

The Union of Choruses

by Noémie Villacèque

In Athens, choral performance was much more than a dramatic method: it was a civic and collective experience, a kind of democratic embodiment of plurality. V. Azoulay and P. Ismard see in it the profound identity of a society overcoming its divisions.

On: Vincent Azoulay and Paulin Ismard, *Athènes 403. Une histoire chorale*, Paris, Flammarion, 2020, 451 pages, €25.

Athens, 403 B.C.

The long Peloponnesian war opposing Athens and Sparta and their respective allies since 431 B.C. comes to an end on April 22, 404 B.C., when besieged Athens capitulates: the Long Walls surrounding the city and protecting Piraeus are destroyed, and the opponents of the democratic regime, including Critias, return to the city. Under the vigilant eye of the Lacedemonians, with five ephors being appointed from among Athenian oligarchic circles, democracy is overturned: in late summer 404, a commission of thirty Athenians is created and put in charge of governing the city while restoring the *patrioi nomoi*, “the laws of the fathers.”

At first, the Thirty seem united: “brought together by the banquets they frequently attended, they even sought to create an ideal community, transposing the Spartan principles of organization to Athens” (p. 64). The violence they employ is

relatively well accepted, because it primarily targets the most radical democrats – Vincent Azoulay and Paulin Ismard speak of a “joyful purge” (p. 63). But soon there are more and more summary executions; the Thirty show no mercy to those who, in their view, supported democracy, including wealthy citizens, nor to the metics. The citizenry is reduced to 3000 men, who are included in a registry from which they can be removed at any moment. The remainder, who are almost ten times more numerous, are deprived of their citizenship, and hence of their rights, disarmed and dispersed around the territory of Attica.

One of the Thirty, Theramenes, opposes this strict limitation of the citizenry and, as a result, dissension emerge within the apparently so harmonious oligarchic chorus. Brought before the Council for treason, he is sentenced to death and executed. From now on, the Thirty rule by terror, as the gratuitous but artfully staged massacre of 300 Eleusinians in spring 403 illustrates. The victims are men of fighting age who had previously been Athenian citizens (Eleusis being part of the city’s territory), but who were not included in the list of the Three Thousand.

Nevertheless, a few days later, the oligarchs suffer a crushing defeat at Munychia, a Piraeus hill that the democratic exiles led by Thrasybulus had just taken; Critias is killed. The Three Thousand depose the Thirty and hand over power to a commission of ten men who, nonetheless, continue to engage in the politics of fear pursued by their predecessors. It is only several weeks later that peace talks between “those of the city” and “those of Piraeus” finally start. In October 403, Thrasybulus and the victorious democrats march up to the Acropolis to make a sacrifice to Athena. The strategists then convene the popular assembly on the Pnyx: a hill that represents a highly symbolic place for Athenian democracy, since it has been the seat of the assembled sovereign people since the middle of the 5th century B.C. The Athenians commit to reconciliation: they vote in favor of an oath by which they undertake “not to recall the misfortunes” of the civil war. This oath of amnesty is at the heart of Nicole Loraux’s 1997 book *La Cité divisée. L’oubli dans la mémoire d’Athènes* [The Divided City: Forgetting in the Memory of Athens].

It is this year of civil war that Vincent Azoulay and Paulin Ismard now revisit, inviting us to have a new look not only at this episode – which up to now has been read as a moment of bipartition, of a breaking up of the city into democrats, on the one hand, and oligarchs, on the other – but also, more generally, at the society of the time: in effect, “to write a choral history of Athens, [...] is to reconstruct a plurality of collectives, without starting from pre-constituted and already organized aggregates

and even less by presupposing in advance the existence of a unique whole – “Athenian society” – that is clearly hierarchized into distinct groups” (p. 36).

The City of Choruses

As the two historians underscore, “chorality is [...] deeply rooted in the lives of citizens, in particular thanks to the practice of the dithyramb: a unique choral formation that consists of singing and dancing in a circle” (p. 20). These dithyrambic choruses take part in competitions during the numerous festivals organized by the city, such as the Thargelia or the Dionysia. Drama competitions also took place at the latter and tragic choruses and comic choruses also performed. If the metics are allowed to participate in the Lenaia choruses in honor of Dionysus, most of the choruses are only open to citizens or future citizens. At least 1165 citizens were chorus members every year just for the Great Dionysia – a little less during the Peloponnesian war, since the number of comedies presented was reduced – or 3.88% of the citizenry. Choral participation thus constitutes an intense civic and collective experience. Moreover, young people from good families were prepared for it by their education and by participation in banquets. The members of the Athenian choruses were thus for the most part young people from aristocratic or at least well-off milieus that the choregos surely recruited first in his own entourage, among young people whose qualities he knew. Moreover, in both Aristophanes (*The Frogs*, 727-729) and Plato (*Laws*, II, 654a 9-b 1 for example), the chorus member appears as the paragon of the good citizen.

