

The Nyktophylaxia of Delos

In 426/425 BC the Athenians purified the island of Delos: they removed all the graves, and for the future forbade either dying or giving birth there; those involved were to be removed to Rheneia. They also instituted the penteteric Delia after the purification.¹ Whatever the Athenians' initial motivation,² the interdiction on burial seems to have been taken seriously, for there were few if any licit burials on the island for the rest of antiquity.³ It must have been very difficult for the people of Delos to conform to this law, as it affected both the burial of the dead, and the performance of the regular, customary, rites of tendance of family tombs. This paper suggests how they may have found a way to adapt normal Greek practice to fit the circumstances peculiar to Delos.

Among the hieropoïic accounts of the period of Delian independence (315-166 BC), eight, ranging in date from 307 to 174 BC, refer to an event which took place during the night.⁴ In the earliest (*IG* 11.142 of 307 BC), it is called ἡ φυλακὴ ἢ ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ, 'the watch in the sanctuary'. Subsequently this is reduced to τὰ νυκτοφυλάξια, of which the most basic rendering is 'the things of the night watch'. In one account (*IG* 11.145), money is allotted to buy beds, and there is an allocation of olive oil, possibly for lighting lamps.

The Nyktophylaxia took place in the month of Aresion (*IG* 11.287, *ID* 316, 338, 372, 442), that is, Athenian Maimakterion, at the very end of autumn, and a number of documents refer to the provision of wood, which could have been used for keeping the premises lit and the participants warm (*IG* 11.142, 145, 199, 287, *ID* 440). It was held in the Thesmophorion (*IG* 11.142 and 145; compare too 287). The materials and funds for the Nyktophylaxia are given 'to the priestesses' (*IG* 11.154, 159, 199, *ID* 372), once to a priestess (*ID* 442): these would have been the priestesses of Demeter, who were responsible for the Thesmophorion. Several things or activities are mentioned in connection with the Nyktophylaxia: τὰ νομιζόμενα in *ID* 372, 442, 440; the megaron is mentioned in two inscriptions (*IG* 11.199 and *ID* 440): there seems to have been a provision of chains for the megaron (*ID* 440). In the same inscription a pig is provided to purify the sanctuary expressly for the Nyktophylaxia. These two events—purification of the sanctuary and chaining of the megaron, are mentioned some lines before reference to the Nyktophylaxia of that year, which suggests that they may have been part of the preparations rather than part of the thing itself.

Other accounts refer to a doorway or an opening in a wall. In *IG* 11.287 (250 BC), in the month Aresion, pay-

ment is made to men who τὸ θύρετρον διελούσι τὸ πρὸς τῷ ἱερῷ, 'who have broken open the doorway at the sanctuary'; a few lines later, money is given to ἐργάταις τὰς θύρας ἄρασιν εἰς τὸν οἶκον, 'to workmen who raised up the doors into the oikos'. Earlier commentators have deduced from this that the breaking open of the doorway took place before, and the raising up of the doors after, the Nyktophylaxia. Θύρετρον, which is strictly speaking the recess in which the door is set,⁵ and θύραι seem to signify the same thing, that is, the doorway complete with doors. In *ID* 372 (200 BC), in the month of Aresion, money is given to the priestesses εἰς τὰ νομιζόμενα, and to τῷ διαλέξαντι τὸ θύρετρον καὶ ἐνοικοδομήσαντι; in *ID* 442 (179 BC), a single priestess gets two drachmas εἰς τὰ νομιζόμενα, and four drachmas τοῖς τὸ θύρετρον ἐνοικοδομήσαντι: on the basis of these, it is possible to restore in *IG* 11.154 (296 BC) [διαλέξαντι] τὰ θύρια καὶ ἐνοικοδομήσαντι; a similar restoration is possible for *IG* 11.199 (274 BC). Finally, in *ID* 316 (231 BC), under Aresion, it is possible to restore [τῷ διαλέξαντι τὸν] τοῖχον κα[ὶ] ἐνοικοδομήσαντι.

The expression διαλέγειν τὸ θύρετρον / τὰ θύρια is matched in Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 720, διαλέγων τὴν ὄπην, where it carries a *double entendre*. The sense in Aristophanes—and clearly at Delos as well—is of 'breaking through a passageway or orifice', or of 'forcing a way through'. The verb in the Aristophanes passage is identified with διορύττειν by Hesychios and the scholiast:⁶ there is something underhanded about the act. 'Ἐνοικοδομεῖν, which occurs in the accounts six times to once for ἄρασιν, means 'to block it up' or 'build it up'.

A few things are clear: every year, late in the autumn, using money provided by the polis, a nocturnal event, called the Nyktophylaxia, took place at the Thesmophorion under the direction of the priestesses of Demeter and Kore, or of one of them. Previously a doorway in the sanctuary or a part of a wall had been broken through, and afterwards it was put back up again, all at public expense. The texts associated with the Nyktophylaxia follow no regularly recurring sequence: it cannot have been trieteric, pentaeteric, or enneateric. It must have been annual.

