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De Cadmos à Créon: de la Thèbes mythique à la Thèbes tragique

Sylvie David, *De Cadmos à Créon: de la Thèbes mythique à la Thèbes tragique*. Institut des sciences et techniques de l'antiquité. Paris: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2023. Pp. 400. ISBN 9782848678603

Review by

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De Cadmos à Créon is a PhD thesis (“these de doctorat”), which was defended by Sylvie David-Guignard at Besançon in 2001.

Preparations for the publication began fifteen years later, before it was finally printed in 2022. Though the bibliography has been slightly adjusted to publications of the last two decades, many relevant titles are missing and added titles have no real impact on the content of the book.^[1] There is no research report. The focus of the book is on Athenian tragedies and their ways of shaping Theban myths. You have to read it as a dense companion to the relevant passages, a philologically inspired interpretation of the topic.

Apart from an introduction and conclusions, the book is divided into three main chapters. Collecting information from ancient texts on the topic, “I. La Thèbes des origines” reproduces early Theban history from the first tribes said to have settled there, through the double foundation by Cadmos and the twins Amphion and Zethos, to the fight of the brothers Eteokles and Polyneikes, which took place when the polis had been established. The main structuring moment, apart from the mytho-historic chronological sequence as given by the ancient sources, consists of prominent motifs like autochthony and the twin story. “II. La représentation de l'espace thébain” is on spatial aspects of the foundation myths and their references to the landscape. Here, the tragedies of Aischylos, Euripides, and Sophocles are the main texts of reference, as intended in the programme of the book. Theban topography in Attic tragedy is characterised as a

mixture of mythical and real places. “III. La Thèbes tragique, une « autre » Athènes?” discusses Athenian perspectives on Thebes as an opponent and a mirror to Athens during the 5th century BC. Here, cross-references to main historical events which were important for the relation of the two poleis at the time being are drawn.

David-Guignard is a philologist and should be evaluated with a view to the methods of her own discipline. She stresses that her book concentrates on the tragedies treating Theban myths in order to understand the specific images of Theban legends, which were produced in front of the Athenian public (p. 19). Inconsistencies, however, begin with the title of the monograph. The double “de ... à la” implies evolution. Does it refer to the evolution of early Theban mytho-history as suggested by the ancient sources and retraced in chapter I? Does the implied evolution refer to literary texts having preserved topics on mythical Thebes, before the myths were reshaped by tragedy? The problem is that many of the texts transmitting Theban myths, which are discussed in the first part of the book, e.g. Pausanias, are much younger than the texts of Aischylos, Euripides, and Sophocles. Why should we assume that the stories told there are of an Archaic origin? David-Guignard convincingly structures her monograph by motifs. But her supposition that all the information on the motifs we get from other sources than tragedy, as they are compiled in the first chapter, is the established vulgate the authors of the tragedies worked with is misleading. If you want to paint the image of an evolution, the strata should be organised chronologically, in a mytho-genetic fashion.^[2] Of course, myth is much more than the versions having been transmitted by written sources down to our own era, and we cannot be sure whether we can reconstruct strata from the material we have. But it is a starting point. If you want to avoid these problems, you should write a book on the motifs in Theban myths as they appear in the tragedies, and you should consequently depart from the tragic material by comparing it with other sources. In conclusion, these inconsistencies of David-Guignard’s book are due to methodological problems.

What is more, the inconsistencies result from the ignorance of relevant theoretical backgrounds. Already in 2001 it should have been impossible to write a book on myths without defining what myth might be. From the title of the book we get the idea that myth is something occurring before history. Or myth is the world of stories whereas history is the world of reality. Accordingly, David-Guignard juxtaposes “la Thèbes réelle” with “la Thèbes culturelle ou

littéraire”, and she is confident that she can reconstruct “l’histoire primitive de la cité” by using “la vulgate mythologique” (pp. 19-20). In contrast, modern scholarship is convinced that there is no mythical vulgate, at least not one that could be used to reconstruct the beginnings of history at a place. Rather, myths always depend on the circumstances, in which they are told and reproduced. Myth and history are different ways of approaching realities. Most importantly, they are deeply dependent on each other. What is more, all the research done on collective memories and how they shape societies is of eminent importance here. In addition, the Spatial Turn^[3] with its basic thesis that perceived landscapes are always an amalgam of real and imagined places and therefore mirror the society inhabiting the place, is central to the discussions in chapter II.

Last but not least, the main question David-Guignard wants to answer in chapter III is not new but heavily relies on Zeitlin^[4] and theories on identity and alterity, which have been intensely discussed from the 1990s onwards but are not explicitly mentioned anywhere. Where David-Guignard delineates the political background of Athenian and Theban history, the medism of Thebes and the Peloponnesian War (pp. 254-264), the situation is mainly reconstructed by referring to Herodotus and Thucydides; scholarship on the topics is hardly ever touched. Even in the frame of a philological study, this is not enough, if you aim at drawing images of self and other as apparent in Athenian tragedy.

In sum, the approach of the monograph is neither methodologically compelling nor theoretically informed. Indeed, the images of Thebes, which are depicted in the tragedies, on the one hand point to a society that is very different from classical Athens. On the other hand, they are a mirror of Athenian society. The results are not new. But David-Guignard has arranged a dense compilation and interpretation of all the relevant passages from Athenian tragedies treating Theban myths. The study is enriching where it discusses genuine philological categories close to the text, e.g. the vocabulary of Theban power (*anax*, *basileis*, *tyrannos*, chapter III.B “Le vocabulaire du pouvoir thébain”, 264-304). In this sense, the monograph is a good compilation for everybody who wants to dive deep into mythically framed images of Thebes as presented in Athenian tragedy.

Notes

[1] To name but one example: D. W. Berman, *Myth, literature, and the creation of the topography of Thebes*, Cambridge 2015, a monograph on the topography of Thebes from a literary perspective, is certainly essential for chapter II but not named at all. A. Kühr, *Als Kadmos nach Boiotien kam. Polis und Ethnos im Spiegel thebanischer Gründungsmythen*, Stuttgart 2006 is cited in the bibliography, but has no impact on David-Guignard's considerations, although the monograph intensely analyses the mythic tradition of Thebes and its interferences with the city's history and topography.

[2] Cf. Kühr 2006 [note 1], pp. 83-198.

[3] Groundbreaking for the debate were H. Lefebvre, e.g. with *The Production of Space*, Oxford/Cambridge 1991 (orig. in French 1974), and E.W. Soja with *Postmodern Geographies. The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, London 1989 and *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-imagined Places*, Malden etc. 1996.

[4] F. I. Zeitlin, *Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama*, in: J. J. Winkler and F. I. Zeilin, eds., *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*, Princeton 1990, 130-167.