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2020. Pp. [xiii] + 267.**

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BOOK REVIEWS

Localism and the Ancient Greek City-State. By HANS BECK. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. Pp. [xiii] + 267.

In this book, *Localism and the Ancient Greek City-State*, Hans Beck argues with the historiographical turn in history based on network studies, which have highlighted the social and exchange networks operating in antiquity, in a modern atmosphere dominated by globalization. B. aims to show that “we should take the local seriously” (p. xii) and deals with many different topics and sources to recalibrate the balance between the focus on connectivity and networks, on the one hand, and the importance of the local, on the other hand. This debate takes place alongside a broader historiographical concern about the application of modern concepts to other periods of the history. Therefore, B.’s timely contribution focuses on the ancient city-state (mostly in the Classical period) and its connectivity in the ancient Greek world in balance with its “local” claims; but B. is also driven by a belief in the impacts or echoes that research about ancient history can have in today’s world, as he writes: “If, as I believe, the accelerated process of globalization will also see an intensification of localism . . . it will become even more critical for us to hear and to understand the local voice. In this sense, too, this study on ancient Greece is part of a wider conversation about one of the pressing challenges of the day” (p. xiii). After a short “Preface,” the first chapter is an introduction to four other chapters that explain the topic and study various examples, and the last chapter (6) is a conclusion.

The introductory first chapter (“Localism and the Local in Ancient Greece”) begins with vocabulary in modern English: the term “local” is charged with negative connotations in modern discourse, as the Greek “epichoric” can be in ancient sources, although the ancient Greek city-states are considered face-to-face societies. In a Greek world characterized by fragmentation, identity was constructed in multiple circles and place played a very important role in this construction. The spatial turn in historical studies has shown the importance of place to identify the community (p. 3) and it raises some concerns or forces us to question some notions: the issue of displacement, the notion of connectedness, and

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processes such as “Mediterraneanization” (Irad Malkin)¹—but this discussion could have taken advantage of a clear definition or short introduction to network theory. As B. argues, localism and connectivity should not be opposed; on the contrary, “locally encoded, bounded cultures . . . are energized by connections near and far” (p. 5). As a matter of fact, B. situates his argumentation in greater historical movements, such as Fernand Braudel’s *longue durée*, in order to focus on the resilience of the local and on the omnipresence of place. A clear definition of “local” and “place” should have completed the argumentation at this point.

Having argued that local and place are such important concepts, B. continues that “in each society reigns a different regime of custom or truth” (p. 8), with local figures, local labels, local *nomos* . . . all these local features participating in the construction of the identity of place. The example of Phlious, in the Peloponnese, shows how a midsize city was a “microcosm of its own” (p. 12): it associates local distinctiveness on coins or in some practices with natural, geographical features of its environment. The “socio-centric mindset” presents the city with the idea of centrality for its inhabitants, where others and strangers only see local, traditional customs, sometimes with amusement. Here B. justifies his approach and his reading of evidence from various sources: to go beyond the common connotations associated with the local, one must examine carefully clues and signs of the local where it is not clearly and explicitly presented or debated (B. uses here a comparison with the concept of “dark matter” in astronomy—matter that is only detected by its traces but cannot be seen itself—and he uses this comparison a couple of times throughout the book).

Shifting to broader notions and approaches, B. appeals to study the local itself, and not only the localized interactions or the connectivity between many localities. In ancient history and archaeology, localism has been studied mainly in two fields: the local pottery styles—B. might here mix up “local ceramics” and “regional pottery styles,” the former referring to the local production of ceramics all around the Greek world, and the latter designating clearly identified and recognizable styles of pottery coming from specific regions—and the political idiosyncrasy that constructed a different constitution for each city. But there is more to explore, in particular the “repertoire of values, meanings, and creative forces” (p. 19) of the local. Therefore B. presents results and data from other periods of history (contemporary urban theory on the modern city, especially) or from other sciences (such as psychology or cognitive neurosciences) to pursue his goal: the spatial turn should lead to the study of the local, not only at the scale of the city or the household (*oikos*), but also at the level of sublocal units, where mutual support can be perceived. Moreover, the importance of place has been confirmed by the neurosciences and the identification of “place cells,” which work like an “inner GPS.” As a result, local knowledge, often seen as traditional, folkloristic, and limited, can otherwise be considered as a craft, driving an “artisanal epistemology” (p. 28, quote from Pamela Smith).

