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James Warren

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Acknowledgements

As a new Classics student in Cambridge, the first ever philosophy lecture I attended was on the Presocratics. I had no intention at that time of studying philosophy seriously and I remember being confused by the idea that studying philosophy involved thinking about people who thought the world was made of water. But something about that lecture – given by Malcolm Schofield – must have made me come back for more.

There are a number of good books on early Greek philosophy and I have learned a lot from them. My hope is that, in a crowded field, this book manages to convey what I take to be the variety and importance of the philosophy at that time, together with an impression of how to go about thinking more deeply about these philosophers, both in terms of how to approach them in a philosophical way but also in terms of how to approach and handle the surviving, often frustrating, conflicting, and meagre, evidence. If I leave a number of interpretative issues open, that should stand as an invitation to further enquiry as well as an indication of the difficulty of drawing unquestionable conclusions about many of these philosophers. (I hope that I might be forgiven, therefore, for the often lengthy strings of further references in the notes. I thought it important to point readers in the direction of the various competing interpretations should they want to pursue a given topic.) There are, of course, many

things I would have wanted to explore in greater detail. Nevertheless, I hope that readers might be encouraged by what I have included to go and think more about what I have not had space to discuss.

One of the irritations of working on these early philosophers is that it becomes necessary to deal with a variety of different numberings of the various fragments and testimonia as different editors and translators impose their own orderings. I have therefore decided to give references to the Diels–Kranz edition wherever possible with the thought that, although Diels–Kranz do not provide translations into English, all good later editions and translations either use their numbering or include at least a concordance to Diels–Kranz so the appropriate text can be found without too much difficulty.

Thanks are due, as ever, to my students for telling me when I was not making much sense and to my colleagues for showing me how to think and write about ancient philosophy. Drafts of various chapters or of the whole book were read and commented on by Jenny Bryan, Eric James, Sara Owen, Kelli Rudolph and the anonymous readers for the publisher; my thanks to them all. Special thanks also to Jason Lucas for the map on p. xv. Most of the work for this book was completed during sabbatical leave for the Michaelmas term 2005 and the Lent term 2006; warm thanks to my faculty and college colleagues who covered various duties for me. Thanks also to Steven Gerrard, who suggested that I should write this book as part of Acumen's *Ancient Philosophies* series and kept faith with the project as it progressed.

This book is dedicated to two people who ask lots of questions. I hope they never stop.

JIW
Cambridge, December 2006

Sources and abbreviations

The following texts are the ancient sources referred to, and serves as a guide to the abbreviations used in this volume.

Aet. (= Aëtius), 1st/2nd century CE collector of philosophical views
See H. Diels, *Doxographi Graeci* (Berlin: de Gruyter, [1879] 1965) and
Mansfeld & Runia (1997).

Aristophanes, c.446–c.388 BCE, Athenian comic dramatist
Clouds = *The Clouds*

Aristot. (= Aristotle), 384–322 BCE, philosopher
De an. = *De Anima (On the Soul)*
De caelo = *De Caelo (On the Heavens)*
EE = *Eudemian Ethics*
Gen. an. = *De Generatione Animalium (On the Generation of Animals)*
Gen. et. Corr. = *De Generatione et Corruptione (On Coming to Be and
Passing Away)*
Met. = *Metaphysics*
Meteor. = *Meteorology*
NE = *Nicomachean Ethics*
Phys. = *Physics*
Pol. = *Politics*
Rhet. = *Rhetoric*

Cic. (= Cicero), Roman statesman, orator and writer
Acad. = *Academica*

PRESOCRATICS

De nat. deorum = *De Natura Deorum* (*On the Nature of the Gods*)
Tusc. = *Tusculan Disputations*

Diog. Laert. (= Diogenes Laërtius), 3rd century CE author of *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*

Dionys. *ap.* Eus. *PE* = Dionysius, 2nd century CE bishop of Corinth, quoted in Eusebius's (2nd–3rd century CE bishop of Caesarea) *Praeparatio Evangelica*

