

Winiarczyk, Marek: *Diagoras of Melos. A Contribution to the History of Ancient Atheism*. Berlin: de Gruyter 2016. ISBN: 9783110443776; XVIII, 224 S.

Rezensiert von: Jakub Filonik, Department of Classical Studies, Jagiellonian University in Krakow

Marek Winiarczyk (W.) has been enjoying a reputation as *the* Diagoras scholar for almost four decades now, an identity he builds upon in his new book dedicated to this enigmatic hero with a thousand faces from many ancient tales: an atheist, a Melian, a poet, and a forgotten colleague of Socrates. The book is a translation of the 2015 Polish original, which bears a title resembling W.'s early articles on the topic and is partly meant as their revision (*Diagoras z Melos – prawda i legenda*, lit. 'Diagoras of Melos: the truth and the legend').¹ The translation is comprehensible and mostly careful in rendering classical terminology into English but lacks the smoothness of W.'s elegant Polish prose, which may be an obstacle to some readers.²

Diagoras opens with a methodological credo (pp. VII–XII), in which W. outlines his scholarly standpoint as a historian, including the need to restrain one's evaluative judgment based on personal beliefs, thus inviting the reader to judge the book through this lens.

Chapter 1 (pp. 1–5) presents the reader with a list of everyone who has mentioned Diagoras (D.) in writing since the 17th century. No arguments are presented here, only short summaries followed by a few words on who, in W.'s opinion, was wrong, when he himself was right. Chapter 2 (pp. 7–41) focusses on the testimonia, and draws heavily from W.'s earlier work on the topic; it discusses the dating of the extant sources and the chronology of D.'s life. The erudite overview does impress but offers little new to the reader with previous knowledge of the subject.

Chapter 3 (pp. 43–59) goes back to the question of dating (pp. 43–46), already outlined in the Preface, and concludes that the only certain thing is that D. was born in the 5th century BCE (p. 46). D.'s 'Curriculum Vitae' is then presented as a list of disputable facts about his life found in the extant sources

(pp. 46–59). W. repeats here, in full, his earlier findings, and states that D. probably came to Athens in the 430s and fled around 415/14 BCE. There are many assumptions here, however, presented as facts but not substantiated by the sources: W. firmly states that D. was charged with impiety *in absentia*, as if this were a known fact (p. 56). As a parallel, he quotes Thucydides 6.61.7 on the way Alcibiades and his companions were charged and sentenced to death, but in the case of D., the most we can say from the extant sources is that there might have been a decree in some way associated with him by the Athenians (or just Aristophanes), but there is no evidence of a trial.³ Neither does W. explain why he thinks D. was charged under the *eisangelia* procedure (*ibid.*), except that he believes that there was a charge brought against him and that the *graphe asebeias* procedure was introduced later – a whole set of conjectures silently passed over in the book.

Chapter 4 (pp. 61–115) provides a detailed debate on whether – or to what extent – D. could have actually been an 'ancient atheist' (a debate recently reopened by Tim Whitmarsh, proposing quite different interpretations)⁴, which includes a longer discussion of the writings ascribed to D., argued to be inauthentic (pp. 78–98). W. gives here a balanced overview of the nuances between modern 'atheism' and being an *atheos* in (various periods of) antiquity, which did not have to equate to the utter denial of the existence of (any) deity, and concludes that D. cannot be considered a 'radical atheist'.

Finally, chapter 5 (pp. 117–126) fiercely and convincingly refutes R. Janko's contention, rephrased in his several publications, that D. was the author of the recently discovered Orphic commentary on the Derveni Papyrus, a

¹ See Marek Winiarczyk, *Diagoras von Melos – Wahrheit und Legende*, in: *Eos* 67 (1979), pp. 191–213; *id.*, *Diagoras von Melos – Wahrheit und Legende (Fortsetzung)*, in: *Eos* 68 (1980), pp. 51–75.

² Cf. Tim Whitmarsh, Review of: Winiarczyk, *Diagoras of Melos*, in: *BMC*, 2018.08.36, <http://bmc.brynmawr.edu/2018/2018-08-36.html> (30.08.2018).

³ See Jakub Filonik, *Athenian impiety trials: a reappraisal*, in: *Dike* 2013, <https://doi.org/10.13130/1128-8221/4290> (27.09.2018), pp. 11–96, (see pp. 49–50).

