

BMCR 2013.11.57

Social Memory in Athenian Public Discourse: Uses and Meanings of the Past

Bernd Steinbock, *Social Memory in Athenian Public Discourse: Uses and Meanings of the Past*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013. xii, 411. ISBN 9780472118328 \$85.00.

Review by

Lucia Cecchet, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz. cecchet@uni-mainz.de; luciacecchet@gmail.com

Preview

A memory is the result of a dynamic process, which involves will, emotions and, to a certain extent, creativity. It always and inevitably entails an intervention on the remembered object or event. When remembering is a common act of the members of a community, the factors that are at play in individual memory have to deal with a social dimension. Social remembering presupposes communication, places, and occasions. Above all, it presupposes a reason and a need to remember shared by the community members and prompted by present circumstances. Ancient historians have shown in recent years a growing interest in the question of the formation of a shared image of the past in antiquity and its role in shaping collective identities. In this important work, Steinbock addresses the question of the use of social memory in public discourse and its power of influencing decision-making. The object of research is Athenian social memory – a term used interchangeably with “collective memory” throughout the book (p. 8 n. 24) – about past relations with Thebes and its use in Athenian public discourse of the fifth and fourth centuries BC.

In the introduction, the author explains his notion of social memory in the light of previous research, in particular Thomas,¹ Assmann,² Loraux,³ Gehrke,⁴ Alcock,⁵ Wolpert⁶ and Jung.⁷ Steinbock considers to be objects of social memory not only those that have been transmitted over at least a generation, as Thomas does drawing from Vansina,⁸ but also recent events (p. 23). The choice of Thebes as a case study is motivated by the fact that Athens’ relations with its neighbour varied over time from cooperation to intense rivalry and traumatic war experiences, and they are often alluded to in Athenian public discourse. The main sources are the speeches of the orators and those attested by the historians, but the author also makes extensive use of inscriptions and visual arts (notably, the discussion about the west frieze of the temple

of Athena Nike on the Acropolis, pp. 193-196, and the metopes of the temple of Zeus in Olympia, p. 229). Steinbock focuses on the way in which individual speakers operated within the Athenian memorial framework so as to convince the audience and influence decision-making. His concept of public discourse builds on Ober's semiotic model of political discourse,⁹ in which public communication is enacted by a system of symbolic references derived from a commonly-shared repository of knowledge and assumptions (pp. 30-31). Drawing from this, Steinbock analyses the use of social memory in rhetorical strategies, focusing both on the cases in which the speakers make use of consolidated collective memories, and on those in which they challenge the master narrative of the *polis* (the term "master narrative" is borrowed throughout the book from Forsdyke,¹⁰ see p. 20 n. 86).

Chapter 1 analyses the different carriers of social memory. In agreement with a well-developed tradition of studies, Steinbock defines funeral orations as the most powerful means of consolidation of a shared image of the past and self-representation of the *polis*, but he includes also a good discussion of tragedies, cults, rituals and festivals as a means for transmitting memory. Though official celebrations contributed to consolidating shared views of the past, he is keen on stressing that social memory was not preserved in a monolithic and univocal way. The Athenians were members of different memory communities, such as tribes, demes, families and symposia, which could preserve versions of the past not otherwise attested or conflicting with the *polis* tradition, just as citizens from other *poleis* contributed to circulating different memorial repertoires in Athens. Neither inscriptions nor monuments served a static function: their content and place of display contributed to the construction of a public discourse on the past that could be constantly reshaped over time. Lastly, the author discusses the role of the Assembly and the law courts as privileged settings for the manifestation and renegotiation of memory, which is the main focus of the book.

Chapter 2 argues that the memory of the Theban support for the Persians in 480-479 was used to portray Thebes as a counter-image of Athens: while the Athenians presented themselves as the saviours of Greece, they described the Thebans as betrayers, treacherous by nature, hence prone to repeat their betrayal in the future. The memorialisation of the Theban medism started immediately after the Persian Wars, and it was further promoted by two sets of events: first, the Plataean-Theban conflicts, culminating in the two destructions of Plataea by Thebes, in 427 and in 373 respectively; second, the several threats of new "barbarian" invasions, either from the Persians or the Macedonians, in the course of the fourth century.

In Chapter 3, the author analyses the way in which the mythical burial of the Seven functioned as a powerful means of celebration of Athenian generosity, further strengthening the image of Thebes as an outrageous city. The bellicose version of the myth was elaborated soon after the Persian Wars and it received a boost after the battle of Delium in 424, when the Thebans did not allow the Athenians to recover their dead. In the light of this event, Steinbock discusses the representation of the myth both in tragedy and in visual arts. He then analyses its use in political discourse on the basis of

examples from Herodotus, Isocrates and Xenophon, showing how in each case individual speakers could emphasise, downplay or even omit aspects of the myth in order to legitimise their points and to exhort political action.

Chapter 4 explores the memory of the Theban help for the Athenian democrats in 404/3. Arguing for the historicity of the Theban decrees in support of the exiled Athenian democrats, Steinbock explains Thebes' sudden change of policy in terms of intra-Theban power struggle, e.g. the ascending to power of Ismenias' pro-Athenian faction. He argues that, in order to convince the Thebans to help the Athenians, Ismenias used arguments from Theban social memory, recalling the collaboration between the Theban-born hero Heracles and Athena. The episode of the capture of Phyle by the democrats became one of the symbols of democratic restoration and a fundamental point of reference for the memory of the Theban support. This memory was probably also kept alive by the Thebans who were granted Athenian citizenship together with the other foreigners involved in the seizure of Phyle, as attested in an honorary decree from the Acropolis (IG II² 10). References to these events were used in political and diplomatic discourse on several occasions in the fourth century: by the Thebans' cry for help in Athens against the Spartans in 395 and 382; probably in 339 by Demosthenes in the attempt to promote an alliance with Thebes against Philip; and in 335 by the Theban refugees' plead for asylum after Alexander crushed the Theban revolt. Steinbock convincingly argues that these events brought the memory of the past cooperation with Thebes to the forefront of discussion in Athens, and prompted the Athenians to even help Thebes regardless of considerations of self-interest.