DK = H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (6th edition, Berlin: Weidmann, 1951)

Epicurus, 341–270 BCE, philosopher, founder of Epicureanism
Letter to Herodotus

Galen, 129–c.199 CE, doctor and philosopher
PHP = *De Placitis Hippocratis et Platonis* (*On the Beliefs of Hippocrates and Plato*)
De medic. empir. = *De Medicina Empirica* (*On Empirical Medicine*)

Herodotus of Halicanassus, 484–c.425 BCE, historian and ethnographer
The Histories

Hesiod, c.700 BCE, Greek poet
Theog. = *Theogony*
Works and Days

Hippocrates, mid-5th–early-4th century BCE, doctor to whom many ancient medical writings, the “Corpus Hippocraticum”, are traditionally attributed
On the Nature of Man
On Regimen

Hippol. (Hippolytus of Rome), 170–c.236 CE, Roman bishop
Ref. = *Refutation of all Heresies*

Lucretius, 1st century BCE, Roman Epicurean poet
DRN = *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*)

Plato, c.429–347 BCE, philosopher
Alcib. I = *First Alcibiades*
Parm. = *Parmenides*
Phaedo
Phaedr. = *Phaedrus*

Phileb. = *Philebus*

Prot. = *Protagoras*

Rep. = *Republic*

Symp. = *Symposium*

Tim. = *Timaeus*

Plut. (= Plutarch), 1st–2nd century CE biographer and essayist

Adv. Col. = *Adversus Colotem (Against Colotes)*

Per. = *Life of Pericles*

Ps. Plut. (= Pseudo-Plutarch)

See *Doxographi Graeci* (Diels 1879) and Mansfeld & Runia (1997)

Strom. = *Stromateis (Miscellanies)*

SE (= Sextus Empiricus), 2nd century CE Pyrrhonist sceptic

M = *Adversus Mathematicos (Against the Professors)*

PH = *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*

Simpl. (= Simplicius), 6th century CE philosopher and commentator on Aristotle

De caelo = *Commentary on Aristotle's On the heavens*

In Phys. = *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*

Stob. (= Stobaeus), 5th century CE anthologist

Themistius, 4th century CE philosopher and orator

Or. = *Orations*

Theoph. (= Theophrastus), c.370–285 BCE, pupil and successor of Aristotle

Timon on Philus, c.320–230 BCE, Pyrrhonist and satirical poet

Xen. (= Xenophon), 428–c.354 BCE, Athenian general and writer

Mem. = *Memorabilia*

Symposium

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Chronology

Dates for many of these philosophers and writers are only approximate. “*Floruit*” indicates the likely period of their mature philosophical activity.

BCE

- c.700 Hesiod composes *Theogony* and *Works and Days*
- c.600 **Thales** *floruit*
 - 585 Eclipse, said to have been predicted by Thales
- c.580 **Anaximander** *floruit*
- c.550 **Anaximenes** *floruit*
- c.540 **Xenophanes** *floruit*
 - Pythagoras** *floruit*
- c.500 **Heraclitus** *floruit*
 - 499 Ionian revolt against Persia
 - 494 Persian sack of Miletus
 - 490 Persian Wars: Battle of Marathon
 - 480 Persian Wars: Battle of Salamis
- c.480 **Parmenides** *floruit*
 - 479 Persian Wars: Battle of Plataea
- 469 Socrates born
- c.460 **Anaxagoras** *floruit*
 - Empedocles** *floruit*

