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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This book has two aims. The first is to provide an account of the historical demography of classical Athens: that is, the size and structure of its population, and how these changed over time. The second, more important, is to show why such an account is necessary, and to persuade the reader that this subject, dry and technical as it might sometimes appear, is an important part of the history of the city.

At one level, the latter aim is a superficially simple matter of filling a gap in the existing scholarship. The only previous account to deal with the population of classical Athens as a whole remains Gomme's little book, published in 1933. This remained the standard account for more than 50 years. Since the 1980s, the field (such as it is) has been dominated by the work of Mogens Herman Hansen, whose best-known and most important contribution is *Demography and Democracy*. In the three decades since this book appeared, Greek historians have shown little inclination to engage with Hansen's work. Instead, the tendency has been to cite 'Hansen 1985' as though it really were the last word on Athenian demography.[1] It is important to say here that my goal is not to challenge Hansen's conclusions: if anything, this account puts them on a firmer foundation than they had before. However, it is often overlooked how narrow Hansen's focus was in this book (its subtitle – *The Number of Citizens in the Fourth Century BC* – is precise and accurate). Furthermore, it is often underappreciated how difficult it is to draw wider conclusions on the basis of his work.

There is more to it than just supplementing Hansen, however. I hope to show just how dramatic the story of Athens' historical

[1] Rhodes 2010, 162; Morris 2009, 114–5 with note 41; Bresson 2016, 409.

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demography is (how great the numbers involved were, and how significant the extent of change was), how that demography can be an indispensable tool for explaining and understanding what was happening in the *polis*, and why it should not be the sole preserve of a small number of specialists in (mainly) political history.

Most if not all, of the existing interest in the size of the population has come from political historians. This is not so surprising. Much of the continuing fascination with classical Athens derives from its status as a democracy. One of the key factors in understanding and appreciating that democracy is the extent to which its citizens participated in its institutions. Clearly, how many citizens there were makes a great deal of difference to what we think about both the breadth and depth of that participation. This is what motivated both Gomme and Hansen and their interlocutors, Jones and Ruschenbusch. Barry Strauss' account is meant to explain the context for the post-Thirty recovery of the democracy. Sinclair provided an appendix on the number of citizens in his account of democratic participation. More recently, and in a rather different way, the size of the citizen population has been important to Edward Cohen and Josiah Ober. Recent studies of individual demes have given some attention to the populations of those demes.[2] While these accounts do provide some wide illumination, the focus remains on political history.

But the evidence for the detailed operation of democratic institutions is mostly fourth century in date: oratory, the Aristotelian *Athenaion Politeia*, and many of the relevant inscriptions. Detailed accounts therefore tend to concentrate on this period, and with them much of the interest in citizen numbers. The most thorough attempt to look at the size of the population in the fifth century since Gomme, by Cynthia Patterson, was concerned primarily with the context of the passage of Pericles' citizenship law in 451/0, and essentially took 431 as an end point.[3] An important consequence of this focus on democracy has been that precisely the period when Athens experienced a major exogenous demographic shock – during the Peloponnesian War – has been

[2] Gomme 1933; Hansen 1985; Strauss 1986. Sinclair 1988, 223–4; Cohen 2000; Ober 2008. Demes: Moreno 2007, 37–76 (Euonymon); Kellogg 2013 (Acharnai).
[3] Patterson 1981.

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neglected.[4] A further consequence has been that the question of how many *non*-citizens were living in Attica remains relatively under-explored.

More recently, demography has become increasingly important as a topic within Roman history, with increasingly sophisticated approaches and arguments being developed.[5] Interest in cliometric arguments has not been restricted to demography. Aside from perennial discussions of trade and money supply, a great deal of attention has been given to questions about the existence or otherwise of economic growth. Although this concern had been present before, new impetus was given to addressing it by the appearance of the *Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*.[6]

As the editors of the *Cambridge Economic History* made clear at the start of their introduction, this volume was meant not only to summarise the current state of research, but to influence its future direction. For the most part this was entirely welcome, as at the start of the twenty-first century there was clearly a need to move (finally) beyond the dominant primitivism–modernism and substantivism–formalism debates of the twentieth century. To a certain extent the present volume, in so far as it deals with demography and has a substantial quantitative element, can be seen as in line with the priorities of the editors as they laid them out there, and as they have developed since. The comparative projects of Morris and Scheidel, in particular, would be impossible without quantification.[7] Demography is given a prominent treatment by Scheidel's contribution to the *CEH*. His first footnote is revealing of the status of the historical demography of Greece compared to

4 On the apparent exception provided by Hansen 1988, 14–28, see 142–143 below.

5 The key article here, on the problems of studying the structure of Roman populations, is Hopkins 1966, on which see 16–17 below. See De Ligt and Northwood 2008 for signs of movement out of what once appeared to be an intractable morass; Hin 2013 develops one of those avenues eloquently and in detail, and with wider significance than her title suggests. Concern about the proper ways to approach and model economic behaviour in the ancient world, and in particular the usefulness of the concept of economic rationality, is a key concern of, for example, Rathbone 1991. For the scope of the historical demography of ancient Rome and its empire, and a useful general summary, see Scheidel 2001b; also Parkin 1992 for a positive assessment. A majority of articles in Holleran and Pudsey 2011 are concerned with Roman questions.

