

**P. Ismard, *Democracy's Slaves. A Political History of Ancient Greece.*** (Harvard University Press, 2017; ISBN 9780674660076). 188 pp. + x. \$35.00.

This book is a translation of the author's *La démocratie contre les experts. Les esclaves publics en Grèce ancienne* (2015), the French title of which rather more accurately conveys the major focus of the book. For Ismard argues, analyzing the figure of the *dēmosios* or public slave, that ancient Greek democracy consciously preserved its directness and its specific ways of privileging “distributed” democratic knowledge by confining the expert knowledge necessary to the running of the *polis* to those of slave status. No chance that technocrats in Brussels claiming the right to run France on the basis of specialized expertise can find a predecessor here, operating “beyond democratic control” (3)! No administrative bureaucracy developing a self-feeding life of its own! Athenian democracy in particular—for as always, most of the evidence about a developed city-state comes from Athens—understood the dangers here, and used *dēmosioi* to avoid them. The book is an extended, and very French, meditation on political community, in which the public slave is used as a heuristic device (and with useful comparisons to public slaves in other cultures), and thus not merely an updating of O. Jacob's *Les esclaves publics à Athènes* (Liège, 1928), the last complete treatment of *dēmosioi* in Athens.

After a wide-ranging Introduction that touches on themes of city vs. state, of expertise, and especially of comparative studies of slave-expertise, Chapter One identifies figures of skill and knowledge, *dēmiourgoi*, in the archaic period: travelling artisans, heralds, scribes, poets, and priests, valuable but a threat to rulers, never fully a member of any new community, indeed dependent on a king, and therefore of precarious condition. Such men—with their stores of powerful knowledge but outsider status—are, by vague implication, the ancestors of the cities' *dēmosioi*, whom the hand-in-hand growth of chattel slavery and democracy then helped to bring into being (33). Chapter Two identifies the tasks undertaken by *dēmosioi*: clerking and assisting with accounts, archiving, inventorying, policing, testing coins, and various forms of physical labor. Chapter Three examines their social and legal status, concluding that in Athens they enjoyed some special legal privileges—of full ownership of property; of access to the law-courts; and of legally recognized families—while also usefully shifting historians' understanding of their status in the direction of *timai* (“honor, right, or power,” 77) and seeing the *dēmosioi* as enjoying a mixture of rights enjoyed by Athenian citizens and metics resident at Athens. Chapter Four identifies the place of *dēmosioi* in the “social epistemology” of the city, by which Ismard means that because it was slaves exercising special expertise, expertise itself could never be a legitimate foundation of, or justification for, the exercise of political power (despite the examples of Eubulus and Lycurgus, 88). Chapter Five draws some larger conclusions—that civil society resisted the emergence of “the state” as a separate agency standing between the community and the exercise of power—and ends with an examination of three famous literary moments (in the

*Oedipus Rex*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Acts of the Apostles*), in which a *dēmosios* features; he is thought of as outside but nonetheless of the city, and the explication of the scenes sparkles with references to Foucault, Vernant, Vidal-Naquet, Derrida, and Loraux. Ancient authors use the singular position of the *dēmosios* in the Greek imagination to enunciate a truth about the political community that owns the *dēmosios* and needs the *dēmosios* but from which he is excluded.

At the widest level, this book is interesting and provocative, and its point about the sequestering of skilled roles in a legally disadvantaged group of people is a thoughtful contribution to the debate about whether the ancient city was truly a city-state or not. But its level of abstraction permits breezy generalization and a lofty ignoring of change over time, and there is an unsettling degree of carelessness in the use of evidence. Some examples: in emphasizing that the *dēmiourgoi* were predecessors to *dēmosioi*, Ismard suggests that the two groups' skills were similar, but Chapter Two's evidence makes clear that they were not: only the scribal function is common to both groups (since there are only two examples of *dēmosioi* as priests, and those from the second century BC and the first century AD [48]). The implied parallel also leads Ismard to claim that *dēmosioi* were bought in a special slave market for servile professionals, their appropriate skills already learned, for which there is no evidence (51; 102). Patrias, a scribe in a late-archaic inscription from Olympia, must have been a manumitted slave, Ismard argues, since no one is allowed to "strap" him when his rights are being challenged—except that Patrias himself can suffer "the same penalty" (of strapping) if he commits a crime against someone else (28–29). The same penalty cannot make you a former slave in one sentence and not a former slave in the next; this is not just an example of *dēmosios* status being "confusedly defined" but something considerably more complicated. Public slaves with accounting skills assisted magistrates, but there is no evidence that they "supervis[ed]" them (40; 52). The "Skias" or "Sunshade" was another name for the Tholos, and referred to its roof; it was not a separate structure "near the Tholos on [sic] the Athenian Agora" (41). Similarly, the Chalkotheke is not at "the entrance to the Acropolis" (86), but along its south wall at some distance from the Propylaea. Ismard does not follow my interpretation of the Athenian *phialai* inscriptions, which is his privilege, but even so, it is simply impossible to translate *apophugei* ("escaped prosecution in court") as "manumitted" and call that translation "unambiguous"—it is precisely because of the peculiarity of the verb used that much of the controversy arises (63). To claim that children of freedmen in Pergamon "theoretically ought to have been considered citizens" (73) is to import, with no justification, a Roman rule into a Greek context. Public slaves copying documents are said to have "composed" documents (38, 83), although there is no clear evidence of activity more creative than copying and archiving. A quick look at the French shows that the translator has introduced some mistakes that the author did not make, but should have caught: the slave Tryphon of Tlos was whipped by the Roman governor of Lycia for falsifying documents in the first century AD, not the first century BC (38–39), and *triclinium* is translated as

