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Patrice Brun, *Aristide 'le Juste'. L'art et la manière de fabriquer un héros dans la cité démocratique*. Scripta antiqua, 175. Bordeaux: Ausonius Éditions, 2023. Pp. 256. ISBN 9782356135902.

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If this book convinces us that we know less about Aristides than we did before we picked it up, it will have accomplished its goal. Brun argues that most of our information on Aristides, especially that from Plutarch, is based on ever-greater rhetorical exaggeration over the Hellenistic and Roman periods, and that it tells us more about the age of the author and the author's concerns than about the 5th-century Athenian general. To that end the book is divided into two unequal parts: in the first (slightly over three quarters of the total length), Brun deconstructs our sources in order to reconstruct a biography of the historical Aristides; in the second, he analyzes how and why the literary tradition gradually transformed a relatively minor figure into a paragon of virtue and justice.

Brun makes no secret of his conclusions: his frequent use of terms like “hagiography” and “golden legend” shows from the first that his intention is to trim back the canonical overgrowth. Some of his arguments in isolation are unpersuasive; the overall thesis is convincing less by the individual threads of evidence than by the grand narrative into which he weaves them. In this, the most thoroughly convincing chapter in the book is the introduction: it takes one famous anecdote, the illiterate rustic who unknowingly asked Aristides to write his own name for ostracism, and peels back, layer by layer, the details that are in each later author but no earlier source, until it has been stripped to the barest possible kernel of historical reality. Whether that barest kernel left over after the stripping is itself an invention can be debated; that the stripping proves almost the entire mass of the story as we have it to be rhetorical accretion cannot.

Before we examine the contents in detail, one mistake must be addressed at once. The book's back cover has two blurbs, one in French and an English translation. The English has the howler “nor is he (Aristides) mentioned by ancient authors.” This is a mistranslation of the statement that no *statue* of Aristides is mentioned by any ancient authors. Since the mistake is not the author's and has no bearing on the argument, it can be passed by after being acknowledged. Likewise unimportant but noticeable is the frequent replacement of elision with a single guillemet (e.g. πᾶσι ἑτέροις). There is also one strange reference to Xanthippus as “X”.^[1] The typography is otherwise sound.

Those aspects of the historical Aristides that Brun argues were exaggerated or invented by later tradition can be discussed under four headings: his poverty, his ostracism, his generalship at Salamis and Plataea, and his role in the formation of the Athenian Empire.

First, his poverty. With the exception of Demetrius of Phalerum, whom Plutarch quotes only to refute, our sources uniformly describe Aristides as poor. In fact, as Brun points out, to have had his political career he must have been a *pentakosiomedimnos*. So much is indisputable. In my opinion, however, an opportunity is missed: rather than examining the nuances of rich and poor in classical Athens, the author spends the chapter arguing that Aristides was “rich” rather than “poor.” Rich compared to what? Poor compared to whom? Someone with enough land to qualify as a *pentakosiomedimnos* was not necessarily in easy circumstances. Thomas Jefferson was famously “rich” in land, yet so “poor” when he died that his estate was auctioned to cover his debts. There is moreover a range among the elite: one aristocrat may well regard another as “poor” by comparison. Likewise, a “rich” person from the early 5th century might well have seemed “poor” to a denizen of the great Hellenistic kingdoms.

It is moreover far from certain that Aristides, even if not poor, did not affect poverty: his austerity stands beside his poverty in the tradition. Brun rejects both as “une pure construction idéologique.”^[2] Unlike the arguments against his material poverty, the arguments against his professed austerity are, as far as I can tell, based on no evidence besides the fact that the Attic orators say it is so, which is taken for proof that it is not so.^[3]

On this point, the most difficult counter-evidence is the ancient tradition that Aristides' descendants were all but penniless: his daughters were dowried at public expense, and his son Lysimachus received a public subsidy.^[4] The subsidy to Lysimachus Brun disposes of by arguing that this Lysimachus was not the son of Aristides and perhaps not even an Athenian, and that Plutarch may well have been the first to connect the two. I am less convinced of the daughters; the giving of dowries to girls who could not afford them is an attested practice, and if Aristides' family were respectable but not wealthy (again the question *rich compared to whom?*), it may well have been thought due to them to maintain them in an honorable station, if not to save them from destitution. But on this we can only speculate.

Perhaps the most famous event in Aristides' life is his ostracism. On this Brun is excellent. If Aristides was not exiled because of his excessive justice—the only reason ever assigned to it in our sources—then why? Any answer must again be speculative, given the state of our evidence, but Brun proposes an intriguing connection to Aegina that may have been taken as “une forme de trahison.”^[5]

Our sources likewise praise Aristides' generalship at Salamis (where he led the hoplites who landed on Psyttaleia) and Plataea. Brun is skeptical on this point, given that, as Plutarch admits, Aristides never held an independent command. His skepticism is perhaps excessive: we need not waste our doubt on Plutarch's claim that the action at Psyttaleia was the decisive movement of the Battle of Salamis, because in fact Plutarch says no such thing.^[6] What Plutarch is certainly guilty of is attributing to Aristides individually actions that in other sources are simply ascribed to “the Athenians” collectively. This is not necessarily incorrect: strictly speaking, “the Athenians” cannot have delivered the speeches given them by Herodotus; but one doubts Plutarch's source for the reattribution. Moreover, it is perhaps a misunderstanding of genre to point out repeatedly that Plutarch puts disproportionate focus on Aristides in the *Aristides*. Of course he does; and of course he talks less about Aristides in the *Cimon* and the *Themistocles*. Plutarch is writing a biography of Aristides, not a history of Salamis.

