Hans Beck and Peter Funke (eds), Federalism in Greek Antiquity (Cambridge University Press, volume in press)

Ancient Greek federalism is a key topic in Classical scholarship. Most Greek federal states have received monographic studies over the course of the past two decades. Beyond such regional accounts, a fair amount of comparative research has been done. This includes studies on the political organization of federal states, the interaction between the city-states and leagues, regional identities and ideological platforms for integration, and federal thinking in Greek political theory. Federalism in Greek Antiquity combines those various approaches and puts them into the perspective of an all-new standard reference work.

The composition of our team of researchers reflects the conceptual advances that have led to a new understanding of federal integration in Greece. In particular, it attests to the recent intensification of knowledge in the fields of interstate relations and federal thought and theory. The most important stimulus comes, however, from the current debate on ethnicity and its diverse manifestations. In short, scholars have argued convincingly that the identities of the branches of the Greek community, such as the Boiotians, Arkadians, or Aitolians are to be regarded as essentially changing, flexible, negotiable and at times even as relatively late constructs rather than as relics of a tribal past. Recent ethnos studies have thus focused on the process by which tribes such as the Achaians or Arkadians were establishing a regional identity through the creation of common identity and alterity towards other ethne. This tribal commonness as reflected in regional myths, heroic genealogies, and material culture has been detected as a major tool of integration. Our project offers the first full-fledged comparative analysis of these aspects.

At the same time, we recognize the co-existence of tribal organizations and emerging polis organizations. Many federal states comprised poleis and non-polis members such as smaller tribes
or villages. The immediate implication is that the political structures of Greek federal states are conceived as being more flexible than previously suggested. Patterns of organization vary not only from koinon to koinon, but might also present a mixture of tribal- and federal-structures within one and the same league. This raises the crucial question as to how independent poleis, komai, and other subunits were formally integrated. It is well known that some koina operated on the basis of artificial subdivisions of the federal territory that provided a conversion table for proportional representation. Other leagues were run by a system of direct assemblies; others still by both, proportional representation and primary assemblies. It follows that artificial subdivisions of the territory cannot be considered as decisive when one approaches Greek federalism. But it must be stressed that recent research does in fact benefit from questions on territoriality and concepts of space. In what one might call a test-case, it has been demonstrated for the League of Phokis how a landscape was gradually perceived as a focal point of regional identity, how its political penetration evolved, and how the interaction of both influenced the integration of different units – cities, villages, and subtribes – into a larger political community. The role of space, territoriality, and liminality for the understanding of early features of federalism has thus become clear; it plays a vital role in our project.

Federalism in Greek Antiquity offers an all-new research tool. It is the first synopsis on Greek federalism since Jakob Larsen’s seminal Greek Federal States. Their Institutions and History (Oxford University Press, 1968). Today’s research continues to be deeply indebted to Larsen’s achievement, but it is not surprising that our volume differs substantially from its predecessor in form, content, and scope. The outline of the book itself takes a different avenue of inquiry. As mentioned above, a high volume of studies has become available that examine the history and institutions of individual federal states. Regional scholarship fostered a tremendous increase in knowledge, also through the ongoing refinement of methodologies and conceptual advances. In addition, countless archaeological, epigraphic, and numismatic discoveries put scholars in a new position to augment, and often revise, the traditional understanding of many federal states. The conceptual call for diversity and plurality of the phenomenon adds its own strides to the investigation. As the boundaries between federalism and other forms of regional integration have become more permeable, the present volume draws on a broader variety of regional case-studies. Among them are the federal states (sometimes appended with a question mark) of Elis, Messenia, the Kyrenaïka, and various island leagues in the Aegean. In Central Greece, the study of micro-leagues in Doris and Oitaia reveals the creative force of federalism in a truly small natural environment.

The increasing specialization of regional scholarship makes it concurrently difficult for any one author (or indeed two) to maintain a steady grip on a blossoming body of evidence, and to keep up effectively with the swift advancement of knowledge about all regions of the Hellenic world alike, through all layers of time. Our obvious response to this challenge was to assign each koinon to scholars who are fully engaged in the ongoing exploration of their assigned regions; indeed, many of the authors assembled in this volume are the globally leading researchers in the respective areas.

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