“table bed” (64) although this was correctly glossed by Ismard in French as *lit de table*. Names are also misspelled (Nicolas of Damascus for Nicolaus [31]; Eumenus for Eumenes [51]). And so on. In short, there is not quite enough deep knowledge here to avoid mistakes, and these missteps are compounded by mistranslation.

There is also too much certainty in Ismard’s extrapolation from his evidence. Lakon, who sealed false staters in a box and deposited them in the Hekatompedon, may have been a slave (or not; *IG II<sup>2</sup> 1388* does not say), but we have no way of knowing that he was the *dokimastes* (“tester”) of the silver and entrusted with the “city’s seal” to seal the box (41); the famous inscription about silver-testing by public slaves from 375/4 (*RO 25*) requires that the counterfeit coins discovered be cut in half and deposited “in the *boulē*,” not sealed in a box and deposited on the Acropolis, and Ismard is stretching between two pieces of evidence to create a plausible, but unfounded, scenario. The logic here should be indicated, or at least Ismard should not have allowed the translation “no doubt” (41) for *sans doute*. In his discussion of the curious status of *dēmosioi*, he stresses that the language of philosophy categorizes public slaves as performing the subordinate functions (*huperetikai*), not command and deliberative functions—but that the language of decrees passed in the Assembly identifies their work as “free service” (*eleutheria leitourgia*). Ismard then concludes that this “slip of the pen . . . condenses the paradox at the heart of the ‘Greek miracle’ . . . In order for these public things without which citizenship would be inconceivable to come into being, there also had to be slaves” (55). A happy conclusion, and not necessarily incorrect, but one that relies on a word (*eleutherian*) restored in the two copies of the inscription, both non-stoichedon, where the phrase occurs. This is “a restitution [sic] about which there can be little doubt,” he writes in the footnote (152 n.106); but in fact there can be doubt, since of the word only “el-” survives in one and “-an” in the other. Why, too, “must” a *palaistrophulax* be understood to be a slave (147 n.41), when he appears in a list with others who are more likely to be free than slave (an *architektōn*, a *neōkoros*, a *grammateus*), but whose legal status is in any case not indicated? Stated as fact, too, is the “common practice” of public slaves consecrating slaves they had purchased to the goddess Artemis, “thereby relieving themselves of the burden of supporting them, until these slaves returned to their master’s service at a later date” (63). This is derived from a Roman proconsular edict of a certain time (AD 44) and place (Ephesus), so “common” only there and then—and the return of the slaves to the master is only a speculation of the modern scholar Ismard cites (156 n.28) and not necessarily the case, because the infants could have been lifelong dedications to the goddess. In three pages, Ismard claims to have solved the mystery of the status of Pittalacus, who figures in Aeschines’ speech against Timarchus. Pittalacus was a public slave, says Ismard—it was just a legal tactic to apply to him a procedure “normally” reserved for citizens (67–69), and this was done so Pittalacus could be *identified* in court as a public, not a personal, slave (why his status could not simply be announced is not made clear). But: suppose instead that Pittalacus was a freedman. Referring to freedmen as “slaves” in court

was a known form of abuse, and when Pittalacus was whipped it was his freed status that allowed him to take legal action against the perpetrators. That is, it is not easy to sort out Pittalacus' status, but it is not difficult to imagine other compelling interpretations, and in any event a conclusion so casually arrived at does not persuade. It may just be that the writing (or the translation) is careless in all these examples, but in each case over-certainty obscures the complications of the ancient evidence while allowing a generalization that helps Ismard make his case: about privileges and responsibilities of *dēmosioi* that brought them closer to the status of free citizens; about public slaves' rights of full property-ownership; and about their privilege of being treated as free men in court. None of these points is, to my mind, convincingly established.

Chapters Two and Three are the most empirical, thus the chapters that attract the most criticism. Four and Five are where the larger argument is made, and where the bigger ideas appear, mind-expanding and sometimes breath-taking. Do *dēmosioi* maintain their hold on the administrative tasks of the city because it is *understood* that a direct democracy will cease to be direct if citizens start to take on permanent administrative roles? Is public slavery "the price to be paid for direct democracy" (135), and can we accept this without going back to Finley's association of the growth of democracy and of chattel slavery, now widely seen as incorrect? Were Eubulus and Lycurgus prominent *despite* their specialized skills rather than because of them, and were not their financial skills remarkably close to those supposedly exercised in invisibility by the public slaves? How are we to understand the Greeks' conception of their city and the people—citizens but also many others—who lived there? Ismar's book is a lively and engaging, if sometimes enthusiastically inaccurate, response to these important questions.

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