

but we lack the details of its construction. Even the datasets that he provides in the appendixes are at times not very helpful (e.g. with ware assemblages, where publications are provided without relevant page numbers, so one would need to read them all...), and checking specific claims or reconstructing the grounds for some of the figures used in maps and charts (e.g. when it comes to coinage, where one notices some discrepancies) can be frustratingly difficult, if not impossible, short of doing the whole work anew. This matters because the book's conclusions rely heavily on data manipulation that needs to be truly open to scrutiny. How accessible, and popular, Big Data will become among historians and archaeologists depends also on this.

That said, the book has the considerable merit of pointing the way towards new ways of working with old data, and there is no denying that this is a serious and thought-provoking attempt to rethink how we study connectivity in early Greece, as well as opening up the debate on how to work with Big Data in our subject. It asks questions worth grappling with – and reminds us that the big datasets sitting in archaeological archives are not just the residue of past projects, but potential sources for reimagining the field.

MIRKO CANEVARO
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH
mirko.canevaro@ed.ac.uk

John Ma, *Polis. A New History of the Ancient Greek City-State from the Early Iron Age to the End of Antiquity*. pp. 713. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024. ISBN: 9780691155388, hardcover £ 42.00.

John Ma's new *magnum opus* is over a decade in the making. Originally delivered as the Stanford University 2011 Eitner Lecture on the Greek city-state (pg xv), Ma's *Polis* is a *tour de force* that seeks to undertake a penetrating new analysis of the eponymous ancient political community. Assembling an encyclopaedic quantity of evidence for ancient *poleis* dating between the Early Iron Age and the End of Antiquity, and weaving a new narrative about the rise and success of early Greek institutional mechanisms, Ma aims to radically shift our understanding of how, when and where the ancient *polis* was so defined.

In his opening chapter, Ma sets out his framework: whereas others might have emphasised the diversity of communities encompassed by the term *polis*, Ma adopts a more 'unitary' (though flexible) definition, that a *polis* is simply 'an urban settlement of contiguous habitations', a place that gives its name to a people who may or may not control a territory (pg 13); and what makes these units uniquely *polis*-like, he argues, is their statehood – that these are complex societies whose institutions and measures of self-governance define their very existence as political units (pg 16–7). Ma sets to explore a broader geographical and chronological scope than is usual for *polis* studies, moving beyond the Aegean focus of the Archaic and Classical periods to look Mediterranean-wide (as far as data-evenness allows) between c.1100 BCE and 400 CE. Ma also outlines that his framework will be Aristotelian, a view of the *polis* that will focus on the institutions that people (read: adult male citizens, cf. pg 503ff.) operated.

Considering that the nature of the political community has received so much scholarly attention within the discipline of ancient history (and outside, too, where state theory more broadly abounds in the American anthropological literature), Ma in his opening chapter is remarkably efficient in distilling the debate to its absolute essentials and in keeping the bibliography trim. There is, for instance, some discussion of the era-defining project of the Copenhagen Polis Centre to categorise the nature of the *polis* (pg 17), but rather than giving a full account of the decades-long discussions and debates (or of other projects on whose shoulders Ma sits, notably those of Gustave Glotz, Victor Ehrenberg and Peter Rhodes), Ma simply notes where his own definitions of the *polis* will differ from that of the CPC (namely, on the importance of civic autonomy to the *polis*). Flicking ahead to the volume's conclusion, one sees that this is intentional, and that rather than getting bogged down in the extensive historiography of the *polis*, Ma regards such a feat as a separate project against which one can test his new reading (pg 543ff.). His aim here, rather, is to take a more inside-out view of the *polis* and its institutions.

