

Background Briefing: The *Polis*, The City-State and Urban Life

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1. Introduction: More Than a City-State

For the Greeks, the inhabited, ‘civilized’ world had certain essential features: the use of Greek language, a recognizable religion giving offerings to the gods, and a host of civic customs and institutions summed up in the notion of the *polis*, the Greek city-state. It included the idea of a centrally organized place where social life was carried out publicly before the human community and the gods. It evolved in some cases to include ideas of citizenship whereby most adult males were recognized as part of the polity and had both obligations and rights. It often included the use of a central agora, or market place, the use of gymnasia for general education, athletics, and military training, and most *poleis* (plural of *polis*) also had a central citadel or defensible area near the main city.

However, we should not view ancient Greece as the source of either city-states or urbanism. Cities probably first emerged in Mesopotamia, where a full-blown but different version of the city-states had already emerged by the fourth millennium B.C.E. Nor should we view early Sumerian cities as merely ‘temple-states’:

None the less Mesopotamian society, based on the city-state, was not a *tempelestadt* as was thought until quite recently, although as I have suggested, the formative and continuing role of the temple was great. Rather, the society was one of over-ranking households of varying size, importance, and type, grouped into two main sectors: public, that is, temple and crown establishments; and private, namely the ‘kinship-centred’ groupings we can call . . . the private-communal." (Maisels 1993, p148; see also Averbeck 2003, p55)

Thus, the Greek *polis* represents one working out of the city-state ‘model’, though the one most often represented as a source for European institutions and political theory. However, as we shall

see, it was far from being a perfect ideal for developing human happiness, especially if slaves, non-citizens and women are drawn into the picture (contra Aristotle *Politics* 1252a-1283b).

2. Evolution of the Greek City-State

Early urban areas in Greece tended to be nothing more than a cluster of nearby villages, often sharing a common nearby communal citadel, i.e. an acropolis (Snodgrass 1980, p31). The city-state extended this by placing all political, and most religious and economic institutions in a central site that then served the country around it. In some cases we actually have the formal joining of smaller civic centres into a larger state, with only one central administration. This process is called *synoecism*, and according to Thucydides (II.15), this happened in Attica under king Theseus, with the political roles of the smaller centres such as Eleusis being transferred to Athens. The details of this 9th or 8th century event are probably legendary, but some such historical event seems likely. Later on, the planned and conscious use of synoecism occurred in a few cases, e.g. the creation of Megapolis in the Peloponnese as the capital of the Arcadian League in 369 B.C.E.

It is possible that the Greeks were influenced by the Phoenician city-states of coastal Palestine, such as Tyre, Sidon and Byblos, which had some of these features. In the case of Phoenicia, the cities were often coast trading-towns, controlling sea and land trade routes (Culican 1980, p130; see also the Biblical 'lament' on Tyre in *Ezekial*, Chapter 27), as well as drawing on a limited hinterland that provided agricultural resources. These cities developed their main features between 1000 and 700 B.C.E., but continued as important centres down into the fourth century. These cities were often controlled by kings, but must have included a large merchant class. The Phoenicians from the 9th century B.C. were one of the dominant trading groups throughout the Mediterranean, and contacts with Greece continued throughout the Archaic period (they are also described as robbers and double-dealers in Homer's *Odyssey* III, p58; XIII, p209; XV, p241) down to the fourth century B.C.E., past the time of the Persian Wars.

Whatever the origins, not all parts of Greece adopted this type of civic organization. Firstly, parts of northern and northern-western Greece, and Arcadia in the Peloponnese retained the *ethnos* system of tribal organization. Snodgrass summarizes this political organization in these terms; -

In its purest form, the ethnos was no more than a survival of the tribal system into historical times: a population scattered thinly over a territory without urban centres, united politically in customs and religion, normally governed by means of some periodical assembly at a single centre, and worshipping a tribal deity at a common religious centre. (1980, p42)

The loosely organized tribes of Thessaly represent this system. Moreover, not all political developments stopped at the *polis* system in Greece. Parts of Greece just south and north of the Gulf of Corinth developed town centres, but did not organize these just into centralised city-states. Instead, they set up federations of autonomous regions, e.g. the Boeotian League, which Thebes always tried to dominate in practice even though the League itself was constitutionally structured from 446 B.C.E. to avoid this ('a highly unusual essay in representative government', Andrewes 1971, p191). Towards the end of the classical period these federal ideas became even more dominant e.g. the Archaean League of the third B.C.E. attracted up to 60 members, including *poleis* such as Argos, Corinth and Megara.

However, during the classical period, approximately 600-330 B.C.E., it is the *polis* which is the most significant development, and through the 6th and 5th centuries it is certainly the dominant political institution in Greece. As we shall see, there is a rough correlation between the *polis* system and the possible (but not necessary) emergence of democracies, while *ethnos* organizations tend to remain oligarchies, though this is not a hard and fast rule (Snodgrass 1980, p46).

