

BOOK REVIEW

From Polypragmon to Curiosus. Ancient Concepts of Curious and Meddlesome Behaviour. By MATTHEW LEIGH. Oxford University Press, UK, 2013. Pp. 272. Hardcover £55. ISBN 978-0-19-966861-8.

This book examines the term πολυπράγμων and its synonyms (φιλοπράγμων and περίεργος) as well as its nearest Latin equivalent (*curiosus*) from fifth century bc to first century ad through a series of case studies. It constructs the concept of curiosity not as a static cognitive representation, but as a rather dynamic model that is further connected with the concept of travel, specifically *theōria* (θεωρία). As the term is applied to the curious and meddlesome man or the state interfering in the affairs of others (including one of the gods)—i.e. when the discussion is centered on the question of curiosity's moral status—it denotes misbehavior. And when functioning as an essential factor in pushing forward the frontiers of intellectual and aesthetic experience, it is seen as a virtue.

The first chapter of the book studies πολυπραγμοσύνη and περιεργία in the Greek literature of the fifth- and fourth-centuries bc. Leigh highlights an association between Platonic σωφροσύνη and justice as the opposite of πολυπραγμοσύνη (*Republic* 433 a-b); likewise, sycophants and busybodies were cited along with criminals, as this is attested in the oratory (see Isocrates' *Antidosis*). In a different way, in expressing cynical and Aristophanic ideas that meddling can be a benefit (31, 34, 47) even while quietism suffers from ignorance, Aristotle argues that the wise man is the man who looks at what concerns oneself, and that can be fairly broad.

For Thucydides and those who wrote about Athens in the late fifth century bc (e.g. most of Isocrates' *On the Peace*), Athenian πολυπραγμοσύνη is the equivalent of an imperial expansion that can bring into peril the Athenian people. But other sources (Euripidean drama (esp. *Heracleidae* and *Suppliants*); the end of "On the Peace" of Isocrates; and the fourth *Philippic* of Demosthenes) introduce a kind of good intervention on the part of the state as this is associated with helping the unprotected.

The second chapter opens with a reference to Aulus Gellius' failure to explain πολυπραγμοσύνη in Latin with a single word. The busybody character of New

Comedy is attested in Plautus, Terence and Afranius and described with the word *curiosus* even though in Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* (1. 108) and in Pliny's *Natural History* (Book 25), the term is connected with an impulse to do research following its Hellenistic version. Like Athens, Rome, following imperialistic politics, is described as a meddler according to Roman Historians despite Livy's effort when translating Polybius to avoid making the term the equivalent of *curiosus* when speaking of Rome. Curiosity in poetry (Catullus, Martial) and in the ancient Novel is connected with nosiness in the love-stories of others.

The third chapter: In the new realm of the Roman Empire, *πολυπραγμοσύνη* describes the impulse of an individual to undertake research, taking advantage of the geographical expansion at the time (see the works of Polybius, Strabo, Pliny's *Natural History*, and Pomponius Mela's *Chorographia*), a trait parodied by Lucian in his *True Histories*. In the same period, the term also refers to a state's intervening actions beyond its boundaries; the latest of which is centralized in an imperial *πόθος* for more conquests (as seen in the texts of Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Cassius' Dio; Tacitus in his *Annals*, *Germania* and *Agricola*). But for Polybius and Arrian in relation to Alexander and his insatiable appetite to conquer more lands, in many cases the term retains its fifth-century, negatively-nuanced meaning.

In chapter 4, the author examines the relationship between the divine and the *eros* of knowledge, i.e. the boundaries of man's legitimate information on magic and religion in general. Among discussions of several texts (e.g. these of Pausanias, work, Aelian (*NA*), in the *Epistle of Aristeas*, in Dionysius Halicarnassus and Cicero), pleasure and danger are hidden in the relationship between *eros* and knowledge in the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius in relation to its character Lucius and in the *Onos* of Lucian. At other times, to be curious about the universe also seems suspicious (see Philo of Alexandria, Pausanias, Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*, but also Lucretius 1.62–79 and the work of Seneca the Younger, e.g. *De Otio* and *Questiones Naturales*).

The book closes with a chapter on the language of literary criticism as expressed through terms such as *περίεργος*, *πολυπράγμων* or *curiosus*. Not only does the discussed connection reveal negative characteristics—e.g. *περιττός* refers to an ornament, complex style or useless knowledge—the term *περιττός* could also describe an aesthetic that pursues a very careful style. It also expresses either a love for useful knowledge (in the texts of Plato, Cicero, Seneca) or simply a drive towards the strange and abstruse (cf. the *Paradoxographoi*, especially Antigonus of Carystus).

Through a detailed analysis of key passages from various epochs both in Greek and in Latin, the book offers a pluralistic reading of the term πολυπράγμων. However, as far as the structure is concerned, there is much overlap between the chapters which may confuse the reader, emanating obviously from the author's attempt to present both a lexically and thematically rich overview of curiosity in ancient thought. Let me suggest some examples. The περίεργος in Theophrastus' *Characters* shares superfluity with the elaborate style described, so does περίεργος (or περιττός) as argued in the last chapter. Likewise, Horace's *Epodes* 17 and 5 on mystic rites have a place in chapter 4 which discusses the association between curiosity and the divine or magic. But despite the sometimes structural difficulties, the book, I repeat, introduces clearly even to a non-classicist public (as the author wishes, 11f.) the concept of curiosity (tracked via lexical evidence) as a moving force in both Greek and Roman thought.

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