



THE PRISON IN CLASSICAL ATHENS

Professor Marcus Folch – Columbia University

4 PM (PST)
April 23, 2021

Register
HERE

This talk explores the history of the prison and the uses of incarceration in classical Athens. Scholars of ancient law traditionally classify imprisonment in Athens in one of three ways: custodial imprisonment, that is, detention of the accused prior to prosecution and of convicts awaiting punishment; coercive imprisonment, internment of debtors who are unable to pay debts; and punitive imprisonment, incarceration in itself as a penalty. In this talk, I set aside the story ancient law tells of the uses of the prison, and seek instead to identify who was imprisoned in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE and why. In contrast to modern societies, in which the inmate population draws disproportionately from the poor and disadvantaged, prisoners whose identities and narratives classical authors document are, with rare exception, members of the elite. Rates of elite imprisonment, moreover, increase in periods of heightened partisan tension, breakdown in intra-elite cooperation, and anti-democratic insurrection. What this suggests is that during periods of intensified civil unrest, Athenians of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE used the prison—much as they did exile—as a political weapon both to protect and to undermine democratic institutions.