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978-0-521-85021-6 - Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

MORALITY AND BEHAVIOUR IN DEMOCRATIC ATHENS

How were moral ideas and behaviour in ancient Athens formulated and made manifest? How did democratic Athens diffuse the inevitable tensions that surface in society? In this groundbreaking work, Professor Herman argues that rather than endorse the Mediterranean ethic of retaliation, democratic Athens looked to the courts to dispense justice. Drawing on a method of analysis taken from the behavioural sciences, he describes the exceptional strategy of inter-personal relationships that the Athenian democrats developed to resolve conflict, to increase co-operation and to achieve collective objectives. In a new departure, this work investigates moral ideas and behaviour alongside each other and expands the focus of the study to include all aspects of Athenian life, be it societal or economic. Highly illustrated throughout and interdisciplinary in approach, this work offers new light on society and behaviour in ancient Athens which might also serve as a model for similar ancient societies.

GABRIEL HERMAN is Professor of Ancient History at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He has held visiting fellowships at Churchill College, Cambridge, the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton and the Institute for Research in the Humanities, Madison, Wisconsin. He is the author of *Ritualised Friendship and the Greek City* (1987) and numerous articles on Greek social history. This book was awarded the Polonsky Prize for Creativity and Originality in the Humanistic Disciplines by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2005.

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Frontmatter

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978-0-521-85021-6 - Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*TO THE MEMORY OF
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978-0-521-85021-6 - Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

... καὶ ἀστυνόμους ὀργὰς ἐδιδάξατο ...

(... and [man] has taught himself a temper that enables him to live
in communities ...)

Sophocles, *Antigone* 355–6

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85021-6 - Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Preface</i>	xix
1 Moral precepts and society	I
Categories of moral injunction	I
A code of behaviour	15
In crisis and in peace	23
Co-operation, reciprocity and exchange	30
2 Athenian society and government	39
Physical environment and population	39
Athenian politics and institutions	52
Rules and norms	63
Tensions and conflicts	72
3 The moral image of the Athenian democracy	81
Moral ideas and democracy	81
Some modern assessments	85
The fusion of moral norms	101
Some contemporary assessments	107
4 Representations and distortions	119
The problem of documentation	119
The distortions of genre	125
Law courts and orators	136
The evidence of forensic oratory	141
5 The structure of conflicts	155
Provocation and reaction	155
Aggression: inborn and learned	159
The threshold principle	164
A case of marital infidelity	175

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85021-6 - Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

Contents

6	Revenge and punishment	184
	‘Mindless’ revenge	184
	Contrasting courses of conflict	194
	Principles and actual behaviour	203
	How violent was Athenian society?	206
7	The coercive power of the state	216
	Theories of sovereignty	216
	Violence: legitimate and illegitimate	221
	The democracy’s coercive apparatus	229
	The hoplite reserve	246
8	Transformations of cruelty	258
	Heroes into citizens	258
	Restructuring sentiments and emotions	265
	Agonistic pastimes	281
	Substitution and sublimation	303
9	Interactions with the divine	310
	Visions of the transcendental	310
	The evidence of myth	326
	Philanthropists, benefactors, and heroes	347
	A very unusual empire	360
10	The growth of communal feeling	374
	Patterns of economic exchange	374
	The problem of collective action	391
	Tit for two tats	402
	The Athenian code of behaviour: a balance-sheet	410
	<i>Bibliography</i>	415
	<i>Index</i>	454

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85021-6 - Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Illustrations*

- 1.1 **Communal graves from the Kerameikos underground station**
Last third of the fifth century BC. Athens, Museum of Cycladic Art. Courtesy of the Greek Ministry of Culture page 20
- 1.2 **Types of exchange**
Adapted from Molm 1997: 21. 35
- 2.1 **The Athenian warship**
Above: Attic black-figure cup, 540–500 BC. London, British Museum. © Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum
Below: A modern reconstruction of a *trieres*. Courtesy of the Trireme Trust 40
- 2.2 **Attica and Athens: city and country**
a. Map by the author
b. Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations 44–5
- 2.3 **Model of a typical Attic farmstead**
Courtesy of Hans Lohmann (Lohmann 1992: 48) 46
- 2.4 **The city walls and the long walls**
Above: From *The Cambridge Ancient History* 2nd edn, Vol. v: 208 (after Boersma)
Below: Photo by the author 48
- 2.5 **Reconstructions of typical Attic houses**
a. Courtesy of Hans Lohmann (Lohmann 1993: 168)
b. From *The Cambridge Ancient History* 2nd edn, Vol. v: 201
c. R. E. Wycherley, *The Stones of Athens* (1978), p. 242, no. 5.
© Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press
d. From *The Cambridge Ancient History* 2nd edn, Vol. v: 201 50

