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Reviews

John Ma, *Polis: A New History of the Ancient Greek City-State from the Early Iron Age to the End of Antiquity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024. XVIII + 713 pages, 71 illustrations, 1 table, and 16 maps integrated into the text.

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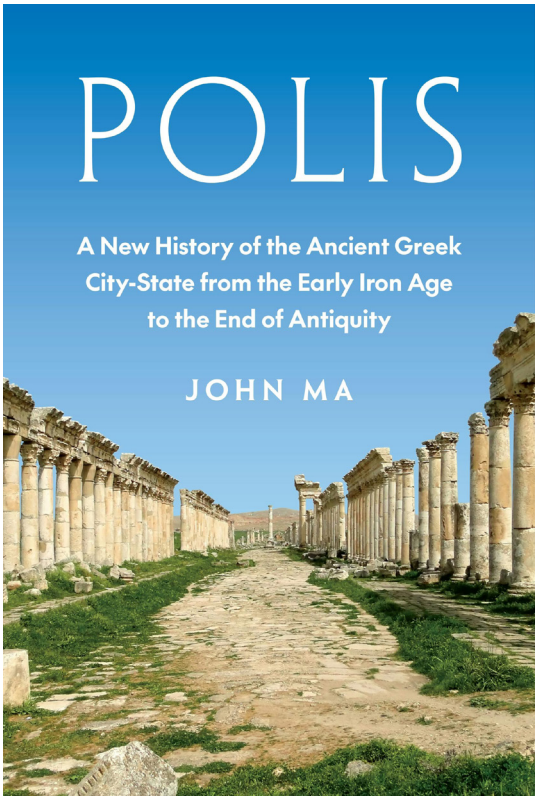

John Ma's work is an ambitious, learned, and deliberately unsettling scholarly contribution. It is not merely a new synthesis of the history of the ancient Greek city-state, but a sustained attempt to rethink what the polis was, how it functioned across time, and why it continues to matter intellectually, politically, and ethically. Its originality lies less in the discovery of unknown material than in the reorganisation of what "the field knows", combined with a consistent refusal to allow the polis to be stabilised either as a timeless ideal or as a narrowly "Classical" phenomenon. What emerges is a long, uneven, and ethically charged history of civic self-governance, one that resists both nostalgia and teleology, and treats the polis as a historical experiment whose outcomes were as problematic as they were innovative.

The most immediately visible way in which the book differs from earlier histories is its systematic de-centring of fifth- and fourth-century Athens. While Athens is necessarily present, it is never allowed to dominate the narrative as the normative model of polis life. Instead, the account is constructed from a mosaic of case studies drawn from small islands, inland towns, marginal regions, and – crucially – the post-Classical and Roman-imperial Greek world. The opening vignette, the decree banning goats on the tiny island of Hērakleia, is emblematic

of the book's method and ambition: a fragmentary inscription from an obscure community becomes the starting point for a reflection on collective decision-making, coercion, ideology, and the moral costs of civic consensus. From the outset, the polis appears not as an abstract ideal, but as a concrete site of regulation, power, and conflict.

This choice signals one of the study's most important historiographical interventions. Against traditions that identify the polis with a narrowly defined "Classical" moment, the author insists on a longue durée perspective stretching from the Early Iron Age to late antiquity. The result is what is explicitly described as a "long Classical" period, in which the polis remains a meaningful political form well into the Roman Empire. This is not a narrative of decline following Macedonian conquest or Roman domination, but one of adaptation, negotiation, and persistence under changing conditions of power. Epigraphy, rather than literary narrative, becomes the primary witness to this endurance, allowing civic life to be reconstructed where traditional sources fall silent.

In this respect, *Polis* stands in a complex and productive relationship to the work of the Copenhagen Polis Centre and, above all, to the scholarship of Mogens Herman Hansen. One of the CPC's central premises – the polis as a form of state rather than a pre-political or merely communal association – is clearly accepted and, if anything, reinforced. Yet whereas the Copenhagen project was primarily concerned with definition, typology, and enumeration – establishing what counted as a polis and how many existed – this book shifts the focus to what the polis did over time, how it exercised power, and what social and ethical consequences followed from its institutional capacities. It may thus be read as a critical historicisation of the CPC model: retaining conceptual clarity while probing the tensions, contradictions, and costs that such stateness entailed in practice.

A second major point of departure from much earlier scholarship lies precisely in this insistence on the stateness of the polis. The author rejects both the romantic image of the polis as a stateless community of equals and the tendency, present in some recent approaches, to dissolve political power into ritual, symbolism, or loosely defined social networks. Throughout the book, the polis is treated as an entity that legislates, judges, taxes, coerces, wages war, and claims legitimate authority over people and territory. This is not to equate it with a modern bureaucratic state, but to take seriously its governmental capacities and the realities of power that accompanied them. Coercion is not presented as an aberration, but as a structural feature of civic life.

