

Were the Ancient Athenians Ever Lonely?

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RECENT EVENTS HAVE GIVEN a particular urgency to our discussions around the topic of social isolation. Fear of contagion has pathologised our meetings and our movements. At the same time, we know that safe social distancing comes with a heavy emotional and psychic cost. Whether it is in hotel quarantine or a community under lock-down, we have become all too aware that loneliness and isolation are serious issues.

The pandemic has brought questions about loneliness to the fore, but our anxiety about our lack of social connections has been building for a while. On 17 January 2018, the British Government took the unprecedented step of announcing the appointment of a special minister for loneliness. This move has been followed in Japan which in 2021 also appointed a minister for loneliness. In both cases, the news caused headlines all over the world and has been universally regarded as a positive development. There have been calls for Australia to follow suit.¹ Part of the reason for this very welcoming response has been the growing appreciation of the tremendous problems social isolation causes in terms of ill health, poverty, and crime. Socially-isolated or lonely individuals tend to be sicker, live shorter lives, are more prone to suicide, alcoholism, heart disease, dementia, cognitive decline, and violent crime.²

Popular culture has similarly become obsessed with loneliness and social isolation.

The last few decades have seen a marked increase in the often salacious and grim reporting about people who die alone and whose bodies are not discovered in their houses for months or even years. The case of Joyce Carol Vincent whose body was only discovered in her flat three years after her death has become emblematic of a much wider societal problem and has been commemorated in film and song.³

Émile Durkheim was among the first to regard loneliness as one of the hallmarks of the modern condition. His influential study of suicide in 1897 stressed the relationship between the isolation of modern life and suicide. Rates and occurrences of suicide between closely-knit Catholic communities and more individualist Protestant ones were compared. Similarly compared were occurrences of suicide between large and small families and married and unmarried individuals. The key for Durkheim in understanding many of these cases of suicide was the lack of organic social cohesion present in the lives of the suicide victims.

While Durkheim did also see suicide emerging from too much social intervention in the lives of individuals, an interpretation of his work which sees it identifying the modern world as one of sick, isolated individuals has proven influential. Indeed, while few would regard his work these days as a useful text for the study and prevention of suicide, as a



▲ Detail, fig. 1, p. 17.

form of cultural critique, it still has potency. In particular, his idea of *anomie*—a sense of rootlessness and an unwillingness to engage with the formal structures of society—has been taken up in a variety of fields as the quintessential modern condition.

Modernity and loneliness seem to emerge hand-in-hand. It is worthwhile asking therefore how the two are related. Or to put it another way, does loneliness have a history? Does it precede the modern world? If so, in what form? How closely aligned is loneliness with the social forces associated with industrialisation? What does the pre-industrial life of loneliness look like? As Hellenists, we may ask ‘Were the ancient Athenians ever lonely?’ And if not, as the evidence suggests, why?

THE PROBLEM OF FINDING LONELINESS IN ATHENS

Writing a history of emotions is a difficult business. It is hard enough trying to work out if someone across the other side of the room is feeling the same things as you do, let alone across the ages. Language helps, but only partially. Translating a complex term like ‘loneliness’ from one language to another requires you to correlate a subtle and complex semantic range across languages with a precision and certainty that is often impossible to achieve.

Despite the difficulties, starting with language is often productive and insightful. It is worth observing that ancient Greek seems largely ignorant of loneliness. While ancient Greek has a rich and complicated vocabulary to denote various types of affection, in comparison, the vocabulary for loneliness is relatively impoverished. Greek seems to regard the issue of cataloguing an overwhelming outpouring of warmth a more pressing matter than defining a life with its absence. So, for example, Greek famously has three different words to demarcate the various species of passion that we generically call ‘love,’ along with a very sophisticated range of kinship terms which allows it to delineate everyone up to the great-grandchildren of maternal half-sisters.⁴ Yet, while it is certainly possible to construct a vocabulary for loneliness, this

is only possible by drafting in words that are more normally used to indicate ideas of singularity, physical isolation, sterility, or individuality rather than any negative emotional state. It is perhaps telling that the modern Greek term for loneliness is not effectively attested before the twelfth century CE, where it emerges amongst Christian writers.

