

## REVIEW

### GREEK LUXURIES

Robert J. Gorman and Vanessa B. Gorman, *Corrupting Luxury in Ancient Greek Literature*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014. Pp. viii + 484. Paperback, \$60.95. ISBN 978-0-472-05229-5.

‘Luxury is a word of an uncertain signification, and may be taken in a good as well as in a bad sense’ (David Hume, ‘Of Refinement in the Arts’, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (1777)). The fascination with luxury as a historical concept began in the eighteenth century: was it a dangerous and debilitating force in the history of nations, or was it on the contrary the basis of progress and the creation of wealth in the commerce of nations. Montesquieu and Helvetius held the first view, against Hume, Stewart, and Genovesi. The matter was finally settled by Adam Smith in the most famous of all works of political economy, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776).

Since ancient history was held by most to be a model for the modern age, every historian of the period had a view on the subject. The controversy for and against Alexander the Great revolved around this issue, as Pierre Briant has brilliantly revealed in his book *The First European* (2017): was Alexander the brigand imagined by Saint Augustine, a prototype for all the tyrannical conquerors of the present age, or did his conquests open up a golden period of prosperity, as free trade blossomed across the Near East. Among professional historians the problem was discussed by Christoph Meiners, rival of Immanuel Kant, in his *Geschichte des Luxus der Athenienser von den ältesten Zeiten an bis auf den Tod Philipps von Makedonien* (1782); *Recherches Historiques sur le Luxe chez les Athéniens* (1823)—although his contributions to the subject are now forgotten in the shadow of his notorious theories of racial stereotypes and the inferiority of women. His Göttingen colleague, A. H. L. Heeren, son-in-law of Christian Gottlob Heyne and leading light of the Göttingen school of history, wrote a once famous work on the subject (*Ideen über Politik, den Verkehr, und den Handel der vornehmsten Völker der alten Welt*, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 1793–6); 4th ed., 6 vols. (1824–6); the second edition of this warranted an English translation, *Politics, Trade and Commerce in the Ancient World* (Oxford, 1833)); yet by his death in 1842 he was forgotten, and only six university students walked in his funeral procession.

Today this debate continues among modern historians, and is in fact the dominant theme in the new picture of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The Gormans are thus engaging in a discussion which is already two centuries old and gaining in strength, although they do not seem aware of the fact. Their argument is more traditional and focussed on the evidence of ancient literary texts, and proceeds without reference to archaeology or epigraphy.

They begin from the historical myth of a Sybaris destroyed by its luxury: this is usually held to derive ultimately from the work of the fourth-century historian Timaeus (or perhaps Antiochus of Syracuse), whose fragments concerning Sybaris seem to depict a society indulging in excessive luxury which led ultimately to its destruction around 510 BC by the more austere city of Croton. The authors argue that this picture is simply unbelievable. Sybaris cannot have been as large or luxurious as it is represented; and many of the anecdotes about the behaviour of the Sybarites are implausible in the extreme.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is clear that Sybaris was a byword for luxury as early as the fifth century in Aristophanes, Plato, and Aristotle. And it is strange to find in the modern age of post-truth and ‘the weapons of mass destruction’ such a naive faith in the relation of facts to the truth of statements about them. This analysis however leads them, not (as it should) to question the reliability of Timaeus, but to the conclusion that all the alleged fragments concerning Sybaris are later fabrications.

The aim of this book is in fact to claim that there was no pejorative view of the relation between the existence of luxury and the decline of military prowess in the Greek world: this relationship was an invention of the Romans, and all earlier evidence to the contrary must be explained away. What do they mean by ‘luxury’? Here a knowledge of the eighteenth century debate and the useful distinction made by David Hume between ‘the effects of refinement both on *private* and on *public* life’ (‘On Refinement in the Arts’, *Essays*) might have helped to clarify their ideas. Instead they begin by analysing the Greek vocabulary around the idea of luxury, which is indeed abundant: words such as *koros*, *hubris*, *chlidē*, *habros* and its cognates were all in use before the word *truphē* appeared in the fifth century. This is perhaps the most useful part of their work, for it is based on a diligent search in on-line resources such as the TLG. They are clearly right to hold that not all of these words possess a pejorative

