

REVIEW

POLIS HISTORIES, HISTORIES OF POLITIES

Rosalind Thomas, *Polis Histories, Collective Memories and the Greek World*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xii + 490. Hardback, £105.00/US\$135.00. ISBN 978-1-107-19358-1.

This is a rich but puzzling book. Much of what is puzzling about it is apparent in the title. The ambiguity of ‘histories’, the fact that ‘polis history’ has not been widely used as a generic title, and the curious addition of ‘and the Greek World’ (as if the Greek world was somehow something separate from polis histories), leave the potential reader not knowing what to expect. The puzzle is not entirely dispelled by the fuller description in the second paragraph of the Introduction (1–2):

The subject of this book is political community, especially the city-state, but also the islands (which are often poleis) and ethnos states, and why people wrote about them: how they wrote, what they wrote, when they wrote and especially what inspired them to write histories of their communities. Why do citizens of a place that is presumably very familiar feel that they must write about it, its geography, its religious cults, its past? To what extent do these histories offer a self-definition of their polis.

The topic for discussion constantly moves here—from political community to geographically defined space (the inclusion of islands is a consequence of Thomas [henceforth T.] having decided that ‘polis history’ is a better title for the genre than ‘local history’, but then finding herself wanting to include histories of islands that cover more than one polis), to the writers of history. The people who wrote about these communities/places are narrowed to citizens only. The question of why individuals wrote is massively emphasised: the book addresses ‘why people wrote about them’, ‘what inspired them to write’, ‘Why citizens ... feel they must write’. Not much sign here that collective memory is an issue, nor of relations with ‘the Greek world’.

The central question of this book is indeed why polis history was written. The book will conclude ‘Each unit—each polis—wanted to display both its unique features and the contributions it made to the broader Greek world. Historiography served this purpose. It stressed the diversity of politics at the same time as emphasizing a binding set of ties that served to sustain a Hellenic

unity amidst the multiplicity of poleis and polities' (409). More particularly, it is concerned with why polis history flowers 'in the period stretching from the late classical period into the Hellenistic period' (2)—for which its answer will be that polis history is 'a response to changing political and social conditions: either celebrating and boosting local pride and a new period of independence, or the opposite, preserving and investigating the elements of community in a period of powerlessness' (409). But as chapter titles such as '5 Origins, Foundations and Ethnicity: Greeks and Non-Greeks', and '9 The Aristotelian *Politeiai* and Local Histories' already reveal, this book is not only about that.

There seem to be two quite distinct concerns behind this book. One is about the genre 'polis history' and its popularity, that is, the phenomenon of citizens of a city deciding to write up its story. The other is about the stories that get told about particular cities, whether strictly in the context of 'polis history' or not. Although the book starts and finishes being about the former, the middle of the book includes much discussion of what was said about 'local history' outside the genre of polis history. It is notable that the two single sources most cited, to judge by the Index Locorum, are Herodotus and Aristotle.

The Introduction sets up the case for looking at local history and anticipates the arguments of the book, in particular insisting that the development of polis history is not simply a matter of the development of a literary genre but is rather a fact about poleis and their changing self-conceptions. It lays out the evidence, points out that not all the relevant material is to be found in Jacoby's Parts IIIA, IIIB, and IIIC, and makes the case for talking not about local history (T. regards the term 'local' as 'patronizing' [16]—rather strangely given the more or less technical use of 'local history' by modern historians) but about polis history—though then wanting to include as part of the same phenomenon 'island histories' and 'ethnos histories' (though these are not much discussed in the book). T. notes that there were some polis histories of Second Sophistic date, but does not consider those here, where the concentration is on the cluster of late classical and Hellenistic histories.

The Introduction ends with a discussion of memory. Given the prominence of 'collective memories' in the title, it is somewhat surprising to discover that T. is unhappy with the way in which 'memory' has come to be used: 'One can in general accept Halbwachs' insights that most memories are influenced somehow by social networks and habits of thought, without going so far as to see all recounting of the past as "memory" or "collective memory"' (26; cf. "'Memory", a deceptively simple word for an extremely complex process' 408); as readers of her first book will not be surprised to discover, she prefers 'to talk of tradition, official tradition, city tradition or collective traditions of the group (polis, island) to denote a particular kind of collectively propagated version' (26). I strongly endorse this view. In accordance with it, T.'s indexes can find only five further individual pages in the book where memories or

memory are discussed. By contrast, look up ‘tradition’ in the index and you find two sub-entries: the first reads ‘preservation of 157–61’; the second reads simply ‘*passim*’.

