

## BOOK REVIEW

*Social Memory in Athenian Public Discourse: Uses and Meaning of the Past.* By BERND STEINBOCK. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013. Pp. xii + 411. Hardcover, \$85.00. ISBN 978-0-472-11832-8.

In this stimulating and ground-breaking book, Steinbock applies the concept of social memory (that is, “the collective historical consciousness of a community,” 2) as an analytical tool to illuminate how the fifth- and fourth-century Athenians viewed their past, particularly through the historical allusions of the Attic orators, which provide an important guide as to what constituted an acceptable image of the past to their audiences. Steinbock demonstrates convincingly that the orators did not rely on a static Athenian master narrative but continually re-negotiated their view of the past in response to contemporary pre-occupations, and, what is perhaps even more significant, concludes that these shared “memories” do not represent empty rhetorical flourishes or masks for *Realpolitik* but constitute crucial factors in actual political decision-making in the fourth century.

In a lengthy introduction, Steinbock provides a lucid exposition of modern theories of social memory, elucidates the methodology to be used in his study, and situates his work in light of existing scholarship on memory studies in the ancient world and Athenian ideology. In the first chapter, he identifies the complex and multi-faceted web of carriers of social memory that determined the Athenian image of the past, to which naturally the orators had to adhere in order to persuade their audience.

In chapters two through five, Steinbock tests his hypotheses by using the role of the city of Thebes in the collective memory of fourth-century Athens as an extended case study. He opens with the familiar portrayal of the Thebans as medizers during Xerxes’ invasion of 480–479, which remained dominant through the fourth century because the Athenian experience during the Persian Wars was crucial to the development of their self-image as the champions of Greek liberty, particularly in contrast to their Theban neighbors and arch-enemies, the “anti-Athens.” This hegemonic image of the Athenians as the protectors of their fellow Greeks was projected back into the mythical past and, as

Steinbock argues convincingly in the third chapter, it is thanks to the city's largely antagonistic relationship with Thebes that the myth of the Athenian intervention to secure the proper burial of the dead Argives in the wake of the campaign of the Seven against Thebes evolved into one of four paradigmatic examples of Athenian altruism in the official polis tradition, with the anti-Theban elements of the myth coming to the forefront in response to various incidents that occurred during the Peloponnesian War.

In the fourth chapter, Steinbock turns to a rare positive portrayal of the Thebans in Athenian political discourse, the Theban support for the Athenian democratic exiles in 404/3, who toppled the government of the so-called Thirty Tyrants in Athens and restored the democracy. This "precarious memory," as Steinbock terms it, survived as the result of three separate but related factors: the (short-lived) periods of Athenian-Theban military co-operation in the fourth century, the incident's prominence in the Thebans' own master narrative as indicative of their self-image as benefactors in the tradition of their culture heroes Heracles and Dionysus (the recent books on Boeotian identity by Angela Kühn and Stephanie Larsen would perhaps have proved helpful in this section),<sup>1</sup> and the diplomatic practice of listing former benefactions when requesting current support.

But the fourth cluster of historical references to Thebes identified by Steinbock in Athenian political discourse, the proposal to annihilate Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian War, strikes me as oddly juxtaposed to the preceding three. Not only does it concern a threat rather than an actual event, but its surprisingly persistent memory in the Athenian collective consciousness seems neatly explained by the generally hostile relationship between Athens and Thebes in the fourth century, demonstrated very convincingly in the preceding chapters. Steinbock, however, chooses instead to attribute the persistence of this particular memory to the Thebans' situating their proposal in terms of a ritual city destruction, for which the annihilation of the Phocian city of Crisa after the First Sacred War stood as the emblematic first occurrence.

The problem with this suggestion (first made many years ago by H.W. Parke)<sup>2</sup> is that the evidence is very tenuous, for the earliest sources do not use any

<sup>1</sup> A. Kühn, *Als Kadmos nach Boiotien kam. Polis und Ethnos im Spiegel thebanischer Gründungsmythen* (Stuttgart 2006); S.L. Larsen, *Tales of Epic Ancestry: Boiotian Collective Identity in the Late Archaic and Early Classical Periods* (Stuttgart 2007).

<sup>2</sup> H.W. Parke, "Consecration to Apollo. Δεκατεύειν πῶ ἐν Δελφοῖς θεῶ," *Hermathena* 72 (1948), 82-114.

ritual terms to refer to the proposed destruction of Athens, nor is there any explicit connection with Crisa (apart from a brief reference in Isocrates' *Plataicus* of 380, some 25 years later), until after the Third Sacred War, when the events of the earlier conflict became politically relevant once again. One could just as easily argue the exact opposite, that the threatened annihilation of Athens by Thebes induced a remembering of the fate of Crisa (notably, only by Isocrates), when the history of Athenian-Theban relations returned to public discourse. Furthermore, both here and throughout Steinbock should perhaps take into account the differing contexts of Isocrates' speeches, which were composed for a reading audience (i.e., the elite), as opposed to the speeches of the orators, which were delivered to large and socially diverse public groups (i.e. the masses).

Despite a certain tendency to long-windedness and repetition (perhaps arising out of the book's origins as a doctoral dissertation), Steinbock offers a new approach to the way in which the past was used in public discourse in ancient Athens and his study will doubtless provoke other scholars to re-think common perceptions of the role of the historical allusion in the Attic orators.

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