<sup>1</sup> See S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1987); J. Brewer and R. Porter, edd., *Consumption and the World of Goods in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1993); M. Berg and E. Eger, edd., *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (Basingstoke, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> The point was already made by Gibbon a quarter of a millennium ago: ‘En tout, hormis la religion, il vaut mieux ne pas croire assez, que de croire trop’ (*Misc. Works*<sup>2</sup> (1814) III.178–82).

implication, and their meanings seem to vary both over time and between authors. As has often been pointed out since at least the work of Santo Mazzarino, *Fra Oriente e Occidente* (1947), *habros* and *habrosunē* in particular designate a distinctive and desirable aristocratic lifestyle throughout the archaic period: this is indeed the central contention of Leslie Kurke's fundamental book, *Coins, Bodies, Games, and Gold: the Politics of Meaning in Archaic Greece* (Princeton, 1999)—both Mazzarino and Kurke are missing from the Gormans' bibliography, though an earlier article by Kurke on this theme is cited. The authors' aim is clearly to show that there was no moral attitude implied in words related to luxury in the Greek world in the archaic and classical periods. That is surely too extreme: when, for instance, Solon attacks the Athenian aristocracy for their *koros* and *hubris* it is not enough to say that his focus is on 'hubris in obtaining wealth' without implying 'an attitude that luxury was a corrupting force in the lives of men' (27).

The dominant word for forms of luxury from the classical period onwards was *truphē*. Even *truphē* itself, though it was often used in a pejorative sense, long retained a connotation of pleasurable excess, as is shown by its use at the Ptolemaic court in female names like Truphaina and royal epithets such as Truphon: the Greeks always enjoyed their pleasures, and flaunted their ability to indulge them.<sup>3</sup> In the discussions of individual passages the Gormans try to minimise the moralising component of either approval or disapproval, preferring to see each passage as purely descriptive. Not all their interpretations are convincing. They do however make the important point that *truphē* and *hubris* are often closely associated together: for Greeks of the classical period the enjoyment of wealth and luxury often leads to undesirable forms of arrogance. This seems an important difference between *habrosunē* and *truphē*: in the new democratic world luxury is not so much associated with softness as the aristocratic *habros* lifestyle had been, and not necessarily interpreted as leading to physical and military weakness, but rather as being morally undesirable and in contrast with the Delphic principles of self-knowledge and moderation.

Having by means of this reductive approach weakened the connection between the vocabulary and the morality of luxury, the authors are left with a problem, which they proceed to solve by asserting that the Greeks in fact lacked any idea of the dangerous consequences of excessive luxury: it was the Romans who invented the idea that luxury could lead to disaster by corrupting the moral strength of a people. In the rest of the book the authors proceed to

<sup>3</sup> I am less clear about the significance of the use of *truphē* in the Septuagint: it refers to the Garden of Eden, and of course all *truphē* derives from God and is taken away by God: it is therefore a divine gift or reward, and a positive good, without moral connotations for the recipient. The Gormans of course relate this to their perception of Greek *truphē*; but I would suggest that it signifies rather a different religious attitude—for the Greeks excessive human *truphē* could bring about the envy of the gods, for the Jews it is simply a reward from God.

demonstrate the weakness of all evidence which seems to contradict this rather implausible thesis.<sup>4</sup>

Chapter 2 discusses the prevailing modern interpretation of Herodotus, which tends to stress that his central principle of causation is the debilitating and corrupting effect of luxury, leading to disaster in war, and held to explain the defeat of the luxurious Persians by the hardened and impoverished Greeks, as well as many lesser instances within the work. Although *truphē* and its cognates appear nowhere in Herodotus this is often claimed to be an implicit Herodotean principle, and is ascribed great importance in his narrative by modern historians from Bischoff and Cobet to Lateiner. The Gormans analyse the various passages that have been held to establish this historiographical principle, from Cyrus' comments at the end of the *Histories* (9.122.3) and all the other passages where he might appear to make this claim (1.89.2, 126.5–6; 3.80; 9.82; *Airs, Waters, Places* 12) or attribute weakness to the Persians (7.210.2; 8.68a.1, 88.3; 7.103.3–4). They point out that nowhere does Herodotus directly assert a connection between luxury and military weakness; though his characters often point out the folly of the rich attacking the poor, they never say that those who live an easy life are more feeble than those who are hardy; instead luxury is often a reward for conquest rather than a prelude to defeat, and the military weakness of the Persians is due to the other tribal contingents in their army, not the Persians themselves. Where warlike courage does prevail, it is because people are fighting for themselves and for freedom, like the Athenians liberated from their tyranny (5.78). Nor will the Gormans accept that Herodotus' denigration of the Lydians and the Ionians attributes their weakness to luxurious habits. While I think that sometimes the Gormans press their interpretations too hard, I agree with them that the modern attempt to portray Herodotus as fundamentally concerned with the corrupting effects of luxury is mistaken. However, without arguing every passage in detail it seems to me that the Gormans have been led by their negative stance to ignore two arguments.

