

R. Thomas, *Polis Histories, Collective Memories and the Greek World*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2019, 490 pages.

In the middle of the fourth century BCE, Athenians began to write prose histories of Athens, expounding in these texts not only the collective past but also the territory, customs, and cults of the Athenian community. They continued to publish works of this sort, the so-called *Atthides*, for the next century or so, right up to Athens' capitulation to Macedon after the Chremonidean War. It is difficult to know why Atthidography did not emerge earlier, or why it ceased so decidedly when it did. Was there a connection between Athens' production of local history and its empire or its autonomy, between the phenomenon of Greek local historiography more generally and the precarious position of the poleis in the face of powerful new leagues and kingdoms? For alongside Athens, countless Greek communities all over the Mediterranean received histories of their own in the late Classical and early Hellenistic periods. How do these texts reflect or inform polis memory and self-identity? What can they tell us about the relationship between the local community and the wider Greek world? Rosalind Thomas has been thinking deeply about these questions for the past decade or so,¹ and she addresses them comprehensively in her stimulating new study, *Polis Histories, Collective Memories and the Greek World* (2019). She does not in every case settle on a definitive answer, nor am I persuaded by all of the answers that she does give. Nevertheless, her rich discussion, in particular her reading of local history as a product not of pedantic antiquarianism but of the vital and dynamic social knowledge of Greek poleis, will make this volume an indispensable resource for students of Greek historiography, local identity, and the construction of community in antiquity.

In a brief introduction, Thomas summarizes recent discussions of social/cultural memory and considers the exigencies of our evidence, almost all fragmentary, for 'polis, island and ethnos histories'—she generally avoids the word 'local' for what she sees as its 'parochial' connotations (16–17). She divides the rest of her study into ten chapters, the first five of which treat some of the parameters of polis historiography. Chapter One confronts the issue of genre. Ancient testimony, Thomas shows, confirms an indigenous Greek category of historiography focused on place, an exceedingly popular category judging from our many later references to and quotations from such works. But what are the criteria, aside from a localized title and its inclusion within Volume III of Felix Jacoby's *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*,² according to which we can deem a fragmentary work a local history?

¹ See 'The Greek polis and the tradition of polis history: local history, chronicles and the patterning of the past', in A. Moreno and R. Thomas (eds.), *Patterns of the Past: Epitēdeumata in the Greek Tradition* (Oxford, 2014), 145–72; and 'Local history, polis history and politics of place', in G. Parmeggiani (ed.), *Between Thucydides and Polybius: The Golden Age of Greek Historiography* (CHS, 2014), 239–62.

² This is the volume into which Jacoby placed the fragments of what he called *Geschichte von Staedten und Voelkern* (*Horographie und Ethnographie*).

Rather than offer a prescriptive definition, Thomas highlights the great variety of expressions of polis history (in terms of chronological range, geographical scope, organization, and style) as well as the hybridity of the texts themselves. Like ethnography, polis histories were interested as much in the present as in the past, as much in matters of cult and custom as in politics (53–6). In Chapter One, Thomas also takes a preliminary look at the authors of polis histories. Aside from a handful of outliers, including a group of historians publicly honored in the Hellenistic period for writing or performing what were essentially city encomia (56–71), most polis historians seem to have written about their own communities.³

Chapter Two turns from genre to narrative, examining a handful of intriguing legendary episodes preserved in local texts. Like Herodotean *logoi*, Thomas asserts, these ‘historical tales’ tend to prioritize the roles of kings, tyrants, and women and do so by exploiting folktale motifs. Their emphasis on the community as a whole, moreover, rather than on particular historical families within the community (78), sets Greek polis histories apart from the Roman *ab urbe condita* tradition and also from many modern examples of the form (78). One wonders to what extent our picture is skewed by the habits of our citing sources, who are on the whole more interested in the time of origins than in the historical period. But Thomas’s larger point about the malleability of these local stories is an important one. For the communities that preserved them, such narratives had ‘powerful explanatory or exploratory use in various, different milieux, and their afterlife could be rich’ (95).