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85021-6 - Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

List of illustrations

- 2.6 **The Pnyx, supreme symbol of Athenian democracy**
 Above: Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies
 at Athens: Agora Excavations
 Below: Photo by the author 54
- 2.7 **The agora during the fourth century: plan**
 Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at
 Athens: Agora Excavations 59
- 2.8 **Ethnic and social types at Athens**
- Attic red-figure *kylix*, c. 475 BC. Agora Museum, Athens, P
 42. Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies
 at Athens: Agora Excavations
 - Attic red-figure plate from Chiusi. Oxford, Ashmolean
 Museum, inv. 1879.175 (V. 310). Courtesy of M. Vickers
 - Attic red-figure *kylix*, c. 480 BC. All rights reserved, The
 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
 - Fragment of an Attic red-figure vase, c. 460 BC. Agora
 Museum, Athens, P 29766. Courtesy of the American
 School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations
 - Attic red-figure fragment of a *kylix*, late sixth century BC.
 Agora Museum, Athens, P 23133. Courtesy of the
 American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora
 Excavations
 - Attic white-ground *lekythos*, 470–460 BC. Brussels, Musées
 Royaux d' Art et d' Histoire, A1019 60
- 2.9 **A slave crying out for help**
 Above: Lead tablet found in the Athenian Agora, fourth
 century BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum (*IL*
 1702). Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies
 at Athens: Agora Excavations
 Left: *Skyphos* from Abai in Locris, late fifth century BC.
 Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 442
 Right: Athenian red-figure cup-painting, from Vulci, c. 480
 BC. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, inv. 2294 (*ARV* 400.1). Photo:
 bpk 71
- 4.1 **Machines for casting lots to select dikasts (*kleroteria*) and
 identification tickets (*pinakia*)**
 Left: Athens, Agora Museum (Archives). Courtesy of the
 American School of Classical Studies at Athens
 Right: Inscribed plaques of bronze, fourth century BC.
 Athens, Agora Museum (= Boegehold 1995: Plate 7, nos. P2

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85021-6 - Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*List of illustrations*

xi

- and P3). Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens 138
- 4.2 **Law-court equipment: water clocks (above) and voting ballots (below)**
- Above: *clepsydra*, model (left) and drawing, restored (right). c. 400 BC. Athens, Agora Museum (= Boegehold 1995: Plate 13). Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens
- Below: Bronze discs, one with solid axle, bearing the inscription ψῆφος δημοσίᾳ; another (damaged) with pierced axle. Late fourth century BC. Athens, Agora Museum (= Boegehold 1995: Plates 17 & 18, B11 and B19). Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens 139
- 5.1 **Euphiletus' *oikos* (house and family)**
- a. Drawing from Morgan 1982
- b. Attic red-figure *hydria*, c. 430 BC. Courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Bequest of David M. Robinson, 1960.344 180
- 5.2 **The typology of Euphiletus' reaction to Eratosthenes' provocation** 182
- 6.1 **Provocation, vengeance and punishment** 192
- 6.2 **Homicide in Attica** 207
- 7.1 **The Athenian state prison**
- Above: Restoration by J. E. Jones, after John Travlos. Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens
- Below: Photo of the remains of the prison by the author 223
- 7.2 **Clay cups found in the annexe to the state prison**
- Fourth century BC. Athens, Agora Museum, P 20858. Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations 224
- 7.3 **Inscribed pieces of pottery (*ostraka*)**
- Above, left: Athens, Agora Museum, P 9973
- Above, right: Athens, Agora Museum, P 18555. Photo: DAI Athen (inst. neg. Goette 2001/731)
- Below, right: Athens, Agora Museum, P 9950. Photo: DAI Athen (inst. neg. Goette 2001/725)
- Below, left: Athens, Agora Museum, P 16755. Photo: DAI Athen (inst. neg. Goette 2001/726) 225

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85021-6 - Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

