

“Guilty of Holiest Crime”: *Antigone* and Yasukuni in Theory and History¹

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What is Yasukuni?

Yasukuni Shrine is among the most contentious sites in Japan. In many ways symbolic of Japan after the upheavals which brought down the Edo *bakufu* after Commodore Matthew Perry’s arrival in Uraga Bay in 1853, Yasukuni, whereat are memorialized Japan’s war dead, is both a palimpsest of the myriad divisions—political, religious, cultural, regional, and historical—which have riven Japan over the past nearly 160 years, and a site where these ongoing divisions are continually revisited and recontested. Those enshrined at Yasukuni are freighted with these conflicting interpretations of Japan’s domestic and international history over the past sixteen decades. Like perhaps no other place on earth, Yasukuni is a reminder that much of what appears to be settled about the past remains in tumult. In many ways, the persistence of Yasukuni

(and, by extension, the persistence of the memories and the souls entrusted to it) destabilizes the present much more violently than does the procession of current events.²

For reasons having much to do with Yasukuni’s challenge to dominant, often unexamined historical narratives, academic and media reports on Yasukuni are rarely dispassionate, especially in the United States, China, and South Korea. Both at the shrine itself and in other countries, key historical anniversaries and visits to Yasukuni by Japanese politicians can even lead to demonstrations and calls for boycotts and violence against Japan and Japanese. Upon closer scrutiny, this rhetorical intensity is often found to belie a lack of understanding of Yasukuni which, ironically, may be traced in part to Yasukuni itself. For, in coming to symbolize, for those of many different outlooks, the disjunctures of Japanese history, Yasukuni also conceals these disjunctures, offering



Fig. 1: Haiden (worship hall) at Yasukuni



Fig. 2: Daini torii, with shinmon behind

¹ “Guilty of holiest crime,” from Sophocles, *Antigone*, in *The Harvard Classics*, ed. Charles William Eliot, tr. Edward Hayes Plumptre (New York: P.F. Collier and Son, 1909-1914), line 82. All translations herein from this source. Antigone, to her sister Ismene, speaking of burying their brother Polyneikes: “Loved I shall be with him whom I have loved, / Guilty of holiest crime. More time have I / In which to win the favour of the dead, / Than that of those who live; for I shall rest / For ever there. But thou, if thus thou please, / Count as dishonoured what the Gods approve.” Lines 81-86.

² See, e.g., John Breen, “Yasukuni Shrine: Ritual and Memory,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, Vol. 3, Issue 6, June 10, 2005. More generally, see Breen, *Yasukuni the War Dead and the Struggle for Japan’s Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

a convenient arena for one-dimensional disputes and even demagoguery and grandstanding over what is actually a complex and expansive set of inter-related issues.³

As for the one-dimensionality of much Yasukuni-themed discourse, many Yasukuni detractors, both in Japan and abroad, home in on the "war criminal" problem in particular. Visits to Yasukuni, the standard accusation goes, inevitably involve reverencing the fourteen Class A war criminals enshrined there. By extension, it is argued, this is tantamount to condoning those men's actions—in short, to collaborating retroactively with the "crimes against peace" of which the fourteen were convicted.⁴

In response, Yasukuni's defenders often counter that the label "war criminal" has been haphazardly, even unfairly, applied to the men so described. The Allied court which tried and convicted the war-crimes defendants relied on trumped-up charges based largely on legal novelties which postdated the crimes of which the defendants stood accused. As International Military Tribunal-Far East (IMTFE) justice Radha Binod Pal (1886-1967) laid out in great detail in his dissenting verdict, and as later scholars—such as American Richard Minear—have affirmed, the IMTFE (colloquially known as the "Tokyo War Crimes Trial") was little more than "victor's justice," a farcical morality play meant to conceal the true motives of the Trial: reprisal, intimidation, and didactics against a conquered population.⁵ The detractors' "war criminal" arguments are specious, Yasukuni supporters say, because the term is merely a function of Allied political expediencies.

