The Genos of Salaminioi and the Cult of Heracles-God

- A Short Briefing Paper-

Theodoraki Stella BA, MA, PhD University of Alcalá, Spain

The political origins and the social identity of the genos of Salaminioi is still under discussion as no consensus on the matter has been reached yet among scholars. Sure enough, this group of people did not form an aristocratic clan with religious duties *sensu stricto* but rather a community of worshippers that preserved its autonomy and redefined itself through the establishment of cults and the periodical celebration of rites related to Salamis in the sanctuaries it owned and administrated in the Attic peninsula. Through its traditions and religious practices, the community came to forge its distinct political identity as Salaminians residing in Athens since the cultic association had leaders and followers who regularly met in the same sacred grounds and decided over diverse affairs of their concern. Moreover, it had its own assets from the business activities and the property it owned with which it funded its common needs and activities. The genos of Salaminioi, though settled in clusters scattered in the Attic peninsula, was considered as a single religious-political body until the 3rd century BCE when after a prolonged dispute, it split in two groups, the Salaminians of the Seven Tribes and those of Sounion.

In the present paper, I recognize the community of the Salaminians as people whose nucleus immigrated to Athens during the on-going war between Megara and Athens over the dominion of Salamis. It seems that the main body of the genos of Salaminioi sought refuge in Attica some time between the late 7th and the early 6th century BCE when political complications in the homeland forced the supporters of the Athenian cause, both prominent members of the local aristocracy and their clients, to perpetual exile. Thus, the Salaminians crossed the strait of Saronicus and came to Attica. A group of them originally settled at the city-deme of Melite- a later myth claimed that Ajax’s sons were made Athenian citizens and established in Melite as well as in Brauron after they had handed over Salamis to the Athenians- where amongst other local cults, they founded the cult of Heracles-god. However, the presence of strangers in the deme was not particularly welcomed by the local people and soon, before their division and assimilation, the Salaminians changed neighborhood and moved to Diomeia. The aition of the festival of Metageitnia- some Athenians moving from Melite to Diomeia- probably makes reference to this incident; the Metageitnia were celebrated annually during the month bearing the same name that did not have any other significant festival but for the afore-mentioned one and the Heracleia in the district of Cynosarges. Both religious events were associated with the Salaminians of Alopece who probably invented the mythical explanation of the compound place name of Cynosarges and founded the cult of Heracles-god in the shrine-gymnasium of Cynosarges. I speculate that the posterior misunderstanding of the nothoi (metro xenoi) frequenting the gymnasium because of the mixed origins of its namesake, Heracles had to do with the foreign pedigree of its Salaminian founders.

The Salaminian community of Alopece was ritually connected with the deme of Phaleron (of the Cleisthenic tribe of Aiantis) through the procession of the Oschophoria and the Lesser Eleusinian Mysteries whose aition had to do with the initiation of the foreigner Heracles into the Mysteries that permitted him to descend to the Underworld and to return unscathed preannouncing, thus, his subsequent immortal status. The deme of Phaleron
where we again encounter the genos of Salaminioi worshipping its local deities (Athena Skiras) and heroes, together with the demes of Peiraeus, Thymaitadae and Xypete made the religious coalition of Tetrakomon Heracleion; people residing in the afore-mentioned demes met at the local sanctuary of Heracleion not only to honor their Heracles with athletic and musical competitions but also to work together issues of their community. Another religious coalition that served similar causes and convened at the local Heracleion was the Marathonian Tetrapolis that included the demes of Oenoe, Tricorinthus, Probalinthus and Marathon; three of its four demes belonged to the Cleisthenic tribe of Aiantis. In the aftermath of the epic Battle of Marathon, the cult of Heracles became extremely popular amongst the Greeks but still, the people of Marathon claimed to be the first to acknowledge the divine status of the hero. Heracles-god was also very popular in Porthmos of Sounion; his cult answered to the dangerous and harsh geography of the region. Porthmos in Greek means narrow passage, straits and every voyage to the unknown waters of the Aegean was thought to be a trip with no return whereas the narrow, dark galleries of the silver mines of Laurion were equally places with no return. Having, thus, Heracles-god who overcame these obstacles by their side, mariners and workers in Laurion felt great relief. They dedicated a shrine and performed sacrifices and local games to honor their patron deity.

Indeed, the worship of Heracles who received honors with sacrifices and games proper to a god, was particularly popular in Athens during the second half of the 6th century BCE. Its cultural impact can be witnessed now in the Attic mythology of Heracles as well as in the art products of all types of material monuments. I claim that this peculiarity- Doric deity in an Ionian city- was due to the strong mythological-religious influence of the genos of Salaminioi in the Athenian tradition which refreshed its poor content as well as to the historical circumstances of the moment. Peisistratus’ victorious military expedition against Megara concluded in an exchange of lands with the defeated city: Megara recovered the port of Nisaea while Athens received the eyesore of Salamis. The annexation of Salamis to Athens was the happy outcome of decades of bitter interstate struggles during which the chronic crushing defeats of Athens had fomented a climate of animosity against whatever Salaminian. There was even a time when its name was a taboo and any discussion on taking back the island was banned. Under the afore-mentioned circumstances, when the first Salaminians arrived in Attica, they were not well received and the local communities of Attica were extremely suspicious of the newcomers. The Alcmeonids, the family bearing the curse of Cylon, were the only ones that show tolerance and admitted the genos of Salaminioi in the areas they controlled. These were located in the deme of Alopece in the southeastern outskirts of the asty and the Paralia, the eastern coast of Attica. The genos soon became friends and allies with the family: by the end of the 6th century BCE, young Salaminian Alcibiades was collaborating with Alcmeonid Megacles to overthrow the hateful tyrant.