In Chapter Three, ‘Ethnography for the Greeks?’, Thomas tackles the subject matter of polis historiography: the polis itself. With three Cycladic islands, Naxos, Paros, and Delos, serving as test cases, she shows how patriotic historians sought to idealize their polis as ‘place with a deep history and long-standing traditions’ (139). This is not in itself a surprising finding. But Thomas argues that the recognition of the polis as *axiologos*, as worthy of record in its own right, was something new: a result not of antiquarian erudition but of shifting power dynamics in the late fourth and early third centuries. It was the insecurity and sense of ‘current obscurity’ felt by the poleis in this uncertain period that gave them ‘extra incentives for celebrating the more glorious past’ (106).⁴ I agree that the production of local historiography, like other acts of communal ‘self-assertion’ (104), can increase in response to perceived external or internal threats. Yet, Thomas’s corollary that local histories represent a polis’s desire to boost its ‘role in matters of wider Greek importance’ (104, cf. 73), a line of thought that stays very much within Jacoby’s framework, risks overvaluing

³ Thomas includes as Appendix 3 a ‘Register’ of all the local historians embraced by Jacoby’s collection, although they are classified here by their subject matter not by their provenance.

⁴ This is more or less the position of Eduard Schwartz (‘Timaeos Geschichtswerk’, *Hermes* 34, 1899, 481–93 at 491) against which Jacoby first argued. Thomas later distances herself from the romanticism implicit in Schwartz’s conception: rather than an exercise in nostalgia, she writes, ‘we are seeing [in polis historiography] a way of celebrating and recording the past because of the recognition of the past’s significance for the present’ (408).

putative 'panhellenic' stimuli. Since so few of our fragments deal with the historical period, and since most of the legendary material that is preserved is decidedly local in setting and parochial in outlook, we can rarely tell how individual histories actually articulated the contributions of the polis to the outside world let alone ideated any supralocal, panhellenic community to begin with.

In Chapter Four, 'Fostering the Community', Thomas considers some of the social functions of polis history, focusing on the ways in which local histories foregrounded territorial integrity and civic cooperation. Through examples pulled from Megarian and Kolophonian histories, she draws attention to the frequency with which several historians of a given locality were cited together, to the tendency of historians of a given locality to repeat the same information, and to what she calls 'accumulative historiography', whereby one writer continues the narrative of a predecessor (156). A local historian, she infers, was actually more interested in confirming a 'communal view' than in offering a new interpretation of the past, and he was revered first and foremost as an 'embodiment' and 'protector' of 'local memory or tradition' (157). In Chapter Five, Thomas uses the apparent preoccupation of many polis histories with the time of origins to explore issues of Greek identity. Local narratives, she concludes, in particular those of self-described colonies like the poleis of Ionia, tended to characterize the foundational period as a series of tensions with aboriginal groups. The fragments of polis histories can thus help clarify ancient perceptions of ethnicity as well as the close connection between local historiography and the act of colonization (180). The *Sikelika*, which also show an interest in non-Greek populations, could provide further insight into this process of 'hellenizing' the past by 'writing out' native peoples (224), but Thomas has mostly excluded these texts from her study (39, cf. 72 n. 129 and 406–7). She does make good use of other comparative data here, however, such as early town histories of New England, whose excursus on Native American custom and culture seem motivated by an analogous anxiety of settling in a new land (181).

Thomas shows in the first half of her book that polis histories shared a similar set of aims: to celebrate the cultural and political superiority of the focal locality, to lay claim to disputed territory, to forge links with other communities or else justify rivalries, and to highlight the essential communality of the citizen body. Yet each polis, she argues in the following three chapters, actually engendered its own brand of local history. By focusing in turn on Miletus and Lesbos (Chapter Six), Samos (Chapter Seven), and Athens (Chapter Eight), Thomas makes a strong case that we can understand the self-identity of a particular polis through its idiosyncratic approach to local history. Milesian histories, she suggests, were particularly interested in the sorts of episodes of archaic political history that had attracted Herodotus (228), Lesbian histories less in political history than in *paradoxa*, 'early myths, poets, and Troy' (260). Samian local historiography, meanwhile, allows us to understand how a polis might deal with past episodes of stasis and dislocation, since for much of the fourth century a good number of Samians were living in exile; by emphasizing

civic consensus and cohesion, Samian histories could reassure these exiles of the perseverance of the Samian community (282). Thomas is aware that what later sources found interesting enough to quote and paraphrase from polis histories is not necessarily indicative of the historiographical tradition as a whole (14); nevertheless, the patterns that she uncovers in these chapters are striking, and her discussions of individual local stories and historians, like Myrsilos of Methymna (261–2 and 269–71) and Douris of Samos (294–302), are excellent.