Finally, B. goes back to Greek vocabulary to conceptualize the local in Classical Greece: *epichoroi*, *polites*, and *astoi* are terms that designate the “folks” living in a specific place and agents of the identity of a place. In the final section of the introductory chapter, the notion of place is defined as “the physical and the imagined realm” (p. 30) and it is set within a conceptual background leading to imagined communities, social

1. See Irad Malkin, Christy Constantakopoulou, and Katerina Panagopoulou, eds., *Greek and Roman Networks in the Mediterranean* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

space, and openness of communications. That is to say, “the everyday experience was shaped by the epicchoric horizon” (p. 40).

In the following chapters B. explores various topics and examines a vast number of sources of different types (literary sources, epigraphy, archaeological remains, iconography, coins) to explore all dimensions of the “local”—even if it is not clearly defined—and its meaning for the ancient city-state, with examples originating from central Greece and of the Classical period. Chapter 2 deals with the “Attachment to the Land,” connoting “how the rise of the Greek city was complemented by the appropriation of place” (p. 42), and B. starts by invoking the image of an archetypal homecoming in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Other sources and case studies, including Selinus (Sicily), Thebes, other cities of Boiotia, and also modern Canada, are used to expand the discussion to agrarian crisis, tales of descent, autochthony, and other kinds of “indigeneity” (p. 54). With the development of sedentarism, as described by Thucydides, the attachment to the land becomes a sense of territoriality; thus, B. explores “the general notion of territorial or defensive mentality” (p. 68), with the fortifications’ networks around ancient cities’ chorai (Attica and Eretria, among others).

In chapter 3 (“Senses and Sensation”) B. explores local characteristics or features that deal with senses and how they are perceived from an external point of view. This discussion deals with food habits and regimes (taste), with material culture and artisanal workshops (touch and smell), with sports, athletes, and the commemorations of their victories within the urban environment (sight), and with the music and songs associated with the moment of the victory and its celebration (hearing). Through various examples (such as the wine of Thasos, meat consumption in Thebes, and clay production in Sikyon or Tanagra), B. gives many insights about the perception(s) of the local, both by the locals themselves and by outsiders. These local sensations and manifestations also allow B. to deepen his thoughts about interactions with network and connectivity analysis, placing the “local” in the middle of ancient Greek connectivity (“the local . . . was in persistent conversation with other locals,” p. 101), and about the commitment of the local with the place (“putting the athlete in the middle of the community,” 109) and the time (“the concreteness of the moment,” 116). But B. does not apply any network analysis on the local features he studies; on the contrary, he describes them and tries to show how they were important to the “locals.” That is to say that B. only demonstrates that the Greek cities or communities that were connected to one another were characterized by specific, local features or traits, and B.’s point is that these features should not be underestimated in comparison with the “connectedness” of the cities often put forward.

Religion is the topic of chapter 4 (“The Gods in Place”). Beyond a few, big, trans-regional sanctuaries such as Olympia and Delphi, the local horizon was the main factor of religious and cultic organization in the Greek world. And both the polis and the place of a sanctuary played a major role in this process: the religious practices were “anchored in and sanctioned by the polis” (p. 125) and the local or micro-regional topography influenced and was influenced by the polis religion. Therefore, the “local horizon” was the framework in which the religious practices were elaborated, with “three genuinely local traits”: cults took place in a small environment (“in the concrete, manageable environment,” p. 132); cults were deeply linked with the place they originated from; and this built the cultic topography of the city, with a reciprocal interaction between place and cults. The localism in religion is also present in the calendars and the ways each city kept track of the time (“time-keeping was a local affair,” p. 138), apart from the calendar of the

Panhellenic games. B. then develops three examples of local cultic topography: the procession of the Molpoi in Miletus, the Daphnephoria in Thebes, and the cult for Demeter Chthonia in Hermione. B. underlines that these processions were always in interaction with their place and environment, that is, they “covered the manageable realm of the polis” (p. 149). The last section of the chapter explores how the ephebic education was also an education into the cultic topography of the city.

The thoughts of chapter 5 (“Big Politics, through the Local Lens”) are firmly based on what B. has argued before about the importance of the local in a global world. Studying the local historiography and local historians of different poleis, B. reaffirms the central role of place in these auto-referential, sociocentric discourses, promoting a local interpretative authority. But through the local discourse, one can have new insights on global history, firstly, because it is a result of the fragmentation of the Greek world and an “authentic expression of Greek polis communities” (p. 172). Addressing the question of news’ circulation, B. points out the difference between the circulation of information and the “degree of informedness” (p. 176), but more importantly B. comes to the example of the Persian Wars to illustrate the multiplicity of points of views, the fragmentation of Greek commemoration and victory celebrations, and the importance of local narratives. One point is closely examined: the accusation of Medism against Thebes and the different narratives that dealt with it. Finally, B. presents Thebes as the paradigm of how cities “fostered their own freedom narrative” (p. 206): to counterattack the accusation of Medism, Thebes constructed its own narrative and finally presented itself as the leader for Greek freedom, shifting the focus to the battle of Koroneia in 447 against Athenian rule in central Greece.