6 *CEH* 2007. Earlier concern with growth: Saller 2002;

7 For subsequent work of these three, see for example Saller 2012; with much greater ambition and scope, Morris 2010, 2013; Scheidel 2017.

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its Roman counterpart: work published in subsequent years has if anything sharpened the contrast.[8] However, I should argue that the aims pursued here are not quite the same. By stressing the importance of economic growth and questions of economic performance rather than structure, they are obliged to take an extremely long view and emphasise long-term trends, over the course of which tiny incremental changes can, cumulatively, become significant. In looking at classical Athens, I am taking a very small region over a relatively short time period, less than two centuries, where such long-term trends may not be visible and may not in fact help us to understand what was happening.

The emphasis on quantification (sometimes apparently for its own sake) and growth and suggestions of long-term improvement in living standards can make the *CEH* and the work that has been done in its wake appear to be very much a 'modernist' project. A focus on a single city could be seen as primitive antiquarianism (of the sort derided, famously and justifiably, by Finley); some readers may prefer to see it, at least in its emphasis on the particular, as instead postmodern. My own view is just that Athens really was an important place, and one that deserves to be seen in its own terms. Accusations of Athenocentricism often hold weight, but they can cut both ways. If we cannot generalise from Athens to the rest of Greece (and often we cannot), then neither should we generalise from Greece as a whole to Athens. Part of what made Athens unusual was the sheer size of its population, and so a proper understanding of the historical demography of Athens is crucial.

That is not to say that historical demography holds the key to all understanding of Athens. There is an important and revealing little passage to this point in De Ste Croix's *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World.* Although this is not quite a work of economic history as such, De Ste Croix was obviously concerned with economic themes. De Ste Croix did not himself make a case against the construction of economic models (of the types which were then being used by historians of other periods) for studying ancient history. But his explicit reason for dismissing the validity

[8] Scheidel 2007, 38 note 1.

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of such approaches was that 'a very able article' by the medieval historian Robert Brenner had dealt 'admirably with various types of "economic model-building" which try to explain long-term economic developments in pre-industrial Europe primarily in terms either of demography (Postan, Bowden, Le Roy Ladurie, and North and Thomas) or of the growth of trade and the market (Pirenne and his followers), disregarding class relations and exploitation as primary factors'.[9]

There is little point in going over what became known as the 'Brenner debate'.[10] What is important here is that Brenner's position (which, like De Ste Croix's, argued forcefully that class interaction was *the* primary factor in explaining historical development – in Medieval Europe, in this case) was very far from winning universal acceptance. Some of the resistance was no doubt motivated principally by differences in political stance; but there were real problems with Brenner's account. De Ste Croix was aware of the immediate responses to Brenner's article – but had nothing to say about them except, in a footnote, that they were of 'very uneven value'.[11] This is an entirely reasonable view, but expressed like this, it neatly tarred the valuable contributions with the brush of the mediocre and the poor, without his having to engage with them in detail. While Brenner's ability is not in question, I am not as admiring as De Ste Croix of his method of dealing with those who had proposed alternative models for explaining economic development. In particular, I shall be arguing in favour of a position which is not, in the end, all that dissimilar to that expressed by one of Brenner's principal targets, Michael Postan.[12]

From an external perspective, a problem with De Ste Croix's argument is that he too is in fact engaged in a form of the 'model-building' he despises: using class, instead of population and resources or commercialisation, to explain development and change. As De Ste Croix hinted, the Middle Ages have proved to

9 De Ste Croix 1981, 83, referring to Brenner 1976.
10 The relevant articles from *Past and Present*, in which the debate was chiefly conducted, are collected in Aston and Philpin 1985.
11 De Ste Croix 1981, 552 note 2a.
12 Postan 1973a; Postan 1973b.