Cities with the *polis* type of political and social organization probably first developed in Greece towards the end of the 9th century. Thus in the early Dark Age we hear of some 50 small *poleis* existing in Crete (Kitto 1957, p65) When the great waves of migrations and colonization began to move outward from Greece from the 10th to 6th centuries, it was city-states that were planted throughout the Mediterranean, especially on the coasts of Asia Minor, the Black Sea, southern Italy and Sicily (see Boardman 1980; Cook 1970). In other words, this was not just an increase in centres of Greek population; it also resulted in the widespread dissemination of a certain way of life, embodied in the city-states which were planted from Spain right across to the Crimea.

Furthermore, these city-states and social organisation sometimes influenced local non-Greek populations; thus in regions such as Lydia in Asia Minor and Etruria in Italy we find some diffusion of Greek arts, crafts, ideas, and ways of life. This process is called Hellenization, and this was only the beginning. In the next 400 years Hellenization was to greatly penetrate and transform most of the Middle East, northern Africa and most of Europe. Later forms of Hellenism were adopted by Macedonian and Hellenistic kings, having a profound influence on the Levant and Middle East after the conquests of Alexander the Great. Many of these Greek conceptions, partly mediated by Roman adaptations, are today very much part of our modern Western and cosmopolitan world-culture, shaping our preconceptions and the very terms of our political language, e.g. words such as democracy, tyranny, and oligarchy, plus concepts such as freedom, the 'good life', and justice, and art forms such as theatre, architecture and sculpture.

3. The *Polis* as a Form of Shared Civic Life

The *polis* has several interesting features, which include political, artistic and religious interactions. Firstly, the *polis* itself is the centre where political power is exercised, originally through the household of a king, or later on, through the assemblies for either oligarchies or democracies. This constitutes one of the beginnings of an open process of decision making in the state, even when the decision making group is at first small (the origins of the 'open society', see Andrewes 1971, pp273-294; for an overstatement of its ideological development, see Popper 1980). Usually the *polis* has one shared area for political assemblies, and all citizens are expected to travel to this centre to vote or participate in public debate. As such, this means that the *polis* cannot effectively be an extended territorial nation, since a journey of more than a few days would break down this form of civic participation. Notions of representative democracy, where a person is elected to represent those who chose him, were not used for internal politics, but only for international affairs, such as the selection of ambassadors, or members sent to larger federal systems, as in the Boeotian League. Hence, democracies in the *polis* are often viewed as 'direct' democracies, with their own peculiar strengths and problems (see below).

The population of the *polis* might be as small as one thousand, e.g. the small city of Plataea, or total figures of more than one hundred thousand persons for a major city-state such as Athens (Gomme

1933, p29), though only Athens, Syracuse and Acragas (Sicily) would have more than 20,000 citizens (Kitto 1957, p66). Aristotle would suggest that the maximum effective number for a city-state would be in the thousands (inferred from *Politics* 1326b), while for Plato the ideal might be around 5,000 citizens (Kitto 1957, p65). Among the largest regions controlled by a city-state was that held by Syracuse in Sicily (some 1,830 square miles), Corinth was still quite large with 330 square miles, while the rather exceptional religious centre of Delos was only 2 square miles in extent (Charlesworth 1982, p4; Kitto 1957, p66).

This process of public meeting as the source of political power may have evolved out of traditional assemblies of members of early communities, whose assent (passive or coerced) might be needed in warfare or for any major changes to these societies. In some cases these may have been assemblies of soldiers, who though they lacked direct power, were, by necessity and recognized practice, expected to give assent to major policy decisions, especially the decision to go to war. We have some remembrances of this tradition of open debate by leaders before soldiers' assemblies in Homer's *Iliad*, where Odysseus tries to stop the rank and file from giving up the Trojan War and going back home (Book II, p45). In most cases the rights of such military assemblies would have been extremely limited, e.g. to giving or withholding assent before kings or other leadership groups. Assent by acclamation seems to have been one of the few rights of the Spartan military assembly (Kitto 1957, p92). The general assembly of the full Spartan citizens was called the *Apella* and could only agree or disagree with the decisions of the council of elders (*gerusia*), but their support was needed in declaring war (see Fitzardinge 1980; for the limited rights of the assembly, see the text known as the Great Rhetra, preserved in Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* of Sparta 6). Later on Macedonian soldier assemblies seem to have some limited (but real) influence even when dealing with strong leaders such as Alexander the Great (see Anasen 1991). It is clear that in the archaic period captains and princes were viewed as having greater intelligence and prowess in war when compared to ordinary men (see Andrewes 1971, p218). On the other hand, the leaders relied on their troops in battle, and they needed the general support and some level of consent from their troops. These soldiers seem to have had the right to sit in most early Assemblies, and possibly their assent (by acclamation) was required in starting on new ventures or wars, a feature we find in Spartan assemblies (for full Spartiates).

