

REVIEW

SOCIAL MEMORY IN ATHENS

Bernd Steinbock, *Social Memory in Athenian Public Discourse: Uses and Meanings of the Past*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012. Pp. xii + 411. Hardcover, \$85.00. ISBN 978-0-472-11832-8.

Steinbock explores the role of social memory in Athenian public deliberation during the fourth century BC. His contention is that the way in which the Athenians viewed their own past (as distinct from what actually occurred) had a profound impact on decision-making. Social memory, however inaccurate, is true to the community that remembers it (7–8) and not only ‘provides a pool of collective experience for the perception and analysis of present realities, but it also serves as a repository of symbols and metaphors for the communication and illustration of a given problem to others’ (30). If we wish to understand how and why the Athenians did what they did, Steinbock maintains that we must understand their shared notions of the past (8). His primary sources are the extant orators, though surviving examples of oratory in historiography are sometimes used when there is good reason to trust their basic historicity or at least verisimilitude (3–4). From these sources Steinbock reconstructs the complex web of people, monuments, and institutions that constituted and maintained the Athenian memorial community.

Steinbock begins with two chapters devoted to issues of theory and methodology, arranged topically. The introduction, ‘Objectives, Methods, Concepts’, situates the thesis within a detailed and valuable survey of memory theory. In Chapter 1, ‘Carriers of Athenian Social Memory’, Steinbock examines the different ways in which memories of the past were commemorated and transmitted in Athens and how the orators variously drew on these sources to inform public debate. After setting the groundwork, Steinbock turns to Athens’ interaction with Thebes as a case study. He focuses on four events that were often recalled in Athenian public discourse. The sequence is not chronological (for an explanation, see p. 5 n. 11). Steinbock begins with the memory of Theban medism during Xerxes’ invasion (Chapter 2, ‘Athens’ Counterimage: The Theban Medizers’), which, he argues, largely defined how the Athenians framed the subsequent actions of their northern neighbour. In the next chapter he examines the influence of Theban medism on the recollection of previous events: in this case, the myth

of the Seven-against-Thebes (Chapter 3, ‘Mythical Precedents: Athenian Intervention for the Fallen Argives’). In Chapter 4 (‘A Precarious Memory: Theban Help for the Athenian Democrats’) Steinbock adds depth to his reconstruction by considering those brief moments of cooperation between Athens and Thebes in the fourth century. He argues that here too social memory played an important role in justifying policy changes that contradicted the prevailing master narrative of hostility. He closes his case study with a more Freudian turn to collective trauma as he examines Athenian memories of the abortive proposal to destroy Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian War (Chapter 5, ‘Persistent Memories: The Proposed Eradication of Athens’). Steinbock ends with a largely summative conclusion.

Steinbock’s study makes several notable contributions. At first glance, the thesis can seem obvious. The way we view the past must shape how we make decisions in the present. Yet historical studies of ancient Athens and indeed the ancient world in general tend to ignore such considerations and reconstruct decision-making largely on the basis of rational self-interest (32–6). Steinbock resists such reductionist tendencies and restores to the Athenians the full range of factors that influence decision-making, then and now. The thesis is supported by a thorough and subtle examination of memory theory. Steinbock does not suppose Athens was a single or simple memorial community, but shatters this collectivist fallacy by introducing the reader to a wide range of smaller communities and carriers of memory that informed the perceptions of the larger group (12–13). Steinbock’s reconstruction makes much of the polis-wide carriers, particularly the funeral orations (49–58), but also reserves space for geographic localities, sympotic groups, families, and even individuals (70–84). What emerges is a more nuanced understanding of the manifold Athenian community of memory. Steinbock also rightly insists that memory was not wholly at the disposal of the present. Against the more functionalist interpretations of Halbwachs and others (18–19), Steinbock argues that memory persists, even when not convenient. Sometimes this manifests itself as a kind of social trauma (as discussed in Chapter 5), but more often than not it is simply due to the fact that the expectations of the audience make wholesale invention on the part of the orator an unpersuasive rhetorical strategy (94).