In the last chapter, the author explores the debate about the eradication of Athens proposed by Thebes and other *poleis* in 405/4, and its persistent memory in the fourth century. The frequent allusions by the Athenian orators to this past threat are discussed in light of the impact of traumatic experiences in shaping social memory, which the author derives from the Neo-Freudian approach to memory studies, as explained in the introduction (p. 18). Further, he argues that the Greeks were familiar with the concept of city destruction both from historical practice and from mythical paradigms. He makes the case that the alleged annihilation of the city of Crisa in the early sixth century became part of the collective knowledge of the recurring elements of city-eradication, namely destruction of houses, enslavement of citizens, and dedication of the land to the gods. As on other occasions, the decision to spare Athens in 404 was determined not only by calculations of self-interest, but also by arguments of social memory, such as the awareness of the contribution of Athens in the Persian Wars.

In the conclusion, the author sums up the results of his research and the main structure of his arguments in each chapter. The bibliography, index *locorum* and general index follow.

A few remarks can be made about this excellent work. As the author makes clear in the introduction, he considers to be objects of social memory also recent events. However, chronological distance is no trivial matter, and the dynamics at play in shaping the memory of an event that happened more than one hundred years before are not always

the same as those concerning the memory of an event of ten years earlier, in which the protagonists are still participants in the memory community. Steinbock seems overall to be well aware of this, but one would expect that in the discussion of the events of 395, in which Thebes recalled the support given to Athens in 404/3 (pp. 248-253), more attention would be given to the narrow time-gap separating the parties involved from the recalled events. The memory of recent events presumably implies a degree of simplification and stereotyping different from events that are very distant in time.

Further, Steinbock seems to regard *polis* ideology as something in conflict with the ideology of individuals and subgroups. Drawing from Herman's study,¹¹ Steinbock claims "the social institution of *xenia* continued to exist throughout the classical period, underneath the superimposed *polis* ideology" (p. 258). He assumes that *polis* ideology was defined by communal interest, hence suffocating personal liberty. However, this perspective has been questioned by recent works, such as Liddel 2007 (on personal liberty and civic obligations in classical Athens)¹² and Vlassopoulos 2007 (more generally on the problems of the "*polis* approach" to the study of Greek History);¹³ neither is included in the bibliography. The fact that personal bonds could prompt the Athenians to make choices that did not line up with the alliances of the city and that this was accepted within the frame of a legitimate institution shows that some aspects of private life were valued above public and political life.

These few remarks do not diminish the value of this book as a very important contribution both to studies of social memory and to those of ancient rhetoric and political discourse. While many works have been devoted to the impact of the Persian Wars in shaping collective memory and identity, Steinbock ventures into the less explored field of the use of memory in the context of public communication for influencing decision-making. The choice to monitor a specific case study allows the author to explore in depth the reshaping of the past both over time and in relation to the rhetoric goal of the moment. The most interesting aspects are the analysis of the speakers' capability of engaging with alternative interpretations of past events challenging "established memories", and the convincing demonstration that arguments from social memory were decisive factors influencing common decisions (though Steinbock somewhat overstates his argument when claiming that political communities "very seldom base their foreign policy decisions on cost-benefit analyses", p. 330 n. 159). The parallels with contemporary political discourse are illuminating – in particular, George Bush's use of the memory of America's role in World War II in his speech to the troops in Iraq on December 14, 2008 (p. 1 f.), and the persistent memory of Morgenthau's 1944 plan of turning Germany into an agrarian state in German historical consciousness and political discourse during the 1980s and 1990s (pp. 298-230).

The book is very carefully edited. The only mistake noted by the reviewer occurs in the final bibliography, in which the publication year of Wilson's book is 2010 instead of 2000.

Notes

¹ R. Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens*. Cambridge 1989.

2. J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. Munich 1992.
3. N. Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*. Cambridge, MA 1986.
4. H.-J. Gehrke, *Mythos, History, and Collective Identity: Uses of the Past in Ancient Greece and Beyond* in N. Luraghi (ed.), *The Historian's Craft in the Age of Herodotus*. Oxford 2001.
5. S. E. Alcock, *Archaeologies of the Greek Past: Landscapes, Monuments and Memories*. Cambridge 2002.
6. A. Wolpert, *Remembering Defeat: Civic War and Civic Memory in Ancient Athens*. Baltimore 2002.
7. M. Jung, *Marathon und Plataiai: Zwei Perserschlachten als "lieux de mémoire" im antiken Griechenland*. Göttingen 2006.
8. J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*. Madison, Wisconsin 1985.
9. J. Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology and the Power of the People*. Princeton 1989.
10. S. Forsdyke, *Exile, Ostracism, and Democracy: The Politics of Expulsion in Ancient Greece*. Princeton 2005.
11. G. Herman, *Ritualized Friendship and the Greek City*. Cambridge 1987.
12. P.P. Liddel, *Civic Obligation and Individual Liberty in Ancient Athens*. Oxford 2007.
13. K. Vlassopoulos, *Unthinking the Greek Polis: Ancient Greek History beyond Eurocentrism*. Cambridge 2007.