

# Book Reviews

## ANCIENT TO MODERN EUROPE

*The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*. By Josiah Ober. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. xxviii + 416. \$35.00, cloth; \$18.95, paper.  
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*Rise and Fall* is an important history of the Greek world written by a leading historian. Its focus is on the “causal relationship between political and economic development” (Preface, p. xv). The central claim of Josiah Ober’s book is that growth in the “dispersed authority” political ecology of the Greek world, with its 1,000 independent cities (plural: *poleis*; singular: *polis*), created robust conditions for real economic growth from 800–300 BCE. The core of the argument is laid out clearly on page 80 of the book, where three premises about the economy are asserted: (1) The Greek economy grew in size and per capita consumption between 1000 and 300 BCE, (2) Greece was heavily urbanized by the fourth century BCE yet maintained living standards, and (3) the distribution of wealth was remarkably evenly distributed.

The bulk of the book is devoted to proving these three premises. The case of ancient Greece provides us, according to Ober, with the best case of sustained real growth in the pre-modern world, outperforming even the Roman Empire at its height in the first two centuries CE. It is an institutional argument, and will be familiar to economists. This is not simply a narrative account of the Greeks, common enough in the field anyway. Rather, this is a sophisticated analytical account and many Greek historians, especially those who work within a cultural framework and view “Greek civilization” as unique, will welcome this perspective. But we have three areas of concern.

First, the dearth of evidence. The rough guess is that there was economic growth of 0.15 percent per annum for roughly five centuries. Ober draws together indicators and proxy data from various bodies of material. For example, consumption rates double between 800 and 300 BCE (p. 98). A sample of 405 houses is used to argue that average house size increased in this period. That data does not represent well the non-elite housing of Greek *poleis*; area based on floor plans does not always reflect the upper floors of houses nor the sub-division of domestic space such as the letting out of rooms, a phenomenon known from non-archaeological evidence. (See, for instance, Bradley A. Ault. “Housing the Poor and the Homeless in Ancient Greece.” In *Ancient Greek Houses and Households: Chronological, Regional, and Social Diversity*, edited by Bradley A. Ault and Lisa C. Nevett, 144. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.) Economic growth in Classical Athens must be somewhat modified where different projections are offered for the fall in the citizen population: from c. 440 to c. 323 BCE, there may have been as much as a 50 percent reduction from c. 60,000 to c. 30,000 male citizens, as pointed out by Mogens Hansen (*The Athenian Democracy in the Age Demosthenes. Structure, Principles, and Ideology*, translated by J. A. Crook, 55. Oxford: Blackwell, 1988). Even a more modest reduction than this still contradicts what one would expect in a city for which one can claim economic growth and the exemplary institutions that are thought to deliver the former. Are we seeing economic growth or the removal or exportation of (poorer) population groups? Social engineering and the movement of population is a feature of *poleis* in mainland Greece, and Sicily alike.

A second problem is the model. Ober’s theory can be sustained if there is real growth in the Greek *polis*, but less growth in other contemporary polities. In other words, the

argument would have been more robust with sustained comparison. (See, for instance, Paul Erdkamp. “Structural Determinants of Economic Performance in the Roman World and Early Modern Europe. A Comparative Approach.” In *Structure and Performance in the Roman Economy. Models, Methods and Case Studies*, edited by Paul Erdkamp and Koenraad Verboven, 17–31. Brussels: Éditions Latomus.) For it is highly probable, in our view, that the same rate of growth, or expansion, or “efflorescence” to use Jack Goldstone’s concept (“Efflorescences and Economic Growth in World History.” *Journal of World History* 13 (2002): 323–389), can be demonstrated in Egypt and the Near East in the first millennium BCE if comparable data sets were used. But while comparison is acknowledged as a desideratum (p. 79) it was thought not possible because of a lack of data. There is in fact sufficient material from the Near East and from Egypt to suggest that there were periods of “efflorescence” elsewhere during the first millennium BCE. That the comparison between the economies of Greek and Near Eastern cities was beyond Ober’s focus is a lost opportunity because this wider perspective would have yielded more robust results on understanding growth in the ancient world.

