

BOOK REVIEW

The Greeks and the New: Novelty in Ancient Greek Imagination and Experience. By ARMAND D'ANGOUR. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. x + 264. Hardcover, £58.00/\$90.00. ISBN 978-0-521-85097-1. Paper, £20.99/\$33.99. ISBN 978-0-521-61648-5.

This book initially seeks to refute a belief that I am not entirely sure needed to be refuted, the claim that the Greeks were profoundly conservative and shunned novelty. To be sure, this claim has often appeared, notably in van Groningen's *In the Grip of the Past*;¹ but I would judge that scholars today are generally inclined as much to discount the Greeks' traditionalism as their innovativeness. Work on the development of literacy, on Greek science and mathematics, on democracy and its ideology, and on literary genres has made it hard to ignore the importance of the new in Greek history. Still, a general investigation of Greek attitudes to the new is itself new and worthwhile, both because we sometimes repeat tired clichés about Greek conservatism, and because Greek attitudes were obviously not uniform or uncomplicated—there was a powerful tendency in Greek thought to value stability and the past, as well as a strain of cyclic thought. We would not want to move from one excess to another. The book is wide-ranging and hard to summarize (even so it does not address every issue I might have liked), but it is consistently balanced and thoughtful.

It wisely concentrates on novelty in the Greek imagination, on how Greeks thought about the new rather than on the "actual" new. As D'Angour says, what counts as new is socially constructed. To be sure, D'Angour briefly comments on the evidence for actual innovation in such technical fields as pottery and architecture, and refers in passing to trade and the development of the money economy; some slippage between reality and Greek thought about it is probably inevitable, but his primary focus is clearly how Greeks evaluated and categorized the new, not on what they invented.

¹ B. A van Groningen, *In the Grip of the Past: Essay on an Aspect of Greek Thought* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1953).

He finds little evidence for what in modern times is both the most typical form of actual innovation and a typical way of thinking about it. In modern capitalist society, we take it for granted that competition prompts invention, as a machine or process is newly invented or improved in response to commercial competition (D'Angour worked for several years in manufacturing). Competition spurred Greeks to innovation in music and poetry, but not in industry. Even in warfare, the evidence that competition prompted invention is weak. Although the argument is familiar that the Greeks did not do as much as might expect in practical improvements, and explanations offered are also familiar (such as slavery and contempt for banausic occupations), the specific point about competition is interesting. Greeks associated innovation not with competition, but with multiplicity, complexity and pluralism, and Athens was a center of innovation because it was a center of trade and contact. D'Angour does not say much about financial innovation, where political and commercial needs were surely powerful, but even here it is hard to see the effect of competition as such. Instead, Greeks created new styles in painting and poetry, or built clever devices, to create wonder. New objects are associated with brightness and radiance.

One of the richest features of the book is the treatment of the vocabulary of newness. There is a sensitive and sensible discussion of the complex semantics of words for "new," which overlap with "young," "recent," and "strange." The word *καινός* is not found before the sixth century, when it refers to objects, and it first appears in literature in Bacchylides. D'Angour suggests etymologies for both *kainos* and the name *Kaineus* from the Semitic root *qyn*, whose derivatives refers to metalworkers (*Kaineus* would be from *qayin*, "spear"). He certainly makes a strong point that the Indo-European etymology linking it to Sanscrit *kanyā* ("young woman") is implausible for a word that could so often have been used earlier than it is, and whose associations are with newness rather than youth. Connecting *kainos* with metal imports, he suggests that its first meaning is "brand-new," "just manufactured." It certainly accords well with the consistent Greek love, which D'Angour documents, for splendid, never-used objects. He also suggests that this word was particularly Attic. This too is plausible. Another particularly interesting discussion concerns the association of innovation and youth. Although Greeks did not think about why young people welcome innovation more than their seniors, they clearly recognized this phenomenon, and D'Angour speculates that Greeks may have given themselves freedom to innovate because they thought of themselves as racially and culturally young.

Not all praise for the new is praise for innovation. D'Angour's treatment of Telemachus' famous statement that people celebrate "the newest song" (*Od.* 1.351–2) points to the difference between a new song and a new *kind* of song. The New Music of the late fifth century was a new kind and brought lasting change, but not everyone was happy about this transformation. Plato's Socrates insists that Homer's praise of the new should be interpreted to encourage only new works, not new forms or style (Plato, *Rep.* 424b–c).

The book is well-written and fun to read—it has itself some of the gleam and glamor of the new, and I expect that its readers will give it *kleos*.

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