

CLASSICAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND POLITICAL HISTORY: SCOPE FOR RAPPROCHEMENT?

By Catherine Morgan

Summary: This article assesses the legacy of the Copenhagen Polis Centre and its influence on the study of Greek social and political organization. The *Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis* transformed the field through its systematic mapping of *poleis*, horizontal networks, and forms of dependency. Yet its temporal limits and text-centred approach constrained the integration of archaeological evidence into broader narratives of state formation. Building on the CPC's work and subsequent insights into federalism and regional diversity, I identify five themes – trust, warfare, economic processes, population, and the nature of *koina* and *komai* – where archaeology has the potential to reshape understanding of long-term trajectories. Using examples from northwestern Greece, I argue for methodologically ambitious, multi-scalar research capable of addressing structural questions about governance, identity, and political integration. A renewed, theoretically grounded collaboration between archaeology and history that mirrors Mogens Hansen's comparative vision would expand the possibilities for writing political history through material culture.

Mogens Hansen's masterly guidance of the Copenhagen Polis Centre (CPC) over a decade from 1993-2003 was undoubtedly a highlight in an exceptional career. The Centre attracted diverse collaborators some of whose interests at the time appeared remote from Archaic and Classical Greek political and institutional history. Some expressed scepticism about aspects of the project: as an archaeologist then working on the Greek Early Iron Age, I was among them. But I quickly came to value Mogens' close attention to critical views,¹ and continue to benefit from insights gained during debates in Copenhagen.²

1 A point noted by reviewers, notably Rhodes 2005.

2 Acknowledged in Morgan 2003: xi; reflected in Morgan forthcoming-a.

The *Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis* is a landmark work. Basing the case for the importance of the *polis* upon systematic substantiation of contemporary Archaic and Classical perceptions of its nature and role, the CPC compiled comprehensive datasets to address fundamental questions.³ How many communities were termed *poleis* in contemporary or near contemporary sources? How large were they, and do they display common traits?⁴ What can be learned from comparison with other city-state cultures?⁵ Beyond the *Inventory*, a wealth of preparatory and adjunct work in some 14 volumes of *Acts and Papers*, plus other related publications, explored cities and regions, conceptual and methodological problems, and laid out research questions for future consideration.

I will not revisit this corpus in detail, since it has been subject to lively critique and debate. Instead, I will explore the consequences of the CPC agenda for the direction of research into Greek social and political organization in the decades following the publication of the *Inventory*. I begin by considering the legacies of the CPC, before moving to the role of Classical archaeology and changing approaches to statehood. In the final part of the article, I will bring the threads of archaeology and political organization together and present a personal wish-list for future research.

The Copenhagen Polis Centre and its Legacies

Even the CPC's critics have generally welcomed the *Inventory* as a foundation for new research.⁶ Its data have been widely exploited, with par-

3 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 12–15. Some omissions, inevitable in a multi-author work, have been noted in subsequent work (e.g. Rönnlund 2018: 29–30 re acropoleis in central Greece), but this does not detract from the overall achievement.

4 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 1–11.

5 Hansen 2000, 2002.

6 E.g. Vlassopoulos 2007: 64–65, who combines disagreement with the project's positivism with appreciation of its outcome; Ma 2024: xvi–xvii, 17–18. See Parker 2006; Frölich 2010 for thorough critique.

ticular attention to the overall figure of 1035 probable or possible Archaic and/or Classical *poleis* and their overwhelmingly small territories⁷ – in most cases one could get from the urban centre to the border and back in a day. These figures provide our first large-scale and robust picture of *poleis* across the Greek world, plus a clear sense of *poleis* attested but not yet located and pre-Hellenistic settlements yet to be characterized.⁸ The *Inventory* records only four *poleis* (Syracuse, Sparta, Pantikapation, and Cyrene) with territories over 3000 km², and a further 13 in the 1000–3000 km² bracket created in whole or part via subjection, merger, or synoikism. This brings into sharp focus questions of process in the creation of residential concentrations on different scales. Drawing on the *Inventory* and on Mogens Hansen's work on estimating comparative population size,⁹ Walter Scheidel suggests that fewer than half of the known Archaic and Classical *poleis* had more than 2,000 members and only 15% more than 5,000. The few largest *poleis* had urban centres liable to be settled substantially by non-farmers, but the emergence of super-cities (Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria) with more than 100,000 permanent urban residents was a distinctive phenomenon of the third century BC worthy of investigation in its own right.¹⁰

Notwithstanding considerable variety in settlement organization and the difficulty of measuring shifts in population distribution between the countryside and cities, these figures underscore the permeability of the town-country, 'urban'–rural divide in most Greek *poleis*. Inter-*polis* borders could be complex constructs, their definitions frequently revisited sometimes without resolution.¹¹ Assessing how people lived within (or

7 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 70–77. Ober 2015: notably 21–44; place data visualized at <https://polis.stanford.edu> [consulted 24.9.25].

8 Ruschenbusch 1985 is prominent among earlier work in this direction. Lists of pre-Hellenistic settlements not attested as *poleis* appear in each regional chapter, with a list of *poleis* attested but not located at Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 1250.

9 Hansen 2006.

10 Scheidel 2007: 75–88 (see 262 for the figure of 15%).

11 Urban/rural: Bintliff 2006, summarizing previous scholarship. In the present discussion I retain the term 'urban' in quotes because large settlements often changed in nature from Archaic to Hellenistic times, and doubts have been expressed about

transcended) them is an important matter. Equally, the challenge of characterizing ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ while avoiding anachronism or undue generalization across time and space has long been recognized. However, fresh impetus to discussion was given by the coincidence of the publication of CPC data and shifts in thinking about ancient Greek economies (with increasing emphasis on quantification).¹² Take the example of ‘urban’ space. The limitations of the concept of ‘town’ as an analytical category had already been noted by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, emphasizing the deep and complex interdependence between settlement concentrations and their physical and social environments.¹³ These concerns have now fed through into a number of studies of *poleis* or groups of *poleis* which place environmental history and ecology on the same footing as, for example, built form,¹⁴ as well as larger studies of the operational chains behind different forms of production and the markets they supplied.¹⁵ In similar vein, the ‘spatial turn’ in sanctuary studies initiated with the work of Francois de Polignac in the mid-1980s, which emphasized the location of a sanctuary in the physical environment (not merely in relation to the characteristics of a deity), has come under fresh scrutiny in the light of strong recent interest in approaches to landscape, historical geography, and ancient conceptions of space.¹⁶ Reappraisal suggests that concepts of ‘urban and rural’, ‘centre and boundaries’ are better understood as part of a continuum, with environment construed in both physical and cognitive terms, and distance in terms of travel

the applicability of the term before the fourth century (on which see point 5 below). On borders, see latterly Reger 2017, noting also current interest in borders within federal structures (nn. 71, 72 below).

12 Among a rich field of scholarship on economic matters, Alain Bresson’s publications exemplify that trajectory: his 2002 *La cite marchande* was a milestone among a growing chorus of criticism of Finleyan primitivism, cemented by his 2007–2008 *L’économie de la Grèce des cites*, then translated and revised into his 2016 *The Making of the Ancient Greek Economy*. Subsequent discussions (e.g. Oliver 2018) point to a marked contrast between Hellenistic and earlier data, without interrogating earlier periods in detail.

13 Horden & Purcell 2000: 89–122.

14 See e.g. papers in Baier & Gauss 2025 (notably Bonnier *et al.* 2025; Morgan 2025a).

15 Exemplified by Gleba *et al.* 2021.

16 See Rousset 2023 for an overview.

time, social or spatial proximity, intervisibility, and/or position within a network or itinerary.¹⁷

Making the CPC agenda coherent and deliverable within a reasonable timeframe required difficult choices about which constraints to impose. Although the decision to close the *Inventory* at the end of the Classical period had sound practical justification, it has given rise to criticism of various kinds. It is regrettable that it tells only part of the story of the *polis*, albeit an important one.¹⁸ Extending CPC coverage and methodology to cover the Hellenistic period remains a desideratum. Equally, while the editors acknowledge variation in *polis* numbers and physical development over the Archaic and Classical periods, it is the chosen snapshot of the year 400 BC that leaves a lasting impression. The result is a tendency to focus on this figure at the expense of understanding longer-term dynamism within the *polis* world.¹⁹ Yet here too, CPC data have afforded a base for further work. Connecting economic performance with democratic institutions, Josiah Ober has argued for a Classical period ‘efflorescence’,²⁰ while Robert Fleck and Andrew Hanssen use CPC data to model political transitions, evaluating their utility and limitations and focusing not only on constitutional form, but on proxies for *polis* wealth (i.e. size of territory, coin issues, *proxenoi* sent, public buildings, and colonies founded).²¹ The larger, period-focused picture is also explored in the multivolume *Oxford History of the Archaic Greek World* and its Classical

17 The classic exposition, de Polignac’s 1984 *La naissance de la cite grec*, is best consulted in the revised second edition (Polignac 1995), with his own retrospective reflections in Polignac 2016. Polinskaya 2006 offers an overview and robust critique of subsequent directions. Among recent collections: Verdan et al. 2026; Williamson et al. forthcoming.