In Chapter Eight, Thomas argues that Atthidography, although anomalous in its annalistic treatment of the past, was typical in its broad embrace of cult and culture alongside politics (340). Only by reading the fragments in light of this ‘socio-religious turn’ (318) can we fully understand the Athenian response to local history. We know more about Atthidography than about any other manifestation of polis history, and Thomas takes this opportunity to revisit the question of origins. Here, too, she connects the proliferation of local historiography in the mid fourth century both to a nostalgia and to an anxiety, in this case Athens’ solicitude in the shadow of Macedon (323).⁵ Without a doubt, the changes that Philip and Alexander brought to Athens and to the poleis of peninsular Greece were momentous, and Thomas is surely right to view the activity of e.g. Androtion and Philochoros in light of Macedon’s rise. But we should be wary of such *cum-hoc* arguments to explain the emergence of polis history in general. For one thing, Greek communities were capable of thinking about a common past and about shared customs well before the 350s (in poetry, say, or oratory or in the context of civic festivals): indeed, such statements of collectivity are key strategies of social cohesion. Nor is it on the face of it clear why smaller poleis, whose autonomy was frequently threatened, would have been more worried, or felt more obscure, in the late fourth century than in the late fifth. More to the point, it is not only local history that flourishes in the fourth century but all manner of historical writing. Could we then be witnessing with polis historiography the manifestation not of a new attention to the community but rather of a new mode of communicating this attention? I have earlier argued that local history appears in spades at the beginning of the fourth century, and appears precisely in the guise of ethnography, because Greeks were at this point widely able to avail themselves of new technologies (prose) and models (ethnography) to express what were deep-seated community impulses toward identity construction.⁶ Thomas queries the inherency of these impulses, I realize (8, 101); but I would nevertheless have liked to know more about how she envisages crisis as a shaper of cultural memory and as a motivator of historiography. Perhaps the problem could be profitably approached from the perspective of the historians themselves; for while local history can certainly be understood as a

⁵ This is not entirely easy to square with Thomas’s suggestion, echoing of one of Wilamowitz’s more puzzling claims (*Aristoteles und Athen* Vol. I (1893), 282), that local historiography did not develop earlier in Athens because in the fifth century Athenians were ‘probably far too busy. . . running an empire to write about their polis in its entirety’ (356).

⁶ D. Tober, ‘Greek Local Historiography and its Audiences’ (*CQ* 2017), 460–484.

sociological phenomenon, it is a personal act as well. Most of those local historians whom we can identify not only wrote about their own communities but did so from a position of political or religious authority; and this implies a significant link between local historiography and civic participation. What was it about times of unease or peril that made the group as whole more inclined to reexamine its identity and at the same time encouraged influential members within that group to put their own stamp on the collective past, to see their cultural memory as more tractable, more exploitable?

Polis Histories, Collective Memories and the Greek World is much more than an investigation of origins. The strength of Thomas's book is its embrace of so many aspects of and approaches to polis history. Chapter Nine is a good case in point. It addresses the perplexing relationship between Greek polis historiography and the Aristotelian *Politeiai*, that corpus of 158 treatises on discrete Greek communities produced by the Lyceum in the final decades of the fourth century. Here, Thomas convincingly argues that the *Politeiai* should be seen not simply in connection to Aristotle's *Politics* or to Attidography—much previous discussion has centered around the influence of Androtion's *Atthis* on the *Politeia of the Athenians*, the one *Politeia* that has survived—but as polis histories in their own right. Like polis histories, *Politeia* were interested both in politics in the narrow sense and also in 'customs, habits and people' (381). Like polis histories, moreover, they testify to 'a sense of loss and change' at the local level (375) and to a 'democratization of what was worth recording' (387). It was no longer only Sparta and Athens to which political philosophers might turn for data.

Thomas returns to this theme in the final chapter, where she reads the flowering of polis historiography ultimately as a testament to 'the energy and vitality of the continuing city-states amidst other polities' (388). The 'upsurge' of localism associated with polis histories implies a 'new Hellenism' in which each community sought to augment its role in external affairs as well as its individuality (397): an 'interconnectivity' that puts 'more emphasis on the value of the separate elements connecting' than on the composite whole itself (394). It is an open question whether this localism is in fact new or we are simply able to discern it more clearly now thanks to our access to these fascinating fragments of polis history. But Thomas has nevertheless proved in this important book just how useful these fragments can be for exploring questions such as this and how valuable a tool they are for understanding community and identity in the ancient Greek world.

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