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Review of *Unthinking the Greek Polis: Ancient Greek History beyond Eurocentrism*, by K. Vlassopoulos

James C. Wright

*Bryn Mawr College*, [jwright@brynmawr.edu](mailto:jwright@brynmawr.edu)

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M. neatly adapts his method to the different sets of ancient source material that survive for each myth. In the case of Hypsipyle, he works with the highly fragmentary evidence by taking a comparative approach which incorporates Near Eastern myths of a similar type. There is an economical system for numbering the various ancient accounts (Melampus = M1, M2, M3 ...; Philoctetes = Ph1, Ph2 ..., etc.) but as these texts are scattered through the book it becomes awkward for readers to use if they forget what, say, Ph3d stands for when there are eleven different accounts of the wounding of Philoctetes (Ph1, Ph2 ...).

In each section, M. tabulates data in order to compare the sources, as for example with the different narratives of how Philoctetes is wounded. He then constructs stemmata to present a visual formulation of the links that he sees between the different accounts in the sources. This method of collation adopts the ideas of textual criticism but applies them to individual elements of a myth in order to suggest where variants are descended from the same or from a separate tradition.

The framing of different features within the myths in terms of oppositions, so beloved of structuralists, offers many opportunities for disagreement, since the terms of the comparison are dictated by the author's idea of relevance and importance. M. applies this method consistently, sometimes using a mediator between the two extremes, and indicating an awareness of the problems inherent in this technique in the final chapter.

The front of the book presents images of nineteenth-century maps of Lemnos but their scaling renders these too small. The ancient sources are numerous enough that there is only space for translations. Some corresponding Greek or Latin appears in footnotes, but only sometimes are textual issues addressed. For Besantinus (p. 48), unfamiliar to this reader and perhaps others, it would have been helpful to include the Greek text.

The quality of the individual analyses is high and each section is constructed with an erudite touch. There is a high density of ancient sources throughout the book, reflecting its intense and sustained focus on the mythical material which is always central to M.'s discussion. Yet M. maintains an engaging style of writing, at times employing allusions to modern cases and similes to explain points. The book is of interest to those working on any of these three myths or on myth generally, since it demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses in varying approaches to myth analysis.

*University of Nottingham*

SARAH MILES  
abxsnm@nottingham.ac.uk

## THE *POLIS*

Vlassopoulos (K.) *Unthinking the Greek Polis. Ancient Greek History beyond Eurocentrism*. Pp. xiv + 288. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Cased, £55, US\$99. ISBN: 978-0-521-87744-2.

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The ancient *polis* is a major subject of urban studies, history, classical studies and archaeology. Hardly anyone teaching the ancient city would ignore Athens, yet clearly there are many other examples that deserve attention. Nor can one discount Plato, Aristotle, Fustel de Coulanges, Weber and Finley, whose influences range beyond classical studies. Recent work by anthropologists, ancient historians and

archaeologists<sup>1</sup> resituates the *polis* within broader definitions of urbanism. C. Morgan, in *Early Greek States beyond the Polis* (London, 2003), uses historical, epigraphical and archaeological sources to attain a richly rewarding and inclusive understanding of urbanism in regions of ancient Greece that traditionally have been relegated to a lesser rank than the paramount examples of the classical tradition. V. now tackles the underlying problems of the *polis* as an object of study and challenges us to set the record straight through a new scholarship.

There are three enquiries and a concluding agenda in this book. First is a historiography of the *polis* from antiquity through to the Renaissance and from the eighteenth through to the twentieth centuries. Second is an examination of the *polis* as a trope for a Eurocentric view of the past used to construct its own social and political ideology. Third is a recontextualisation of the *polis* within systems of interdependencies in the ancient world. In conclusion V. argues for a new writing of the history of the *polis* employing modern theories and methods of history.

The first enquiry wrestles with the way the Greek past has been appropriated and reconfigured for a Eurocentric culture. V. argues that Greek history is a construction of the Romantic period and *polis* studies an outcome of nineteenth-century Orientalist functionalism and evolutionism. In the aftermath of the Second World War the *polis* was reconceived in a reductionist format that bedevils modern scholarship, even as it now attempts to place the *polis* properly in its context. This leads V. to a hermeneutic reading of Aristotle in order to recover an ancient Greek understanding of the *polis*. He argues that Aristotle's concept of the *polis* is not linear, developmental and historical but rather natural. Aristotle's *polis* is constituted of *koinônai*; because of this V. interprets it as heterogeneous, non-linear, heterarchical and dynamic in structure and operation.