Furthermore, the argument goes, if the US had lost the war, then Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer (1904-1967), who led the Manhattan Project which developed atomic weapons, Col. Paul Tibbets (1915-2007), who oversaw and coordinated the mission to drop those weapons on a defenseless Japan, Gen. Curtis LeMay (1906-1990), the mastermind of the spring-to-summer, 1945 firebombing of Tokyo and other major cities across Japan (which killed hundreds of thousands of Japanese non-combatants), and even President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (posthumously) and President Harry Truman, who bore ultimate political and moral responsibility for the outrages committed against Japan, would have been found guilty of much more heinous offenses.

The Missing Emic Model

These points of contention are important, and the problems surrounding and flowing into them deserve to be treated in their full complexity, with due regard for historical facts and persistent biases. However, notably missing from these more global, etic debates is a consideration of what might motivate visitors to Yasukuni beyond historical politics. One commonly finds Yasukuni visitors and supporters labeled in the popular press—and even in "academic" writing—as "fascists," "apologists," "history deniers," "militarists," and "revisionists." These labels are sharply at odds with the realities of the *experience* of Yasukuni, the emic reality of what Yasukuni visitors and supporters know within themselves.

In my own visits to Yasukuni, I have been struck by the solemn humility of the place. Its towering torii and imposing main shrine, coupled with its stately trees, boulevard-like stone-paved approach, iron column to martial virtue, and dignified curtaining and appurtenances all form an architecturally and aesthetically reflective, contemplative space. Apart from August 15th, when crowds (often including contingents of rowdies and provocateurs) throng for the anniversary of Japan's surrender to Allied forces at the end of the Pacific War, Yasukuni is almost always quiet, reserved, even shy. Far from lending itself to political combat, Yasukuni is a place for the silent remembering of things that cut much deeper than politics-as-power-struggle. Even visitors who come out of distinctly partisan motivations, of whatever kind, might find it difficult to negotiate Yasukuni as anything other than an individual, thrown back on his or her own convictions about the relationship between the citizen and the state, and about the meaning of allegiance, law, duty, loyalty, life, and death—in other words, the much broader meaning of "political" as "communal".

There is thus a big gap between Yasukuni the rhetorical and discursive object, and Yasukuni the phenomenological subject. The former is bitterly contested, but the latter—the real Yasukuni, the one that anyone may visit and experience for him- or herself—is a place of serenity designed to engender private reflection: an intentionally apolitical location.

It is with this intensely personal nature of Yasukuni in

³ See, e.g., John Nelson, "Social Memory as Ritual Practice: Commemorating Spirits of the Military Dead at Yasukuni Shinto Shrine," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 62, no. 2 (2003).

⁴ These fourteen men were enshrined at Yasukuni in a secret ceremony in 1978, long after their conviction

⁵ See Yuma Totani, *The Tokyo War Crimes Trial: The Pursuit of Justice in the Wake of World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Richard Minear, *Victors' Justice: The Tokyo War Crimes Trial* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971); and Radhabinod Pal, "Judgment," in *The Tokyo Judgment: The International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) 29 April 1946 – 12 November 1948*, edited by B.V.A. Röling and C. F. Rüter (Amsterdam: University Press Amsterdam, 1977). See also Kei Ushimura, tr. Steven J. Ericson, *Beyond the "Judgement of Civilization": The Intellectual Legacy of the Japanese War Crimes Trials, 1946-1949* (Tokyo: LTCB International Library, 2003).

mind that I propose seeing Yasukuni as primarily a site, not of political dispute, but of internal conflict. This internal conflict, on the part of both the fallen and those who mourn them and pay them their respects, is a fact of life in nearly every political community, regardless of time or place. Always and everywhere, partisan politics (and politicians) tries to appropriate and control the interior of each individual. But the individual, always and everywhere, is free, even at times conscience-bound, to resist. Acknowledging this universal aspect to Yasukuni will help fix it more firmly as a human space, with a mode of existing that goes well beyond this-worldly partisanship.

