

Lucia Cecchet

Poverty in Athenian Public Discourse

From the Eve of the Peloponnesian War to the Rise of Macedonia

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While previous research has focused on the public discourse of wealth, little attention has thus far been paid to the perception of poverty and attitudes toward it in classical Athens. This book argues that a public discourse of poverty in Athens can be reconstructed from sources dating from the 430s to the 330s BC. Athenian democracy promoted ideas about poverty that could substantially contribute to the stability of the political system, while simultaneously differentiating between destitution and “good poverty” – the latter being a legitimate condition for a citizen and beneficial to the polis. After a preliminary discussion of the debate over the definition of poverty in the social sciences, Lucia Cecchet explores the web of beliefs and the collective imaginary of poverty that emerge from classical Athenian sources addressed to large audiences: drama and oratory. The frequency with which images and ideas about “the poor” occur in these sources testifies to an ongoing discussion of the causes and effects of poverty and even possible solutions to this social problem. These sources allow us to investigate how these topics were used in drama, in the Assembly and in the jury courts to arouse emotions and influence public decisions.

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