Along with language, it is useful to consider social structures. Scholars who work on loneliness often like to distinguish between social isolation and loneliness, and they do so for good reasons. Not everyone who is socially isolated is lonely, not everyone who is lonely is socially isolated. That said, social isolation is an effective predictor for a high degree of loneliness. This is especially the case when social isolation occurs in the absence of any social or ideological structures, such as religious faith or societal endorsement, that mitigate or compensate for the effects of isolation. Hermits or religious ascetics don’t seem to have suffered the same effects of loneliness as others despite their isolation. Here systems of belief act to help build resilience despite the lack of social interaction.

Examining the structure of Athenian society indicates why loneliness might be hard to find. In ancient Athens, you were almost never alone.⁵ We see this most clearly in the agrarian economy where there was a high degree of interdependence of labour—slave, hired, and free. Such cooperation was essential for the successful harvesting of crops and responding to the challenges of an always harsh environment. The chatty, egalitarian nature of life on the land became an Athenian cliché. In the fourth century BCE, the writer Theophrastus penned a series of character sketches about the various social stereotypes that one could encounter in Athens. Amongst these characters was the ‘country dweller’. Theophrastus offers three attributes that help you spot a country person. The first is his bad breath, the second is that he wears shoes that are too large for his feet, and the third is this man’s familiarity with his slaves and farm-workers: ‘[The country dweller is the type who] ... takes the opinion of his slaves on



important matters and explains in great detail all the current political issues to the hired-labourers working on his land.' While there is clearly exaggeration at play here, not least in the way the text suggests such easy relations between master and slave, the impression that life in the Attic countryside revolved around tightly bound communities chatting away and working for the common weal seems to hold true.

Certainly, these values of collaborative cooperation are manifested in Athenian depictions of agricultural labour in vase-painting. The rich iconographic record preserved on the sides of Athenian vases gives us an invaluable insight into the values of the community for which they were produced. They are statements of ideas and ideals. They instruct us in how to think about the world. A black-figured amphora attributed to the Antimenes painter and dated to 520 BC illustrates this well. On one side, we see olive harvest (fig. 1). The scene stresses the way that the harvest is the product of the collective



effort of people across the ages. Two older men beat the olive tree with sticks to dislodge the fruit. A young boy has climbed up into the branches with the aim of knocking fruit from the higher branches. On the ground, a youth collects the fruit in a basket. Only by working together can the harvest be achieved.

In order to underline this focus on cooperation, the image of olive harvesting is juxtaposed with a very different scene on the other side of the vase (fig. 2). In a sudden shift of register, we move from the prosaic to the heroic. Here we are confronted with an encounter between two of Greek myth's great tragic loners, Heracles and the centaur Pholos. In moving from agricultural labourers to Heracles, the vase cleverly plays with the Greek concept of *ponos* which can mean 'work,' but also 'heroic labour or struggle' of the type of which Heracles was famous. Two types of *ponos* are being compared and the contrast between the two images could not be more stark. Knowing viewers of the encounter between Pholos and Heracles can only look away in

▲ Fig 1. (left) The Olive Harvest. Black-figure amphora, attributed to the Antimenes Painter, 520 BC. The British Museum. 1837,0609.42.

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▲ Fig 2. (right) Pholos receiving Heracles. Other side of fig. 1.

