

Did the comitatus influence the idea of Epicurean friendship?

Post by “Cleveland Okie” of July 10, 2024 at 11:28 PM

One of my favorite historians is Christopher Beckwith, a provocative but also very interesting scholar who likes to write particularly about Eurasia and the "Silk Road." I just finished his book *Empires of the Silk Road*.

One of Beckwith's central ideas in the book is about the comitatus, a unit in warfare which Beckwith says was central to the armed warriors of very many different groups, including Scythians and Germans. The comitatus were the "friends" or "companions" of the king, who were expected to remain loyal to the king and to be rewarded by him. In particular (as described, for example, by Tacitus in *The Germania*) it was considered a complete disgrace if the leader fell in battle and any of his companions survived; they were expected to defend him to death and, if necessary, die with him. Anyone who survived was infamous for the the rest of his life. (As a quick aside, his would seem to shed light on the famous "last stand" of Leonidas and the 300 at Themopylae).

Compare with Vatican Sayings 56-57: "The wise man feels no more pain when he is tortured than when his friend is tortured and will die on his behalf; for if he betrays his friend, his entire life will be confounded and utterly upset because of a lack of confidence." (I am quoting from *The Epicurus Reader* by Inwood and Gerson, which I bought because Emily Austin recommended it.)

Anyway, all this is background, because I wanted to share a quote from *Empires of the Silk Road*. In a section suggesting that Central Eurasians influenced Chinese and Greek Philosophy, Beckwith writes, "Do the social and religious ideas of Central Eurasians, including the importance of friendship and the beliefs behind the comitatus, imply philosophical positions or interests, such as the quest for happiness, or the perfect state?"

He doesn't mention Epicureanism specifically, but it sure would seem to apply to the particular Greek philosophy we are interested in. Do any of y'all (correct English plural of "you," in Oklahoma and in the South) know of anyone else who has talked about the possible connection between the comitatus and the Epicurean idea of friendship? Beckwith kind of tosses it out there and moves on, but it seemed interesting to me.

Post by “Godfrey” of July 11, 2024 at 12:39 AM

Beckwith has another book titled Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia. I don't know if this covers your specific topic but it might be of interest.

Post by “Cleveland Okie” of July 11, 2024 at 12:52 AM

I do know of it and I do plan to read it. It looks very interesting!

Post by “Martin” of July 11, 2024 at 3:31 AM

Just to correct a historic distortion which was apparently created by the movie "300":

Quote

...Leonidas and the 300...

The references vary but they all agree that more other Greeks than the 300 Spartans made the last stand with Leonidas at Thermopylae.

Post by “Cassius” of July 11, 2024 at 6:59 AM

Great topic Cleveland Oakie. It's very interesting to look into the meaning of the Latin "posse comitatus." We in the USA don't generally seem to associate the term with anything other than our law which prohibits the use of military troops from getting involved in civil matters, but your example implies there is a lot more going on than that!

I see this also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Posse_comitatus

Quote

The **posse comitatus** (from the [Latin](#) for "power of the county"), frequently shortened to **posse**, is in [common law](#) a group of people mobilized by the conservator of peace – typically a [reeve](#), [sheriff](#), chief, or another special/regional designee like an officer of

the peace potentially accompanied by or with the direction of a justice or a judged parajudicial process given the imminence of actual damage - to suppress lawlessness, defend the people, or otherwise protect the place, property, and public welfare.

...

Derived from [Latin](#), *posse comitatūs* ("force of the county/region") is sometimes shortened to simply *posse* from the mid-17th century onward to describe the force itself more than the legal principle.^[3] While the original meaning refers to a group of citizens assembled by the authorities to deal with an emergency (such as suppressing a riot or pursuing felons and outlawry), the term is also used for any force or band, especially with hostile intent, often also figuratively or humorously.^[4] In 19th-century usage, *posse comitatus* also acquired the generalized or figurative meaning.^[5] In classical Latin, *posse* is a contraction of *potesse*, an irregular Latin verb meaning "to be able".^{[6][7][8]} The unusual genitive in "-ūs" is a feature of the [fourth declension](#). In its earliest days, the *posse comitatus* was subordinate to the king, country, and local authority.^[9]

Sound to me like translating it as "county" is probably covering over a deeper meaning that goes in the direction of what Cleveland is finding.