Living in Athens

Presentation to Prospective Students in Classics

What I have to say corresponds indirectly to the paperwork… You’ve got a brief statement about the course (appearing on the website), preliminary lecture titles, some sample examination questions, and a select bibliography. But what I say here is meant to stand by itself….

Over the years, I’ve organized six or seven Part II Papers; and the one I enjoyed the most was called ‘City of Athens’. What this did was to look at key elements that made up the Athenian polis: the democracy (naturally), citizenship, the courts, the major religious cults and festivals, and so on… It was pretty much history ‘from the top down’, looking at institutions, rather than individuals. So what I want to attempt in this new course, ‘Living in Athens’, is the other side of the coin; that is, to refocus on the experience of individual Athenians, or groups of Athenians. What was it like, living in Athens? How can we best go about trying to answer that question?....

I think there’s a hint (more than a hint) in our own experiences. What is it like living in Cambridge? Answer: it’s very different for different sets (different types) of people, at different times, in different places. My own experiences and expectations are somewhat different from yours (though they may overlap)…. So, in the case of Ancient Athens, one approach will be to think in terms of the traditional divisions regarding types of people: men and women, free and slave, rich and poor; and then some not-so-traditional divisions between people: insiders and outsiders, the very young and the very old, healthy and sick, criminals and their victims, literates and non-literates, those awake and those asleep. So that’s the people side of things….

Other dimensions provide cross-bearings, in terms of time and place. Like times of the year: seasonal events, encompassing the harvest and (maybe) military service; or the monthly meetings of the assembly (and the monthly repayment of debts); and then the daily round of work and play…. ‘Places’ include significant locations within the city, where all these performances by individuals were acted out; both public (the Agora, Pnyx, temples, sanctuaries, gymasia, the public baths), and private (notably, family housing). And there’s also what might be labelled ‘Greater Athens’: the country demes, frontier zones, and the harbour area of the Piraeus.

Then there are the detailed contexts for all this activity, to be presented lecture by lecture. What I want to do, is approach these different dimensions, involving people, time and space, through a sequence of case-studies. These will focus on specific areas where there’s been recent, significant research. Now, I’m still thinking this through, which is why the titles for lectures on the handout are pretty broad (‘placeholders’). The problem is that you initially have to formulate proposals for courses like this, for official approval, about two years in advance……
But here’s a sample of the kinds of things I intend…. For example, with regard to democracy, I’ll not focus on elite politicians (Pericles and the like), but on what’s come to be called ‘street politics’; that is, informal discussion and gossip in the streets, shops and Agora…. For education, I’ll be concerned, not with the higher education offered by the sophists, but with levels of literacy and the testimony of graffiti…. For religion, emphasis won’t be on the great festivals, but on the personal dimension of magic and superstition…. Then entertainment won’t just involve elite symposia, but how poor Athenians amused themselves. One of the most frequently cited scholarly articles of all time is by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. It’s called: ‘Deep play. Notes on the Balinese cock fight’. It relates how cock-fighting on the island of Bali is, in effect, a microcosm of Balinese culture and society. Well, the equivalent in ancient Athens was fighting, not with cocks, but with quails… And finally, there’s the business of sleeping. Like us, the Athenians spent approximately one third of their lives asleep (or trying to sleep). So it may be that the process (even the ritual) of ‘preparing for bed’ says something about more general cultural attitudes; and maybe their recorded dreams give some kind of access into the everyday Athenian subconscious…

As for the ancient resources to be drawn on in these reconstructions…. Well, it will involve everything…. Paradoxically, the historians (like Thucydides) are perhaps the least helpful: they tend to be concerned with abnormality; typically, with warfare and its disruptions. More generally, there’s a place for law-court speeches (our very own Lysias I might get a passing mention), and also the literary genres of philosophy (like the settings of Plato’s dialogues), and, crucially, drama…. There’s a story that Plato, visiting the court of Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse, was asked by Dionysius: ‘How can I best find out about the people of Athens’. And Plato’s reply: ‘By reading the plays of Aristophanes’. Was Plato joking? We must endeavour to find out… Apart from written materials, there’s the tantalizing testimony of vase-painting; and, above all, the physical fabric of the city itself. I’d like to think that, by the end of the course, those who have attended, when equipped with a time-machine and a cloak of invisibility, could confidently find their way around the ancient city of Athens.