Finally there is Aristides' role in the formation of the Athenian Empire, especially the assessment of the allies' contributions. The importance given to this topic is based on the fact that later authors, searching for a reason why Aristides was called “the Just,” ascribe it to his fairness in apportioning the tribute. Thucydides all but canonizes this interpretation by referring to the former level of tribute, less onerous than later, as τὸν φόρον τὸν ἐν Ἀγιοτείδου.^[7] Despite well-cast doubts, I do not think Brun is able to argue around this evidence. It is true that Thucydides does not explicitly say that the level of tribute was set by Aristides, and that the expression ἐν Ἀγιοτείδου is likely temporal; but only a scholar with a thesis could believe that Thucydides, in referring to Aristides by name, intended to *lessen* his importance.^[8] At most, this can be taken as evidence that the exaggerated tradition was already in place and widespread by the time of the Peloponnesian War.

The second part of the book is meant to show how and why the tradition developed—the *manière de fabriquer un héros* from the title. Slightly less than a quarter of the book is given to this topic. The blame is given partly to the philosophers of the Socratic circle, partly to the Attic orators. The work of the orators consists of stylized comparisons and contrasts: on the one hand, the contrasts between Aristides and Themistocles, Aristides and Cimon, or Aristides and Pausanias, which tended to exaggerate the characteristics of each; on the other, the listing of Aristides beside other “great men” as exemplary of the glorious past. Such references, Brun correctly emphasizes, are of no historical value.^[9] The role of the philosophers is less certain. It is well observed that much of our information on Aristides is cited by philosophers making an ethical point. The fact that the philosophers valued certain qualities, however, by no means proves that their attribution of those qualities to Aristides was erroneous; nor can I believe that it is impossible for Aristides to have lived in a manner the later philosophical schools would praise because, “pour raisons de simple chronologie,” he cannot have been a member of those schools.^[10]

Overall, the book's thesis is largely unanswerable. No reader who sees the evidence marshaled by Brun can doubt that later tradition exaggerated and embellished their accounts of Aristides to the point that the historical figure is all but impossible to recover. Brun is also sensitive to the effects of rhetoric, especially how techniques of comparison and contrast would tend to stylize and overdraw. The breadth of evidence is likewise impressive. Brun cites other scholarship extensively in the footnotes and does not gloss over opposing views; these summaries of the state of the scholarship are one of the most rewarding parts of the book.

And yet, if the general thesis is proved, many of the specific arguments are unconvincing. Brun relies heavily on *topoi*, with the unspoken assumption that if something can be shown to be a *topos* it must be unhistorical—a game he cannot lose, because anything can be beaten into the shape of a *topos*. Moreover, I do not think that Brun ever sufficiently explains the *why*: why Aristides? If Aristides was really a perpetual second-rater with no great victories and no splendid virtues, *why* did the rhetorical apparatus fasten onto *him* to refashion into a paragon of all excellence? The difficulty is how to account for the 5th-century evidence cited by Brun himself: the “souvenir positif” of him among the Athenians,^[11] or the τὸν ἐν Ἀγιοτείδου of Thucydides.

The argumentation is also occasionally marred by gratuitous censure which gives the impression that Brun is a prosecutor rather than an impartial judge.^[12] This culminates in one of the most savage footnotes I have ever encountered, which I do not think would have made it past the editors of BMCR—and which is all the more unnecessary because it is aimed at a book from 1935 whose author is long dead.^[13]

All that aside, though readers may quibble with this or that detail of Brun's reconstruction, his overall argument is certain, the case is proved. I would have liked more of the how and the why. Later authors exaggerated and embellished; of the concerns that led them to do so, and the techniques through which they did so, we are told just enough for them to come across as the villains of the tale. This avenue would repay further inquiry. No reader, however, can come away without a doubt whether much of our historiography is a house built on sand, or without a more nuanced understanding of workings of the literary tradition through Classical, Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine times.

Notes

^[1] 98: “...les raisons pour lesquelles Hipparchos, Mégaclês et X furent ostracisés...”

^[2] 66.

^[3] 63-66.

^[4] 68-78.

^[5] 106-113.

^[6] Plutarch's words, cited on p123 n29, are ὁ γὰρ πλείστος ὀθισμός τὸν νεὼν καὶ τῆς μάχης τὸ καλύτερώτατον ἔουσε περὶ τὸν τόπον ἐξείνων γενέσθαι (Aristides 9.3).

^[7] 31, 153; Thucydides 5.18.4.

^[8] 153: “N'est-ce pas, au contraire, un argument essentiel pour penser que Thucydide, par cette formule vague, doutait de la seule responsabilité d'Aristide dans cette affaire et, au total, avait pour intention de remettre Aristide à une place plus équilibrée...?” The argument also falls apart if Thucydides used the *ipsissima verba* of the treaty.

^[9] 179-190, 191-195.

^[10] 171-178, 202.

^[11] 212. *Why* a positive memory? No reason is given.

^[12] 72, 89-90, 118.

^[13] 100 n.45: “Carcopino associe son bannissement à ‘sa réputation de haute intégrité morale.’ J'édugement savoureux quand on se rappelle les actes de l'historien en tant que ministre de l'Éducation Nationale dans le gouvernement Darlan et son application sans faille ni états d'âme des lois antisémites de Vichy. Il est vrai que son livre sur l'ostracisme est antérieur à sa nomination ministérielle et qu'en ce temps-là, ses notions de ‘moralité’ étaient peut-être plus solides.”