18 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 10–11. Critique ranges from observation of the fact (as F. Naerebout <https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2005/2005.02.29/> [consulted 24.9.25]) to discussion of practical difficulties in separating data around this divide, with potential loss of information (Frölich 2010: 648–56), and the extreme view of it as a fatal flaw in the entire enterprise (Osborne 2014: 205).

19 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 53–54, with index 10.

20 Ober 2015.

21 Fleck & Hanssen 2018.

successor (in preparation), which trade the CPC's systematic coverage for greater depth, nuance, and fuller use of the material record.²²

Clearly, it would be unfortunate were organizational convenience to reinforce, rather than spur us to interrogate, perceptions of a change in the nature of the *polis* after Alexander. Major historiographical and evidentiary fault lines still separate scholarship on the Hellenistic period from that on earlier centuries. Accounting for the consequences of the scholarly choices behind various strands of modern research when attempting to understand the long-term development of Greek states and institutions remains a distant prospect. Approaches to citizenship, for example, have been a particular focus in the Archaic period, with results which only partially carry forward into later times.²³ Likewise, discussions of Hellenistic *poleis* have favoured subjects such as relationships with larger imperial or quasi-imperial powers; characteristics seen as distinctive in relation to earlier periods;²⁴ and the reception of Athenian thought, images, and ideas.²⁵ This remains true of the latest and increasingly influential study of the *polis*, John Ma's 2024 survey that sets out to examine long-term changes in attitudes to statehood, autonomy, power, and social bargaining from the Early Iron Age to Late Antiquity. It is no injustice to Ma to note (as he does himself) that he does not interrogate underlying period-specific approaches and historiographies.²⁶ Ma's work on Hellenistic *poleis* is largely shaped by cities in Ionia and the eastern Aegean, where the epigraphic record is particularly rich; the results do not describe the situation in the northwest, for example. Agendas for exploitation of the archaeological record also diminish in scope and ambition as one moves forward in time.

22 Cartledge & Christensen 2023-; Constantakopoulou et al. in prep.

23 Brock 2018.

24 Gray 2018; papers in Börm & Luraghi 2018.

25 Various explored by contributors to Canevaro & Gray 2018.

26 Ma 2024 (p. xvii, "even while trying to renegotiate the boundaries of traditional periodization, I often follow the tenor of the existing scholarly treatments").

The Copenhagen Polis Centre and Classical Archaeology

Two choices largely determined how material evidence was adduced in the CPC's publications. First, a start date well into the seventh century (including Hesiod but excluding Homer) fitted the project's emic focus²⁷ but passed the point when material evidence serves as the primary tool for social and political reconstruction. Second, material evidence was used in the *Inventory* essentially as a measure of settlement status. Aside from the size of territory, attention focused on coinage and monumental constructions such as city walls, settlement planning, 'political architecture' (e.g. *bouleuteria*), and infrastructure such as temples, theatres, stoas, and facilities for competitions and festivals.²⁸ This is not solely due to the constraints of the *Inventory*: while a few contributors to the *Acts* and *Papers* made wider use of archaeological evidence,²⁹ a specific focus on the connection between the built form and political status of settlements entered the CPC agenda early on.³⁰ At the same time, it was recognized that monumental investment was not unique to the *polis* level of political organization. The *Inventory* addresses the significance of second- and third-order sites, and includes in regional accounts settlements not attested as *polis* towns or of uncertain status.³¹

Here too, it is no accident that historians broadly aligned with New Institutional Economics were the first to exploit these data.³² Records from the *Inventory*, from coin issues to fortifications, have begun to be deployed in examination of economic growth, as noted above. But much more should now be done to place the growing body of work on infrastructural investment and its role in the political economies of individual *poleis* within a larger, comparative frame.³³ The second charge raised above, that the *Inventory* downplays diachronic development, has greater

27 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 9-10.

28 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 25-26.

29 E.g. Morgan & Hall 1996; Morgan & Coulton 1997.

30 Hansen & Fischer-Hansen 1994; see also Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 138-43.

31 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 74-79; Hansen 1995b.

32 For overviews and critique of NIE and its applications in ancient history, see Boldizzone 2011; Bowes 2021; Carugati 2024; Eberle 2024.

33 Indicatively: Fachard 2012 on the defence of the territory of Eretria; O'Halloran 2019 on naval aspects of the Athenian political economy.

consequences when reading socio-political significance from the material record. While broad dates provide a framework of sorts, change – in the use of structures, modifications to them, the planning and execution of new buildings, or the use of the surrounding area – was normal and ranged from small, near continuous alterations to occasional and usually major structural development. The decisions involved at each stage variously inform on institutions, actors, and their agency, with clear political implications (broadly understood). It is commonly claimed (not always convincingly) that urban development in colonial *poleis* was particularly influential on the old Greek world, but as I have argued in relation to other periods, radical change (e.g. relocation or synoikism) was a wider and more or less cyclical phenomenon.³⁴ Political integration and state politics ebbed and flowed over the dynamics of life in settlement centres, and can neither be dissociated entirely nor inextricably linked.³⁵

The archaeological aspects of the CPC's work reflect a more general lapse in creative thinking about the application of the material record during the long Classical period. By contrast with the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age, and the Roman period, work on Classical Greek socio-political organization rarely seeks a comparative Mediterranean or larger frame (in this respect Mogens Hansen's study of city-state cultures stands out). And while important science-based research has been undertaken on both organic and inorganic materials from Archaic and Classical contexts, it is clear that the results have not cut through into historical understanding in the same way as in the long Early Iron Age and the Roman period. Indeed, the Roman picture should dispel any notion that archaeology is somehow less significant in a text rich-period.

Over the decades since the publication of Anthony Snodgrass' 1984-1985 Sather Lectures,³⁶ there has been considerable reflection on the development and scope of Classical Archaeology as a discipline (here I confine myself to indicative examples from anglophone literature; readers

34 Morgan 2003: 45-106 (esp. 95-102 on cyclical change); 2012: 39-42 (decisions involved in settlement relocation on Andros); 2025a: 34-36 (built environment as a work in progress). Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 19 reiterate the view that colonial foundations had a formative influence on old world *poleis*.

35 Morgan 2025a: 28.

36 Snodgrass 1987.

will doubtless fill in gaps from their own standpoint). Much celebrates achievements, the pace of change, and the diversity of interests and approaches now encompassed.³⁷ Some authors lament unfulfilled potential – a failure to use archaeological data and text together to tackle issues of long-term economic and social change, for example.³⁸ Others focus on the differing historiographies and interpretative practices pertinent to text and material evidence, on the alternative and sometimes conflicting results they may produce, and on the challenges of achieving rapprochement on a sound methodological basis.³⁹ In contrast to my approach in this article, recent consideration of the place of material evidence in historical discourse beyond antiquity tends to begin with objects rather than research questions, focusing on diverse approaches to artefacts (however defined) and their materiality. Insofar as antiquity enters such larger discussion, the Archaic and Classical periods have played a relatively small role.⁴⁰ Long-durée studies of Greek historical writing,⁴¹ while offering excellent summaries of current knowledge, neither challenge historiography nor push boundaries with respect to the questions asked of material data.

My concern here is less with the state of Classical Archaeology as a discipline, and more with the conservative nature of the questions generally asked of the late Archaic-early Hellenistic record, which may explain why historical arguments founded on archaeological data rarely cut through as effectively as they do in other periods. This is not just a matter of using both text and the material record (as many historians do). As Anthony Snodgrass put it almost 40 years ago, “Classical archaeology may excel in offering strikingly new answers to old questions; but in the long run this is much less fruitful than asking entirely new questions.”⁴² What are the questions which we need to answer in order to move forward our understanding of the Greek world? Regardless of

37 E.g. Nevett 2017; Whitley 2018.

38 Osborne 2014.

39 Hall 2014. Rapprochement should not automatically be equated with the identification of a supposedly unproblematic middle ground, as Khatchadurian 2016: 196–99 rightly notes.

