GEPHYRA	9	2010	152–155

Kitap Eleştirisi / Book Review

Anna Missiou, *Literacy and Democracy in Fifth-Century Athens* (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 211; ISBN 978-0-521-12876-6; £ 17.99.

In her book Missiou (M.) aims to assess the role of literacy in the workings of democracy in 5th-century Athens. For this purpose she looks exclusively into the «literacy of Athenians in their role of citizens» (5). The book is divided into an introductory chapter, five main chapters and a conclusions chapter; it has a number of illustrations (23 figures and 3 maps), two tables, three appendices, a bibliography and two indices.

In her introduction (1–10) M. gives a brief overview of research perspectives and sets out her own line of argument. Her underlying assumption is that literacy was extensive in fifth-century Athens and assumed a greater importance in Athens than in other Greek city democracies; she argues that the Kleisthenic reforms were conducive to the spread of literacy.

In the first chapter, *The geography of literacy* (11–35), M. asks how the written word promoted the overall functioning of the democratic tribal organisation. Challenging the minimalist literacy view propounded by W. Harris[1], who argues that rural patterns of living, which prevailed in Antiquity, were inimical to the spread of literacy, she believes that under the new political system, established by Kleisthenes and founded on the principles of political equality and solidarity, written communication facilitated the exchange of reliable information on political issues on and across all levels of political organisation (demes, tribes, city centre), exemplifying her point in the procedure for raising a pan-Athenian army. M. claims that the awareness of the advantages of writing had developed between Solon and Kleisthenes and that «Athenians of different social classes, professions and localities were acquainted with literacy by the end of the sixth century BC» (26), arguing that traders and craftsmen played an important role in the proliferation of privately motivated writing.

In Chapter 2, *Literacy and political ethos: the institution of ostracism* (36–55), M. focuses on the naming of the potential candidates for ostracism. In particular, she is concerned with the problem of namesakes and single-name ostraca, arguing that the ostraca have to be conceptualised as «a medium of communication between voters and vote-counting officials on the basis of the principles of fairness and equity» (46). For this communication to be effective, M. assumes that the written communication (i.e. the ostracon) provided all the information needed by the recipient (i.e. the vote-counting official) to understand the written message correctly, since in the vote-counting process no other way of ascertaining the meaning of the message (e.g. gestures or oral feedback) was possible, says M. She therefore believes that the confusion of homonyms and single-name ostraca was resolved by means of «a fixed list of candidates with their full names» prepared «by the councillors on the basis of nominations made by individual Athenian citizens some time after or during the preliminary meeting which decided to hold an *ostrakophoria*» (50). Writing and said list were «the most effective method of protecting the freedom of the individual to express his own opinion as to whom to ostracize» (54).

In Chapter 3, *Literacy through intermediaries: I. The ostraka* (56–84), M. re-examines the 190 Akropolis ostraca bearing the name of Themistokles and believed by Broneer[2] to have been written by not more than 14 writers, which has been used as evidence showing that literacy was not widespread amongst

[1] W. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass./London 1989).

[2] O. Broenner, ‹Ostraca› in ‹Excavations on the North Slope of the Acropolis, 1937›, *Hesperia* 7.2 (1938) 161–263 (228–243).

Athenians. Unlike Broneer, who focused on the letterforms, M. draws attention both to morphologic and syntactic abnormalities which one would not expect from professional scribes and to the way the writers proportioned the number and size of the letters to the size of the respective ostracon, thus drawing conclusions as to the spatial perceptions of the writers, which, says M., yields more reliable results than do the idiosyncrasies of letterforms. She therefore believes that said ostraca, showing almost as many hands as there are ostraca, were written by private Athenians who wished to see Themistokles ostracised and therefore prepared numerous ostraca with his name on them in an attempt to influence fellow citizens to vote against Themistokles, be they literate or not.

In Chapter 4, *Literacy through intermediaries: II. Stone inscriptions* (85–108), M. focuses on official, rather lengthy inscriptions set up in city, inland and coastal demes mostly in the 50 years following the Kleisthenic reforms. These texts, which deal with rights and responsibilities of Athenians in a private or official capacity in secular and religious matters, mark the progression from the mere writing of names or short messages to the writing of more complicated texts functioning, says M., as a medium through which the sovereignty of the people and principles of the new polity were affirmed. She then proceeds to discuss the use of wooden writing tablets, none of which has survived, adducing sculptural and pictorial representations of such tablets as well as literary works mentioning them. In her opinion, all this suggests widespread familiarity with these tablets, which she assumes were used in political contexts to communicate important information to the citizens at particular points in time, while stone inscriptions, which took longer to produce, recorded decisions in a more permanent fashion.

