Introduction

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The purpose of this volume is to provide a fresh, critical account of Greek and Roman political thought from its beginnings to the point at which *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought* takes up the story, i.e. c. AD 350. The choice of this date is obviously to some extent arbitrary: there is no implication that 'Greek and Roman' political thinking then suddenly stops short, to be replaced by some entirely new way of thinking about political issues (the 'medieval'). The latter sections of the volume, and the Epilogue, make clear the continuities, as well as the discontinuities, in political thought between the 'ancient' and the 'medieval' periods. Indeed, as the readers of the present *History* may discover, it is a moot question whether the discontinuities here are more significant than, for example, those between Greek and Roman 'periods', or better[1] the 'Classical' and the 'Hellenistic' (beginning with the death of Alexander in the last quarter of the fourth century BC). The political triumph of Christianity over the Greco-Roman world – when for the first time an official, monotheistic, religion came to occupy centre-stage – was certainly momentous. But the changes in the political environment after the fourth century BC were themselves massive. What is striking in both cases is the extent to which political theorizing, if not political thought in the wider sense, remains comparatively, and remarkably, conservative, working as much by selection, adaptation and modification as by downright innovation.

The distinction between 'political thought' and 'political theory' is an important one. 'Political thought', the broader of the two categories, forms the subject of this volume. 'Political theory' represents direct, systematic reflection on things political; but it is of course possible to think politically – to reflect on political actions, or institutions – without doing so systematically or philosophically,[2] and such thinking may be

[1] See below.

[2] Philosophical thinking about politics is likely to include, among other things, some second-order reflection about what it is to think politically, and about the nature and possibility of political knowledge; it will also tend to work at a more general level than practical thinking that responds to actual situations and events.

expressed, as it was in the Greco-Roman context, in literature of all sorts. The writing of political theory is, in that context, an invention of the fifth century BC (in its fully-fledged form, an invention of Plato's), but such writing did not exist in a vacuum; it emerged against the background of the evolution of complex systems of organization – beginning with that highly distinctive form of community, the Greek polis – which to a greater or lesser extent institutionalized debate as a means of managing political conflict. The question, then, which is addressed in the essays that follow is how Greeks and Romans (prior to AD 350)[3] thought, and theorized, about politics. Other cultures and civilizations are considered only insofar as they may have contributed to, or – as in the case of parts of the Jewish intellectual tradition – insofar as they may have become enmeshed with, the Greek and the Roman, in an intellectual context that becomes so cosmopolitan as to render demarcations by national, cultural or linguistic grouping for the most part unhelpful. It accords with this latter point that the main division in the volume is not between Greek and Roman at all, but rather between 'Archaic and Classical' and 'Hellenistic and Roman'; if 'Archaic and Classical' means primarily Greek, to separate out the specifically Roman in 'Hellenistic and Roman', at least at the level of theory, is in part a matter of unravelling a complex web of appropriation and modification which was itself sometimes carried out by Greeks within a Roman context.

The volume adopts a predominantly author-based (rather than a topic-based) approach, for various reasons. We may of course talk loosely of what 'the Greeks' or 'the Romans' thought on this or that subject at this or that time, and there is perhaps no harm in our talking in this fashion, as a way of picking out certain (apparently) widely-shared ideas or patterns of thinking. Both 'thought' and 'theory', however, require individuals to do the thinking. At the level of theory, our concern must inevitably be with the specific theses and arguments advanced by particular individuals, which are in principle as likely to cut across as to support contemporary thought and practice; and the reflections of other writers – poets, historians and others – whom we may class as 'non-philosophical' (though the boundaries between categories here are notoriously permeable) are often themselves highly distinctive and individual. Again, different genres may offer different opportunities for, and invite different modes of, reflection: the thought of a poet like Hesiod, or Sophocles, is quite different in quality and feel from that of a Herodotus or a

[3] 'Greek and Roman' thus corresponds to what writers in English have commonly, and parochially, called 'ancient' (as opposed to 'medieval' and 'modern').

Thucydides. In order to bring out the individuality of such diverse writers, the editors have encouraged contributors where possible to include direct quotation from the original texts.