40 Cooper 2020 reviews the long history of such engagement; Osborne 2020a; 2020b.

41 Whitley 2001; Bintliff 2012.

42 Snodgrass 1987: 12.

whether these answers are currently within reach, defining the gaps and the kind of information needed to fill them may at least encourage forward-looking research strategies.

The Copenhagen Polis Centre and Approaches to Greek Statehood

Every reader will have their own preferences as to which questions to tackle and in what way. Reflecting on the CPC's impact on our understanding of Greek statehood and my own work on long-term state development in northwestern Greece,⁴³ I will focus on the conditions for the development of common polities or federations, especially changes over time in the fabric of decision making, disruptive events, the agents involved, and the potential for formalized regulation. Before setting out my personal desiderata, I begin by reviewing the implications of the CPC's work for the study of Greek statehood in the fullest sense, and the steps subsequently taken to explore federal states or common polities.

Two of the most significant conclusions of the CPC were: (i) that 'tribal' states (*Stammstaaten*) were not precursors of *poleis* but coexisted and overlapped geographically with them; and (ii) that *autonomia* was not an indispensable characteristic of the *polis* during the periods under consideration. As the atoms of political society, *poleis* functioned in collaborations of various kinds, and these could be asymmetric to the point of dependence or subordination (locally or via formal control by an external power).⁴⁴ This was not a unilinear trend: a community's exact place on the spectrum of dependency was contingent on a range of immediate circumstances, and its own rhetoric may gloss over asymmetries pertaining in real life. As Hansen noted, by the time that the use of the term *autonomia* spread in Hellenistic times and became more closely linked to the *polis*, it essentially described the place of self-government within

43 Morgan forthcoming-a; forthcoming-b.

44 Hansen 1995a; 1998: 77-83 (as Hansen points out, for Aristotle the key is *autarkeia* – economic and demographic self-sufficiency – *autonomia*, or political self-sufficiency, is not a point of discussion); Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 87-94.

larger systems of power, consensual or otherwise.⁴⁵ There has been substantial discussion of the nuances, complexities, diachronic development, and local significance of *autonomia* (where I remain in substantial agreement with Hansen's position),⁴⁶ but my concern here is not with the rhetoric of autonomy but with the various ways in which freedom of choice was circumscribed in practice, or perhaps better, the risk/benefit calculations which might favour particular associations.

The emphasis placed by the CPC on understanding the horizontal and vertical relationships of *poleis*, their complementarities, clusterings, and collaborations, has now become normalized and recalls interest in networks broadly understood.⁴⁷ Yet while mindful of the role of federal political structures (i.e. those where sovereignty is divided among different levels of government), discussion in the *Inventory* of larger-scale or parallel affiliations linking individual *poleis* with the wider Greek world concentrated on ethnic identity, usually in the sense of a group living in a specific area, whether described in ethnic or tribal terms.⁴⁸ Evidently, most *ethne* were thickly sown with *poleis*. This gave meaning to a regional scale of investigation; indeed, the *CPC Acts* and *Papers* contain several explorations of different aspects of regional organization. These include examinations of the place of Sparta within Lakedaimon and the nature of perioikic dependency.⁴⁹ In Achaia, discussion of the pace and nature of *polis* development was set in the context of regional topography (with its unifying and dividing features), overarching and local or sub-regional communal/tribal identities, and the potential influence of Achaian colonial foundations in southern Italy.⁵⁰ In Elis, James Roy's exploration of traditions of synoikism highlights the mismatch between settlement history and much later textual evidence and calls to mind the work of Katherine Clarke on Strabo's understanding of long-term universal processes

45 Hansen 1998: 82. In this respect, Ma 2024: 211-13 misrepresents Hansen's position.

46 Frölich 2010: 645, 660-67, essentially followed by Ma 2024: 176-78; response by Hansen 2015.

47 E.g. Ma 2024: 115-21; Vlassopoulos 2007: 190-99; 2009.

48 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 4-5.

49 Shipley 1997; Hall 2000.

50 Morgan & Hall 1996.

as operative in the creation of the diverse communities he observed.⁵¹ Of all the regions examined, Arkadia provided the richest evidence for the operation of *polis* communities and networks alongside and within tribal and ethnic groupings.⁵² Considered in its historiographical context, this aspect of the CPC's agenda did most to lay to rest evolutionary models.

This work provided the direct inspiration for my 2003 book *Early Greek States Beyond the Polis*, in which I mapped the different tiers of identity via which mainland Greek communities constituted themselves, setting the stage to consider when and how particular aspects of this palimpsest became salient.⁵³ I demonstrated that key developments such as the clustering of population in towns were not distinctive to the supposed 'major' *poleis* and that the areas considered in the book (Thessaly, Phokis, East Lokris, Achaia, and Arkadia) were neither primitive nor 'backward' in relation to some abstract, *polis*-centred ideal. This approach has since been forcefully championed by John Davies, who opens a characteristically unorthodox exercise in modelling the operative forces behind state formation with a reminder that "the 'rise' of all the various post-Mycenaean polities that emerged in Greek-language space by ca. 600 BC is equally worthy of analysis".⁵⁴ Both Davies and I focused on the Early Iron Age and Archaic period, but neither of us saw our approach as period-specific.

Despite these advances, key pieces of the puzzle remained poorly understood. The CPC did not interrogate the notion of *koinon*, even though *koina* vary greatly in scale, may nest within larger common polities, and may or may not include settlements identified as *poleis*. *Komai* were, and continue to be, examined as second order settlements;⁵⁵ but is this appropriate? As I will argue, further work is required to understand their nature, operation, and roles within *koina*. Even allowing for marked differences in preservation, archaeological visibility, and/or capture in the

51 Roy 2002; cf. Hansen 1995b: 58–60; Clarke 1999: esp. 247–51, 264–93; see now papers in Rousset & Derron 2023 for renewed interest in Hellenistic and later understanding of historical geography.

52 Nielsen 1996a; 1996b; Roy 1996; Nielsen & Roy 1999.

53 Morgan 2003: agenda at 1–4.

54 Davies 2018: 52.

55 Hansen 1995b.

epigraphic record, regional socio-political organizations across the Greek world (and experiences of them on the ground) present a more complex and varied picture than could reasonably be discussed in a study devoted to the *polis*.⁵⁶

Nonetheless, others were quick to explore the wider implications of the CPC's conclusions for our understanding of what at the time were generally termed 'federal states'. In an important stock-taking article published in 2003, Hans Beck rightly observed that while the ethnicity turn, with its focus on process and contingency, represented an important rejection of old evolutionary models, it left open the problem of interaction between collective identity and political integration and the rationale for political/legal institutions at all levels.⁵⁷ Among the large body of work on aspects of federalism that followed, I single out two landmarks. The first is Hans Beck and Peter Funke's 2015 collection of essays exploring individual federations across the Greek world and examining the concept of federalism and ancient and modern attitudes to it.⁵⁸ As Emily Mackil notes, almost half of the 456 mainland Greek and Peloponnesian *poleis* securely attested in the late fourth century were members of a common polity or federation.⁵⁹ Mapping the scale and diversity of the phenomenon was therefore a major step. But against a tradition of deep and broad inter-community cooperation – military, economic, political, and religious – it is clear that many collaborations did not translate to formal federation, and the figure cited should be seen as one end of a large and varied spectrum.⁶⁰ What 'membership' meant and why formal association proved attractive are thus important questions. The second landmark work, Emily Mackil's 2013 account of Boiotia,

56 This is not peculiar to the work of CPC: Ma 2024: 210–12, for example, takes a somewhat one-dimensional view in accepting that "the generalization of autonomy and the end of dependent *polis*-hood" facilitated participation in large federal states, citing the third-century Boiotian, Achaian, Akarnanian, and Aitolian Leagues, even though these differed markedly in history, character, and composition.

57 Beck 2003; echoed by Mackil 2013: 6–8.

58 Beck & Funke 2015, explicitly presented as an update and expansion of Larsen 1968.

59 Mackil 2013: 1–2 with n. 3, calculates that some 40% of *poleis* (183 of 465) are securely attested as members, rising to 46–50% when probable cases are added.

60 For indicative examples of recent approaches, see e.g. Mackil 2015a; Morgan 2021; Nielsen & Schwartz 2013.

Achaia, and Aitolia from Archaic times to the end of the Hellenistic period, addresses exactly these questions, examining the complexity of *koina* and their religious, political, and especially economic underpinnings.⁶¹

Considering the role of the material record, while there is some variation in approach between contributors to Beck and Funke 2015, all rely more or less exclusively on textual sources.⁶² Partly because of the questions asked and the time-span covered, Mackil makes more extensive use of archaeological publications (including landscape studies) within a text-based framework although, coin studies aside, she does not work independently with primary material data. This situation is not unusual, and archaeologists and archaeologically-focused historians must accept considerable responsibility for it, given the conservatism of their questions and approaches in comparison with earlier and later periods. Nonetheless, it fails to do justice even to current archaeological discussions.

