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GREEKS BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

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Essays in Greek Literature and History

in Memory of
David Asheri

edited by
Gabriel Herman
and
Israel Shatzman

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PREFACE

According to a well-known Greek proverb, the office reveals the character of the statesman (*Arche deixei andra*). One could argue by the same token that the bibliography reveals the character of the intellectual. There are few people to whom this would apply more aptly than the man commemorated in this volume. David Asheri (1925–2000) was a dedicated scholar who lived for his work, and his personality was immersed in his writings. This brief preface will therefore focus on his literary output, eschewing as much as possible reference to his private or public life – to which he would anyhow have objected.

Asheri's writings span four major subjects and a wide range of minor ones, each of which could separately provide a lifelong occupation for the ordinary historian. At the initial phase of his academic career, Asheri was concerned with the legal and social aspects of the Greek city-state. He published a long series of studies on agriculture, land-holding, property, inheritance, lending and borrowing. The question of land-holding and land distribution at the initial stages of city-state formation took him, next, to the world of the Greek colonies, in which the Greeks re-enacted older patterns. The issue of colonization raised questions about the building of cities, and especially about the ideologies, utopias, and myths of the old world that received concrete expression in the new colonial world. His interest in the historians, whose writings provided the main documentation of those ideologies, utopias and myths, prompted Asheri to undertake a third line of inquiry, into Greek historiography. His deep involvement with Herodotus, the historian of the great war between the Greeks and the Persians, opened up a fourth field of interest: the Persian Empire and its culture. We shall present here a representative sampling of Asheri's work and thereafter risk some comments on his approach.

Asheri's Ph.D. dissertation for the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, (*Distribuzioni di terre nell'antica Grecia*, Turin 1966) written under the guidance of Alexander Fuks, was acclaimed immediately upon its

publication as a landmark in the social history of ancient Greece. Asheri started by identifying the *polis* as an agricultural city-state in which the relationship between civic rights and land-ownership was among the most crucial structural links. He then compiled a comprehensive database of cases of land distribution in the Greek world, from the Archaic age down to the Roman conquest. This enabled him to draw a typology of the circumstances in which such distributions occurred: when citizenship rights were granted to those who had lacked them before, in order to replenish or enlarge the citizenry; when some people were deprived of citizenship rights in the wake of civil wars or proscriptions; and, finally, as a reaction to the gradual process of accumulation of land in the hands of the few, with a view to restoring the original equality that had existed among the citizens. This typology generated an important insight. What served as ‘a living model’ for all these sorts of land distribution, wrote Asheri, was the original partition of territory that took place whenever a colony was founded, following which each family was assigned equal and inalienable plots of land. This finding implied that the legal concept of land ownership in the Greek city-state arose not from some sort of primordial, pre-political rights of the would-be owners, but from the concrete, original partition of plots among the citizens. This insight provided a key to a better understanding of the demands for redistribution of land (*ges anadasmós*) so often sounded by the revolutionary parties in the Greek cities, in the course of what the Greeks called *stasis* (internal strife, civil war, revolution).

Asheri’s 1969 book *Leggi greche sul problema dei debiti* (Pisa 1969), about Greek laws concerning debts, is in a sense a sequel to *Distribuzioni di terre*. Here Asheri brings together, for the first time, not only the surviving Greek laws that touch directly on debts, but also the decrees, judicial verdicts, and decisions that touch on them indirectly. With its meticulously prepared critical apparatus, the book presents the reader both with an overview of the issue and with a comprehensive collection of the surviving documents on the subject.

Two of Asheri’s numerous contributions to Greek social history merit special attention. In his article ‘Laws of Inheritance, Distribution of Land and Political Constitutions in Ancient Greece’ (*Historia*, 12 [1963], pp. 1–21), he revealed a surprising correlation between the

form of the constitution within each city-state (whether oligarchic, democratic, or monarchic) and its laws of inheritance and patterns of land distribution. The ancient Greek lawgivers realized, with astonishing perspicacity, that small changes introduced over time into the legislation concerning land ownership may have substantial cumulative, long-term effects. The character of the regime consequently depended not only on its constitutional laws regulating assemblies, councils, and decision-making processes, but also on its legislation concerning the ownership of land and houses and their transmission from one generation to the next.

In another article, ‘Tyrannie et mariage forcé’ (*Annales: Economies, sociétés, civilisations*, 1 [1977], pp. 21–48), Asheri sought to reconstruct the bits and pieces of historical reality lurking behind a fictive legal case incorporated in the elder Seneca’s *Controversiae*. A tyrant has massacred most of a city’s male population and subjugated the surviving women to the people’s own former slaves. However, some of the dignitaries have managed to flee and set up a base beyond the city limits. Among them is a man whose wife and daughter remain in the city. Back home, the slaves ravish the women in their power, but this man’s former slave spares the virginity of his daughter. After the tyrant’s death, the dignitaries return to the city and crucify the slaves. Our dignitary, however, emancipates his slave and marries him to his daughter. His son thinks he has gone out of his mind.

To account for this strange story, Asheri cites five historical documents in which tyrants are charged with the ‘abominable’ crime of bringing free women and slaves into matrimonial union. Then he considers the numerous cases in which free women were forced to marry emancipated slaves in the wake of proscriptions, executions, and civil wars. Finally, he evokes a series of myths mentioning similar instances of forced marriage between free women and slaves. All this makes it extremely likely that these variations on a theme followed an underlying pattern that had a real-life counterpart – one that Asheri has no difficulty in recognizing. The diminishing of a city’s male population (*oligandria*) following civil wars or proscriptions deals a serious blow both to the city and to its indispensable sub-units, the families. The city forfeits one of its policy-makers and warriors; the family forfeits the legal owner of its property and its crucial liaison with the centre of civic power. In this

dire situation, the civic authorities are faced with a dilemma: Should they abolish the city altogether, or ‘dilute’ its male population with former slaves and barbarians? Small wonder that they normally adopt the second course. Forced marriages, argues Asheri, are not a curiosity or a rarity in the history of the Greek city-states. They should rather be regarded as part of a widespread structural phenomenon, grounded in the city-state’s class system.