At an early stage of the project, many of the contributors met to discuss both initial drafts of individual chapters and general issues of policy. One of the benefits of the discussion was to initiate conversations between the contributors which continued until the submission of final versions of the chapters, and this process has ensured (so the editors believe) a degree of coherence in the volume as a whole which might otherwise have been lacking. From the beginning, however, there have inevitably been points of mild disagreement, or difference of emphasis, between editors and contributors, and between the contributors themselves. The editors have not sought to impose any final resolution of such disagreements, since any resulting tensions accurately reflect real, and defensible, differences of approach to a highly complex subject-matter. One such tension that may be apparent is between those contributors who prefer a more historical approach, and those whose interests are primarily philosophical, and who write with closer attention to the connections of the ancient material with modern (or perennial) concerns.[4] Clearly different sorts of material may require different handling; but there must also often be room for discussion of the same material not only in its original context – within a particular text, within the oeuvre of the author, or within the framework of the society and culture in which that author was writing[5] – but also in the larger context of political philosophy as a whole, whether that is seen as an attempt at the impartial resolution of relatively distinct issues, undetermined (unless perhaps accidentally) by any history, or indeed as itself an outcome of historical processes. The productive interaction between historical and philosophical approaches, of whatever sort, is probably one of the chief distinguishing features of current work on Greek and Roman thought in general.

In principle, then, the volume aims to be catholic and comprehensive in its coverage, including differing types of treatment of political thought in

[4] The volume nevertheless avoids affiliation to any specific critical agenda among those on offer (whether Marxist, 'Straussian', communitarian, or any other); if such a stance is itself held to involve an agenda of a kind, however labelled, the editors will not mind. That certain methodological assumptions are in play is not in doubt: see e.g. the following note.

[5] Implied here will be some version of the 'contextualist' thesis associated particularly with Quentin Skinner, which claims – among other things – that the understanding of texts 'presupposes the grasp both of what they were intended to mean, and how this meaning was intended to be taken' (Skinner 1969: 48). No one will deny the particular difficulty of establishing the intentions (in Skinner's sense) of ancient authors or texts; but most will accept both the propriety and the necessity of the task.

the widest sense. It must be acknowledged, however, that once Plato (and Socrates) and Aristotle have made their appearance in the volume, it is political theory which is privileged over other sorts of political thinking. Plato and Aristotle themselves receive a treatment which is necessarily[6] both broader and deeper than that accorded to any other thinker; and much of the 'Hellenistic and Roman' section follows the fate of Platonic and/or Aristotelian ideas[7] in later thinkers, who are either philosophers, or writers drawing on philosophical sources. It is here, as it were, that the main action is taken to be situated. A consequence, however, given the limits on available space, is that other authors (i.e., broadly, those writing in non-theoretical mode) in the later periods are handled rather more selectively than in the earlier. In this sense, the volume may appear somewhat lopsided (why, for example, should the Roman poets be less deserving of mention than the Greek?), but – in the view of the editors – not disturbingly so.

Differences of approach between contributors, of the sort described, inevitably lead to variations in the degree of historical information supplied by individual essays. However, suitable use of the index and bibliographies provided at the end of the volume should be sufficient for the basic repair of gaps in any reader's knowledge of the periods covered. This *History* is not intended in any case as an encyclopaedia or dictionary. The contributors are all actively working in the areas on which they have written. Their brief was to address their particular topic or theme in a way appropriate for any intelligent reader, reflecting what seemed to them the best available scholarship, while at the same time offering new thoughts and suggesting future lines of investigation. Where there is controversy, this is marked, at least by means of references to rival views; the aim is to advance discussion, not to close it off. The bibliography includes those items which contributors regard as essential for anyone wishing to pursue an individual topic in greater detail.

Probably the most important subject of discussion at the preliminary meeting of contributors, and subsequently, was the meaning of 'the political'. Just what is to count as 'political' thought? In Greece down to the Hellenistic period, the answer to the question is simple enough: 'the political' covers any and every aspect of the polis, the 'city-state', or the 'citizen-state', as the fundamental unit into which society is organized.[8] When we apply the term 'political' here, it functions essentially as the

[6] Necessarily, that is, because of the extent, complexity and importance (both historical and philosophical) of their political writing. [7] See below.