For first millennium Babylonia for instance, Michael Jursa (*Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC. Economic Geography, Economic Mentalities, Agriculture, the Use of Money and the Problem of Economic Growth*. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010) has shown that a growing population offset a Malthusian threat; as Near Eastern cities grew, so did consumption patterns and the demand for non-agricultural labor. Sixth century BCE Babylon, clearly, as the center of an empire, had all the characteristics of cities in Greece and was far more sophisticated in terms of commercial law and many other areas before Athens. The network of waterways lowered transport costs around Babylon, a clear demonstration, among others one could produce, that ancient empires also lowered, in some areas, transactions costs. The contrast in economic performance between democratic Athens and a place like Egypt under the Saïte kings (656–525 BCE) should be clear, in theory. But this is far from proven. If it can be shown that expansion, and the same magnitude of real growth, existed in the Near East or in Egypt, for example, then the thesis that it is open access institutions, and “democracy” in particular, that lies behind Greek success can be brushed aside. It is more likely that what we see in the Greek record, hardly robust until the fourth century BCE in any case, is an Iron Age expansion that can be documented in many places, in Babylonia (Jursa, 2010), and no doubt in Egypt.

A third problem is one of causality. Ober’s framework builds on New Institutional Economics and the work of Douglass North, John Wallis, and Barry Weingast (*Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). He ties the ancient Greek economy to North’s institutional arguments, taken up by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (*Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), to explain differential economic performance in history. This platform he thinks is sufficient to explain real growth. But while “open access” institutions may have been important, other drivers or forcing mechanisms of expansion and growth existed: scale, demography, slavery, geography, climate change, war, and external political frameworks. How these factors affected productivity and growth still remains to be fully explored. (See Stanley Engerman and Kenneth Sokoloff. *Economic Development in the Americas since 1500. Endowments and Institutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.) The wider political economy of the Eastern Mediterranean

and beyond was not a stable environment. Choices by actors within Greek *poleis* were not formulated only within a framework of *polis*-institutions. The reach and eventual collapse of the Achaemenid Empire and the growth of the Macedonian Kingdom were factors that destabilized the world of the Greek *polis*. The persistence of the Greek *polis* can be understood not only by virtue of its internal structures, or institutions, but by re-assessing the *polis* in relation to the other external powers that dominated much of the wider political economy that shaped the eastern Mediterranean in the fifth and fourth centuries. The (small-)scale of the Greek *polis* was important: as a unit of social organization it was a structure that could readily be absorbed without complete deformation into other large polities. The generational capacity of the *polis* to produce economic growth cannot therefore be easily disentangled from the nexus of the wider Mediterranean world. If the *polis* experienced growth, then reasons for a more buoyant economy may not, nor need not, have been the result of actions by the *polis* but could readily be associated with other forces beyond the city. The wider social context in which *poleis* operated demands further investigation.

There is a danger that this book will serve non-specialists as a handy go-to study of the economies of the ancient Greek city. And there is a risk that many readers of this JOURNAL will assume that the data, and the author, can resist arguments of a granular nature that seek to underline contradictory spans of negative growth (p. 338, n. 14). There is an even greater concern among ancient historians that Ober's identification of "political conditions" will go unchallenged. This review has drawn out three main issues related to arguments made for economic growth in the *polis*, its presence or absence elsewhere in the Mediterranean and beyond in the first millennium BCE, and the discussion of causality and the identification of "dispersed authority" as the central factor. Ober's treatment of the Greek *polis* is highly selective and fails to stress the broader political context for understanding its economic growth. A constructivist political economy approach may in fact offer a fruitful alternative. *Rise and Fall* ignores the wider contingent factors of the political economy of the greater Mediterranean world, and beyond, within which the development of the political economy of the Greek *poleis* must be located.

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*The Making of the Ancient Greek Economy. Institutions, Markets, and Growth in the City-states.* By Alain Cresson and translated by Steven Rendall. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. Pp. xxvi, 620. \$45.00, cloth.

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This book is undoubtedly the most important study of the ancient Greek economy to date. One important feature is that it gives not only an excellent overview on economic theory and its application to the ancient economies, but also exemplifies the implications of theory on nearly every page. Bresson professes to be inspired by "neo-institutional economics," which allows him "to move beyond the old debates between primitivists and modernists or substantivists and formalists" (p. 27). A second strong point is that the economy of ancient Greece is studied in the context of economic history from the