
‘This book attempts to understand the ways that ordinary farmers, craftsmen and slaves in ancient Greece made sense of their world and their place in it.’ So Sara Forsdyke begins what proves to be a most stimulating study of various aspects of Greek popular culture. As one who has tried to do the same, in a rather less ‘scientific’ way, I can only salute her achievement. History, as we know, is written by the winners, who are generally highly literate elites, so one has to probe beneath, and re-interpret, the written record, if one is to have any hope of making contact with the great majority of the less fortunate in society.

The book consists of an Introduction, in which the theoretical background is set out, and two parts, entitled respectively ‘Discourses’ and ‘Practices’, each consisting of two chapters, followed by an Epilogue. Her introductory chapter, on ‘Peasants, Politics and Popular Culture’ is devoted to laying out the theoretical and comparative background to the case-histories that she proposes to discuss in later chapters. Popular culture is indeed ‘an elusive quarry’, in the words of Peter Burke (author of *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*), one of the authorities to whom she appeals. Others include Eric Hobsbawm on bandits, Le Roy Ladurie on the peasantry of France, medieval and later, E.D. Genovese on slavery in the American South, and Michael Bakhtin on folk humour. All these lend depth and breadth to her investigations, though there is always a danger of seeing false analogies between different cultures. One particular problem, it seems to me, lies in assimilating the perspectives of free peasants to those of chattel slaves: they both groan under the oppression of elite masters, but the peasants will surely have more of a sense of belonging than will the slaves — though of course freed slaves often assimilate very well. There is a similar, though lesser, gulf between the perspective of adult male members of the ‘common people’ and that of women (though, as she shows, women were often able to join in manifestations of revelry and popular punishment). Another problem of interpretation arises from the examples that she chooses being so often transmitted to us in a garbled and distorted form, so that their interpretation requires a good measure of conjecture. This is not Forsdyke’s fault, of course; it is simply a function of the nature of the evidence.

In Chapter 2 she turns to the first of her case-histories, the remarkable story of Drimakos, leader of a slave-revolt in Chios, probably in the sixth century BC. Drimakos went on the run and gathered together a considerable band of fellow-slaves into a disciplined force which gave the Chian slave-owners

such trouble that they ultimately had to make a pact with him. Stories gathered
round him, and on his death he was so revered that a shrine was erected to him
in the countryside, where he was still worshipped in later times as the ‘Kindly
Hero’.

This is indeed a fascinating tale, but it exemplifies all the problems to which I
have drawn attention. The story is relayed to us by a certain Nymphodorus of
Syracuse, writing in the third century BC (apud Athenaeus), who must have
learned from some informants on Chios. But who would these have been?
Hardly the slaves of the Chians. Presumably members of the Chian elite with
whom he would have been communing. If this were a slave tale, it would cer-
tainly exemplify Forsdyke’s category of reconciliatory ‘discourse’; but whose
tale is it really?

The second ‘discourse’, in Chapter 3, involves Cleisthenes, the sixth-century
tyrant of Sicyon, whose opposition to his larger neighbour Argos led him to
certain bizarre tinkerings with the social structure and religious practices of
his state. These are relayed by Herodotus (V 67–8), and Forsdyke’s claim has
to be that Herodotus, misled by the malice of a later generation of Sicyonians,
is giving us a distorted picture of them, designed to ridicule Cleisthenes. Here
her claim is more plausible, as we can see who would have told the story to
Herodotus and why, but we still need to conjecture what is really behind, for
example, the apparently absurd clan names called after animals.

Turning to the first of her ‘practices’ (Ch. 4: Revelry and Riot in Ancient
Megara), we are faced with, once again, a doubtless distorted account of cer-
tain events occurring in sixth-century Megara, this time relayed, disapprov-
ingly, by Plutarch (in his Greek Questions): the poor broke into the houses of
the rich, demanding to be feasted, on pain of damage to property, and at the
same time some sacred ambassadors from Sparta were attacked by drunken
Megarians and their wagon pushed into a lake. Plutarch portrays this as a
noxious outbreak of democracy (as did probably his source), but Forsdyke,
with much adducing of parallels from other cultures, is able to argue plausibly
that this is a record of something like a ‘trick or treat’ — though one with
teeth! — and designed rather as a safety-valve to defuse tensions between the
oligarchy and the masses than to overthrow the regime.

Lastly, in Chapter 5 (‘Street Theatre and Popular Justice in Ancient Greece’),
she adduces a number of instances of the popular (unofficial) punishment of
adulteresses and adulterers (e.g. by dragging them round the town on a don-
key), and also of attacks on military leaders deemed incompetent or treacher-
ous (stoning, razing of houses), to show how orchestrated popular forms of
punishment can operate alongside the official procedures of the court system.
Some of these practices, one is moved to reflect, would do very well for deal-
ing with the present-day pompous and predatory bankers who have well-nigh
destroyed our world — if only one could lay one’s hands on them!