

Mining in Ancient Athens was a topic that impacted many different people from a variety of backgrounds. It did not matter what class you were from, to be in the mining industry was simple from an outside perspective. You were either wealthy and owned/rented mines¹, or you were not in such a stable financial situation and had to work the mines for a living.

The mines from Laurium in Southern Attica, have lots of inscriptions from 367 BCE all the way through to the end of the 4th Century BCE². This is known because the areas were reworked in the 19th to 20th centuries³. This suggests that we can use ancient Athenian mines like Laurium to make good comparisons of other mines in ancient Athens and across the ancient world. The large amount of inscriptions means that other mines can be looked at and partially reconstructed to see similarities and differences over both time and area.

The mines being open and active meant that as long as they always had employable workers then men would have jobs in order to be able to create a living⁴. However, typically these workers were slaves who would work for their owners in order to create income. Freedmen did not have a tendency to work inside the mines, instead these jobs were left to the slaves who were seen to be the most unimportant⁵. New lessees would normally continue the employment of previous slaves working in the mines. The miners who were too old to do the underground work in the mines would work in the washeries and smelting areas above the ground⁶. This meant that the age of the miners/slaves was a practical issue in ancient Athenian mining because it meant that it impacted the areas in which they could work. Xenophon suggests that there was already plenty of work to go around which allows the allusion that men were already over worked⁷. Therefore, working the mines would not have been an easy task.

We can also find out a lot about mining through slags. In mining terminology, a slag refers to what is left over after the smelting process has been completed. It can have a number of materials in it but traditionally in Laurium is had left over lead in it. The miners would create tunnels and then from this when they thought that large amounts of lead were present, they would take them through the smelting process⁸. This was where the silver was removed by melting for impurities and then melting again and the silver would sink to the bottom and then therefore be extracted. 1 kilogram of ore was equivalent to burning 200 grams of charcoal⁹. The people who ran the mines knew that if they used less charcoal then it resulted in the slag heap having more lead left in them than typically would have happened.

The installations that had been used in Laurium were quite advanced and there were 30 preserved installations left and there are mention of eighty-three others¹⁰. This suggests the mine was very large and would have been able to create a lot of income. This means that the owners and leasers would have been able to create a good amount of monetary gain from the use of such a large mine as well as the slave workers being so cheaply paid.

In conclusion, the practical issues of mining in ancient Athens was typically a reflection of the workforce which in this case was slavery. Therefore, the slaves could be worked for as little as necessary and the

¹ Christesen, 2003, pg.39

² Christesen, 2003, pg.39

³ Christesen, 2003, pg.39

⁴ Xen. Ways. IV.3

⁵ Fisher, 1993, pg.49

⁶ Fisher, 1993, pg.49

⁷ Xen. Ways. IV.3

⁸ Christesen, 2003, pg.41

⁹ Christesen, 2003, pg. 44

¹⁰ Christesen, 2003, pg. 42

Feryn Walmsley 1901540

money would go straight to their master. As a result, it means those richer were gaining more money than those without. And even older workers would have had to work throughout the mines in the underground areas.

Bibliography:

Christesen, P. (2003). 'Economic Rationalism in Fourth-century BCE Athens', *Greece and Rome*, 50(1), pp.31-56

Xenophon, *Ways and Means*. E. C. Marchant (trans.). 1925

Fisher, N. R. E. (1993). 'Slavery in Classical Greece'. London: Bristol Classical Press