

Polly Low

Interstate Relations in Classical Greece

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196 |

Polly Low's book, *Interstate Relations in Classical Greece*, succeeds in debunking the traditional "damning assessments" of scholars studying interstate relations in Classical Greece, and in legitimizing the need to bridge the gap between the fields of Interstate Politics and Ancient History. The former subject has undermined the study of relations in Ancient Greece primarily due to the misguided tendency of scholars to attempt to place Ancient Greek society within our own modern ideal of explicit, formalized relations between states; therefore, using a modern measuring stick to evaluate and detect signs of an established interstate framework. Through epigraphic and literary evidence spanning a wide geographic area and the tools and questions gleaned from modern studies, Low, employing an inclusive approach, develops a "normative framework" for thinking about relations in Classical Greece, which incorporates concepts such as morality, power, reciprocity, intervention, society, and culture. Although this methodology is not without problems, it does provide a springboard for the revival of interest in this area of study and questions which successive scholars can tackle.

Low's book is divided into six chapters formatted in a thematic rather than chronological manner, which allows her to avoid a tedious play-by-play of political and military events. She begins with an introduction that clearly outlines the central point of her book, that "the absence of an explicit theory of interstate politics does not entail an absence of complex thinking about the

subject”¹. Her goals are to fit Ancient Greek thought on interstate relations with contemporary literature on the subject: to challenge negative conceptions, move away from a Thucydides-centric approach, and employ a holistic methodology. Chapter one then goes on to provide a synopsis of the establishment and history of modern Interstate Politics, which was created in 1919 with the first chair of International Politics, Alfred Zimmern – a Classicist and Ancient Historian, as a reaction to World War I. He and Low believe that an effective study of Ancient International Relations involves knowledge of the contemporary field, since it creates an increased awareness of the dangers of imposing our own values and beliefs on the subject matter.

| 197

Then she launches her investigation into the specifics of interstate relations in Classical Greece beginning with chapter two and the definition of the constraints and limitations of the ‘state’ in relation to concepts such as empire, power, reciprocity – which she relates to the Greek ideas of *eunoia*, *philia*, *homonoia* and *sungeneia* (goodwill, friendship, fellow-thinking, and kinship), and bilateral/multilateral relationships, keeping in mind that much of the ‘rules’ of modern and ancient relations occurs “inside our heads,” rather than being explicitly stated.² This section is followed-up by three in-depth examples of the various expressions of interstate politics by Xenophon, Demosthenes, and Isocrates, whom then comprise the bulk of literary evidence throughout the rest of the book. The subject of the connection between law and society, its creation and enforcement, is tackled in Chapter three, highlighting the divergence between modern and ancient conceptions: unlike contemporary society, the *nomoi* (laws) of

¹ Low, P. (2007) p. 2-3.

² Low, P. (2007) p. 68.

Ancient Greece can be found “in the habits and the will, the hearts and minds of society.”³ They are unwritten and belong to a broader framework that is flexible, not rigid; treaties are not instructions, but agreements.

Moving into chapter four, she tackles the existence, or lack thereof, of the boundary between domestic and interstate morality, and its representation. Are the *nomoi* constant between these two arenas? The answer seems to lie within the framework (outlined above) of the previous chapter. Although some concepts are more closely related to one field over the other, there is no rigid divide. In Chapter five, Low discusses the norm specifically pertaining to intervention, and how it relates to autonomy. She divides intervention into two categories: negative – *polypragmosune* (meddlesomeness) – associated with imperialism, and positive – helping the wronged and promoting democracy. Chapter six wraps up the book with a discussion of the effects of interstate interactions on the whole of Greece and Magna Graecia, in that some areas did not feel, or at least felt them to a diminished extent, the rippling effects of the Peloponnesian and other wars, and that despite these wars interstate norms were stable throughout the Classical period. Then the conclusion provides an overall summation of the major components of the book.