Nonetheless, as Vincent Azoulay and Paulin Ismard underscore, “if the chorus assumes such importance in Athens, it does so by embodying a properly democratic aesthetic” (p. 21), if only because “by arranging its members in a circle or in a square, sometimes under the direction of a coryphaeus, the chorus first provides a visual realization of the principle of equality among citizens” (p. 21), even if certain characters stand out, such as the choregos, the coryphaeus and the aulete. Furthermore, “chorality in Athens was plural, egalitarian and competitive: the whole point was to prevent the emergence of an overly powerful chorus, which could represent the city as a whole, even if only during a ceremony” (pp. 22-23). In a very interesting discussion, moreover, the authors show that “competitions between choruses were established in the aftermath of the bloody conflict that opposed the [aristocratic] factions of Cleisthenes and Isagoras at the end of the 6th century. From 508-507 on, choral reorganization [...] can be interpreted as a way of preventing the

return of civil war”: “the choral confrontation makes it possible [...] both to recreate and go beyond the experience of civil war, in short to sublimate the experience of division” (p. 27).

Vincent Azoulay and Paulin Ismard thus seize on the choral metaphor to (re)think not only the year 403, notably by “[eluding] political bipartition,” but also Athenian society more generally. In effect, this “absolute metaphor of Athenian thought” (p. 18) allows the two historians to take into consideration provisional groupings, to highlight emotional communities and the relations between the different choruses, while multiplying the levels of analysis. Thus, not only do they put into motion, in striking fashion, a society that historiography has until now largely presented as frozen into status categories (citizen/woman/metic/slave), but also, as announced in the introduction, they go beyond the aporias to which the (in recent decades, so heavily used) notion of network leads, as does that of association.

A Lively Democratic Polyphony

Eager to restore the plurality of voices, of collectives – or, in other words “the weave of Athenian polyphony” – the two historians have focused on ten characters (the ten chapters of the volume), both men and women. Thus, they take us to meet “structurally important figures” such as Critias, the Thirty’s “inscrutable leader,” Thrasybulus, who became the head of the democrats, the moderate Archinos, Socrates, “voice of neutrality,” and the metic Lysias, as well as “tiny lives”: women in the service of Athena – Lysimache and, along with her, Myrrhine and Syeris – or women in their families, such as the rich Hegeso, but also Eutheros, a poor (today we would say “marginal”) worker, Gerys, a former slave who became a vegetable merchant, and Nicomachos, “scribe and administrator” or, in other words, a bureaucrat. As they themselves explain so well, “the approach [consists of] starting from individuals, who play the role of coryphaeus, in order to reconstitute the choruses that surround and exalt them” (p. 36). The aim is “be attentive to the plurality of the collectives in which individuals are inscribed and that they contribute to structuring” (p. 37).

These lives, whether illustrious or tiny, are sketched in minute detail: to this end, the authors call upon all sources – literary, epigraphic, iconographic, archaeological – not avoiding any difficulty or refusing to pose any question, while systematically highlighting their method, but in a way that never makes for

burdensome reading. On the contrary! The use of anachronisms, parallels drawn with contemporary situations and facts, is explicit and always helpful. In doing so, they revisit the facts, the civil war – the *stasis* – while underscoring that chronology is in itself “a historical and historiographical problem” (p. 318): not only does the episode of the Thirty merely cover half the civil war, but the Athenian population was also not affected by it in the same way and with the same degree of violence. “It was neither one nor the other: at the end of the civil war the city was neither cacophonous nor monophonous, but it was traversed by plural and sometimes dissonant harmonies” (p. 330).

They thus set in motion a plethora of characters of different social statuses and with different occupations, thus bringing to life a history that long seemed settled (not to say frozen). We wander through this volume – which is as exceptionally lively as it is coherent and well-structured – just as we could have wandered through the little streets of Athens in 403 (maps, illustrations and chronological markers are provided, moreover, to help readers orient themselves), crossing paths with some “great men,” but also with a lot of “nobodies”: men and women whom Vincent Azoulay and Paulin Ismard bring to life in vivid colors.

Further Reading:

- AZOULAY V., « Violente amnistie. La réconciliation athénienne de 403 av. J.-C. », *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 74 (2), 2019, pp. 383-425.
- AZOULAY V., « Repolitiser la cité grecque : trente ans après », *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 69 (3), 2014, pp. 689-719.
- AZOULAY V. et P. ISMARD, « Les lieux du politique dans l’Athènes classique. Entre structures institutionnelles, idéologie civique et pratiques sociales », in P. SCHMITT-PANTEL et Fr. de POLIGNAC (eds.), *Athènes et le politique. Dans le sillage de Claude Mossé*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2007, pp. 271-309.
- CAIRE E., *Penser l’oligarchie à Athènes aux V^e et IV^e siècles. Aspects d’une idéologie*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2016.
- KRENTZ P., *The Thirty at Athens*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1982.
- LORAUX N., *La Cité divisée. L’oubli dans la mémoire d’Athènes*, Paris, Payot & Rivages, 1997.
- MORETTI J.-Ch., *Théâtre et société dans la Grèce antique*, Paris, Librairie Générale Française, 2001.

- WILSON P., *The Athenian Institution of the Khoregia: The Chorus, the City and the Stage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, 14 June 2021. Translated by Tiam Goudarzi, with the support of Cairn.info. Published in booksandideas.net, 28 September 2023