

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Pitfalls of Introducing Greek History

Reviewed by O. Kimball Armayor

Mr. Armayor teaches classics at the University of Georgia

A History of the Greek City States 700-338 B.C. By Raphael Sealey (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1976). \$7.85 paperback, 516 pages.

Sealey intended this book as an introduction to Greek history. But what we want to introduce, surely, is the Greeks and their achievement, the *story* of Greek history from beginning to end, with all its sweep, in all its drama and panorama. Therefore we are entitled to doubts about Sealey's book before opening the cover. In accord with its title, and after a brief introduction to the earliest inhabitants of Greece (pp. 11ff.), it begins with the eighth century B.C. and ends with the battle of Chaeronea in 338 B.C. But how can we introduce Greek history without telling of the Minoans and Mycenaean or Alexander the Great?

To introduce Greek history properly, we have to convey something of the Greeks' role as the beginning of western civilization: re-building in the ruins of the Minoans and Mycenaean, borrowing from the Egyptians and Phoenicians, transforming the discoveries of the East and breathing new life into them, trading and settling in the new worlds of the western Mediterranean and Black Sea, pitting West against East in self-defense against the Persians and building a new empire in their wake, conquering the East and melding it with the West, teaching the Romans almost everything they were ever to learn of the arts and letters, unsurpassed instructors to the present day in the tragedy and comedy and philosophy of life, ever striving toward unity and never achieving it.

But if so we must not look to Sealey. If the Minoans and Mycenaean are absent, so are the Assyrians, Babylonians, Phoenicians, and Hittites, even from the index. We are left to wonder about the meaning and significance of the Greek city-states in his title, about Pericles the man and politician, about Alcibiades, his career and place in Athenian history (pp. 372ff. notwithstanding), about Periclean democracy itself, not to mention Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and all the other classic art and architecture we have come to associate with it. Polygnotos the painter, Phidias the sculptor, Ictinus the architect, Hippodamos the town-planner, even Pericles' mistress Aspasia and the Funeral Oration, all of them are missing from Sealey's index, along with Olympic religion, Orphic religion, Dionysiac religion, Hippocrates and Greek medicine, slavery, Sappho, and the place of women. As for philosophy, nowhere did theories and abstractions play a greater role in shaping events than in ancient Greece. But Pythagoras of Samos and the Pythagoreans, Anaxagoras the teacher of Pericles, Gorgias of Leontini and the sophists, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle's philosophy and relation to Alexander, all are conspicuously absent.

Greek ideals took on form and substance in the persons of great men, and the historian must convey their achievement to those who will be charged with the keeping of it. It is all the more unsettling, therefore, that Sealey should explain away Dracon the lawgiver (pp. 101ff.) and de-emphasize Solon to the point of

denying that he fathered Athenian democracy (pp. 107ff.), and largely on the ground that Solon does not say very much about his work in the extant fragments of his poetry (pp. 115, 120). To one extent or another, Sealey also seeks to diminish the stature of Cleisthenes, Themistocles, and Pericles, to name but a few Athenians. Why?

Ideals also flexed themselves in the outreach of great city-states, Athens foremost among these. The historian must account for the achievement and stature of Athens. Yet Sealey never really draws a contrast between Athens and Sparta, or takes up the question of Athens' peculiar genius at all, political, cultural, or otherwise, the question of why Athens was *different*. Again, why?

Much of Greek history is a matter of perspective. The Greek beginnings of western self-government, for example, are *not* peculiar to Athens. In the first half of the sixth century B.C. Ionian Chios off the coast of Asia Minor had an elective demotic council that met on the ninth day of every month to carry on the business of the demos and hear appeals (ML 8 C 1ff., p. 16).^{*} Likewise Greek militarism was not exclusive to Sparta. It was probably a holdover from the time of invasions and migrations, all over the Greek world. Sealey does not deal with militarism or the beginnings of western self-government, and he gives very short shrift to a great many of the major problems of perspective in Greek history: the Persian Empire (about a page, 169f.); Darius' Scythian expedition (two paragraphs, pp. 173, 180); the Ionian Revolt (two pages, 176-178); the Greek Tempe expedition (one paragraph, pp. 207f.); the siege and destruction of Plataea (one sentence, p. 326); the Plague (two sentences, p. 325); the Sicilian expedition (one page, 354f.); Athens' abolition of imperial tribute (one sentence, p. 356); Jason of Pherae and the unification of Thessaly (a paragraph, pp. 420f.); the military and political genius of Epaminondas of Thebes (nothing; Sealey does not even name him in connection with the battle of Leuctra in 371, p. 420!); fourth-century Athenian socialism and the state-financed theater (a few sentences, p. 441); Sicily after the Sicilian expedition, the Syracusan Empire, the struggle with Carthage, Dionysius of Syracuse, the catapult—nothing; the phalanx, nothing.

And where are the Greek weaknesses? The beginning student has a keen interest in them. The incompatibility of the *polis* with pan-Hellenic unity, the Greek emulation of eastern empires, the excesses of the demos, the Friendships of Plato's time, the Greek attitude toward women, slaves, and technology—these also are important matters of perspective, but Sealey never takes them up.

By comparison, we find chapters and appendices such as the following: "The Orthagorid Dynasty at Sicyon," five pages (60-65); "The Peace of Philocrates," eight pages (454-461); "The Chronology of the Third Sacred War," five pages (463-468); "The Embassy of Python," three and a half pages (474-477); "The Fourth Sacred War," seven pages (484-491); "Note on the Athenian Calendar," two pages (496-498). In the light of what he merely alluded to in passing or did not mention at all, it is difficult to understand how Sealey could regale the beginning student with any of the above or other such topics too numerous to mention.