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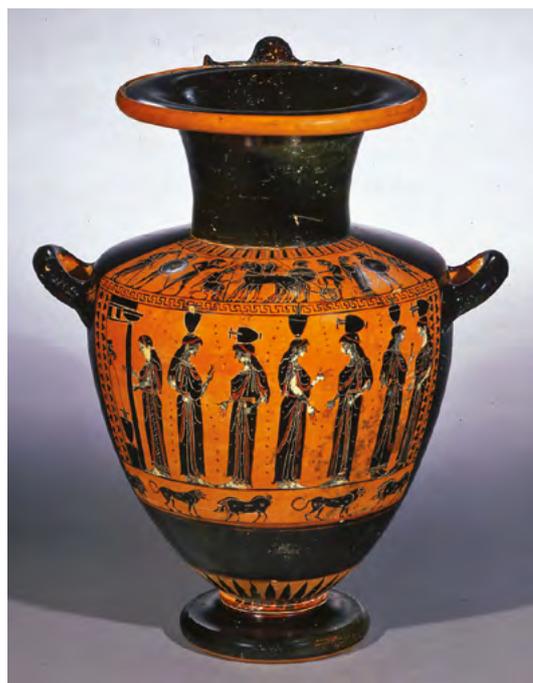
► **Fig 3.** Women collecting water at a fountain-house. Black-figure hydria, attributed to the Antimenes Painter, 530–510 BC. The British Museum. 1843,1103.66.

IMAGE: © THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

horror. We see here the calm before the storm. It looks to be a scene of two characters greeting each other in friendship, but this is a meeting that will end in tragedy. Heracles visits Pholos as he travels Greece completing one of his 'labours'. When Pholos and Heracles settle down to drink, the smell of their wine will attract wild centaurs. Fights will break out and in the course of the struggle, Heracles will end up fatally wounding his friend Pholos.

The disastrous conviviality of Heracles and Pholos illustrates much about the nature of Heracles' heroic character. Unlike the happy field workers on the other side of the vase, Heracles is a figure who can only work alone. One of his epithets was *monoikos* 'the one who lives alone' and modern day Monaco supposedly gets its name from a nearby temple to Heracles Monoikos. Heracles' assistants rarely last. As in the case with Pholos, whenever he joins company, the evening will almost always end in bloodshed. In his radical autonomy, Heracles marks out the difference between heroes and mortals. Heroes don't need anyone, the rest of us need to rely on each other.

The lives of urbanised Athenians were equally as enmeshed as those on the land. Multi-generational living conditions were common. Studies of Athenian domestic architecture show that while houses certainly were designed to control access and lines of sight from outside, they were also places where neighbours were always aware of the lives happening next door. Domestic architecture in Athens often exhibits multiple contiguous shared walls, so that the sounds and smells of one house transmit easily to adjoining houses. Ancient comedy, for example, is full of incidents of neighbours being able to smell the cooking of the people next door or neighbours who turn up to assist having heard a scuffle or a commotion on the other side of a wall. While there is no doubt some comic exaggeration and plot convenience in these dramatic moments, the lives of family members and events inside houses must have been very familiar to neighbours or even passers-by who stopped to pay attention.



Greek literature routinely paints a picture where every inhabitant of a neighbourhood seems to have had no trouble in keeping track of every other member's movements and actions. Writers regularly complain about the impossibility of keeping anything secret in Athens. Athens was a city full of gossips. Neighbours always seem to be able to inform inquirers about the location of any nearby resident. If you ever needed to find someone in Athens, all you needed to do was ask a neighbour.

Cementing these relationships in the city was the constant reliance on shared resources. Just as in the country, it was impossible to be entirely self-sufficient in the city. The important role that community resources play in bringing citizens together is evocatively illustrated in scenes of women gathering together in the public fountain houses to collect water for their households. This was a popular scene, especially in Athenian black-figure vases, and we possess dozens of examples. The striking feature about these vases is the way in which their iconography stresses the highly social nature of the activity. We almost never see women collecting water alone. Instead, the scenes are filled with women, all engaged in friendly, playful interactions. In one notable example (fig. 3), the

artist fills the blank space between the figures with letters. The letters don't spell out anything sensible. Instead, they skilfully invoke the hub-bub of conversation that filled the air as the women exchanged news and information.