Three points should be noted here. First, for many archaeologists (myself included), the ‘ethnicity turn’ was less about identities *per se* and more about understanding the *habitus* and the practices which shaped and were shaped by it, and thus how differences might be objectified and expressed in context.⁶³ Ethnic identity was certainly a powerful and flexible tool to encourage (or coerce) people into participation and/or foster a sense of stability, but behind its ostensible timelessness lie change, disruption, and resilience.⁶⁴ In *Early Greek States*, I examined the diversity of groupings and affiliations centred on practical activities and the taskscapes involved in them – groupings which intersect but are not always co-terminous with *polis* or *ethnos* boundaries. This focus on the *habitus* permits a thicker understanding of the drawing of boundaries and of points of identification.⁶⁵ It still holds great potential to build long diachronic perspectives emphasizing bottom-up experiences.

61 Mackil 2013.

62 The view expressed by Beck 2003 (at 181) that “there is hardly a methodological knife that cuts before Homer” is unlikely to convince EIA and Archaic specialists.

63 Jones 1997 is the classic exposition of this position.

64 Mackil 2019.

65 As recognized by Mackil 2013: 151-52 with respect to communities of worship.

Second, while discussion of common polities as economic communities has drawn on a range of environment-related issues, from resource distribution to subsistence practices, land-ownership, and transport routes,⁶⁶ floral, faunal, and other material data from Archaic-Hellenistic contexts have been slower to enter the larger frame of work on climate change and human responses (e.g. in terms of diet and subsistence).⁶⁷ Among factors encouraging and sustaining co-operation in antiquity, further critical consideration could be given to the role of shared and potentially unifying environments such as gulfs, rivers, and island clusters. The publication in 2000 of Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's *The Corrupting Sea* brought consideration of micro-ecologies, small worlds, environmental change, and networks of all kinds into the mainstream.⁶⁸ Equally familiar is the idea that small polities often collaborated closely (even as micro-federations) in order to mitigate risk.⁶⁹ Less attention has been paid to the role of micro-environments in creating co-dependencies even between hostile states, especially when the shared space is small and there is common interest in access to resources and infrastructure. For example, I have argued elsewhere that access to a well-functioning Leukas channel and the large all-weather port at Leukas was a powerful factor militating against sustained hostility between Leukas and its Akarnanian neighbours.⁷⁰ Risk/benefit calculations of this kind may vary over time, but the role of the physical environment and of human interventions in it is important in understanding how local relationships and co-dependencies could become strong factors promoting associations from the bottom up.

Yet just as archaeological interest is expanding to encompass these larger environmental factors, historical research into common polities is

66 The fullest account remains Mackil 2013: 237–325, citing Horden & Purcell 2000; see also Post 2022.

67 Work is now developing at greater pace (albeit of varying quality). For critical overviews, drawing out key contributions, see: Bonnier 2022–2023; Lodwick & Rowan 2022; Post 2017.

68 As Horden & Purcell 2000: 123–43 in microcosm. See e.g. Bonnier 2014 on the Corinthian Gulf; Morgan 2021; Morgan forthcoming-b on the central Ionian islands and the Akarnanian coast.

69 Ma 2024: 170–78.

70 Morgan forthcoming-b.

homing in on the legal and institutional specifics of border cultures and border-management policies, albeit now with fuller consideration of the interests, cultures and/or practices in which they were grounded.⁷¹ This contrast in analytical scale could helpfully open discussion about how borders and boundaries exist because or in spite of other patterns of connectivity, as points of decision (to limit, cross, ignore or avoid), with multiple viewpoints in play.⁷²

The third point concerns the relationship between institutions, instruments, and customary practice. Institutions and instruments usually leave a direct trace in the form of texts or artefacts such as coins. Customary practice may be alluded to, but is more often depicted visually (e.g. in vase painting) or observed ephemerally as a space of decision making indicated by the nature or affordance of particular objects, or by the sequence of decisions understood from a set of material remains. It is objectively true that without text we cannot know the details of institutions and their decisions, or the letter of the law. Nonetheless, not everything was written down, and even in Classical Athens where so much was, the work of Edward Jones in particular demonstrates how the inscribed record fits in the context of customary practice.⁷³ If we are to understand the impact of institutions – if and how they functioned in reality, and what they meant in daily life – we must avoid the positivist fallacy of measuring their significance by the size of their textual footprint.

One might take these points simply as confirmation of slow and sometimes erratic scholarly progress towards common goals. But I suggest that there is more at stake for our understanding of common polities. In some instances, we have reached an impasse and have little hope of progress without new evidence. A case in point is the Akarnanian League, where conflicting views about the existence or robustness of common

71 Notably the ERC-funded *FeBo* project at the University of Trento: <https://erc-febo.unitn.it>

72 Dietler 2022: 245–46.

73 Jones 2024.

institutions during the fifth and early fourth centuries largely reflect different interpretations of the same small body of texts.⁷⁴ One might reasonably seek to target for exploration less well-known Akarnanian centres such as Argos Amphilochikon (in existence by the late sixth or early fifth century),⁷⁵ Olpai, a fortified site in Argive territory and perhaps the seat of a common *dikasterion*,⁷⁶ and Anaktorion, although here earlier prospections suggest shallow soil cover and few obvious remains.⁷⁷ Any or all of these sites might produce epigraphic evidence, but this cannot be relied upon, and we must entertain the possibility that epigraphic culture in this area was radically different from other parts of Greece.

In other cases, supposed fixed points in the development of common polities rely on readings of texts which can be questioned in their own terms and may be challenged on the basis of the material record. In the case of Aitolia, I argue in the *Oxford History of the Archaic Greek World* that text-based reconstructions of Archaic and Classical political history may be misleading if they are not grounded in the larger context provided by the archaeological record.⁷⁸ Setting aside his political/philosophical motivations,⁷⁹ Thucydides' treatment of the tribes and subtribes of the Aitolian interior essentially describes how people chose to identify themselves, muster, and take decisions in wartime. In so far as he discusses the rich coastal *poleis* with their monumental city centres, he treats them individually, from a maritime perspective, rather than as parts of an Aitolian collectivity. Sometimes he uses colonial language to express strategic alliances and/or associations, real or perceived, with external powers (hence Chalkis is a Κορινθίων πόλιν at 1.108.5, a characterization which is neither necessary nor compelling). The question is whether this

74 Compare, for example, Marcotte 1985; Gehrke 1994-1995; Beck 1997: 31-43; Corsten 1999; Beck 2001; Fantasia 2010; Freitag 2015; Lasagni 2018, 162-71; Pascual 2018.

75 Date by interference from Hekataios of Miletos (*FGrHist* 1) fr. 26 (as quoted in the second century AD in Arr. *Anab.* 2.16.5); thereafter, Thuc. 2.68.3-6.

76 Thuc. 3.105.1; Steph. Byz., s.v. Ὀλπαί; tentatively located at modern Agrilovouni.

77 British School at Athens Archive: Handlist of Topography Papers: Aetolia, Acarnania, and the Ionian Islands 6: Anactorium [G. M. Young – T. Dunbabin April 1939]; Stavropoulou-Gatsi & Alexopoulou 2002.

78 Morgan forthcoming-a: section 5.1, with further references in sections 4.1.1, 4.1.2, 9.1.1, 9.1.3, and 11.3.

79 Hirsch 2022 with extensive bibliography.

difference in treatment can be attributed to geopolitical concerns or whether it connotes real political fragmentation to the point of separation, with subsequent reunification of the coast and interior a critical step towards federation.⁸⁰ If the latter, how can it be reconciled with the archaeological picture of communication, co-dependence, and a medium-long term cycle of movement between the interior and the coast involving different rhythms of urban foundation and expansion? Or should we instead recognize different perspectives on a complex set of relationships?

Looking Forward

The selective and personal sketch that I have presented so far highlights a collective failure of imagination in the use of the material record during the long Classical period (ca. 600-300 BC).⁸¹ The task now is to provoke archaeologists and historians to ask different, challenging, and disruptive questions. The effect may be to open new spaces of research and discourse rather than to provide immediate answers, but acquiring the data for new lines of argument takes time. Alongside this, I have sought to explain why I find current understanding of long-term trajectories in the development of common polities somewhat thin. Given the high degree of variation in political organization across the Greek world, bias towards the regions with the richest textual record inevitably means a loss of alternative and potentially challenging perspectives.

