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## Review of Lewis, S. (1996) News and society in the Greek polis

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printed (11 French, 6 German) and in another language which can be French, German, English, or Italian, though some are rather too short to do credit to the original papers.

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1) Most of the present papers have been published in *Kiema* 15 (1990 = 1992) and 16 (1991 = 1993), and then they looked decent enough. Odd that the present augmented and revised version should be such a letdown.

2) I can point to many seminal works published in the 80s, such as D. Cosgrove & S. Daniels, *The iconography of landscape. Essays on the symbolic representation, design and use of past environments* (Cambridge 1988; Cambridge studies in historical geography 9); H.H. Birks, et al. (edd), *The cultural landscape. Past, present and future* (Cambridge 1989); E. Hirsch & M. O'Hanlon (edd), *The anthropology of landscape. Perspectives on place and space* (Oxford 1995; Oxford studies in the anthropology of cultural forms), based on a 1989 conference; the work in landscape archaeology by people like M. Aston and W.G. Hoskins, with its counterpart in Greece, such as the projects in the Argolid or on Keos, already published in some form around 1990. Also Robin Osborne had out both his *Demos* (Cambridge 1985) and his *Landscape with figures* (London 1987). A well-known work as A. Bermingham, *Landscape and ideology: the English rustic tradition 1740-1860* (London 1987), had its counterpart in E.W. Leach, *The rhetoric of space. Literary and artistic representations of landscape in republican and Augustan Rome* (Princeton 1988). Nothing of all this is mentioned in the present collection. Although authors have included some references to literature which appeared after 1992, there is no improvement in this respect.

3) Perusal of some recent literature will show that comparison, which in itself I welcome, should not gloss over the differences. On the landscape in Chinese art and literature see for instance W.C. Fong et al., *Images of the mind* (Princeton 1987), and R.E. Strassberg, *Inscribed landscapes. Travel writing from imperial China* (Berkeley 1994). For the European counterpart in art: P.C. Sutton et al., *Masters of 17th-century Dutch landscape painting* (Boston 1987); W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and power* (Chicago 1994); and R.L. Falkenburg et al. (edd), *Natuur en landschap in de Nederlandse kunst 1500-1850* (Zwolle 1998).

SIAN LEWIS, *News and society in the Greek polis*. London, Duckworth, 1996. x, 206 pp. Pr. \$45 (hb); \$16.95 (pb).

Lewis' monograph is original, its subject pleasing and teasing. L. has put together a lot of previously scattered material in a book that is well-structured (with many helpful summaries in the course of her argument) and well-annotated (alas, those inconvenient endnotes). She broaches several questions not asked before, or not in this way, and opens up a number of intriguing and inviting vistas.

But about what exactly? This is not so easily established, and that is the one thing about this book that is less satisfactory. The author tells us that she wanted to write on communication, but has been

advised to restrict herself to news, because “communication is about everything” (in the words of Robin Osborne, as quoted on p. vii). I am afraid she had better have stuck to her original idea: as L. notes herself, news, that is, the communication of news, shades into other types of communication, and has to be seen against a background of communicatory processes in general. So in talking about news we cannot possibly avoid communication. But as communication had been ruled out, its re-entry through the back door was also largely blocked. Where the author promises us to analyse her material “in the light of modern theories about communication” (p. vii) this does not actually happen, and we are left with a handful of perfunctory references to Umberto Eco, Marshall MacLuhan, and some general studies of news, clustering on some two pages out of over two hundred. On those two pages L. merely mentions some hypotheses on the development of communication over time, evolutionary models which are rightly rejected, but she hardly refers to theories on the mechanisms of communication, which would have helped her and us along.

As a result we have to combat with an exasperating lack of conceptual clarity from the very first page, where we find all of the following: communication, information, news and communication, reception and dissemination of information, information exchange, news and methods of communication, news and its social context. Later in the book the concepts of message and intelligence are added to this list. All of these remain without any definition, except for news, which is defined as “new information about a subject of some public interest, that is shared with some portion of the public” (derived from M. Stephens, *A history of news* (New York 1988)). L. considers news to be a specific type of information (still, she uses the phrase “news and information”, e.g., p. 25). Information is the foil against which news is set. But perusal of some general studies of communication science shows that this is not a very satisfactory choice (I discuss the matter in my *Attractive performances* (Amsterdam 1997), 335, 382-383). Neither is Greek terminology made much work of, but this is understandable, as most of our sources speak of communication only implicitly.

Despite being set against an unclear background, L.’s subsequent discussions of affirmation, propaganda, gossip, and rumour are both interesting and clarifying. L. speaks of communication at large, stressing spoken or written messages with some novelty value, but she does not limit herself to these, because her (commendable) thesis is that such messages cannot be seen apart from messages of a different kind. As I already said above, L. was ill-advised to drop her original design. The very title of the book contradicts her own insights.