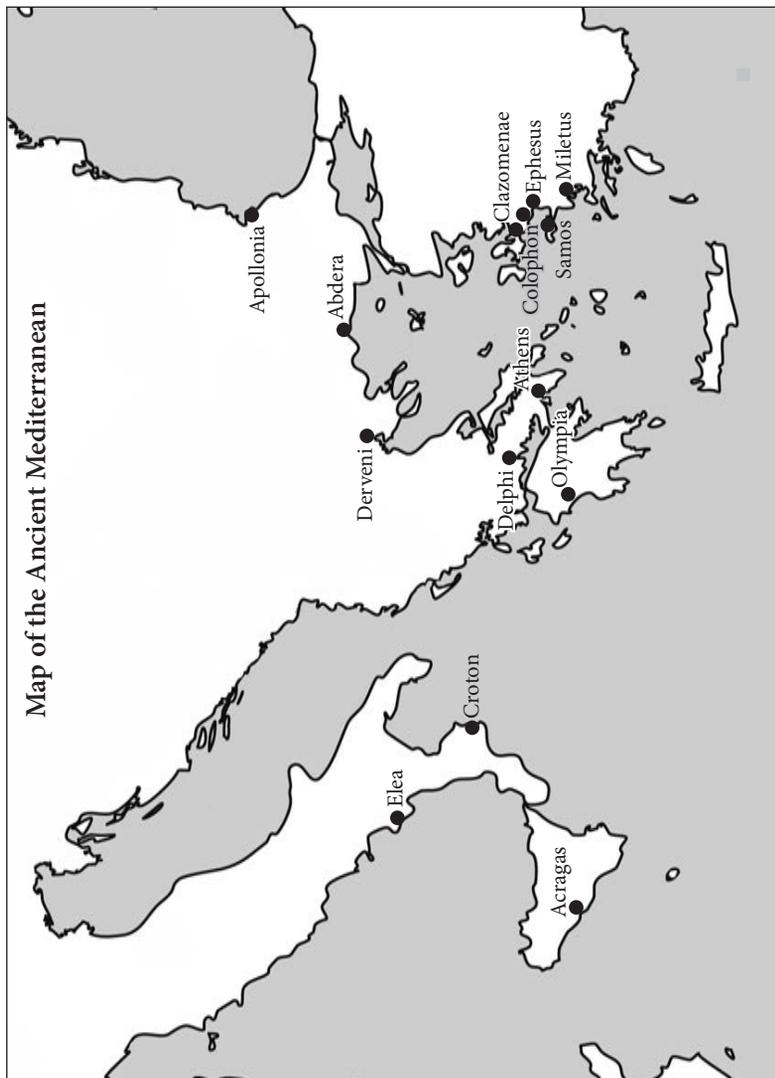
PRESOCRATICS

- c.450 *Zeno floruit*
Melissus floruit
Democritus born
- 450 Great Panathenaia, probable dramatic date of Plato's *Parmenides*
- 441–39 Samos revolts from Athens, Melissus a Samian general
- c.440 **Leucippus** *floruit*
- 430–29 Plague in Athens, death of Pericles
- c.430 **Diogenes of Apollonia** *floruit*
Philolaus *floruit*
- c.428 Plato born
- 423 Aristophanes' *Clouds* first performed
- 399 Death of Socrates
- 384 Aristotle born
- c.360 Death of Democritus
- c.347 Death of Plato
- c.335 Aristotle begins teaching in the Lyceum
- c.320–230 Timon of Philus
- 322 Death of Aristotle
- 285 Death of Theophrastus
- 106–43 Cicero

CE

- c.50–c.120 Plutarch
- 1st–2nd century Aëtius
Clement of Alexandria
- 2nd century Sextus Empiricus
Dionysius of Corinth
- 129–c.199 Galen
- 2nd–3rd century Eusebius of Caesarea
Hippolytus of Rome
- 3rd century Diogenes Laërtius
- 4th century Themistius
- 5th century Stobaeus
- 6th century Simplicius

Map of the Ancient Mediterranean



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ONE

Introduction: reading Presocratic philosophy

Our primary interest in what follows will be in thinking about early Greek philosophers' views on such topics as the nature and origins of the world, our knowledge of it and how we should act within it. We shall also be interested in thinking about the arguments they offered for these conclusions. But there are some crucial questions and difficulties to be addressed before we can begin, since they bear on the nature of our evidence for early Greek philosophy and the nature of the context in which the early Greek philosophers lived and worked. These factors shaped first the production and then, in turn, the transmission of the philosophy we shall go on to consider, and therefore deserve to be given serious attention.

