

CONSCIOUSNESS AS A PUBLIC SPHERE:

HISTORICAL AND EPISTEMIC CONDITIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF ANCIENT GREEK DEMOCRACY

Organizer: Excellencecluster Topoi, Research Group B-I-1, Prof. Dr. Volker Gerhardt, Dr. des. Colin G. King, Ita Brunke M.A.

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This conference, organized and conceived by Prof. Dr. Volker Gerhardt and Dr. des. Colin G. King, brought together promising young scholars and internationally recognized experts in the fields of ancient history, classical philology and the history of law, philosophy and science for two days of discussion on the topic of ancient (particularly: Athenian) democracy. The purpose of the conference was to pose some of the long-debated questions in connection with ancient democracy in the theoretical framework of the study of place and location, particularly with a view to the „public sphere“. Connected with this, a primary objective of the organizers was to invite scholars from various areas of expertise in the literary and political history of early Greece to use the concept of the public for questions in connection with ancient democracy. In particular, participants were invited to reflect upon both the historical and epistemic conditions for the development of Greek democracy.

The conference was organized in three sections:

- 1) Publicity and the development of the democratic polis–state
- 2) Communication and political rituals in the Athenian public sphere
- 3) The relationship between publicity and democracy

Prof. Dr. **Volker Gerhardt** (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin/Exzellenzcluster Topoi) spoke first, with prefatory remarks which concerned the theoretical framework for the questions adumbrated above. In his remarks he developed an approach to the public and the structure of political space which is based in the theory of mind. A central concern of these remarks was to articulate a concept of what it means for a group of individuals to attain (collective) consciousness. In a key assumption in this regard Gerhardt claimed that consciousness is the expression of what is known in the interaction of individuals with their environment. This particular type of consciousness, so Gerhardt, in serving as a generator of public action, fulfills a condition for political participation. In this regard, the creation of a public sphere

through mechanisms of collectively expressing what is individually known may be seen as an important step in the development of democratic structures.

The first speaker in the first section was the ancient historian Prof. Dr. **Christoph Ulf** (Universität Innsbruck). His lecture –*The early polis and the conditions for the polis-identity*– was concerned with the development and role of agonal structures in archaic and historical Greek society. His main thesis was that relatively egalitarian societies of the Greek »Dark Ages« gave way to more aggressive, stratified and agonal societies, which however also sought (because of these very characteristics) to strongly integrate their members internally. The strong bond of polis identity, Ulf argued, is ultimately the result of (particularly: a reaction to) the development of agonal institutions. In the course of the development of the polis from the archaic period to classical times, a major function of law-giving was to contain the aggressivity of the agonal mechanisms of stratification of particular poleis. This enabled communities to cultivate integrative and consensus-building forms of contest which would prove invaluable for the establishment of democratic structures in politics.

Next spoke Dr. **Johannes Haubold** (Durham University) on *The construction of community in Homer*. He sought to show the continuity in the conceptual and linguistic differentiation of political and social publicity from the epoch of Homeric epic poetry into the time of the Athenian democracy. A central claim in this connection was that the differences between the terms *laos* and *demos* found in the Iliad are continued even in democratic Athens. In Homeric language, the term *laos* indicates the subordination of people to a class of rulers. *Demos*, by contrast, refers to the local relationship of the people to a given place and location. In Classical times, this distinction lived on in a particular sense of the term *laos*, which came to be associated with those parts of the society responsible for public rituals, whereas the word *demos* came to refer to the concrete place of the polis and thus also to a determinate and committal political community.

In the last contribution to this section, Dr. **Elizabeth Irwin** (Columbia University) spoke on the topic of *Sympotic poetics and the creation of an Athenian public sphere*. She sought to show the emergence of political discourse

in the elegaic poetry of Solon, the themes of which she compared to the poetry of Hesiod and Theognis. All three authors provide testimony for a poetic discourse concerning social justice and politically virtuous action which was well-developed by the mid 6th Century B.C. The demand for social justice, by this time quite vocal in Athens, is to be seen in the context of the particular material conditions of the poorest members of Athenian society. In Athens, this call leads to the introduction of Solon as mediator and law-giver. His successful attempt at reconciliation of different social classes was, Irwin argued, important in creating the consciousness of a public sphere in this socially disenfranchised part of the Athenian citizenry. In particular, Solon's own political elegies could, despite their self-aggrandizing tendencies, bring about an important change in the self-perception of the socially disenfranchised, and through this democratic institutions were strengthened politically.

The first paper of the second section was given by an historian of ancient law, Dr. **Philipp Scheibelreiter** (Universität Wien). In his presentation, *Der delisch-attische Seebund und sein Einfluss auf die Athenische Öffentlichkeit – eine völkerrechtliche Perspektive*, Scheibelreiter described the changes in the legal and power-political structure of the Delian League. As is well known, this institution, founded after the repulsion of the Persians in 477 and dissolved at the end of the Peloponnesian War in 404, quickly evolved from an alliance of equals against the Persians, to an instrument of Athenian empire and hegemony. Scheibelreiter traced this development to a change in the consciousness of the Athenian public. The change, he argued, was precipitated by a broad awareness that the semi-governmental space of the alliance was sufficiently supported through force and treaty to serve as a power-basis for whomever was able to act as hegemon within it. As a result of this realization, a conscious intention was formed in much of the Athenian citizenry and political elite to attain the status of hegemon within the alliance, precisely in order to use it to these ends. In other words: Athenian imperial designs were the product of popular policy based upon common political knowledge.