As for course-delivery, that will consist of twenty-four lectures and classes, in the Lent Term. If you’ve attended any of my lectures for Part I, you will know my methods (what to expect). In those twenty-four sessions, I will try to set out the possibilities on the various subjects, with a clear statement of my own views; which (as I know from experience) the various supervisors for the course will then do their best to subvert. Which is how it ought to be…. We have an excellent rule in Ancient History for Part II: that the persons giving the lectures are forbidden from supervising. There is no such thing as a ‘party line’.

I said this was a new Part II course, which it is. And it’s also the last Part II course that I will deliver before my retirement. So I intend to enjoy myself, and have some fun.
What was it like to live in Athens, the countryside as well as the city? Was it (as some have argued) a question of public affluence matched by private squalor? How can we know? This course will try to provide some answers, through an exploration of three overlapping categories: peoples, times and places. Apart from the traditional ‘legal’ categories of citizens, metics and slaves (each encompassing both men and women), we will consider the experience of being young and old, rich and poor. ‘Times’ encompasses ‘times of the year’ (military service, festivals), ‘of the month’ (politics), and of the day (work and play). ‘Places’ include significant areas within the city, both public (Agora, Areopagus, Pnyx, temples, sanctuaries, gymnasia) and private (notably, housing), and in ‘Greater Athens’ (country demes, the Piraeus). These broader themes will engage a range of topics, including: literacy, education, health, wealth, poverty, entertainment, eating and drinking, and crime. The timescale will be approximately the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. Overall, the course will engage with the problems faced by historians in writing the history of society. The process will involve the full range of literary texts (poetry and prose), inscriptions (including graffiti), archaeology, topography, and iconography. Where appropriate will be introduced the comparative testimony of other ancient and not-so-ancient cities and their surroundings.

**Lecture Topics**

(Intended only to give some sense of scope; snappier, more focused titles to be substituted in due course)

1. Social life; social history; the history of society
2. Approaches to living in Athens
3. Preindustrial Cities
4. The problem of change through time

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5. Being a child
6. Being old
7. Being a slave
8. Being a metic
10. Being rich and poor
11. Being a sex-worker

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12. Living Space
13. Civic Space
14. Religious Space
15. Gymnasia
16. Country demes
17. Piraeus
Specimen Questions (the actual paper will not contain so many questions)

1. To what extent is the category of the ‘Preindustrial City’ helpful to the historian of Athens?

2. Did democracy make an appreciable difference to living in Athens?

3. How are ancient literary accounts of living in the city of Athens modified by either archaeology or iconography?

4. How might a history of Athenian society differ from a history of social life in Athens?

5. ‘A category so broad as to be meaningless’. Discuss with reference to either ‘citizens’ or slaves’ living in Athens.

6. ‘Careers open to the talents.’ To what extent is this statement an accurate description of metics in Athens?

7. ‘We possess courtesans (hetairai) for the sake of pleasure (hedone), we have concubines (pallakai) for daily service of our body, but we have wives (gunaikes) for the production of legitimate children and to have reliable guardians of our household property.’ What gets left out?

8. ‘Very few rich, a great many poor, and hardly anyone inbetween.’ How far is this an accurate assessment of the citizen-body in Athens?


10. Is it helpful to describe the Agora in Athens as a ‘zone of competitive reciprocity’?

11. Was the Piraeus ‘a place apart’ with regard to the rest of Athens?

12. How far is it helpful to approach the country demes of Attica as replications in miniature of the city of Athens?

13. To what extent were civic festivals integrated into the wider life of Athens?

14. How far is it accurate to characterize the ordinary Athenian citizen as homo politicus?
15. ‘Our knowledge of the private religious experience of the average Athenian remains marginal’. Discuss.