Steinbock’s basic thesis is incontrovertible—social memory mattered and was a powerful tool in public decision-making. Problems emerge in his detailed analysis of the role of Thebes in Athenian memory. Steinbock frequently contrasts the ‘actual historical events’ with later recollections of them (45), but he does not always follow the strongest tradition when reconstructing these events and on occasion goes well beyond what the evidence can say. The testimony of late sources is often accepted without due consideration for the possibility that they reflect the subsequent evolution of social

memory. The presence of a Theban contingent at Tempe, a report Steinbock traces back to a fourth-century Boeotian local historian, is accepted as fact (103–4). Early deliberations about the fate of Athens after the battle of Aegospotami are reconstructed on the strength of two second-century AD sources, Pausanias and Polyaeus (296–7). Steinbock goes further, on occasion citing such later authors as near transcriptions of their supposed sources. For example, a Theban decree pertaining to Athenian exiles is characterized as ‘fitting and akin to the deeds of Heracles and Dionysus’ by Plutarch (*Lys.* 27.3–4), who is assumed to have taken the phrase directly from Ephorus, who in turn is assumed to have taken it from the Oxyrhynchus historian. Now armed with a contemporary source, Steinbock concludes ‘it is entirely possible that we can grasp here a trace of the debate in 404’ (225). It is certainly possible, but just as likely not. Steinbock also evinces a clear desire to vindicate the orators’ questionable value as historical sources (39–43). When, for example, Xenophon diverges from Dinarchus about the timing and extent of Athenian aid for Theban exiles in 379, Steinbock follows Dinarchus, even though he is writing over 30 years after Xenophon and 56 years after the event. In support, Steinbock notes that ‘Dinarchus is more likely to reflect what his contemporaries knew about this incident’ (267). Although Steinbock is quite right to surmise that audience expectation allows us to treat the orators’ version of history as true to the Athenians, nevertheless that consideration does not make it any more likely that it was also true as to fact. Popular opinion, even when widely held, can still be grossly incorrect. Athenian views on the overthrow of the Pisistratids come to mind (Thuc. 6.54.1), but similar examples, ancient and modern, could be multiplied.

There is even more need for caution when attempting to establish that a particular version of the past was recalled on a specific occasion. Here again later sources are adduced frequently. The strongest evidence for an Athenian focus on Theban medism in the fifth century depends on the inscription that accompanied a set of shields dedicated in the late fourth. Steinbock concludes they were copies of an earlier dedication (111). Our earliest treatment of Athenian intervention in the burial of the Seven-against-Thebes, preserved in fragments of Aeschylus’ *Eleusinians*, features a peaceful resolution to the dispute. Steinbock assumes that a bellicose ending, first attested decades later, must have predated it (179). The ritual destruction of Crisa, itself first mentioned in the mid-fourth century (Isoc. 14.31), is cited as a precedent for the proposals to destroy not only Athens after the Peloponnesian War, but also Thebes some 80 years before (310–19). When our surviving evidence fails, Steinbock maintains that we can still trace the development of certain memories by locating similar circumstances that would have naturally called them to mind (113). For example, various stages in the mass

emigration of the Plataeans to Athens at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War would have evoked the memory of Plataean patriotism and Theban medism during the Persian Wars (122). Memories of Theban support for the Athenian exiles of 404 would have been part of the debate about the Theban alliance before the battle of Chaeronea (269) and would have been called to mind again when anti-Macedonian Thebans were exiled afterward (272). Each supposition is reasonable enough, but the cumulative effect robs memory of its specificity and consequently its probative value. The point is made clearly enough if we look at a final example. Steinbock conjectures that frequent military engagements between the Athenians and Thebans in the fifth century would have prompted memories of Theban medism. Speeches provided by Thucydides in his account of one such battle, Delium, are cited to corroborate the common practice of invoking past victories on the battlefield (114–15), but it is notable that on this occasion the Athenians do not mention Theban medism or even the battle of Plataea, despite the fact that there were undeniable parallels. Rather, the Athenian general, Hippocrates, mentions Oenophyta (Thuc. 4.95.3), as Steinbock notes in a later footnote (119 n. 78). Occasion does not necessitate use, and we run the risk of imposing recollections that did not occur when we assume otherwise.

Memory is malleable, subtle, and often unpredictable or, in Steinbock's words, 'always fluid and dynamic and never static' (11). When we can rely on the archival tendencies of the modern era, we can explore these intricacies in detail. But in the ancient world, where establishing the facts of the case depends so much on the very imperfections of memory we hope to study, there is need for extreme caution. To present a detailed account of the four events in his case study—and these are extensive examinations of about 60 pages each—Steinbock proceeds beyond what can be deduced from our surviving evidence with confidence. Such instances give pause and call some of Steinbock's individual conclusions into question, but there is sufficient support to demonstrate his broader thesis beyond doubt. His nuanced picture of Athenian memory, the orators' role in its negotiation, and indeed much of his analysis of the recollection of Thebes in Athenian public discourse are must-reads and will prove a valuable point of departure for any future study of Greek social memory.