

No Free Lunches

Paraprasis in the Greek cities of the Roman East

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I. Introduction

At some time in the late 120s AD a certain C. Iulius Theophrastus, citizen of Sparta, during a shortage bought grain at the price of 40 *denarii* per *medimnos* and then sold it to his fellow-citizens at a mere 12 *denarii* per *medimnos*.¹ This was still quite expensive, to be sure, but not as outrageous as the going scarcity price in the market.

Theophrastus was not doing something particularly new. Centuries earlier, in 330/29 BC, an Athenian merchant named Chrysippus and his brother had imported over 10,000 *medimnoi* of wheat into Athens and had sold them at ‘the normal price’ (τῆς καθεστηκυίας τιμῆς) of 5 drachmas per *medimnos* when the market price had reached 16 drachmas (Dem. 34.39). Grand Hellenistic civic benefactors such as Protogenes of Olbia and Moschion of Priene had likewise provided their fellow-citizens with cheap grain at difficult times (*Syll.*³ 495; *I.Priene* 108). It is in the Greek cities of Rome’s eastern provinces during the early and high Empire, however, that such practices are particularly well attested. In the inscriptions from this period (our chief source of evidence) the phenomenon is usually referred to as *paraprasis*, and somewhat less frequently as *parapipraskein*, *epeuonismos* or *parapolein*. All these terms signify the sale at reduced price of foodstuffs, primarily grain, but oil too (both for

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¹ Woodward 1925-1926: 227-234, no. F3.

consumption and gymnasial purposes).² In the honorific inscriptions in question, *parapraseds* are usually listed among the offices held and the benefactions made by the honorand. This would suggest that we might be justified in considering *paraprasis* as part of the general phenomenon of civic euergetism, the exchange of gifts for honours between wealthy citizens and their communities so characteristic of Hellenistic and imperial Greek *polis* culture.³ And yet, there is something odd about it.

On the reasonable assumption that euergetism was, among other things, a mechanism for converting economic capital (wealth) into symbolic capital (prestige), it seems strange that the organisers of *parapraseds* did not simply give away their grain for free, thus maximising their prestige. One could perhaps make some profit by selling instead of donating, especially if the price at which one sold the grain was higher than normal (but of course still below the current scarcity price, otherwise the sale would not count as a *paraprasis*), at least if the grain came from one's own stocks. *Paraprasis* organisers seem however often to have imported their grain⁴, and in that case it is doubtful if there was much profit to be had, especially if the scarcity afflicted wide areas and once the cost of transportation is factored in. If profit was the main motive, moreover, why not sell at the scarcity price in the first place, or sell in another market, where prices might be higher still (as indeed individual elite landowners on occasion did –see below)? In addition, as numerous inscriptions testify, local elite benefactors were none too stingy or profit-motivated when it came to other forms of munificence, easily spending thousands and sometimes even hundreds of thousands of *denarii* on public buildings,

² Wilhelm 1897: 75-77 = 2000: 233-235; Robert 1937: 347-348; Triantaphyllopoulos 1971. In the remainder of this paper, I shall employ the generic term *paraprasis*

³ See in general Veyne 1976; Zuiderhoek 2009 for the Roman imperial period.

⁴ As did Iulius Theophrastus at Sparta, see Woodward 1925-1926: 230-231 for discussion.

games, festivals and, indeed, public banquets and distributions.⁵ What, then, was the rationale behind *parapraxeis*? Profit can, I think, hardly be a satisfactory answer. Instead, we need to look for a more systemic explanation, which takes into account various socio-economic, political and ideological factors shaping post-Classical *polis* society, especially during the Roman imperial period.

II. *Paraprasis* and Shortages

Parapraxeis were not exclusively linked to food shortages. For instance, they regularly feature as a type of benefaction in inscriptions recording the careers of priests and cult personnel associated with the sanctuary of Apollo at Didyma (Miletus) from the late first century BC onwards, and the texts in question do not in every case refer to a shortage.⁶ There is nothing unusual about this, given that it was not uncommon for priests and priestesses at great sanctuaries to provide meals for and distribute olive oil and wine among worshippers, particularly during festivals, as, for instance, numerous inscriptions from the sanctuaries of Hera and Zeus Panamaros at Stratonikeia testify.⁷ In many texts recording *parapraxeis*, however, there are indications that the benefactor's sale of foodstuffs at a reduced price occurred during a period of serious scarcity. Thus, as we saw, C. Iulius Theophrastus' *paraprasis* at Sparta took place during a shortage (ἐν σπάνει), while a little further on the text states that during his career he frequently gave *parapraxeis* 'in pressing circumstances' (ἐν

⁵ Broughton 1938: 499-918 for many references to sums donated by local elite benefactors in Roman Asia Minor. Zuiderhoek 2005: 167-186 for analysis.

⁶ Although it is hard to be sure sometimes, as several of the inscriptions are quite damaged. See e.g. *I.Didyma* 416 (first century BC?), 391A1 (47 BC), 391B1 (24 BC), 406 (early imperial), 296 (imperial, perhaps under Hadrian). An exception is *I.Didyma* 248 (c. AD 50/84), which records a sale at a fair (reduced) price of grain and olive oil during 'troublesome times.'

⁷ Frézouls 1991: 13-14 for examples.