In Chapter 5, *Athenian literacy in its sociopolitical context* (109–149), M. propounds the reasons in favour of mass literacy in Athens, starting off with various officials whose administrative tasks required literacy. M. assumes that all administrative bodies had at least one secretary and very likely also undersecretaries often referred to in literary sources as *dêmosioi*, whom she takes to have been free Athenian citizens serving for remuneration. She also considers the question of full participation of the *thêtes* in the Council, which, in her opinion, was an integral part of the Kleisthenic reforms. The fundamental principles of Athenian democracy (see above) in conjunction with the literate tasks involved in the Council «required all Athenians, including *thêtes*, to be literate» (130). How did they acquire literacy? M. rejects Harris's emphasis on formal schooling and instead argues in favour of informal ways of training, suggesting that «family and neighbourhood networks helped common citizens to learn basic writing and reading» (133). She concludes that there was «mass literacy among Athenian citizens» (133), attaching particular importance to the Council, which she sees «as a workshop where literacy-related knowledge and experience could be shared» and where, in a kind of master-apprentice relationship, literate and less literate councillors would collaborate in the composition of texts, which motivated the latter «to become independent readers and writers» (135).

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Missiou makes no bones about her conviction that Harris's minimalist literacy view is untenable and therefore presents a situation which is quite the opposite, with mass literacy and even low-class citizens only too willing to become proficient readers and writers. However, some of her assumptions, constructions and, ocassionally, also her reasoning cause unease: To start with, her limitation of her study to the fifth century is artificial and is not justified, either by the political framework (democracy), which would have necessitated including the fourth century, or, even less, by the subject matter (literacy). In defence of her view of more or less literate *thetes* being actively engaged in the Council right from the Kleisthenic reforms onwards, she claims that her interpretation «is consistent with Aristotle's analysis of the fifth- and fourth-century constitutions in his *Politics*, which as regards procedural democratic detail relies on Athenian reality» (127). What reality? Bleicken, in his fundamental article *Wann begann die athenische Demokratie?* – which unfortunately is absent from her deliberations –, has shown that the reports, from the late fifth and the fourth centuries, on the beginnings of the Athenian democracy are retrospective constructions and speculations highly dominated by reflections on constitutional

theory laden with abstract terminology and cannot be taken as representing the political situation at the end of the sixth century: «Von hier [i.e. from said abstract reflections] finden wir keinen Weg zu den Anfängen.»[3] Missiou ignores this (or is not aware of it) and applies to the beginnings what became reality only decades later. This approach is anachronistic, all the more so as she evokes the picture of a fully-fledged, democratic system with uniform structures across all demes right from the Kleisthenic reforms onwards, placing great emphasis on constitutional features such as appointment by lot etc. (see above) which, she insinuates, required all Athenians to be literate (130). The truth, however, is that we do not know very much about the beginnings, e.g. about whether officeholding was a matter of volition or coercion or a combination thereof: as Whitehead put it: «what remains indeterminable is the norm» and, in his chapter *Recurrent Business*, he states with regard to the discharge of duties and functions: «local variation is certain».[4] Active, not to mention literacy-dependent, involvement of the *thêtes* in the political process prior to the Persian Wars is not very probable at all.[5]

A categorical error in her reasoning comes when she jumps from an assumed *theoretical* requirement for basic skills of writing and reading to the *practical* «fact» of mass literacy among Athenian citizens right from the Kleisthenic period onwards.[6] It is astonishing that in her construction of the Council as a workshop for the acquisition of literacy through apprenticeship the question of second-hand reading and writing is given no room in her deliberations; instead, she claims that *extensive* functional literacy was actually *achieved* (149). This is pure, carried-away speculation that puts forth in an excessively affirmative tone what cannot be proved. The fact is that we do not and cannot know the extent to which, for example, officials (usually) relied on secretaries in order to discharge tasks requiring literacy. Equally arbitrary in this context is her interpretation of the *dêmosioi* as free Athenian citizens performing work requiring literacy for remuneration (117), as these *dêmosioi* may also have been metics or slaves.[7]