Chapter 1 answers the question ‘What are polis histories?’ It discusses the number (T. counts 530, compared with the 300 numbered historians in Jacoby Part IIIB) and the range, starting from Dionysios of Halikarnassos’ testimony on epichoric history in *Thuc.* 5, the particular historiographical bias of which, towards Thucydidean history, is stressed. T. discusses the evidence we have for their organisation, and explores how and why the *Atthides* were different in their strictly chronological ordering. In terms of subject matter, patriotism and an emphasis on origins stand out, along with material related to cult. A final section turns to historians honoured for the writing of history, observing both the chronological distribution of these and the number of those honoured who are quite obscure to us. Neither the suggestion that we should see ‘these historians as part of the enhanced cultural activity of the Hellenistic cities’ (70), nor the conclusion that ‘Such cities could quietly strengthen territorial and cultural claims and give voice to a sense of belonging or of loss, depending on the city’ (73) will occasion surprise.

Chapter 2 picks up on Dionysios’ observation that polis histories are marked by *to mythōdes* to explore the nature of these stories. The main point here is that the ‘memorable and anecdotal story’ of local history did indeed function as a ‘myth’, capable of being reused in multiple contexts, and ‘tales of panhellenic moral worth and significance’ (74), providing much raw material for Callimachus and other Hellenistic poets.

Chapter 3 asks whether polis histories provided ethnography for the Greeks, and explores this through looking at histories of Naxos, Paros, and Delos. T. stresses as ethnographic the inclusion of much material on cult and of material about contemporary practice, as well as stylistic objectivity, but is much less concerned in the end with whether or not we are dealing with ethnography than with rejecting the idea that polis histories were ‘antiquarian’. She is undoubtedly right that many features of the British antiquarian tradition of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries are not to be found in these Greek local histories, but in the end their fragmentary nature makes it effectively impossible for us to know whether in the more general sense they were works of history (i.e., concerned primarily to understand the past) or were rather works primarily concerned to record the past (perhaps for the usefulness of this record for the present).

Chapter 4 addresses the phenomenon of ‘accumulative historiography’, in two senses. The more obvious sense is that writers of local histories built upon work by earlier writers; the less obvious, but more interesting point, worked out through close examination of the histories of Megara and of Kolophon, is that by writing their histories of particular communities, local historians ended up *not* examining ‘sectional’ history. That is, the prevalence of local history in

some ways prevents family histories, or histories that concentrate on particular factions or groups within a city.

Chapter 5 turns to stories of origin, and at this point the focus on polis history as a genre begins to evaporate. T. is concerned with the origin stories of particular poleis wherever they are found in ancient literature, whether in polis histories or not (note the final paragraph of the chapter which flags up Ephoros, Theopompus, and Aristotle). This chapter therefore contributes to the wider discussion of the role of foundation stories that has been recently made prominent by the work of Naoise Mac Sweeney,¹ and like Mac Sweeney T. looks primarily at Ionia, suggesting that stories of foundation feature large here because the communities were somewhat beleaguered. The absence of any attempt to test the conclusions about Ionia by looking at other areas of the Greek world is notable. Only keen readers will spot the terse notice in a footnote that the book will simply ignore the western Greeks: ‘Magna Graecia, especially the numerous histories of Sicily (not of individual cities), will not be treated here’ (72 n. 129). The Aegean focus of the book is somewhat unfortunate, prolonging bad scholarly habits and making the ‘and the Greek World’ of the title ring somewhat hollow.

Chapter 6 concerns political history, and contrasts what was written about Miletos, which was strongly political in focus, with the island histories of Lesbos, which seem to have ‘elided the fissures between city-states and helped to create an idealized collection of socio-religious groups with aitiologies’ (273). T. seems surprised by this difference, and reluctant to draw the obvious and important conclusion that *polis* histories, because it was a polis they were histories of, were inevitably political in a narrow sense, inevitably replaying past political events for present political purposes, whereas the politics of island histories was quite different, inevitably concerned to play out what was shared rather than ensure that past divisions could still be operated in the present. This chapter, in a sense, makes the case for not talking about ‘local’ history, since to do so would put polis histories and island histories into the same category when they do quite different things; but in doing so it makes a strong case for *not* doing what T. has herself done—replace ‘local’ by ‘polis’, but then attempt to treat island histories as part of ‘polis history’.

