
Nach seiner eigenen Aussage ist B. von Hannibal zu Alexander gekommen, scheint sich aber auf dem Weg dorthin nicht gründlich genug umgesehen zu haben, insbesondere bei Alexanders Vorgängern auf dem makedonischen Thron. Auch macht er es seinen Lesern nicht immer leicht, seine Aussagen zu überprüfen: So bleibt unklar, nach welchem Prinzip in den Anmerkungen zitiert wird (abwechselnd antike Quellen und neuere, nicht jedem Leser sofort erreichbare Forschungsliteratur); dabei werden bisweilen Angaben gemacht, die mit dem im Text Behandelten nichts zu tun haben.


Heikendorf


A book on left-handedness could hardly find a more fittingly named publisher than Der Andere Verlag. Everyone, regardless of personal predilection, wonders at some point about the otherness of the left hand. Vocabulary alone, chastising the gauche and fearing the sinister while praising all that is pravda or recht und gut, offers enticing evidence that handedness has long played a role in making sense of the world. Simultaneously, these linguistic artifacts still provoke suspicions that there is something inherently wrong about not being ‘right’. Belying the visual symmetry of our external physique, individual preference for one hand
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(and, less obviously, foot, eye, or ear) has had varying manifestations. Aristotle offered human preference for the right hand as evidence for our superiority over the rest of the animal kingdom (IA 706a), while prejudices against left-handers have produced complications ranging from relatively minor inconveniences (cork-screws, scissors) to processes of 're-education' that employ brutal psychological and physical tactics. The origins and nature of laterality have also recently received much attention in the biological and physical sciences, so that chemists speak of the handedness of amino acids and physicists ponder the significance of all neutrinos being 'left-handed'.

The seminal humanistic treatment remains Robert Hertz's 1909 essay 'La Prééminence de la main droite: étude sur la polarité religieuse'. Hertz sees in humanity's asymmetrical sidedness the physical manifestation of our moral oppositions between sacred and profane. In dividing our single selves into right and left, each side develops corresponding associations (positive/negative, elite/plebeian, etc.), a development Hertz describes as 'obligatory, imposed by coercion, and guaranteed by sanctions' (6). Hertz's schema has proven surprisingly resilient to exceptions, the chief being traditional Chinese thought, in which pre-eminence of sides does indeed exist, but in a complicated system of alternation between right and left where neither predominates exclusively. Hertz only touches upon a peculiar feature of the ancient evidence, particularly the Roman. It is characteristic of the human imagination that the other can exert conflicting reactions of fascination, awe, and disdain. Like the Latin sacer, describing objects both cursed and revered, the left side of the human anatomy features prominently in areas outside the boundaries of human certainty, with the result that its manipulation can have tangible benefits. The left hand frequently features as a crucial component in cures (Marcellus, Pliny) and is the hand preferred for plucking medicinal and magical plants throughout a range of sources – literary, technical, magical. Greek and Roman sources continually oppose the sinister power of the left with the propriety and dexterity of the right. It is into this fascinating world, where nature seems to conspire with culture, that Edith Humer enters with her compendium on left-handedness. The book consists, appropriately, of two distinct but unequal halves. The first reviews briskly the scientific and sociological literature on side-asymmetry among humans (Ch. 1, 12–64). The presentation is hardly elegant, consisting largely of long quotations from authorities that the author strings together with her own summaries, but the intriguing nature of the subject comes through nonetheless. As H. observes, our creation of the pairs 'left' / 'right' differs from oppositions such

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3 See M. Granet, 'La droite et la gauche en Chine', translated as 'Right and Left in China', in Needham ed. (op. cit.) 43–58.
as ‘up’ / ‘down’ or ‘front’ / ‘back’, since in describing human beings the designa-
tions ‘left’ and ‘right’ tend to refer to nearly identical mirror images. It is proba-
ably significant, I would add, that in contrast with these other binary oppositions
most of us need consciously to learn sidedness. Freud, for example, admitted to
moving his writing hand (the right) when needing to distinguish sides; most can
recall similar mnemonics, and they predominately depend upon some movement
of, or mark upon, our bodies. Analogously, we often refer to sides as they relate
to our hands (e.g., ‘it is on the left-hand side’). Left and right, especially left and
right hands, offer a particular perspective on the ways in which our bodies inter-
act with the world.