τοῖς ἐπείγουσιν καιροῖς) (lines 15-16). At Beroia in Macedonia during the late first century AD, Q. Poppilius Python sold grain at a reduced price during ‘difficult times’ (ἐν καιροῖς ἀνανκ<α>ίοις, *SEG* 17.315), while around the same time at Didyma (Miletus) a benefactor sold grain and olive oil at a fair price during ‘troublesome times’ (ἐν [δυ]σχε[ρέ]σι καιροῖς, *I. Didyma* 248, c. AD 50/84). Other texts eschew such rather vague references and are more specific. At Metropolis, an unknown benefactor organised *paraprasis* of grain during shortages (ἐν σειτοδείαις, *I.Ephesos* 3419). A fragmentary inscription from Argos, dating to the reign of Hadrian, shows an *agoranomos* who had olive oil sold at a reduced price during a shortage (ἐν [ἐ]νδείᾳ, *BCH* 28 (1904) 427-8, no. 10). Other attestations can be found in texts from Kolossae (ἐν σειτοδείᾳ, Robert, *Laodicée du Lycos*, 277-9, under Hadrian?), Aizanoi (ἐν σειτοδείᾳ, *SEG* 35.1365, under Hadrian or Antoninus Pius), in Herakleia (ἐν σπάνει, *IG* X.2 2 53, c. AD 100-150) and Lete in Macedonia (ἐν τε σειτενδείαις, M.N. Tod, *BSA* 23 (1918-1919) 72-81, no. 7, early in the reign of Hadrian), and in Amantia in Illyria ([ἐν δὲ τη σει]τοδείᾳ, *Albania Antica* 1 197.19, c. AD 200⁸). In addition there are texts that do not contain a direct reference to shortages, but mention a relatively high current price, probably indicating scarcity, and then go on to mention the low price at which the benefactor sold.⁹ Thus, even if we cannot relate every single instance of *paraprasis* to an episode of scarcity, there clearly existed a strong link between the phenomenon of *paraprasis* and the vicissitudes of the urban food supply. How then should we understand that link?

⁸ This inscription does not contain the term *paraprasis* or any of the other terms referring to the same phenomenon listed above, but it is clear from the text that something along the lines of a *paraprasis* of grain took place.

⁹ See e.g. *SEG* 38.679, Stuberra, Macedonia, AD 74/5, where the olive oil sold at 12 *asses* per *xestes* may represent a scarcity price; Robert 1937:343-350, no. 4, Sebastopolis, where grain at 4 *denarii* per *kupros* is probably a scarcity price.

As research during the past few decades has made clear, local and regional food shortages were endemic in the ancient Mediterranean, due to regional climatic variation and especially the high interannual variability in rainfall.¹⁰ This meant that good and bad harvests alternated in a highly unpredictable manner, with a frequent occurrence of dearth. Poorer agriculturally inactive urban inhabitants were particularly at risk. The high inelasticity of demand for food and the fact that even during normal years, the urban poor are likely to have spent most of their income on purchasing foodstuffs meant that a bad harvest and the resulting high prices on the urban grain market could quickly compromise the livelihood of a substantial section of the urban population.¹¹ Theoretically, of course, an integrated grain market might have resolved such problems. Mediterranean regional climatic variability and ecological fragmentation meant that shortages in one locality would often occur (roughly) simultaneously with gluts in another. The Mediterranean Sea, it has been argued, provided an efficient conduit for medium- and long-distance transport of staples (and other types of commerce) between Greek and Roman cities clustered around its shores like frogs around a pond, ensuring a high level of connectivity.¹² However, recent in-depth study of grain markets in the Roman world has indicated that this level of connectivity should not be overstated. Even during the period of political unification within a single Empire that created an unrivalled system of trunk roads connecting its many cities, provided a unified legal system and a singly currency, and cleared the seas of pirates, grain market integration in the Mediterranean region remained relatively low, mainly due to the slowness and high cost of transport and communication.¹³ Consequently, to overcome this lack of integration and forcefully match supply to demand in case of shortages required the intervention and agency

¹⁰ Garnsey 1988: 8-16.

¹¹ Jongman and Dekker 1989

¹² Horden and Purcell 2000.

¹³ Erdkamp 2005.

of powerful, wealthy individuals and groups involved in extensive interregional elite networks, emperors, governors, but above all, local urban elites. The economic misery created by shortages could (and did) easily translate into social unrest, protests and riots that had the potential to undermine urban social and political stability, and, most importantly, endanger the position of the urban elite. Hence urban elites in particular would be strongly motivated to intervene, and like their counterparts in many other pre-modern urbanised societies, that is exactly what they did.

The people, moreover, also *expected* elites to intervene. This has become particularly clear from research on early modern European food riots, which often resulted not from scarcities *per se*, but from a perceived disregard, by elites, for what the social historian E.P. Thompson has called ‘the moral economy.’¹⁴ This term refers to a pattern of expectations and assumptions among the populace based on past behaviour of elites and governments in times of scarcity (or at least collective memories infused with moral ideals about the correct behaviour of authorities in such circumstances). Studying eighteenth-century English food riots, Thompson found that protesters often focussed on what they perceived as a breach of customary, fair regulation of the grain market that ensured prices were reasonable and the poor received their share, regulation which in the recent past had been supported by the aristocracy and the government. The liberalisation of the British grain market however started to erode such upper-class/governmental support, resulting, in times of shortage, in popular demands that the elite once again take up its paternalistic role.¹⁵ Approaching the topic of food riots from a different angle, that of European state formation, the sociologist Charles Tilly came to a similar conclusion:

¹⁴ Thompson 1971. See Thompson 1991 for an overview of the debate and a reply to critics.