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be a particularly hotly contested battleground of competing models for explaining change. The crucial point in this context, however, is that, as Hatcher and Bailey more recently argued, none of the traditional 'supermodels' which have been deployed has ever managed to deal a knockout blow.[13]

Hatcher and Bailey observed that demographic models initially emerged as a counter to simplistic 'modernising' assumptions, but managed to attain a hegemonic status in medieval history. It was this situation which Brenner sought to shake up with his explicitly Marxist account. The 'Brenner debate' fought out in the pages of *Past and Present* failed to produce a clear winner, which in turn (and with some irony) allowed the re-emergence of the commercialisation model, albeit now in more sophisticated forms. But the greatest strength of each of these single-issue models – simplicity and ready appeal to intuitive understanding – has proved to be their greatest weakness, as each also involved too great a level of abstraction to be reconcilable with the ever-increasing detail of scholarly understanding of the medieval world. In this context, Badian's penetrating observation about the grand narrative that is presented in *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* – that the areas of weakness in its argument occur precisely in the times and places about which we are best informed – is particularly telling.[14]

Variations on the observation that 'if the only tool you have is a hammer, it is tempting to treat everything as if it were a nail' have been illustrated by historians of the economies of ancient Greece in recent decades as well as by anyone. Without straying too far into the realms of caricature, Finley's *The Ancient Economy* (in so far as it is about economic history at all) tries to explain everything in terms of status relations, for which De Ste Croix substitutes class relations. More recently, we have seen Cohen's *Athenian Economy and Society* explain the important changes in its subject in terms of the emergence of a fully marketised economy and private banks. Loomis saw the key determinant of *Wages, Welfare Costs and Inflation in Classical Athens*

[13] Hatcher and Bailey 2001.
[14] Badian 1982.

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as being the available money supply. Loomis' project derived from Schaps' attempt to collate the commodity price data from the ancient world; Schaps' own treatment of *The Invention of Coinage and the Monetization of Ancient Greece* is an overtly (and sophisticated) commercialist account of important changes in archaic and classical Greece. Important recent contributions to the economy of classical Athens include Moreno's *Feeding the Democracy* and Bissa's *Governmental Intervention in Foreign Trade in Archaic and Classical Greece*. Athens is given due attention in more general works such as Ober's *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece* and Bresson's *The Making of the Ancient Greek Economy*.[15] Greek, and especially Athenian, economic history is thus at present approached largely in terms of commercialism and marketisation. In part, this is a continuing reaction to Finley. Along with the strategic thrust of the *CEH* in favour of emphasising economic performance and trying to quantify growth, there is a danger here of a swing back in Greek history to an unreflective modernism, where the valuable lessons of the substantivism–formalism debate are lost. However, by suggesting that demography is an important part of the economic history of Greece and of Athens, I do not want to suggest that this is a better hammer. I am not arguing for the superiority of historical demography over approaches that emphasise other factors more; it would be a disaster if, having dragged ourselves away from the substantivism–formalism debates, we should simply start to refight the Brenner debate.

Having said all of that, I still want to maintain that close attention to historical demography can help us understand classical Athens, and in more ways than it has been used in the past. This includes its political history: at the very least, there is scope for progress in pulling together those accounts that deal with issues related to population size over relatively restricted periods. Barry Strauss' intuition – that demographic change must be an important part of the explanation for the course taken by Athenian politics in the immediate aftermath of the Peloponnesian War – can be

[15] Cohen 1992; Loomis 1998; Schaps 2004; Moreno 2007; Bissa 2009; Ober 2015; Bresson 2016; Harris, Lewis, and Woolmer 2016.

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justified even if one does not accept the detail of the arguments he makes to this end.

However, we can go further than this too. Athens was not just a set of political institutions, nor is its continuing fascination due solely to its democracy. All of its achievements and failures were, whatever else can be said about them, products of a particular context and background. The number of Athenians, the structure of the population, and the fact that both of these were not static but susceptible to change (and sometimes dramatic change) are in themselves an essential part of that context. The emphasis in this volume is on the relationship between demography and economic history. That the two are connected may seem obvious, but the connection is rarely made explicit by ancient historians. I hope to show that active consideration of the relationship can have interesting results. Even if the detailed conclusions advanced here are not found convincing, I hope to show that the subject is worth pursuing.

Chapter 2 begins with a general consideration of the population structure and how ancient historians have tried to get to grips with ancient populations. In Chapters 3 and 4, I look at the evidence for the absolute size of the citizen and non-citizen populations at various times in classical Athens. In Chapter 5, I consider the evidence for and scale of change in the population over the course of the fifth and fourth centuries. In Chapters 6 and 7, I suggest some important implications of the picture of Athens' population that emerges from the earlier chapters; Chapter 6 deals primarily with simple and obvious issues of aggregate consumption, while Chapter 7 tries to draw slightly more complex connections between population and wider social, political, and economic themes.

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