PEOPLE AREN'T LONELY IN GREECE, THEY ARE MISANTHROPIC

This is not to say that we don't find references to people living alone in Athens. However, they are always marked as rare and exceptional. The most famous historical example seems to have been Timon, the figure who lies behind the Shakespeare's play *Timon of Athens*. Shakespeare's plot is completely fictional, a tragicomic tale involving complicated plot twists relating to the topics of the abuse of trust and the fickleness of friends. Our ancient sources about Timon are just as unreliable. Our dates for his life and death vary from the late fifth to the early fourth century BCE. Whatever the truth of his life, Timon became the subject of folklore soon after his death, and the historical reality of the man is almost impossible to reconstruct. That said, the way in which Timon is discussed is noteworthy. In Shakespeare's play, Timon addresses Alcibiades and declares "I am Misanthropos, and hate mankind/For thy part, I do wish thou wert a dog/That I might love thee something" (Act IV, Scene III, Lines 59–61). Shakespeare's plot may be false, but his echo of Athenian discourse rings true. Timon was famous for his hatred, not his loneliness. The emotional state that is regularly ascribed to individuals like Timon is not loneliness, but misanthropy. They do not miss people, they hate them and rejoice in their solitude.

Misanthropy, then, was the condition that concerned Athenians, not loneliness. We possess references to a number of comic plays which seem to feature a central misanthropic character. The surviving play, the *Dyskolos* (The Angry Man) by Menander, might give us a clue about what the plots were like for these plays. The central character in the *Dyskolos* is an anger-fuelled misanthrope by the name of Knemon. Knemon hates mankind. Although, significantly, even misanthropes in Athens

cannot live alone. He shares his house with a slave and a daughter; a nuclear family with servants is what constitutes extreme isolation for Athenians. The trajectory of the plot involves the god Pan ensuring that Knemon's plans to cut himself off from society are foiled. Here the gods are seen to take a dim view on such misanthropic tendencies. Through a series of plot devices, the daughter is eventually betrothed and Knemon is forced to modify his ways and re-enter society. The play ends with multiple weddings and Knemon once again begrudgingly part of a large extended network of families and friends. On the dramatic stage, the misanthrope is a problem to be solved.

Plato reflects these contemporary concerns about misanthropy in speculating about the cause of this anti-social attitude. His reasoning is curious, not least for the way he approaches the topic so differently from how we might approach it. For Plato, the misanthrope is not a person who hates socialising. In fact, it is entirely the reverse—the misanthrope loves others too much, not too little. He is a figure who invests too much in others. Misanthropy occurs when this man discovers that the person that he loves is unworthy of him. However, it will not occur as the result of a single moment of disappointment. Plato is clear that it is only after regular and repeated moments of disappointment that a man will start to become a misanthrope. It requires a complete destruction of faith in humanity for misanthropy to be engendered.

Apart from the comic misanthropes, people were rarely alone by themselves in Attica. People always seem to have moved through the city and the countryside in packs, for protection if nothing else. There were few solitary pastimes. Even reading was rarely conducted alone. Ancient texts were designed to be read aloud to others. Solitary drinking was not a Greek practice. We rarely see figures in literature drinking alone. The archaeological evidence related to drinking (cups, mixing bowls, ladles), all suggest that wine was designed to be shared and served in large groups. The symposium, literally a 'drinking together', was a mainstay of Athenian male social life.



▲ Fig 4. (top)
Pan advancing on shepherd. Red-figure bell krater, c. 470 BC.

▲ Fig 5. (bottom)
The Death of Actaeon. Other side of fig. 4.