What is “Presocratic” philosophy? What does this book include and what does it leave out?

The term “Presocratic” is a modern classification not found in the ancient sources themselves and, although it is still commonly used, some scholars have argued that it ought to be allowed to fall into disuse.¹ Not only is it chronologically inaccurate, since some of those philosophers usually classified as “Presocratic” were contemporaries of Socrates and others, notably Democritus, probably outlived

him, but it is potentially misleading in other ways. A full account of all Greek thought in the period up to the death of Socrates in 399 BCE would include a far wider cast of characters than do standard accounts of Presocratic philosophy. It would include not only the Greek cosmologists, but also doctors, poets such as Hesiod, political thinkers such as Solon and Thucydides, teachers of rhetoric and other intellectuals of many different interests, few of whom would conventionally be referred to as “Presocratics”. There is no reason to think that a global account of Greek thought to the end of the fifth century BCE could not be written, but it would be a daunting task and I shall not attempt it here. One reason for this refusal is that there are Greek sources who have left us a relatively clear and plausible account of what they took to be the development and history of Greek philosophy. In following their lead, we might indeed produce just one selective history among many possible others, but it would at least have the virtue of following what classical and later ancient writers took to be a plausible and enlightening account. We should note first, therefore, that the Greeks themselves are responsible to a large degree for the production of an account of their own intellectual development and also, it must be emphasized, for the selection of a certain group of thinkers and a certain set of speculations that they chose to single out as “philosophy” rather than, say, “history” or “medicine” (see Nightingale 1995). Of course, we ought also to be aware of the presence of other thinkers and sources of influence outside the cast of characters in the standard modern collection of evidence about Presocratic philosophy, H. Diels and W. Kranz’s *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (usually referred to as DK, first edition by Diels in 1903). However, although they did not refer to anyone as a “Presocratic”, ancient writers nevertheless often identify a specific phase in the development of Greek philosophy before Socrates and give a narrative account of its development, characterizing it as driven by some shared general concerns, principally concerns in “natural philosophy”: the study of the nature, origin and processes of the natural world. While it would be foolish to follow this ancient historical account slavishly and without critical distance, it would equally be foolish to discount it, either as an informative description of how

some ancient philosophers saw their own philosophical heritage or as a plausible – if partial – account of a genuine historical reality.

A further characteristic of these ancient accounts is that they tend to identify phases within the development of philosophy before Socrates, often pointing to Parmenides as an important break in the tradition and the inauguration of a new phase of “post-Parmenidean” cosmologies. In brief, this story of Presocratic philosophy begins with Thales and the other Milesians, who are principally interested in the question of what is the original material principle out of which all things in the universe are made or from which all things originate. (This is sometimes referred to as the *arkhē*: the Greek word for “beginning”, which can describe a temporal beginning but also a first principle or cause.) Each Milesian offers a different candidate and goes on to offer a description of how the universe and the workings of the natural world can be explained in these terms. Next, a new movement is inaugurated by Parmenides and the “Eleatic philosophers” Zeno and Melissus, perhaps also inspired by Xenophanes. They are radical monists, claiming that only one thing exists, and also produce arguments that deny the possibility of plurality, coming-to-be and passing-away or change. After the Eleatics come various pluralists – Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Democritus – who accept certain Eleatic strictures such as a ban on any absolute coming-to-be but nevertheless seek to explain the processes of the natural world in terms of the interactions between a set of fundamental existents. They return, in other words, to the Milesian project of natural philosophy but with a more sophisticated metaphysical view generated in reaction to Parmenides and his followers.

This is a very influential story, particularly because it derives to a large extent from the work of the two greatest ancient philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. They both saw that it was important to engage with the work of their philosophical predecessors and, although there were earlier moves to produce accounts of the works or collections of the views of early philosophers, it is the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition that is to a large extent responsible for the view we have inherited of the early period of Greek philosophy (see Mansfeld 1986).²