It is quite likely that it was the overlapping rights of household members and the rights of soldiers that first directed these early communities in the direction of some level of 'open society', in part based on the 'face-to-face' interactions of such small communities (see Andrewes 1971, p273). These small states would also need to have been highly effective in maintaining their own autonomy and integrity to avoid a process of gradually being absorbed into greater regional powers, a process which was complete in Egypt by the third millennium, and successfully undertaken by different Mesopotamian cities over a 2,000 year period. The geography of Greece, with its small valleys and mountains, would have slowed down, but not entirely stopped, such agglomerative processes. However, as population pressure grew and inter-state contacts expanded, it was clear that small states might be forced to enter alliance systems, e.g. those focus on powerful states such as Sparta, Athens and later on Thebes, or even become part of a true empire as in the first Athenian Empire.

A second feature of classical Greek *polis* helped at first to sustain its independence. In general we find a move to the hoplite technique of infantry fighting tactics, where heavily armoured men form

a disciplined line of overlapping shields. This tactic means that a much wider range of citizens can afford to take a prominent role in warfare (in contrast to reliance on chariot or cavalry warfare). This form of fighting was adopted in a piecemeal fashion from the mid-eighth century B.C.E. (see Snodgrass 1965), but had become commonplace by the mid-seventh century B.C.E. (Andrewes 1971, p228), with the state of Argos being one of its first proponents. She defeated Sparta in 668-8 B.C.E., and Sparta not long afterwards followed in adopting this type of infantry formation. The cost of maintaining a suit of bronze armour, of course, still meant that the owner had to be relatively wealthy, and this was usually based on land ownership rather than trade. Thus they were 'the men in the middle', giving political balance and strength to the state (see Andrewes 1971, p22). In general, hoplites were expected to provide their own armour, and it was only late in the fourth century (circa 335 B.C.E.) that the Athenian state, for example, bothered to provide some weapons at public expense to expand their hoplite forces (see Bertosa 2003).

This shift to massed infantry formations, means, of course, a shift from earlier cavalry combats as an elite form of participation, towards a wider dispersal of social responsibility. In this there is a noted move away from the earlier state systems ruled by kings or 'feudal' lords (Charlesworth 1981, p4). It also means that this new armed class has the ability to take forcible action within the state if required. In other words, it would become more and more difficult for political power to be held either by a king, or by a very small number of clan leaders. Most of the Greek states of the 6th and 5th centuries B.C.E. relied on citizen armies, rather than major mercenary forces. This was, in economic terms, a very efficient means of asserting their independence at the city level, but it also made internal civil disputes, and the possible of civil violence or revolution (*stasis*) much more likely. This reliance on an armed citizen body, rather than either a special warrior caste or mercenary group, would become a mainstay of democratic forms of government, both in the ancient period and in then modern 'age of revolutions'. In Greece, the situation was to change after the end of the exhausting Peloponnesian War, 431-404 B.C.E. In the fourth century there was a sharp decline in the manpower of citizen armies, and this may have in part forced a greater reliance on mercenary forces, e.g. at Corinth, 393-391 B.C. (Androtion FGrHist 324F48; Philochorus, FGrHist 328F150, Justin, *Epitoma*, 6.5.2, translated in Harding 1985, pp35-36). Likewise, most *poleis* did not have what we would call professional or standing armies, though Sparta as a fully militarized society was an exception to this, thereby allowing her to annex the conquered territory of Messenia (Kitto 1957, p90).

It is in this environment that a class without political power can begin to agitate for a place in the state. Thus we begin to see a spread of political privileges from aristocratic classes down to larger oligarchies (Snodgrass 1980, pp91-2, who views this as a move away from 'exclusive citizenship' patterns). In turn, this can be extended towards a full ancient democracy, especially when a *polis* comes to rely on naval power, and even the poorest men, as rowers in the fleets, begin to take on more central roles in the defense of the state. It is in this connection between economic, military and political power that cycles of constitutional change can be readily promoted. However, in many cases the agenda for assemblies was set by some sort of smaller council which thus had a key function in channeling policy and shaping debate (*probouleusis*, see Andrewes 1971, p186).

