David M. Pritchard


Long experienced as a scholar of the Athenian democracy and its military, David Pritchard offers in this short book a provocative look at those subjects, and Athenian religion also, through an examination of public expenditure across certain decades for which we would seem to have just enough evidence (the 420s, 370s, 330s). But there is much more at stake in this well-produced volume than one might initially suspect – it is no mere accounting-ledger but rather a work that prompts one to consider larger questions concerning not only the history of Athenian public finance but also questions of historical method.

Pritchard situates his book as finally, and unequivocally, resolving what he views as an important, current debate concerning the scale of the democracy’s spending on military affairs versus its own running costs and religious affairs. That debate extends to the values that underlay the democracy’s choices to spend as it did, and has its roots in A. Böckh’s ready acceptance of Demosthenes’ claims (4.35-37) that the Athenians in the mid-fourth century spent too much on religious festivals and their own government relative to the military threat posed by Philip of Macedon. But from the outset Pritchard overlays that question with a separate debate involving A. H. M. Jones who posited that since the fourth-century democracy could pay for itself without the benefit of empire so too could the fifth-century democracy, a position which M. I. Finley rejected. But Pritchard does not explain clearly enough how or why these problems should be sorted out together except – and this seems only implicit in his strategy of argumentation – that it would be impossible to settle one matter of debate without garnering the evidence necessary to solve the other one also. While the highly fragmentary nature of our evidence for public expenditures (more on how to define this later) compels us as historians to resort frequently enough to analogy and arguments from probability, Pritchard goes far beyond what would seem to be necessary to assemble enough evidence to attack Demosthenes’ claims per se, for which his extensive treatment of the 420s might thus be irrelevant in principle. But in support of the ‘consensus’ of military historians (p. 6) that war really did cost far and away the most (and, secondarily, that democracy’s costs were independent of empire), Pritchard feels that Jones’ claim required a still more thorough demonstration upon a methodologically sound assessment of the evidence (p. 10) lest Böckh’s, Finley’s, (and Demosthenes’) version(s) of military history continue to hold an unjustifiable, improper sway over much of the field. Thus, it appears that...
while Pritchard writes as if there is one unified debate that he aims to settle and which he labels the ‘Böckh-Jones debate’ (e.g. pp. 88-90), that debate is something of a chimaera. One might be forgiven for surmising that Pritchard’s interest in writing this book was not so much to settle any such debate as to demonstrate that in all periods the Athenian democracy chose war above and beyond all other things.¹

Pritchard’s procedure is to ‘cost’ all of the knowable expenditures in three principal categories (religion, the running costs of the democracy, military expenditure) in each of the three periods (the 420s, 370s, and 330s [with an excursus on the 360s]). Ideally, this procedure involves elucidating explicit, precise, and contextualized figures for the amounts spent on all goods and services for which the Athenians are known to have spent some public money and then tallying the total for each category before determining the annual average of spending. It is only in the Conclusion that Pritchard introduces (too briefly) such cultural and political evidence for what he sees as the Athenian preference for war. All of that material is important to consider and Pritchard should have treated that subject at greater length much earlier in the book. It is only there, too, that Pritchard dissects (pp. 114-16) Demosthenes’ claims and the few other pieces of ancient testimony (e.g. Plutarch) that gave rise to Böckh’s claim. In any case, Pritchard’s strategy depends heavily not only upon the usual evidence of *Ath.Pol.*, the scattered testimony of speeches, comedy, and the historians, as well as a good number of inscriptions but also upon the few pieces of recent scholarship where this kind of work has been carried out in some detail, such as Wilson’s on the City Dionysia, which Pritchard accepts without question.

As to the particular figures that Pritchard examines and the calculations that he produces, Pritchard’s efforts are not sufficiently convincing with regard to either substance or method. Notwithstanding Pritchard’s welcome (if only implicit) subscription (e.g. pp. 6, 50) of the method whereby one renders the opposing case as strong as possible to test whether one’s proposition can be falsified, there are simply far too many questionable assumptions or tendentious readings of the evidence (e.g. p. 39) to accept his figures at face value (cf. Pritchard’s own criticism of Jones’ work as involving too many arbitrary guesses and for having conflated data from different eras that ought to have been kept separate: pp. 9-10). Too few of the expenditures for which no explicit

¹ This might explain, too, why Pritchard includes (pp. 111-13) the military costs of the 360s, which perhaps should have been treated separately in an appendix since Pritchard does not strenuously apply the figures he adduces for this period to a narrowly targeted refutation of Demosthenes’ arguments in the late 350s.