Thus broadening our perspective allows us to draw upon an infinitely wider array of resources for deepening our understanding of Yasukuni. Yasukuni has often been isolated as a pariah, a dangerous rebel against secular-liberal modernity. But Yasukuni, considered as a personal space, is easily seen as part of the basic human instinct to bury, honor, and remember the dead. As such, and as part of clearing out a new rhetorical space for contextualizing Yasukuni within the larger human pageant, a source remote from Yasukuni in both place and time—namely, the ancient Greek play *Antigone*—emerges as a way to further comprehend the larger import of Yasukuni as a memorial, at least in part, to personal turmoil, and in particular to that between the localized demands of the state and the state-transcending, universal demands of humanity and religion.

Why *Antigone*?

Antigone is a tragedy written by Athenian dramatist Sophocles around 441 BC. Although geographically and temporally greatly removed from Yasukuni Shrine, in both overall dramatic theme and finer-grained particulars of plot and character, *Antigone* is remarkably legible within a context as foreign to fifth-century BC Greece as near-contemporary Japan.

In nuce, *Antigone* is a story of duty. The crucial question which the protagonist, and everyone else, must ultimately answer is whether one's obligations to the dead (and, by extension, to the gods) trump one's obligations to the state.

As with other Greek tragedies, hubris—the outlandish human pride which seeks to put human prerogatives before divine pre- and proscriptions—calls down misery, suffering, and ruin, thus reinforcing the order of the universe as bending ultimately to the will of heaven, not of men.

The titular character in *Antigone* is the daughter of Oedipus, the ill-fated Theban king who, to his later horror, unwittingly committed incest with his own mother, Jocasta, a deed which drove him to gouge out his eyes and go into permanent exile.⁶ Antigone—whose name means “worthy of one's parents”⁷—is the offspring of that incestuous union, as are Ismene, Antigone's sister, and Polyneikes and Eteokles, their brothers. After Oedipus' self-banishment in atonement for his sin, Polyneikes and Eteokles had been joint kings of Thebes until a fratricidal civil war broke out between them. In the fighting, the brothers slew one another, their personal enmities intermingling with their political positions.

The play opens *in media res*, with Antigone and Ismene debating whether to break the decree of the new Theban king, Creon, that Polyneikes—who warred against Thebes when he warred against Eteokles, who was ensconced there—not be given any burial rites. Creon considers Polyneikes a traitor and refuses him even the minimal duty owed by the living to the dead. As Antigone and Ismene speak, Polyneikes lies outside the city walls, his “unsepulchred, unwept” corpse a travesty and a public scandal.⁸ Antigone is resolved to bury Polyneikes and suffer Creon's wrath, piously preferring human opprobrium to divine retribution. But Ismene begs off, saying that as a weak woman she has no power to defy the decrees of the state.⁹

In the second scene, a panicked guard tells Creon that his order has been disobeyed: someone has performed burial rites for Polyneikes. Antigone is soon caught in the act (indeed, she had implored Ismene to tell everyone what she, Antigone, was going to do). Defiant, Antigone is brought before Creon, where she upbraids him for his arrogance in placing his own will above the higher law of the gods.¹⁰ Creon is enraged. He has Antigone sealed up in a cave (a gesture of false piety—Creon fears divine retribution if he kills Antigone outright) and taunts his own son, Haemon—who was Antigone's betrothed—over the marriage that will now never take place.

⁶ See Peter J. Ahrensdoerf, “The Limits of Political Rationalism: Enlightenment and Religion in *Oedipus the Tyrant*,” *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (August, 2004), 773-799.

⁷ There are other etymologies available for her name. For example, Kenkyusha's *New English-Japanese Dictionary* gives: “Gr. Antigone (原義) in place of mother ← ANTI + gone womb.” I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

⁸ *Antigone*, op. cit., line 31

⁹ See Arlene W. Saxonhouse, “From Tragedy to Hierarchy and Back Again: Women in Greek Political Thought,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (June, 1986), 403-18.

¹⁰ Cf. Klemens von Klemperer, “‘What Is the Law That Lies behind These Words?’ Antigone's Question and the German Resistance against Hitler,” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 64, Supplement: Resistance Against the Third Reich (December, 1992), S102-S111.