BOTH IMAGES:
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BUCOLIC ISOLATION

Was there no place for solitude in Athens? One group of individuals that is worth considering in this regard are shepherds. They represent a rare case of a profession whose practitioners spent a lot of time alone. As we have seen, farmers needed to work collectively and it was the same with most of the trades in the city where even small, independent workshops regularly employed members of the extended family as well as a number of slaves. In contrast, shepherds in order to maximise pasturage opportunities tended to operate

during the day in small groups of one or two, either returning to farms in the evening or coming together into larger groups if they were grazing flocks far away from habitations.

It was a solitary and vulnerable profession. Again we can look to the iconography of Greek vase-painting to give us a sense of this. Perhaps the most striking evocation of the vulnerable nature of the shepherd is found in the name-vase of the Pan Painter. This vase is a mixing bowl found in the Museum of Fine Art in Boston. The central scene (fig. 4) is the one that gives the, otherwise anonymous, Pan Painter his name. It shows a young shepherd fleeing from the sexual advances of the god Pan who advances on him sporting a large erection. The sexually explicit nature of the violence that Pan intends to inflict on the shepherd is underlined by the nearby statue which the artist has endowed with another unfeasibly large menacing erection. Here Pan, the god of the wilderness, embodies all the dangers that the shepherd faces. The other side of the vase reinforces this message (fig. 5). It doesn't show the rape of a shepherd. This time it is the death of a solitary hunter. The scene replays the death of Actaeon, the unfortunate hunter, who, while out in the forest alone, disturbed the goddess Artemis while bathing. For this crime, he was turned into a stag and torn apart by his hunting dogs. Both images speak to the dangers of being alone in the countryside and the dangers that hunters and shepherds faced. It is no wonder that the feeling associated with the presence of Pan is panic.

In facing such dangers alone, these figures are unique and this exceptional work pattern helps to explain why characters such as shepherds feature so regularly in ancient myth. If your plot requires a character who is plausibly all by himself, then a shepherd is your best choice. Solitary shepherds in myth rescue abandoned babies, provide aid to characters who find themselves lost, and generally provide a human presence where we wouldn't expect one.

Shepherds bear witness to events that other people don't get to see. As a group, they more regularly see the gods than other professions.

In Greek myth, when gods appear amongst crowds they regularly appear in disguise. Only shepherds get to see the gods as they really are. Indeed, over time, we can see the development of an aesthetics of epiphany in which the presence of a shepherd and a wild, lush, sheltered landscape become the preconditions for immortal revelation. The strength of this association between shepherds and the appearance of the gods is best demonstrated by stories in which the gods only appear to characters when they become shepherds. So, for example, it is only when the young prince Endymion is serving as a shepherd that the moon goddess appears and falls in love with him. While he was in the palace, she never makes an appearance. Similarly by declaring himself a shepherd, the poet Hesiod strengthens his claims to be a conduit for the divine Muses.

Arguably, the most famous example of this no-divinities-until-you're-first-a-shepherd motif relates to the story of the Judgement of Paris. This famous incident proves to be the catalyst for the events that lead to the tragedy of the Trojan War. According to myth, the young Trojan Prince is out alone as a shepherd when Hermes appears accompanied by Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite who ask him to arbitrate a dispute and award a golden apple to the fairest goddess. Paris spurns the entreaties of Hera and Athena, thereby ending their undying enmity, and chooses to award the apple to Aphrodite. She rewards him by assisting him in his abduction of Helen and the Trojan War erupts as a consequence. The scene is captured on an Athenian red-figured water-jar (fig. 6) which shows the goddesses presenting Paris with the apple. The sheep at his feet faces away from the action refusing to witness Paris making his fatal choice.

