

Being Poor in Ancient Greece

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Research in ancient history is often linked to current social issues. The fight against poverty has recently been a hot topic in contemporary societies and often in the press. However, far from being a result of capitalist societies, poverty existed in pre-industrial societies, even in ancient ones. The poor and poverty in Antiquity must be considered as true objects of historical, philosophical, anthropological and

sociological study, despite the fact that the available sources, which were written by the elites, rarely mention the poor.

In the book we have recently published, proceedings from an interdisciplinary seminar on the subject, we sought to take a new approach to the social history of Greek cities by questioning the state of poverty and the behaviours and practices that follow from it. Ultimately, studying poverty and the poor, hardly a glamorous subject for research in the humanities and social sciences (scholars prefer to study the privileged social classes), means taking an interest in the hidden side of a society. Such research can also help us better understand the nature of poverty and the causes and solutions envisaged and/or set up to try to eliminate it.

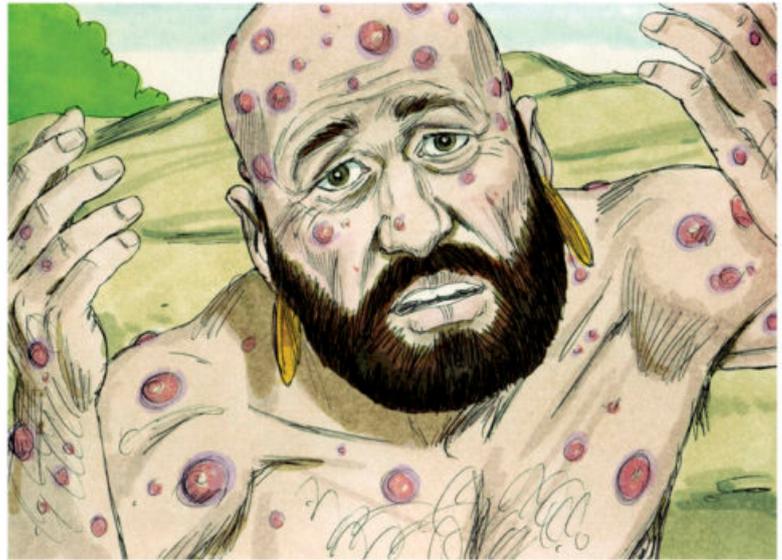
- Galbois E., Rougier-Blanc S., dir., 2014, *La pauvreté en Grèce ancienne : formes, représentations, enjeux*, Scripta Antiqua 57, Bordeaux : Ausonius

How to Study Poverty and the Poor?

While studies of poverty and the poor from the Middle Ages to the present have increased in recent decades, this is not true for Antiquity,

for which almost everything remains to be done. Drawing in part on the methodology developed by historians and sociologists studying poverty in contemporary France, we were able to lay the foundations for a study of poverty, its forms, and its representations and challenges in pre-industrial, Ancient societies.

The poor and poverty can be examined from several perspectives. Studies can be carried out in a traditional way from an economic, social or political perspective: by analysing the factors leading to poverty and defining the lines for poverty, absolute poverty and relative poverty.



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- In the most general definition, the poverty is the level of revenue below which a household is considered poor. That level varies depending on the methods chosen for calculating it.



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Another approach is possible: analysing poverty and the poor from the perspective of assistance, charity or work, i.e. exploring the way in which States deal with poverty. In the 1990s, this approach was adopted in research on the notion of « social disqualification » defined by sociologist Serge Paugam. This aspect of the question has recently attracted the attention of specialists in Antiquity, particularly in the 2013 issue of the journal *Ktèma*: authors explored how Greek cities reacted to poverty (aid to war orphans, single women, distribution of basic foodstuffs, food crisis management, etc.). The poor were considered by these cities as a burden.

We chose to follow yet another path, which is relatively marginal in sociological research, but more common in history, notably in work by André Gueslin: to investigate the state of poverty and the resulting behaviours and practices. In short, this means starting from the poor themselves and leaving aside all our preconceptions. Without claiming to be exhaustive, we sought to lay the groundwork for more general research on poverty in Antiquity, which does not reduce poverty solely to a

history of social conflicts or economic disparities, but views the poor themselves as historical objects.

- **Gueslin A.**, 2013, *Une histoire de la grande pauvreté dans la France du XXe siècle*, Paris : Pluriel.
- **Ktèma**, 2013, *Dossier : La question des pauvres et de la pauvreté dans le monde grec*, n°38, 1-134.
- **Paugam S.**, 2009, *La disqualification sociale. Essai sur la nouvelle pauvreté*, Paris : PUF, 1ère édition 1991.

Who Were the Poor in Ancient Greece?

In this book, we stressed that the poor in Greece from the 8th to the 1st century BC were not a homogeneous social category, no more than they are today, even in times of crisis. A variety of words was used to define them. A brief inventory of the words used for poverty provides a first overview of the forms that poverty takes in Ancient literary sources, and is a good starting point for sketching the outlines of a Greek 'taxonomy of poverty.'