Chapter 7 is devoted to Samos—an island but also a polis. With this chapter it becomes clear that the book has been slowly slipping from being a book concerned to answer questions about the nature of the genre of ‘polis history’ by looking at the histories of individual places, to being a book telling us what the histories of particular poleis said. Although hung upon ‘how did polis histories deal with stasis?’ and ‘how different were the *Atthides*?’, chapters 7 and 8 are essentially accounts of polis history at Samos and at Athens. In the

¹ N. Mac Sweeney, *Foundation Myths and Politics in Ancient Ionia* (Cambridge, 2013); ead., ed., *Foundation Myths in Ancient Societies* (Philadelphia, 2015).

case of Samos, the story turns upon evidence from Douris. But Douris is hard to deal with since he did not only write polis history, and even his polis history, to judge by citations, was not much like other polis histories, and allowed itself a very wide remit to discuss events only indirectly linked to Samos. Was this because of the way Samos was imbricated in wider Greek history? Or was this just a peculiarity of Douris?

T.'s treatment of the Atthidographers sits slightly uncomfortably against the discussion of Samos. For T. takes it as read that Harding has disposed of Jacoby's claim that the *Atthides* were 'party-political' documents and the chapter dismisses any sense of the political. The Atthidographers emerge as charmingly naïve writers, worried that the Athenians might forget their history, and adopting a plain style in order to contrast their hard facts to the flowery patriotism of oratory. Given the strong political reading of polis histories elsewhere in the Greek world that T. herself gives, and given that the Atthidographers write in the second half of the fourth century and first quarter of the third, this is hardly plausible. A great deal was at stake during these years in how one presented Athens, and the choice to make Athens essentially conform to the emerging conventions of polis history elsewhere was surely not innocent. Much depends on who one takes the readership of local history to be, a question T. does not much discuss (despite including 'and its audiences' in the title of chapter 1), initially simply pointing out that they were 'widely read' (19, 29, 36) and only in the final chapter appearing to suggest that they were 'solidly polis-based' (390).²

The final chapter before the conclusion is devoted to the Aristotelian *Politeiai*. The presence of this chapter is curious. In the introductory paragraph T. suggests that they are discussed because 'they form a suggestive parallel to the local histories'. But the story then told is rather different: 'the writing up of *Politeiai* effectively captured and crystallized a coherent image and account of a polis and its *politeia*. This may not have been the initial aim: but they created stylized visions of community, an "imagined community" with customs, political institutions, origins and origin myths and some (or more) of its past history' (384–5). That is, those who came along to write polis histories in the wake of the Aristotelian *Politeia* of their polis, were inevitably influenced by the Aristotelian work.

The final chapter seeks to situate the writing of polis history into its historical context. The discussion revisits much that has been discussed earlier (another attack on antiquarianism, for instance, 393), and makes many sharp observations (notably that 'the writing of local history ... and particularly polis history, is almost always an activity that, in some way, is a reflection of

² On audiences, see recently D. Tober, 'Greek Local Historiography and its Audiences', *CQ* 67 (2017) 460–84.

something else in addition to a simple interest in place' (390). But it is undermined by the failure ever to grip exactly what is being explained. Are we seeking to explain why anyone wrote a polis history in the first place? Or are we explaining why polis histories became so popular? The two questions need to be prised apart because they direct attention at two different historical periods. If we are asking the former then we are asking about the later fifth and fourth centuries; if we are asking about the latter we are asking about the Hellenistic period (Appendix 2 'Polis, Island and Ethnos Historians Dated to the Fourth Century', and Appendix 3 'Register of Polis, Island and Ethnos Histories: Jacoby's Local Histories' are helpful here).

Unfortunately, this question impinges not only on the last chapter, but on the book as a whole. If it is the beginnings of the enterprise that are at issue, then the pioneers need to be sifted out for special attention—but they are not. But if it is the flowering of polis histories that is at issue, then we needed the discussion of the Aristotelian *Politeiai* and their potential influence on polis histories much earlier.

This question of chronology returns us also to the question I raised at the start: is this a book resolutely concerned with the genre of polis history, or is it interested in any attempt to write about some aspect of the history of a particular polis in any historiographical context? The design of the book, in particular the way in which individual city histories are used as case studies, demands that it is about a genre, and demands the assumption that that genre was relatively consistent across time and (with the possible exception of the history of Athens) space. But although T.'s decision to look at different case studies for different aspects of polis histories somewhat conceals difference, the more the rich account of the details of particular polis histories is revealed, the more questionable the claim to consistency within the genre becomes.

The reader is left with two questions. The first is, what story would have emerged had polis histories been arranged in chronological order? Would the same themes have been prominent in the earliest polis historians, down to say 323 BC, and in the later? Or did polis history change over time? The second question is about fragmentation. How far is the picture we can gain of polis history fundamentally compromised by our total dependence on what gets quoted by later writers? We might wonder whether any author's work (including the work under review) is adequately represented by what others chose to quote, and in particular we might wonder whether, in this case, T.'s own inability to refrain from treating snippets of local history in works that were not themselves polis histories might be itself a sign that, at the level of the quotation, any distinctiveness that polis history had as a genre is quite lost.

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