Finally, a seer, Teiresias, appears. Blind and led by a boy, the wizened Teiresias—who has offered counsel and prophecy to Creon in the past—rebukes the hubristic king, pointedly reminding him that his power comes from beyond himself and that he is outraging divine law and public sensibility by his thoughtless decrees. (The Thebans consider Antigone heroic for performing the forbidden funeral rites.) Creon later comes to his senses and tries to undo his rash mistake, but it is too late. Haemon commits suicide at Antigone's feet upon entering the cave and finding that Antigone has hanged herself. Haemon's mother and Creon's wife, Queen Eurydice, also kills herself when she discovers that Creon's stubbornness has caused the death of her son and his beloved. Ismene, too, dies, also by her own hand, unwilling to let Antigone suffer injustice alone. Not the gods themselves directly, but the iron laws of justice that they have decreed, effect the awful denouement.

The message is unmistakable. Regardless of political partisanship at time of death, all human beings are entitled to a decent burial. He who deprives his fellow man of this—that is, he who carries political rancor across the Styx and into the realm of the shades—acts recklessly, overstepping his authority and offending the gods and justice.

Antigone and Yasukuni

The theme of honoring the dead against the injunctions of the ruling authorities has obvious parallels with Yasukuni Shrine. There, all who have died in military service to a shared homeland are mourned and memorialized, provided with meet regard as befits human beings who perished in a state's wars.

Beyond this broad overlap of theme and motif, extending the Yasukuni-*Antigone* analogy further reveals more, and more discomfiting, points of similarity. For example, Creon lends himself to comparison with the Allied occupiers of Japan, and in particular to the military authorities of the United States. Just as Creon wanted Polyneikes to be eaten by dogs (Creon gets his wish: when Creon repents and himself goes to cremate Polyneikes' body properly, he finds that wild dogs and vultures have "mangled"¹¹ Polyneikes' corpse), the United States Occupation wanted to turn Yasukuni into a dog racing venue as an intentional act of disrespect to the souls venerated there.¹² In many ways, the act of spite intended by the Allies

in conspiring to have dog races held on the sacred grounds of a national cemetery is even more offensive to natural justice than Creon's anger-fueled crusade against the corpse of a lone enemy. Creon's ire was personal, even grotesquely patriotic; the Allies acted solely out of contempt for a broken foe.¹³

Antigone and Ismene, for their parts, correspond to divided Japanese sentiment on the Yasukuni question. Most Japanese people—going back at least to the time of Taira Masakado (d. 940), the wild insurrectionist who led a campaign against the emperor himself and who was later apotheosized and venerated in order to placate his violent spirit—would surely agree with the ancient Greeks that all are equal in death.¹⁴ However, not all Japanese people today dare defy the political forces arrayed against the performance of duties honoring the dead. There are steep costs for doing so. Those who visit Yasukuni or who are seen to support even the existence of the shrine are often subjected to the kind of labeling described above. It is far easier to go along with the media and academic establishment than to openly defy their *de facto* imprimatur on the Allies' Creonic injunction against mourning the war dead. Hence, some, like Antigone, go to Yasukuni; others, like Ismene, beg off.

Pressing the metaphor even further, perhaps Oedipus, the father of all four siblings, could stand for Japanese modernity, which, by a kind of incestuous relationship with the Japanese past, produced the divided mind symbolized for our purposes by Ismene and Antigone, as well as by Polyneikes and Eteokles. The latter two ended up warring against one another, much as late Edo forces took up arms in civil war largely over the question of whether, and to what extent, Japan was to "modernize". (Oedipus' self-blinding and auto-exile may stand, in turn, for Japan's blindness to, and alienation from, its own tradition, now that the incestuous marriage which produced the schizophrenic present is done and the past largely dispensed with.)

In this schema, Haemon, son of Creon yet affianced to Antigone, could be read as the Japanese past in the present, longing to be reunited with the open, public expression of duty and honor and love of country which Antigone represents, as opposed to following the whims of a come-lately overlord who prevents patriotic actions by means of caprices of jealousy, prejudice, and power.

¹¹ Ibid., lines 236, 1375

¹² "Him I decree that none should dare entomb / That none should utter wail or loud lament / But leave his corpse unburied, by the dogs / And vultures mangled, foul to look upon. / Such is my purpose. Ne'er, if I can help, / Shall the vile share the honours of the just; / But whoso shows himself my country's friend, / Living or dead, from me shall honour gain." Creon, in *ibid.*, lines 233-240.