[8] To give any precise date in Greek history for the emergence of the polis as a distinct form of organization is probably in principle impossible, but its origins surely lie in the Archaic period. Cf. Raaflaub in Ch. 2 below.

equivalent of the Greek *politikos* ('appertaining to the polis'); when Plato talks of *politikē* (*technē*), 'the art/science of politics', he has in mind a body of expertise that at least includes[9] something resembling our 'political theory', except that the theory in this case is restricted to the polis. That other forms of 'political' organization exist is recognized, but they are not treated as viable alternatives. This way of thinking is encapsulated in Aristotle's formula, according to which human beings are by nature 'political animals', i.e. creatures designed – as it were – for life in a polis. But in that case 'things political' (*ta politika*) will not only include, but actually turn on, the central ethical question about the best life for human beings, insofar as that life must not only be lived in the polis, but will be shaped by it. How is the community, and how are individuals who constitute that community, to live justly and happily, and in general to achieve their proper goals? Ethics is thus a part of 'politics', the whole being conceived of as 'the philosophy of things human' (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1181b15).

Given all of this, the decline of the polis from the later fourth century BC onwards, together with the rise of the Hellenistic monarchies, might have been expected to lead to a sea-change in the conception and function of political theory; and just such a change might be seen as signalled by the apparent reversal of the Aristotelian perspective by the Hellenistic schools, for whom politics was a part of ethical philosophy. On the other hand, from a wider perspective, this is no more than a minor, and essentially technical, shift of emphasis.[10] In the Greco-Roman period as a whole, political and ethical philosophy are for the most part irrevocably intertwined, and differences in the size and nature of the units into which society happens to be, or might be, organized simply add to the complexity of the demands on the study of political theory. 'Classical', Platonic and Aristotelian, *politikē* and its Hellenistic counterpart now turn out to be no more than (partly) different applications of the same type of reflective activity, and the difference between the latter and the former no more than 'an enlargement of the pool of concepts in which political thinking can be done'.[11]

There will, then, clearly be ways in which, to a greater or lesser degree, the conception of 'the political' reflected in large parts of this volume is likely to seem, and actually is, foreign. The modern conception refers to the institutional (and economic) management of society without restriction to any particular form of communal organization,

[9] The qualification is necessary because, for Plato, the expertise is to be acquired primarily to be exercised. [10] For a slightly different, but overlapping, analysis see Griffin 1996.
[11] Griffin 1996: 282.

and tends to banish ethical concerns to the sphere of the private.[12] The overlap, however, between this and the ancient notion or notions is so great that, so long as the differences are borne in mind, it is possible to move between them with little sense of strain; and indeed if it were not, the very project of a history of Greek and Roman 'political thought' would make little sense.

It might be claimed, in fact, that the tight ancient connection between politics and ethics is itself largely the invention of the philosophers. Insofar as we can construct an ancient Greek, or Roman, notion of the political independently of philosophical theorizing,[13] it seems to have rather little to do with what we should call the moral aspects of the citizens' life that so preoccupy a Plato, an Aristotle, or a Cicero, and much more to do with what are to us more recognizably political issues such as equality, autonomy, the distribution of power, and the obligations of the citizen as citizen. Thus when Plato claims, in the *Gorgias*, that Socrates – someone who on Plato's account took no part in practical politics – was in fact the only true *politikos* ('politician' or 'statesman'), because he was the only person who did what a statesman should (tell the straight truth on ethical questions), that would have been as paradoxical[14] to a contemporary Athenian as to us, and for similar if not quite identical reasons. For us, Plato's Socrates is simply non-political, to the extent that he eschews political institutions to achieve his ends; to the Athenians, not only could he not be a politician (who is someone who speaks in the assembly), but he might even be thought to be failing in his role as citizen or *politēs*, just by virtue of his preferring not to participate in the institution of communal debate. The distance between theory and practical reality illustrated by this (extreme) example may lessen in succeeding centuries, but never disappears; it is itself one of the most striking features of Greco-Roman political thinking.[15]

[12] For the contrast with modern notions of politics and the political, and for a more detailed and subtle account of ancient ones, see Cartledge in Ch. 1 below.

[13] That is, by way of reference to what politicians, or historians, would refer to as 'public affairs': *ta politika* in Thucydides' sense, or *res civiles* in Tacitus'.

[14] It is, of course, *intended* as a paradox; the underlying claim is that *politikoi* should use their power to do what Socrates tries to do (change people's attitudes and behaviour) by non-institutional means.

