CHAPTER 11

Revisiting Urban Graveyard Theory: Migrant Flows in Hellenistic and Roman Athens*

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Introduction

Foreigners in Athens formed a fluctuating but sizeable group. How many ‘metics’ or free foreigners exactly lived in the city and surrounding area, we will never be able to establish. A very rough indication of the size of this body of inhabitants of the city suffices, however, to set the stage for this paper on the demographic characteristics of Athenian immigrants. Current estimates hold that free migrants and their descendants formed anywhere between 15% to about a third of the total population of the city. With a (very roughly) estimated total population size of about 300,000 in the fifth century BCE and 200–250,000 in the fourth century BCE for the whole of Attica, of whom about 50,000 might have been slaves, this would imply a minimum of around 30,000 metics residing in Attica in the classical period.¹ Many of them might have lived in the harbour town of the Piraeus, or in the surrounding countryside rather than in the city of Athens itself, which housed less than half of the total population of Attica.² Mobility in the Hellenistic period, so it has been argued, accelerated between 350 and 250 BCE.³ Whether increased levels of mobility in the Greek East coincided with an increase in the share of foreign residents in Athens cannot be confirmed. But the fact that Athens displayed greater openness towards foreigners in the Hellenistic period has been well recognised.⁴

² Less than half of the total for Attica residing in Athens: Hansen 1986: 67–68.
³ Reger 2007: 461.
⁴ Oliver 2010.

* The author thanks the editors of this volume for their helpful comments. Thanks are also due to Elena Isayev, Johan Strubbe and Walter Scheidel for their comments on an earlier draft, to Christelle Fischer-Bovet, and to Graham Oliver for clarifying the status quo of research on non-migrant gravestones from Athens.
The city remained an attractive destination for migrants, even though it had lost its position as the centre of the Greek East, and significantly declined in population size.

Given its reduced population size, it is not evident whether or not post-classical Athens would have counted among the so-called ‘urban graveyard’ cities, in which population size and population density created elevated mortality levels. That the city declined in numbers during post-Classical times was a logical corollary of its reduced political importance and economic strength. Yet how much smaller Athens became after the end of the Classical period is not all that evident: there are few estimates, and the evidential base on which these rest seems very flimsy. Morris held that by 150 BCE, Athens had declined to less than 10,000 inhabitants, a figure falling below De Vries’ and Sharlin’s minimum threshold for the urban graveyard effect to operate. Others, however, hold that 10,000 is too low an estimate, and suggest that Athens in Roman times may have had up to 20,000 inhabitants. Hence post-Classical Athens is an indeterminate case when it comes to the question of density-driven elevation of mortality rates.

In Classical urban graveyard theory, as first presented by John Graunt in 1662 and subsequently elaborated on by Petty, Malthus, Süssmilch, and Wrigley, elevated mortality rates induced by crowding were key. The demographic role of migrants to urban centres was to fill the gaps left by those who died prematurely from infectious disease. Immigrants kept cities going that would otherwise be running out of people. The need for migrants to maintain population size in urban centres was, on this same view, perpetual. They were needed as a compensation for high death rates.

In 1978 Sharlin gave a new twist to urban graveyard theory. He placed the demographic characteristics of temporary migrants (sex, age, marriage and fertility behaviour) in the spotlight. According to Sharlin, it was migrants, not permanent residents, who played a key role in creating the surplus of deaths over births in the bookkeeping of urban areas. These migrants strongly contributed to the observed urban graveyard effect because they boosted death

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6 For a neat overview of the urban graveyard theory as first set out by John Graunt in 1662 and subsequently elaborated on by Petty, Malthus, Süssmilch and Wrigley, see Puschmann et al. 2013. The hypothesis rested on comparing deaths to births – a method that does not take the effect of migration itself into account. Among ancient historians, comparative studies drawing on this method are still being used; see Lo Cascio 2006: 54 and Hin 2013: 221–228 for critical remarks.