

BOOK REVIEW

The Heroic Rulers of Archaic and Classical Greece. By LYNETTE MITCHELL. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. Pp. xi + 207. Softcover, \$29.95. ISBN 978-1-4725-1067-9.

“Setting out deliberately to be provocative” and “in opposition to many current trends in the scholarship”, this book begins with the proposition that rule by one man had a “continuous existence as a legitimate political form” from the Early Iron Age to the Hellenistic period (1). Chapter One, therefore, “challenges” (1) the “orthodoxy” (34) of the “traditional” (48) distinctions between *basileis* and *tyranmoi* that arise from Thucydides 1.13, “exploding” these “myths” to bring about “the disappearance of an ‘age of tyranny’” (1). Chapter Two replaces these categories with the idea that “legitimacy—that is, willing obedience—was achieved through proof that the ruler had an excess of *aretē*, excellence” (57). “The most convincing proof of one’s right to rule was to achieve heroic status” (61) by performing acts of polygamy, martial and athletic victory, and city-foundation. Chapter Three adds that rulers shared their power with other aspirants, officials, and family members. Is a power-sharing ruler an oxymoron? There are two answers: Chapter Four says that rulers “shared sovereign power” with other bodies within the *polis* (120), and Chapter Five sets aside sovereignty to conclude that it was, rather, “Personal and charismatic rule [that] did not disappear entirely from all of the Greek world by the end of the archaic period as many have claimed” (153).

Thus, after starting with an analytical hypothesis about the continuous existence of a politically legitimate form of rule across EIA Greece, the book unfolds as a redescription of evidence regarding the activities and concerns of Big Men, and concludes with historically contextualized statements about how this type of one-man rule was “deeply embedded” (163) in democratic Athens. But did one-man rule have a continuous existence as a legitimate political form, even there? That depends on definitions. Whereas ‘legitimacy’ is sharply defined (57), ‘one-man rule’ is extensively discussed (25-30). Sovereignty and ruling power are shared when one shares administrative responsibilities (126-32) or a place in one’s monuments (93) with others, and failed assassination attempts are limits on ruling

power (130). The use of evidence is sometimes counter-intuitive: Archilochus (*ouk ereōturannidos*, fr. 19W) does “not necessarily” reject one-man rule (23). The Spartan dyarchy provides a “good example” of “individual rule” (132). The support for monarchy shown by a Persian regicide in the work of a half-Dorian, half-Carian metic (i.e. Darius in Herodotus’ ‘Constitution Debate’) is evidence for the “positive theory of rule by one man” as developed in Athens (156), and Pericles’ statement about election to the *stratēgia* (Thuc. 2.37.1, cf. *HCT* ad loc.) happening *ap’aretēs* is a full-blown “reworking of democratic principles” that “formed the cornerstone of the positive theory of kingship” (157). These are among the many provocative readings of one-man rule that were promised, and —agree or disagree—there is much to think about here.

The rhetoric of intentionality recurring behind the book’s central suggestion, that *aretē* as a tool of legitimization was actively sought by rulers and was the causal impetus behind their actions, however, would remain epistemologically suspect even if our sources better confirmed it. Because if *aretē* is a scholarly byword, rather than a textually attested concept, it can be found nearly anywhere. For example, while it may be true that “for the Homeric hero the most important quality is *aretē*” (66), the conversation between Glaucus and Sarpedon (the sole example adduced) nowhere mentions it, instead saying that heroic combat results from a realization of one’s own fragile mortality (*Il.* 12.322-8). Similarly, in Herodotus (7.155.1), the bodyguard Gelon became ruler not by an act of *aretē* or “by election” (94), but by first siding with his dead boss’ sons to defeat the citizenry in battle, and then switching sides to rob them of their throne. Likewise, although Xenophon’s Cyrus provides “the ultimate model of *aretē*” (159) because he “justifies his right to rule on the basis that he is the most adorned of all with *aretē*” (57), the cited passage (*Cyr.* 8.1.21) says that Cyrus displayed *aretē* in order not to justify rule but to inspire *kala kai agatha* (and the next sentence says that Cyrus thought the good ruler was one who gives commands and punishes transgressors).

Finally, Alcibiades (Thuc. 6.15) is cited as an example of how to “prove the abundance of one’s *aretē*” through “success at games, foundations of cities, and leading the city in war” (47), although Thucydides has chosen to invoke the concepts of *dunamis* and *doxa*, not *aretē*, in this context. Furthermore, Thucydides’ moral behind the Alcibiades story at this point in his text seems to be that striving after *aretē* could indeed both deprive one of legitimate command and render one unfit to remain within the *polis*. But part of Alcibiades’ failure, Thucydides implies,

was because he expected his fellow Athenians to believe Mitchell's thesis and accept that "rule by one man was not inconsistent with the life of the *polis*" (18). The fact that the Athenians did not, however, points to the value in Mitchell's analysis of how sources of social power were available to certain individuals from outside of their local legal-constitutional frameworks.

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