¹⁵ Thompson 1971; Erdkamp 2002. Also Broekaert and Zuiderhoek 2012: 77-80.

On the whole rebellions did not occur when people were hungriest, but when people saw that officials were failing to apply the standard controls, tolerating profiteering or, worst of all, authorizing shipments of precious local grain to other places.¹⁶

The same mechanism was also at work in food riots in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century (Qing) China, where “not simply the quality of the harvest [was at issue], but whether the people controlling supplies would make grain available on terms and in quantities demanded by people expecting their needs to be met.”¹⁷

In the Greco-Roman world, a similar pattern of expectations existed among urban populations regarding the behaviour of authorities in the event of scarcity.¹⁸ This can be seen from the fact that when faced with shortages, urban populations generally did not vent their displeasure on the economic actors in the market (traders, bakers, food-sellers) but turned to the authorities, local elites, city magistrates, provincial governors, kings or emperors.¹⁹ For their part, ancient elites and rulers generally seem to have shared the urban masses’ vision of a morally just food market (which did however not always prevent individual large landowners from profiteering at the people’s expense, through speculative hoarding or export of local

¹⁶ Tilly 1990: 118.

¹⁷ Bin Wong 1982: 785

¹⁸ See Erdkamp 2002 to which this paragraph is much indebted.

¹⁹ See e.g. Philostratus, *Vit. Soph.* 526: citizens of second-century AD Athens, enraged by high bread prices, attacked a *strategos*, the sophist Lollianus; Philostratus, *Vita Ap.* 1.15: at Aspendus, a leading magistrate came near to being burned alive during a scarcity. In AD 354 the people of Antioch mutilated and killed a provincial governor during a severe shortage, see Ammianus Marc. 14.7.5. Roman emperors were also frequently targeted by crowds enraged by scarcity and high food prices, see e.g. Tacitus, *Ann.* 6.13 (Tiberius is jeered by the theatre crowds because of the high price of grain); Suetonius, *Claudius* 18.2 (Claudius is set upon and pelted with pieces of bread by an angry crowd in the forum). So strongly were the emperors associated with the food supply that when Nero left the capital for Greece, the city populace feared shortages, see Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.36.4.

supplies to high-price regions –see below).²⁰ As a leading citizen of Prusa in Bithynia, Dio Chrysostom, accused, apparently wrongfully, of grain price speculation, remarked to the popular assembly, the people’s demand for “supervision of your market” was “the course of sensible human beings, and in this no-one will oppose you” (*Or.* 46.14).²¹ All this has prompted Paul Erdkamp to argue that the notion of a ‘moral economy’, interpreted broadly, was as applicable to the ancient food markets as to early modern European ones.²²

In the ancient world, furthermore, especially at the urban level, the expectations of the moral economy were mediated through, and reinforced, by what we may call the entitlements of citizenship. In the Greek *polis* (and Roman *civitas*), the shared citizenship of richer and

²⁰ Note the *lex Iulia de annonae* against grain price speculation in the city of Rome (*Dig.* 48.12.2), echoes of which can be found in the *lex Irnitana*, a municipal law from Spain (González and Crawford 1986: 172, ch. 75; De Ligt 2002: 12-16). See also the imperial *mandata* for provincial governors concerning food price speculation recorded in the *Digest* (*Dig.* 47.11.6 *pr.*). L. Antistius Rusticus, governor of Cappadocia, in an edict concerning a food shortage in Pisidian Antioch in AD 93 condemned speculative hoarding by large landowners, stating that “it is deeply unjust (*iniquissimum sit*) that someone should draw profit from the hunger of his fellow-citizens”, Abbott-Johnson 65a = Freis 65; Philostratus (*Vita Ap.* 1.15) has his hero Apollonius of Tyana remark to the greedy landowning elites of Aspendus that “the earth is mother of us all, for she is just; but you, because you are unjust have pretended that she is your mother alone” (Loeb tr.), that is, all are entitled to a fair share of the earth’s fruits (that is, the harvest), they are not just the property of the rich; the emperor Julian, confronted with shortages in Syrian Antioch in AD 362, tried to persuade the urban elite “that it is better to despise unjust profits and to benefit the citizens and strangers in your city.” Having taken various measures, such as importing grain, the emperor writes “I thought it was my duty to assist the mass of the people who were being wronged” (*Misopogon* 368c-d, 370b). In this sense, the outlook of ancient elites differed fundamentally from that of the eighteenth-century British political elites, who increasingly embraced the novel ideology of economic liberalism and thus no longer shared the people’s vision of a moral economy, see Thompson 1971; Erdkamp 2002: 107-110, 114 for discussion.

²¹ Tr. Loeb.