At the same time, the analysis refuses to reduce the polis to institutions alone. One of the most productive tensions in the book lies in its constant oscillation between the polis as an apparatus of power and the polis as a social organism embedded in everyday relations. Civic institutions both express and distort social structures; they generate participation and solidarity, but also exclusion and inequality. Citizenship empowers, yet it is founded on sharp boundaries. Autonomy enables collective agency, but it also legitimises violence exercised in the name of the community. These tensions are not treated as failures of the polis, but as constitutive features of the form itself.

From this vantage point, the book is able to integrate questions often marginal in traditional political histories: the position of non-citizens, the uneven distribution of economic burdens, the moral costs of consensus, and the experience of those who lived within the polis without fully belonging to it. The late chapters on "bad" and "worst" poleis, which examine injustice, domination, and abuse of power, are particularly striking. Few general histories confront so directly the fact that civic freedom rested on systematic exclusion and coercion, and fewer still incorporate these issues into the core of their interpretative framework rather than treating them as regrettable side effects.

Methodologically, the author is explicit about the choices made, and these will not please all readers. This is a work of "lumping" rather than "splitting": it aims to produce a unitary image of the polis across immense temporal and geographical diversity. Local specificity matters, but it serves a larger synthetic argument. The book moves confidently between archaeology, epigraphy, literary texts, and political theory, often privileging interpretation over exhaustive documentation. This strategy gives the book much of its rhetorical and analytical force. Individual cases – Hērakleia, Priēnē, Panopeus, Palmyra – are not treated as isolated curiosities, but as variations on shared problems of power, membership, and autonomy. The polis emerges not as a fixed institutional template, but as a recurring historical solution to the problem of collective self-rule.

This synthetic ambition also entails risks. Specialists may object that local differences are sometimes flattened, or that regional trajectories – especially beyond the Aegean core –could have been explored in greater depth. Others may question whether the emphasis on stateness underplays more fluid, associational forms of social organisation highlighted in recent scholarship. Such objections are anticipated and addressed, but the balance struck between synthesis and specificity will inevitably remain open to debate.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its sustained engagement with epigraphic evidence. Inscriptions are treated not merely as repositories of information, but as political acts that reveal how communities understood themselves and wished to be seen. Decrees, honorific texts, laws, and boundary stones become windows onto civic ideology, normative expectations, and power relations. This approach is particularly effective in the chapters devoted to the Hellenistic and Roman periods, which offer a powerful corrective to narratives of civic exhaustion or irrelevance. Poleis under empire appear as constrained but not inert, subordinate yet still self-conscious as political actors. Autonomy becomes negotiated rather than absolute, but it does not disappear.

The visual apparatus of the book deserves attention in its own right. The 71 black-and-white illustrations, together with the maps integrated into the text, are not decorative supplements but form part of the argument. Inscriptions, site plans, landscapes, and urban layouts reinforce the insistence on the material embeddedness of civic power. The images repeatedly draw the reader back to questions of scale, space, and physical constraint: the size of communities, the visibility of institutions, and the proximity between political centres and everyday life. The maps, in particular, support the

non-Athenocentric perspective by situating lesser-known poleis within wider regional and imperial contexts, making tangible both their connectedness and their marginality.

The theoretical dimension of *Polis* also merits emphasis. The book remains in constant dialogue with modern political and social thought, even when references are implicit. Aristotle is an obvious point of departure, but the interpretation is filtered through modern reflections on power, ideology, and state formation. The brief references to Engels and to Marx and Engels are best understood in this light: not as markers of a Marxist framework, but as elements in a broader genealogy of critical thinking about the state, violence, and social conflict. There is no economic determinism here, nor any teleological model of history; rather, these references underscore a sustained concern with structural inequality and with the material and ideological conditions under which civic power operates.

This concern is linked to the author's explicit positioning. There is no pretence of writing from nowhere. In the preface and in the concluding chapter, "Polis of Our Wishes", an interest in autonomy, democracy, and political equality is openly acknowledged, both as historical phenomena and as contemporary problems. This does not result in idealisation. On the contrary, it sharpens the critical edge of the analysis. The polis is treated as an experiment whose achievements are inseparable from its failures, and whose modern appeal must therefore be examined with caution.

Polis does not close debate; it actively invites it. Questions remain about the relationship between ideology and material conditions, about scale and comparability, and about the limits of synthesis. Yet this openness is one of the book's virtues. This is not an introductory handbook, nor a conventional narrative history, but a demanding, synthetic, and deeply reflective work that reshapes how the Greek city-state can be studied and conceptualised. Its originality lies in its temporal breadth, its non-Athenian focus, its insistence on the polis as a state, and its ethical seriousness. Even where one disagrees with its emphases or conclusions, the book forces a reconsideration of assumptions that have long structured the study of ancient Greek politics. In this sense, John Ma's book is not only a new history of the polis, but also a manifesto for how its history might now be written.