in the fifth century were seated directly on the rock (probably on cushions), whereas the phrase *ἔδρας καταλαβεῖν* (at *Ar. Eccl.* 21, 86–87) suggests some form of artificial seat, perhaps wooden benches.<sup>13</sup> So the explanation may be simply that Pnyx II (like Pnyx I) could accommodate only 6000 citizens who, on the other hand, were slightly more comfortably seated than previously. Alternatively, Dinsmoor and McDonald argued that the auditorium may have covered 3200 square meters.<sup>14</sup> In that case Pnyx II must have had space for some 8000 citizens, which seems less likely and is more difficult to reconcile with the inferences based on *Ecclesiazusae*.

In conclusion, the laws prescribing a quorum show that 6000 was a regular attendance in this period. Accepting the excavators' reconstruction of Pnyx II, we infer that the auditorium could accommodate *ca* 6000 citizens and no more. So the quorum equals the accommodation of Pnyx II. It is not believable that, on an assembly day, precisely 6000 citizens showed up in the morning. Hence we are forced to admit, on this evidence alone, that regularly at least some citizens were refused admission because the 'house' was full. This conclusion is considerably strengthened by independent literary evidence, *viz.* Aristophanes' description in *Ecclesiazusae* of the women's coup d'état.

### III. Pnyx III and Subdivisions of the Auditorium

During the excavations of the Pnyx six beddings for stelae were found cut in the rock forming the auditorium of Pnyx I but obviously

<sup>12</sup> Kourouniotes and Thompson (*supra* n.3) 126, restated by Thompson (*supra* n.2) 139.

<sup>13</sup> *Cf.* Hansen (*supra* n.1: 1976) 131, and *infra* n.18.

<sup>14</sup> W. B. Dinsmoor, *AJA* 37 (1933) 180–82 (reply by Kourouniotes and Thompson at 652–56); W. A. McDonald, *The Political Meeting Places of the Greeks* (Baltimore 1943) 71–75.

to be connected with the second rebuilding of the Pnyx, since all six run parallel to the two scarps, two to the east and four to the west of the existing *bema*. The distance from the scarp varies between 10.40 and 10.75 meters. The only apparent explanation for the stelae originally placed on these beddings is that they rose above the floor of Pnyx III and marked certain divisions of the auditorium. The excavators adduce the beddings as supporting evidence for their belief that the seating floor was divided radially into wedges. Since the area lying between each line of stelae and its respective scarp is *ca* 1/10 of the total area of the auditorium (*ca* 567:5550 m<sup>2</sup>), the excavators seem to favour a division of the auditorium into ten sections. Furthermore, one bedding found some 12 meters to the north of the centre of the *bema* suggests that around the *bema* an *orchestra* was fenced off with its centre near the front step of the *bema* and a radius of some 15 meters. And a few steps cut into the western scarp *ca* 31 meters from the *bema* suggest a *diazoma* subdividing the auditorium into two major sections (see *Figure 1*).<sup>15</sup>

This interpretation has been widely accepted and has led to the belief that the auditorium was subdivided into ten wedge-shaped sections, either because the Athenians were seated according to their *phylai* or because "ten seems a logical number for the sections."<sup>16</sup> In my article on Athenian voting procedure I hope to have demonstrated that the Athenians were not seated in tribal divisions, but I did not preclude the possibility that the auditorium was subdivided, not into ten but probably into nine wedge-shaped sections, each of the nine *proedroi* being responsible for the estimation of the vote in one section.<sup>17</sup> On reconsideration, I now suggest a different interpretation of the archaeological evidence.

The theory of wedge-shaped subdivisions is in my opinion incompatible with the fact that the six known beddings all run parallel to the scarps. If the auditorium had been subdivided into wedges, the beddings near the *bema* should have been placed much closer to the scarps and the westernmost bedding, *ca* 14.50 and not 10.45 meters

<sup>15</sup> Kourouniotes and Thompson (*supra* n.3) 155–58; John Travlos, *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens* (New York 1971) 475 fig. 599.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. McDonald (*supra* n.14) 78–79. Grouping into ten *phylai* is assumed by E. S. Stavely, *Greek and Roman Voting and Elections* (London 1972) 81–82; followed by F. Kolb, *Agora und Theater, Volks- und Festversammlung* (Berlin 1981) 93. Grouping into ten random sections is assumed by A. Boegehold, "Toward a Study of Athenian Voting Procedure," *Hesperia* 32 (1963) 374.

