

## *Review Articles*



### **The (Re)Birth of the Greek Economy?**

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#### **Josiah Ober**

*The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece.* The Princeton History of the Ancient World.  
Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015. xxv + 416 pp. \$35.00.  
ISBN 9780691140919 (hbk).

The title of Josiah Ober's new book signals its audacious scope. Ober seeks to elucidate the connection between political processes, economic growth, and cultural production across the entirety of the Greek world and over the course of more than three centuries. He argues that in the period between c. 600 and c. 300 BCE, hundreds of relatively small, largely autonomous Greek city-states developed 'citizen-centered' political systems and impartial rules that protected citizens from exploitation and expropriation. Intense competition between individuals and communities was counterbalanced by institutions and cultural norms that facilitated interpersonal and interstate contacts and rational cooperation. This ecology incentivized investments in human, social, and material capital and reduced transaction costs. Growing stocks of capital and low transaction costs, along with intense competition and rational cooperation, drove continuous institutional and technological innovation that helped bring about sustained economic growth at rates that were, by pre-modern standards, unusually high. Economic growth in turn made possible remarkable cultural achievements. The resulting efflorescence was diminished though not terminated by the rise of a Macedonian state

governed by leaders who freely borrowed institutional and technological innovations from citizen-centered polities. Hence the rise and fall of Classical Greece.

*Rise and Fall* is divided into two quite different parts. Chapters 1-5 present data on economic growth in ancient Greece and models and hypotheses that might be used to explain that growth. The second part of the book, Chapters 6-11, presents a narrative history of ancient Greece that focuses on the Archaic and Classical periods but also reaches back into the Bronze Age and down through the Hellenistic period. Ober's historical account, although centered on the trajectories of Athens, Sparta, and Syracuse, is explicitly presented as a sketch of developments in the Greek world as a whole.

The intended audience for *Rise and Fall* is never explicitly stated, and the text itself leaves the matter ambiguous. It is worth noting in this regard that there is a marked difference between the two parts of the book. Scholars specializing in the study of the ancient world are more likely to be interested in the complex collection of data, models, and hypotheses presented in Chapters 1-5 than the frequently quite basic historical narrative in Chapters 6-11. Non-specialists, on the other hand, might well be put off by the need to wade through the complexities found in Chapters 1-5 before getting to the historical narrative that follows. The range of issues covered is too narrow for *Rise and Fall* to be used as the central assigned text in a course on Greek history, but some or all of it could easily make helpful secondary reading in such a course.

The hypotheses that Ober formulates to draw a causal connection between the rise of 'citizen-centered' political systems and economic growth in ancient Greece are the hinge on which *Rise and Fall* turns and its most important contribution to the existing scholarship. Ober summarizes those hypotheses as follows (p. 103):

Hypothesis 1: Fair rules (formal institutions and cultural norms) promoted capital investment (human, social, material) and lowered transaction costs.

Hypothesis 2: Competition within market-like systems of decentralized authority spurred innovation and rational cooperation. Successful innovations were spread by learning and adaptive emulation.

In offering estimates of economic growth, Ober draws heavily on the inventory of Archaic and Classical Greek poleis compiled under the leadership of Mogens H. Hansen as well as recent work by other scholars, most notably his Stanford colleague Ian Morris. The economic models and hypotheses on