

REVIEW–DISCUSSION

THE EMERGENCE OF ‘GREAT MAN THEORY’ IN
CLASSICAL GREECE?

Sarah Brown Ferrario, *Historical Agency and the ‘Great Man’ in Classical Greece*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xiii + 409. Hardcover, \$110.00. ISBN 978-1-107-03734-2.

‘The history of the world is but the biography of great men’, wrote Thomas Carlyle in 1841.¹ His aphorism captures the conviction of many historians in the nineteenth century that individual agents make history. One of the few dissenting voices was Herbert Spencer, who pointed out that Carlyle and other historians downplayed the eminent role of society.² In the long run, Spencer’s critique of Carlyle seems to have carried the day. While in the 1890s Karl Lamprecht still incurred the scorn of his peers when he privileged economic and cultural structures over political and military deeds, the success of the French *Annales* school in the second part of the twentieth century and the continuing sway of cultural history have sidelined the achievements of individuals. History seems to reside in structures to be explored with the sociologist’s toolbox, or in the everyday life that requires historians to become anthropologists. That being said, there are still historians who would unflinchingly subscribe to Carlyle’s view of history. More importantly, the huge market for historical biographies indicates that the ‘Great Man theory’ continues to resonate with readers outside the narrow confines of academia.

Sarah Brown Ferrario’s *Historical Agency and the ‘Great Man’ in Classical Greece* is not concerned with the methodological issues of the modern discipline of history, but she explores what could be termed the ‘ancient foundations’ of the ‘Great man theory’. The argument of her book is that there is a development from early Athenian democracy which highlighted the polis as agent to Alexander, arguably the most fulgent of ‘great men’. In Brown Ferrario’s eyes, Alexander is the ‘culmination’ (354) of a trajectory in which the notion of individual agency becomes increasingly prominent. I shall first summarise the seven chapters, which, together with an introduction and a conclusion, trace this trajectory.

¹ T. Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History. Six Lectures* (London, 1841) 47.

² H. Spencer, *The Study of Sociology* (Appleton, 1896).

The journey commences with the Athenian Tyrannicides, whom Brown Ferrario deems the starting point of the discourse about historical agency. The commemoration of the murder of Hipparchus reveals a tension about who should be credited as founder of the democracy. A similar tension between the claims of individuals and the polis can be gleaned from the monuments devoted to Marathon and the change of funeral practices during the fifth century (ch. 2).

The third and fourth chapters are devoted to Herodotus and Thucydides respectively. Brown Ferrario shows that Herodotus, while juxtaposing the individual agency of barbarian kings with the collective stance of the Greeks, also contemplates the influence of Greek leaders such as Solon and Leonidas on history. It is, however, Thucydides who dissects the relation between the individual and the mass more sharply. The analysis of his treatment of Pericles, Cleon, Nicias, and Alcibiades is complemented by a study of the inscriptions in the second half of the fifth and the early fourth century. Initially, it is mostly foreign individuals that are honoured; then, by the fourth century, the number of Athenians on honorific decrees increases.

However, in the fourth century, it is less often political than private topics that feature in funerary inscriptions. Brown Ferrario links this development to the attention lavished on leaders in Xenophon's *Hellenica* and *Anabasis* (ch. 5). The public discourse about historical agency, she claims, intensifies in this period: 'Those who could now discern from the monuments proliferating around them that they would not have access to this particular kind of valuation seem to have sought commemoration in the private, domestic sphere instead' (351–2).

While the rich material available prompts Brown Ferrario to focus on Athens, she also considers other poleis in ch. 6. There are close parallels between Spartan efforts to commemorate Thermopylae and the Athenian monuments for Marathon. In both cases, collective dedications coexist with private ones that champion individual deeds. Institutional differences notwithstanding, similar phenomena can be observed in Theban inscriptions.

Finally, the Macedones. When Philip II of Macedon came into power, he could rely on a highly developed idiom of individual historical agency. Most of the accounts of historians are written significantly later, but monuments, inscriptions, and coins attest to Philip's desire to create a lasting memory (ch. 7). Alexander could thus build on his father's work: his 'behavior and reception therefore represent not a sudden explosion, but a logical next step' (320).

Whether plausible or not, the trajectory delineated in *Historical Agency and the 'Great Man' in Classical Greece* will conform to the intuition held by most Classicists—namely, that the role of the individual increased from the fifth to the fourth century. The merit of Brown Ferrario lies, I think, in her treatment of a vast array of sources, including both literature and archaeological remains.

Particularly fruitful is the juxtaposition of historiography with material evidence. Throughout her study, Brown Ferrario tries to show that monuments, inscriptions, and coins reflect the role that Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon all ascribe to individual agency. The wide range of the material discussed is impressive and shows Brown Ferrario's effort to penetrate thoroughly what she repeatedly calls the 'discourse' of historical agency.

