

TOKENS AND THEIR ECONOMY: THE GREEKS HAD A USE FOR THEM

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The Greeks were the first people to use tokens on a large scale to solve a serious political problem. During the fifth century B.C., Pericles introduced a hitherto unheard of measure, namely payment for money for attending the Ecclesia, or General Assembly, where most citizens gathered to take part in the deliberations of the day and vote on various issues (Kenyon, 1891). The payment was introduced because attendance was declining; poor people could not afford to leave their work to spend a whole day on matters of State without compensation. The amount paid was relatively small but was sufficient to justify a day's absence from work. The system worked well for nearly half a century.

Following the Peloponnesian war and the defeat of Athens at the end of the fifth century, an economic collapse occurred wherein inflation further impoverished the poorer classes. During the fourth century B.C., the State could not afford to raise the one-drachma payment for attending the Ecclesia. Gradually a curious phenomenon began to appear. The assembly was always well attended in the early hours of each session, but as the day passed, members began to leave. By the end of the day, very few citizens remained. First, the payment was made when the citizens arrived very early in the morning before the session began (Rogers, 1924). Second, the assembly was held on the Pnyx, an open-air space suitable for the occasion. The Pnyx was surrounded by trees, rocks, and slopes, making it easy for those who wanted to do so to slip away unnoticed by the policemen who guarded the assembly. When the time arrived for a vote to be taken, only a fraction of the morning attendees were present.

In an effort to increase the attendance, the government decided to provide the payment at the *end* of each session, hoping citizens would stay for money and cast their votes too. In time, a different phenomenon developed. The early hours of the session were sparsely attended, although the assembly gradually filled as citizens finished their own work and arrived at the Ecclesia in time to collect their payment. These late arrivals thus did not take part in the deliberations and often voted without knowing the issues.

To remedy the situation, someone in the government thought of an ingenious way to encourage the citizens to arrive early and remain until the end of the session. Tokens, in the form of baked clay tablets of various sizes and shapes, were developed. To prevent counterfeiting, different tokens were used each time. The tokens were given upon arrival and were exchanged for money at the end of the session (Glotz, 1928). This procedure solved the problem for many years until Greece was conquered by the Romans (ca. 150 B.C.)

References:

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