List of illustrations

- 7.4 **The coercive apparatus of the Athenian democracy** 230
- 7.5 **Scythian archer**
Attic black-figure vase by Exekias, late sixth century BC.
University of Pennsylvania Museum (neg. #164395) 231
- 7.6 **Anti-tyranny decree**
Marble stele, 337/36 BC. Athens, Agora Museum, I 6524.
Photo: DAI Athen (inst. neg. Goette 2001/708) 236
- 7.7 **A Greek hoplite overpowering a non-hoplite Persian soldier**
Attic red-figure amphora, dating from after the Persian Wars.
All rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 241
- 7.8 **Armed Athenian hoplites**
Above: Attic red-figure Bell-*krater*, attributed to the Altamura Painter, c. 470–460 BC. London, British Museum, GR 1961.7-10.1. © Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum
Below, left: Attic tombstone, Staatliche Museen, Berlin.
Photo: bpk
Below, right: Athenian red-figure vase, fifth century BC.
Athens, Agora Museum, P 24061. Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations 251
- 8.1 **The cult of beauty**
Tombstone of Hegeso, c. 420 BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 3624. Photo: DAI Athen (Hege 1688) 260
- 8.2 **The interrelationship of perceptions of honour and social structure** 269
- 8.3 **The structure of amiable relationships** 273
- 8.4 **Reflections of *philia* in visual art**
Above, left: Marble grave stele, 350–325 BC; Athens, Museum of Cycladic Art, inv. L 5775. Courtesy of the Greek Ministry of Culture
Above, right: Grave relief of a young girl with her parents, second quarter of the fourth century BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 717
Below, left: Grave monument of Procles and Procleides, fourth century BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 737

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85021-6 - Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

	<i>List of illustrations</i>	xiii
	Below, right: Grave stele of Thraseas and Euandria, third quarter of fourth century BC. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photo: bpk	280
8.5	Animal fights	
	Above: Base of a <i>kouros</i> from the cemetery of Kerameikos, late sixth century BC. Courtesy of the Museum of Classical Archaeology, University of Cambridge (original at Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 3476)	
	Below: Attic <i>chous</i> , Vatican Museum, inv. 16 522 (Photo: Alinari). Courtesy of the Direzione dei Musei Vaticani	282
8.6	The S[timulus]–R[eaction] chain	287
8.7	Athenian combat sports	
	Above, left: Attic <i>hydria</i> , c. 520 BC, from Cerveteri, of the Leagros Group. Vatican Museum, inv. 416 (ABV 365). Courtesy of the Direzione dei Musei Vaticani	
	Above, right: Bronze statuette, c. first century AD. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (no. 54.1006)	
	Below: Base of a <i>kouros</i> from the cemetery of Kerameikos, late sixth century BC. Courtesy of the Museum of Classical Archaeology, University of Cambridge (original at Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 3476)	288
8.8	Pyrrhic dance, and its unexpurgated version: warriors dancing with severed heads	
	Above: Remains of the monument of Atarbos, fourth century BC. Athens, Acropolis Museum, inv. 1338. Courtesy of the Greek Ministry of Culture, Ephorate of Prehistorical and Classical Antiquities. Photo: DAI Athen (inst. neg. 2001/866)	
	Below: Attic black-figure <i>lekythos</i> , fifth century BC. London, British Museum, B 658. © Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum	304
8.9	Athenian non-combat sports	
	Above left: Athenian red-figure vase, 440–430 BC. Courtesy of the Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University Art Museums, 30.444	
	Above right: Attic black-figure <i>lekythos</i> from Gela. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, inv. 1890.27 (V. 250). Courtesy of M. Vickers	

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85021-6 - Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv

List of illustrations

- Below: Base of a kouros from the cemetery of Kerameikos, late sixth century BC. Courtesy of the Museum of Classical Archaeology, University of Cambridge (original at Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 3476) 306
- 8.10 **Child victim of the plague**
Red-figure Attic *chous*, last third of the fifth century. Athens, Museum of Cycladic Art, inv. no. A 15272 (= Parlama and Stampolidis 2000: 356). Courtesy of the Greek Ministry of Culture 307
- 9.1 **Interactions between the mundane and the transcendental** 313
- 9.2 **The rulers of the cosmos: Zeus, Poseidon and Hades**
Attic black-figure lip-cup, sixth century BC, Xenocles Painter. London, British Museum, B 245. © Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum 314
- 9.3 **Visions of the underworld**
Top: Attic white-ground *lekythos*, fifth century BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 1926 (CC 1668). Drawing by Ruth Herman
Bottom: Attic black-figure amphora, late sixth century. Munich, Antikensammlung, inv. 1493 (Bucci P., *ABV* 316). Drawing by Ruth Herman 315
- 9.4 **Divine metamorphoses**
- Athenian cup, c. 540 BC, attributed to the Phrynos Painter. London, British Museum, B 424. © Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum
 - Relief depicting Leda being raped by a swan (Zeus). Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 1499. Photo: DAI Athen (inst. neg. Wagner 1975/651)
 - Zeus sending forth Hermes and Iris. Attic red-figure vase painting. Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. G 192
 - Attic black-figure *hydria*, end of sixth century BC. Uppsala, Museum Gustavianum 316
- 9.5 **Funerary stele of the Athenian diviner (*mantis*) Cleoboulus of Acharnae**
Found in the 1950s near Acharnae, second half of the fourth century BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 319
- 9.6 **The oath-stone (*lithos*)**
Athens, Agora Museum, late sixth century BC (= Ober and Hedrick 1994: 122). Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens 320

