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THE ROMAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

HÖLKESKAMP (K. J.) *Rekonstruktionen einer Republik. Die politische Kultur des antiken Rom und die Forschung der letzten Jahrzehnte (Historische Zeitschrift Beiheft 38)*. Pp. 146. Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2004. ISBN: 3-486-64439-4.

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This extremely refined book, published in the supplementary series to *Historische Zeitschrift*, discusses previous contributions to the debate on the nature of the Roman political system and successfully steers the subject in new directions. The author's stance in the debate on Roman democracy, also presented in the collection of articles *Senatus Populusque Romanus. Die politische Kultur der Republik – Dimensionen und Deutungen* (Stuttgart, 2004), seems to originate from a very learned and analytically detailed critique of Millar's ideas, as presented in a succession of articles and culminating in *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic*.

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Strongly arguing the case for the aristocratic character of Roman political culture, the book aims at articulating the responses presented to Millar's arguments and at laying out new theoretical, methodological and practical perspectives to further the investigation of Republican politics (pp. 16–17).

The first chapter sets the debate in motion, pleading for a more nuanced picture of the so-called 'orthodoxy', the 'traditional' view of the Roman political system centred on the aristocracy's role in the conduct of politics. In Chapter 2 H. convincingly criticises Millar's constitutional approach. Constitutional history, it is argued, is something different from political history, and its deployment leads to the use of the same meta-historical categories as those applied by the criticised orthodoxy. The author underlines how Ch. Meier, in his neglected *Res Publica Amissa*, had shifted the focus to the so-called 'grammar of Roman politics' (p. 22), while Wieacker had stressed the importance of moral perceptions such as *auctoritas*, *dignitas*, *grauitas*, *gratia* and, above all, *mos maiorum* in the shaping of Roman politics. In Chapter 3, H., referring once again to Meier's studies, advocates the cause of 'structural history,' where politics is analysed as closely interdependent on social, mental and cultural factors. The critical issues of the creation of consensus and of the aristocratic ethos binding the whole of Roman society are investigated in the next chapters, and a strong case is made for the need for an interdisciplinary approach (pp. 50–3). Concepts such as *imperium*, *honor*, *dignitas* and *auctoritas* are part of the 'political culture' of the Republic, and this, H. maintains in Chapter 5, should be at the centre of our investigation. The symbolic forms of Roman political culture (e.g. theatre performances, games, civic rituals together with monuments) serve to reproduce the legitimacy of the political system and the reinforcement of the sense of politics (here H. refers to Muir's as well as to Hölscher's and Zanker's studies). Implicitly in opposition to Millar's dismissal of the senate's central role, H. analyses in Chapter 6 Roman senatorial aristocracy. Although this is the least original of the nine chapters, it is important for H.'s argument to reproduce these well known results: the senatorial aristocracy was competitive and exclusive at the same time; war and political achievements granted success, but the final honours were bestowed on the aristocracy by the *populus Romanus*. Introducing in Chapter 7 the sociologist Simmel to his analysis of the Roman political system, H. underlines the people's function as third party awarding the prize amongst the aristocratic competitors. As underlined in Chapter 8, an essential element of such competition was 'symbolic capital,' an important notion borrowed from the sociologist Bourdieu. Although the introduction of such a concept is not particularly innovative, its centrality to aristocratic competition and, ultimately, to the collective tradition of the *mos maiorum* enables H. to cast a very clear light on Roman political culture. The author takes a militant stance in the conclusion, advocating the importance – which can never be stressed enough – of moving ancient history beyond its traditional boundaries. For H., the way forward lies in a combination of theoretical reasoning, systematic empirical research, and interdisciplinary practice. The book concludes with an up-to-date and excellent bibliography.

One of the essential features of H.'s book is that his analysis of Roman political culture is conducted through the careful investigation of modern authors' contributions and their theoretical assumptions. In this way, not only are works in other disciplines applied to the study of ancient history, but also the book finds its unique feature: it is neither a book about modern historiography only nor yet a book of pure theory to be applied to the study of ancient history. It is both of these and more. Its main achievement consists in presenting well-known facts in a new and exciting form offering considerable stimulus to further discussion. At times, however,

the author appears rather monolithic in his approach, paying exclusive attention to the top of society, and hence partly losing the nuances of that structural history which he himself advocates so convincingly (see, for instance, his particular attention to the analysis of the *mos maiorum* on pp. 24ff., 68ff.).

If, as H. persuasively argues, Polybian constitutional history, as re-evaluated by Millar, is now superseded, H. himself seems unable, on occasion, to escape the same framework. The claim that the assembly as a legislative body does not constitute a sign of people's participation in the decision-making process is not entirely convincing: if it is true that an increase in legislative activity indicates a certain erosion of consensus, it is not so clear why such activity cannot be considered a 'kind of democracy', according to Millar's definition. Although H. suggests that we leave behind the dichotomy between aristocracy and democracy, it would have been helpful if he had clarified his own working definition of democracy against which he judges Millar's approach.

Although it is not expressly stated, the book is clearly aimed at the initiated: there is no discussion of primary material (few sources are presented in Chapters 6 and 8, which have chiefly an explicative function) and a certain level of prior knowledge is assumed. It is a pity that the book does not make very smooth reading for a non-German reader, since the author rightly laments the neglect of German scholarship by participants in the current debate. None the less, it is to be hoped that readers will make the effort, as they will be richly rewarded.

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