L.’s point of departure is that news was important to all ancient

societies, also to the Greek *polis*, but that the *polis* nevertheless did not develop any institutions to gather news systematically. L. seeks to illuminate why this was so, and suggests that it was not because of technological underdevelopment, but because of ideological constraints. When L. states that in her book she studies “the ways in which Greek ideas about information structured social and political life”, she might with as much, or more, justification have said that she deals with the ways in which the social and political life of the *polis* shaped Greek ideas about what was news and how that was dealt with. So this is no monograph discussing shorthand, carrier pigeons, telegraphic systems, or whatever technicalities of communication, but asking who disseminated what kind of news to what purposes and effects. If much attention is paid to travel, heralds, epigraphy or letter writing, this is always in the context of the classical Greek understanding (L. concentrates on the 5th and 4th centuries BC) of what communication was about.

L. discusses in subsequent chapters news within the community. This includes all kinds of news, including gossip and rumour, on different levels from the smallest units to the *polis* as a whole. Secondly, news from the outside, which is disseminated independent of the *polis* (here L. has a lengthy disquisition on travel opportunities, especially interesting on religiously motivated travel). Thirdly, news as communicated officially by the *polis*, which turns out to be but rarely news as L. defined it. Fourthly, news deliberately carried from one *polis* to the other but not by officially appointed messengers (L. has interesting things to say on the evaluation of such adventitious news). Fifthly, the citizens’ assembly, inscriptions put up in public space, and letter writing, which are all shown to be but minor sources of news, as they are not really meant to inform an audience of what was previously unknown. Rather they are symbolic acts confirming what most have already in some other way been apprized of. Otherwise, written communications are distrusted, and should preferably receive some oral confirmation.

News is vital: within the community it not only imparts necessary or useful messages, but is also a source of diversion, and supports social cohesion, by assisting in self-definition and in determining the collective moral standards, the fabric of public life, and the status of others. News from the outside of the community is as important: military intelligence, trade news, and so on. There are many opportunities to learn about other *poleis*. Still, gathering and disseminating facts about the world outside one’s own *polis* is hardly acceptable to current ideology. The ideal of complete local autonomy leads to a stereotyping of The Other (not L.’s wording; she has no references to literature on this

aspect), rather than to efforts to acquire reliable knowledge. Those inter-polis contacts which are acceptable are institutionalized. But such official communication is not primarily intended to disseminate news, but to establish control on what is news, by mediation such as public announcement. In this way, contacts between individuals, and news carried by unofficial messengers, are more important than officially sanctioned news. No regulated message service or intelligence gathering is contemplated, as the *polis* considers this a characteristic of totalitarian rule and thus incompatible with citizens' freedom. Between *poleis*, separation is stressed above whatever they might have in common. This image of jealously guarded *polis* autonomy has of recent come under some fire, but on the whole L.'s arguments are quite persuasive.

The two and a half page conclusion of this book is not as clear as it could have been: L. seems to say that both the unofficial communication (as the main channel of disseminating news) and the official communication (where modes of communication are in general more important than actual contents) are equally important in supporting the social fabric of the *polis*. This sounds reasonable enough, but quite some loose ends are left dangling. One hopes L. will return to her larger communication project and try to integrate the interesting work she has done in this book in a larger (and more rigorously thought out) framework.

I have some little squabbles remaining. L. often takes what ancient authors tell at face value; if Demosthenes informs us that the news of the loss of Elateia in 339 was told in the Agora and that all citizens knew about it the following day, L. seems to accept this unquestioningly (p. 14), but still she speaks of Athenians who made "a rare visit to town" (p. 17). L. speaks very intelligently about women and slaves and their access to news (pp. 21-3), but in this context she might have mentioned *basanos* (hinted at on p. 88, in a different context), which throws a somewhat different light on slaves' cognizance (see M. Gagarin, *The torture of slaves in Athenian law*, *Classical Philology* 91 (1996) 1-18, with full references). L. wants to play down the technological barriers to effective communication, and stresses the mobility of Greeks of different social status—not unconvincingly so, but sometimes she seems to be carried away by the drift of her own argument. When she states that "the traveller on foot needed only a recognised route, not an 'all-weather paved surface'" (p. 30, versus Casson), speaking of winter travel between *poleis* (p. 29), she shows herself never to have attempted mountain treks in wet or freezing winter weather, which in Greece are not less difficult than in any other mountainous area. The motto carried by chapter 5 seems not very apt: in speaking of information and communication, Samuel Johnson is talking about truth,

while L., especially in this chapter, stresses ideology. When L. opposes Hansen and Starr as to the news value of the assembly, she seems to forget about the unofficial opportunities that such a huge gathering must have offered (there is some slight hint of this in L.'s first chapter). Misprints are few and unimportant; only on p. 3 I suspect that chapters 4 and 5 should read chapters 5 and 6.

This book is a good example of what interesting things will happen when one looks from a new angle at a range of phenomena previously studied in isolation. It is a pioneering effort; as such, it is in some respects imperfect, but also highly stimulating.

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