In the remainder of this article, I bring these two concerns together in setting out a personal wish-list of five areas for future research. The challenge of modelling process in the material record will be familiar to those working in earlier periods. In bringing it forward into the Classical world, I implicitly reject the idea that the textual and the material are

80 For summaries with extensive bibliography, see Freitag et al. 2004: 379, 384-85; Funke 2015. Mackil 2013: 52-53, 276-77, 286-87 is more nuanced.

81 There is, for example, nothing in the Classical Greek world to compare with Lori Khatchadourian's approach to satrapy in the Persian empire in terms of framing of research questions, methodology, and handling of material evidence: Khatchadourian 2016.

entirely different discourses.⁸² It is essential to recognize their different methodological underpinnings, but equally important to establish shared intellectual space and common theoretical perspectives.

What follows is relevant across the Classical Greek world in one way or another, although the illustrations I cite mostly come from the northwest – from Aitolia, Akarnania, Epirus, and the Ionian islands. In part this reflects my own research interests, noting that substantial new excavations (many for large-scale public works) have significantly changed our understanding of these areas.⁸³ But it also responds to the admission, noted by Robert Parker in his review of the *Inventory*, that most of the scholars entrusted with these regions by the CPC struggled to handle their material in the terms required.⁸⁴ This is a complex part of the Greek world, with very different political organizations in close proximity: two emergent common polities in Akarnania and Aitolia which variously combined coastal *poleis* with inland tribal groupings; three separately governed tribes in Epirus (the Molossians, Chaonians and Thesprotians – the first a monarchy and the latter governed by aristocracies, Chaonia also with annual magistrates),⁸⁵ plus occasional references to subgroups; and a series of independent *poleis* in the Ionian islands.

In so far as the northwest has entered into studies of Greek state development, attention tends to focus on Aitolia (and largely on the Hellenistic federation) and the Corinthian foundations at Leukas, Anaktorion, and especially Ambrakia. This is not just a matter of the limited pre-Hellenistic textual record. Significant differences in settlement history (at least before the fourth century), and the diversity of built environments and phenomena such as material expressions of religious belief, may seem insurmountable obstacles to understanding significant parts of the northwest within what we have come to accept as a ‘Hellenic’ frame. This view was not entirely shared in antiquity: the Aristotelian *politeiai* included treatises about a range of northwestern *poleis* and *koina*

82 Pace Hall 2014: 210. My case recalls a longer debate in relation to non-western cultures, closely linked to post-colonial critique: for a review, see Schmidt & Mrozowski 2013.

83 Morgan 2026; forthcoming-a, -b, -c; in preparation. See also Handberg forthcoming.

84 Parker 2006: 381; Hansen and Nielsen 2004: 339, 380, 392.

85 Thuc. 2.80.5-6; Morgan forthcoming-a: section 5.5, with previous bibliography.

now preserved in largely uninformative fragments.⁸⁶ These areas merit investigation free of preconception and with greater openness to wider comparison.

At the same time, a high degree of (especially economic) interconnectivity on scales from the very local to long-distance confirms close relationships across borders, and sometimes strong co-dependencies. These embed the Classical northwest into areas which we would place firmly within the old *polis* world: the region can no more be understood through the lens of colonial relations and/or legacies than it can be dismissed as peripheral.⁸⁷ There are significant challenges in modelling long-term change in a methodologically more robust way than merely moving between textually attested episodes. It is already evident that the idea of a Great Convergence which features so prominently in Ma's history of the *polis*⁸⁸ is not so clearly attested in the northwest, where hegemonies of various kinds and on various scales remained significant. But even though it does not work as a universal, Ma's model is powerful, so it is important to understand how, when, and why things differ and what lessons might be learned that could also nuance the picture elsewhere.

My personal list of priorities encompasses large (and to some extent intersecting) themes and fields of enquiry some of which are already attracting attention. All speak to theoretical and thematic interests rarely linked in discussion of Classical Greece. All could entail a significant number of new field projects, doctoral theses, and/or large syntheses, with corresponding potential for methodological and theoretical innovation. And all will require time to develop. To effect a qualitative change in our understanding of how and why common polities developed in the Classical period, and if and how their form influenced what followed, a much higher degree of granularity in our material data, region by region, will be required to build the blocks necessary to construct and test larger

86 Ambracia: Gigon 15 = Rose fr. 477; Kephallonia: Gigon 143,1 = Rose fr. 611.64; Ithaca: Gigon 509-14 = Rose fr. 504-9; Leukas: Gigon 102 = Rose fr. 546; the Akarnanians: Gigon 477-8 = Rose fr. 474-5; the Aitolians: Gigon 476 = Rose fr. 473; the Epirotes: Gigon 501 = fr. 494 Rose; and the Molossians: Gigon 143,1 = Rose fr. 611.45.

87 For analogous reflections on Hellenistic northern Greece, see Daubner 2018.

88 Ma 2024: 203-28.

comparative scenarios. Key to this is greater capacity to work on multiple scales.⁸⁹

A Wish-list for Future Research

1. *Trust*.

The epigraphic environment of Classical Greek states varied greatly. At one end of the spectrum lay Attica and Boiotia, with their continuous and extensive record of public inscriptions from Archaic times on. At the other, most parts of the northwest have produced few Archaic and Classical inscriptions (the Dodona tablets excepted), which largely consist of private texts – funerary, votive, and a small but significant body related to crafts.⁹⁰ It is always possible that this picture will change. But given important eighth- and seventh-century evidence from Aetos on Ithaca and Vlachomandra in Aitolia, I suggest that it is more likely that the record represents not a rejection of writing *per se*, but a different view of what should be recorded and how.⁹¹ The implication is that public actions, from engagement in trade to justice and government, relied on customary behaviour and on trust in processes and in the individuals who played key roles.

The concept of trust can be understood in two main ways. It may apply to confidence in a familiar individual or, in an abstract sense, a system which allows people to interact as if they trusted each other. In a stimulating examination of trust in the Classical Greek world, Steven Johnstone focuses on the latter.⁹² His work is significant not only for the issues covered (from establishing value to collaboration and decision making), but for the way in which he positions trust between competing emphases on structure (i.e. institutions) and agency as forces shaping political society. In this he acknowledges inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu's exploration of the notions of practice and the *habitus*.⁹³ Johnstone

89 For pertinent remarks on scale, see Dietler 2022: 235–36.

90 Evidence collected in Morgan forthcoming-a: *passim*., with summary discussion in section 12.1.

91 Antonetti & Cavalli 2004; Morgan 2017.

92 Johnstone 2011.

93 Johnstone 2011: 4–6. Agency: Latour 2005. Practice and the *habitus*: Bourdieu 1977.

addresses the relationship between trust (and distrust – not always a negative force), institutions (which have a formal existence independent of trust), and agency, concluding that in analysing trust he is not commenting on agency itself but on the conditions that made it possible. Trust, in other words, has general political import as a force positioning actors and institutions for success. And as Esther Eidinow has shown, the downside, the need to manage mistrust in the social and spiritual realms, is powerfully attested in the ritual sphere, for example in the use of *pharmakos* rituals to purify the city or the cursing of individuals in the exercise of their professions.⁹⁴

A further question concerns the extent to which individuals who successfully practised in conditions of trust could enhance their personal or familial agency, and how the opportunities for this changed over time. How may we understand pathways to the exercise of political power or public influence, and personal or familial path-dependency? Later in the Hellenistic period, public honours are generally linked to benefactions, but how did individuals' personal trajectories build to this point? From the late fourth century on, as public inscriptions in Aitolia, Akarnania, and Epirus increased in number, we see new opportunities via roles in political institutions, religious matters, and the resolution of disputes (commonly over boundaries), with status, office, and honours expressed in terms widely recognizable beyond the Greek world. This recalls my point that while inscriptions show how federal government operated, they do not show how and why it became necessary and embedded into local decision-making traditions. Or to state the proposition in another way, identifying spaces of decision making and potential regulation in the material record even without inscriptions is essentially a matter of research design.

Steven Johnstone is not unusual in basing his discussion on textual evidence, although he takes full account of practices involving distinctive objects. Coins, weights, or capacity measures remain visible in the record and in many cases indicate a location and/or context of use. But we can go further in pursuing the affordances of objects and assemblages and the decisions embodied in their use, thus delineating the social (and perhaps also physical) spaces of decision making by trusted actors that

94 Eidinow 2013: 160-94; 2022: 18-20.

may or may not be managed in other times and places using instruments and/or institutions. We are already accustomed to considering aspects of sanctuary conduct and organization in this way, if not exactly in these terms.⁹⁵ I add here one further example of how such evidence may hide in plain sight.

