

## BOOK REVIEWS

Martin Ostwald, *Oligarchia. The Development of a Constitutional Form in Ancient Greece*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2000. 96 pp. ISBN 3 515 07680 8.

This essay is focused on oligarchy, or rule of the few, as a constitution or a form of government in ancient Greece. It is not concerned with the historical reality of oligarchic states and societies. Ostwald chooses to concentrate on the definitions of oligarchy found in antiquity, the terminology used by the Greeks, and the problems they encountered in their attempts at delineation and classification of constitutions (pref.). It is made clear by Ostwald that his work is not meant to replace the famous and elaborate monograph of L. Whibley (*Greek Oligarchies: Their Classification and Organisation*, London, 1896), but to serve as a complement to it, by way of updating (pref., 11-12).

Ostwald's study also differs from the former work in its historical rather than typological propensity. In accord with the author's approach, the historical account does not describe the progress of the establishment and practice of oligarchy, but how that kind of government was perceived, conceived, evaluated and defined by the Greeks. As such, it seems to complement Ostwald's own essays on the concepts of sovereignty, law and citizenship in ancient Greece. Thematically, the study can be divided into two parts. The first one, which includes chapters 1-4, depicts the views on oligarchy articulated by Aristotle's predecessors. The second, which consists of chapter 5, proposes a new understanding of Aristotle's statements on oligarchy.

The work starts with the first conceptual appearance of the rule of the few in Greek thought. Ostwald reports that Greek reflection on forms of governance emerged only after apprehension of the existence of various governments in different societies, and comparison between them (9). The upshot of this examination was a tripartite division of régimes, which was exclusively Greek (13), and which corresponded to the number of rulers in each administration: one, few, or many. The rule of one was the earliest and the only form of government recognized by the Greek poets of old (9-11). But whereas the rule of the many is well documented (especially in democratic Athens), there are not many extant sources which tell us something about the rule of the few.

Ostwald argues that the first instance we have of the tripartite division (Pindar's contrast between the rule of the 'wise' [*sophoi*] and that of 'tyranny' and the 'tumultuous host' [*Pythians*, II.86-88]) is too short to make its meaning understood (15-16). Similarly Herodotus' Persian 'constitutional debate' (3.80-82), a passage which contains the first known attested occurrence of the word '*Oligarchia*'. The justification Megabyzus is made to offer there for the rule of the few speaks of a domination of the 'association of best men (*aristoi*)'. Ostwald notes that this notion of 'best' is not unequivocal (it can mean both noble birth and great achievement), to the extent that even Darius utilizes it in his defense of the rule of one (18, 21 n. 36, 23).

The sources we have from the fifth and fourth centuries BCE seem to indicate that oligarchy entered political propaganda in Greece. Ostwald claims that the civil war in Corcyra is presented by Thucydides (3.82.8) as a crucial development, which gave ideological dimension to the Peloponnesian war, opposing democracy and oligarchy (21-2, 24). At Athens oligarchy soon became the antonym of democracy. Often it was associated with tyranny because of the threat both posed to the established rule of the many. Conversely, oligarchy was commended, as in the political treatise *Constitution of the Athenians* of Pseudo-Xenophon (nicknamed 'the old oligarch' in modern times), e.g. for having greater ability than democracy to guarantee the provisions of treaties, and for being a better home for persons not of the people (2.17 and 20). Ostwald insists that not much can be known about the nature of the principles of oligarchy once the term became a mere party-political tag (26, 30). According to him, little can be learnt even from Thucydides' description of the oligarchic upheaval of 411 BCE (25). Nevertheless, using several methods of inference, Ostwald arrives at a recurring number of features of what oligarchy was considered to be. Its principal institutions and measures included restriction of suffrage and/or qualification for

office to a few citizens, mainly the affluent, suspension of all payments to public officials, and imposition of penalties for not attending meetings of the council. Its typical agenda included putting restraint on certain freedoms, particularly on the right to address the public at political gatherings (23-8).

With Plato, Ostwald's discussion enters a philosophical plane, albeit in a very concise manner, and without many references to secondary literature. In the schemes of three dialogues, Plato differentiates constitutions according to ideal principles (the degree to which they aspire to the 'real' good of the governed [*Republic*], or transgress the laws that realize the injunctions of the ideal expert ruler [*Statesman*]). Oligarchy is not held in high regard by Plato: it is either grouped alongside tyranny and (bad) democracy, and opposite the three constitutions which adhere to the laws — kingship, aristocracy, and (good) democracy (*Statesman*) — or it is placed at the lowest end of his list, following tyranny, kingship and democracy (*Laws*). It seems that Ostwald finds all these classifications rather idiosyncratic, and offering little consideration of real constitutions or systems of government (34-5).

Aristotle, however, is regarded not only as an individual thinker, but also as a person who exemplified what the Greeks thought about the rule of the few. According to Ostwald, Aristotle 'gave us the most coherent picture we have of what "oligarchy" meant to the Greeks' (12), presumably because he did not have recourse to any ideal or transcendental rule, but looked at actual governments (37). Aristotle's analysis of oligarchy is mainly scattered throughout his *Politics*. But Ostwald does not follow his line of argument. Assuming that Aristotle's discussion is consistent (41), he prefers another presentation, via the elucidation of several concepts, and the connections between them: citizenship and property (44-9), types of property (45-8), and its evaluation (50-2), the economic groups of the well-to-do (*euporoi*) and the indigent (*aporoï*) (53-9), their political status, and their relationship with the wealthy (*plousioi*) and the poor (*penetes*) (60-8), and oligarchy and the rule of law (70-1). The key passage in Aristotle's profound treatment envisages oligarchy as the rule of the wealthy, and only incidentally as the rule of the few (*Politics* 4.4 1290a30-b3). The possession of substantial (landed) property furnished the resources (*euporia*) to exercise active citizenship, in terms both of a qualification to vote and of eligibility to hold high office in oligarchies. Since the indigent were not provided with payment in order to enable them to participate in public affairs instead of worrying about their livelihood, authority rested in the hands of the affluent. Furthermore, Aristotle treats oligarchy as one of the constitutions that are governed in the interest of the rulers, in this case the well-to-do. Oligarchy, therefore, impresses one as a government by the wealthy and for the wealthy.

But the truly opulent will be the readers of this essay, thanks to the abundant wealth of information furnished by Ostwald, the richness of detail that he gives, his plentiful deep insights coupled with the original texts in Greek, and the many resources he provides for an understanding of the rule of the few.

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Mark Joyal, *The Platonic Theages. An Introduction, Commentary, and Critical Edition*. Philosophie der Antike 10. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2000. 335 pp. ISBN 3 515 07230 6.

Joyal (henceforth = 'J.') has produced an admirably sound and sober edition of the pseudo-Platonic *Theages* which includes a detailed introduction (9-172), critical text, and commentary (195-294).