¹³ The practice of psychologically dismembering defeated opponents is deeply ingrained in the Northern way of war. Cf., e.g., the Federal seizure of Gen. Robert E. Lee's private property at Arlington, which was deliberately appropriated for burying Northern dead as a way to psychologically traumatize and paralyze the South.

¹⁴ Cf., e.g., Sukehiro Hirakawa, *Japan's Love-Hate Relationship with the West* (Global Oriental, 2005).

Lastly, the aged seer, Teiresias, is natural religion, the voice of conscience as the whisper of divine law in every heart, coupled with the understanding that man is small and that his hubris—when he forgets his waifish exiguity and insists on substituting his puny will for the mysterious outworking of divine justice—calls down on his head the fit punishment of the gods. Indeed, continuing with this loose mapping of *Antigone* motifs onto Japan, it is difficult to see Teiresias as anything other than Shintō, Japan's natural religion par excellence. Shintō is nothing, after all, if not the belief that the world is permeated with spirit, and that there are ways of doing things that offend those spirits, and ways of doing things that please them. (However, this indication must be made in sharp distinction to State Shintō, which was an artifice of modernity and a doomed attempt to make natural religion serve the nation-state. State Shintō was not Shintō but ritualized statism.) Likewise, Teiresias pointedly reminds Creon that religion is bigger than politics, just as the dead belong to the gods, regardless of the outcome of any battle here on earth.

There is not a perfect correspondence between Teiresias and Yasukuni per se, of course. Yasukuni was caught up in State Shintō just like any other Shintō shrine in Japan. But subtle in present-day Yasukuni is the natural religion common to all human beings, the universal justice of honoring the dead, putting them beyond the quarrels of the living and remembering them as mysteriously both part of our shared past and yet no longer defined by it. Shintō sees the dead beyond faction, carefully separating lines of political loyalty and accidents of birth from the overall circumstances of a given moment. In this sense, Teiresias' appeal to conscience, and Shintō's respect for universal humanity, correspond much more than they conflict.

Antigone as Mirage

Given how readily *Antigone*'s dramatic sequences and overall gist suggest much more recent Japanese developments, it should not be surprising that other scholars have already made many of the connections presented in this essay. Perhaps the most salient example comes from dramatist, scholar, translator, and cultural commentator Fukuda Tsuneari (福田恒存 1912-1994). According to a memorial essay for Fukuda's friend, art critic and professor Endō Kōichi (遠藤浩一 1958-2014), written by Fukuda's only child, translator and professor

Fukuda Hayaru (福田逸 1948-), Fukuda *pere* once asked Endō, while they were sharing drinks one evening, what he thought about staging *Antigone* in Japan. Fukuda had already translated *Antigone* from Sophocles' Greek into Japanese, and had written in the explanatory notes that the opposition between Creon and Antigone was one between the laws of the state (国の掟 *kuni no okite*) and the laws of the gods (神の掟 *kami no okite*). As such, Fukuda continued, *Antigone* should be performed nowhere else in Japan than at Yasukuni Shrine. Staging *Antigone* at Yasukuni, he argued, would cause people to think about Yasukuni, and about the "heroic spirits" (英霊 *eirei*) memorialized there.¹⁵

Fukuda *filis* adds:

In my own view, Antigone's contention that the laws of the gods must be followed—namely, that the war dead, as dead, should be given generous burial rites—is entirely apropos to the heroic spirits at Yasukuni. Endō thought that we had very much to learn from the commonalities between the Japanese and Greek ways of thinking, that even if 'war criminals' were among the dead, everyone who perished in war should be venerated—that under no circumstances should the gods be defied.¹⁶

According to Fukuda *filis*, they had the "unheard-of" (*hatenkō* 破天荒) plan to build a stage in front of the *shinmon*