Two serious attempts have been made to explain the Nyktophylaxia, the first by René Vallois, the second by Francisczek Sokolowski. Vallois, following Nilsson, identified the Nyktophylaxia as a ritual of Dionysos, and argued that the rite took place in the cave on Mount Kynthos.⁷ Sokolowski interpreted the Nyktophylaxia as 'a festival in honour of the deities of the earth' (389), which took place in the Thesmophorion, its name being derived from the organization of 'a guard for the protection of the women' (389-90).⁸ Ph. Bruneau (1970) accepts Sokolowski's interpretation on the whole, and considers (291) that the main rite involved the doorway which was broken open and walled up again.⁹

⁵ See Roux (1960) 179-80.

⁶ Henderson (1987) 164, on lines 720-1.

⁷ (1931) 274-289; Nilsson (1906) 304-5.

⁸ (1935) 382-90, esp. 385.

⁹ Robertson (1996) 364-5 also follows Sokolowski; he identifies the door with the cover of the megaron.

¹ Thucydides 3.104.1-2; 1.8.1; Diodoros of Sicily 12.58.6-7.

² See, e.g., Hornblower (1991) 517-25, on Athenian motives.

³ See, e.g., *Guide de Délos* (1983) 21, 24-5, 265-8, with references to earlier literature.

⁴ Sources: Bruneau (1970) 291-3; *IG* 11.142.61 (307 BC, dated by Reger (1991) 234); *IG* 11.145.30 (302); *IG* 11.254.A.-25-26 (296); *IG* 11.159.A.53 (281) *IG* 11.199.A.48-49 (274; restorations by Vallois (1966) 80 note 4, and Sokolowski (1935) 384); *IG* 11.287.A.76, 77, 80 (250); *ID* 316.109, 111 (231); *ID* 321.A.5; *ID* 338.49, 51-52 (224); *ID* 339a.5; *ID* 372.A.92, 93-94 (200); *ID* 442.192, 193 (179); *ID* 440.A.40-41, 44-45 (174; dated by Tréheux (1985) 493 note 29). In addition to these Bruneau includes *ID* 460 and 465.

The most unusual feature of all this activity is that the government of Delos paid people to force a way into the Thesmophorion before the Nyktophylaxia and then paid them to repair the damage afterwards, rather than have the priestesses or priestess of Demeter open the place up and close it again. They spent public money for breaking and entering, and then compounded the offence by patching things up. What was there about the Nyktophylaxia which would warrant such a thing? The only thing which might help is τὰ νομιζόμενα, which could refer to customary things, or customary acts. In the latter sense, τὰ νομιζόμενα is one of several terms used to describe the customary rites performed at the tombs of the dead, not only at the time of burial and during whatever period of mourning was customary, but also annually on the anniversary of the death.¹⁰ Not only individuals and families, but an entire state could set aside a day, at the same time every year, to commemorate the dead of the community. The best known example is the Athenian Genesia, conducted on the fifth day of Boedromion, that is, early in the autumn.¹¹

The small amount of money allocated εἰς τὰ νομιζόμενα at Delos—two or three drachmas at a time—is appropriate for a ritual of this kind, where all that was needed was some oil, incense, perhaps wine.¹² The other expenses—these too were not high—came from providing wood for heat and light and perhaps cooking, and for the forcing and repairing of the doorway.

If τὰ νομιζόμενα does refer to rites performed in honour of the dead, then this was what the Nyktophylaxia would have been about. Yet this would seem to go against the spirit, if not the letter, of the law forbidding death and burial on the island.

It is in this context of conflict between the obligation to fulfil a responsibility to the dead according to ancestral custom and the law of the god which effectively forbade it that the curious matter of the doorways may be explained. There seems to be no parallel to the act of forcing open the doorway and blocking it up again afterwards. Sanctuaries which are open once a year or so are not the same as a building in a sanctuary which is broken into every year before a ritual. Furthermore, the role and motives of the polis have to be explained. The government of Delos in effect provided public funding for breaking into and entering the Thesmophorion or a part of it, so that they could perform a perfectly normal ritual, one for which the state also paid. It seems as if they preferred to pretend that whoever celebrated the rite had pushed their way in by force and done the thing illegally, but on the other hand quite legally. This may have been a device to permit the people of Delos to honour their dead in the normal, customary way of the Hellenes, despite their having been forbidden to have anything to do with death. The whole operation was devious: it was conducted stealthily at night, and the

state formally absolved itself and the sanctuary in which the rite took place by breaking into the sanctuary like a burglar, but of course repairing the damage afterwards.