Most evidence – such as cave paintings – indicates that the right-hand has pre-
dominated since pre-history, despite the Iron-Age tools that H. cites as evidence
for 45% left-handedness (24). Her data can be countered by earlier Stone-Age
material, where worked stone implies that left-handedness was represented by
circa 5% of the population, a figure matching modern statistical trends.2 Even if
researchers cannot find a time when right-handedness has not been the norm,
this example of human asymmetry, perhaps genetically encoded from an early
stage, cries out for explanation. H. lists the most popular theories for origins,
most of which do not bear scrutiny (23–30): handedness coincided with the de-
velopment of specialized tools or weapons; mothers would have held babies to
their heart, causing the free right-hand to be favored; left-handers arise from
gestational trauma. H. concludes this opening section by reviewing the prejudice
against left-handers across time and civilizations, with particular remarks on ‘re-
education’ (Umschulung). Although our right-hand obsessed culture can often
produce greatness among the minority (such as Jimi Hendrix playing his guitar
upside-down), H. shows clearly the many inconveniences, and even deep suffer-
ing, that it has caused.

Part B (Chapters 2–4), the volume’s real focus, makes few connections with
Part A as it helpfully classifies the ancient evidence. H. synthesizes the work of
earlier scholars, with frequent recourse to their categorization, in particular that
of A. Wagener’s ‘Popular Associations of Right and Left in Roman Literature’
(Baltimore 1912). Yet emphasis upon secondary material creates peculiarities of
presentation. Typically, H. links a series of quotations from modern authorities,
adding little more than mere summary. While this makes sense in Part A, which
employs studies outside classics, the procedure becomes particularly quizzical
here. I choose an example from the discussion of a worshipper circling leftward
when approaching a chthonic deity (168–169). H. begins by citing Samson Ei-
trem’s ‘Opferritus und Voropfer der Griechen und Römer’ (Kristiania 1915).
This citation is immediately followed by a quotation from Wagener (in English),
then by a German summary of Wagener’s next sentence. To this summary is
added a footnote to Wagener and Eitrem again, together with Gornatowski.3
Only then does the author quote from Statius’s ‘Thebaid’ – to my knowledge the
only ancient reference to the practice. She then concludes by quoting Eitrem at
length for an explanation. This method places skewed emphasis on the secondary

1 McManus (op. cit.) 63, with other examples (Goethe, Richard Feynman); Humer 16.
2 McManus (op. cit.) 210–211, 213.
3 A. Gornatowski, Rechts und links im antiken Aberglauben, Diss. Breslau 1936.
sources and leaves the reader uncertain about how well-attested a practice actually is (cf., e.g., 199–200); in this particular case, Wagener, Eitrem, and Gornatowski cite only the Status passage. In addition to being potentially misleading, the practice also creates an inelegant style, with discussions often reading like note cards strung together with little assimilation. Another weakness of the book is its frequent disregard of chronology and local context. Evidence from Homer to the Papyri graecae magicae to Censorinus are freely exploited as if the ancient world had a consistent attitude toward left and right distinctions. That this is untrue is evidenced by two of the most interesting sections, covering the different valences of right and left in augury (89–113) and the peculiar valorization of left-handedness in gladiatorial combat (243–265).

The second chapter treats general associations of the right and left. Greek and Latin idioms, many of which have modern equivalents, consistently identify ‘left’ with negative or dangerous connotations (67–75). Accordingly, a familiar logic marks the right side as masculine and the left feminine in both medicine and folk belief (75–89). This section on the sexing of sides includes a discussion of their role in various theories of sexual differentiation, jumping from Aetius to Censorinus to pre-Socratics to Aristotle. A detailed section on handedness in prophecy (including augury) and folk omens follows (89–119). The chapter closes with random observations on other areas in which the different sides play a role, including apparent exceptions to the tendency for the right to be positive; afflictions on the right side of the body, for example, were considered less easily curable (120–133).