The fallacy of the equation of extensive use of the written word with mass literacy is best shown with an example from the Roman Imperial period, which Harris regards as more highly developed in terms of literacy: Roman army administration required each and every soldier to confirm in writing receipt of food and equipment. This was a regular, recurrent procedure throughout a soldier's standard 25 years or so of military service. But does this mean that we can say – with confidence! – that all or almost all or at least a majority of legionary and/or auxiliary soldiers were possessed of at least name literacy (i.e. the ability to write one's own name – which, by the way, would not have sufficed for drawing up the full wording of a receipt) because they were all and without fail regularly confronted with at least this one recurrent task? No, it does not. The second-century papyrus *P.Hamb.* 34 shows that only a third or so of a cavalry regiment were literate and lent a helping writing hand to the illiterate majority of comrades. By the same token, the fact that there was a gradually increasing number of tasks requiring

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[3] Bleicken, Wann begann die athenische Demokratie?, *Historische Zeitschrift* 260 (1995), 337–364: 349.

[4] D. Whitehead, *The Demes of Attica. 508/7– ca. 250 B.C. A Political and Social Study* (Princeton 1986), 321; 114, 319 with fn. 103.

[5] See Bleicken (fn. 2) 351 fn. 23: «Die politische Mitsprache der Theten vor den Perserkriegen ist strittig. Wenn Aristot. AP 7, 3 und Pol. 1274a15–21 (vgl. 1281b31–34) Solon die Theten als vierte Klasse einrichten läßt, kann man dies leicht als eine späte Zuordnung der in der entwickelten Demokratie bedeutsamen und politisch aktiven Gruppe verstehen, die zu Solons Zeit zwar als Gruppe (alle freien Bauern Attikas unterhalb des Zensus der Zeugiten) existierte, aber politisch passiv war […].» Also see id., *Die athenische Demokratie* (Paderborn [4]1995), 75; Chr. Meier, *Die Entstehung des Politischen bei den Griechen* (Frankfurt am Main [3]1995), 151 – all absent from Missiou's bibliography.

[6] «At least theoretically, service on the Council required Athenians, no matter whether they were inhabitants of remote demes or members of the thetic class, to be equipped with the basic skills of writing and reading. A claim can, therefore, be made for mass literacy among Athenian citizens.» (133) Where is proof of the *necessity* of *personal* literacy as opposed to *second-hand* literacy?

[7] See M. H. Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes. Structure, Principles, and Ideology* (London [2]1999), 244.

literacy in fifth-century Athens' political system can on no account be taken as circumstantial evidence for *mass* literacy (of whatever degree) amongst male Atheninan citizens. Numerous tasks of this kind on the one hand and mass literacy on the other are two completely different things, and the one cannot be confidently deduced from the other.[8]

Another point of criticism concerns her hypothetical list of ostracisable candidates. One wonders by what criterion the name of a candidate would have been accepted onto this list. Would nomination by a *single* male Athenian citizen have sufficed, or would a quorum have been needed to ensure minimum consensus on possible candidates? If nomination by a single Athenian sufficed, hundreds of individuals might have proposed dozens (or even hundreds) of different names (including those of personal enemies[9]), which would have rendered this alleged pre-arranged list with a «limited» number of candidates rather useless. If minimum consensus was needed, was it brought about by a simple show of hands, e.g. in the people's Assembly, or would a «secret», i.e. written, ballot have been needed, an *ostrakophoria* before the *ostrakophoria* proper? Missiou's hypothetical list raises more questions than it solves and potentially runs counter to the principles of fairness and equality which she sets so great store by.

Missiou's claim to have refuted Harris's literacy concept (129) is unconvincing, particularly with regard to the late sixth and early fifth centuries. What would have been desirable is a study that examines the spread of and increase in the quality of literacy as a development concomitant with that of Athens' political system over the fifth and fourth centuries. What Missiou does is counterpose Harris's literacy model with a diametrically opposite one based, in some essential respects, on anachronistic or overoptimistic assumptions that apparently emanate from a resolute determination, which transpires from virtually every page, to «prove» that there *was* mass literacy, and so it is little wonder that she also finds it.

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[8] An example, from the civilian sphere, of an illiterate man in an administrative position involving the drawing up of documents is P. Annius Seleucus, who appears to have been manager of storage facilities owned by Domitia Lepida, the aunt of Emperor Nero (*TPSulp.* 46). Cf. Harris (s. fn. 1), 197–8; R. Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge 1992), 151.

[9] Cf. W. Nippel, *Antike oder moderne Freiheit? Die Begründung der Demokratie in Athen und in der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main 2008), 25 – also absent from her bibliography.