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Harnessing Markets: Perpetual Endowments in the Hellenistic Economy

In the fourth century BC the Greek world saw the birth of the perpetual endowment, a self-sustaining revenue-generating fund whose income was earmarked for specific expenses. Ancient endowments have been treated as charitable institutions, social mechanisms for dealing with social problems. I argue, however, that many were deployed as economic tools for shaping the economic environment. I treat three representative inscriptions. All are enabling decrees, on whose regulations the endowments were established and managed.

In the third century the people of Samos enlisted citizens to contribute a small sum of money toward the creation of a large endowment (IG XII.6 172). This famous inscription is routinely cited in discussions of ancient food-shortage, but Gargola has shown that the fund was used to convert the Anaean tithe paid in to Hera from grain to cash, and so to help ensure the liquidity of Samos' state bank (Phoenix 1992, 12–28). Moreover, scholars have neglected two sets of stipulations, which offer incentives for entrepreneurs to import grain from locations where prices were lower, and provide for limited strategic price-manipulation, carefully timed stockpiling and distribution in order to temper normal seasonal price-inflation.

In 332/1 the deme of Eleusis endowed a quarry owned by Herakles (SEG XXVIII 103). The quarry was let to the highest bidder on condition that the rents underwrite a feast for the deity. I argue that this endowment, like the Samian, solved a problem of cash-flow and streamlined annual budgetary negotiation. Moreover, the endowment contained a set of simple stipulations that (A) enabled contractors to bid to market conditions and (B) ensured the endowment's viability and the quarry's profitable exploitation, notwithstanding the state of the market.

In 160/59 Attalos II established two endowments at Delphi (Syll.3 672). One underwrote education of Delphic youth, the other an annual festival in which the youth took part. The decree includes a cluster of straightforward stipulations that suggest that the endowment targeted wealthy landowners for low-interest loans in locally expensive "Alexander drachmas."

The Samian endowment was enacted as a piece of social welfare. But it also provided a mechanism for converting tithes in kind to cash, furnishing entrepreneurs with venture capital and regulating seasonal inflation in the city's most important commodities market. The Eleusinian quarry-endowment underwrote a religious festival that facilitated the annual gathering of local demesmen. But it also normalized cash-flow, streamlined the deme's budgetary process and reduced the effect of supply and demand on a sector of the local market in stone. The Delphic endowment funded teachers' salaries and a religious festival. But it also offered limited control of the Delphic currency market to the local elite.

Thus, from their earliest appearance perpetual endowments were used as sophisticated tools for solving economic problems. The mechanics of Hellenistic endowments suggest a powerful understanding of the market economy, and aggressive experimentation with tools designed to shape, control and rationalize the economic environment on which all civic life depended.