


The Mutilation of the Herms: Unpacking an Ancient Mystery


By Debra Hamel



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In 415 B.C. the Athenians woke to find that during the night most of the herms in Athens (priapic statues of the Greek god Hermes) had been vandalized. The damage was too widespread for the act to be dismissed as a youthful prank. What was it, then: a conspiracy brewing against the democracy? Or merely a bad omen for their upcoming expedition to Sicily? The so-called "mutilation of the herms" is an important episode in Athenian history. Nearly 2500 years later, basic questions about the crime continue to exercise scholars—who done it and why they done it. In "The Mutilation of the Herms: Unpacking an Ancient Mystery," Debra Hamel provides a comprehensible account of the vandalism and its aftermath. This booklet is written for an audience of general readers and students. No previous knowledge of the period is assumed. The text could profitably be assigned for undergraduate classes in Greek history. Topics discussed include the Eleusinian Mysteries, the role of drinking groups in the vandalism, Alcibiades' involvement in the affair, and Eva Keuls' feminist take on the episode.

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Editorial Review

Review

"In short, Hamel's book is an accessible starting point for anyone interested in this particular event or for those who are curious about the practices of Classical scholarship. Hamel's core assessment that the mutilation of the herms is 'a humbling reminder that however carefully and cleverly we piece together fragments of the information our sources have preserved, we'll never be able to fully reconstruct what happened that night' (29) is an important lesson that extends beyond this particular topic." -- Carolyn Swan, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*

A "useful short listing and analysis of the sources for this notorious episode...." -- Peter Green, *London Review of Books*

About the Author

Debra Hamel is the author of the following books about the ancient world:

- Reading Herodotus: A Guided Tour through the Wild Boars, Dancing Suitors, and Crazy Tyrants of The History (Johns Hopkins University Press)
- Trying Neaira: The True Story of a Courtesan's Scandalous Life in Ancient Greece (Yale University Press)
- Athenian Generals: Military Authority in the Classical Period (Brill Academic Publishers)

When she's not writing about wild women, wild boars, and ithyphallic statues, Debra can be found in her subterranean lair tending her fleet of web sites, which include the literary sites TwitrLit.com, KidderLit.com, and ScatterLit.com. She is also the creator of TheTwitterHerodotus.com, where she is posting an abbreviated version of Herodotus' History for the modern age.

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