Approaches to containerization – the packaging of goods for transport and the transfer of information about them – varied greatly over the long span of antiquity. In Archaic-Classical times, transport amphorae were the dominant form of container used to move widely available commodities across the Mediterranean for some comparative advantage in terms of perceived quality or access to bulk supplies.⁹⁶ Provenance therefore matters, and here consumers largely relied on information encoded physically on containers or conveyed by trusted agents.

Transport amphorae display notable variation in the degree of visible/functional connection to a place or a commodity through space and time. As Andrew Bevan has suggested, large-scale shape analysis conducted over a wide geographical area, and the systematic use of computational artefact modelling, might reveal underlying attitudes to factors such as capacity, stress and strain properties, and ease of handling and loading.⁹⁷ This would enable us to discern which properties were prioritized and where decisions were required as a result. But in terms of the information made visible, during the Archaic and Classical periods there is a marked difference between east and west. In the eastern Aegean, we find stamps, distinctive ceramic fabrics, and shapes which generally correspond to a *polis* or circuits of polities: the long-term trend was towards greater convergence.⁹⁸ In the Ionian and Adriatic seas, however, ‘Corinthian’/Adriatic A, A’ and especially B types dominate the record, with much greater uniformity in shape and general appearance over a much larger area. This choice optimized efficiency in cargo-building, but left open more questions for consumers. Type B in particular was made at

95 Most recently, Barringer et al. 2025.

96 Residue analysis is now providing more information about contents, trace ingredients, and vessel treatments; as evidence builds this could be linked back into local/regional production strategies; Foley et al. 2012.

97 Bevan 2025: 17.

98 Lawall 2010; 2025 with previous bibliography; Panagou 2010.

multiple centres. Sometimes these are identified by stamps, but for the most part jars were unmarked, looked alike, and did not advertise the nature or source of their contents. This information must have been conveyed by other means, presumably at the point of transaction,⁹⁹ putting trust (in individual agents and perhaps locations) at a premium. Quantified distribution data would help to establish where agents and labour were concentrated and amphorae produced, delivered, and perhaps recycled. Identifying end-to-end transport routes, the terrain crossed, the various vessels used at each stage, and the decisions taken, would also build a picture of the trust placed in those variously involved. By contrast with the later convergence in the Aegean, the Hellenistic and Roman west saw greater provenance- and product-related divergence in amphora types. Might this suggest limits to the scale and/or complexity on which a trust-based system could operate, or did consumer expectations change?

2. Warfare.

Few would now defend ‘events led history’ or the reading of the archaeological record through the lens of what we choose to prioritize in texts. But what Douglas Bolender terms ‘eventful archaeology’, i.e. a focus on those major disruptive events which create impacts observable in diverse interconnected ways, and on different temporal and spatial scales, is a powerful notion.¹⁰⁰ Northwest Greece experienced exactly such disruptions during the fifth and fourth centuries, especially during the Peloponnesian War. Surely the most potent were the episodes of warfare waged across the territories of all mainland states in the area (touching also the islands). These variously implicated local people as combatants on behalf of conflicting powers and in pursuit of their own interests, exploited local resources, threatened and in some cases displaced communities, and raised the prospect of material and social gain.

Recent work on material and social aspects of conflict covers subjects such as the costs of creating and maintaining infrastructure (from ship-sheds to city walls), technological innovation,¹⁰¹ and the work of craft

99 Morgan 2025b: 70–71.

100 Bolender 2010.

101 On the Athenian naval economy, see e.g.: O’Halloran 2019; Davies 2007.

communities to provide for large-scale campaigns.¹⁰² To this we may add historical work on fiscal matters such as profits in the form of booty or reparations.¹⁰³ Thinking about this in terms of politics, institution-building, and personal authority takes us in additional directions.

Military campaigns had the potential to disrupt the economies of the areas affected, for example by introducing new wealth gained from the sale of supplies and materiel to allies or trade in booty.¹⁰⁴ A striking case is the hoard of at least 388 Aiginetan silver staters buried in a late sixth- or early fifth-century bronze oinochoe by the fortress of Hollm in south-east Albania. Formed a little after 430 BC, it is the earliest on the eastern side of the Adriatic, in an area unaccustomed to coined money. Shpresa Gjongecaj-Vangjeli attributes the import of these coins to late fifth-century military activity.¹⁰⁵

Under such circumstances, established flows of coin and plate could easily become skewed. Especially when offset against detriments arising from war, there is high potential for social inequalities to emerge and/or deepen. The issue of where benefits went raises the questions of which communities prospered, which did not, and the factors behind this (such as location or access to particular infrastructure or resources). Considering how this may appear in the archaeological record, we may examine public construction – when and what did communities build and at what cost – and public art, whether it be the adornment of monumental buildings or commemoration of events or people in the public domain.

The status and capacity of social actors may also be impacted. Were gains confined to a few individuals, and/or those already well placed to profit? Did they amount to ‘new wealth’, i.e. wealth not incorporated into those families already recognized as wealthy? Did they serve to build or extend markets in the sense of negotiated transactions where the wealth created was not automatically embedded into any institutionalized relationship between people? Changes in local demography resulting from

102 Massar 2021.

103 Konijnendijk & Dal Borgo 2024.

104 O'Connor 2015.

105 Gjongecaj-Vangjeli 2019: 16–36 connects the hoard with the movement of Brasidas' forces in 424 (citing in error Thuc. 4.58 for Thuc. 4.79, 4.83). While the precise suggestion is not credible, the larger notion is.

displacement and increased mortality (for reasons ranging from disease to homicide) may have made it challenging to maintain the social order. Can we see this, for example in the burial record where we may compare traditions in the form, furnishing, and grouping of graves with biological indications of residence history and kinship (on which see point 4 below)?

Environmental questions also arise. Armies and navies at various times carried food supplies, scavenged, lived off the land, or relied on markets controlled by friendly or neutral communities.¹⁰⁶ Calculation of a typical military diet now enables us to quantify demand and consider potential impacts.¹⁰⁷ To contextualize this, we need a more extensive and granular picture of the productive landscape of Aitolia and Akarnania (as of many other parts of Greece). Recent consideration of the relationship between pollen data and food supply highlights the potential for combining environmental data with residue analysis, storage capacity, rural installations, and settlement and market locations to assess diet and production strategies and support inter-regional and diachronic comparisons.¹⁰⁸ The construction of rural infrastructure forms part of this picture. During the fifth century, few areas in the northwest were defended in the same way as, for example, the countryside of Eretria.¹⁰⁹ In considering how this changed from the latter part of the century on, how may we understand the respective effects of lessons learned, demographic change, emerging markets, and changes in the nature and/or intensity of rural exploitation? Arguments based primarily on survey data often point to the Classical period as the peak of population pressure and agricultural intensification. In the northwest, by contrast, emphasis on the Hellenistic period largely rests on urban development and rural investment, raising the question of what such changes actually mean, and whether we are comparing like with like.¹¹⁰

Taking these points together and focusing on questions of politics and routes to power and influence, what opportunities for public action and

106 O'Connor 2015; 2022; Sears 2023.

107 O'Connor 2023.

108 Bonnier 2023; Bonnier et al. 2025; Post 2017; 2022.

109 Fachard 2012.

110 For this reason, I am sceptical about the approach taken by Bintliff 1997.

benefaction may we see case by case, and how might we trace this systematically without written testimonia? The issues raised remind us that path dependency in the development of public roles and the identity of those who assumed them may follow circuitous routes.

3. *Economic processes and questions of scale.*

Emily Mackil has argued that the main driver of federation was to protect economies. This is not a matter of wealth redistribution or any strong social intervention, but rather a codification of rights and an easing of internal impediments to interaction to the point where economic integration might follow.¹¹¹ As she emphasizes, this foregrounds the interaction between state power and economic behaviour – federations in other words were not just political entities – while recognising that the relationship was dynamic. Understanding the history of economic connections, the various scales over which they operated, who they affected, and how matters of regulation intervened or not (let alone whether states could actually deliver what they claimed) is thus essential if we are to understand the logic behind the political choices made.