Firstly it is of course true that Herodotus is fundamentally uninterested in causation: he never makes any statement about the cause of events which is not based on a personal factor or the divine will. Nevertheless his narrative is open to interpretation by later generations in antiquity and today in terms of abstract causative principles: the reader will inevitably understand the narrative as offering a moralistic and rationalising interpretation of the causes of

<sup>4</sup> Since the Gormans insist so rightly on analysing the exact connotations of Greek words in context, it is a pity that they are so loose with their own vocabulary: they nowhere define what they mean by 'pernicious luxury'; and they seem to believe that the connotations of what they call 'effeminacy' are the same in the ancient world as in the modern. Yet ancient women were thought to be irrational, violent, unruly, and impulsive, but never feeble or weak.

events. So the actual statements of Herodotus do not preclude an interpretation of his message in antiquity or the present along the lines of modern commentators.

Secondly it seems to me that the Gormans' obsession with disproving modern theories has led them to ignore the positive contribution that their linguistic analysis could make to the understanding of Herodotus. If it is true that there is a close connection between *truphē* and *hubris*, then it is this danger associated with prosperity that is precisely what Herodotus so often highlights: prosperity leads to arrogance, which in turn brings down the wrath of the gods or the *phthonos* of men; it therefore often unbalances the stability of human affairs. This is surely indeed the central message of Herodotus, which is too often ignored by modern commentators, because it is difficult to interpret in rationalistic terms; perhaps John Gould has got closest to understanding the forces at work in a book again significantly absent from the Gormans' bibliography.<sup>5</sup>

It is for these reasons that I find myself unconvinced by the Gormans' reading of Herodotus, while largely accepting their criticisms of other scholars.

The third chapter is devoted to Athenaeus. Here they wish to argue that this author's attitude to source citation of prose (though not apparently of poetic) texts is fundamentally unreliable, and he has interpreted his sources in accordance with his own Roman imperial preoccupations with the deleterious effects of luxury. Since the majority of Athenaeus' citations come to him through Hellenistic intermediaries, this attempt to show that even in the Hellenistic period the Greeks had no perception of a connection between luxury and decadence seems doomed from the start; and I must confess that I find their interpretation of Athenaeus as a highly original manipulator of his material to be implausible in the extreme: for a completely different interpretation of Athenaeus, more in tune with modern scholarship from Düring to Christian Jacob, see my article 'Athenaeus the Encyclopedist' in *Rivista Storica Italiana* 126 (2014): 689–720, in which I argue that Athenaeus is an encyclopedic compiler of quotations from previous authors concerning food and drink, whose work reveals the mentality of a librarian rather than a creative writer of dialogue: the dialogue form is simply part of the structure on which he has chosen to arrange his quotations according to the order of dishes in a Roman feast. At the very least his practice in quoting poetic texts and his obsession with giving exact references for the authors he cites suggests that his quotations are as reasonably accurate as was possible in the ancient memory world. The contextual explanations he offers are of course a different matter, and must be assessed by the modern interpreter on each occasion. But this difficult and traditional

<sup>5</sup> *Herodotus* (London, 1989).

task is not helped by the imposition of an over-arching interpretation of authorial intention, a blanket mistrust of all contextual statements, and a belief in the creative originality of an author who was essentially a compiler.

