

Heroes and demons of the tale of the demos change with time

Athenian Democratic Origins and Other Essays - Athens
March 18, 2005

Formal Western history begins when Herodotus goes public with what he calls the display of his investigation. He aims to entertain, to commemorate and to dazzle on an epic scale, and to get at something like truth. He knows that the great and curious deeds done by Greeks and foreigners will hold the attention of those listening to what he has to say, or later reading it, if he tells his story well. In short, Herodotus is a lot like Edward Bulwer-Lytton.

Herodotus leaves his listeners and readers with Athens poised to become the first democratic imperial power. The rest of the tale, from the late 5th century BC to well into the 19th century AD, is not a pretty one. Nor is it a clear or easy story, given the changing nature of the source material available to ancient authors and modern historians. Reading the *Quellenkritik*, or source criticism, in the previously unpublished essays of Geoffrey de Ste. Croix, makes this clear. The collection, edited by David Harvey and Robert Parker, gives us the ancient historical equivalent of peering inside the workings of a Rolex.

Herodotus's immediate successor, Thucydides, was as well placed as any teller of 5th-century Athenian history has ever been. As an elected general forced into exile when outmanoeuvred by the brilliant Spartan strategist Brasidas, he knew how the elaborate machinery of Athenian government - a conglomeration of all sorts of Jules Verne kinds of political inventions - worked.

Thucydides had strong opinions on how the Athenian populace came to make the decisions they made, but he rarely comes right out and says them. His particular take on Athenian democracy - as a system of politically empowered free-minded citizens, designed to excel so long as they and their government mechanisms were under the steady control of a strong, aristocratic guiding hand - long ago became the norm for relating the grandeur that was Greece.

For those who favoured democratic institutions, the inventors and first great fans of tragedy played out their own tragedy, complete with tragic flaws, whether of character or circumstances, with stunning reversals of fortune - and equally astonishing, albeit temporary, comebacks - and with Luciferian displays of hubris. The Athenians during the age of Herodotus, Aeschylus, Thucydides, Sophocles, Euripides, Socrates, Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle and orators such as Demosthenes and Lysias were characters every novelist could love.

For those of aristocratic or monarchic persuasion, Athenian history was an assortment of good moral lessons about the inability of common citizens to rule themselves well for any considerable period of time. Those who aspired to be leading men in Greco-Roman, and later British and American, culture sought out these lessons in the Greek authors I just catalogued, or in Plutarch or later Thomas North's version of Plutarch. For restraint, sobriety and civic obedience, the hardy Spartans were the positive stuff, only not very exciting.

I know because I experienced the dying stages of this kind of higher education as a young *novus homo* in the late Sixties. When I studied Greek history formally for the first time 30-odd years ago, I was lucky. I took a seminar where we read every word of George Grote's *History of Greece* (first volume published in 1846). Grote represents a watershed for several reasons. He is a modern scholar in his careful attention to individual sources, in his scepticism about traditional Greek evidence, and in championing Athenian history and Athenian political institutions over those of Sparta. I even specialised in Grote's life and intellectual background.

But until I read Oswyn Murray's lucid introduction to his bicentenary edition of Bulwer-Lytton's 1837 account of the rise and fall of Athens, I thought Grote had been the first, in Bulwer-Lytton's words, "to vindicate" the Athenians. Yet, as Murray points out, Bulwer-Lytton, a Member of Parliament sharing Grote's political beliefs, anticipates by about a decade Grote's understanding of Athenian greatness as deriving from a mindset and arrangement of institutions conducive to "unceasing emulation and unbounded competition". Yet Grote maintains a self-serving silence within the pages of his history about Bulwer-Lytton's contribution.

This interpretation of Athenian genius sounds a lot like the political slogans of George W. Bush. But neither Grote nor Bulwer-Lytton saw the high degree of service that all Athenian citizens, rich or poor, had to give to the state as "big bad government". Nor does de Ste. Croix.

Bulwer-Lytton also anticipated Grote in reassigning the roles of villains and heroes in Athenian democratic history. For the first time since Thucydides did the casting, the radical popular leader Cleon looks good and the dilatory conservatism of the Athenian statesman and general Nicias, a large-scale slave-owner, looks bad. Casting of heroes and villains has since gone back and forth with the political tides.

To read Bulwer-Lytton and Grote side by side is to be reminded why the occasional banker may write good history, but only a novelist can make it sing. Bulwer-Lytton's few notes are mostly in the way of discursive asides or completely unpredictable citations of ancient passages. By contrast, almost every page of Grote is jammed not only with citations, but with the original Greek texts. Grote, in fact, is the reason I took up Greek. I was frustrated that I could not criticise his sources. Without him, I might have stayed a mathematician.

Still Bulwer-Lytton is not writing a Mary Renault or Steven Pressfield historical novel. He engages and challenges the ideas of leading historians of the period, Karl Otfried Müller in Germany and William Mitford in England and even "men more learned than that historian". When he does, it is often on commonsensical political grounds. Take the Spartan senate (*gerousia*), which is made up of the two Spartan kings and 28 senators, aged 60 or older, who held their positions for life. The senators were selected by public acclamation, as determined by judges stationed in an adjacent room who could not see the candidates. Bulwer-Lytton, again drawing on his own experience in Parliament, criticises this form of election as "open to every species of fraud" and agrees with Aristotle in finding it "frivolous and puerile". As for Müller's praise of the *gerousia* as "a splendid monument of early Grecian custom", Bulwer-Lytton can "conceive no elective council less practically good than one to which election is for life, and power is irresponsible".

Bulwer-Lytton buttresses his general negative appraisal of the effects of the Spartan *politeia* (roughly, system of government and way of life) by citing Machiavelli. The Spartan constitution is designed for durability by limiting the number of citizens and checking any impulses towards innovation. In his estimation, to achieve splendour and greatness, a state needs to encourage its population and regard "political ferment and agitation" leniently. The lesson is that democracy is messy but promotes innovation and brilliance.

If you read these books, turn to Bulwer-Lytton first. Then when you read de Ste. Croix, you will see clearly the effects of the later 19th-century German seminar system, the discovery of important papyrus documents such as the "Aristotelian" Constitution of Athens (in 1892), and the careful editing and then use of Greek historical inscriptions on the practice of Greek history. Grote made Greek history reasonable and logical, or at least gave it "accountability". These additional developments, along with the refinement of source criticism, have made Greek history, for better or worse, what it is today.

Keep in mind, too, as you read de Ste. Croix, that his is near the pinnacle of engaging humanistic source criticism. The collection closes with essays on the political and economic makeup of Aegina, a nearby island trade competitor of Athens, and on the foreign policy of Spartan king Cleomenes during the period when Cleisthenes's political manoeuvrings led to the main structures of Athenian democratic government, when Ionian city-states briefly revolted against Persian imperial power, and when Cleomenes intervened to prevent Aegina from "Medising", that is, going over to the Persian side in the first Persian War.

Throughout de Ste. Croix remembers the practical realities. He is the only historian I have ever read who makes the implications of hoplite (heavy infantryman/citizen soldier) status within Athenian citizen rankings real and also makes clear why those who lived in Athens would desire to be classed as *zeugitai* ("agents of pairing") and face the dangers of hoplite

battle. The importance of slavery was felt on the battlefield as well as in the assembly and the market place, and de Ste. Croix makes us feel it.

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Athenian Democratic Origins and Other Essays

Author - Geoffrey E. M. de Ste. Croix

Publisher - Oxford University Press

Pages - 464

Price - £84.00

ISBN - 0 19 925517 2