

Herman, Gabriel
Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History

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Gabriel Herman's latest monograph can be seen as a chapter in a career-long, consistent, and valuable study into personal interaction in ancient Greece, specifically ancient Athens. This work fits very well with his 1987 opus, *Ritualised Friendship and the Greek City* (Cambridge UP) and appears to be the culmination of more recent research introduced by his 1998 article, 'Reciprocity, Altruism, and the Prisoner's Dilemma: The Special Case of Classical Athens' (in *Reciprocity in Ancient Greece*. Christopher Gill, Norman Postlethwaite and Richard Seaford eds. Oxford UP.; 199 – 225). The former examined the socially institutionalised relationships between members of the Greek aristocracy with special emphasis on rules of exchange and the concept of reciprocal obligation, the latter introduced modern theories of social interaction, specifically 'Prisoner's Dilemma' theory, to the evaluation of Athenian social interaction. It was in this article that Herman began to reveal the dichotomy between norms of behaviour as they are practiced in a democratic system where communal participation is necessary, and norms of behaviour practiced in other social systems where aristocratic values promote self-interest, competition and the code of blood-feud. In *Morality and Behaviour*, Herman is examining that "moral system" of Athenian culture which developed, according to Herman's thesis, to accommodate the requirements of a participatory citizenry and the functioning of direct democracy.

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Herman first recognises the difficulty of constructing an Athenian moral code out of incomplete and often contradictory data. His answer to this problem is to import observational data from various disciplines within the behavioural and social sciences and to compare that with data from ancient sources, and to apply the methodological paradigms and resultant theories from the former to the latter. The book progresses, or shifts weight, from early chapters in which social theory is reviewed and discussed with reference to ancient data, to later chapters where ancient data is reviewed and discussed with reference to social theory. The program seems to be to establish an evaluative paradigm and then to apply that paradigm first to the isolation of a manageable question and then to a theory that might answer that question. By combining his original query with the results of his methodological search, Herman is able to define more precisely the object of his study: He is looking for a “*code of behaviour*” defined as “*a complex of explicitly defined or implicitly recognized rules that a community of people accepts and makes predominant, thus differentiating its moral profile from the total range of possible human norms and types of behaviour*” (22 italics in original). Herman then recognises the problem of scope and he proceeds to refine and limit the parameters of his focus and argues that a moral code is best revealed when it is being tested by crisis. Those mechanisms and forces embedded within a social code that are designed to prevent disintegration are rarely evident when nothing, either internal or external, threatens the stability of the system. The thesis, then, is twofold: there was a dominant moral code that bound and defined Athenian culture in the democratic period, and; that code can be detected as its mechanisms were

brought to bear in the prevention of social breakdown in times of duress – both on a macro and micro scale.

That Herman has taken a widely interdisciplinary approach is laudable but the problems of interdisciplinary research are immediately obvious in these opening chapters. If Herman is writing to an audience of social scientists it is understandable that he often assumes prior knowledge of socio-anthropological theory while offering elementary exegesis on basic concepts in classical history and philology. If he is writing to classical historians it is understandable that he often glosses over rather complex and controversial issues in Greek history and language while offering occasionally pedagogical discussions of socio-anthropological theory. The problem is that Herman does both and is left with a monograph that can be properly appreciated only by sociologists or anthropologists who have a background in classical history or by an audience of historians and classicists who have a background in socio-anthropological theory. His struggles with audience force Herman to the end of the second chapter (some 80 pages) before arriving at a program of research, an identification of specific preceding theories on the same subject and, finally, the novelty of his approach justifying the current project.

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At this point the reader might expect that methodological discussions and reviews of recent scholarship are concluded, but Herman takes up most of the third chapter ‘The Moral Image of the Athenian Democracy,’ with more discussions of an ‘introductory’ nature. He reviews modern perceptions of Athenian socio-political culture going back to the seventeenth century and reveals a cyclical pattern in which Athens is alternatively portrayed as dominated by conflict and by concord. This perception du jour is important to Herman’s thesis because it

speaks to the effectiveness of any behavioural codes that might have been in effect. Most recently the trend amongst scholars has been to focus on concord and stability and to see episodes of *stasis* within Athens as abnormal and this is the position Herman takes. His position here should not be surprising. He credits this current view to publications early in the career of the eminent Cambridge classicist, M. I. Finley, to whom Herman dedicates this book and with whom Herman has had long association.

The fourth chapter attempts to defend the perception du jour by grouping ancient sources by reliability – by accuracy of information – and eliminating almost all but Thucydides and the forensic orators. He then links this evaluation back to the discussion of chapter three by arguing that the current interpretation – that of Athens as a predominantly peaceful and benevolent culture with a stable democracy – is derived from a dispassionate and reasonably objective employment of the most reliable sources.