The *polis* could occur in various constitutional forms, whether based on a kingship, traditional land-holding aristocracies, oligarchies based on a somewhat wider group of wealthy citizens, or it might move towards primitive patterns of democracy with an enlarged citizen body. We can see some of

these transitions in early Athens. After the loss of an early kingship, the state moved from an aristocracy to a limited democracy, a process largely forced by economic and political crises. In Athens the most important clan had called themselves the Eupatridae, meaning the 'well born', indicating they had ancient lineages stretching back into the Dark Ages. For the Greeks, these men weren't just the rich, they also claimed to be the best in moral and intellectual terms, and provided the leadership for the state. However, during the 7th century there was a sharp division between this group and the common bulk of the citizens, the *demos*, or people.

However, Greece society was also a highly competitive and agonistic one (see Andrewes 1971, p216; for competitive festivals at Athens, see Rhodes 2003, pp107-108): it demanded that such claims to be the best men (*aristoi* or those holding true excellence or *arete*) be tested, whether by competition, warfare, or in public debate and service. These trends pushed Greek society towards a pattern of superb achievement, but also towards internal conflict: -

The abstract noun *aretê*, which we helplessly translate 'virtue' because we have no nearer word, implies more than usual skill at doing something, perhaps something we should recognize as virtuous, often what we should treat as, at best, morally neutral. The concern is with doing whatever it is well, and the test is success rather than good intention.

The Greeks tended to see any activity as a competition or test – in their own word, an *agon*; and much has been written about the 'agonal' concept of Greek life, some of it helpful and some exaggerated. (Andrewes 1971, p216).

Thus honour (*timê*) could not be exclusively retained by a passive aristocracy (for early origins, see Finkelberg 1998; Zanker 1988). In turn, timarchy (rule by those who have held political, military or religious office, as distinct from the rule of just the wealthy) could provide one channel to widen the number of those worthy of holding power. This new elite would still seek pre-eminence through the support of other citizens, to whom they nonetheless feel superior. Honour and preeminence could not be retained by a small group, and in time such forces would push some *poleis* (e.g. Athens, Samos and Syracuse in Sicily) towards the rule of tyrants or towards democratic structures (for cyclic views of political systems in ancient thought, see Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Politics*, Polybius's *History* and Cicero's *De Republica*).

One of the key features is that it allows, through the combination of small-state structures and the demand for autonomy, a fairly rapid change in power-sharing relationships. The evolutionary patterns followed by Greek constitutions thus have major advantages; they can evolve towards systems of greater representation, and allow high levels of social mobility. Part of the cause for such moves in states such as Athens and Corinth was a violent reaction against pattern of spiraling peasant debt (Snodgrass 1980, pp92-3). On the other hand, this pattern of fluidity can become very unstable, swinging between oligarchic and democratic forms of dominance, (a problem for a wide range of *poleis* including Athens, Megara and Corcyra).

4. City-State Culture and Mass Participation

The *polis* is more than a sharing of political powers and military duties by a wide proportion of citizens or a defined high-status group operating in accordance with some pattern of law or custom (*nomos*). It also involves a shared culture in a way that we would find very hard to understand in the modern world, with the current strong trends of individualism, pluralism, extensive personal choice, the distinctions between high and low art, dozens of different sub-cultural 'art niches', each

of which develops a relatively independent life. For the culture of the *polis*, however, we find not only the pursuit of an incredibly wide range of arts and philosophies, but also a penetration of these developments through the civic body. In many ways this involved a wider range of people in public activities in more fully developed democracies (see further Ober 1991), ranging from defending the state, through to rotational office holding, sitting in the assembly, jury-service, through to attending the theatre (a mass activity) or providing public liturgies to fund such activities.

As noted by Max Charlesworth: -

Between about 525 and 325 B.C. there was an astonishing flowering of civilization in the main centres of Greece. Playwrights such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes, historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides; philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, sculptors such as Phidias and Praxiteles; and the architects of buildings such as the Parthenon - all flourishing through this marvellous 200 years. It was also during this time that the philosophical study of politics was invented and the foundations of democratic theory were laid down. (1982, pp1-2).

We should not exaggerate the ordinary Athenian's political interest in every session of the Assembly: it has been suggested that the pay for sitting in the Athenian assembly had to be raised from one to eventually three obols to ensure that the needed quorum was there for voting (Andrewes 1971, p205). However, civic life in Athens involved not just voting, sitting in democratic juries, or waging almost seasonal warfare. It included participation in the great religious and artistic ceremonies of Athens; the sharing of meat from the sacrifices to Athena in the festival of the Little Panathenaia, the viewing of Pan-Hellenic games in greater Panathenaia every four years (Burkert, 1985, p232), taking part in various great ceremonial processions which lead through the city, starting or ending at a major temple complex such as the Acropolis, the crowding into the huge amphitheatre for the contests in tragedy (at first a unique Athenian form, but not necessarily democratic in origin or content, though its processes evolved alongside democracy in Athens, see Rhodes 2003) and comedy held at the festivals in honour of Dionysus (Andrewes 1971, p243). It might also include initiation into the mystery cult held in special ceremonies at Eleusis. For the Greeks their yearly cycles were largely structured by these religious events, with festivals which 'interrupt and articulate everyday life'. Indeed the 'order of the calendar is largely identical with the sequence of festivals' (Burkert 1985, p225). These processions were called a *pompe*, and brought people together for hours at a time in a structured escorting of religious objects or persons (Burkert, 1985 p99).