In a final, general discussion, the results of this first day of the conference were summarized by the moderator, Dr. des. **Colin Guthrie King** (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin/Exzellenzcluster Topoi).

The second day of the conference began with a paper by the ancient historian Dr. **Marek Wecowski** (University of Warsaw) on the topic *Consciousness and publicity in political practice: the case of ostracism*. Wecowski forwarded the thesis that the institution of ostrakismos was an in-

strument of the Athenian political elite, of the Athenian aristocracy in particular. It served to remove dangerous competitors for political power from the political scene. As a means of aristocratic competition for political influence within the polis, the institution of ostrakismos could not work without the public opinion of the demos, which became manifest in this practice. Indeed, an important condition for effectively employing the ostrakismos as an instrument of power was a shrewd calculation with regard to this opinion. According to Wecowski, one may thus see this institution as one in which a correct assessment of public opinion was to become a necessary condition for its use.

Next to speak was Prof. Dr. **Josiah Ober** (Stanford University); the title of his paper: *Democracy and the institutions of common political knowledge*. In his approach to this topic he began by discussing the mechanisms of social integration which ancient Athenian democratic institutions provided. These functioned by bringing individuals and their particular knowledge into contact and communicative exchange, thus increasing the knowledge-input in community institutions and facilitating coordination within these institutions. The integrative power of this management of collective knowledge was also harnessed by the performance of public rituals and public festivals. Such events created collective experiences which, in turn, were transformed into common knowledge and communal recollection. In this way, the Athenian polity was able to generate public knowledge and make this knowledge perpetually available.

The final speaker in this second section was the ancient historian Prof. Dr. **Johannes Engels** (Universität Köln/Exzellenzcluster Topoi), who gave a paper entitled *Der Areopag und die Ekklesia in der Ära des Eubulos und des Lykurg (355-322 v. Chr.)*. Against scholarly consensus Engels claimed that the Areopagus was an instrument of democratic policy in the 4th Century B.C. The new juridical powers of the court planned by Eubulos in the middle of the 4th Century were in fact to serve to secure democracy and not, as previously assumed, to stake old aristocratic claims to power. Although the members of the Areopagus were not selected according to Athenian democratic principles, the court evidently functioned in a manner which was fully satisfactory for the demos. Evidence for this may be found in the fact that powers were often transferred from the Assembly to the Court. Furthermore, the limitation that the Court not sit if the democracy should be dissolved shows, Engels argued, that the Areopagus was newly conceived in the 4th Century as a support and protection for democracy.

The first speaker in the third and final section was the ancient historian Prof. Dr. **Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp** (Universität Köln). His paper bore the title „*Proper place in the history of democratic values*“? *Die Debatte um die politische Kultur der römischen Republik*. It consisted in a comparison of the depiction of the Athenian democracy and the Roman republic in modern scholarship, particularly with regard to practices of representation and public communication on the part of the Roman political elite. Central to this topic was Hölkeskamp's description of a certain development in the scholarship on ancient Rome. Whereas earlier ancient historians concentrated upon an analysis of institutions and their structures, modern ancient historians have increasingly sought to understand the functioning of societies in terms of communicative interactions within the community. With this approach, similarities between the strategies and mechanisms of communication in very different communities may be compared, quite independent of the institutional context within which they were embedded. Moreover, such a comparison need not imply that the institutions to which they belonged were comparable. That is why, as Hölkeskamp claimed in his main thesis, certain similarities between the habitual communication of political elites in democratic Athens and its polity and in republican Rome and its citizenry need not imply that Rome was in any way a democracy.

In the closing lecture of the third and final section of the conference, the ancient historian Prof. Dr. **Wilfried Nippel** (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin/Exzellenzcluster Topoi) spoke on *Democracy ancient and modern, revisited*. His contribution, too, was focused upon the history of modern scholarship on, and reception of, ancient Athenian democracy. Nippel argued that the Greek model of democracy never really was a paradigm for modern democratic state-builders – neither in the French Revolution, nor during the founding of the United States of America, nor even later. To the contrary: for modern historians and politicians, ancient democracy has often served as a negative example, associated with mob rule. It was only in the course of the 19th Century that Athenian democracy attained a better reputation through contributions in the modern *Altertumswissenschaften*. Nippel further claimed that the criticism of Athenian democracy by scholars in this context was directed more by criteria for modern democratic institutions, and had little to do with the historical reality of Athenian democracy. Nippel concluded that because ancient Athenian democracy cannot be compared to modern democracy, it will not in future be able to serve as a political paradigm.

The concluding discussion of the conference was centred on the possibility of reconstructing the public sphere in historical societies quite generally, and on the methodological challenges involved in such a project. Though the conference was focused particularly on problems and methods from the field of ancient history, the contributions by classical philologists Haubold and Irwin showed that much promising work on this topic can be done in literary studies, as well. In particular, the study of the construction of collective and political identity by recourse to the public sphere as a collectively shared – real or imagined – space promises many insights into the relationship between space and knowledge in ancient civilizations. It is a field which has hardly been touched, and which would future research under the auspices of Topoi would do well to consider.

Ita Brunke & Colin Guthrie King