Matthew Simonton, *Classical Greek Oligarchy. A Political History*. Princeton – Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017. Pp. 355. ISBN 978-0-691-17497-6 hardback.

It is a truism to say that great books fruitfully interact with the historical moment of their composition. This is also true of important books in ancient history. What I mean here is not changing intellectual paradigms and methodologies, but historical, political and even existential experience of a given author and of his or her envisaged readers. Suffice it to mention, among many recent highlights in ancient Greek history, such cases as that of Jonathan Hall's *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (1997), written when, upon following the news from the former Yugoslavia, the scholarly world painfully woke up from the dream of the end of militant nationalisms and combative ethnic identities, or that of Irad Malkin's book on *A Small Greek World. Networks in the Mediterranean* (2011), written in the world suddenly telescoped under the influence of the World Wide Web and its accompanying technologies. As will be clear from what follows, I have no doubt that this is also the case of the remarkable and innovative book by Matthew Simonton, entitled *Classical Greek Oligarchy. A Political History*, whose Preface and Acknowledgements are dated to November 28, 2016.

As the Author observes himself (p. 1–2), among the three classical categories of political regimes, the rule of the few, or oligarchy, has received little attention in more recent scholarship, unlike ancient democracy or diverse forms of solitary rule in antiquity. And even when scholars do study Greek oligarchies, they would rather focus on oligarchic coups and oligarchic ideology, but only marginally on "what oligarchs in the Classical period actually did in their capacity as oligarchs. What was the relationship between the rulers and the wider male citizenry (the demos) of an oligarchically governed polis? To what extent was oligarchic rule contested by popular movements? And how might oligarchs have collectively responded in an attempt to retain their power?" (pp. 2–3). Logically, to answer these "pragmatic" questions, the Author is faithful to the concerns of political history and not to those of cultural history or of the study of political thought. All in all, this is as refreshing as it ultimately proves rewarding for the reader of this book.

Importantly, the Author diagnoses the reasons for the scarcity of studies of classical Greek oligarchy (pp. 3–4). Besides the shortage of the available evidence, he also emphasises that this phenomenon seems less engaging than the two other classical forms of government because it is supposed to be "so overwhelmingly common". And this common-sense assumption widespread among the students of Greek antiquity is (seemingly) supported by some popular political theories that have been arguing for the (allegedly) natural tendency of all political organizations to degenerate into some form of oligarchy[1]. It has long been clear that this would not be true of classical Athens,

[1] Cf. e.g. the so-called "Iron Law of Oligarchy" as formulated by Robert Michels in his book *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie. Untersuchungen über die oligarchischen Tendenzen des Gruppenlebens*, Leipzig 1911, whose reprinted English translations anchored this "law" in modern-day political thought for good from the sixties of the previous century onwards.

i.e., of the most complex and perhaps the most malleable political organisation we know of classical Greece, which already should be enough to prove the aforementioned "rule" monumentally wrong. But many scholars still assume that oligarchy must have been the most common form of government outside of Athens for most of the archaic and the classical period. This assumption, again, runs against the data compiled, e.g., in the monumental *Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis* by Mogens Herman Hansen and Thomas Heine Nielsen (Oxford 2004), at least for the classical and early Hellenistic period, but the great merit of Simonton's book is to translate their data into a coherent historical narrative supported by a well-orchestrated methodology.

True, to do this the Author must rely on a very discrete understanding of ancient Greek *oligarchia*, which for him "does not refer to just any regime in which a small number of people govern, but to a specific constitutional alternative that arose as a reaction to *dēmokratia* between the late sixth and mid-fifth century". As he puts it himself, his meaning of *oligarchia* cannot be separated from *dēmokratia*. "Once the Greek elite perceived *dēmokratia* as a potential threat to their interests as a class, many members of the elite, working in different poleis and under different local conditions, created what nevertheless became a broadly similar repertoire of political and social institutions designed to avoid the danger of democracy. The term for this bundle of defensive and reactionary techniques was *oligarchia*" (all quotes here on p. 5). In his book, Matthew Simonton persuasively argues for the rise of this *oligarchia* rather early in the fifth century BC – and not in the earlier archaic period, where many scholars would usually locate *their* ancient Greek oligarchy, or in the later fifth century, where others would locate it and interpret it as a reaction to the excesses of the radical Athenian democracy and of its empire.

Some critical remarks may be in order already at this point. Given the thematic focus of this book and especially the somewhat paradoxical, or at least polemical, definition of Greek oligarchy to work with, it is striking how little space is given here to the much-debated phenomenon of Greek aristocracy. Rather disappointingly, summarising one of the discussions about the historical link between "aristocracy" and "oligarchy" during the archaic period, the author only marginally admits (n. 17 on p. 5) that instead of delving into these issues he "would speak [...] in a rather undifferentiated manner of 'Archaic elite-led regimes'." I for one would argue that the originality of the central concept of this book would be even more pronounced if set against earlier historical phenomena that, after all, must have contributed to the rise of the *oligarchy* as Simonton defines it.