²² Erdkamp 2002.

poorer citizens had always provided a strong normative framework for interactions between mass and elite. Rich citizens were expected to use (part of) their wealth to contribute to the well being of the citizen community as a whole.²³ It is within this broad ideological framework, sometimes referred to as the ‘civic model of society’, that we should interpret both the liturgy system of Classical democratic Athens as well as the public benefactions (euergetism) of elite citizens in the *poleis* of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, even if, in these later periods, the ideology acquired a more specifically paternalist flavour (see below).²⁴ In fact, it is euergetism that underscores particularly well the continuing centrality of this civic ideology in the *poleis* of the high imperial era: recorded public benefactions from this period are almost always targeted primarily at the citizen community to which the donor belonged.²⁵

As argued above, it is this same civic ideology, incorporating the notion of a moral economy, that provides the backdrop to the measures urban elites took to protect ordinary citizens from the volatility of grain prices caused by harvest fluctuations: just as individual elite citizens were expected to be publicly generous, so the elite as a collective were expected to make an effort to protect their fellow-citizens from starvation. In return, they received honours, prestige, and, as a group, were confirmed in the legitimacy of their exalted position. The measures civic elites took, which include outlawing exports, stimulating imports, negotiating floor and ceiling prices, fixing price levels (generally of bread) as well as setting up civic grain funds and, occasionally, publicly funded distributions, are attested in Greek *poleis* from the Archaic period until the later Roman empire, and have often been discussed.²⁶ Particularly striking during the Roman imperial period are the municipal grain funds set up by

²³ See e.g. Ober 1989: 199-202, 307 on liturgies in Classical Athens as a “mode of redistribution.” In similar vein, with regard to euergetism in Hellenistic and imperial *polis* society, Zuiderhoek 2009: 130-133.

²⁴ Zuiderhoek 2009. See Brown 2002: 4-5 for a brilliant evocation of the Greco-Roman ‘civic model of society’

²⁵ Zuiderhoek 2009.

²⁶ See e.g. Garnsey 1988: 69-86; Migeotte 1997; Garnsey and Van Nijf 1998; Erdkamp 2005: 269-316.

many *poleis* throughout the eastern provinces (and arguably also by cities in the Roman West).²⁷ Interestingly, most such funds seem to have been cash reserves, as the sources make clear, managed by annually appointed officials, generally called *sitonai* in the East. Their main task seems to have been to decide annually whether, given the current market situation, it was opportune to use the fund to import grain from abroad and distribute it among the citizens (for free or at a low price).²⁸

My argument would now be that *paraprasis* as a measure to counter high grain (or oil) prices fits in broadly with this whole range of strategies adopted by urban elites to shield citizens from the effects of price volatility. That in the case of municipal grain funds, the money to buy grain abroad mostly came from (probably largely tax-based²⁹) civic income, while in the case of *paraprasis*, the cash was furnished by the organiser does not matter much. Indeed, the funds available to *sitonai* might also be a mix of public and private monies, given that *sitonai* occasionally made contributions to the grain funds from their own resources, as did other members of the elite.³⁰ What mattered, and what is underscored by this evident mixture of public, governmental care and private euergetism is that from the perspective of the mass of ordinary citizens, the elite were seen to be taking their responsibility for the welfare of the citizen community as a whole. Whether they did this as private euergetists or as civic magistrates was of little importance within the ideological framework of the civic model: it is significant, in this respect, that some donors organised their *paraprasis* while they were

²⁷ Strubbe 1987, 1989; Erdkamp 2008; Zuiderhoek 2008a.

²⁸ Erdkamp 2005, 76; Zuiderhoek 2008a: 165-6.

²⁹ Zuiderhoek 2008a: 167-8.

³⁰ For *sitonai* using some of their own money see e.g. *TAM* 2.539 = Strubbe 1987 no. 64 (Arsada); *IGR* 4.1290 = Strubbe 1987, no. 19 (Thyateira). See *IGR* 4.1632 (Philadelphia) for an example of a benefactor making a sizeable financial contribution to a municipal grain fund. See also Thonemann and Ertuğrul 2005: 75-6. doc. 2.

sitones or *agoranomos*, while others did not.³¹ Moreover, by making the grain or other foodstuffs available at an artificially low price during periods of scarcity, organisers of *paraprasis*, *sitonai* and price-fixing *agoranomoi* were conforming exactly to what according to Thompson and other scholars was a central aspect of the ‘moral economy’, namely the expectation among ordinary consumers that elites and governments would take care to ensure ‘just prices’ in the food market. The expectation that elites or rulers would ensure fair food prices is well attested in pre-modern urbanised societies, including the Greco-Roman world, and it is I think one important reason why organisers of *paraprasis* sold the produce they made available, rather than give it away for free.³² As members of the urban elite, they had to be seen to care about the morally just operation of the food market, and what better way was there to demonstrate concern for one’s fellow-citizens in this respect than to sell one’s grain at an eminently ‘just’ (i.e. low) price during a period of scarcity?

III. *Paraprasis* and Euergetism

Another reason why *paraprasis* organisers sold their grain or oil instead of donating it may have to do with the overall character of civic euergetism. Benefactors mostly gave to their fellow-citizens, not to the poor *per se*.³³ More specifically, they generally gave most to those people or groups within the citizenry who could offer something substantial in return. In

³¹ Thus, for instance, Iulius Theophrastus was *sitones* at Sparta when he organised his first *paraprasis*, but he apparently organised his later *paraprasis* in a private capacity.

³² On the notions of ‘just’ and ‘unjust’ prices see Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 51.3; Julian, *Misopogon* 368c-d; Libanius, *Or.* 18.195. See Erdkamp 2002: 109: “Whether a price [in antiquity] is ‘just’ or not is not simply determined by its level, but rather by what is perceived as the rightful operation of the market.” Triantaphyllopoulos 1971: 68-9 arguing from a legal perspective connects *paraprasis* explicitly with “a theory –or rather a practice- of just price for the Greek sale...”

³³ Zuiderhoek 2009.

