Andrew Shortridge

This work – a considerable expansion of an earlier work in French by the same author, and projected to involve three volumes in total – is a study of Pre-Socratic writings in the genre of historia peri phuseōs: accounts of nature (phusis).¹ Gerard Naddaf argues that to speak of nature involved giving an account from the origins of the cosmos up to the present, and that the origins of the cosmos, of human and animal life, and of the polis – cosmogony, anthropogony, and politogyne – were all foci for explanation in peri phuseōs accounts. Naddaf draws parallels between the peri phuseōs genre and traditional cosmological myths; he argues that the pre–Socratics had greater political interests than has been appreciated, and that these political commitments informed Pre–Socratic cosmological models to a profound degree; he explores the Pre–Socratics’ use of Egyptian teachings; and he argues that the use of historia peri phuseōs, common to all Pre–Socratics, was inaugurated by Anaximander.

Naddaf begins with a study of the meaning of phusis, and contends that to speak of phusis meant to explain the origins of the cosmos, as well as the stages of its growth, and the culmination of that process in the world as we find it (20). He cites discussions – from Euripides, Plato, and others – of phusis and of those physiologoi who study it, in order to show that peri phuseōs accounts possessed this comprehensive explanatory scope.

Naddaf’s second chapter identifies three sorts of cosmic origin myth. The Babylonian Enuma Elish tells of the creation of the gods, of the cosmos, then of life, man, and society. Naddaf argues that this myth would be retold and performed at annual ceremonies that explained and justified the Babylonian socio–political structures (41–2). Hesiod’s Theogony is similar,
telling of the origins of various deities, their machinations, and the creation of mankind and the *polis*: a “rationaization of the history of the present world order.” (54–5) However, Naddaf notes that Hesiod portrays the origins of the cosmos as antecedent to that of the gods, and argues that this suggests a linear development, contrasted with the cyclical character of the *Enuma Elish* (56–7). Finally, in *Works and Days* Hesiod “advocates nothing short of dispensing with kings, for they embody ... the destructive *eris* or competition.” (60) The origin narrative here implies criticism rather than support of the status quo. Naddaf connects this critical tone with the contemporary development amongst Greek *poleis* of codified law, which he traces to the destabilizing effects on Greek culture of Oriental wealth and lifestyles; this cross-cultural encounter bringing a desire for a less fickle and more objective source of judgement than that of royal decree.

Naddaf argues that Anaximander clarified and developed cosmogonic myth in two ways: his explanation of *phusis* distinguishes cosmogony, anthropogony, and politogony, and is wholly natural (64). No extant fragments attest to Anaximander’s political interest: Naddaf argues that such interests can be inferred from his interest in history and geography, interest which is perfectly compatible with a wider inquiry into the whole of nature, since the later inquiry would have to explain the history and geography of the world (106). Further, efforts at political reconstruction are no more difficult than those required to understand Anaximander’s cosmological framework (65, 92. ff.). Naddaf goes into much detail about Anaximandrian doctrines: he discusses the original cosmic principle/substance of *to apeiron*; he reads Anaximander’s biology as one of species transformation rather than immutability (90); and in his reconstruction of Anaximander’s politics, Naddaf draws out the similar principles and concepts that order the political and cosmic realms, and argues that the advent of certain quintessentially Greek notions – the *agora*, *isonomia* – have a pervasive influence on the whole of Anaximander’s *historia*, from the cosmos to the *polis*.

Naddaf’s final chapter examines several of the *historia per physeōs* offered by other Pre–Socratics. In each case, Naddaf attends to the explicated tripartite structure he sees as integral and original to studies of *phusis*. He draws out the political commitments of the Pre-Socratics in a particularly interesting way: so, Heraclitus endorses moderation in political affairs (133–4), while Empedocles – on contingent or utilitarian grounds – supports democracy (146). Naddaf concentrates on the cosmogony of each thinker, identifying the way in which some fundamental principle(s) produce the whole world, living things, and human communities, and so he demonstrates the comprehensive and synoptic character of Pre–Socratic inquiries into nature.
Subsequent volumes shall deal with the tradition of peri phyeōs accounts as it is taken up by later Greek intellectual traditions: no doubt these promised works will be well–received, if they are as detailed, intriguing and ambitious as this first volume.

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NOTES

1 The original work is: Gerard Naddaf, L’origine et l’évolution du concept grec de physis. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992. The second volume will cover Plato and the Sophists, the third Aristotle and the Hellenistic schools. Neither Aristotle nor the Hellenists were included in Naddaf’s original study.