The main core of Ma's text (chapters 2–14) comprises a chronological overview of the *polis*, and the various types of evidence that we can use to track its development. Ma tracks the seeds of the *polis* to around 1100 BCE, where competition and desire for status co-ordinated networking between different political units, thus causing more dispersed communities to aggregate into 'clustervilles'. This proto-*polis* he traces all the way to c.700 BCE, where a shift to larger and more monumentally elaborate

urban centres marked a significant trajectory of state formation. All the while, peer polity interaction continued to drive processes of change. Such is, Ma notes, '[i]mmediately obvious [by] the more-ness of archaeological evidence' (pg 38), particularly as we move into the worlds of Archaic Greece and the usual domain of *polis* studies. So far so familiar – yet lucidly written and bringing together an impressive diversity of case studies. Where Ma's narrative begins to break new ground is in his treatment of (particularly the end of) the Classical period, traditionally a point after which the *polis* begins to 'decline'. Following a century of inter-state conflict between rival *poleis* vying for public goods or control of institutions (a 'tragedy of powers'), Ma identifies 350 BCE as a watershed moment. This he terms a 'great convergence' between city states, where networking between states intensified and *polis* units worked together in a manner of ways towards collective goals. This, and not earlier, he argues, marks the 'high point' of the *polis*, a time when autonomous civic institutions flourished. And this flourishing was enabled by a period of relative peace ushered in by Hellenistic monarchies and emerging imperial structures. Perhaps more controversial to argue is that Ma sees another key driver of the 'great convergence' as the continuation of democracy (or 'democratic characteristics') in its Classical form. Thereafter, we return to more familiar ground, with Ma moving beyond the Hellenistic period to trace the importance of elite identities and local benefaction ('the glare of elitism') in holding together the imperial networks of the Roman Empire. He also gives due attention to the myriad relationships that local (and newly redefined) *polis* states maintained with Rome. Here, Ma goes furthest in terms of geography as he discusses in detail case studies from the Roman East (Gerasa, Kanatha, Palmyra); the same coverage is not given, however, to the western Mediterranean.

Having taken a unitary approach to the nature of the *polis*, Ma is thus able across the sixth and penultimate section of the book to reflect on some more cross-chronological thematic considerations – a suitably effective grand *finale*. He first returns to the Aristotelian framework to discuss what this lens reveals about both access to power (chapter 15) and the 'virtue politics' (chapter 16) of the city. Thereafter Ma pivots from the purely political and institutional to the economic, demonstrating how the *polis* could weigh up factors in deciding to act for its own profit (chapter 17). The author concludes that both ideals and institutions were real, historically grounded, and embedded within specific contexts; their embeddedness into the *polis*

served to support networks of cooperation between citizens.

The final two chapters in this section take the more 'pessimistic' view of the *polis*, illustrating how the selfishness of those coordinating institutions might push communities towards violence (chapter 18). Ma also indicates that the *polis* could be largely exclusionary and (perhaps belatedly) turns his attention to those outside core civic institutions, *i.e.* women, children, slaves and foreigners (chapter 19). In this chapter Ma also considers the antithesis between town and countryside. The synergy between urban and rural life has long been considered a major defining criterion of the *polis*. But in discussing various models of territory organisation (among them nucleated rural settlement, dispersed rural settlement, synoikised territory and off-island territories), Ma suggests that there always existed underlying tensions between town and country. This implies that the very existence of the *polis* only sought to perpetuate and intensify structural inequalities. Equally thought-provoking is the discussion that follows on estimating the size of various *polis* populations. Ma uses these estimates to suggest how great a proportion of the population living in any community might have been excluded from *polis* institutions. Had Ma pushed the evidence he uses from survey archaeology even further, I wonder whether he could have brought some similar element of quantitative estimation into his previous discussion on urban/rural populations. But even without, Ma's analysis is convincing and provocative.

Thereafter Ma closes with a summative conclusion that indicates further avenues of study: both to widen the geographical scope of the project to non-Mediterranean state-level societies; and to consider the historiography and reception of the *polis* in its intellectual, political and social contexts. Sixty-six pages of densely packed endnotes follow, supported by a full and rich bibliography. Overall the text is convincing and well-argued, particularly in Ma's restructuring of fifth-century historical chronology and in his transmuting the *polis*' heyday from the Classical into the Hellenistic period. The text – although abundant in fairly long and discursive sentences whose abundance of abstract theoretical concepts can make it more challenging to follow the author's meaning – is compelling, engaging, and overall well-written.