Classical democratic Athens, the entire citizen collective, including the poor, was sufficiently politically empowered, through the sovereign assembly and the popular law courts, to be able to offer serious political, social and courtroom advantages to generous liturgists.³⁴ In the more oligarchic *poleis* of the later Hellenistic and Roman imperial periods, though the popular assemblies remained an important element in local politics, citizens were no longer as politically equal and entitled as they had been in Classical Athens. Magistracies and council membership were now the prerogative of the wealthy, who in the imperial period came to constitute an *ordo decurionum* (bouletic order) along broadly Roman lines.³⁵ Yet we also witness an increasing tendency towards the formation of different status groups among the non-elite citizenry.³⁶ Such citizen-subgroups included the urban professional middle strata, to whom the Romans referred as the *plebs media*, who provided the membership for the professional *collegia* that flourished in the *poleis* under Roman rule, and who constituted a dominant force in the popular assemblies, but also several less well understood status groups, who in our epigraphic sources are distinguished from the *politai*, the ordinary citizens.³⁷ Such higher status groups will have had more political influence than mere *politai* (think of the dominance of the *plebs media* stratum in the assemblies), and, along with the councillors, they are therefore likely to have been crucial voices in the decision-making process leading up the awarding of honours and privileges to elite benefactors. Consequently, they were a prime target of munificence.

This can be seen very clearly in euergetic distributions, which often included *per capita* handouts of grain, oil, wine and/or money. Commonly, the councillors received most,

³⁴ Ober 1989: 226-233.

³⁵ Quaß 1993.

³⁶ Van Nijf 1997 refers to this phenomenon as ‘*ordo*-making.’

³⁷ See Van Nijf 1997 on eastern *collegia*; Veyne 2000 on the *plebs media*; Zuiderhoek 2008b on the role of the *plebs media* in the popular assemblies of the imperial *poleis*.

with *gerousiasts* (who often included a ‘plebeian’ element among their membership³⁸) frequently coming second. It is noteworthy however that in many such distributions, higher status citizen-subgroups (e.g. *eklesiastai*³⁹, *collegiati*) are distinguished from, and receive larger handouts, than those just designated *politai*.⁴⁰ If my interpretation of *paraprasis* as part of the general armoury of elite strategies for food market regulation is along the right track, however, then the aim of a *paraprasis* would have been to make grain or other foodstuffs cheaply available to *as large a number* of urban inhabitants as possible, including the poorest sections of the community, just as an *agoranomos*, during a festival, might set a maximum price for bread for both citizens *and* visiting foreigners, whose presence during the festival days might otherwise drive up prices too much. From the perspective of the *paraprasis* organiser, selling then made more sense than donating, since he was partly targeting groups that were of relatively low status and poor, had little influence in the *polis* and could thus offer little in return.

Moreover, providing such large numbers of people with a substantial amount of free grain or other free foodstuffs for a prolonged period of time (several months perhaps, until the new harvest was in) would probably have been beyond the means of most elite individuals, except perhaps in the smallest of *poleis*, or if the donor belonged to the few super-rich. Supporting even a small city population of 5,000 at subsistence level for one year might easily cost the equivalent of 140,000 *denarii* or more.⁴¹ Gifts of such magnitude (equivalent in value

³⁸ See Van Rossum 1988, a seminal study of *gerousiai* in the Roman East.

³⁹ There is currently no consensus about the precise identity of the *eklesiastai* beyond the notion that they were a citizen subgroup of apparently (somewhat) higher status than ordinary *politai*. See Zuiderhoek 2008b: 426 and 440n57 for references to sources and debates.

⁴⁰ Zuiderhoek 2009: 98-107 for examples and discussion.

⁴¹ Assuming a subsistence ration of 250 kg wheat equivalent per person/year and a grain price of HS 3 or 0.75 *denarius* per *modius* of 6.55 kg. For an annual subsistence need of 250 kg wheat equivalent, see Hopkins 1980:

to more than five times the official property requirement for a city councillor) are relatively scarce in our records.⁴² Organisers of *paraprasis* of course sold their grain instead of distributing it freely. Still it often had to be purchased at a scarcity price first, and then transported to the city. For such reasons, the costs involved in providing a lot of people with a lot of dearly bought grain at a low price for a long period of time might be very substantial too. The inscriptions do not provide much help here. They rarely mention the actual amounts of grain or other foodstuffs sold at *paraprasis*, or how many people benefited, to what extent, and for how long. One uncharacteristically precise text from Sebastopolis mentions that a *paraprasis* organiser made available 2,000 *kuproi* of grain.⁴³ This equals 4,000 *modii*, or 26,200 kg: on average some 5 kg per person if we assume a fairly broad group of, say, 5,000 individual buyers.⁴⁴ The grain was purchased at 4 *denarii* per *kupros*, and sold for 2 *denarii* per *kupros*, which brings the total expenditure of the organiser to 8,000 *denarii*, and his loss after sale to 4,000 *denarii*. If this text is in any way representative, it might be assumed that most *paraprasis* were in fact short term emergency measures. *Paraprasis* could reach a large number of people, but their long-term effects on the food market were probably limited. However, their *ideological* significance, as public gestures by members of the civic elite, might indeed be substantial, and for this paper, that is the crucial issue.

118n51. For a 'normal' grain price of HS 3 per *modius*, see Rostovtzeff, *RE s.v.fruentum*: 149; Hopkins 1980: 118-119.