First, there is an 'economic' vocabulary that stresses the absence or lack of goods, in short, on the state of deprivation induced by poverty, such as *aporos* (a person who does not have the means to obtain the necessary income). Some of the terms emphasize the incapacity and limits that result from poverty, and forms a 'social' terminology that makes poverty into a form of servitude: *adunatos*, (without capacity, disabled), a term often associated with poverty among Attic orators. It is probably in this same register that we should understand the vocabulary associated with the requirement of work and the family of *penia*, including *penês*, a term that refers to the poor worker who does manual labour and does not own his own land.



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Finally, there is a third group of poverty terms linked with seeking, supplicating, and begging, as well as the dependence that results from them, i.e. the practices and behaviours of the poorest. In this category we find that the family of words around *ptochos*, the beggar, one of the oldest terms to describe extreme poverty, as Sandrine Coin-Longeray analyses in her chapter. The beggar is considered a social parasite.

The literary and iconographic research also revealed that the external signs of poverty are not so different from those of today: thinness (malnutrition), old age (premature aging due to hard labour or wandering), disease, clothing (simple rags or the *tribanon*, a typical type of coat).

Practices of the Poor in the *Polis*

The state of poverty in fact covers a variety of situations, but always leads to exclusion, primarily political exclusion because the poor do not have time to exercise their 'profession' as citizens since they are consumed with the need to find food and shelter. Greek society's view of the poor was often critical and excluded them: the poor were considered to have low morality and the degradation of insecurity and impiety. They looted altars and stole offerings made to the gods, lied and would do anything to get enough to survive. All these acts showed their marginality and their rejection of practices for living together in a harmonious community. Yet in cities, the poor occupied open spaces (public porches and the porches and thresholds of homes), but there is no literary or epigraphic  evidence indicating legislation to drive them out. The poorest could even maintain a semblance of sociability, by often attending public baths or their systematic presence near temples. Figures of the *polis*, they were in a way partially integrated.



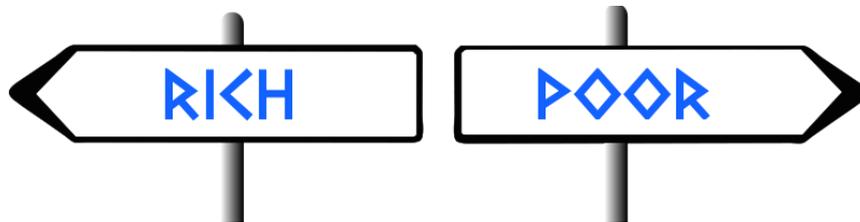
The question of the visibility of poverty and related issues, with a particular focus on the iconographic representations of the poor, is the focus of several chapters in the book. In particular, they examine images of poverty other than the well-known one of Ulysses, disguised as a beggar to return home and take his revenge. In the imagery, some Hellenistic terracotta figurines represent emaciated, simply dressed workers and fishermen, while others are naked characters, beggars with grotesque faces. These images indicate that elites feared falling into poverty and tried to keep the evil eye away with these laughable figures.

Finally, choosing to 'become poor' (whether in clothing, posture, modest offerings to the gods, or in one's way of life) was a common practice at different times in Greek history. Doing so was a way to value giving everything up, soberness, simplicity and a return to original values, of setting oneself apart within the city. Whether for the philosopher Socrates, who walked barefoot, or the Cynics, who advocated detachment from all goods, their 'poverty' was an ideological posture, as Etienne Helmer explores in his chapter.

Why Study Poverty in Ancient Societies?

For example, in a recent book Jean-Manuel Roubineau rereads the history of this period in terms of inequality. Throughout his synthetic work, he compares and contrasts the liturgies (rich citizens who took on certain public expenses) with beggars, clothing with nudity, and the rich with the poor. Such a comparison is no longer done solely in terms of opposition, or even « class struggle », but through examining the practices and daily lives of the most disadvantaged people. More recently, Lucia Cecchet's thesis shows how poverty was a major issue in political discourses and pleas in the 5th and 4th centuries BC in Athens. This was the case regardless of the economic situation. The Peloponnesian War [📄](#) and its consequences only reinforced further the discourse rejecting the image of the poor person.

These new kinds of studies also show how ancient societies developed a discourse on poverty that sometimes praised, but often stigmatizing it, without however totally excluding the poor from the life of the city. They invite us to question, in our own societies, the notion of 'integrated poverty.'



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Studies of this kind have paved the way for a new approach to research on the poor and poverty in ancient Greece have led to new ways to analyse society in Greek city-states.

- **Cecchet L.**, 2015, *Poverty in Athenian Public Discourse. From the Eve of the Peloponnesian War to the Rise of Macedonia*, Alte Geschichte Historia, Einzelschriften 239, Stuttgart.
- **Roubineau J.-M.**, 2015, *Les cités grecques (VIe-IIe siècle av. J.-C.). Essai d'histoire sociale*, Paris : PUF.



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