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OBITUARIES

Gabriel Herman

1947–2024



Professor Gabriel (Gabi) Herman who passed away on November 18, 2024, was a social historian of ancient Greece. Athenian democracy and its societal values have been at the center of his research. I am writing this as someone who was his student and later his colleague in the Department of History at the Hebrew University and had the privilege of being personally connected to him. Gabi Herman was born in 1947 in Transylvania, Romania, and immigrated to Israel with his parents as a teenager. He studied history and classical studies at the Hebrew University. After completing his Master's Degree (his thesis dealt with the Athenian Empire in the 5th century BCE), he went on to study for a doctorate at Cambridge. He wrote his dissertation on 'Ritualized Friendship and the Greek City' under the supervision of Moses Finley and received his PhD in 1985.

Finley was, of course, one of the leading social historians of the Greco-Roman world. But Gabi would probably not have been content with this description—he always spoke with admiration of Finley's unique greatness. He was ever grateful for what he had received from him and took great pride in having been Finley's student, even though the type of social history he did was very different from Finley's, with his Marxist background. Gabi Herman's history was socio-cultural, one that studies the values and norms of behavior that prevail in a society, the conditions for their growth, and their social impact, paying full attention to the economic and social-class dimension, but without necessarily assuming that it is "the basis". He was an enthusiastic champion of using a variety of theories, models, and research methods from social sciences in the study of history and often applied this approach in his research.

After completing his PhD., Gabi Herman returned to Israel and to the Hebrew University, where he became a senior lecturer in 1990 and a full professor in 2010. His first book, *Ritualized Friendship and the Greek City*, based on his PhD dissertation, was published by the Cambridge University Press in 1987. It deals with the phenomenon of *xenia* (ξενία) in the Greek world: a strong personal bond that was ceremonially forged between men from different political communities, which included exchanges of gifts, mutual aid in times of need, and mutual hospitality. This relationship was sanctified by social norms, and it was hereditary. It is known from Homer, where its character is thought to reflect eighth-century aristocratic norms. However, it survived and

prospered in the classical polis, the Hellenistic kingdoms, and the Hellenistic world under the rule of the Roman Empire. The phenomenon proved lasting despite the tension between cross-border bonds of loyalty between upper-class men and the norms that prevailed in the world of cohesive political units, frequently in conflict with each other, with their strong claim on their citizens' exclusive loyalty that applied to all strata, including the upper classes. Although in cases of direct clash with loyalty to the polis, the *xenia* gave way, it was often very powerful in less unequivocal situations. It played an important role in the life of the Greek elites and expressed a Pan-Hellenic cultural and social dimension in the fragmented world of independent city-states.

While his first book examined the survival, in the world of the classical polis and thereafter, of a phenomenon that was in a way a relic of the distant aristocratic past, his second book, *Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History* (2006, Cambridge University Press), examines the extraordinary power of the Athenian polis in the age of developed democracy and its impressive ability to impose its collective civic ethos on all citizens, including the upper classes. In this book, Gabi Herrmann made brilliant use of a rich source that was well known, but had not been used in this way until then: the forensic speeches of Attic Orators, a large corpus of speeches delivered in Athenian courts, which lay out a broad picture of social reality in Athens. He analyzes these speeches and reveals a recurring pattern: the litigants in the Athenian popular courts attributed to themselves an extraordinary degree of restraint and a willingness to endure multiple insults and injuries not only without resorting to force but also without filing a lawsuit. It was only as a last resort, after repeated abuses, that they finally decided to prosecute the offender—so they claimed. Since these claims were made repeatedly, clearly in the hope of winning the jurors' sympathy, they must have reflected, whatever the truth of the matter in each case, the prevailing notions of proper social behavior. Such a societal norm stands in sharp contrast not only with any notion of aristocratic honor but also with the usual images of masculinity. Athenians were willing to boast of behavior that would have been considered demeaning even in developed modern societies that seek to restrain the use of (excessive) violence and prohibit "taking the law into one's own hands." Thus, the Athenian democratic polis succeeded to an extraordinary extent, as convincingly attested by these sources as well as by the multitude of testimonies of various kinds that the book presents and analyzes, in imposing on its citizens the norms of behavior that suited it. These included not only the supremacy of state law that prevents violent revenge and vigilantism but also the ideal of civic cohesion which, in principle, placed the collective interest in a peaceful resolution of conflicts above considerations of personal interest and even of personal honor.

The Athenian society is portrayed in this study in a way that is very different from the image that emerges from descriptions that attribute to it a "Mediterranean code of honor", with an emphasis on aggressive masculinity and unbridled competition. The frequent claims of "turning the other cheek" in forensic speeches must have appeared to many scholars as obvious special pleading by litigants; thus, they seemed neither credible nor particularly instructive. Gabi Herman's great and original contribution is his argument that it is precisely the suspicious outlandishness of such claims in result-oriented forensic speeches before popular courts that makes them particularly significant: unless they reflected a clear social norm, they would have amounted to a self-inflicted humiliation. In a "Mediterranean-code-of-honor" society, as commonly understood, it is not customary to boast in public (rightly or wrongly) of one's willingness to take insults and bear them meekly.

But I dare say that Gabi Herman's general verdict on the Athenian democracy also reflects his great love for Athens, and even more so, his belief in democracy, not just Athenian. He dealt extensively with modern theories on the "wisdom of the crowd" that offer a rational basis, backed by the findings of behavioral studies, for relying on "the many" and their collective wisdom to decide various important questions. He was evidently happy to find a basis in empirical research for his belief in democracy—without deluding himself that the logic of the wisdom of the crowd applies in all cases. But in essence, this was for him a matter of faith—part of his deep belief in the Human's intrinsic value and intellectual and moral potential, perhaps in the spirit of Protagoras. He found, in

a clearly pre-post-modern manner, in classical Athens and ancient Greek culture—and, more broadly, in the best of the Western cultural tradition—marvelous manifestations of this potential realized.

I am afraid that he would not have been happy with this hypothesis, that there was a connection between his love for Athens and his belief in democracy and his research. Nothing infuriated him more than the post-modern (in the common and certainly his, understanding) readiness, and indeed eagerness, to allow an ideological agenda to contaminate (as he would define it) the findings of academic research. The purity of methodology was for him inviolable, truly sacrosanct. A scholarly thesis that exempted itself from the need for a rigorous substantiation by claiming to reflect some higher truth and serve some noble goal aroused in him utter contempt. His love for Athens, his remarkable mastery of its history, its literary heritage, and its material culture—all these I could observe personally during Athenian tours, together with him and under his guidance, in which I had the privilege of participating. During these tours, as on many other occasions, I had the privilege of knowing him as a man who was as exemplary in friendship and kindness as he was an admirable scholar and a fine first-class historian.

Alexander Yakobson