<sup>17</sup> Hansen (*supra* n.1: 1977) 134–35. Following McDonald (*supra* n.14) I am less pessimistic than Thompson (*supra* n.2) 141–42 about wooden seating for the whole of the auditorium. The seats in the 'Periclean' theatre were probably of wood (A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Theatre of Dionysus in Athens* [Oxford 1946] 19), and I can see no reason to be sceptical about similar seating facilities on the Pnyx.

from the scarp. Rather, the beddings indicate that an area on both sides of the *bema*, ca 10.50 meters in width, was cut off from the rest of the auditorium. So the only subdivisions of the auditorium indicated by the archaeological evidence are the *orchestra*, the *diazoma*, and the roping off of the front part of the cavea. How can this last sectioning of the auditorium be explained?

One possible explanation is that the area between the scarps and the line of beddings was simply left free, so that all citizens were seated behind the fence, in the upper part of the cavea. Subtracting the *orchestra*, the *diazoma*, and this front section, we are still left with some 4000 square meters, which is sufficient space for ca 10,000 citizens.

Alternatively, we may assume that the area between the scarps and the fence was reserved for a special group of citizens as opposed to the rest of the *demos*. Turning to the literary evidence, we have the choice between three possible reconstructions.

(a) The area was reserved for *rhetores* who intended to address the assembly, thus facilitating their access to the *bema*. In support of this assumption one may first adduce Hyperides' remark (1.9) that Demosthenes used to sit *κάτω ὑπὸ τῆ κατατομῆ*. But this phrase may be taken to mean no more than that Demosthenes was seated in the lower part of the auditorium (near the fence) and so beneath the scarp (when seen from the upper part of the auditorium). Second, many citizens did not know in advance whether they would want to address the assembly during the debate; and third, it would be very unlike the Athenians to encourage a splitting up of the audience into active and passive citizens.

(b) The area was reserved for the councillors apart from the fifty *prytaneis* who, together with the nine *proedroi*, were undoubtedly seated on the benches cut in the rock above the scarps to the right and left of the *bema*. I am, however, inclined to reject this possibility, because there is no evidence whatsoever that the ordinary councillors were grouped together and separated from the rest of the citizens.<sup>18</sup>

(c) In the speech *Against Timarchus* and again in the speech *Against Ctesiphon*, Aeschines refers to a law by which front seats were reserved for one of the ten *phylai* entrusted with the maintenance of order during the meeting. This privilege and duty was binding on all members of the *phyle*, on average one tenth of the audience. Our knowledge about the law is restricted to these two passages and a reference in Demosthenes' first speech *Against Aristogeiton*:

<sup>18</sup> For the rock-cut benches above the *bema* see Thompson (*supra* n.2) 141 and 143.



Aeschin. 1.34: ἀναγνώσεται οὖν ὑμῖν τοὺς νόμους τοὺς περὶ τῆς εὐκοσμίας κειμένους τῶν ῥητόρων. τὸν γὰρ περὶ τῆς προεδρίας τῶν φυλῶν νόμον Τίμαρχος οὕτως καὶ ἕτεροι τοιοῦτοι ῥήτορες συνελθόντες γεγραμμένοι εἰσὶ μὴ ἐπιτήδειον εἶναι, ἔν' ἐξῆ ἀυτοῖς καὶ λέγειν καὶ ζῆν ὡς αὐτοὶ βούλονται.

Aeschin. 3.4: τῆς δὲ τῶν ῥητόρων ἀκοσμίας οὐκέτι κρατεῖν δύνανται οὐθ' οἱ νόμοι οὐθ' οἱ πρυτάνεις οὐθ' οἱ πρόεδροι οὐθ' ἡ προεδρεύουσα φυλή, τὸ δέκατον μέρος τῆς πόλεως.

