CHAPTER THREE

THE SACRED FIRE AND THE PUBLIC HEARTH

The Transfer of Sacred Fire from the Mother-City

An entry in the *Etymologicum Magnum* under the heading, *prytaneia*, reads:

πρυτανεία: δι τὸ ἱερὸν πῦρ ἐπὶ τούτων ἀπόκειται, καὶ τοὺς δὲ ποτὲ ἀποικίαν στέλλονται, αὐτόθεν αὐδαθαί τὸ ἀπὸ τῆς ἑστίας πῦρ, δὴ ἐστὶ ξωπηρείαθαί.

*prytaneia*: The sacred fire is stored in them; and those who take out a colony to any place whatsoever kindle for themselves a fire from the hearth there (that is, they light it). (694.28)

It is commonly accepted that the practice attributed to the Greek colonists of taking with them sacred fire from their mother-city was the general rule.¹ The fire which is said to have been taken from the perpetual fire that burned on the common hearth in the prytaneion, that is, from the “heart” of the *polis*, seems to be a beautiful symbol of participation in and continuity of the community’s collective life and soul. This interpretation of the symbolism, however, is open to question, for it is not explicitly stated in these terms in our sources. Furthermore, it is difficult to assess the historical role and meaning of symbols; by nature, social and political symbols are particularly compressed and composed of layers of meaning added by change of circumstance and political reality. The correlation between such changes and their effect on the meaning of these symbols does not lend itself easily to a discursive discussion.²

Our first task is to put together and assess the evidence for this custom. As we shall see immediately, the explicit evidence is so late and meager that one wonders why scholars have accepted it as a universal custom of Greek religion at all. The evidence proffered by Fustel de Coulanges in his seminal *La cité antique* and by subsequent scholars, consists in certain scholia of the 4th century A.D., the statement in the *Etymologicum Magnum* quoted above, and a possible allusion in Herodotus. Farnell was justified, therefore, in raising doubts about the universality of the custom of transfer of sacred fire.³

It is our intention to both analyze the known evidence and in addition to present fresh evidence and sources which until now were not, it seems to us, put together for this purpose. Through this we hope to prove that the ritual of

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¹ Bérard (1960: 148).
² See generally on the difference between symbolic or mythic “condensation” and logical discursive thought in Cassirer (1940).
³ Farnell (1909: 351).
sacred fire-bearing was indeed a general practice.

Our plan in this chapter follows this outline: (a) evidence (b) the probable origins for the transfer of sacred fire (c) the symbolism of the common hearth in the prytaneion of the polis (d) perpetual fires and their significance for the symbolic values of the transfer of sacred fire (e) exceptional colonies (f) conclusions.

In highly rhetorical praise of Athens, Aelius Aristides (second half of the 2nd century A.D.) emphasizes the special nature of the prytaneion and its hearth. Since the scholia on the following passage furnish the main evidence for the custom of transferring the sacred fire, it is important to look at this passage first:

καὶ μοι δοκεῖ τις ἐν εἶπεῖν ὅτι οἱ μὲν ἄλλοι τὰς πόλεις οἰκουσιν, ὡσπέρ στρατόπεδα, οἷς κατέλαβον ἐμμείναντες, μόνοις δὲ τοῖς ταύτης ἐγγόνοις τῆς χώρας ἡ πόλις ἔστι κυρία καὶ μόνη πόλεων, ἦ κομιδὴ γε ἐν ὀλίγαις, ἐστίν ἀκίνητον πρυτανείου δικαίως νέμει (Panath. 29).

And it seems to me that someone might say that whereas all other people inhabit their cities like camps in which they remained after seizing them, to the offspring of this land alone the city is sovereign; and it alone, or with very few other cities, justly maintains in the prytaneion a hearth which has not been moved.

The praises of the Athenian prytaneion are repeated often: it is the hearth of Greece, a prytaneion of wisdom, etc. Two aspects of the singularity of the Athenians are emphasized in the passage quoted: the ancient theme that Athenians are autochthonous and that the hearth (Hestia) has never been moved or replaced, as may have been the case in other poleis.

Whatever the case may be, Aristides’ statement is interesting, for it reveals how the hearth in the prytaneion at Athens was perceived, even if the exact meaning of his words escapes us. It also seems that in order for the symbolism implied in the transfer of sacred fire to function, it was necessary that this fire derive from a fixed point (and that it be a perpetual fire — see below). A movable hearth could not fulfil this condition.

The unmoved hearth intrigued the scholiasts on this passage, as is shown by their following comments:

1. Schol. D. A. Aristides 103, 14: τὸ πρυτανεῖον σύμβολον ἐστὶ τῆς πόλεως· οὐδὲ

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4 See testimonia No. 227; 228; 69; 121; 233 in Miller (1978).
5 On Athenians as autochthonous: Ermatinger (1897) and now: Loraux (1981). It is unlikely that hearths in non Athenian prytaneia were moveable hearths, rather, they were sometimes replaced (I am grateful to F.T. van Straten’s comment to me on this point). Hearths in private Greek households were fixed. McDonald (1943: 274–275) argues that this may have been different in public meeting places where perhaps moveable hearths were more practical, but because this is based on an argument from silence, it is open to question.
6 It seems that Aristides simply carries on the military metaphor of camps; as we shall see below armies did carry fire with them. Still, this is not how the scholia explain it.