Polly Low approaches the subject through a theoretical, ethnographic perspective; she utilizes modern International Politics as a model to view Ancient Greece. While this does provide some provocative questions to answer and increases the awareness of our own biases, it can also magnify the chances of

³ Ibid (2007) p. 102.

falling into the very trap she is trying to prevent. Using contemporary thinking as a springboard for thinking about Ancient Greece, in effect, places it within a modern framework from the outset, in spite of the fact that she acknowledges the differences between the two timeframes. Classical Greece is a unique context in its own right outside the scope of modern politics.

| 199

As a result of her theoretical approach, which is geared for an academic audience, it provides answers, or in this situation a normative framework, that are not necessarily right or wrong, but possibly more right than other proposed conclusions. This is a common problem with theoretical methodologies. However, Low does achieve what she set-out to do: debunk the negative pre-conceptions of scholars, provoke new thought about the subject, and prove that the lack of an explicit set of rigid interstate guidelines does not indicate a lack of guidelines. The Classical Greeks had different conceptions of what society meant and constituted, and how the role of morality came into play, which made interstate relations much more complicated, especially in contrast to our own explicitly concrete ideologies: it could occur at various levels in the community from individuals to groups to *poleis*. Although the majority of literary sources originates from Thucydides, Demosthenes, and Isocrates, and while the presence of epigraphic evidence is scanty, Low does provide a multitude of examples from a wide geographical region – from Northern to Southern Greece and Magna Graecia - to illustrate the variety of appearances international relations can take in Classical Greece.

In spite of its highly theoretical approach, the book is written in a very clear and concise manner, with the exception of a few Greek terms that were not explained to the reader, such as

summachiai, *spondai*, and *sunthekai*.⁴ The reader was only directed to sources explaining these concepts in the footnotes. However, Polly Low makes her book reader-friendly by explicitly outlining the purpose and goals for her analysis, which had begun with her 2002 dissertation, in her introduction and preface. In the interim, she states the individual goals set-out for each successive chapter in its own introduction and conclusion, and again re-caps her goals in the conclusion of the book including a vision of what she would like to see scholarship achieve in the future.

Similar to other studies surrounding Classical Greece, the data substantiating the author's claims is Athenocentric, since Athens was the hub of innovation and new thought during this period. As a result, there is very little evidence from Sparta, the other major urban center. And even in sources that result from treaties or agreements not involving Athens, Athens becomes included on the basis of mediation, ratification, or enforcement. This comprises my main criticism of the book: there is no archaeological evidence incorporated into the book. Although Low acknowledges this deficiency in her introduction and while it may be outside the scope of her book, material evidence would have brought another dimension and strengthened her discussion.

One of the many strengths of archaeology is to provide evidence for the gaps left in the literary record. This could have prevented the Athenocentric emphasis. Specifically, I would have liked to see Hoepfner and Schwandner's book *Haus und Stadt im Klassischen Griechenland*⁵ included in this book. Based mostly

⁴ Low, P. (2007) p. 85.

⁵ Hoepfner, W. & Schwandner, E-L., *Haus und Stadt im Klassischen Griechenland*. (2nd Ed. Munchen: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1994).

around Olynthus, which Low does discuss briefly in a literary sense, their book tracks the development of Olynthus first as a newly established *polis*, and then as the synoecism resulting from the Macedonian destruction and threat to surrounding *poleis*. This city is one which can provide concrete evidence for the expression of changes resulting from interstate relations: the city plan and construction techniques are considerably altered from pre to post merge. For example, houses with different characteristics were located in different regions of the city: the Villa section was associated with agricultural production and the North Hill was associated with the production of goods, such as textiles.⁶

|201

Polly Low's book, *Interstate Relations in Classical Greece*, clearly and concisely lays out a methodology for studying Classical Greek interpolital relations that attempts to recognize the unique 'system' utilized within its own right: out from under modern society's shadow. Although she, admittedly, focuses solely on literary and epigraphic evidence at the expense of archaeological evidence, she opens up the field for a new perspective. This book will hopefully provide the impetus for continued study in this vein of the topic, and specifically, for further study of interstate relations that includes material evidence.

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⁶ Cahill, N., *Household and City Organization at Olynthus*. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press. 2002).