
This book is divided into two main sections ('discourses' and 'practices'). It is also designed to be read as a set of free-standing essays grouped around related issues. Kurke (henceforth K) is aware that this entails some repetition, but contends that 'it has seemed worthwhile to facilitate the reader’s access to individual chapters' (37). The argument is quite clear, though there are problems with it, and the author’s (slightly jargon-heavy) style does not always make for an easy read. K contends that in sixth- and fifth-century Greece coins, (women's) bodies, games and gold had specific associations (simultaneously economic, political and ideological) that were determined by a fundamental conflict ('contestation' is the word commonly used) between the old, closed, aristocratic domain and the emerging, egalitarian world of the *polis*.

In arriving at this conclusion, K's way of reading Herodotus is of primary importance. This is easily the most stimulating feature of the book, influenced by related disciplines and informed by the latest scholarship (witness the very full Bibliography, 337-64). It seems bound to make a lasting impact in the field of those who deal seriously with Herodotus. His text 'appears to preserve competing, sometimes even contradictory *logoi* from oral informants across a whole spectrum of socioeconomic and ideological positions' (333). K uses him as a source arising from, and still rooted in, an oral culture. What he provides is 'an open *agora* of *logoi*, jostling one another, with the *histor* as our sly tour guide among them' (333). In the kaleidoscope of views found preserved in Herodotus, many not evaluated or simply bizarre, K finds evidence for discursive contest and negotiation, the forerunner to formal political theory, between aristocratic and democratic forces. The non-élite position constructs the *polis* as a central mediating agency, which imposes order and identity on its citizens and screens them from cosmic forces that are arbitrary and inscrutable. The élite position resists implicit claims for the ultimate authority of the city, and defines itself through the cultivation of luxury, symptic culture, and privileged links to the gods, the heroes, and the East. The contest over what constitutes legitimate culture, or the proper framework of social and cosmic order, takes place through 'discourses' (chs.1-4) and 'practices' (chs.5-8) that emerge in the sixth century. The range of symbolic resources includes
(on the non-élite side) coinage (chs.1-4, 8), stories about tyrants in different
cities throughout Greece (chs.2-4), the agora as a political space
(established c. 600 BCE in Athens; ch.6), and new boardgames (notably a
game called ‘polis’; ch.7). These cluster in opposition to élite symbols: the
symptotic language of metals (chs.1, 4, 5), the ‘cult of habrosune’ ('Eastern
influenced luxury', 20; cf. chs.4-5, esp. 134, 185), the hetaira, constructed
in contrast to the porne (chs.5-6), symposium games like kottabos (ch.7),
and palaistrai where Greek aristocratic males cultivated bodily perfection
(ch.7).

K does not see a struggle played out only within the élite—or within
élite texts—since it involves also lowly and pervasive practices like the
circulation of coin and the playing of games. She sees a broader non-élitist
or anti-élitist ideology forged through practice. This ideology was the
forerunner to democratic theory, which is notoriously absent from classical
Athens. Moses Finley thought that there was no ‘articulated democratic
theory’ in Athens, only ‘notions, maxims, generalities’ (Democracy Ancient
and Modern, London 2nd ed. 1985, 49). K follows Pierre Bourdieu and
Michel de Certeau in thinking that

‘the logic of practice is complex and elaborated even if it defies the
laws of theory. Indeed it is the messiness of practice that gives it
such power and endurance.’ (334)

The ‘messiness’ referred to here is indeed hard to untangle—so much so
that it would probably have been better to stress ambivalence. At any rate,
the neatness of the clusters of binary opposites looks to be problematic.
This applies in particular to the fundamental opposition set up between élite
groups and the egalitarian, democratic polis. As is well known, not all
poleis were democratic, let alone egalitarian. They were all hierarchical by
degrees, were set up by aristocrats, and the majority were oligarchic in
character. Even fifth-century Athens was dominated by aristocrats, like
Themistokles, Aristeides, Kimon, Perikles and Alkibiades. It is true that
expressions of anti-democratic sentiment were made in the symposium, and
classical Athens ousted oligarchies and replaced them with democracies at
times. Such behaviour supports the idea of an antithesis, the likelihood of
discourse, and so on, but it is between oligarchy and democracy, not
between aristocracy and the polis as such. Granted, there were opposing
ideologies, but the attitudes involved were more ambiguous than K allows.
Athletes could be admired. Alkibiades could be lionized at one instant and demonized at the next. The rich could afford the time and equipment to train. They could also afford sumptuous food, wine and entertainment. Negative attitudes toward these things from poorer sections of the community are understandable. But the rich could also throw huge banquets for the people (as Kimon did), and could win glory for the city as well as themselves through victories in panhellenic games. Hostility to elements of élite culture was not consistent or inevitable, and aristocrats in general seem to have been fiercely loyal to their poleis. There were also practical matters to consider along with the political or ideological associations of a discourse or practice.

This brings us to the attitude of élite groups to coinage. It is a major cornerstone of K’s argument that there was pronounced élite hostility to coinage because of the sanction it gave to state authority and the alternative it posed to the aristocratic practice of gift exchange. This view is based primarily on the fact that coinage (nomisma) hardly receives a mention in Greek literary texts for a century or more after its invention (4), a situation explained in terms of hostility and contempt. However, it was precisely in poleis controlled by aristocrats that coinage first arose in the Greek world in the second half of the sixth century. An alternative view is that, instead of threatening the aristocratic system of gift exchange, silver currency was adopted for reasons of practicality, to facilitate exchanges. Coinage from this perspective was an essentially apolitical monetary instrument that Greek states adopted (regardless of political orientation) for its efficiency in discharging their financial obligations. In this case, it seems to me, the practical advantages of coinage have to be seen as primary, rather than the ideological associations that K, a scholar of cultural poetics and ideologies, perhaps naturally wants to emphasize. Coins undoubtedly did have a symbolic or political dimension, but this is the less likely reason for their original use in aristocratic poleis during the archaic period. It should be admitted that my attitudes on this topic have been shaped largely by e-mail exchanges with Professor John Kroll of the University of Texas and I would refer the reader to his review in a forthcoming number of Classical Journal for further detailed discussion.

Similar problems seem to exist in respect of the other elements mentioned in the book’s title. They were all available for potential exploitation in an ideological discourse between opposing élite and
democratic factions, but various attitudes seem to have been available. In the matter of precious metals, to take one final example, K finds an élite identification with gold, and an egalitarian opposition to this. It might be objected that classical Athens did not spare the gold on a project like the Athena Parthenos, but K points out that Greek states mostly coined in silver. Once more, however, practical concerns obtrude: gold was available, but silver was more abundant, had a much lower value, and was for these reasons a far more flexible medium of exchange than gold. Therefore, silver was the universal choice for coinage purposes.

In the end we have a book of contrasts. On the one hand it is full of insights into how Greek texts might be read more profitably and interestingly. This applies in particular to Herodotus. On the other hand, the argument is not quite convincing in its depiction of elements teamed up in either ‘élite’ or ‘egalitarian’ colours. In addition, it is likely to open up a divide between numismatists and those interested (as I myself am) in the symbolic dimension of various elements of Greek culture.

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