Dem. 25.90: οὐ πρυτάνεις, οὐ κῆρυξ, οὐκ ἐπιστάτης, οὐχ ἡ προεδρεύουσα φυλή τούτου κρατεῖν δύναται.

The references to the law indicate that the *phylai* took turns, and I suggest either that the presiding *phyle* was selected by lot before the meeting or that the ten *phylai* served in a fixed order. The law was passed shortly before the speech *Against Timarchus* was delivered, *i.e.* in 346/5, and so it must have been enacted either contemporaneously with or a few years before the second rebuilding of the Pnyx.<sup>19</sup> The law was immediately indicted as unconstitutional, but it must have been upheld by the court, for Aeschines fifteen years later, in the speech *Against Ctesiphon*, refers to the institution as a simple fact. The law must have resulted in some device by which a section of the auditorium near the *bema* was roped off and reserved for the presiding *phyle*. Hence I suggest that we combine these passages with the archaeological evidence and conclude that the line of beddings is the remains of a fence separating ἡ προεδρεύουσα φυλή from the rest of the *demos*.

## IV. Conclusion

Pnyx I was constructed so as to accommodate the required quorum of 6000. But the attendance was often insufficient, and coercive measures had to be applied to make up for the lack of enthusiasm.<sup>20</sup> Pnyx II accommodated the same number of citizens as Pnyx I (now more comfortably seated), but the introduction of *ecclesiasticon* in the 390's had such a stimulating effect on attendance that the auditorium was regularly filled<sup>21</sup> and that frequently some citizens (perhaps only a few) were refused admission and failed to obtain the *ecclesiasticon*. The auditorium of Pnyx III was considerably enlarged and accommodated without difficulty all citizens who wished to attend. Densely

<sup>19</sup> I follow Thompson (*supra* n.2) 144–45 who now suggests an earlier date for the second rebuilding of the Pnyx, *viz.* the 340's instead of the 320's.

<sup>20</sup> *Cf.* Hansen (*supra* n.1: 1976) 123–24.

<sup>21</sup> Hansen (*supra* n.1: 1976) 132–34.

packed the auditorium could hold up to 13,400, but I doubt that so many Athenians were ever assembled on the Pnyx. On the other hand, I believe that *ecclesiasticon* was still paid out to all participants and that attendance was usually higher than 6000. In connection with the second reconstruction, the front part of the auditorium was probably roped off from the rest of the cavea in accordance with a law of 346/5 by which front seats were reserved for all members of one of the *phylai*, who were entrusted with maintaining order during the session. Apart from an *orchestra* and a *diazoma*, no further subdivisions of the auditorium can be traced.

An *ecclesia* was reputed to be a meeting of all Athenians and a *psephisma* a decision made by the entire people.<sup>22</sup> But as usual there is a contrast between ideology and reality. The auditorium of all three periods was too small to admit all Athenian citizens, or in the period 460–340 even a majority of them. Pnyx II could not even accommodate all those who wanted to participate. The sources indicate that, in the period 400–340, the Athenians practised a system of restricted admission to the *ecclesia* that had been used for the *dicasteria* in the fifth century: early risers were admitted and late-comers were refused when the auditorium was full.<sup>23</sup>

THE UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN  
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<sup>22</sup> IG I<sup>3</sup> 105 (δημος πλεθύνων); Hdt. 5.97.2; Pl. *Axiochus* 369A (30,000 Athenians); Lys. 13.32, 86; Xen. *Hell.* 1.7.9; Dem. 18.169, 21.180 and 194, 24.48, 25.95; Aeschin. 2.13, 3.224; Din. 1.4, etc. Other sources, however, admit that the Athenians in the *ecclesia* constitute only a fraction of the *demos*: Ar. *Ach.* 1–25; Thuc. 8.72; Lys. 12.75; Aeschin. 3.125–26; Dem. *Ep.* 1.1.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Ar. *Vesp.* 689–90. The selection of jurors in the fifth century is reconstructed in J. H. Lipsius, *Das attische Recht und Rechtsverfahren* I (Leipzig 1905) 137–39, and in H. Hommel, *Heliaia* (Leipzig 1927) 113.