Many thousands of people, sometimes including women, children, slaves and on occasion guests of the city, would be involved in these events. Not only the rich and educated, but the poor also attended (see for example Plato's criticism of the audience at the theatre in his dialogue *Gorgias*, section 502d). Attendance at these special theatrical festivals was of such importance to the demos of Athens that in the fourth century funds were set aside to ensure that the poor could attend the theatre (see Rhodes 2003 on the problem of charging for elements of a religious festival).

Greek theatre then, though today regarded as one of the highest art forms, in classical Greece was part of a much more integrated social activity, and was one of the social practices which helped maintain cohesion in spite of the enormous tensions and divisions which had begun to emerge in the *polis* during the 5th century. Both comedy and tragedy helped inform the minds and emotions of Greek audiences, and reflected in an immediate way upon major social and political issues. The

comedy the *Archanians* of Aristophanes, for example, reflected directly on the causes and conduct of the Peloponnesian War, makes a strong cause for peace, and directly attacks specific political leaders thought to be war-mongers. Theatre also tried to position human societies in relation to aspirations and values. Tragedy, in particular, was deeply concerned with the working out of necessities, which though often horrible, helped define humankind's place in the world. They are often concerned with cases of individuals 'overstepping the mark', when they have gone too far, bringing down retribution and danger not just upon themselves, but upon their society. This is an important point to remember about Greek tragedies: although they often seem to focus on the actions of individual kings and heroes, the outcomes are always shared by the society in which these actions take place. These 'community' views and needs are often represented by the words of the chorus. The overstepping of religious and moral boundaries is represented by notion of *hybris* (hubris), which is much more than just the fault of pride. *Hybris* could also imply arrogance and even violence against another on the basis of presumed superiority (Andrewes 1971, p235), an action which was legally chargeable during the later Athenian democracy. Jack Lindsay makes some important points on this concept: -

Hybris is the overweening insolence, arrogance and self-conceit, which makes a man go too far, transgress limits, fling himself into an untenable or unbalanced position. The limits are those laid down by the Olympian world-view. They were in fact determined by the forms of social development that turned the tribe into the polis and then gradually broke the polis down by conflicts and contradictions which were historically incapable of being resolved; conflicts of individual initiative and freedom with the demands of the collective, contradictions of democracy and individual flowering based on slavery and increasing tensions, and the like. The more that progress in the sense of social and economic expansion went on, the more the conflicts and contradictions worsened and the farther the hope of resolution receded. Men seemed held in the grip of a hopeless situation, in which the best of motives were inverted into their opposite and begot disaster. (Lindsay 1965, p350).

It will be no surprise, therefore, that not only the ideals and aspirations of the Greeks will be found in their religious and artistic expressions. Their problems, failures and social crises will also find a coherent and detailed representation in the theatre and in speeches made before the assembly. Philosophy and historiography, in particular, tried to address some of these major problems within the city-state.

These public reflections within the *polis* would also shape the identity of cities such as Athens and the more generalised concept of what it was to be Greek. For the historians, such as Herodotus and Thucydides, there was the need to explain two major wars which shook the Greek world and their view of themselves. The war against Persia would have an enduring impact on Greek history, politics and their views of Hellenism (the very notion of a Hellene gains an important boost by the conflict with the Persians). In the words of Oswyn Murray; -

Like the Jews, the Greeks learned to define themselves as a nation in the course of their contacts with the Persians: from the series of conflicts between them in the early fifth century arose that sense of separateness and superiority over other peoples which created the conditions for Greek culture of the fifth century, exclusive, self-confident and hellenocentric. (1973, p461)

The Peloponnesian War, on the other hand, was a major conflict between two systems of Greek alliances built up around the cities of Athens and Sparta, one generally more democratic in complexion, with democratic Athens more reliant on naval power than Sparta. The Athenian leader Pericles, in his great funeral oration of 431-430 B.C., would claim that Athens was also a more

free, original and open society (Thucydides II.36-41, a position developed to its limits by Popper 1980), a point which conceals just how reliant Athens was on a naval empire which she controlled through force.