How did a Trojan prince become a shepherd? Our sources are unclear about this. The most elaborate telling of this backstory occurs in Euripides' lost play, the *Alexander*.⁶ Only fragments of this play survive, but we do possess an ancient plot summary. It presents a high-convoluted story which has Paris abandoned as an infant and raised as a shepherd, called Alexander, only then



to be reunited with his royal family when he, inappropriately given his low status as a shepherd, enters an athletic competition ironically staged in memory of the exposed young prince. His prowess in the games reveals his royal nature, and his identity is confirmed by the prophetess Cassandra. In the baroque elaborateness of the plot, we see the way in which the story of the Judgement of Paris finds itself pulled in two different narrative directions. The cultural logic of epiphany requires Paris to be a shepherd, but the storyline of status-conscious epic demands that he be a royal hero. The *Alexander* is Euripides' attempt to resolve these tensions.

The stories of shepherds and their supernatural experiences remind us that there can be value in being alone. Are there any other conclusions that we can draw from a study of ancient loneliness for modern society? Looking at the way that Athens seems to have avoided loneliness certainly has implications for the way that we structure work and plan our cities. The strong focus on communal, interdependent labour in Athens should make us concerned about our increasingly atomised, online work existence. Similarly, the important roles allocated to large extended families in Athens remind us of the significant role that kinship networks can play in providing social support. We might also look to ancient cities for ideas about modern town planning. As the

▲ Fig 6. The Judgement of Paris. Red-figured hydria, c. 470 BC. The British Museum. 1873,0820.353.

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discussion of the role of shared communal resources in building community shows, there are benefits in establishing places that people can collectively use and benefit from, especially in terms of increasing social interaction. We certainly don't want to abandon indoor plumbing, but we might see in shared BBQs, outdoor wi-fi hubs, and moonlight community cinemas, the modern equivalent of the ancient fountain house. At the same time, the ancient evidence also reminds us that in combating loneliness, we don't want to lose the pleasures of solitude. After all, as the Greeks remind us, this is the state in which we are most likely to encounter the divine. ¶



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1. See, for example Calla Wahlquist, "Loneliness minister" proposed to tackle Australian social isolation', *Guardian*, 19 October 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/oct/19/loneliness-minister-proposed-to-tackle-australian-social-isolation>> [accessed 27 May 2021]; Charles Purcell, 'Why we need a minister for loneliness', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 February 2021 <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/why-we-need-a-minister-for-loneliness-20210224-p575ej.html>> [accessed 27 May 2021].
2. John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008) provides an accessible introduction to the topic and associated issues. Surveys of scholarship on the impact of loneliness are provided in Debanjan Banerjee and Mayank Rai, 'Social Isolation in Covid-19: The Impact of Loneliness', *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 66 (2020) 525-27 (p. 526); Liesl M. Heinrich and Eleonora Gullone, 'The Clinical Significance of Loneliness: A Literature Review', *Clinical Psychology Review*, 26 (2006) 695-718; Andrew Stickley and Ai Koyanagi, 'Loneliness, Common Mental Disorders and Suicidal Behavior: Findings from a General Population Survey', *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 197 (2016), 81-87; and Robert S. Wilson et al., 'Loneliness and Risk of Alzheimer Disease', *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 64.2 (2007), 234-240.
3. For media trends in the reporting of lonely death, see Holly Nelson-Baker and Christina Victor, 'Dying Alone and Lonely Dying: Media Discourse and Pandemic Conditions', *Journal of Aging Studies*, 55 (2020) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2020.100878>> [accessed 27 May 2021]. The article also discusses the case of Joyce Carol Vincent.
4. Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) offers a rich and profound meditation on the terminology relating to love in Greek.
5. An expanded version of this discussion is available in Alastair Blanshard, 'Jurors and Serial Killers: Loneliness, Deliberation, and Community in Ancient Athens', in *How to Do Things with History: New Approaches to Ancient Greece*, ed. by Danielle Allen, Paul Christesen, and Paul Millett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 137-57.
6. For a summary of information about the play, see Matthew Wright, *The Lost Plays of Greek Tragedy. Volume 2: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), pp. 146-48. The fragments of the play are collected in Ioanna Karamanou, *Euripides, 'Alexandros': Introduction, Text and Commentary* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2018).