In the final remarks (chap. 6, “Toward a Local History of Ancient Greece”), B. summarizes the main notions and results of his inquiry, with, among others, the plurality of perspectives, the identities of place, and the auto-referentiality of the polis. B. reexpresses clearly the thesis of his book, that is, the view “that sees the local both as a realization of universal processes and as an ontological force that relates people to the local domain” (p. 209).

To sum up, B.’s book is very dense and erudite. It is also very well written, and easy and pleasant to read. Many different sources are used to build up the argumentation and that gives strength to B.’s thesis: he explores every aspect of the topic and all the consequences in fields that could seem distant at first glance. While the literary sources predominate, B. also looks into demographic data, archaeological evidence, and inscriptions. The editorial work is of good quality, but the maps could have provided a legend of the symbols used (what is the difference between black dots and white squares on fig. 2.2, p. 66, for example?) and readers might expect more localized maps to illustrate B.’s views (to show the cultic topography of some sites in chapter 4, for instance).

The chronological and geographical scopes announced in the introduction (pp. 40–42) are fulfilled: the book is limited to the Classical period and examples are taken mainly from central Greece. That is not totally coherent with the book’s title, which makes us wait for a more diverse spectrum to give results about “the Ancient Greek city-state” in general. Moreover, B. does not avoid the problem of relying on Hellenistic sources to talk about Classical realities: that might be a sign that, for the topic of the book at least, the distinction between the two periods is not really relevant and that we should adopt a *longue durée* perspective (see p. 7).

The book is well informed, and nothing lacks in the references. Some of them could have been mentioned earlier, like Maurice Halbwachs (p. 181, but not in the

bibliography):² this is a result of the manner with which B. constructs his writing. He starts from the modern meanings of “local” to explore realities of ancient Greece, and he only does true conceptualization in the course of the chapters when he needs it. But the “localism” has, fundamentally, many ties with the question of identity. This topic is addressed here and there, and sometimes the idea of identity is named by other terms whose meaning and connotations are not exactly the same. For example, in chapter 2, the autochthonous descent and the community’s cultural and spatial continuity are said to be the basis of Thebans’ claim for “indigeneity,” but this term cannot be used without at least addressing its connotations and, even better, considering the contribution of post-colonial studies. Later in the same chapter (p. 71), the attachment to the land and its transmission are said to shield “realms that infused the world of the polis with local meaning” (and a bit further, “the land of the polis was a meaningful place”). The concept of identities of place, often put forward in this chapter, hides the problematics of identity through place. The “meaning” of land and space for the city is in fact one of identification. For that matter, earlier reference to Maurice Halbwachs’ works about collective memory and social memory would have helped B. to get straight to the point: the reciprocal relationship between polis and space is well demonstrated throughout the book, but only evoked at its beginning (e.g., p. 24).

Another flaw is what the use of “local” terminology does not allow us to see or to study properly. More specifically, in the introductory chapter, different scales are considered, including “sublocal units, such as *phylai*, *obai*, *komai*, *demoi*” (p. 23). Even if B. concedes that they were “organizational landmarks in the increasing complexity of the Greek city,” he does not say that they are, fundamentally, *subcivic* units. The political frame of “localism” (or, to say it with other words, of local or civic identity) cannot be ignored in all the fields tackled in this book. The chapter devoted to politics (chap. 5) is in fact not really about politics, but rather about local and global historiography. Twice B. signals that neither “authenticity” (p. 164) nor “veracity” (174) was the point in local history or narratives oriented by a single city; then B. demonstrates the multiplicity of narratives and the relativity of political discourses. But not only the references to Katherine Clarke about “making time for the past” (pp. 170–73),³ but also the allusions to cultural memory (175) should have led B. to address in a more comprehensive way the question of polis identity, that the “local” terminology could help to redefine on the basis of inner foundations (see p. 164: “polis societies operated in an auto-referential and sociocentric fashion”).

These remarks and points of discussion do not undermine the quality of the book, the contribution it makes to the debate about connectivity in the ancient world, or B.’s erudition. After many historical turns, and lately that of networks and connectivity, this focus on localism and fragmentation of the ancient Greek world is more than welcome and will be stimulating reading for both specialists and students.

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2. Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1925) (new edition by G. Namer, 1994); *La mémoire collective* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1950) (new edition by G. Namer, 1997).

3. Katherine Clarke, *Making Time for the Past: Local History and the Polis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).