16. What was the impact of military service on the overall life of Athenian citizens?

17. Did the experience of schole (‘free time’) differ appreciably across the different levels of Athenian citizen society?

Select Bibliography

Detailed, annotated bibliographies on specific topics will be circulated on a lecture-by-lecture basis.

Items in the list that follows are in the approximate order they will occur in the series of lectures.


P. Horden and N. Purcell, The Corrupting Sea (via contents page and index)

Robert Sallares, The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World (as above)

Eric Hobsbawm, ‘From social history to the history of society’ Daedalus 100 (1971) 20-45

Lucy Grig (ed.), Popular Culture in the Ancient World

W.A. Becker, Charicles, or Illustrations of the Private Life of the Greeks (to be looked through rather than read through)

James Augustus St. John, The History of the Manners and Customs of Ancient Greece 3 vols (as above)

J.P. Mahaffy, Social Life in Greece from Homer to Menander (as above)

T.B.L. Webster, Everyday Life in Classical Athens (as above)

T.G. Tucker, Life in Ancient Athens. The Social and Public Life of a Classical Athenian from Day to Day (as above)

Jennifer Gibbon, Athenian Society (as above)

A.P. Dorjahn, A Day in Old Athens (as above)

Peter Connolly and Hazel Dodge, The Ancient City. Life in Classical Athens and Rome (as above)

Antony Andrewes, Greek Society

Jean-Manuel Roubineau, Les cités grecques (Vie-II siècle savant J.-C.): essai d’histoire sociale (reviewed by Boehm in Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2016.0.4.28)

Jennifer Neils and John H. Oakley, Coming of Age in Ancient Greece
R. Garland, *The Greek Way of Life: From Conception to Death*

R. Garland, *The Greek Way of Death*

Sara Forsdyke, *Slaves Tell Tales: And Other Episodes of Popular Culture in Ancient Greece*

N.R.E. Fisher, *Slavery in Classical Greece*

Yvon Garlan, *Slavery in Ancient Greece*

Debra Hamel, *Trying Neaera. The True Story of a Courtesan’s Scandalous Life in Ancient Greece*

E. Fantham *et al.* (eds), *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text*

S.L. Jones and S. Dillon (eds), *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*

Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*

David Whitehead, *The Ideology of the Athenian Metic*

P. Millett, *Theophrastus and His World*

Victor Ehrenberg, *The People of Aristophanes: A Sociology of Attic Comedy*

R.E. Wycherley, *The Stones of Athens*

P. Cartledge, P. Millett and S. von Reden, *Kosmos. Essays in Order, Conflict and Community in Classical Athens*

John McK. Camp, *The Athenian Agora*

Lisa Nevett, *House and Society in the Ancient Greek World*

B.A. Ault and L.C. Nevett (eds), *Ancient Greek Houses and Households*

C.A. Cox, *Household Interests*

W.K. Lacey, *The Family in Classical Greece*

R. Garland, *The Piraeus: From the Fifth to the Fourth Century B.C.*


Robin Osborne, *Classical Landscape with Figures*

J.D. Mikalson, *Honor Thy Gods: Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy*

Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*

M.I. Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World*

Alex Gottesman, *Politics and the Street in Democratic Athens*
Claude Mossé, *The Ancient World at Work*

Peter Acton, *Poiesis: Manufacturing in Classical Athens*

V.D. Hanson (ed.), *Hoplites: The Classical Greek Battle Experience*

Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*

Mabel L. Lang, *Graffiti in the Athenian Agora*

Oswyn Murray (ed.), *Sympotica: A Symposium on the Symposium*

L. Kurke, ‘Ancient Greek board games and how to play them’ *Classical Philology* 94 (1999) 247-67


C. Nicolet, *The World of the Citizen in Republican Rome* (as above)

Clifford Geertz, ‘Deep play. Notes on the Balinese cock fight’ in his *Interpretations of Culture* (as above)

Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in One Hundred Objects* (as above)