The third chapter, ‘Linke Hand und rechte Hand’, concentrates on hands themselves (135–215). The first section, on war, devotes fourteen pages to demonstrating that the right hand actively employs weapons, whereas the left holds defensive objects such as shields, or weapons not in use. The second area surveyed, daily life, also offers few surprises – the right tends to write, play the lyre, seal agreements, and hold drinking cups, whereas the left plays a largely supportive role. In religion, too, few exceptions are found to this tendency (the intriguing importance that Apuleius assigns to the left hand in Isis ritual appears for no clear reason in a different section). In the third section on ‘die wissenschaftliche Medizin’ (171–187), empirical knowledge promises to bridge the seemingly ubiquitous divide: Hippocrates explicitly states that operations may be performed with either hand, a position supported by the Roman Celsus. Contrast ‘die Volksmedizin’, where H., following Gornatowski, cites three possible explanations for the odd pre-eminence – here of the left! – in the texts of Marcellus, Pliny, and PGM: 1) as the supportive side, it is reserved for special functions such as healing; 2) its position nearer to the heart confers special powers; 3) the association of left with death and demons renders it an appropriate healing agent by the principle of similia similibus. A miscellanea closes the chapter. In magic, unsurprisingly, the employment of the left hand parallels that just discussed for folk cures, and H.’s summation underscores the reverse situation of the two hands in times of warfare: «Rechts wirkt abwehrend bzw. zauberbrechend, die linke Seite ist für das Zaubern zuständig» (191). The left hand and arm also predominate as a site for jewelry, a circumstance for which the ancients offered several explanations. Finally, H. offers a fascinating account of the role of the sides
in aphrodisiacs, with the right tending to stimulate the desire for licit intercourse, whereas the left either inhibits such desire or, conversely, encourages illicit outlets. The left in fact has such deep associations with crime and unsanctioned violence that it appears in descriptions of murder even when the right hand is the principal perpetrator (208–210).

Chapter 4, ‘Linkshänder im Altertum’, closes the book (217–276). From Greek and Roman antiquity only two left-handers can be named – the emperor Commodus and a certain painter, Turpilius. Despite having no ancient authority, websites and popular literature perpetuate this status, for which H. finds no ancient evidence, for Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. In a wonderful irony, even Aristotle, who sees left-handedness as emphatically contra naturam, has been identified in modern sources as a southpaw. Indeed, textual discussions of left-handers are rare, the principal exceptions being a surprisingly enlightened portion of ‘Laws’ in which Plato argues that right-handedness results from socialization and, on the Roman side, Ulpian’s decision that a buyer cannot claim that the body of a left-handed slave is somehow faulty (Dig. 21.1.12.3). Material remains also depict left-handers rarely except in the case of gladiators, to which H. devotes separate and full treatment (243–265). Following closely the epigraphic evidence collected by Robert and Coleman, H. makes a convincing case that depictions of left-handed gladiators result not from artistic exigencies but from the realities of combat. Comparison with modern one-on-one sports such as boxing or tennis, where left-handedness runs higher than in the general population, provides clear reasons for this exception. Not only can the presence of a left-handed opponent discomfit solely by unfamiliarity, but the division of labor in the brain provides left-handers with a faster reaction time (10–35 milliseconds). By contrast, there survives no certain visual depiction of any other left-handed sportsman or warrior. This interesting discussion leads to two short sections only loosely connected with the main theme, on ‘forced’ left-handers (such as Gaius Mucius Scaevola) and on the scant evidence for ambidexterity.

Despite an approach that places more emphasis on summary than critical evaluation, the book constitutes a helpful reference. All relevant primary and secondary material receives full consideration and is accurately cited, while thorough indices to both ancient sources and subject matter provide an entrée for further study.

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