

## BOOK REVIEW

*Myth, Literature, and the Creation of the Topography of Thebes*. By DANIEL W. BERMAN. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. x + 190. Hardcover, \$95.00. ISBN 978-1-107-07736-2.

Daniel W. Berman's *Myth, Literature, and the Creation of the Topography of Thebes* provides a thorough discussion of the literary evidence concerning the mythical and topographical details of ancient Thebes. In the introduction, subtitled "Constructing a city," Berman lays out the theoretical foundations of the work and the following five chapters are arranged in roughly chronological order with each focusing on the predominant literary genre of that particular period, thus: epic, lyric, tragic, and Alexandrian poetry comprise the first four chapters respectively; the fifth chapter centers on the Roman-era travel writer Pausanias while also serving as a conclusion.

There are three appendices discussing in turn the available evidence for the plain(s) of Thebes, the famous walls and gates of Thebes, and Pindar's house. The footnotes supply valuable information on key issues in the previous scholarship related to Berman's close readings of the literary texts and the list of references is brief but up-to-date. Classicists and ancient historians interested in how literary traditions reflect real and imagined topography will find illuminating discussions throughout Berman's monograph.

Alexander the Great destroyed Thebes in 335 BCE, which may have irrevocably changed the topography of the famous city. Thebes was rebuilt in 316 BCE, "but in many ways it must have been a significantly changed place," according to Berman (21). This assumption underlies his textual interpretations and informs his criticism of earlier scholarship that has relied on mythic texts and later sources such as Pausanias to reconstruct a topographical reality of archaic and classical Thebes (8–11). Berman especially criticizes archaeological work that has been too credulous of literary sources: "there is a very real (and sometimes a realized) danger of circularity, when archaeological inquiry takes its cues from the literary record" (20).

An acute problem particularly with the study of ancient Thebes is the paucity of textual and archaeological evidence, which makes it necessary to use all

available evidence. Berman is right that scholars should not use literary sources indiscriminately and without acknowledging their limitations and historical context, but it could also be said that there is a certain circularity in how Berman's literary inquiry takes its cues from the archaeological record, or lack thereof. Despite deft handling of the textual evidence, Berman often does not provide enough discussion of what he considers the real topography to highlight the significance of the imagined topography.

Almost all literary evidence for ancient Thebes comes from non-Theban writers and from a variety of genres. Pindar is the major exception, but the nature of his works limits the amount of detailed descriptions of the actual topography of the city. Berman clearly articulates how the biases of the non-Theban sources and the different genres distort and manipulate the image of Theban topography: "If epic erases real topography in service of the mythic discourse, tragedy plays with it, expanding and contracting its details like variations on a musical score" (157). Berman says, "The Thebes of Athenian tragedy is to some extent an ideological construct and a useful tool for working out particularly Athenian social and cultural tensions" (108). For Berman, these representations had a major impact on later writers, particularly Pausanias, who has been a major resource for modern scholars but should be used cautiously when attempting to reconstruct Thebes in earlier periods.

Berman provides valuable insight into the limited and problematic nature of literary sources for reconstructing the topography of ancient Thebes. It would have been good to have some discussion of the Greek historians and how they contributed to later understandings of Theban topography. In all, however, Berman has provided a detailed evaluation of the major literary evidence for mapping Thebes in the ancient Greek imaginary.

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