Fig. 3: Shinmon door before which *Antigone* was to be staged

¹⁵ *Seiron* (正論), *Maboroshi no Antigone*, *Tsūtō tokushū*, *Saraba*, Endō Kōichi-san (「幻のアンティゴネ」追悼特集さらば、遠藤浩一さん), March, 2014, 283. I am grateful to Prof. Kawakubo Tsuyoshi for generously sharing this article with me, of which I was completely ignorant beforehand.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 283

(神門), or main shrine gates, on the Yasukuni grounds, and then to have Antigone and Creon exit and enter through the enormous gate doors emblazoned with the imperial chrysanthemum crest.¹⁷

But despite extensive preparations, which included securing permission from Yasukuni's head priest, Nambu Toshiaki (南部利昭 1935-2009), the plan to stage *Antigone* at Yasukuni never came to fruition.¹⁸ There were difficulties in choosing actors who could appropriately convey the gravitas of the characters (Fukuda *filis* preferred Endō as Creon, although Fukuda never mentioned this to him), and the planners simply became engrossed in other projects. So *Antigone* at Yasukuni remains, as Fukuda's essay title suggests, a *maboroshi*, a mirage.

Antigone and Yasukuni: From Theory to History to Theory of History

Perhaps *Antigone* will someday finally get its staging at Yasukuni. Such an event would be pregnant with significance, and would help signal, at long last, the end to Japan's now three-quarters-of-a-century postwar period. Meanwhile, the literary and political interpellations sketched herein point beyond themselves to an historiographical paradigm which can help move historical inquiry beyond the fens of political instrumentality.

Specifically, the way to break free of the deadening constraints of political corner-fitting is to remember that history is, at heart, Antigonean. Historians are not adjuncts to the state. Whatever the prerogatives of the state might be, historians are charged with the duty, inherently sacred, of remembering the dead, beyond the ephemeral cross-currents of politics.¹⁹ In a postmodern age of political saturation, of media and academy, of past and present, of the living and of the dead, historians, if no one else, must obey a higher law than that of political correctness.²⁰ To be an historian in a political age is, like Antigone, to confess the existence of something nobler than the state's convenience in calling to mind the manifold past.

An Antigonean history is not a history of slavish encomia to individuals. People in all ages do great evil. Evil deeds do

not die with the doer, but live on in the memories of the living, and are handed down from generation to generation as part of the human story. The truth will always out. The historian must never cover over the horrors of yesterday. But the dead, whatever they did while living, in death have a double life. They exist in our recollections of what they have done, whether good or ill. And they also exist as individuals who have gone over history's horizon. Political power, for reasons ultimately grounded in the fleeting struggles of this earthly life, seeks always and everywhere to taboo some of the dead, to make it too politically costly to remember some things as they really happened. In this sense, the historian acts like Antigone, giving the dead their due, putting their individual selves properly back among the possessions of the divine, and sorting their acts from their persons so the former may be balanced, weighed, judged, and reckoned with in our own way as finite humans: as best we can.

But the example of Antigone—the first historian?—shows us that history is ultimately tragic. Try as we might, we cannot do what the historian is charged with. We cannot separate the living from the dead. There are no burial rites final enough to put the deceased both out of sight and out of mind.²¹

As Fukuda said in his short farewell to Endō,

My life is among the ties that bound me in the past to you, Endō, who are dead. We take our life from amidst the perpetual moment known as 'history', which has been engendered by the countless dead who have built this, our country.²²

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¹⁸ On Nambu, see Norimitsu Onishi, "Ad Man-Turned-Priest Tackles His Hardest Sales Job," *New York Times*, Feb. 12, 2005.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/12/world/asia/ad-manturnedpriest-tackles-his-hardest-sales-job.html>

¹⁹ As former Yasukuni chief priest Nambu said, "There is no Class A or Class B in Japan. We enshrine them all as war dead." Ibid.

²⁰ Cf. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1990).

²¹ Cf. Ernst Wolff, *Political Responsibility for a Globalised World: After Levinas' Humanism*, Ch. 9, "Ricoeur's Contribution to a Notion of Political Responsibility for a Globalised World" (Transcript Verlag, 2011). See also Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton University Press, 2015) and Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (University of Chicago Press, 2003). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing me in the direction of the latter two volumes.

²² *Seiron*, op. cit., 283

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