

An extremely brief Introduction to the History of Sikyon

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The following is a very brief introduction to the history of pre-Hellenistic Sikyon. It sketches the importance of the city by contextualizing the information on it found in M.H. HANSEN & T.H. NIELSEN (eds.), *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis* (Oxford 2004).

We begin by situating Sikyon in the overall landscape, as it were, of Peloponnesian *poleis*. HANSEN & NIELSEN comprises 131 Peloponnesian entries, a number which is surely too low, since an unknown number of *poleis* undoubtedly has escaped identification. Almost all Peloponnesian *poleis* belonged to regions such as Arkadia or Achaia. Only two Peloponnesian *poleis* did not belong to such regions: Corinth and Sikyon. In this respect, then, Sikyon resembles Corinth.

A mere handful of the Peloponnesian *poleis* are reasonably well-known: cities such as e.g. Argos, Corinth and Sparta. The majority of the Peloponnesian *poleis* are almost entirely unknown in historical terms. About *poleis* such as for instance Alasyaion in Elis or Epitalion in Triphylia almost nothing is known beyond the bare fact that they existed. Alasyaion remains unlocated and classical Epitalion was only recently located by the German survey team at Olympia. To which group of *poleis* does Sikyon belong? It clearly belongs to the group of reasonably well-known *poleis*, and it should be evident that well-known *poleis* are well-known because their importance was such that they generated the material, modern scholars need in order to investigate them. In terms of historical importance, then, Sikyon resembles a *polis* like Corinth rather than tiny and obscure *poleis* such as Dipaia in Arkadia or Noudion in Triphylia.

Comparison with the other important *poleis* of the Peloponnese is instructive. I begin with the size of the territory as estimated in HANSEN & NIELSEN. The territory of Sikyon is estimated at c. 400 km² and thus compares favourably with *poleis* such as Tegea and Messene, and the territory may have been not significantly smaller than those of Argos and Corinth, though clearly much smaller than those of Elis and Sparta. Size of territory cannot be translated *directly* into historical importance, but it is important to realize that no less than 80% of all Greek *poleis* had a territory of *less* than 200 km². Sikyon, then, belongs in a rather exclusive group of *poleis* in terms of territorial size. Moreover, the majority of the most extensive territories are found in colonial areas, and Sikyon, accordingly, ranks among the large and important *poleis* of homeland Greece. Sikyon was, then, probably a fairly wealthy city.

For the size of the population there is no good evidence, and we will have to make do with figures for military contingents. I shall not attempt to translate the military figures we have for Sikyon into an estimate of the total population, but use them simply to get a vague impression of the power of Sikyonian military strength in comparison with the strength of other Peloponnesian *poleis*, Sparta excluded, since it is evident that Sikyonian strength did not compare to that of Sparta. But it compares favourably to that of most other Peloponnesian *poleis*. The best evidence is the evidence for the Persian Wars provided by Herodotos. For the battle at Plataiai in 479 BC, Sikyon provided a contingent of 3000 hoplites, a contingent outsized only by that of Corinth which comprised 5000 hoplites. A major *polis* such as Arkadian Tegea provided only 1500 hoplites. In terms of hoplites, then, Sikyon was one of the major *poleis* of the Peloponnese. Sikyon also had a fleet of triremes, and this fleet fought at the battle of Salamis in 480 BC for which battle the Sikyonians manned 15 triremes. Again, the Sikyonian contribution was outsized only by that of Corinth who provided 40 triremes for this

crucial battle. A fleet of 15 triremes may seem quite modest but it is, in fact, the huge navies of *poleis* such as Athens, Aigina and Corinth that call for comment. The sizes of the other Peloponnesian contingents at Salamis show that the fleet of Sikyon was not ridiculously small. In terms of military strength, then, Sikyon ranked above the average Greek *polis*, and the existence of a navy implies that the harbour must have had facilities such as shipsheds.

Now a few brief remarks on coinage. Of the 131 Peloponnesian *poleis*, 31 are presently known to have minted coins in the late archaic or classical period. 25 of these seem to have begun their production only in the classical period, but six began already in the sixth century, i.e. at the very inception of Greek coinage. Among these six archaic mints is that of Sikyon. There is no direct correlation between the importance of a *polis* and the production coins: Arkadian Thaliades, for instance, is almost entirely unknown apart from its Archaic coinage. Moreover, ancient historians do not agree on *why* Greek *poleis* struck coins and so we cannot say with certainty what the production of coinage tells us about a *polis*. However, it seems the most reasonable interpretation of Greek coinage that *poleis* were prompted to produce it by the need to make and receive large payments that is, to pay expenses and receive taxes. Sikyon, then, must have felt such a need from the sixth through the fifth and fourth centuries, and in this respect, again, it resembles Corinth rather than, say, tiny Asea in Arkadia.

A vague outline of the constitutional history of Sikyon can be given, and in this respect, too, Sikyon bears a remarkable resemblance to Corinth. At Corinth, the traditional aristocracy was replaced by the tyranny of the Kypselids in the middle of the seventh century. At Sikyon, the traditional aristocracy was replaced by the tyranny of the Orthagorids in the middle of the seventh century. At Corinth, the tyranny of the Kypselids was replaced by an oligarchy in the early sixth century. At Sikyon, the tyranny of the Orthagorids was replaced by an oligarchy in the middle of the sixth century. At Corinth, the oligarchy which replaced tyranny was extremely stable and remained in place throughout the sixth, fifth and fourth centuries. At Sikyon, the oligarchy which replaced tyranny was extremely stable and remained in place throughout the sixth, fifth and fourth centuries. In the fourth century, Corinth experienced a brief democratic interlude. In the fourth century, Sikyon experienced a brief democratic interlude. The two remarkably similar constitutional histories suggest that socio-economic and political conditions at Sikyon must by and large have resembled those found at Corinth.

The elite of Sikyon seems to have had a lifestyle resembling that of the elites elsewhere in the Greek world, a lifestyle of which athletics was an essential part. Sikyon produced victors at all the great festivals of the *periodos*, and at least 8 Sikyonians are on record as Panhellenic victors, not a bad record and one that resembles or outdoes the records of major *poleis* such as Tegea and Mantinea. Moreover, Sikyon itself celebrated an athletic festival, which enjoyed some international prestige, though, needless to say, it pales in comparison with the Isthmian Festival staged by Corinth. The Sikyonian festival, the *Pythia* in honour of Apollo, was founded by the famous tyrant Kleisthenes in the sixth century and existed throughout the archaic, classical and hellenistic periods. As already hinted, the athletic competitions of the festival enjoyed a certain international prestige, and it attracted athletes from several other *poleis* than Sikyon itself, already in the sixth century. Athletes from Argos, Sparta, Corinth, Athens, Thebes, Aitna and Rhodos are known to have competed at the *Pythia*, and they surely cannot represent anything but the top of the iceberg. If we exclude the festivals of the *periodos*, the *Pythia* of Sikyon is in fact one of the more conspicuous athletic festivals of the Peloponnese and more or less on a par with the *Hekatomboia* of Argos.

Finally, we may note that Sikyon erected treasuries at both Olympia and Delphi. Only two other *poleis* are positively known to have built at both Olympia and Delphi, and these are

Syracuse on Sicily and Kyrene in Libya, two of the biggest of all Greek *poleis*. In building at both Olympia and Delphi, then, Sikyon was projecting an image of itself of the kind that otherwise only the greatest of the greatest did: Not even Athens or Corinth built at both sites.