This is clear, for instance, in his discussion of the mechanisms of consensus-building as one of the safeguards of the aristocratic regimes, where he refers to the practice and the ideal of "a decision that satisfied a high number" in an oligarchic deliberative body. At this occasion, the Author mentions that "this was also the ideal held up by the symposium, which, like politics, was considered a form of speaking 'to the middle' (*eis to meson*)" (pp. 84–85). Although, for this ideal, Simonton rightly refers his reader to the sympotic texts of the archaic period, one cannot tell how exactly we got from this

archaic social practice (and its concomitant ideals) to the social practice (and its concomitant ideals) of the oligarchy in the classical period. Clearly, such notions as "archaic Greek elite" or "Archaic elite-led regimes" (cf. above) are not enough to do justice to the "prehistory" and hence to fully explain the emergence of the classical Greek oligarchy (as Simonton understands it). Here, the reader may have the impression that the main thesis of this highly original book, namely the idea of oligarchy proper as a "bundle of defensive and reactionary techniques" devised against the rising *dēmokratia*, somehow prevented the Author from fully appreciating the potential of exploring social practices and ideals of Greek elites preceding the birth of classical Greek oligarchy. This is all the more striking that Simonton is well aware – unlike many other scholars dealing with archaic Greek politics – of the need to explore the "other side" of the problem (in a brilliant preliminary section 1.1.1, p. 11–20), namely the crucial importance of the demos in the political life of the archaic Greece as a phenomenon that paved the way both for the emergence of democracy and, consequently, that of oligarchy.

This problem has also rather far-reaching consequences for Simonton's argument as regards the historical circumstances of the rise of the oligarchy as he defines it. Whereas some of his arguments for the emergence of *oligarchia* in the first decades of the fifth century in reaction to the first democracies seem incontrovertible, some episodes of *staseis*, or conflicts between the demos and the elite in late sixth and early fifth century as adduced by Herodotus (esp. Aegina in Hdt. 6.91 and Naxos in 5.30) are not so obvious. Did these cases of infighting result from early elite reactions to the nascent democratic politics, or were they (more traditional) conflicts between "archaic Greek elites" and the demos arising under some extreme circumstances, but without any "ideological" (i.e. "counter-revolutionary") background involved? And how can we distinguish between the two in our fragmentary historical material? Given the nature of our evidence, simple chronological convergence with the more securely attested cases of early Greek democracies may not be enough, especially because with these events we find ourselves exactly at the historical threshold between the old and the new he postulates.

To return to the central thesis of this book, Simonton argues that oligarchy as such was never popular with the masses of the demos, so the real question of his work may be put as follows: "*Given the general unpopularity of oligarchy and the widespread appeal of democracy as a constitutional alternative, what accounts for the survival of oligarchy during the Classical period?* The answer, in brief, is institutions" (p. 6; emphasis by the Author). Accordingly, the Author interestingly applies the methods of the so-called "New Institutionalism" claiming, against more traditional approaches, that institutions are far more than just instruments of coercion or reflexions of some dominating ideology, but as such can decisively shape individual behaviours among other things by successfully imposing specific expectations on individuals as to the course of action or decisions most likely to be made by other members of their community. (Importantly, what is meant by "institutions" is not only conventional political

institutions, but also communal practices broadly speaking, including cultural and religious practices.) In our present case, it is argued, *oligarchia* was safe and stable wherever oligarchs were able to devise or just to optimise the use of institutions that efficiently kept the elite united while at the same time keeping the demos disunited – unable or unwilling to act collectively against the ruling few. In this first aspect, stable oligarchic regime may be seen as the long-term solution to an iterative "prisoner's dilemma", in which all players will cooperate upon realising they are all trapped with their oligarchic competitors in an unending and potentially devastating political game, so loyal cooperation may be the only safe and even rewarding option for all of them.

The core of this book is devoted to the actions and institutional practices of the oligarchs that made all this possible. Thus, Chapter 2 deals with "Oligarchic Power-Sharing" (p. 75–106), Chapter 3 with "Balancing Coercion and Co-optation" (p. 107–147), Chapter 4 with "The Politics of Public Space" (p. 148–185), and Chapter 5 with "The Manipulation of Information" (p. 186–223). Throughout the book, the "New Institutionalist" agenda recurs, from time to time illustrated by parallels drawn from modern-time studies on authoritarian regimes as they too had recourse to institutions enabling them to safeguard the rule of the few by promoting cooperation among them and by discouraging the masses from collective actions. Thus, by balancing coercion with inclusion when dealing with their subordinates, they were able to achieve a stable equilibrium analogous to that of successful Greek oligarchies.