These tensions, both expressed and sublimated, helped make Greek artistic expression so vital and long-lasting in 'Western' culture. These public events formed a binding sense of community participation, and in major cities such as Athens, Thebes, Corinth, or special cult centres such as Delphi, Delos and Elis (which hosted the Olympic games) were a source of great pride and international prestige. These cultural expressions were not just 'entertainments'; they were crucial forms of political and social participation, often strictly circumscribed by religious custom and even international law (for example, on one occasion the small city of Elis attempted to impose a fine on the powerful Spartans for breaking the Olympic truce, see Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, V.49-50, pp380-1). We can see the significance of such events in another incident. Alcibiades led the whole Athenian army beyond the city walls in 407 B.C. in order to conduct the religious procession to Eleusis, in spite of being at war with Sparta and the threat of Spartan intervention from their fortified position nearby at Decelea (Anderson 1974, p39). The action would have had a considerable propaganda effect specifically because Eleusis had become something of a pan-Hellenic festival with strongly pious overtones.

It is this mixture of political, economic, cultural and social aspects that made *polis*-life, poorly translated as our idea of 'political life', so crucial for thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle. Plato's seminal work, *The Republic*, is only so-called after its use in the Roman world. It is really one of several works in Greek literature concerning the *politeia*, that is a work 'On Political Society' (Charlesworth 1982, p1) as specifically found in the *polis*. It is also assumed that this society is in some sense legitimate, desirable, and therefore has a necessary component of 'justice' and promotes the virtue of its members (Charlesworth 1982, p1, p4; Kitto 1957, pp72-77). Hence we find a close connection between debate on justice and debates on the structure of the state for many Greek thinkers and historians.

Indeed, for Aristotle a full human being is by definition a political animal, a person exploring their full range of potentials within the frame-work of *polis* life (Charlesworth 1982, p3; Kitto 1957, p78). Furthermore, the Athenian *polis* specifically, and democratic cities generally, aimed at wide participation of the citizen body in all forms of government, including the use of direct voting on laws, the use of sortition (election by lot), and representation on juries without any separation of the judiciary, the legislature and the executive (see Andrewes 1971, p184). Government, in effect, was run by amateurs (Charlesworth 1982, p4), a position which the Athenians regarded as the greatest sign of their freedom, equality and ability (Kitto 1957, p161). To be unconcerned with political life and to be uninvolved with the city was marginally possible, but viewed as at best suspicious or even strangely individual. Hence the word *idiotes* was used for this emphasis on the individual, which would later on become a revolutionary trend in Hellenistic philosophy in that it did not seek the human good via reforming city institutions. By the time that Cynic and Stoic philosophers began to declare themselves citizens of the universe, and thus cosmopolitan in outlook, the traditional city-state was already in serious decline (see Kitto 1957, p159; see further Hadas 1943, 1963; Ferguson 1973), though local municipal structures would remain important in many ways under the Hellenistic monarchies and the Roman empire.

5. Structural Problems of the *Polis*

The city-state did provide an exceptionally wide range of participation in virtually every sphere of human existence for its citizen members. But it must be noted that women, for example, did not have political representation in the polis, except in so far as they were part of a citizen-household, the extended family or *oikia* (Forrest 1966, p50). Nor did resident aliens or foreigners have full rights, though they found some protection under the law, especially if there were treaty agreements between the home and host cities, or of a citizen patron would act for them. Likewise, the slave was a common item of property in these city-states, and was viewed by thinkers such as Aristotle as inferior to a full human being, specifically because they did not fully participate in political life as free persons. In the same way most non-Greeks were metaphorically slaves because they submitted to rulers and kings in a servile way. The notion of freedom was thus bound up the attitude of being a true Greek: -

The Greeks according reject the term 'slave' as applicable to Greeks, and confine it to barbarians. But this is merely harking back to the natural slave of whom we spoke at the outset; it is in fact an admission that some men are slaves under any circumstances and others under no circumstances. . . . For Greeks consider themselves noble everywhere, even beyond their own frontiers, but recognize the barbarian as noble only in his own country - assuming thereby that there are two kinds of freedom, one absolute and the other relative. (Aristotle *Politics* 1255a, p13).

It is true that the growth and development of these larger city-states rested at least in part on unfree labour, whether the helots of Sparta or the public and private slaves of Athens. This labour was required to provide more surplus and more 'leisure time' to the poorer elements of the citizen body. Indeed, for Aristotle the proper use of this 'leisure' time is one of the distinguishing features of a free man in a good society (*Politics*, 1334a, p214), for it is only by using this opportunity properly that an informed public life can be achieved. For the modern liberal democrat, of course, this is rather a sore point for his conscience (see Vogt 1974), though slavery *per se* was not the major cause of class conflict and social evolution in the Greek world (Finley 1985, p50, p184). This topic has been fiercely debated, e.g. Finley 1968 admits that exploitation did occur but denies that this is a central explanation underlying Greek civilization, with opposing views by de Ste Croix (1981) and Padgug (1975). Rather, poor free men seeking land, a cancellation of debts, or greater political representation and more privileges were a much strong force in Greek politics than the issue of slavery.

