Irad Malkin, Christy Constantakopoulou and Katerina Panagopoulou, eds., 2009: *Greek and Roman Networks in the Mediterranean*. London/New York: Routledge. Pp. xii + 321. ISBN 978-0-415-45989-1.

The Roman Via Egnatia began at Dyrrachium on the Adriatic coast, and stretched through ancient Macedonia and Thrace as far as Byzantium. Centuries before that road was built, black-figure pottery from Attica (and later the more elaborate red-figure) made its way to some of its most eager consumers in Etruria and Campania. And before that, the Phoenicians had been the great travellers of the ancient world, criss-crossing the Mediterranean, and giving rise to centres of population which would identify as Punic long after Byzantium had become Constantinople. It is perhaps nothing new to see the Mediterranean world in terms of such overlapping or interconnecting networks, as the editors of this volume freely admit. It is their stated intention that these 18 short articles – arising from a 2006 conference in Crete, and previously published as two special issues of *Mediterranean Historical Review* – do not settle for only discovering or revealing these networks but also set out the means by which modern social network theory can be exploited by ancient historians as a tool of analysis. To take one of the above examples, the producers and consumers of Attic pottery become less important than the path it traces across the ancient world, the relationships it must establish and the information it may convey.

There are of course difficulties in applying network theory to the past, and for ancient historians the most salient is the scattered and incomplete nature of the evidence. No historian can send out the kind of questionnaire a sociologist might employ; and where social network theory has recently been applied to the ancient world, it has chiefly been in the rare cases (such as in lists of office-holders at Oxyrhynchos, or collections of ancient letters) where the evidence is, if not comprehensive, at least fairly extensive. This problem is acknowledged by the editors, who sensibly retreat from demanding any kind of quantitative analysis; but even so, they seem to me to understate the importance of redescription in historical analysis. It may be that social network analysis will only show us things that we already know, or could have discovered by other means; but, as Dominic Rathbone notes in the volume's closing essay, the comparatively sparse evidence for the ancient world means that new 'explanatory models' such as that offered by network theory are always welcome. Even if, as the introduction has it, many of the networks that can be identified 'are still in need of a question to which they may provide an answer', this collection offers the valuable and often exciting spectacle of scholars – from PhD students to (an astonishing number of) eminent professors – accepting the challenge of rethinking and re-approaching their subject in terms of networks.

Naturally enough, the contributors vary in the extent of their engagement with social network analysis as such. As so often in works of this type, the essays can be divided into three groups: those who show themselves familiar with the theoretical underpinnings of the network approach; those who are interested in thinking more loosely in terms of networks; and those few who refuse to play the game at all. Not unexpectedly, it is the second category which predominates, and they sometimes seem disappointed with the results. On that Attic pottery, Robin Osborne concludes that it 'did not, as far as I can see, serve in any significant fashion to spread Greek cultural knowledge and values, and it did not of itself create a network of people linked by shared cultural knowledge and experience'. Michael Sommer comes to a similarly downbeat conclusion on the Phoenicians, deciding that 'network links did not necessarily connect existing cultural, linguistic, or ethnic identity groups'. But this is not to say that these articles fail in their purpose, which was deliberately experimental, or that they are not valuable reading. At the very least, all of these contributions suggest that network theory is often very well adapted to the traditional virtues (or possibly vices) of ancient history: its chronological and geographical breadth, for one thing, and perhaps also a certain tendency towards the pedantic identification and accumulation of fragments. This may not be a matter of fashionable theory replacing outmoded, antiquarian history, but of each turning out to enhance the value of the other.

Certainly the approach proves workable in those of the contributions which engage more closely with modern social network theory; and at times the results suggest that the

editors were too cautious in assessing the scope for making use of graphs and mathematical methods. The diagrams in Ian Rutherford's paper, for example, clarify at a glance the connections established by *theoriai* (religious delegations) among Hellenistic Greek cities – even if any conclusions must largely reflect the limitations of our evidence. Meanwhile, Anna Collar proposes using the idea of 'phase transition' to model the adoption of pagan monotheism in the Roman empire as 'a decentralized, emergent process', not dissimilar to the suggestions made by Rodney Stark among others regarding the spread of Christianity. In the end, a model is only as good as its data: but an incomplete model can nevertheless give some idea of the scale and shape of a problem.

Nor is this to say that the only gains are in the abstract modelling of large-scale phenomena. One of the chief advantages of network theory is its claim that general patterns are understood to emerge from what Isabella Sandwell in her paper calls 'the messiness of [the] actual practice of social relationships'. Such a dual focus is directly exploited by Kostas Vlassopoulos as a way to undermine the polarities inherent in our usual models of the Greek *polis*, and to refocus our attention instead on the 'lived experience' of its inhabitants. 'What occurs,' he asks, 'when a citizen and a metic drink together and converse in a tavern or a barber's shop?'. In this case, network theory is used to return from (post-)structuralism to a (post-)Marxist social history; whereas elsewhere, discussing the same phenomenon of private associations within the Greek *polis*, Vincent Gabrielsen makes the case for networks as a way of exploring modern ideas of 'communitarism'. Network theory, it would seem, imposes no single interpretation: it is not so much an explanation as a perspective on the past.

None of this is wholly new, of course, and networks of trade and patronage and civic loyalties have long been recognised in the ancient as in the modern world. In general it would be a mistake, I think, to imagine that network theory can provide us with a more privileged access to historical reality: to 'how it really was'. But it can make clearer what questions remain to be asked, or else may be worth asking again. And even if its main contribution is to allow us to redescribe the past, then – well, historians have always engaged in redescription. After all, to reinterpret the world is inevitably to change it.

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