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85021-6 - Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*List of illustrations*

xv

- 9.7 **Athenian curse-tablets (*katadesmoi*), designed to harm enemies and to influence the outcome of trials**
 Above, left: Attic lead tablet of unknown provenance, fourth century BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum (= Gager 1992: no. 104). Photo: DAI Athen
 Above, right: Lead container with lead doll and graffito curse from a fourth-century BC grave. Athens, Kerameikos Museum (= Gager 1992: no. 41). Photo: DAI Athen
 Below, left: A piece of blackware of unknown provenance. Copenhagen, National Museum, Department of Classical and Near Eastern Antiquities, Kinch Collection, inv. 7727
 Below, right: Lead curse tablet, fourth century BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum (= Boegehold 1995: 56). Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens 322
- 9.8 **Homeric duel, as represented on a sixth-century Athenian black-figure amphora**
 Attic black-figure amphora, about 540–530 BC. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Henry Lillie Pierce Fund, 98.923, The Botkin Class (*ABV* 169). Photograph © 2005 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 326
- 9.9 **Conflict and the gods**
 Attic black-figure vase, Berlin Painter, 1686. London, The British Museum, GR 1861.4-25.50 (B 197) 327
- 9.10 **The mourning Athena**
 Marble stele, fifth century BC. Athens, Acropolis Museum, inv. 695. Courtesy of the Greek Ministry of Culture, A' Ephorate of Prehistorical and Classical Antiquities 330
- 9.11 **The myth of Agraulus and its civic adaptations**
 Above: Attic vase from Camirus. London, British Museum. © Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum
 Middle: Athenian vase painting. Original at St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum. Drawing from C. Daremberg and E. Saglio eds., (1877–1919) *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines*, Paris: Hachette
 Below: Attic ram's head *rhyton*, decorated by the Sotades Painter. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Cat. L2. Drawing (by François Lissarague) from Hoffmann 1997: 73. Courtesy of Herbert Hoffmann 332

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85021-6 - Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xvi

*List of illustrations*9.12 **The tyrannicides**

Roman marble copy of a Greek bronze original of 490 or 475 BC. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 44825.

Reproduced courtesy of the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici delle province di Napoli e Caserta 334

9.13 **The altar of the eponymous heroes (reconstructed model)**

Model by Petros Demetriades and Kostas Papoulias. Athens, Agora Museum. Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens

337

9.14 **The central scene of the Parthenon frieze**

Fifth century BC. London, British Museum, Slab V, 31–34.

© Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum 341

9.15 **Three Herms, a guardian figure from Bali, and a Papuan**

a. Head of a Herm found in the Leokoreion, late fifth century BC (S 2452). Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations

b. Head of a Herm found near the Royal Stoa, early fourth century BC (S 2499). Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations

c. Athenian red-figure vase-painting, c. 470 BC. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 127929. Reproduced courtesy of the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici delle province di Napoli e Caserta

d. Drawing of guardian figure from Bali. Courtesy of I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt

e. Drawing of Papuan with penis sheath. Courtesy of I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt 344

9.16 **The monument of Dexileos**

Left: Fragment of an Attic red-figure *oinochoe*, c. 400 BC. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Henry Lillie Pierce Fund, 98.936. Photograph © 2005 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Right: Grave relief, 394 BC. Athens, Kerameikos Museum, P 113. Photo: DAI Athen (inst. neg. Kerameikos 5977) 353

10.1 **Athenian silver tetradrachm, didrachm, and drachm and silver drinking vessel**

Above: Silver tetradrachm, didrachm and drachm. Obverse: head of Athena. Reverse: owl. Cambridge, The Fitzwilliam Museum

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85021-6 - Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

	<i>List of illustrations</i>	xvii
	Below: Silver <i>kantharos</i> with gold-figure decoration from Duvanli, Bulgaria. Plovdiv, Archaeological Museum. Courtesy of Dr. Cornelia Ewigleben	380
10.2	Lead tokens Above: Fourth century BC, Athens (<i>IL</i> 656, 819, 893, 944, 1146, 1173, 1233). Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations Below: Fourth century BC, Athens (<i>IL</i> 587, 716, 941). Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations	384
10.3	Official Athenian weights and measures Above: Clay public measure, second half of the fourth century BC, Athens (P 3559). Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations Below (left): Set of official bronze weights, about 500 BC, Athens (B 495, 492, 497). Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations Below (right): Bronze public measure, about 400 BC, Athens (B 1082). Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations	388
10.4	The prisoner's dilemma Adapted from Axelrod 1984: 8. Courtesy of R. Axelrod	400