[15] Cf. the exchange between Julian and Themistius, discussed in section 1 of the 'Epilogue' below. The issues there partly relate to the choice between the philosophical and the political life: Socrates' commitment to practice, Julian insists, had nothing to do with politics, and everything to do with philosophy. It is philosophy, and philosophers, that have the power to transform us; by comparison the benefits conferred by those who wield political power pale into insignificance. Socrates would have applauded the general sentiment. But as Julian recognizes, and must (since he has just entered a position of power second only to that of emperor), the practical problems of day-to-day politics will not simply go away.

PART I

ARCHAIC AND CLASSICAL GREECE

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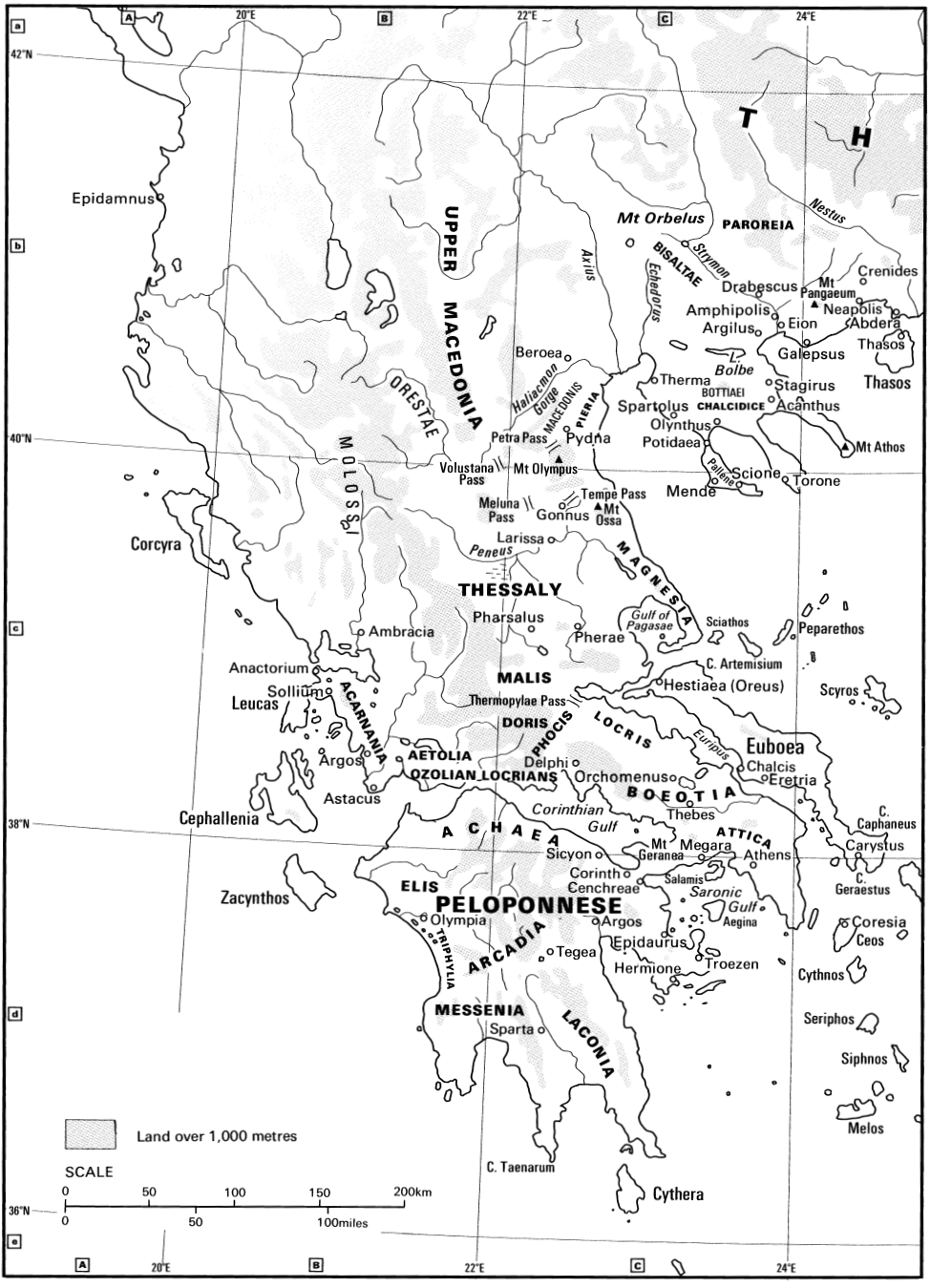

Map 1. Greece in the fifth century BC.