⁴² The official property (or census) requirement for city councillors (*decuriones/bouleutai*) is often recorded as HS 100,000 or 25,000 *denarii*, Duncan-Jones 1982: 4n2. See Zuiderhoek 2009: 23-36 (with table 2.1) and 167-169 for a discussion of the size of munificent gifts in Roman Asia Minor, and lists of sums recorded in inscriptions.

⁴³ Robert 1937: 343-350, no. 4.

⁴⁴ Note that 1 *kupros* = 2 *modii* (Epiphanius of Salamis, *Measures and Weights* 54) and 1 *modius* = 6.55 kg. Of course, reducing the number of people who had access to the cheap grain increases the average amount available for each person to buy.

IV. *Paraprasis* and Speculation

The specific character of *paraprasis* may also have been determined partly by a phenomenon that was in many ways its precise opposite, i.e. grain price speculation. As Peter Garnsey has written, the class that produced the benefactors also produced the speculators.⁴⁵ It was very profitable for large landowners, especially during lean years, to hoard part of their produce in the hope of driving up prices, or to hold on to (part of) their stocks for sale in another city or region where prices were higher (provided that the profits achieved outweighed transport costs). As was the case with *paraprasis* itself, there was nothing new about such speculative behaviour. Solon's early sixth-century BC reform package at Athens, for instance, arguably included a law banning all exports except olive oil (Plut., *Solon* 24), which has been interpreted as 'an *ad hoc* measure issued in the context of a food crisis', a 'shortage aggravated by unscrupulous landowners who were sending their grain abroad in search of higher prices.' Similarly, from fourth-century BC Selybria near Byzantium we know of a law, probably enacted during a food crisis, explicitly forbidding the export of grain (Ps.-Aristotle, *Oec.* 1348b33).⁴⁶ A list of curses from early fifth-century BC Teos even contains a passage in which death is wished upon anyone who forces up the price of grain.⁴⁷

A string of anecdotes from Roman times, particularly from the East, confirms that such speculation was by no means absent among elite landowners in the empire's provincial cities.⁴⁸ It is hard to prove whether the phenomenon was actually more common under the

⁴⁵ Garnsey 1988: 82.

⁴⁶ Garnsey 1988: 74-5, 110-13.

⁴⁷ Meiggs and Lewis 30, side A, ll. 6-11.

⁴⁸ See e.g. Cic., *Att.* 5.21 (Cicero as governor of Cilicia in 51/0 BC during a shortage persuades local landowners to release their stored grain); Cic., *Flacc.* 17 (Athenagoras of Kyme is punished by a local court for exporting grain during a shortage); Phil., *Vita Ap.* 1.15 (At Aspendus in Pamphylia under Tiberius, wealthy landowners

Empire than in previous periods, yet if we take into consideration that most preserved attestations were probably preserved because they refer to relatively exceptional interventions by governors, emperors, and, on one occasion, a miracle worker, into conflicts surrounding speculative hoarding, it seems a safe assumption that the practice was more prevalent than the sources suggest.

Also, circumstances were conducive. There was now the political integration into a single empire with the associated benefits of easier movement of people, goods and information, which made selling abroad a more realistic option for enterprising landlords (though we should not overstate the level of market integration, see above). Also, the political transformation of the eastern urban elites into veritable *ordines decurionum* under Roman aegis, widening the power gap between mass and elite, might lead many a notable to conclude that he could get away with self enrichment somewhat easier. At the same time, however, this political transformation had taken place within the confines of a *polis* society structured around the notion of a citizen community. The resulting tensions were defused in a proliferation of munificence through which wealthy and powerful notables strove to

create or aggravate a food shortage by holding onto their stocks of grain for export; wonder-worker Apollonius intervenes and can only just save the life of a local magistrate about to be burned alive by an irate crowd); Petr., *Sat.* 44 (wealthy hoarders, *aediles* and bakers are accused of colluding to keep bread prices high. Fictional, but perhaps not unrealistic); Abbott-Johnson 65a = Freis 65 (during a shortage in AD 93, the governor of Cappadocia L. Antistius Rusticus orders those with stocks of grain in Pisidian Antioch to bring it onto the market); Dio Chrys., *Or.* 46.8 (Dio Chysostom, local landowner and notable of Prusa in Bithynia, is accused of speculatively hoarding grain so as to drive up the price, but denies the accusation); *P. Oxy.* 3048 (March AD 246: the local government buys up stocks of grain from landowners in the Oxyrhynchite nome to relieve the city during what was probably a severe shortage, after compelling them first to register their hoards. The whole situation suggests that those holding on to stocks were not (yet) inclined to sell of their own accord); Libanius, *Or.* 18.195 (AD 362: shortages at Syrian Antioch because of a ‘bad season’ and speculative hoarding by the city’s elite; the emperor Julian intervenes).

emphasise their good citizenship in exchange for prestige and legitimation of their position, and by means of a paternalist civic ideology according to which the rich were supposed to take care of their ordinary fellow-citizens (see above).⁴⁹

This paternalism found its institutional incarnation in the various measures civic elites took to protect the citizenry against the extremes of grain price volatility, as we saw. As a group, elites had every reason to resent the mavericks from their own circle who risked disrupting social harmony for their own private advantage. Yet for those elite individuals seeking symbolic rather than pecuniary profits, what better statement was their against such un-civic, unscrupulous and uncaring profiteering from the plight of the ordinary citizenry than actually making one's grain available to all and sundry at a spectacularly low price? Speculative hoarding was the ultimate negation of the elite's 'duty' to ensure fair prices on the food market, whereas *paraprasis* was its ultimate confirmation. In an age when euergetism and a paternalist attitude were so highly rewarded, in terms of privileges, honours and prestige granted by the people, the food price speculation practised by some of the wealthy must have provided others elite individuals with a strong incentive towards *paraprasis*.