If the historian has to teach perspective on events, it is even more important that

^{*} ML = Russell Meiggs, David Lewis, *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions to the End of the Fifth Century B.C.*, Oxford, 1969.

he should teach perspective on the evidence. Yet here is Sealey's greatest failing. He attaches far too much importance to the late sources. It is absurd to use the Byzantine lexica as proof of Solon's homicide provisions in the sixth century B.C. (p. 133). It is absurd to use Cicero from the first century B.C. and Hesychius from the fifth century A.D. to make the Peisistratid tyrants of the sixth century B.C. revise Panathenaic rhapsodic competitions (pp. 138f.). Surely we begin with the earliest tradition and deal with the late sources only in the light of it. We teach the student that he must not rely on a source merely because it is ancient. But that is precisely what Sealey *does*, and throughout his book. On the years 375 and 374 B.C., how can he possibly raise the question of the "relative reliability" of Xenophon in the early fourth century B.C. and Diodorus Siculus in the first (p. 418)?

Sealey also teaches faith in the later sources of ancient biography, even when the stakes are enormous. He relies on Herodotus' authority throughout the archaic period and the early fifth century (pp. 3ff. and e.g. 176) and especially in his assessment of Spartan foreign policy and Athenian politics (pp. 70, 92, 123). Much of that authority rests on the biographical tradition on Herodotus, which Sealey takes for granted (pp. 3ff.). But most if not all of it derives from Herodotus himself and none of it can be reliably corroborated outside the pages of Herodotus. Sealey refers to Herodotus' travels in Egypt, Syria, probably Babylon, Thrace, the Black Sea coasts, and European Greece, and also to his role in the Athenian colonization of Thurii in southern Italy. But we only have Herodotus' word for such travels, and Herodotus himself does not claim the relationship with Athens and Thurii that Sealey relies on, or any relationship at all for that matter. Sealey assumes that "Herodotus drew his historical information almost entirely from oral tradition." Yet here again Herodotus himself never says that, and whatever he says, we only have his word for it. E.g. we only have Herodotus' own word that he or any other early Greek talked to Egyptian and Chaldaean priests: claims that reflect *Greek* tradition. In the light of Hecataeus' droll but wise Egyptian priests before Herodotus (ii.143ff.) and Plato's droll but wise Egyptian priests after Herodotus (*Timaeus* 21 E ff.), Herodotus' Egyptian priests are likely to be nothing but a Greek storyteller's literary convention inherited from Hecataeus. Sealey assumes that Herodotus' *History* is free of schemes, theories, speculation, and controversy, uninfluenced by the arguments of his predecessors (p. 4). But Herodotus deals with Egypt, for example, in *terms* of schemes, theories, speculation, controversy, and the arguments of his predecessors, citing and quoting Hecataeus and other Ionians of the previous century, with and without acknowledgement. Yet Hecataeus does not appear in Sealey's index. Surely we want to convey more caution in the matter of Herodotus' sources.

Likewise there are serious distortions in the Thucydides period. According to Sealey's Thucydides, in 416 Dorian Melos and Thera were the only islands in the Cyclades that did not belong to the Athenian Empire. The Athenians sent an expedition against the Melians, who resisted in the hope of getting help from Sparta but did not. When they surrendered unconditionally, the Athenians executed the men, enslaved the women and children, and sent 500 colonists to occupy the island (pp. 251, 350f.). What Sealey leaves out is at least one crucial piece of Thucydides' evidence and nothing less than all the epigraphic evidence. Thera was

probably pressed into the Athenian Empire in 431 or 430. She paid both tribute and indemnity (ML 68.21, p. 187). Athens probably assessed Melos at the same time after she held aloof on the outbreak of war (Thuc. ii.9.4). In any event Melos chose to stave off Nicias in 426 (Thuc. iii.91.1-3) and Athens re-assessed her at 15 talents in 425 (ML 69.65, p. 194). The Melians actually contributed to a Spartan war-fund, and probably between 431 and 425 (ML 67, p. 184). In all probability Melos was not neutral but hostile. Even so Athens gave her half a dozen chances to emulate Thera and she flatly refused all of them. *Prima facie*, at least, here is a case in which modern archaeology and epigraphy can act as an illuminating corrective to Thucydides' narrative. Even if he wanted to rely on Thucydides alone, Sealey was bound to deal with Nicias' first Athenian expedition against Melos in 426.

Sealey assumes virtual certainty where there is not any. Solonian courts are a good example (p. 259). He is often obscure. He speaks of the phratry "early in the archaic period as the group of men attaching themselves to a clan" but goes on to say that "In the fourth century . . . one clan held a privileged position within its phratry," referring again to the clan's "position within the phratry." Does the clan embrace the phratry or the phratry the clan? Or do they reverse themselves on the way to the fourth century?

There are many annoying typographical errors and a lot of exotic word usage. "Innovatory" on p. 258 is a good example.

There is much of interest here, useful notes and references, a refreshing emphasis on Athenian regionalism and the great families of Attica (e.g. pp. 95, 99, and 134ff.), on Athenian history in terms of the growing authority of the state and the growing predominance of Athens in the territory of Attica (e.g. pp. 134ff. and 155), and on "hegemonic leagues" and "leagues of more equal type." At \$7.85 Sealey's book is relatively cheap. But it is not a proper introduction to Greek history and Sealey never allows himself sufficient depth on any given problem for it to be taken seriously as a collection of essays.