While the breadth constitutes the major strength of the book, there are a couple of conceptual issues that left me pondering. The notion of historical agency is only explored in the tension between individual and collective agency. There are, however, further salient aspects. How, for instance, does human agency relate to chance or necessity? A broader engagement with the issue of historical agency would have made several discussions more appealing. It is, for example, not surprising to read that 'for Thucydides, group agency cannot account completely for the movement of history, or even for the history of the Athenian democracy alone ... Individual leaders are essential catalysts for, and at least partial agents of, nearly all history-making action in Thucydides' (105). That Thucydides meditates on the relation between outstanding individuals and the mass is widely acknowledged and need not be expounded upon over many pages. It would be interesting, though, to explore how Thucydides mediates individual agency with chance. How is agency in general affected by the abstract and nominal style of Thucydides which seems to convey the idea that men are exposed to forces they cannot control?

In Herodotus, *ergon* not only means 'deed', but also signifies monuments and other achievements.³ Besides narrating the encounters between East and West, the *pater historiae* takes a strong interest in culture, religion, economy, society, etc. To what extent, I wonder, is individual agency in the *Histories* defined by such structural factors? Or does the focus on agency eclipse the aspects that have come to dominate historical scholarship over the last fifty years? What about Aristotle's *Athenaion politeia* and all the other constitutional histories he is said to have written—how does Aristotle relate individual agency to political institutions? In this context, it would also be worth looking beyond Herodotus and the period tackled by Brown Ferrario. The transmission of Hellenistic historiography is lamentably scanty, but no one less eminent than Strasburger found in the fragments signs that in the works of Agatharchides and Poseidonios political and military history did not take the pride of place.⁴

I also wonder if historical agency is always the right label for what Brown Ferrario discusses. She speaks of the 'ascription of historical agency' (259) through monuments and inscriptions. But is it really historical agency and not

³ H. R. Immerwahr, 'Ergon. History as monument in Herodotus and Thucydides', *AJP* 81 (1960) 261–90.

⁴ H. Strasburger, *Die Wesensbestimmung der Geschichte durch die antike Geschichtsschreibung*³ (Wiesbaden, 1975) 88–96.

rather commemoration that is at stake here? Of course, it is implied that the honorand has done something, but this does not necessarily mean that here historical agency is *negotiated*. And if there are differences in the honours bestowed on individuals and collectives, this may not reflect a change in the concept of agency, but can also be due to the events recounted. It is, for example, obvious that a monarchy, as in Macedonia, gives more space to individual agency than a democratic polis. Brown Ferrario does not ignore political developments, but the extent to which they shape the idea of historical agency would have deserved further reflection.

Historical Agency and the 'Great Man' in Classical Greece allows for tensions and intricacies, and yet I feel uncomfortable with the trajectory it presents: 'From a debate over whether individuals or groups are responsible for the motion of history at the time of the Tyrannicides, the discourse has progressed to a point where, in the mid fourth century, appropriately positioned individuals are now able to script ... and stage their own historical significance' (282). Here, 'discourse', a notoriously vague and problematic term, has become itself the subject, or even the agent, of history. The verb 'progress' highlights the teleological construction which also comes to the fore when Alexander is called 'a logical next step'. Historians inevitably narrate in retrospect. The shortcomings of strongly evolutionary accounts have, however, been felt with particular poignancy in Classics, which is still busy deconstructing such *grands récits* as the 'discovery of the mind', 'the emergence of subjectivity', and 'from mythos to logos' ...

The idea that 'the Greek world' has 'been gradually acclimated to the appearance of 'greatness' through a long, slow process of negotiation between individuals and groups ...' (322) is challenged by the prehistory of Brown Ferrario's grand narrative. In defence of her decision to start with the year 514 BCE, she notes that 'ideas about the potential historical agency of groups cannot be examined as effectively at that early date' (14). This, I think, downplays not only the wealth of archaeological material, but also the insights that can be gained from archaic poetry. Just think of elegy, be it the invocation of collective values in Tyrtaeus's adhortations or the praise of a Smyranean *promachos* in Mimnermus fr. 14W. More incisively, Homeric epic, without referring to historical events, nonetheless features an ideology that has the agency of great men at its core. It is not incidental that Alexander, as Brown Ferrario, alongside numerous other scholars, notes, stylises himself as an Achilles *redivivus* (326–9). Far from being the product of a development in the fifth and fourth centuries, the notion of individual greatness and its conflict with collective claims are fully fledged in Homer.

In offering us a penetrating and thought-provoking study of the notion of historical agency in classical Greece, Brown Ferrario joins the current (neo)historicist mainstream in Classics, which considers it our goal to elaborate on ancient views of the world. However, as I initially said, agency is a point with

which historians today still have to come to grips. There is not only the debate about whether individuals or structures make history, but the sociological actor-network theory has become more and more influential in history over the course of the last years.⁵ Following the lead of Bruno Latour, certain historians ascribe agency not only to humans, but also to things. I wonder what light ancient reflections on historical agency could shed on our current debate. They are obviously very different, but it may be exactly the gap separating antiquity from our own time that endows ancient reflection with the capacity to stimulate our thinking. One of the points that makes historical agency in classical Greece such a great topic is the fact that it could be of more than antiquarian concern.

JONAS GRETHLEIN

Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg jonas.grethlein@skph.uni-heidelberg.de

⁵ In ancient history, see, for example, S. Graham, *Ex Figlinis: The Network Dynamics of the Tiber Valley Brick Industry in the Hinterland of Rome* (Oxford, 2006); G. Ruffini, *Social Networks in Byzantine Egypt* (Cambridge, 2008).