

BOOK REVIEW

Blakely, Sandra. 2006. *Myth, Ritual, and Metallurgy in Ancient Greece and Recent Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

The book is based on Blakely's doctoral dissertation in the departments of Classics and Anthropology, University of Southern California, and is divided into four themes: an introduction to the data, the scholarship on the pre-Classical and Classical Greek and African metallurgy, analysis of gender in the process and portrayal of metallurgy, and the political forces involved in the respective myths and rituals.

Blakely poses the question in her introductory chapter of whether pre-Classical and Classical Greek metallurgy was “good to think” and whether the male dancers attending on the Great Mother (daimones) were “good to think about”. She notes “the approaches through which the African materials have been studied...suggest avenues of investigation for Greek material that reveal more of the uniquely Greek articulation of metallurgy that the daimones provide. Analysis of the modalities through which the Greek daimones enter ritual – in song, dance, and magic – and through the literary genres of epic and epinician praise, reflect a more nuanced relationship between the daimones and metal than previously apprehended.” Such an analysis is by no means an easy task, taking the pitfalls of time scale, ethnoarchaeology, classical texts and geographical scopes into account.

Much of what the book seeks to achieve is to incorporate methodological advances moving away from the search for how and why the daimones survived in a variety of forms. This latter approach postulated the initial act of metallurgy as representative of cognitively primitive and non-complex societies on the Greek peninsula. Blakely draws attention to the uncertainties and problematic nature of this hypothesis. She reworks the existing data on the daimones to focus on individual articulations of their positions within society and the way metallurgy is a socially constructed package. The ensuing discussion stresses that ancient Greek metallurgy was wrapped up in a pluralistic, sophisticated package which cautions against over-generalisation.

It was with these questions in mind that Blakely first introduces the data, in particular the relationships between the daimones and the Great Mother. The patterning observed in the narrative themes, ritual functions and iconographic variation, and indeed the uneven distribution of metallurgical attributions to the various groups of daimones, demonstrate enormous variability that decry the search for a single overarching explanation. Viewed in this context, the formidable scale of the task faced by Blakely becomes apparent.

The complexity of the task grows when she confronts her readers with the seemingly impossible task of using African metallurgical analyses to shed new light on ancient Greek practices. The African rituals are rooted in diverse local traditions, economies and polities, and the academic traditions in which these analyses have occurred must also be understood. The result is that Blakely opts for a solid historical survey of the relevant African ethnoarchaeological literature and highlights to good effect the social structures which were developed to support the technology, the dynamics of economic control, secret rituals as a means for ideological identity and power, and the way the activity's potency contributes towards the cultures' understanding and placing in the cosmos.

The epistemological challenges thus posed moves Blakely to a socio-technological approach which is claimed to examine “the rituals through indigenous perspectives that reveal the cosmology in which metallurgy is one of numerous social, ancestral, economic, and political factors. This is the

most compelling model for the diversity of forms and themes that characterize the daimones.” Through the utilisation of African smelting ideological constructs, which involve the positioning of gender in relation to the smelting activities, Berkley examines the nuances involved in the expression of sexuality in the diamones' music. The purpose behind this is to look at the ways in which gender was constructed and used during the diamones' rituals. The beauty of using the African ethnography is that it informs the reader on the different varieties of ritual behaviours and suggests approaches, such as that adopted by Berkley, through which metallurgy can be positioned in relation to rites of passage.

As such, the smiths who forged the metal controlled the sacred access to the symbols of authority and some everyday items. The effect this has and had on the social structures of societies has rarely been applied to Greek diamones. Berkley reflects on their relation to territorial ownership, signifies of power, and economic and ancestral power. The latter in particular was constructed by the Argive rulers to legitimate their power, which provides a nuanced avenue for future research on the changing political function of metallurgists temporally and spatially amongst the ancient Greek communities.

Blakely's historical investigations into establishing methodological and factual linkages between mythic and ritual analyses correctly challenges traditional classical concepts of how political power is articulated through the mastery of iron and archaising imagery. In doing so, she establishes the polymorphic nature of the daimones which challenges the concept of the diamones as diagnostic types.

It is to be hoped that Blakely will publish future works in a form accessible to those scholars outside of select journals. It is of benefit to Africanist scholars as well to see how their data is being employed to analysis materials in other continents. As such, this book provides a ready resource for students, scholars and laypeople interested in the role, place and expressions of both African and Ancient Greek metallurgy. Laypeople would struggle to follow the dense and discipline-specific language utilised and many archaeologists would need to have had some background in Classical Greek studies to get to grips with the intricacies of her arguments. The well illustrated text could perhaps have benefited with some comparative tables between and within the respective African and Greek metallurgical records.

These minor criticisms, however, should not dampen praise on her achievement is to collate the research materials into a single publication, accompanying this with her own interpretation of the various types of evidence. This publication deserves to go down as a seminal inter-disciplinary work.