Here too, decision paths were not always direct. As an example of a shared instrument facilitating temporary convergence, consider the financing of Timoleon's expedition to Sicily (344-338 BC), which led to the defeat of the Carthaginians and the freedom of all Greek cities on the island, *inter alia* securing mainland access to western markets.¹¹² Support for the expedition crossed the political divides of the previous century, bringing together the Corcyraeans, Leukadans, Anaktorians, Ambrakians, Akarnanians, and Amphilochean Argives within an alliance extending from Corinth to Dyrrachion. Regardless of the differing numismatic histories of individual cities, widespread issues of silver staters on the Corinthian standard and with Corinthian Pegasos iconography surely facilitated common financing of the expedition. In the longer term, they may also have been advantageous in western trade.¹¹³ They illustrate the

111 Mackil 2015b.

112 Plut. *Tim.* 35; Domingo-Forasté 1988: 58-63.

113 Pegasoi: Hoover 2014: 217-75 (noting, at 261, that the numismatic history of Palairos remains poorly documented). Domingo-Forasté 1988: 132-48 offers a critical overview of arguments surrounding the sudden widespread issue of this type.

prioritization of widely shared economic and geopolitical ambitions and buy-in to the most suitable instrument to achieve them on a geographical scale different from fifth-century alliances and larger than that of the future federations. This convergence may seem to be a step towards a common coinage shared by the northern islands of the Central Ionian Archipelago and their mainland neighbours,¹¹⁴ but it had no long-term political consequence. Alongside it, the more varied histories of fractional silver and especially bronze coinage, for example in Leukas and among the Akarnanian cities, point to the co-existence of smaller scale markets and different local needs.

One of the least developed areas of current discussion concerns what we might term the middle range – documenting markets which can extend beyond *polis* borders, if not always greatly so, and understanding how they might operate individually and in the context of intersecting networks.¹¹⁵ We also know surprisingly little about the real extent of monetization region by region: about coin supply, the use of other fungible commodities, and the potential role of bullion and metals in other forms alongside coin. Methodologically innovative work is now being done to identify metal sources and bullion mixes, painting a picture of essentially opportunistic trade on which minting communities could draw more or less at will.¹¹⁶ What we lack is a balance between larger scale issues of supply and exchange and granular understanding of practices and attitudes (e.g. to value and valorization) in individual regions.

Finally, there is the question of labour, wealth, and inequality. Discussions of the nature of work and of ‘professions’ in the Classical world¹¹⁷ have largely remained separate from evaluation of economic performance.¹¹⁸ Recently, Sarah Murray has emphasized the need to factor in the human costs of growth and to develop metrics to assess cost/benefit

114 Liampi & Papaevangelou-Genakos 2022; on the spectrum of common coinage, from convergence to issues in the name of federations, see Mackil & van Alfen 2006.

115 A phenomenon better understood in Hellenistic times: e.g. Oliver 2018. Hayward & Morgan (in review) pose similar questions in relation to the supply of building materials.

116 Davis in review.

117 As Lytle 2018; Stewart et al. 2020.

118 Morris 2005 remains a standard treatment of Classical data.

in human terms.¹¹⁹ Nuancing the general assumption that improved performance promotes greater well-being, Murray raises the question of whether there was such a thing as ‘bad’ growth that might disproportionately affect different sectors of the population, create risks to be managed, or even threaten the integrity of the state.

A growing body of work seeks to evaluate socioeconomic inequalities on the basis of the mortuary record. Some studies are morphometric, as the examination of (in)equalities in Classical to Roman east Attica by Anna Karligkioti and colleagues, and Anna Lagia and Lisa Steige’s comparison of Early Iron Age to Early Byzantine skeletal remains from Laurion and the *asty* of Athens, designed to test the view that the Classical period saw a peak of economic prosperity, and if so whether all benefited equally from it.¹²⁰ A greater range of techniques and much larger samples are required in order to examine the effects on various sectors of the population of settlement scale, intensity of occupation, and differing diet and exposure to pathogens and other environmental factors. Here Greece is particularly well placed to contribute, given the large data sets amassed from decades of rescue excavations in settlements and cemeteries across much of the country. One example of how such data can be mobilized is the programme *CityLife. A Bioarchaeological Study of 1,800 Years of Resilience and Adaptation to Urbanity*, directed by Christina Pappageorgopoulou (Democritus University of Thrace). Based on a sample of 4,500 skeletons from contexts dating from 300 BC–1500 AD excavated during the construction of the Thessaloniki metro system, this addresses issues of resilience, pathogen load, diet, immunity, living conditions, urban food systems, and social structures.¹²¹ A related challenge is to develop a more sophisticated theoretical understanding of inequality and its relationship to wealth creation, and thus to make the fullest use of the information acquired. Some of this work is being done within the discipline of ancient history,¹²² but there is also great promise in ongoing

119 Murray 2024.

120 Karligkioti et al. 2023; Lagia & Steige 2024. Such approaches are more advanced in the Roman world: see Bowes 2024 for a review, emphasizing potential methodological pitfalls.

121 <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101126337> [consulted 24.9.25]

122 Eberle 2024.

comparative research into the nature and role of asymmetric relationships of all kinds worldwide, up to and including slavery.¹²³

4. *Population.*

It is only fitting that discussion of population should feature in a tribute to Mogens Hansen, given his many contributions to this field. Amongst archaeologists in particular, methodological discussion remains live.¹²⁴ But while population size can be relevant to political organization, as we have seen, my focus here is on the relationship between changing population composition, governance, and decision-making.

How may we understand changes in population size, social composition, and distribution within state territory? Can we quantify movements in and out of state territory, from traffic in unfree labour to population displacement or voluntary resettlement (temporary or permanent)? What sectors of the population were most affected? What opportunities might have been opened by changes, for example in inter-state connections, increased investment, or economic activity including agricultural regimes? This all speaks to the 'what' and 'how' of government and foregrounds the resilience of existing systems. What were the potential strains on government, and did countering them open different conceptual space in terms of how regulation (including taxation) might be applied? If we are correct in assuming that systems of trust played a fundamental role, how might they be impacted if the people involved changed? Did it make a difference if incomers were assimilated into traditional structures (by marriage and/or acceptance into families as attested, for example, by burial in family tombs or plots) or if they emphasized their differences; if they were people who could bring assets or otherwise assert influence or if they filled subaltern roles? If inequalities in

123 The concept of Strong Asymmetric Dependency (SAD) has been developed and researched by the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies: <https://www.dependency.uni-bonn.de/en> [consulted 24.9.25]. Archaeological aspects of this agenda are carried forward by the Centre's ARCHDEPTH research group.

124 Terrenato 2013 reviews recent work on this subject in a volume dedicated to problems and agendas in historicizing archaeological data of this kind.

wealth and status increased, might this affect popular acceptance of administrative systems which were not formally regulated?

Understanding the composition of populations over time is an essential first step. One approach is to acquire large diachronic data sets connecting genetic relationships with kinship structures as expressed in the mortuary record, health status, social standing, and social practices such as foodways. This does not imply a crude distinction between self-identity and biological identity, let alone an attempt to identify ethnicity or race.¹²⁵ Rather, it is a matter of grounding scientific data from skeletal material in social practice using the culturally sensitive context of formal burial.¹²⁶ DNA is a key tool, but it is also expensive to employ at scale; other approaches, including isotopic analysis and cranial and dental non-metric traits, are cheaper although to varying degrees cruder and with their own methodological complexities.¹²⁷

These techniques are well established, and while they may feel new in Classical archaeology they are beginning to cut through. However, studies are still geographically scattered and sample sizes often small. There is a pressing need for larger and better integrated studies with emphasis on building a picture across the territories of future federal states. Areas of northwest Greece hold great promise in this respect. Excavation of large cemeteries for recent public works¹²⁸ offers the prospect of comparison between Akarnanian and Aitolian cities and Corinthian colonies which themselves had divergent trajectories – undergoing change in political control and forced migration (Anaktoron and Ambrakia) or hosting foreign residents (identified in the port community of Leukas by ethnics on gravestones). The colonial cemeteries all display strong emphasis on the family, with tomb re-use normal from the beginning and complemented in Classical and Hellenistic times by the grouping of graves within periboloi. At Ambrakia in particular, substantial work has been undertaken to characterize the human remains in these often-complex contexts and to consider questions of diet and health status.¹²⁹ It would

125 Parmenter 2024.

126 Laghia & Voutsaki 2024 represent the current state of the field.

127 Exemplified in Panagiotopoulou et al. 2018; Nikita et al. 2024.

128 Vikatou 2019.

129 Angeli 2021; Berry 2002; Georgiadou et al. s.a.

be a logical further step to address the biological relationships between those admitted to such contexts.

5. *Koina and komai*.

Whether we truly understand the range of communities brought together within common polities is an open question. The *Inventory* included settlements not attested as *poleis*, and in *CPC Papers 2* Mogens Hansen examined the term *kome* as attested in literary sources (largely Athenian at least for the Classical period).¹³⁰ As he observed, perceptions of the socio-political significance of *komai* vary. For Aristotle, they were lower-level villages, while Thucydides saw them as evidence of earlier and/or more primitive society (he allows their existence in early *poleis* as Athens under Theseus, as villages within a conurbation like Sparta, or as characteristic of a backward *ethnos* as that of the Aitolians). In Xenophon's *Anabasis*, *kome* describes a barbarian town.