Readers of *JGA* will be delighted that, in a subject usually dominated by textual data, material evidence is given decent air-time by Ma. In his chronological romp through Greek antiquity

(chapters 2–14), Ma draws on a mixture of literary, historical, epigraphic and archaeological evidence. Granted, material culture becomes more sidelined after chapter seven (480 BCE onwards), particularly as an increasing quantity of inscriptions allows Ma to keep tighter focus on his Aristotelian interest of institutions. In general, the author uses objects to illustrate broader social changes: the grave of the rich Athenian lady and the contents of the Tomb monument at Lefkandi are used to demonstrate an intensification of overseas links and a desire to compete for status in the Early Iron Age; the building of temples at Corinth or the fortification walls at Phokaia are cited to mark the acceleration of the *polis*' growth; and the Odeion of Herodes Atticus and the southern gate of Perge are chosen to make a point about the relationship of elites to the *polis* via imperial dedication and benefaction. None of the examples chosen nor anything said about them is necessarily surprising; but what is new is in how elegantly the author brings these strands into conversation with the broader historical evidence.

My only criticism in this area is that Ma gives far more exposition when it comes to epigraphic data: a student or generalist reader might have benefitted, for instance, from a few more sentences discussing the structure or significance of the 'Bluebeard Temple' (pg 103); and in dealing with the possibility of a dining hall at Azoria in just a single sentence (pg 87), Ma assumes a prior familiarity with the evidence. But the other side of the coin is that this synthetic approach permits Ma to pack his text full with plentiful useful examples – many of them spanning a wide geographic remit. In fact, case studies often come so thick and fast that the reader needs to run to keep up with Ma. We go from the Archaic period Athenian offering trenches, to elite burial in Megara, to Clazomenian sarcophagi in the space of half a paragraph (pg 130). But these are only minor quibbles: there is indeed much here for archaeologists and art historians to enjoy.

Finally, I draw to readers' attention a point that is in no way the fault of the author's – and it will, I am sure, cause to him as much annoyance as it did to me. From the academic year 2025/2026, we at Durham will be setting select chapters of Ma's major work as essential reading (and rightly so!) in a well-attended ancient history module. Evidently, we will need the class to access the online e-book of *Polis*. Having read through much of Ma's text in electronic format for the present review and mindful that our students will access the book on the same platform, I am disappointed at what a poor reading experience awaits them.

Having accessed the ProQuest Ebook edition of the book, I encountered many problems that made reading difficult. The integrated online reader is slow and unresponsive, often skipping through multiple pages at a time. Downloading PDFs per chapter does not improve things. The pagination is inconsistent, where in-text cross-references point towards references of the print edition and do not correlate to pages numbers in digital format. A handful of endnote links are dead and do not lead anywhere. The setting of images is extremely problematic in that pictures do not match the structure of the PDF pages: the image of the Nikandre *kore* in chapter six stretches across four pages. And, most frustrating of all, there are problems with the setting of diacritic characters: any character of either Greek or Latin that bears any sort of accent becomes '#', rendering such bizarre stylisations as 'D#los' or '#peiros' throughout. Every other letter of the Dreros (rendered as 'Dr#ros') inscription at the start of chapter four is a nonsensical '#', making the whole text almost completely unreadable. I hope that the author does not mind my pointing out these frustrations that I encountered during my read; I reiterate that they are in no way his fault, nor do they bear upon the substance of the book. I just find it a shame that for a completely monumental work into which Ma has poured so much soul, the publishers have done a considerable disservice in their presentation of the text.

Ma's *Polis* is undoubtedly a triumph. A biography of political communities from the Early Iron Age through Late Antiquity is by itself a major landmark work; but add in a careful and thought-provoking analysis of institutional history and a radical new take on the chronology of the city-state's rise and fall, and *Polis* is nothing short of magisterial. Scholars, students, and those outside the field will be talking about Ma's new history for years to come.

MICHAEL LOY

DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS AND ANCIENT HISTORY

DURHAM UNIVERSITY

michael.p.loy@durham.ac.uk

Robin Rönklund, *The Cities of the Plain: Urbanism in Ancient Western Thessaly*. Pp. 192. Oxford: Oxbow Books 2023. ISBN: 1789259924, paperback \$58.03.

An Open Access version is also available through <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.6338470>