Rather, the seeds for the decline of the ancient city-state grew out of the very features which were also the basis of its vitality and strength. Max Charlesworth, following the arguments of H.D. Kitto (1957, pp152-169), postulates the following causes for the decline of the *polis*, (with extra comments added in brackets): -

1. The Peloponnesian War, and the decline of Athens (and in the long run, followed by the decline of Sparta)
2. The rise of Macedonia as a power under Philip II (from 359 B.C.)
3. Political lethargy and indifference (based in part on the failure of various political systems to achieve their ideals)
4. The rise of individualism (though perhaps this is more outcome than a cause for the decline of the *polis*)

5. The internal limitations of the *polis*, in that it was based on
 - a) political amateurism
 - b) economic self-sufficiency
6. The introduction of theories of moral political relativism (Charlesworth 1982, pp4-5).

We can explore this further. One of the great notions behind the maintenance of the *polis* system was the notion of not just economic self-sufficiency, but also the complete political (aut-archy), military and constitutional (auto-nomy) independence of the state. In this way a people would be free to live according to what were called their 'ancestral constitutions', which was really a propaganda term for living out their own political and cultural modes without being forced to accept foreign ways of life (see Lintott 1982). However, these very notions meant that the ideal of the *polis* would be compromised as early as 499 B.C., when the city-states on the coast of Asia Minor began to be threatened by Persian power. It was clear that neither an individual city, nor even a traditional cultural league such as the Ionian League, would have sufficient power to hold off the Persian Empire. Instead, the Greek states which chose to oppose Persia soon formed a wider Hellenic league, in which Sparta was the main leader of all forces, but with Athens the major naval power. Once the Persians are forced out of mainland Greece, Athens and her allies, especially the island peoples, chose to continue the prosecution of the war against the Persians, with the result that this 'Delian' League (formed in 478 B.C.) was soon transformed into what can only be called the Athenian Empire, under which *polis* ideals of freedom and autonomy were strongly compromised. Likewise, the Lacedaemonian League under Spartan leadership would come to intervene in the politics of its member, usually favouring oligarchies over democracies. In both cases, the independence and autonomy of the *polis* would be compromised.

Likewise, the *polis* could only rarely be really independent economically (Charlesworth 1982). The ability of the Athenian state to pay for democratic political reforms, for example, involved access to more than traditional taxes and revenues. In modern terms the government of the *polis* was really a modest affair - it had almost no standing bureaucracy, and wages were generally low. But unemployment at any sustained level would have been disastrous for these traditional communities, and one of the roles of keeping a large fleet manned after the Persians had been forced out of the Aegean was to keep the poorer citizens employed as rowers. This would have sufficed them (at a very basic level) for 2/3 to 3/4 of the year, i.e. excluding the winter season. Public festivals, along with payment from jury and later on from Assembly attendance could have helped them over the remaining period. In a sense, a political solution was arrived at to avoid excessive poverty, but the Athenians needed the Athenian Empire, built out of the Delian League, to maintain such a system. Revenue from this empire would have amounted to between 400 and 600 talents, a massive sum at that time (Jones 1957, p7). The glory of Pericles' Athens was largely based on such wealth - democracy beyond a very primitive level didn't come cheap.

Furthermore, Athenian democracy also ensured social mobility for the poor. Through treaties acquiring plots of land overseas, and through confiscation from rebellious League members, Athens managed to send out numerous small colonies, called cleruchies, in the Aegean and Hellespont. Through this means, A.H.M. Jones estimates that more than 10,000 of her citizens were raised from poverty to modest affluence: at the same time Athens' hoplite forces were increased (1957, p7), and small groups of them were now found in strategic positions overseas, e.g. the city of Hestiaea on the island of Euboea, and at Chalcis. It must also be remembered at this time Athens was also reliant on imported corn supplies; she therefore needed to keep open the sea route through the

Hellespont into the Black Sea (a strategic goal in which she failed towards the end of the Peloponnesian war). This was quite different to earlier patterns of 'colonization' which had seeded independent and new city-states.

