

Founding Father

Thales of Miletus: the beginnings of Western science and philosophy

Patricia F. O'Grady

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reviewed by Trevor Curnow

Thales has often and long been regarded as the first Western philosopher, but it has not always been clear whether this should be treated as a fact of history or a convention of tradition. This book is a sustained and serious effort to give Thales his authentically historical dues. Unfortunately, historical sources of knowledge about him are few and far between, and, where they exist, do not always tell the same story. Assembling the fragments, reconciling the differences and filling in the gaps over 2,500 years after he died is clearly no straightforward task. To produce a full-length book out of it is a substantial achievement.

A few facts about Thales are generally acknowledged, such as that he was a citizen of Miletus and regarded as one of ancient Greece's Seven Sages. Unlike Pythagoras, there never seem to have been any doubts about his genuine historicity. His identification as a Sage clearly indicates that he should be treated as a remarkable figure. The problem lies in understanding exactly why he was considered to be so remarkable, and in assessing whether he really was.

Patricia F. O'Grady's treatment of the subject is far from being an uncritical hagiography. His supposed engineering feats in particular are met with deep suspicion. But there is plenty left even when they have been disposed of. The Thales that emerges from these pages is indeed the first Western philosopher and, as if that were enough, the founder of Greek mathematics as well.

Philosophically, the most interesting parts of the book deal with Aristotle's comments on the metaphysics of Thales, in particular the fundamental role he assigns to water. This has long appeared to be something of a puzzle, when it has not been dismissed altogether as implausibly primitive. However, what emerges from the patient and detailed discussion here is something surprisingly sophisticated and, far from being a piece of random metaphysical speculation, probably founded on and derived from extensive empirical observation.

Other issues are treated with similar thoroughness. For example, could Thales have predicted an eclipse of the sun in 585 BC, and if so how? The search for the likely truth about this matter leads to

places far from Miletus, and one of the strengths of the book is the broad context within which the life of Thales is located. One of the appendices is dedicated to considering his possible travels and the influences to which he may have been exposed on them. While Thales is always the focal point, he is never the whole story, and much is revealed about his times if not about his life.

If Thales has been a neglected figure in the past, it is presumably because it was never felt there was much to say about him. If nothing else, this book clearly shows that to have been a mistake. The specific conclusions, tentative or otherwise, to which O'Grady comes are bound to be matters for debate, but overall she makes a compelling case for Thales to be regarded as a worthy founding father of Western philosophy.

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