V. Food-related Munificence, Civic Ideology and Intra-elite Politics

The argument developed in the previous section might go some way towards explaining why many attestations of *paraprasis* date to the Roman imperial period. At the same time, however, it begs a large question regarding *paraprasis* and other forms of food-related munificence during this same period: why, if these types of gifts so well fitted the political and ideological climate of the age, are they not far more widely attested? Food-related gifts are on record, to be sure, even, occasionally, in respectable numbers, yet as a percentage of recorded euergetic gifts from the early and high empire they do not stand out. In one

⁴⁹ Zuiderhoek 2008b, 2009.

collection of over 500 (mostly) epigraphically recorded gifts from Roman Asia Minor, they make up only some three per cent of all gifts.⁵⁰ Especially plain gifts of grain by local elite benefactors to cities are thin on the ground, as Garnsey has noted too: ‘Euergetists rarely gave grain away.’⁵¹ Why? Above we have explored several reasons why it might be in the interest of *paraprasia* organisers to sell their grain rather than give it away for free. These already provide some clues, yet a broader argument is still required.

One possible explanation for the general paucity of food-related gifts in eastern provincial munificence can be found, I think, in the combined effects of then-current ideological ideals and the realities of intra-elite politics in the imperial Greek cities. In Greek honorific inscriptions from the high empire benefactors continue to be addressed in a discourse of praise that is decidedly civic, stressing classic virtues of the good (rich) *polis* citizen as motives for munificence, i.e. *megalophrosyne*, *megaloprepeia*, *megalopsychia*, *eunoia pros ton demon* and so forth. At the same time, as suggested earlier, a notion of paternalism developed that had remained largely below the surface in the democratic *polis* politics of the Classical and early Hellenistic periods, when it was the *demos* that politically controlled the generosity of the rich, as in the liturgy system at Athens. In the high empire, local elite benefactors were increasingly addressed as ‘fathers/mothers of the *polis*’, (*pater/meter tes poleos*). Younger members might earn the epithet ‘son’ or ‘daughter of the *polis*’ (*huios/thugater tes poleos*), in addition to being praised for their civic virtue.⁵² This of course cast their ordinary fellow-citizens in the role of ‘children’ from whom obedience might be demanded, yet the metaphor cuts both ways: the elite was not just expected to be generous, but had a moral (‘parental’) obligation to care. No type of munificence, therefore, fitted this

⁵⁰ Zuiderhoek 2008a: 172; 2009.

⁵¹ Garnsey 1988: 83.

⁵² Robert 1969: 827n1; Veyne 1976: 313, 342n146, See also Veyne 1983: 26 on the civic elite: ‘La cité est leur famille’; Panagopoulos 1977: 214-216; Van Rossum 1988: 152-154; in particular also Pleket 1998: 212-215.

ideological climate better than gifts of food, for what would be more praiseworthy, and more natural, for parents than to do their utmost best to feed their children?⁵³ Hence no type of gift would arguably earn a benefactor more immediate popularity, more prestige, and more renown. And, for oligarchic civic elites whose political effectiveness depended on not letting internal power struggles get so far out of hand as to weaken the internal cohesion of the group, *that* was precisely the problem. Allowing some of their number to stick their head above the parapet this far might crucially weaken the position of the group as a whole.

The obvious analogy is with the city of Rome, another community with a decidedly oligarchic elite, where pious tales were told in later centuries about one Spurius Maelius who was executed on the accusation of aiming for kingship in the fourth century BC after providing the populace of Rome with grain on his own initiative (Livy 4.13-16; Dion. Hal. 12.1.1-4), where the tribune Gaius Gracchus got into trouble in 123 BC over, among other things, his grain provision scheme for the urban *plebs* (Plut., *C. Gracch.* 5), and where the emperors from Augustus onwards were adamant that control over the *annona* should be theirs and theirs alone (e.g. Tac., *Ann.* 3.54). Governmental views on munificence, or ideas echoing such views, among them those of Plutarch and Dio Chrysostom referring to the imperial Greek East, betray a similar nervousness about the runaway popularity of those benefactors who gave exactly, or too much, of what the people wanted. Buildings were fine, except (amhpi)theatres (notably also a problem in Republican Rome⁵⁴), but with regard to games,

⁵³ Zuiderhoek 2008a: 175-177.

⁵⁴ The Republican senatorial oligarchy for a long time prevented any of their number from constructing a permanent stone theatre at Rome, for fear that a project of this kind would render the donor such enduring popularity that he would become a threat to his peers. See Holleran 2003: 52-54 for references and discussion.

festivals, shows, distributions and banquets (especially when involving large numbers of ordinary citizens), there is much ambivalence in our sources.⁵⁵