Particularly interesting is the final Chapter 6 on the "Processes of Regime Breakdown" (p. 224–273). A first sight, the Author revives here the once hotly debated problem of *stasis*, or civil strife, but the important novelty is the general idea of coordinating diverse types or better practices of *stasis* with different types of government. It is argued that "certain tendencies inherent in oligarchic government" "not only encouraged civil war but also discouraged the successful reinstitution of stable oligarchy afterwards" (p. 225). In this chapter, Simonton studies conditions and ramifications of oligarchic breakdown. One such condition was the failure of the oligarchs to efficiently control public space (public festivals, military campaigns, or military reviews, of citizenry). On such occasions, revolutionary uprisings of the demos could occur by overcoming the institutional discouragements imposed on them and when gathering for collective action after realising not only its own numerical advantage, but most of all upon realising the universal nature of political discontent among the otherwise atomised individuals. Another factor were individual strategies of oligarchs themselves "when confronted with different type of shocks to the stable cooperative equilibrium" (p. 249). In that, Simonton distinguishes external shocks (those beyond the oligarch's control) and internal ones (caused by their own mistakes in their dealings with one another or with the demos) and claims that in principle that the external ones often resulted in tyranny, whereas internal ones resulted in democracy. At times, both sets of factors converge, when collective actions of the emboldened demos are made possible or facilitated by individual strategies of success or survival of renegade oligarchs. To conclude, in line with a more and more popular

branch of classical scholarship, the Author briefly discusses the role of emotions and passions (e.g. shame, anger, pride, jealousy) in oligarchic competition for superiority and in *stasis*, thus introducing an additional dimension to his analyses in this chapter.

The book is rounded off by an Afterword, "The Eclipse of *Oligarchia*" (p. 275–286), where the general retreat of oligarchies and expansion of democracies in the Hellenistic period are followed (partly having recourse to an Appendix, p. 287–290, that compares the numbers and possible durations of the three basic types of political regimes in individual Greek poleis between *ca* 500 and *ca* 300 BC). At least in numerical terms and in our available evidence, it is claimed, democracies outnumbered oligarchies by the end of the fourth century. As Philippe Gauthier has shown, based on earlier insights by Louis Robert[2], before the new "rules of the game" as introduced by the Romans, democracy flourished in the Hellenistic period.

In his Afterword, Simonton additionally tries to coordinate the undisputable democratic tendencies of the early Hellenistic world (supported by fourth-century Athens and by the political actions of Alexander the Great in Asia Minor) with more general drive "of everyday citizens requiring accountability from their ruling elite" – still along the lines of his study of the interplay between the demos and the oligarchs (p. 280). I must confess, however, that his explanation of this phenomenon as "a cyclical process" in which the demos gains more and more experience every time the governing oligarchy makes mistakes of governance does not seem entirely convincing to me. Simply put, the proof for democracy not only not being disruptive, but efficient and successful instead, was there since the early fifth century as punctuated by the triumphs of the nascent Athenian democracy. (Suffice it to mention here the attempt to emulate rather closely one of its emblematic institutions, the ostracism, in Tauric Chersonesus in Crimea, most probably already in the first decades of the fifth century.) True, there is a lot to support Simonton's thesis of the weakening oligarchy becoming its own worst enemy, but the idea of "a dialectical development of democratization, re-oligarchization, and re-democratization" (p. 285) seems slightly far-fetched. However, the general conclusion that "well-designed institutions kept oligarchies afloat for considerable periods of time; recovering after collapse was another matter" and that "even the best institutions proved ineffective in a world where the power of the people was becoming a norm" (p. 286) looks noncontroversial.

To sum up, this book is a major contribution to the political history of the classical antiquity and to classical scholarship at large. There is no doubt it will soon become a must-read for all students of ancient Greek history and ancient Greek political thought. Meanwhile, completed in Autumn 2016, referring the reader time and again to modern parallels of authoritarian governments, and reaching its reader at the time when the

[2] See now in P. Gauthier, *Études d'histoire et d'institutions grecques. Choix d'écrits*, Genève 2011, esp. pp. 338-350, 359-360, and 407-408. Cf. already L. Robert, "Recherches épigraphiques VII", *Revue des Études Anciennes* 62 (1960), p. 325-326, for the fundamental distinction between the rhetoric of the inscriptions of the early and of the late Hellenistic period.

concentration of wealth, power, and authority in narrow circles – as well as diverse populist reactions to this phenomenon – seem to determine the future of our contemporary democracies, this book will most likely prove engaging far beyond the field of classical scholarship.

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