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Sulla and the Pirates: early 1st-century contexts in Athens and on Delos

by Susan I. Rotroff, Washington University in St. Louis

Forty years ago, Philippe Bruneau published a lengthy account of the urban development of Delos from the late 4th century until its definitive abandonment in the early Byzantine period (“Contribution à l’histoire urbaine de Délos à l’époque hellénistique et à l’époque impériale,” *BCH* 92, 1968, 633-709). Naturally, he devoted considerable attention to the period between 166 and 69 BCE, when favorable trade conditions drew a large population of merchants to the island and the previously modest settlement mushroomed into a large town graced with lavish domestic architecture. In his discussion of the attacks of the soldiers of Mithridates in 88 and then of the pirates of Athenodoros in 69, the events that brought that period to a close, Bruneau wrote skeptically about the possibility of establishing a firm relationship between historical events and archaeological data. In particular, he expressed the opinion that it was close to impossible to distinguish between Delian structures destroyed by or abandoned in the wake of the earlier catastrophe and those that fell victim to the second one, only 20 years later.

The publication of *Délos XXVII (L’îlot de la Maison des comédiens, Paris 1970)*, the monumental presentation of a complete insula and its contents, should have constituted progress towards the solution of this problem. While reiterating his reservations about close dating, Bruneau there concluded that significant occupation of the insula ceased in 88.

Several excavations have taken place on Delos in the intervening years: large-scale exploration of the Maison des Sceaux, by the French School and the Archaeological Service, as well as several small excavations undertaken by the Service in the course of conservation and curation of the site. Although final publication is in most cases pending, substantial preliminary reports have appeared. The excavators have not hesitated to assign destructions and deposits to one or other of the two historical catastrophes, and several have contested Bruneau’s chronology of the insula of the Maison des comédiens..

This paper offers a review of this new evidence, as well as that of the Insula of the Maison des Comediens, where the revised chronology of Athenian bronze coinage provides a new tool for the dating its abandonment. The Delian deposits are compared with another body of material, debris associated with the sack of Athens by Sulla in 88 BCE, in an attempt to discover whether the ceramic evidence alone is sufficiently sensitive to reveal a chronological difference on the order of 20 years.