

## BOOK REVIEW

*Thebes: A History*. By NICHOLAS ROCKWELL. *Cities of the Ancient World*. London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2017. Pp. xi + 177. Hardback, \$112.00. ISBN 978-1-138-65833-2.

Nicholas Rockwell's *Thebes: A History* does precisely what it says on the tin—an overview of the Greek city-state of Thebes from roughly 1600 BCE to 476 CE. Rockwell can cover so much time in the slender 150-page volume in part by focusing largely on military and political events, with only comparatively minor interest in other historical spheres. Although a useful survey of the city-state and its place in the Hellenic world, several drawbacks undermine *Thebes'* otherwise impressive historical scope.

*Thebes* moves chronologically through seven chapters: the Mycenaean period (1600–1200 BCE), the Dark Ages and Greek Renaissance (1200–700), Archaic Thebes (700–479), three chapters on the Classical era (479–404, 404–371, and 371–323), and the Hellenistic and Roman eras (323 BCE–476 CE). The core chapters on Archaic and Classical Thebes are the most thorough, detailing Thebes' relations with other powers—its medizing collaboration during the Persian War, the ups and downs of the Spartan alliance against Athens and the Theban Hegemony of 371–362 BCE. In Rockwell's narrative, the city-state's political activity almost always tied it to powers which overshadowed it—Mycenae and the Minoans, the Phoenicians, Persia, Sparta and Athens, Macedonia and, finally, Rome. The only major exception was the Hegemony, when Thebes dominated Greek affairs.

The opening and closing chapters emphasize Thebes' relations with other powers, but provide less concrete detail about Thebes specifically. The first chapter points out that “The root of [Cadmus, legendary founder of Thebes'] name most likely means ‘Easterner,’ which undoubtedly reflects the trading ties the Greeks continually had in the Eastern Mediterranean” (15). However, most discussion of the Mycenaean era presents observations about Hellenic culture in general—for instance, that Homeric myth may reflect Dark Ages metallurgy and kingship structures (32). These larger patterns provide useful context for early

Thebes, but they are not unique to Theban experience. To a certain extent this is unavoidable, as Rockwell repeatedly notes the dearth of reliable materials and the plethora of scholarly disagreements over pre-Archaic archaeological finds.

While the early chapters touch on material culture, Rockwell's core chapters largely catalogue Thebes' ever shifting political alliances and military campaigns. These chapters emphasize how the Thebans aligned themselves with dominant powers, and how they attempted to maintain regional control of Boeotia. Rockwell gives specific descriptions of battles like Delium in 424 (68–73) or Leuctra in 371 (101–104). Here he really excels, analyzing political power struggles, troop numbers and movements, tactics, and arms and armaments. However, when he turns from non-military/political culture, discussions become more cursory and rely heavily on ancient authors, whom Rockwell admits often have an anti-Theban bias. An example comes in the chapter on Hellenistic and Roman Thebes. A page and a half long discussion reproduces negative assessments of Theban character from 2<sup>nd</sup> century historian Polybius and travel writer Heraclides Criticus (142–144). These writers describe Thebes' decline to a vendetta culture, and the loss of manners among Theban men. Rockwell does little either to confirm or reject these accusations, beyond including a picture of a statue of a Theban woman dressed in the manner Criticus describes (145).

Rockwell does incorporate images throughout his book, which helps create a somewhat stronger sense of Theban material culture and geography. Some of the most striking images include a bowl and spear head from a Mycenaean tomb (7), a pottery fragment depicting a hoplite (41) and the lion monument at Chaeronea (111). *Thebes* also includes numerous landscapes, viewing the city or battlefields from different angles. However, the images are not well integrated with the book's text. Rockwell discusses the subjects, but never directs us to a specific image, and some—particularly images of stelae or landscapes—seem incidental rather than integral to the historical narrative.

Another distinctive characteristic of this book is the volume of summary. The Introduction provides a synopsis and survey of Theban history. Then, each chapter overviews Theban history during the era in question, before the rest of the chapter elaborates. It's nearly impossible to lose one's sense of the overall picture of Theban history—every major event is presented repeatedly, so readers always know what's coming and how it fits into the overall chronology. However, this technique is repetitive. The Introduction particularly suffers from this fault. The first paragraph condenses the high points of Thebes' entire history, then the remaining roughly four pages provide a more comprehensive overview, before

the rest of the book expands further. So, the basic narrative is repeated twice in the intro and again in the body of the book. Instead of the less detailed summaries, a discussion of methodology, source material, historiographic style, etc. might have made for a more engaging Introduction.

Overall, Rockwell's *Thebes: A History* is a fine study in the military and political activities of the city-state. The analysis in these arenas is detailed and thorough, providing excellent information for scholars and students studying one of the most important, though often underappreciated, city-states of ancient Hellas. However, the rather limited scope means this study will be less useful for readers interested in culture, women's experiences, economic/trade history, literary history, etc. While touched upon, none of these is discussed in the detail given to military and political history. The book is, altogether, a useful but limited resource.

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