Under these conditions, we soon find disputes building between the Sparta and her allies (the Lacedaemonian League) and the Athenian Empire. It was mutual fear and suspicion which was the main cause of the Peloponnesian War which devastated much of Greece during the later 5th century (Thucydides I.23, where this is presented as the 'real reason' as distinct from other pretexts). In the fourth century we find new leagues emerging, the Arcadian, Arcanian and Aetolian Leagues, while Thebes as leader of the Boeotian League made a serious bid for hegemony between the years 371 and 362 B.C.E. In all these cases, it is apparent that the *polis* is not a big enough unit to defend itself, but that many Greeks were not willing to give it up as the main unit of political life. Nor was there anyway of justly regulating power between these various leagues - in the end each would try to build up its power at the expense of other groups. Thus the international-relations and alliance systems of the *poleis* were not stable systems that could easily maintain peace, even under supposed hegemonies such as Sparta or Thebes. Regular and indecisive warfare was therefore the price paid, until Macedonia, at last, managed to win a relatively clear dominion in the Balkan peninsula. Only when the Macedonians were weakened by the Romans would the Greek states, including Athens, once again seek their freedom (unsuccessful revolts occurred in the second century B.C.). The *polis* would once again loose out to a power that had found ways to organize the resources and manpower of larger territorial units under a single political leadership, for by this stage the Rome was much more than a Latin city-state.

In the end, the very issue of the viability of the *polis* when inter-city conflicts were allowed would be called into question. In a system of inter-locked alliances, most *poleis* could neither be truly independent either economically or militarily. These problems would be exaggerated when she came to face major external enemies such as Macedonia and Rome, turning the *poleis* into cities with limited freedoms only irregularly guaranteed within dominating empires.

6. Conclusion: A Unique Experiment with Enduring Legacies

If the *polis* could neither maintain its stability, nor beat more powerful enemies, it must be remembered that these were structural prices for the adaptable and evolving civic life that could be found in small city-states. If the *polis* had real limits economically, militarily and politically, then its arts, literature, philosophy and its model for city-life would live on as a crucial heritage for Europe, the Middle East, and the modern world. As noted by Richard Mackenney: -

But the city-state is also one of the most dynamic sources of change. In its transformation from ancient *polis* to modern republic, the city-state provides in its political language and in its historical experience a capacity for innovation which never loses its feeling for the past. The history of the city-state . . . is one of our most important guides to the deepest origins of the modern world. (1989, p55)

This, of course, was not the end of the city-state. We find somewhat similar conditions being repeated in Renaissance Italy and a little later in Holland and the Netherlands. These cities, too, displayed a unique combination of political independence, examples of relatively strong political involvement by a rather wide citizen base (e.g. the Republics of Florence and Venice), and a great harvest of prominent artists, writers and thinkers. It is difficult to explain away this co-incidence;

perhaps both periods had some of the features of Karl Jasper's idea of an 'axial age' civilization where there is 'a basic tension between the transcendental and the mundane order' which helped generate 'new types of elites in general and carriers of models of cultural and social order' (Eisenstadt 1987, pp11-12). Max Weber has noted that such similarities as exist between the classical *polis* and the Renaissance city-state grew out of certain structural similarities between the early military organization of the *polis* and the ability of certain medieval towns to establish themselves as trade centres relatively free from the power of both the Church and territorial monarchies (Weber 1968, pp941-1359). This trend would be especially crucial, for instance, in the development of Venice (Plumb 1964, p231). It is the ability of the city-states to be free and vigorous, of course, which makes them central to the history of Europe. Mackenny notes that this is a 'story of the survival and continued vigour of autonomous towns, of federations, of republicanism - and of their influence upon the liberties of the modern West, liberties identified with a "free world", a vast and complex world which has yet to resolve the contradictions of the tiny polis of the ancient Greeks.' (MacKenny 1989, 8).

The developing conditions of a non-rigid, and partially open society, combined with a broadening cultural horizon beyond its immediate neighbours to truly different cultural systems, would have been important conditions helping broaden Greek thought beyond its archaic mold. The mutual advantages and disadvantages of extensive trading networks, combined with the threat of intervention by powerful neighbours, was a major stimulant to the city-state cultures mentioned. Combined with the inherent problems of the *polis*, and the massive challenges faced by most of the Greek states during the fifth century, Greeks had every motivation and opportunity to find new explanations and new ways of reflecting about their world. In this they were, and remained, an innovative people.

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8. Internet Resources

- A short but interesting account, 'Polis: City-State' by Richard Hooker (1996) can be found at <http://wsu.edu/~dee/GLOSSARY/POLIS.HTM>
- A range of resources on ancient Athens and Greece can be found via 'Greek History and Civilization' by John Paul Adams (2007-2008) at <http://www.csun.edu/~hcfl1004/histlink.html#Athens>
- The *Internet Ancient History Sourcebook* contains many sources for this topic via <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook.html>
- The Plutarch quotation on the 'Great Rhetra' at Sparta can be found at <http://www.csun.edu/~hcfl1004/rhetra.htm>
- A range of short articles on Sparta can be found via 'Sparta - Lacedaemonia - Resources on the Ancient Greek City of Sparta' at http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/sparta/Sparta_Lacedaemonia_Resources_on_the_Ancient_Greek_City_of_Sparta.htm