

6522 KD NIJMEGEN, Ubbergseweg 172

A. BASTIAENSEN


This is the first volume of papers to be published by the Copenhagen Polis Centre, brainchild of Mogens Herman Hansen, since October 1993 realized through the support of the Danish National Research Fund1). It is somewhat odd, for what are called ‘the collected papers from members of the Centre’, that of the five papers in this small collection four are by the director of the CPC, Mogens H. Hansen (one co-authored by Tobias Fischer-Hansen) and one by the co-director David Whitehead, who doubles as the editor. But of course this curious inbreeding does not necessarily imply any impairment of the quality of the individual contributions.

The collection opens with a 10 page article by H. containing a programmatic statement from the CPC: ‘Poleis and city-states, 600-

© E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1996

Mnemosyne, Vol. XLIX, Fasc. 5
323 BC. A comprehensive research programme’. Not only are the aims of the CPC outlined here, but the article also introduces the present volume, to which W. has prefixed only the barest of editorial forewords. The programme introduced here is certainly comprehensive. The immediate goal is the publication of an inventory of all archaic and classical poleis. I think nobody would deny the usefulness of such a tool. Nor the immense difficulties facing such a project. While work on this inventory is in progress, there are to be organized annual conferences on themes relevant to the ancient Greek polis, presumably contributing to ‘the analysis of the origin, nature and development of the polis’ that is to accompany the finished inventory.

The first question that springs to mind is which criteria will be applied in order to ascertain what sites to include. According to H. the CPC inventory is to comprise all places explicitly called ‘polis’ in some ancient source, to avoid the confusion arising from contradictory modern definitions. But surely a single, unchanging semantics of the word ‘polis’ cannot be taken for granted; and how about contradictory ancient definitions? Not a word as yet on these issues, but maybe I am impatient. There surely must be more to it. And indeed there is mention of a ‘checklist of assumed poleis’, where apparently archaeological evidence will come into play, as it does in this volume (see H. on p. 25, W. on p. 86).

The ultimate goal of the CPC is the first survey of all city-states, whenever and wherever. Examples are mentioned, ranging from 3500 BC Sumeria to present day Hong Kong. There are fourteen characteristics listed (pp. 12-13), which have to be shared ‘all, or at least most’, which I take to mean ‘most’. But how many is ‘most’, and are all fourteen of equal weight? And how about those (unavoidable) ‘contradictory modern definitions’? I shall be the very last person to deny the importance of comparative studies, but the grandiose scheme outlined here begs a lot of questions. By the way: it is surprising to see Amsterdam described as ‘an oversized city-state from 1579 to the end of the 18th century’: whether Amsterdam’s hinterland is supposed to be the province of Holland or even the United Provinces of the Dutch Republic, this is surely a very inadequate way to describe the realities of 17th and 18th-century Dutch political life.

The synthesis to go with the inventory should call into question the following accepted beliefs: 1. the polis arose before the mid 8th c.; 2. a polis is politically autonomous; 3. a polis, ‘city-state’ does