Oligarchy has long been the odd-man-out in the study of ancient Greek constitutional history. Democracy, as the form of government of the city which produced the majority of extant Classical literature, comes with a plethora of evidence on which modern scholars can draw. Tyranny and kingship were objects of fascination for Classical writers, and have received major attention from historians of Greek politics and thought. Oligarchy, however, has received far less scholarly attention. The paucity of evidence for oligarchic politics, coupled with the fact that much of the evidence that does exist comes from hostile, pro-democratic writers make it difficult to create a coherent picture of how oligarchic states actually functioned. With this book, Matthew Simonton (henceforth ‘S’) sets out to remedy this ommission by providing a political history of Classical Greek oligarchy. By ‘political history’, S explains, is meant a focus on the institutions, both legal and extralegal, by which oligarchic poleis kept the governing minority in power and ensured that the poorer majority remained docile (p. 3).

S’s first thesis is that Classical oligarchy should not be seen simply as a continuation of Archaic elite rule; rather, it represented a new, more exclusive and more repressive type of regime, created in reaction to the threat posed by democracy to elite dominance. S’s second contention comes as a result of this historical perspective: oligarchy should be seen as a form of authoritarianism, in which the governing wealthy minority relied heavily on force and the threat of force to check any aspirations by the majority for greater political access. Finally, S argues, oligarchy was a fundamentally unstable system. Not only did oligarchic regimes face threats from a discontented demos, but also from within their own ranks. Individual oligarchs, eager for status and mistrustful of each other, might well be tempted to abandon their comrades and champion the interests of the demos, perhaps with an eye to eventual tyranny. Individual oligarchs thus found themselves trapped in the the famous Prisoners’ Dilemma, obliged to choose between the certain, but smaller, benefits brought by intra-elite co-operation, and the larger, but much more risky prizes that came from abandoning the regime in quest of personal power. As a result of this instability, S concludes, the period in which oligarchies flourished was actually very short: the fifth century BCE marked the high-water mark of oligarchy in Ancient Greece; the fourth century saw a steady decline in oligarchies, and by the high Hellenistic period, democracy, not oligarchy, was the standard form of government in the majority of poleis.
Over the course of his work, S fleshes out institutions which oligarchic regimes evolved in order to keep the oligarchs united and content, while at the same time ensuring that the broader demos was divided, intimidated, and generally incapable of uniting to push for constitutional change. To obtain the former end, oligarchs promoted an ideology of elite community, exemplified in the convivial equality of the symposion, backed-up by institutional safeguards such as the multiple oligarchic councils of Boeotia, designed, S argues, to ensure that no individual or group of oligarchs could gain undue prominence over their fellows (75-106). To keep the demos in line, S outlines an impressive array of tactics used by oligarchs, including extra-judicial murder of prominent members of the demos to create an atmosphere of terror (112-118); co-option of a few token members of the demos as councillors in order to provide the illusion of popular input (133-147); dispersal of the poorer citizens around the countryside, far from the city centre and the seat of oligarchic power (160-185); the use of lavish festivals and sacrifices to impress on the demos the strength and resources of the regime (194-210).

In seeking to write an institutional history of oligarchy, S has taken on a daunting task, given the paucity of available evidence. S has clearly worked hard to marshal as much evidence as possible, drawing on a wide range of literary, epigraphic, and archaeological sources. Nonetheless, the fact remains that evidence for oligarchy is simply thin on the ground, and this has had the result of making S’s arguments very uneven in terms of support and thus persuasiveness. At times, when S is able to draw on multiple sources which give some degree of detail, the results are highly convincing – for example, when describing the oligarchic reliance on the covert murder of opponents, or the tendency of oligarchies to destroy or deface the symbols of previous democratic regimes in order to deny the masses rallying-points (210-221). At other times, however, S bases arguments on highly fragmentary or unreliable evidence. The conclusions derived from these arguments remain possible, and sometimes even plausible, but lacking corroboration they come across as little more than speculation. So, for example, when discussing mechanisms of regime solidarity, S suggests that oligarchies regularly used secret ballots so that the preferences of individual oligarchs could remain obscure (87-88). This sweeping statement is, however, based only on a passage from the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Rhetoric to Alexander*, which advises only that the highest magistrates should be elected by such a ballot. At other times, interpretations are simply asserted without further justification – as when S suggests that stories of Archaic tyrants expelling the demos from the city centre are retrojections of the practices of fifth-century oligarchies (154).
Throughout the work, S uses analogies from 20th and 21st century authoritarian regimes to provide comparison and elucidation for the practices of Classical oligarchies. While I certainly have no objection to the use of comparative material, I cannot help but feel in this case that the comparanda may not be entirely useful. Modern governments have a vast range of organizational and technological tools available to them, tools which no Classical state could even dream of. I would suggest that the techniques of other pre-modern oligarchic societies might have been much more useful and convincing comparanda. I was particularly surprised at the near-total lack of comparison to the Roman Republic, an elite-dominated state about which we have both a great deal of historical evidence and modern scholarship.

A major theme of the work is the use of force and terror in the maintenance of oligarchy. On the one hand, it certainly is important to remember that fear is an important aspect of power for all forms of government (including, as S rightly points out, the rule of Athenian male citizens over women and slaves, p. 139). And perhaps, given the current emphasis on ideology and negotiation of power in Ancient History, there is need of a corrective re-emphasis on the role of force. On the other hand, however, in S’s analysis the pendulum may swing too far the other way. In S’s picture, oligarchic rule was almost entirely stick, with barely any carrot. This is particularly noticeable in the sixth chapter, in which apparently crowd-pleasing activities like the arrangement of public feasts are re-read as implicit threats, demonstrating the resources of the regime (204-205). This seems to me an extreme position: given their small numbers and the absence of anything like a standing army or police force, it seems likely that successful oligarchies must have evolved techniques to secure at least some degree of consent to their authority (see Isocrates To Nicocles 2.16).

The criticisms above should, however, be balanced by the fact that there was no time when I did not find this book stimulating and thought-provoking. I constantly found myself pondering aspects of oligarchy, and indeed of classical politics more broadly, that I had not previously considered. While I may not agree with all of S’s answers, I can confidently say that, in thinking about oligarchy, S has asked important and thought-provoking questions, and has approached them in novel and challenging ways. With the caveats mentioned above, therefore, I would happily recommend this book to scholars of Classical history and politics.

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