We might well imagine, in this context, that outright gifts of food to the populace by private individuals, given their huge symbolic significance and their focus on the most immediate material needs of the masses, were regarded with especially deep suspicion among urban political elites, as the analogy with the city of Rome also suggests. Here, then, is one possible explanation of why grain was rarely given away straight. Viewed from this perspective, the specific character of several frequently attested forms of food (grain)-related munificence is informative. Distributions, for instance: when grain was distributed among the people, often alongside money handouts, the distribution generally followed the social hierarchy, with ordinary citizens receiving least (see above).⁵⁶ Thus, most of the distributions that we do see in the sources actually re-emphasise and reinforce the political *status quo*, which of course from the perspective of the elite as a group could only be a good thing.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Note e.g. *Dig.* 50.8.6 and 50.10.3, which express Roman governmental concern about local expenditures on theatres, amphitheatres and games and shows eroding civic funds and causing rivalry and sedition; Plut., *Mor.* 821f-822a, 822f-823a, 823d-e, where the aspiring *polis* politician is warned that donating gladiatorial games, theatre shows, distributions and banquets leads to unproductive competition among the elite and produces only ephemeral popularity with the masses; note esp. 822a: members of the elite ‘should realise that they are destroying themselves when they buy prestige through great expenditures, thus making the masses strong and bold in the thought that they have the power to give and take away something important.’ (Loeb tr.); Dio Chrys., *Or.* 40, 45 and 47 are eloquent testimony to the sort of vicious intra-elite conflicts that munificence-based popularity might arouse. See Zuiderhoek 2007 for further references and discussion.

⁵⁶ Rogers 1991: ch. 2; Van Nijf 1997: 149-188; Zuiderhoek 2009: 86-107, esp. table 5.2. For a clear example see *IGR* 3.802 (Sillyon).

⁵⁷ Note that distributions to large numbers of ordinary citizens indiscriminately are regarded as a ‘corrupt practice’ in Pliny’s correspondence with Trajan, see *Ep.* 10.116-117.

Contributions to the municipal grain fund are another example: these, we might argue, were acceptable, because they supported the very structures the elite *as a collective* had set up to protect ordinary citizens from exorbitant food prices. The same, of course, was true of *paraprasis*. Though organised by individual elite members, *paraprasedeis*, as I have argued above, were structurally entirely in line with the collective policy of urban elites, expressed via the workings of municipal grain funds and the actions of *agoranomoi*, to maintain acceptable ('just') prices for foodstuffs on the city markets.

Naturally, politically and economically powerful elite individuals could and did occasionally break the informal consensus on gifts of food (just as they might sometimes ignore the demands of the moral economy and hoard their grain to make a killing in a scarcity market at home or abroad). Then they organised lavish public banquets for the entire populace, or gave away their grain, oil or wine indiscriminately. But, and that is the crux of the matter, they did so not nearly as often as we would expect them to.⁵⁸

VI. Conclusion

To sum up: *paraprasedeis* were certainly considered acts of munificence by the citizens of Roman-era Greek *poleis* (as they were in earlier periods). They were viewed as part and parcel of the general pattern of 'honourable behaviour' ideally displayed by the good rich citizen of the late Hellenistic and Roman imperial Greek *polis*, as revealed to us by countless honorific inscriptions: multiple office holding and unreserved use of one's private wealth for the benefit of the community through generous liturgies and benefactions. Yet *paraprasedeis* did have some peculiar characteristics. The reason for this, as I have tried to argue in this paper, is that they directly concerned the supply of food and its distribution through the urban

⁵⁸ It is noteworthy in this respect that many public banquets in the Greek *poleis* during the Roman imperial period were also organised along decidedly hierarchical lines, see Van Nijf 1997: 156-188.

market and thus touched on one of the most sensitive political and economic issues in ancient urban life.

Two forces impacted upon the structure and frequency of food-related munificence, *parapraxeis* in particular. The first was what scholars have termed the ‘moral economy’ of the food market, the general expectation among the urban masses in many pre-modern societies, Greece and Rome as well as imperial China and early modern Europe, that political and governmental elites would take care to ensure the ‘just’ working of the food market, insuring the masses against starvation by, for instance, keeping prices at an acceptable level and organising emergency supplies as and when the need arose. Failure of elites to live up to these expectations would quickly result in riots, disturbances and general socio-political instability, as many studies show. In the Roman East, urban elites, to avoid such troubles, set up municipal grain funds and as office holders, *agoranomoi* or *sitonai*, tried to ensure a steady supply of grain and its sale at a fair price. As individual benefactors, they often tailored their food-related gifts to the system they had set up as a collective, by, for instance, contributing to the municipal grain fund, or, significantly, by selling their grain at a low price to as large a section of the urban populace as possible in times of dearth, thus living up most empathically to the demands of the moral economy. In this way, they could also make a strong political and ideological statement against those mavericks from their own circle who ignored the moral economy and tried to profit from scarcity by speculatively hoarding their grain.

The second force impacting upon *parapraxeis* and other forms of food-related munificence was intra-elite competition and rivalry. In a civic world where rich citizens won and legitimated their power through gifts to the community and where a paternalist ideology underwrote elite dominance, outright gifts of food could make one individual benefactor dangerously popular and influential with the masses. This might well explain both why food-related gifts are *relatively* scarce in our records (i.e. compared to other types of benefactions),

and why those food-related gifts that we do find are often politically ‘neutralised’ to some extent, reinforcing the political *status quo*, as in the case of hierarchically structured handouts, or underscoring the collective elite efforts to ensure a steady supply and fair distribution of food in the *polis*, as in the case of gifts to the municipal grain fund, and of course, *paraprasis*. The conclusion we might draw from this is that *paraprasis*, both in terms of the frequency of its occurrence and in terms of its characteristics as a form of munificence, was as much a product of the internal socio-political dynamics of *polis* society, especially during the later Hellenistic and Roman imperial periods, as of the (mal)functioning of urban food markets.

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