

BOOK REVIEW

Class in Archaic Greece. By PETER W. ROSE. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xiii + 439. Hardcover, £70.00/\$120.00. ISBN 978-0-521-76876-4.

Scholarship over the past thirty years has hardly neglected the Archaic period of Greece (here, c. 800–500 BCE) but, according to Rose, what has been missing is a single, unifying explanation that can account for Dark Age society, the rise of the polis, colonization, tyranny, territorial expansion, and ultimately—though not everywhere—the emergence of democracy. For Rose, the driving factor behind developments in these three centuries is the struggle that ensued when a class of wealthy landowners monopolized the means of production. On this reading, conflicts over land ownership between free citizens, such as those documented for early sixth-century Attica, are just as significant as divisions between freemen and slaves.

In the Introduction, Rose bemoans the tendency of classicists either to avoid engaging with issues of class or to treat it as a deeply compromised analytic that needs to be encased in “scare quotes.” The blame for this is attributed in part to Engels’ insistence on the “scientific” status of Marxist approaches to history (14) but also to Moses Finley, whose substitution of Weberian notions of status for Marxist definitions of class was, Rose suggests, a consequence of his need to distance himself from Marxism in the political climate of the U.S. in the 1950s (5). Rose, instead, following the lead of Geoffrey de Ste. Croix’s magisterial *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (1981) advocates an unabashedly Marxist reading of the period—albeit with some refinements offered by the likes of Althusser and Gramsci. Whereas status consciousness is subjective, “the relationship of individuals to the mode of production is objective whether they are conscious of it or not” (9)—a perfect example of the “naturalizing” tendencies of Marxist ideology if ever there was one!

Dark Age society (Ch. 1) is characterized as lacking much social differentiation, with small communities dominated by *basileis*—a cross between “big-men” and chieftains. The polis is treated as the creation of a newly emergent aristocracy that responded to demographic increase and a shift toward a more agriculturally

focused subsistence regime by forging a self-conscious community of small landowners while simultaneously insisting on its own distinctiveness and superiority. Each of the six chapters that follow pursues a largely chronological narrative, normally based on close readings of a specific text. So, the *Iliad* (Ch. 2) is interpreted as a stand-off between the consensus-based rule of charismatic Dark Age *basileis*, represented by Achilles, and the more recent collective leadership of big landowners, embodied in the figure of Agamemnon. The *Odyssey* (Ch. 3) reflects the recourse to commerce and colonization on the part of the impoverished and dispossessed and expresses “the long build-up of rage at the arrogance of the leisure-loving, stay-at-home suitors viewed from the perspective of a man who has traveled widely, who knows intimately what it is to do the hard labor of a small landowner ...” (165). Hesiod (Ch. 4) represents the perspective of an alienated middling farmer and the first symptoms of a festering class struggle that Solon tried to address through a modest expansion of political privileges and the tyrants by curbing aristocratic excess and creating a more centralized state (Ch. 5)—though, in both cases, without drastically altering the relations of production. The surviving fragments of Tyrtaeus (Ch. 6) are plausibly interpreted as an attempt to instill in Spartan citizens a homogenizing ideology while the final chapter offers a welcome—if not necessarily approbative—rehabilitation of the Peisistratids’ role in the future development of democracy at Athens.

Rose displays a dazzling command of the relevant scholarship—especially in his treatment of the literary evidence but also, despite several disclaimers, in his familiarity with the archaeological material. Readers will, of course, find their own reasons for disagreement—be it the sharp distinction drawn between subjective representations and objective conditions “on the ground,” the conventional dating of Homer and Hesiod, the “autobiographical” readings of Hesiod and the Archaic poets, the traditional explanation for colonial ventures and the failure to consider how impoverished farmers secured the capital for overseas voyages, the seemingly timeless or primordial character of Spartan institutions, or the notion that the architects of Athenian democracy appealed to the memory of the charismatic leadership of Dark Age *basileis*. To my mind, details aside, Rose makes a persuasive case for the heuristic value of a Marxist definition of class to the study of Archaic Greece even if I am less confident that a struggle for control of the means of production is the only underlying thread that accounts for developments in this period. But Rose’s class-based analysis does not really generate any radically new interpretations of the evidence—as opposed to setting existing interpretations on a more explicitly theoretical footing—which might suggest

that scholars have already incorporated, however unconsciously, Marxist approaches into their working methodologies. Indeed, reading this book can sometimes feel like receiving a stern dressing-down from a card-carrying member of the party brandishing the official rule-book. Overall, however, this volume is as rewarding as it is dense—which makes it all the more regrettable that it is marred by an unacceptably high number of editing errors (I had to abandon my intention of logging all the typos, spurious cross-references, and ungrammatical constructions long before reaching the misspelling of even the word “class” on p. 348).

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