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The Organization of Labor at Delos

The relationship of town to country in Hellenistic Delos was atypical, but the annual inscriptions of the hieropoioi reveal much about its economy—more, in many respects, than we know about anywhere else, even Athens.

The sanctuary owned farms that were leased out at public auction every ten years. They were regularly rented by the local nobility, apparently for profit, since rents were paid in coin. Small-scale farming, if it existed, did not interest the temple.

We find labor for honor, for salary, by contract, and occasional labor.

The work of the magistrates and priests was honorific. The latter presumably received perquisites from the sacrifices; the magistrates received only honor.

True salaries were few. The architect usually received no more than a skilled worker's daily wage, but since it was paid every day in the year, his annual income was very high. A few experiments with skilled workers on retainer were abandoned. Some minor magistrates received stipends too small to live on.

Contractors undertook many projects, from the very small to the very large. Large projects were carefully supervised, on terms that permitted the contractor to undertake enterprises for which he could not provide startup capital. There was good money to be made, and at least some jobs attracted foreign bidders.

Lastly, there were odd jobs. Skilled jobs tend to have been done by the same people over relatively long periods of times, but most were done by whoever was available. It appears that men appeared in the labor market only when they had a particular need of money, living for the rest of the time from other resources. This kind of variable labor force has parallels in the present day and in ancient Athens.

There was some mobility, but class lines were harder to pass the higher one went. Daily work for cash was not the way most people earned their bread, but rather a common way to meet special needs. Contracting could significantly advance a person's standing, but only rarely could it turn a sow's ear into a silk purse.