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**A mysterious affair at Athens: night, deviance and subversion in the Athenian imaginary**

This paper takes as its starting-point the story of the nocturnal profanation of the Eleusinian mysteries and the mutilation of herms on the eve of the departure of the Athenian forces for the Sicilian expedition in the summer of 415 BC. Going beyond modern attempts to discover facts, name the actors and reveal their intentions this paper looks at how the rhetoric generated in the wake of these events articulated popular and elitist discourses of deviance, resistance and subversion. A close examination of the conflicting narratives that circulated in the courts, literary circles and in the streets following the events in question reveals that these two separate incidents (profanation of the mysteries, mutilation of *hermai*) were conflated in a public discourse that reflected opposing Athenian perceptions of individual decorum and social order. Immediately following the events suspicion fell, certainly not unjustifiably, to aristocratic *hetereiai*, aristocratic "brotherhoods" with oligarchic political agendas. Furthermore, the name of the infamous Alcibiades, a paragon of elite debauchery in the mind of many Athenians, was immediately implicated in this affair. Whether or not Alcibiades was personally involved in some of the activities that occurred the nights in question is largely irrelevant. With or without Alcibiades, it is clear that Athenian aristocrats have symbolically appropriated the night as the proper time to define and foster elite identity. The night and its characteristic aristocratic activities (e.g. the *symposion*) allows for seclusion from the civic affairs of the democratic city in an ideologically sterilized environment in which aristocratic social values and political ideals, constrained in the daily civic routine of democratic Athens, can find a favorable audience and flourish. Drunkenness, an almost inevitable concomitant of the aristocratic *symposion* and almost certainly a factor in the events of the nights in question, was frequently viewed by aristocrats not as an inhibiting or socially disruptive conduct but as an enabling attitude, a behavior that signified the ability for symbolic resistance against the prescribed norms for controlled drinking enacted by the democratic city.

On the other hand, ordinary Athenians were suspicious of the usual nocturnal drinking bouts of aristocrats. With particular reference to the mutilation of the herms and the profanation of the Eleusinian mysteries, Athenians were shocked to discover what happened. Rumors spread rapidly and certainly inflated some aspects of the story. But the *demos* clearly perceived these events as a threat to the social and religious fabric of the democratic city. Dismissed by aristocratic circles as a youthful prank, the mutilation of the *hermai* and the profanation of the mysteries articulated in the eyes of the *demos* the nocturnal machinations of the social elites who constantly despised and undermined the democratic constitutional framework. In Athenian popular mentality aristocratic nocturnal and secretive activities were tantamount not only to social deviance but also to political subversion. Hence the democratic citizen-body soon turned revengeful and went after those perceived as responsible in a way that emphasized the entrenched ascendancy of egalitarian institutions: by prosecuting them in a popular court.