It is not possible to discuss the Gormans' dissection of every passage in Athenaeus, most of which are taken from Book 12, which is indeed specifically devoted to examples of *truphē*. But, for instance, their analysis of Athenaeus' interpretation of Homeric practices attributes this to Athenaeus' desire for novelty, ignoring the well-attested Hellenistic literature that compiled and discussed Homeric banqueting practices, or the fact that the problem of Nestor's cup was one of the most famous focuses of Homeric scholarship. The authors would have done well to consider the Homeric scholia and the traditions of Homeric scholarship in Alexandria and in Pergamum.

Chapter 4 takes those passages cited by Athenaeus from lost authors which are usually classified as fragments. Again, each passage is analysed in order to prove that its contents have been tendentiously misrepresented by Athenaeus. I refrain from discussing every passage; but, for instance, on pp. 258–62 the authors compare Athenaeus' account of Clearchus F 47 Wehrli with Aelian's telling of the same story, apparently unaware that Aelian took this and many other anecdotes directly from Athenaeus, of whom he is the first known reader.<sup>6</sup>

Once Clearchus, who was indeed a major source for Athenaeus on *truphē*, is disposed of, Ctesias' account of Sardanapallus is tackled. Sardanapallus, along with Smindyrides of Sybaris, had been stock examples of luxurious living since Aristotle, and the account of the former, which involved him losing his power because of his luxurious behaviour, appears to descend from Ctesias. The Gormans prefer to attribute the picture to Athenaeus, despite the fact that much the same account is given in Diodorus, which as they say suggests an earlier source—who must of course be Ctesias. Similarly the account of Ephorus on Milesian *truphē* in Athenaeus is supported by Strabo. Again Theopompus is a major source in Athenaeus for the luxury of the Athenians, the Etruscans, and the behaviour of Philip of Macedon; but the Gormans believe that he was not important in the development of the historiography of luxury. Likewise the fragments of Heraclides Ponticus from his book *On Pleasure* have been distorted in Athenaeus; but the very title of his book must suggest that he wrote on luxury.

Some of these passages may involve Athenaeian rewriting, but the idea that they all do can only be supported by an *a priori* assumption about the nature of Athenaeus' project. And that assumption is undermined by the existence of confirmatory evidence from earlier authors, such as Diodorus and Strabo (who themselves derive from earlier Hellenistic writers) as well as forerunners from

<sup>6</sup> See N. G. Wilson's introduction to the Loeb *Aelian Varia Historia* (1997) 10–11; and myself, *RSI* 126 (2014): 696–7.

the late classical period. Nor do the Gormans consider the importance of archaic and classical sumptuary legislation proscribing luxurious behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

With Rome we are on less controversial grounds: everyone knows that the Romans disapproved of *luxuria*, *avaritia*, *libido*, *licentia* etc., and from Cato onwards regarded *mos maiorum* as condemning all forms of culture or enjoyment, from feasting and poetry to sexual license. Everyone also knows that Etruscan and Roman aristocratic women were much more liberated than the Greeks, and took part in male *convivia* in ways unacceptable to the Greeks. In order to maintain their distinction between Greek and Roman attitudes the Gormans identify all late Hellenistic authors from Polybius onwards as belonging to the Roman tradition, which is an odd interpretation of the development of Greek historiography, and does not always lead to clarity. Thus the analysis of the multiple Hellenistic sources of Diodorus in terms of the attitudes of a single allegedly Roman author does not illuminate the complex relationship between Greek and Roman prejudices about women. And the discussions of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Strabo, Philo, Josephus, and Dio of Prusa in turn simply serve to suggest that, while *truphē* is not entirely used negatively, its close association with *hubris* often leads to politically disastrous consequences. I fail to see how this view is different from their analysis of earlier Greek attitudes expressed, as Philo says, ‘in the old adage *koros breeds hubris*’, which in turn leads to destruction, or why it is necessary to suppose a divide within classical culture between ‘Greek’ and ‘Roman’ attitudes.

This is a book written from a single viewpoint, in which all evidence is reinterpreted in the light of an *idée fixe*. As such it is not convincing in its attempt to overturn almost the entire traditional picture of the ancient conception of luxury derived from our ancient historical and literary sources.

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<sup>7</sup> C. Ampolo, ‘Il lusso funerario e la città arcaica’, *AION* 6 (1984): 71–102.