

BOOK REVIEW

Polis Histories, Collective Memories and the Greek World. By ROSALIND THOMAS. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xii + 490. Hardback, \$135.00. ISBN 978-1-107-19358-1.

Students of Greek historiography often gravitate toward the works of Thucydides, Herodotus, Xenophon and Polybius. The sources of attraction to these historians are manifold and obvious: their works cover crucial periods in the political history of ancient Greece; their prose can capture something ineffable about the human condition; the texts come down largely intact, and thus are classroom staples. Without question, the titans of Greek historiography have been central to the genre since antiquity, setting the standard against which all other historians are measured. In comparison, the hundreds of local historians in Ancient Greece whose work survives only in fragments have traditionally been found lacking, their projects antiquarian rather than scholarly. In other words, local history is “the ugly duckling of Greek historiography.”¹ In *Polis Histories*, Rosalind Thomas reassesses the surviving fragments of these histories, arguing that dismissing them has caused the field to miss the significance of their proliferation from the 4th century onward.

Local histories, not the grand political narratives, were the most common type of historical writing in ancient Greece. There are surviving fragments from some 530 unique histories spread unevenly throughout the Aegean world before expanding the count to include those from

¹ As Thomas put it in “Local History, Polis History, and the Politics of Place,” in *Between Thucydides and Polybius: The Golden Age of Greek Historiography*, ed. G. Parmeggiani (Center for Hellenic Studies: 2014), 242.

Macedonia, Cyprus, Sicily or either of the two intact local histories (Dionysius of Halicarnassus' *Roman Antiquities* and Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*). These local histories, Thomas argues, were neither mere *horoi* (annual chronicles), as some handbooks lament, nor chronicles of wars and politics, but a repository of information about cults, customs and local curiosities that helped define a polis' identity. Rather than strictly exercises in nostalgia, these histories were "a way of celebrating and recording the past because of the recognition of the past's significance for the present, as well as...in the identity of a place" (408).

After establishing the character of this kaleidoscope of histories, Thomas divides the next eight chapters into sets of polis histories connected by location, tradition or rivalry. She links these case studies with three broad threads, looking at the local histories for the changing conception of the city state in the 4th century, for the historiography of place and fundamentally making the argument that that historiography is contingent and therefore cannot be attributed solely to the developing conventions of a genre.

Thomas' argument for the contingency of local historiography is the strongest feature of *Polis Histories*. Building on her earlier work on the intersection of history, memory and oral tradition, Thomas approaches the body of local histories as an expression of anxiety that emerged at transitional moments when there was concern over the potential loss of local identity. The act of writing the history, she argues, created a long history of an idealized polity and thereby ensured the special status of a polis' citizen body against the contemporary political reality of subordinate relationships and diminished influence. Moreover, these histories wrote into existence political unity that stands in clear contrast to the epigraphic record of political conflict by exiling civil strife to the distant past.

There is much to recommend about *Polis Histories*. Felix Jacoby is the obvious starting point for any study of Greek historians, and while stretches of this work read like Thomas skipping past Brill's *New Jacoby* project in order to test Jacoby's original formulations, this fundamental re-assessment calls for just that. For instance, where Jacoby and those who followed him sought to understand local histories through the works of the Atthidographers, which, unsurprisingly, constitute the largest collection of local historians, Thomas flips this formulation on its head. Placing the Athenian polis histories (Chapter 8) before only discussion of the intersection of local histories and the Aristotelian *politeiai* (Chapter 9), she declares that "we may not be happy with the assumption that Athens was typical in this respect when it was not a typical Greek polis in any other" (12).

Thomas also offers a convincing framework to understand the popularity of local histories beyond Dionysius of Halicarnassus' verdict that they held an easy charm and unpretentious language. In particular, she argues that local histories amount to "accumulative historiography," where the authors of local histories for a given polis faded into the background while the total sum of their works took on an authoritative role in creating and maintaining collective memory. This, in turn, made local history a natural reference point for everything from later historians to diplomatic disputes.²

Where Thomas' evidence for the nature and purpose of local histories is compelling, I was less satisfied by some of the individual case studies. Take Samos, for instance. Thomas rightly rejects the traditional interpretations that Duris of Samos injected his history of Samos with a potent strain of

² *Inschriften von Priene* no. 37, for instance, records an early 2nd-century Rhodian arbitration of a border dispute between Samos and Priene in which the Samians provided evidence from local historians to support their claim.

anti-Athenianism out of “pride and patriotism,”³ in favor of seeing his project as part of the program to rebuild Samos after the period of exile (300). But her focus on Duris’ program and the other Samian local histories also leads her to evaluate them against an orthodox interpretation of Samian history. Reconsidering the expulsion of the Samians after Timotheus conquered the island in 366 is clearly beyond the scope of *Polis Histories*, but is also the sort of issue in individual case studies that can complicate the analyses presented here precisely because of the contingency of local historiography.⁴ Put another way: the same features that make *Polis Histories* of fundamental importance to anyone considering either ancient historiography or local history also impose limits on this volume.

In sum, *Polis Histories* will not be the last word on local histories.

Thomas brilliantly resets the terms of engagement for this corner of Greek historiography by amply demonstrating the “contingency” of historiography and, in so doing, invites us to consider local histories anew, at the intersection of local concerns, global politics and the complicated processes of memory.

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³ As e.g. R. Kebric, *In the Shadow of Macedon: Duris of Samos* (R. Steiner: 1977), 79 and F. Pownall, *Duris of Samos* BNJ 76, biographical essay, though Thomas does not cite the latter.

⁴ I am producing a chapter on the Athenian memory of Timotheus’ conquest of Samos for the upcoming collection, *The Orators and Their Treatment of the Recent Past*, ed. A. Kapellos (De Gruyter: *Trends in Classics Supplementary Volumes*).