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THE PNYX IN THE HISTORY OF ATHENS



Edited by
Björn Forsén and Greg Stanton

The Pnyx in the History of Athens

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Contents

Introduction and Acknowledgements <i>Björn Forsén and G.R. Stanton</i>	i
Greetings to the Colloquium <i>Homer A. Thompson</i>	v
Archaeological Research on the Athenian Pnyx <i>P.G. Calligas</i>	1
The Shape and Size of the Athenian Assembly Place in its Second Phase <i>G.R. Stanton</i>	7
Reflections on the Number of Citizens Accommodated in the Assembly Place on the Pnyx <i>Mogens Herman Hansen</i>	23
Pnyx III: Pottery and Stratigraphy <i>Susan I. Rotroff</i>	35
The Form of Pnyx III <i>John McK. Camp II</i>	41
The Sanctuary of Zeus Hypsistos and the Date and Construction of Pnyx III <i>Björn Forsén</i>	47
Assembly Places and Theatres in the Greek World and their Later Reuse for Religious Functions <i>Adolfo J. Domínguez</i>	57
Lykourgos, the Panathenaia and the Great Altar of Athena: Further Thoughts Concerning the Pnyx Hill <i>David Gilman Romano</i>	71
The City Walls on the Pnyx Put into Context <i>Lars Karlsson</i>	87
The White Poros Wall on the Athenian Pnyx: Character and Context <i>David H. Conwell</i>	93

The Pnyx and the Mouseion Hill Inscriptions Reconsidered <i>Dina Peppas Delmousou</i>	103
General Bibliography	117
Index of Written Sources	131
Addresses of Contributors	135
List of Illustrations	137
Illustrations	

To Students and Friends of the
PNYX
Assembled in the Acropolis Center and on the Site of the
Pnyx

October 7-9, 1994

I greatly regret that I could not accept a warm invitation to be with you today. At the same time I am happy to know that so many lovers of ancient Athens have come together from far and near to pay special attention to the Pnyx as a significant monument in the history and life of the ancient city.

I am glad to know from the program that Greek scholars too will be joining in your deliberations. As I look back on my own activity on the Pnyx of more than sixty years ago I have warm memories of its international character. My chief colleague was Dr. Constantine Kourouniotes, then head of the Department of Antiquities, collaboration with whom was an experience that gave me a high regard for that branch of Greek bureaucracy. Our architect was also Greek: John Travlos, then just completing his studies in the Polytechnion, who was to become a close life-long associate and, in my opinion, the greatest archaeological architect of our time. I'm happy to realise the studies prompted by this colloquium are based in part on the results of our work in the 1930s. Equally important, they are going to correct some of the errors committed in the publication of that early work, youthful and hasty as it was. From the program I infer that you will be concerned largely with the physical form of the assembly place and an effort to arrive at greater precision in tracing its history in relation to the overall history of the city.

But can generations of research, and the expenditure of a good deal of money, be justified as the cost of learning a little more about a monument of which the physical remains are, to say the least, undistinguished? My own response is "yes", and let me say briefly "why".

The assembly place on the Pnyx has few if any parallels for the rôle it played as the operational base of the sovereign element in the government of the city state in the heyday of classical Athens. The choice of the Pnyx as a meeting place represented a clear break with practice in the time when Athens was ruled by kings or tyrants. In those days, when assemblies of the people were held, they took place on the west slope of the Acropolis or at its north foot. After moving to the Pnyx the assembled citizens could look across at the Acropolis with a sense of independence. In the same way they could look down on the Agora: the seat of the Boule and the Dikasteria, as well as the business centre of the city. Likewise the Pnyx commanded a fine view of much of the best farmland of Attika and of the mountains that yielded its much prized marble.

Equally visible from the assembly place were some of the glories of Periclean architecture made of that marble. On many days from the hilltop just above the assembly place I recall beautifully clear views of Aegina and Salamis, occasionally also of Acrocorinth, all of which had played such important rôles in Athens' foreign relations.

From long days spend directing excavation on the hillside I came to realise the severe physical conditions under which the Assembly operated. Any citizen who aspired to an active role in political life had to be able to address and hold the attention of an audience of thousands seated or standing in the open air in summer heat or winter cold. This will account in large part for the emphasis on the loud voice and vulgar manners of the demagogues. One thinks also of the special personality required of the modern politician who must face not only thousands but millions of his fellow citizens from the television screen.

It is intriguing to recall, in the light of this, that when Aristophanes in his *Ekklesiazousai* proposed his post-modern communistic state completely dominated by women, he chose as a setting the assembly place on the Pnyx.

But these are only the reflections of a far distant retiree. Let me wish for you who are still active a fruitful discussion indoors and fine weather on the site.

Homer A. Thompson