CHAPTER EIGHT

GRAIN FOR ATHENS

Athens was the largest polis in the Greek World in the classical period and imported grain from various suppliers, mainly Egypt, the Black Sea and Sicily. More information on the imports of Athens has survived than for all other poleis together. The greater part of the evidence regarding the Athenian grain supply concerns the fourth century, mainly because of the existence of multiple lawcourt speeches relating to the grain trade. The situation before the fourth century is rather obscure. For the archaic period, there is no evidence to suggest that Athens imported grain regularly; however, that does not mean that grain imports were unknown in the period.

In the fifth century, Athens imported a variety of foodstuffs from around the Mediterranean. Most of the surviving evidence refers to luxury products, including grain products, such as *semidalis* from Phoenicia.\(^1\) There is no surviving mention of regular grain imports from abroad, although there is evidence of grain reaching Athens from Egypt and of Athenian interest in the grain production of Sicily in the planning for the Sicilian Expedition.\(^2\) However both the estimated population of Athens in the fifth century (see below page 171) and the reliance of the Periklean strategy on vital imports suggest that Athens imported grain from abroad in significant quantities at least in the second half of the century.

For the fourth century, it is generally agreed that Athens imported grain in large quantities, although the exact volume of the trade is a matter of debate. Demosthenes in his speech *Against Leptines* says that Athens imported 400,000 *medimnoi* per annum from the Bosporus: “Now from there we import 400,000 *medimnoi*.”\(^3\) It should be noted at the outset that Demosthenes is arguing in favour of Leukon being a major benefactor, consequently, he would play down or omit anything

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\(^1\) Athenaios 1.28a.

\(^2\) Sicily: Thucydides 6.90; Egypt: Plutarch *Perikles* 37.4. For the surviving evidence not providing the necessary basis for identifying any regular contact with a specific producer, particularly the Black Sea, see Braund (2007: 42–51).

\(^3\) Demosthēnes 20.32: αἱ τοῖνυν παρ' ἐκείνου δεῦρ’ ἀφετεροῦμεναι σίτου μιρίαδές περὶ τετταράκιοντ’ εἰσὶ.
that detracts from this point. These 400,000 medimnoi come, according to Demosthenes, from the Crimean Bosporus only, not from the whole of the Black Sea as some scholars have argued. Athens may well have imported grain from other Black Sea regions as well.

Garnsey has argued that Demosthenes refers to a bad year for local crops, and thus a year of extra imports. However, Demosthenes specifically mentions a bad year later in the passage, and there mentions that Leukon responded to this crisis by sending a large gift of grain to Athens: “But in the year before last, when there was famine amongst all peoples, not only did he send you enough grain, but also …” Later Kyrene was to do something similar, not just to Athens but to a variety of poleis and kingdoms. The implication is that the import of 400,000 medimnoi was common, not a crisis response. Although, as Oliver argued, the exact figure may apply only to the year in question, as per the accounts of the sitophylakes, the relative quantity must have been within the usual import quantities from the Bosporus, since an excessive import, probably due to shortage in Athens, would have immediately defeated Demosthenes’ argument as the audience would have been aware that the import for that year was exceptionally high.

While it is possible that Demosthenes is lying or trying to mislead his audience, it seems unlikely that the Athenians were so ignorant of their

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4 For Demosthenes’ relations with the Black Sea, see Braund (2007: 57–58).
6 For example from Romania, which is an important producer of wheat in the region, although there is no evidence to my knowledge suggesting grain imports from Tomis or Kallatis. Note that Romania in spite of being almost 3 times smaller than the Ukraine produces on average almost half the wheat that Ukraine produces, according to the data from FAOSTAT (note particularly the relative yields):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Romania production (Mt)</th>
<th>Romania area (Ha)</th>
<th>Romania yield (Hg/Ha)</th>
<th>Ukraine production (Mt)</th>
<th>Ukraine area (Have)</th>
<th>Ukraine yield (Hg/Ha)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>7,027,000</td>
<td>2,462,000</td>
<td>28,542</td>
<td>18,700,000</td>
<td>6,570,000</td>
<td>28,465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>7,812,428</td>
<td>2,291,650</td>
<td>34,091</td>
<td>17,520,200</td>
<td>5,533,700</td>
<td>31,661</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 Garnsey (1988: 97).
8 Demosthenes 20.33: ἀλλὰ πρωπέρυσιν αἰτοδείας παρὰ πάσιν ἀνθυφόποις γενομένης οὐ μόνον ἤμεν ἤμαντον σῖτων ἀπέστειλεν, ἀλλὰ …
9 RO 96.
10 Whitby (1998: 124–125) rightly notes that the amount of grain stopped by Philip II of Macedon in the Hellespont supports such large amounts being imported from the Black Sea. See also Moreno (2007a: 69–70).