On this reading, the rite had nothing to do with Demeter and Kore, even though it was conducted at their sanctuary. A number of details point to this: at least once, the recipient of money for the Nyktophylaxia is only one of the priestesses, but if it had been a festival of Demeter, both ought to have been involved; the rite seems to have been held in the *oikos*, a subsidiary building in the Thesmophorion;¹³ the megaron may have been chained shut, to keep out the profane. There are a number of reasons why the Thesmophorion would have been used to house the Nyktophylaxia: it was not in use at the time; it was big enough to cope with a reasonable number of people; and the megaron in the sanctuary—whether it was used or not—provided direct access to the underworld; although the Thesmophorion has not been located, it must have been on the shore, at some distance from the town and the main sanctuary, on the west coast opposite Rheneia.¹⁴ It could be argued that if the people of Delos were capable of taking their dead over to Rheneia for burial, they could just as easily have gone across themselves and tended their graves on the spot, rather than doing so vicariously. Individuals probably did just that, but what is envisaged here is a formal public ritual which was fixed in the month of Aresion, at the dividing line between autumn and winter, when the short trip across the water would have been even more difficult than at a less inclement season, the seas around Delos and Rheneia being very rough at the best of times.¹⁵

Delos was not the only place to hold a public commemoration of the dead at this time of year. In Boiotia, the main public celebration of the month Alalkomenios—the equivalent to Delian Aresion—was the commemoration of the community's dead: the Herakleia of Thebes, originally a funerary celebration in honour of those who died in battle, began with a night-long commemoration of Theban military heroes; and every year in Alalkomenios the people of Plataia performed ceremonies in honour of those who had died in 479 BC. The battle of Plataia took place in the summer of the year, but the annual commemoration of the dead was transposed to conform to Boiotian practice.¹⁶

¹² Precisely what Sokolowski (1935) 386 estimated could be bought for the money allotted.

¹³ *IG* 11.287A.80, where money is provided ἐργάταις τὰς θύρας ἀραισιν εἰς τὸν οἶκον.

¹⁴ It had to be on the coast itself, since in *ID* 440 (174 BC) mention is made at line 53 of the removal of a corpse from the beach at the Thesmophorion (πρὸς τὸν αἰγιαλὸν τὸν πρὸς τῷ Θεσμοφορίῳ). Tréheux (1986) 309-17 suggests a site on the Bay of Skandhara, in the northwest corner of Delos, opposite the northwest corner of Rheneia, where the dead from Delos were re-interred in 425 BC.

¹⁵ See, for example, the *Mediterranean Pilot* (1968) 196-201: the waters around Rheneia and Mykonos are particularly dangerous. See too Barber (1988) 672: 'The crossing (from Mykonos to Delos) is often choppy and cold; in rough weather (not infrequent when the north wind blows) it cannot be made'.

¹⁶ See Schachter (1986) *sv* Herakles (Thebes), and (1994) *sv* Zeus (Plataia).

¹⁰ See Georgoudi (1988) and Bruck (1970) 177-81, and n.1, 194-5.

¹¹ See Jacoby (1944) (recapitulated in his commentary on Philochoros, *FGRH* 328F68). See too Humphreys (1980). The most extensive collection of testimonia on annual commemorations is to be found in Wyse (1904) 269.

There are a number of other things which Delos and Boiotia had in common. Both the Boiotians and the Delians celebrated the Thesmophoria, not in the autumn at the time of the autumn sowing, but in late summer;¹⁷ both the Delian and Boiotian years began, not in the summertime as did most in the Hellenic world, but at the winter solstice;¹⁸ one of the months at Delos is Lenaion, the only month name mentioned by Hesiod, *Works and Days* 504; Delos was the only place with a month called Galaxion, while in Boiotia Apollo had the epithet Galaxios and a sanctuary called the Galaxion.¹⁹ Boiotia and eastern Phokis abound with sanctuaries of Apollo with a connection to Delos: from east to west, they are Delion on the coast, Tegyra, perhaps Tilphossa and the Ptoion, certainly Kalapodi just over the border at Hyampolis; in both Boiotia and Delos, the motif of the birth of gods is unusually strong: at Delos it is of course Apollo and Artemis, while in Boiotia there are Apollo and Artemis at Tegyra, Dionysos and Herakles at Thebes, Hermes at Tanagra, Athena at Alalkomenai, and Zeus at Thebes, Chaironeia and possibly Plataia. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go more deeply into these connections; they are mentioned here in order to show that the celebration of an annual rite in honour of the dead at the end of autumn was neither limited to Delos nor an entirely isolated phenomenon, but part of a more complex web of interconnections.²⁰

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¹⁷ Schachter (1994) *sv* Theilouthia. At Eretria on Euboia the Thesmophoria were also celebrated during the summer.

¹⁸ On the Delian calendar, see Bruneau (1970) 507-9, and Reger (1994) 14. For the Boiotian calendar see Roesch (1982) 1-70.

¹⁹ Schachter (1981) *sv* Apollo (Galaxion). There was a festival of the Mother of the Gods at Athens called the Galaxia: see Deubner (1932) 216.

²⁰ I am grateful to the Editor of the *Journal* and the two readers for their helpful comments and suggestions.