In Part 2 V. explores how perniciously the traditional views of Greek history and the *polis* are embedded within modern views of society and social change. This happened because the Eurocentric model of Greek history chose the *polis* as the central phenomenon of a unitary model of Greek civilisation. Much modern Western thinking about the *polis*, urbanism, society and state is linear, static and bounded, driven by stereotypes and tropes derived from a long tradition of Western approaches to the study of the Old World. This argument is advanced by two case studies. First is the Near Eastern city, in which V. proposes that the *polis* is in part an outcome of the wider world of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean in which Greeks participated. Then he turns to economic approaches to the origins of modern states in the Middle Ages represented by Weber's misleading model of consumer/producer cities. This model also homogenises what on the ground is much more diverse and variable.

In Part 3 V. proposes a new research project on the *polis* that will write an alternative Greek history. First new analytical and methodological approaches need developing. They involve attention to theory and method of history, political theory, and economic and social models, like world systems theory. V. argues we must reframe the traditional units of analysis ('societies, states and cultures') by embracing his reading of Aristotle, which concludes that all communities are in different ways

<sup>1</sup>For example D. Nichols and T. Charlton (edd.), *The Archaeology of City-states* (Washington, 1997); H. Damgaard Anderson (ed.), *Urbanization in the Mediterranean in the 9th to 6th centuries B.C.* (Copenhagen, 1997); M.H. Hansen (ed.), *A Comparative Study of Thirty City-state Cultures* (Copenhagen, 2000), and B. Cunliffe and R. Osborne (edd.), *Mediterranean Urbanization 800–600 BC* (Oxford, 2005).

dependent upon an outside system; therefore, the only way to understand a community and its history in all its dimensions is to pay attention to its interdependence among the various systems in which it participates. This is, of course, a version of Wallerstein's world-systems theory, from which V. derives 'unthinking' for his title, but he also employs Braudel's conception of a *système-monde*. V. then examines the *polis* according to spatial, political and temporal perspectives. Here he advances his argument for the variety and fragmentation of a world 'scattered all over the Mediterranean and the Black Sea' and undergoing continuous metamorphosis from its origins in the ninth and eighth centuries until its demise in the Roman period.

V.'s concluding chapter is entitled 'Towards New Master Narratives of Greek History?' The question mark signals that he does not intend to provide the narratives but rather to indicate how they might be pursued. Earlier he argued for a return to the Greeks themselves for guidance, but for evidence he proposes more extensive use of that gleaned by archaeology. In answering the question how a narrative might be constructed, he advocates the use of the travelogue and the dialogue for demonstrating and representing the past.

No doubt there is a place for these approaches, but the project is surely larger, involving more attention to recovering the totality of ancient *poleis* in terms of their territories, interconnections, landscapes, climates and ecologies, an approach that requires an examination of the evidence from archaeological survey and excavation and use of the comparative method.

Although sometimes V. is chatty, urging the reader on with the insistence of a recent convert, this book merits close study. Its specificity may be daunting to those outside the discourse of classical scholarship, but the effort will reward. V.'s insistence that the *polis* be reconfigured so that it ceases to be the reducible core of Greek civilisation requires consideration of how the *polis* fits into a comparative study of similar forms of urbanism and urban-states at other times and places of the world. This is the purpose of Hansen's edited volume (2000) and an important aspect of Horden and Purcell's study *The Corrupting Sea* (Malden, 2000). Significantly, V.'s multidimensional view of the *polis* is not explicitly argued in the recent volume edited by Cunliffe and Osborne (2005), nor in the earlier conference volume edited by Andersen (1997). This suggests the extent to which V.'s perspective is welcome and original.

Some reviews of *The Corrupting Sea* suggested that it lacked appreciation of the archaeological evidence. To an extent this also holds true for this book, yet V.'s critique of Aegean prehistorians' dependence upon an unquestioned unitary and linear model and their over-reliance upon Homer and Greek myth is on target. Since he considers the comparative evidence of Near Eastern cities, he might advocate for a comprehensive comparative survey of polity formation and interaction throughout the Eastern Mediterranean including the Aegean during the second millennium, the interesting cases of the formation and flourishing of Cypriot *poleis* in the Early Iron Age, and the contemporary rise of 'Phoenician' polities. These make a good subject for a comparative project that ultimately can extend to other regions of the world where *polis*-like conurbations flourished. Morgan's research on *ethnê* is a salutary model for this project. We can be confident that future studies will take up V.'s project and explore classical, Hellenistic and Roman examples.

Bryn Mawr College

J. WRIGHT  
jwright@brynmawr.edu

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