Asheri’s talents at systematizing knowledge and drawing the big picture are represented by two masterly articles published in the second edition of *The Cambridge Ancient History* – ‘Carthaginians and Greeks,’ in Volume IV (1984), and ‘Sicily 478–431 B.C.,’ in Volume V (1992) – and by his contributions to *I Greci*, a collective work in eight volumes intended to describe and assess the impact of the Greeks on world culture.

Another field in which Asheri made a mark was Greek historiography. Concern with method, to be sure, shows up already in his earlier writings. Treating the myths as if they were history, he wrote in ‘Tyrannie et mariage forcé,’ is as dangerous, methodologically, as treating history as if it were myth. To get to the bottom of things, one should conceive of myths as reflections of historical events, rather than conceiving of historical events as if they were reflections of myths. This methodological premise guides a long series of articles on the subject of Greek historians, as well as Asheri’s new commentary on Herodotus.

Asheri considered his editions of four books by Herodotus the highest achievement of his academic career. There is a degree of symbolism in his choice of Herodotus, rather than any other Greek historian, as his chief object of inquiry. The ‘father of history’ possessed an endless curiosity, which was directed toward gaining a better understanding of the mysteries of human existence. He loved to observe, to question, to listen, to compare, to argue, and to draw conclusions. He also loved giving a sympathetic hearing to stories told by others, no matter what their status, ethnic origin, or religious creed. And he loved to integrate everything he absorbed into a large, comprehensive, rational mental scheme, which he finally converted into an outstandingly original written document.

There was thus, to some extent, a spiritual kinship between Herodotus and David Asheri. But there was a major difference, too.

Like most ancient historians, Herodotus believed that the goal of history was to discover the truth. We risk the suggestion that David Asheri thought otherwise. Numerous hints to this effect are scattered through his writings, but he expressed his view in full, we believe, in an extraordinarily compact Hebrew article, ‘Meditations on the Beginnings of Greek Historiography’ (*Eshkolot*, 68 [1976], pp. 23–41). Asheri discussed the two forms of truth worked out by the Greek philosophers: the ontological (*aletheia*) and the gnosiological (*etymon*). *Etymon*, they believed, could be uncovered – but never *aletheia*. The Sophists even went a step further, denying any possibility of arriving at the absolute truth and arguing that everything going under that name was, in fact, subjective.

Asheri saw Plato’s theory of absolute ideas as an expression of his objection to this prevailing world-view. As we know, Plato distinguished three ontological grades of existence: In the first place, the idea of, say, a bed, which represents the highest level of reality and the absolute truth; in the second place, the bed made by a carpenter, which is no more than a *phainomemon*, a reflection of an idea in the world of the senses; and in the third place, the picture of the same bed drawn by a painter, which is merely an apparition (*phantasma*). Thus Socrates, according to Plato, comments that the reason why the practitioners of the mimetic arts can invent almost anything is that they are so far removed from the truth (Plato, *Republic* 10.598B).

Shifting from philosophy to history, Asheri concludes that the historian is positioned similarly to the painter in relation to the absolute truth. Unable to come into direct contact with the vanished ‘facts’ of the past, he can work only with their incomplete, partial, and distorted reflections in the miserable scraps of surviving evidence. This evidence is once removed from the facts, and the historian who works with it, constructing a historical narrative, is at a second remove, no less than the painter of Plato’s famous bed. In other words, Asheri believed that, in writing history, he was looking at the past from ‘the third place.’

The eight papers brought together in this volume cover a narrow section of David Asheri’s wide range of interests in Greek history. The papers by Alexander Uchitel and Margalit Finkelberg deal with Greek prehistory, a topic that comes up frequently in Asheri’s monumental commentary

on Herodotus's Books I, III, VIII, and IX. Deborah Levine Gera's paper on Ctesias is evocative of Asheri's studies of the Persian empire, while those of Rachel Zelnick-Abramovitz, Daniela Dueck, and Ephraim David mirror Asheri's abiding interest in Greek historiography. Gabriel Herman's paper tackles the relationship between myth, reality, and ritual, represented in Asheri's bibliography by articles in the vein of 'Tyrannie et mariage forcé.' Finally, Gocha Tsetskhladze's paper represents Asheri's fascination with Greek colonization and urbanization.

The contributors, though they come from different schools, all either were pupils (or in Dueck's case, a pupil of a pupil) of David Asheri or were in close touch with him as friends and collaborators, giving them the opportunity to draw inspiration from the discussion of academic problems with him.

The papers included in this volume, bar Herman's, were delivered at an international conference held on 25 March 2002 at the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Jerusalem, on the theme 'Greeks Between East and West.' We wish to express our thanks to the Publications Department of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, and in particular to Deborah Greniman, Editor of English-Language Publications, for editing the volume and preparing it for press; to Don D. Finkel, Production Manager, for overseeing its production; and to Batsheva Shor, Project Manager in the President's Office, for proofreading the final version of the manuscript. We are grateful to the Israel Academy for sponsoring this event, and for making possible the publication of this volume – a fitting tribute to the memory of a great scholar.

Gabriel Herman
Israel Shatzman