In the same article, Hansen addressed the question of transformation in settlement organization. In the case of Kassope, he contrasts Ps.-Skylax's description of the Thesprotoi, Kassopoi, and Molottoi (Ps.-Skylax 31-32) as *ethne* where people lived *kata komas* with the reference to Kassope as a place (and likely a *polis*) in the Epidaurian list of *theorodokoi* (IG IV² 95.24-26). Ps.-Skylax was active around 380-360 BC and the inscription dates ca. 356, implying a change just before the mid fourth century. This accords with the archaeological date for the foundation of Kassope.¹³¹ Hansen thus assumed that Kassope was created via a synoikism of *komai*. Yet we lack evidence to substantiate this: the texts are uninformative, and post-prehistoric data from the only systematic survey of the area, conducted by the Nikopolis project from 1991-1996, remain unpublished.¹³²

There is much still to learn about the nature and role of communities of this kind both individually and as members of *koina* of varying scales. Unfortunately, some of the most significant areas for our understanding of them are also the least explored and/or with problematic and often

130 Hansen 1995b.

131 Hansen 1995b: 61.

132 On the project design and coverage: Wiseman & Zachos 2003: 1-45.

unpublished data sets. In inland Aitolia, for example, a shortage of evidence for settlements and burials after the early eighth century makes it impossible to contextualize the emergence of towns from the mid-fifth century onwards.¹³³ In Epirus, before the widespread urban development of the fourth and third centuries, settlement in Chaonia, Molossia, Thesprotia, and the lower Acheron area is uniformly described as *kata komas*, yet varied considerably in appearance. Molossia has the highest number of excavated sites; villages with associated cemeteries and access to fortified areas which appear consistent in form from the Early Iron Age until their abandonment (generally in the fourth century).¹³⁴ But even here, there are many unanswered questions – about social structure, relations between communities, patterns and locations of trade and exchange, and the continuing role of rural sites, especially fortifications, after the foundation of urban centres. Clearly there are ways to approach this via the material record – mapping storage capacity for example, or the activities of mobile craftsmen – but this will require further publication and new fieldwork.

This situation cannot be dismissed as just a phenomenon of the ‘periphery’. First, it speaks to larger biases in the settlement record. Site distributions are inevitably incomplete, but gaps in the coverage of particular areas and kinds of environment should be targeted as a priority, and legacy data published and/or reappraised. In other words, the problem is less one of increasing site numbers *per se*, and more of designing projects to target difficult areas and assess what the data represent. Some unpublished data will be straightforward to process. Others are so severely impacted by landscape change and problems of visibility that a new research design is required: such is the case with legacy data from the Grevena Survey in western Macedonia.¹³⁵ In the northwest, including the Ionian islands, large areas of uplands and mountains are barely investigated (a situation not unusual in the old Greek world). In these kinds of environment, pedestrian survey faces challenges of scale and practi-

133 Evidence summarized in Morgan forthcoming-a: section 4.1.2.

134 Morgan forthcoming-a: section 4.1.6; Papadopoulos 2016.

135 Apostolou et al. 2024.

cality. Integration of LiDAR, drone, and geophysical survey is significantly more advanced in Italy and further west in Europe and is much needed in Greece.¹³⁶

Secondly, a clearer view of the form and date of the infrastructure belonging to communities currently subsumed under the heading of *komai* in modern scholarship will permit more robust comparison with settlements attributed to *poleis*. In a provocative recent article, Robin Rönnlund argued that it is misleading to treat Greek *polis* towns as ‘urbanized’ before the late fourth or third centuries and thus as models for settlement development in temperate Europe.¹³⁷ Rather, with primary reference to western Thessaly, he identifies a dominant system of lowland villages with fortified hilltop refuges. Whether or not one agrees with this argument, it challenges us to take a comparative view of how populations aggregate and with what degree of variation across a political territory.¹³⁸ Rather than simply contrasting some abstract idea of a *kome* with that of an *asty* (bearing in mind that we lack direct evidence for how many supposed *komai* were described by their inhabitants), one might, as a heuristic exercise, evaluate points of similarity and difference between widely scattered communities (considering, for example, Corinth, Sparta, western Thessaly, and Epirus within the same frame). Rönnlund himself has advocated such an approach to acropoleis across political formations of all kinds.¹³⁹

This in turn problematizes attitudes to fourth- and third-century urban development which explicitly or implicitly present formal planning and monumental construction as aspects of modernity and symptomatic of larger political transformations. One should not underestimate the social, economic, and political implications of investment on such scale, nor the conceptual shifts implied in changes such as the first use of formal cult buildings in Thesprotia and Molossia. However, the success with which these cities became embedded in local society, with transformational effects in the long term, clearly varied. In western Thessaly, Rönnlund describes such urbanization as ephemeral, meeting late fourth- and

136 Stek & Hamel 2019.

137 Rönnlund 2024; compare Morgan 2003: 47–49.

138 Gyucha 2019.

139 Rönnlund 2018.

third-century political needs but losing relevance and fading away by the mid second century, thus displaying a lack of resilience which contrasts with the persistence of often wealthy and powerful villages.¹⁴⁰

Sites of the kind now described as *komai* range from villages to small conurbations. As communities they could be expected to have their own political organization and to act as units in larger associations. We hear about tribal government, but the potential for more local, smaller-scale groupings is worth examining. In the case of Epirus at least, the form of overarching government could change without any real impact on the size and/or form of settlements, at least until the fourth century. It is not easy to find suitable language to describe these settlements without recourse to the outsider voices of Thucydides and Aristotle. Reliant on these sources, we tend to distinguish *komai* from *poleis* by virtue of a supposed lack of political status, and thus fall back on socio-economic considerations. But this is hardly satisfactory: the lack of an insider voice to give a sense of the political language surrounding these communities cannot be taken as evidence that it did not exist. The larger aim must be to fill out and thicken the picture presented by Mogens Hansen.

Conclusion

It would hardly be appropriate to commemorate Mogens Hansen with familiar questions and simple answers. I celebrate his taste for the intractable both in my choice of subject – the contribution of the material record to understanding the decision paths leading to the development of common polities – and region, since (Hellenistic Aitolia apart) north-western Greece so rarely features in discussions of Greek statehood.

My conviction that nothing is off-limits for material modelling may seem a throwback to the 1960s and 70s. But in asserting our capacity to write history through material culture,¹⁴¹ I take inspiration from recent work on other western places and periods,¹⁴² as well as from the concern

140 Rönnlund 2023. More systematic exploration of notions of disentanglement, as advocated by Semerari 2017, would also be profitable.

141 Renfrew 1980; on the intersection with history, see Hall 2014: 1-16; Khatchadourian 2016.

142 Dyer 2021; Gerritsen & Riello 2020; 2021.

expressed in the Americas and beyond the western world to avoid allowing the idea of prehistory to reinforce the supremacy of text-based outsider voices.¹⁴³ This is a matter both of reclaiming a wider range of voices and of recognising the equal importance of histories read through material and textual sources. In the Greek world, the task is to identify compelling questions with the power to change historical understanding. I emphasize the need to embrace dissonance between sources – to seek a thicker understanding rather than just connecting more reference points in one dimension – and to respect methodological and evidential challenges arising from all forms of source material.¹⁴⁴ Given concerns that the archaeology of the long Classical period appears introverted, I stress the need to tackle large problems with questions and methodology widely applicable across the Greek world and beyond. The CPC took a comparative approach to city-state cultures. Federal states and *koina* are larger and more complex entities, with implications for studies of urbanism, forms of political integration and their relationship to economic and other forms of alliance, and links with local power structures.

If I have been critical of current historical research, it is not to score points or set archaeology against ancient history. As Andrew Bevan has emphasized, the risk that Mediterranean topics are seen as over-represented in archaeological research means that we have a responsibility to maximize larger impacts and the utility of the data generated. Perpetuating splits with history, being unwilling to generalize, and accepting in his words a ‘balkanization of study into sharply bounded, period-, region-, and material-specific territories’ can only be counter-productive.¹⁴⁵ Greek archaeology has long produced an enviable range and quality of data. Now we must find more compelling ways to exploit it.

143 Lane 2013; Schmidt & Mrozowski 2013.

144 Snodgrass 1987: 38. Hall 2014: 207–12.

145 Bevan 2025 (quotation at p. 13). Sauer 2017 likewise emphasizes the political wisdom of outreach and generalization at a time when the future of the humanities is insecure.

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