Although a great deal of ink has been used in the process, Herman is, at this point, able to proceed on firm academic ground: He has identified his theoretical and methodological paradigm; has focussed his object of study to a fine point; has critically evaluated his source material, and; has formulated a question that is both specific and of real interest. In the chapters that follow Herman uses this structural framework to arrive at a theory that is somewhat surprising to the reader yet compelling and potentially very useful to further research.

In Chapter Five Herman examines the question of blood-feud and its apparently pervasive existence throughout the Mediterranean world. It is here that the real thesis begins to take shape. Herman agrees that Athenian culture was dominated by

codes of honour and vengeance in pre-democratic times, but through this chapter argues that democratic ideology itself forced the abandonment of those codes in favour of a code of cooperation, self-restraint and deference to public forms of satisfaction – the laws and the courts. This chapter, like the book as a whole, begins with a broad survey of examples in various cultural contexts. This is followed by a review of scholarly treatments of these examples and, finally, Athenian examples.

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The thesis of this chapter is that the older system of vengeance was replaced, in democratic Athens, by recourse to the law courts. He concludes that the avoidance of personal satisfaction and preference for public satisfaction is an indication that Athens was not a feuding society and that the people of Athens were “of an unusually mild temper” (201). Herman calls this a “cognitive re-orientation” in which self-restraint, seen in other societies as an indication of cowardice, was promoted and accepted in democratic Athens as a virtue (202-3). The sixth chapter begins a search for the origins of this “re-orientation” and shows that it could not have been the democracy itself as represented by the state. The state’s ability to apply coercive force was extremely limited and what is known about such mechanisms as the Scythian Archers, the board of Eleven and the jail-house is enough to demonstrate that such institutions in Athens were, comparatively, insignificant.

At this point Herman introduces a surprising twist, a direction and a theory that were not alluded to in the earlier chapters. To this point the reader is still expecting – despite an overly long introduction – a socio-cultural evaluation on the level of the individual. What follows is much more a socio-political discussion on the level of the population as a whole. Herman

argues that the coercive power of the Athenian democracy was not represented in state institutions because it resided with the potential power of the citizen soldier. Coercive force, conceived of as resident within the *demos* as a whole but realised through the actions of individual members of that *demos*, was dependent upon, rather than threatened by, the existence of large numbers of weapons. The fact that each member of the hoplite class had ready access to weapons was not a threat to, but rather the guarantor of internal concord and stability. This is a novel and provocative approach: many have analysed the citizen army in terms of its ability to defend the city against forces from without, but Herman (240-44) is here looking at that same army, both as kinetic and potential force, as a coercive power within the state itself. “The hoplites were... a deterrent, a permanent though dormant threat that would only be activated if and when the coercive agencies failed to attain some goal” (243). Herman concludes this chapter with the proposition that the potential power of the hoplite citizen army was “an effective deterrent and one of the main sources of the Athenian democracy’s now widely acknowledged stability” (257).

The last chapters, seven to ten, are devoted to the development of the thesis arguing that it was the democratic structure, and the ideologies necessary to support that structure, that transformed Athenian behavioural norms from those promoting self help and vengeance to those demanding self-restraint and recourse to public methods of dispute resolution. But the democratic structure and its ability to promote such values was entirely dependent upon the fact that its members were both voting citizens and members of a militia and it was in the militia

that concepts of group cohesion and action for the common good even at the cost of self-interest were developed.

Herman's methodological approach is worth emulating. The value of interdisciplinary research is appreciated more and more in recent scholarship. Herman is not the first or only classicist to employ socio-anthropological method and theory but few others have employed them to quite the extent that Herman has in this work. This reviewer believes that the concluding theory could have been approached in a more traditional way and could have been developed much more thoroughly. But it is the methodological structure that dominates and unifies the book, more than the thesis. The overall structure is to introduce concepts current in socio-anthropological discussion and then to apply those concepts to ancient data. This is not only the structure of the book as a whole but also the structure of each chapter. The only structural progression is that the emphasis shifts from the early chapters where socio-anthropological paradigms are given greater attention, to later chapters where ancient evidence takes primacy of place. The thesis itself, however, is disjointed. It is not clear how early promises relate to concluding examinations nor how a search for a general code of moral behaviour in Athens resulted in a discussion of the coercive power of a citizen army. The result is that Herman's book appears to be more about how than what and gets to the point where the structure guides the content. Perhaps this is Herman's real message: It is about methodological structure as much as the content.

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