Tim Whitmarsh. *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015. Pp. 304. Hardcover $27.95.

Tim Whitmarsh, Professor of Greek Culture at Cambridge University, argues that in order to understand the context of atheism and atheistic views in ancient Greece and Rome, one must recognize that modern ideas of non-belief do not apply to the ancient world. In many cases, Greek and Roman thinkers may not have been outright atheists, but rather held radical non-traditional religious beliefs that may be considered atheistic in nature. *Battling the Gods* is chaptered chronologically, following the progression of atheistic, non-traditional religious thought from the Greek Archaic age, through the Classical and Hellenistic periods to the Roman Empire, ultimately culminating with the rise of Christianity. Using ancient sources such as literature, poetry, and official inscriptions, Whitmarsh argues that polytheism offered a flexible system interspersed with traditional Greco-Roman gods as well as syncretized gods from throughout the Mediterranean and ancient Near East. The fact that there was no state religious requirement in place until after the first century also played a large part in the cultivation of atheistic thought. There was no universally recognized sacred religious canon, nor was there a singular interpretation of morality or piety, therefore atheistic ideas were not inherently blasphemous.

Although the polytheistic and multicultural nature of the ancient Mediterranean allowed for atheistic thinking to develop, it was not always welcome. Whitmarsh illustrates several instances of atheists put on trial in Greece, the most notable of whom was Socrates of Athens. Trying the supposedly impious was often a political move rather than a product of religious fervor. These political trials served as the beginning of a nebulous idea of Greek religious orthodoxy, which was based on a politically influenced desire to stigmatize certain undesirable individuals or groups.

The Hellenistic Era brought a new wave of non-traditional religious and philosophical ideas to Greece. The newly emerging philosophical schools of the Cynics, Stoics, Skeptics, and Epicureans each held different non-traditional ideas about the nature of divinity, some of whom were more atheistic than others. The Hellenistic Era also brought about the beginnings of ruler-worship as well as the importation of foreign religious cults into Greece. Religious changes continued under the Roman Empire as higher levels of emperor worship became common as well as the worship of abstract ideas such as fortune or chance. The Roman

Empire began the first real instances of government-imposed enforcement of religious observances which would later pave the way for Christianity.

Despite the existence of many non-traditional religious thinkers throughout Greek and Roman history, Whitmarsh suggests that no cohesive atheistic school with a set system of belief (or disbelief) emerged. Instead Whitmarsh shows atheistic thinkers connected through past and contemporary networks of other thinkers to form and maintain a "virtual network" dependent on texts, rather than face-to-face interaction. These networks allowed thinkers to communicate through time and geography and to build upon past theories and beliefs. The later coming of Christianity brought with it a concrete state religion and set of prescribed dogmatic beliefs which later led to the creation of a solid orthodoxy through which atheistic thought no longer found itself tolerable.

Battling the Gods serves as an important addition to ancient and intellectual history as well as to classical and religious studies. Whitmarsh offers new insight into the origins of disbelief within the context of highly religious ancient societies. While the book includes detail of the Greek world from the Archaic Period to the Hellenistic period, it devotes far less attention to atheistic thought during the Roman era, choosing instead to focus primarily on the rise of emperor worship and the introduction of abstract ideas into religious practice. Despite this, the book succeeds in exploring a traditionally overlooked area of Greco-Roman history while illuminating the origins of atheistic thought, thus making it a compelling work for both general readers and scholars alike.

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