

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

THOMSEN (C.A.) **The Politics of Association in Hellenistic Rhodes**. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. Pp. xi + 178, illus, maps. £85. 9781474452557.
doi:10.1017/S0075426924000132

With this short, crisply argued book, Christian Thomsen seeks to intervene in recent discussions around Hellenistic democracy and its institutional foundations. Unconvinced by approaches that equate the continued existence of democratic institutions with continuity in democratic practice (5), he uses the rich epigraphic material from Rhodes to show how social relations and their strategic manipulation determined the outcome of politics, with the result that a relatively small group of wealthy men could monopolize political office despite an institutional setup seemingly designed to prevent this outcome.

After an overview of Rhodian democratic institutions that establishes the existence of a small elite (18–48), chapter 3 is dedicated to the *oikos* and shows how marriage and adoption could be used by elite families to maintain or regain status (49–64). But the core interest of the book lies in associations of various kinds. Chapter 4 discusses public associations such as demes and ‘clans’ (*patrai*), which competed with each other but were also targeted by benefactors to shore up political support beyond ancestral subdivisions (65–88). Chapter 5 introduces the many private associations attested on Rhodes, demonstrating that these associations were all democratically organized but nevertheless developed their own magisterial elite that partially overlapped with the elite that dominated politics in the three constituent *poleis* of Rhodes (89–104). Chapter 6 elaborates on this by showing in some detail how members of this elite used benefactions to and foundations of associations to create groups of supporters that would prove valuable both in elections and, through their many honorific decrees, in public relations (105–28).

While these deliberations are convincing, associations appear in them only as pawns within elite competition, indeed as ‘human resources’ to be exploited (to quote the title of chapter 6), when of course they must have had their own agendas as well. Chapter 7, ‘The Civic Aspirations of Private Associations’, belatedly introduces this aspect into the discussion, pointing to the associations’ tendency to imitate the polis and to publicly subscribe to its values, and their attempts to publicize their proximity to notables that would enhance their own standing, even when their exact relationship with them is unclear (129–59). This latter point is important and would perhaps call for some caution, given that not a few of the observations assembled in chapter 6 rely on the implicit assumption that all honorific decrees respond to tangible efforts made by a prominent individual to enlist the support of a specific group (for instance, the case on page 126). It is only in this chapter that associations appear in an active role, and yet even here the argument gradually moves back to elite strategies of exploiting associations for personal gain. Few concrete examples of associational agency are given, and some leave room for doubt. If an honorific inscription set up by an association lists the honorific decrees of other associations for the same benefactor, is that really an attempt by said association to make its benefactor (and by extension itself) appear as important as possible (142–43), or is it simply the result of the benefactor providing it with instructions? The prime examples for a private association that entertained very close relations with state representatives are ‘those residing and working the land in the city of Lindos’ (*katoikeuntes kai georgeuntes in Lindiai polei*), but one wonders if their ever closer involvement in Lindian politics from the late second century BCE does indeed illustrate the capacity of private associations to gain

influence within ‘the corporate polis’: might it not rather be one of several examples for the institutionalization of foreigners as a status group in the late Hellenistic polis, with consequences for taxation and obligations regarding liturgies? According to Thomsen, the *katoikeuntes* pushed the Lindians towards opening the *choragia* (lit. leadership of the chorus) to foreigners and then served as guarantors for this system if not enough foreigners were found (148), but this is based on a counterintuitive reading of *IG XII.1 762*, which rather seems to give the Lindian magistrates the power to choose six foreigners from among the *katoikeuntes* who then have to serve as *choragoi* even if they do not want to (unless the group can provide enough volunteers).

Thomsen has certainly chosen a narrow focus. Because everything revolves around the elites and their strategies for gaining support, the motivations of individuals to join and sustain associations receive relatively little attention. There is also no discussion of the number and role of slaves and other disenfranchised people in Rhodian associations, but given that recent studies by Benedikt Boyxen (*Fremde in der hellenistischen Polis Rhodos: Zwischen Nähe und Distanz* (Berlin 2018)) and Stéphanie Maillot (‘Associations dites d’étrangers, clientèles et groupes de travail à l’époque hellénistique’, in S. Maillot and J. Zurbach (eds), *Statuts personnels et main-d’œuvre en Méditerranée hellénistique* (Clermont-Ferrand 2021), 285–313) have addressed these issues at length, repetition of their results would not have made this a better book. Thomsen has delivered a concise and targeted contribution to a wider debate on Hellenistic politics. Its results are largely convincing, and many should be applicable to other Hellenistic societies where the epigraphic evidence is less forthcoming.

BENEDIKT ECKHARDT
University of Edinburgh
Email: b.eckhardt@ed.ac.uk