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85021-6 - Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

The idea for this book came from five interrelated facts that began increasingly to intrigue me during the academic year 1990–91, which I spent on sabbatical in the stimulating atmosphere of Cambridge. Firstly, I observed that whereas many excellent works had been written on various sub-systems of Athenian society (politics, culture, economy, slavery, family, women and religion, for example), no attempt had been made to study them as parts of an integrated whole. In this book I shall try to examine the workings and interactions of these sub-systems in the context of the wider social system to which they and the individuals who participated in them belonged.

My second observation followed closely on the first. Since these sub-systems were all parts of a self-consistent social system, they must have been held together by some version of what is generally known as morality or a moral system. (Throughout this study I shall be using these terms in Hobbes' sense ('those qualities of humankind that concern their living together in peace and unity') rather than in the customary sense of rules concerning the suppression or regulation of vice, profane practice or debauchery.) Although many excellent books have been written about *Greek* morality, I do not believe that any work has yet been devoted exclusively to the study of *Athenian* morality. In this book I shall try to bring together and evaluate the evidence we currently have concerning the moral system that underpinned Athenian society throughout almost two hundred years of democratic rule.

The third observation was that most books on the subject of Greek morality had interpreted morality as a loosely defined assemblage of ideas that should be approached using conceptual tools derived from the history of ideas. No author had yet examined the Athenians' moral ideas *and* behaviour (or, more broadly, their moral *and* social systems) as interrelated entities. In this book I propose to reveal the characteristic features of the code of behaviour (or, in contemporary language, the 'unwritten laws') that the Athenians developed to make democracy practicable throughout

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85021-6 - *Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History*

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xx

Preface

the manifold and complex fields of activity that constituted their social life (politics, land tenure, the employment of slaves, interpersonal and class relations, conflict resolution, state power, the army, foreign relations, religion and the economy). This book is, in other words, also a social history of democratic Athens.

Fourthly, I observed a disparity between the conceptual tools with which classicists and ancient historians investigated the moral norms of ancient societies and those used in adjacent fields of research. The former group relied by and large on a personal and hence culturally determined concept of morality, often following K. J. Dover in believing that the researcher's own moral experience must be his or her best guide to unravelling that of the Greeks. This book will be taking a different approach to the Athenians' moral system, using analytical tools developed in psychology, the behavioural sciences, ethology and game theory. I believe that these tools are more impersonal and less likely to be compromised by cultural bias than any that rely upon the researcher's moral experience alone. Deriving from several disciplines, in which they have been greeted as considerable advances, they are brought together in my book to create a fully rounded analytical approach that is not merely appropriate to the study of ancient Athens, but may, with certain adjustments and refinements, be used to evaluate objectively the moral systems of many other small-scale societies, both past and present.

My fifth observation was that throughout the wider field of social studies the study of man's society and culture tended to be regarded as separate from the study of man as a biological organism. Dubious as to the legitimacy of the widespread practice of abstracting 'constitution' from 'society', 'society' from 'collective behaviour' and 'collective behaviour' from an individual's biologically and culturally conditioned sentiments, and inspired by Professor Burkert's call to apply 'biological methods' to the study of ancient societies (Burkert 1996), I shall be attempting in this book to reintroduce man's biological aspect into the study of Athenian society and mores. Though I am by training an ancient historian, my longstanding familiarity with the behavioural sciences has convinced me that their methods offer us a key to certain problems in ancient history that cannot satisfactorily be resolved using the ancient historian's analytical apparatus alone.

In the course of the thirteen-odd years that it has taken me to write this book, I have received endless help and advice from a long list of friends. I am more than grateful to Moshe Amit, Paul Cartledge, John Crook, Peter Garnsey, Manuela Giordano, Wilfried Nippel, Anthony Snodgrass and Nigel Spivey for many extremely helpful discussions. I have also profited

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85021-6 - *Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History*

Gabriel Herman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xxi

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Finally, a few general remarks concerning the text that follows. All dates are BC unless otherwise indicated. All translations from the Greek are my own, except where otherwise indicated. I have used the term 'polis' (plural: poleis), without italics, to sidestep the ambiguities associated with 'state', 'city' and the cumbersome 'city-state'.

The fifty-five illustrations with which this book is punctuated are intended to give the text depth and dimension. The captions, many of which expand upon ideas that appear in the text only in outline, are an integral part of the book's argument.