⁴ See Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods. Atheism in the Ancient World*, London 2016.

view generally rejected by scholars.

In the Conclusions (pp. 127–131), W. gives a brief summary of the statements made in the book: D. showed lack of reverence for cult piety in revealing the secrets of the Eleusinian Mysteries but did not openly deny the existence of divinity; he did not author any atheistic books, and was not a radical atheist; he was not an influential intellectual in classical Greece but was mainly recognised as a second-rate poet in his times.

The book ends with three appendices with various testimonia (pp. 133–150), a bibliography with a separate list of critical editions and testimonia (pp. 151–198), and carefully prepared indexes (pp. 201–224).

W. praises his past achievements throughout the book (p. 3: ‘M. Winiarczyk’s monograph was highly appraised by other scholars’, ‘M. Winiarczyk also published a new edition ... [t]oday scholars cite testimonies of D. according to this edition’), while either reproaching other scholars for their lack of knowledge or skill or describing their arguments as, at best, ‘interesting’. One gets the impression that W. often does not want to seriously engage in a discussion with other scholars’ arguments, but rather to disprove them based on views he has already established decades ago. In fact, he seems to be putting his credo aside when he gives many strong judgments based on his personal sentiment with no arguments to back them (the epithet ‘erroneous’ and the phrase ‘it is wrong’ tend to be applied to others’ viewpoints without much explanation). In this, the book resembles the methods of the 19th-century scholarship it openly praises, and posits the expert’s intuitions as the valid source of knowledge – a presumption criticised ever since. W.’s evaluative style is not limited to modern scholars; he shows a similar attitude to those not remembered as ‘illustrious men’ in the past, not least when he describes the Athenians as ‘simple and uneducated people’ (p. 8).

In his discussion of legal norms, decrees, and court trials, W. only in a very moderate degree refers to the arguments of legal historians and to Greek legal culture in general (curiously, the only work on the Athenian amnesty of 403 quoted in his monograph is the much disputed 2013 book by E. Carawan, listed in

the bibliography as Caravan).⁵ The same goes for the use of inscriptions in the study of Greek beliefs, rarely mentioned in the book, and the now abundant scholarship on Greek sacred laws completely missing from its bibliography. One would have found a discussion of these texts, together with Greek laws in general (including temple and festival regulations) helpful here, especially in W.’s discussion of *asebeia* as distinct from *atheotes*. In such instances, the book’s focus on the literary sources and famous intellectuals shows its shortcomings. This approach probably stems from the fact that W. is mainly interested in intellectual history seen in a very traditional sense, which he consciously posits against much of contemporary scholarship (p. XI).

W.’s method makes the book full of excurses that often take the reader away from the main argument (as W. himself concludes, the overview of the Arabic sources on pp. 35–41 does not offer a single valuable piece of evidence but, for example, notes that one translation ‘was the first English language book to be printed with a date and colophon’); however, these sometimes offer well-researched introductions to various topics on their own merit (especially those on the gnomological tradition, the scholia to Aristophanes, ancient anecdote, and quotations). W. is much more careful as a philologist, always ready to point out the semantic nuances of words such as *atheos*; he is also more often than not faithful to his credo in offering no answers when there is too much doubt – a problem facing his entire topic of research.

It seems reasonable to assume that readers familiar with W.’s previous scholarship and other publications on D. and ancient ‘atheism’ to date, together with those used to a different academic style, will be disappointed by this book. Others, particularly those who had not read his previous works in German, may learn quite a bit from it, turning their ear to W.’s scholastic voice for ‘both the just things and the contrary’, to paraphrase one failed ancient prophet.⁶ W.’s book may be a helpful overview for the students of ancient athe-

⁵ See, e.g. Christopher Joyce, *Mē Mnēsikakeín* and ‘all the laws’ (Andocides, *On the Mysteries* 81–2): A Reply to E. Carawan, in: *Antichthon* 48 (2014), pp. 37–54.

⁶ Sophocles, *Antigone* 666–7.

ism and disbelief not discouraged by pages of non-transliterated Greek, as well as those interested in ancient intellectual history in general – most likely as a point of departure and a review of the sources rather than the last word on the topic.

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