

## BOOK REVIEW

*Democracy Beyond Athens: Popular Government in the Greek Classical Age.* By ERIC W. ROBINSON. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press. 2011. Pp. ix + 275. Hardcover, £63.00/\$103.00. ISBN 978-0-521-84331-7.

This book provides an overview of democracies that have some attestation in the Classical period (480–323). Robinson utilizes a wide range of literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence to construct a convincing argument that democracy was wide-spread outside of Athens. He succeeds in revealing the problems of an Atheno-centric view of ancient democracy and opens the door for more work on how democracy functioned and spread.

The introduction offers a working definition of democracy that includes both institutional and ideological criteria. The primary principle he follows, however, is “whether or not contemporary Greeks *did* call or *would have* called (as best we can determine) such a state *demokratia*” (3). Robinson argues that each facet of his definition of democracy should be handled on a case-by-case basis in terms of the *polis* in question and the source material. He recognizes the potential for authorial bias and the multivalent connotations of several terms, but analysis of these problems does not feature strongly in his case studies of individual *poleis*. In addition, his definition of democracy includes the feature that “freedom and equality serve as guiding principles of the order” (4). This is a particularly vague criterion and it receives little attention. Robinson uses a cautious approach to identifying democracies. He collects corroborating data and presents strong “big picture” arguments for the democracies he identifies.

The first three chapters offer case studies of *poleis* that seem to have had some form of democratic government at some time in the Classical period. Each chapter covers a wide geographic area (the Greek mainland; western and north-western Greece and Cyrene; and eastern Greece). The cities are organized alphabetically, although especially prominent (Syracuse) or closely linked (Abdera and Teos) cities break this schema. In each case he reviews and situates the evidence, and also offers brief conclusions about each democracy’s nature. When necessary, Robinson digresses into issues which are potentially distracting, such as the dispute over Syracuse’s constitution during the Sicilian Expedition and

Athenian influence over the constitutions of eastern Greek cities. These three chapters build Robinson's argument and will serve as a useful reference work for other scholars.

Chapter Four includes a number of informative tables and graphs which provide a picture of the geographic and temporal spread of democracy. Robinson tackles the argument that Athenian democracy was the model and motivating factor for democracy because of Athens' role as a military and cultural power. His strongest argument is that the incidence of democracies in the Aegean did not increase at a greater rate than democracies outside of the Athenian sphere of influence. Given the assumption that Athens promoted or even installed democracies in its subject states, the evidence is surprising. I agree that this suggests that something more is at play in motivating democracy. Robinson then proposes two explanations for democracy's expansion. First, he argues for the influence of regional democratic powers such as Argos and Syracuse and imperial pressures from Persia or Alexander. Second, Robinson offers peer polity interaction as an explanatory model. This model has been applied to both Archaic Greece and Hellenistic Greece to explain the development in parallel of similar structures in autonomous *poleis*. These kinds of interactions contributed to the spread of knowledge about democracy. It is difficult to see the difference between Athens' role as cultural hegemon influencing the spread of democracy and Athens' involvement in peer polity interaction, although his contention that the (primarily non-Athenian) early travelling sophists spread democratic ideology is another convincing argument that more factors than Athens alone are involved. He concludes that Athens played a role as a regional hegemon and as a participant in peer polity interaction, but claims that it is mistaken to see Athens as the chief cause of democratic expansion. What is missing here is a more overt discussion of Sparta, which could also have been a factor in spreading as well as inhibiting democracies.

In Chapter Five, Robinson draws provisional conclusions about the nature of democracies beyond Athens. He introduces the premise that Athens is the only "fully realized" democracy. He convincingly argues through primary source material that the Greeks at least did not consider Athens the sole true democracy. I was surprised, however, to see no mention of Polybius here, who explains why he rejects Athens as a model in his constitutional comparison (6.43). Robinson then reviews democratic commonalities. The problem here is that he finds as common practices the very elements he listed as criteria for democratic constitutions in the first place. Next he addresses some "false commonalities." He argues

against the position that sea power and democracy go hand in hand by examining prominent non-democratic naval powers, such as Minoan Crete, Corinth, Aegina, Samos, and Phocaea. It would have been much more convincing to emphasize democracies that were not naval powers. In his discussion of democratic peace, he uses the evidence of ancient democracies to refute the view, common in modern political thought, that democracies do not go to war against each other, although he acknowledges that constitutional form increasingly became a motivation for alliances during and after the Peloponnesian War. Robinson then presents variations between different democracies, such as differences in populist tendencies, the titles of officials and institutions, means of voting, and the education of citizens. The result is a complex picture of how ancient democracies may have functioned.

Even in light of this study and the discussion of archaic democracies in this book and discussed in more detail in Robinson's *The First Democracies* (1997), it is difficult not to view Athens as the paradigm for ancient democracy. The overwhelming amount of Athenian primary source material provides us with the fullest picture of a working democracy. But this should not lead us to develop political theory from a singular example of political practice. What this book succeeds in doing is to remind us that we should not use the institutions and ideology of the Athenian paradigm alone to set the rules for what constitutes a democracy nor should we conflate it with Greek democracy in general. Rather, we should cast a wider net and be more flexible when examining and proposing arguments about ancient constitutions.

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