

Ancient Greece and the *polis*



The end of the archaic period

- In all the Greek world, between the end of the 9th century and the 8th century BCE the aristocracy takes over the power of the traditional monarchy.
- Between 8th and 7th century there are large migrations, with huge social, political, and economic consequences.
- The main causes of these migrations are class conflicts, wars among the various towns, and a significant increase in population.
- In the 8th c., from more archaic forms of society, there emerges a form of social and political organizations based on a town, the *polis*.

Emergence of new classes

- Among the main consequences of the colonization there is the expansion and the increase of commercial exchanges and of artisanal activities.
- This leads to the emergence of a new class of merchants and artisans who challenge the power of the aristocracy.
- The new commercial and industrial class demands the legal regulation of its relations with the aristocracy:
- Between 7th and 6th c. BCE, ongoing social conflict leads to 1) codification of laws; 2) emergence of the tyranny.

Ancient Legislators

- Between 7th and 6th c. BCE there appear legendary figures of legislators, like the famous **Lycurgus** of Sparta, **Draco** of Athens, and others.
- Soon there are **tyrants** who seize power with coups d'état in a great many towns.
- In the beginning the word “tyrant” is a neutral one; later it takes a very negative meaning.
- There start to appear what are going to be the most powerful towns of the classical age: Sparta, Athens, Corinth, Thebes, that extend their power to the near towns.

Lycurgus of Sparta

- Lycurgus of Sparta, mythical legislator, believed to have lived between 8th and 7th c. BCE.
- The tradition says that the oracle of Delphi suggested him a reform of Sparta's institutions.
- He came up with a new constitution called "Great Rhetra" that was observed in Sparta for many centuries.
- In the Great Rhetra there are established the main Spartan institutions, including:
- the diarchy (the simultaneous presence of two kings); the council of the elders (*gerusia*); the people's assembly (*apella*); and Sparta's traditional, very strict educational system (called "*agoge*").

Draco of Athens

- Draco codified Athens' laws in 621 BCE, starting from criminal law.
- His collection of laws was exceptionally severe and provided for the death penalty not only for homicide (in order to stop the traditional practice of blood feuds), but even for small infractions
- (hence the adjective "draconian" = excessively harsh and severe).
- Draco's laws were replaced by Solon's laws in the 6th c. BCE.



Tyrants

- Sparta's situation is a little exceptional. Very conservative, it keeps for a long time Lycurgus' ancient constitution and doesn't have significant social conflicts, nor migrations.
- In almost all other towns, instead, tyrants seize the power.
- They are usually soldiers.
- In Athens, Pisistratus rules for about 30 years (about 561-528 BCE) and transmits his power to his son Hippias.

Cleisthenes and his reforms

- Hippias' government is overthrown by the politician Cleisthenes in 510 BCE.
- Cleisthenes deeply reforms Athens' constitution, and democracy is established in 507 BCE.
- The reforms established the principles of Athenian democracy and reorganized the population and the access to political offices.
- Also, Cleisthenes introduced a procedure (called ostracism) to exile for ten years any man who was suspected of trying to become a tyrant, if 6000 citizens voted against him.
- Cleisthenes called his constitution not "democracy" but "*isonomia*" = "equality before the law".

THE CLASSICAL PERIOD



The Persian Wars

- The classical period is dominated by two long and devastating wars: The Persian Wars and the War of the Peloponnesus.
- The Persian Wars started in 499 BCE with a rebellion of several Greek towns under Persian control in Ionia (now the Western shore of Turkey).
- Miletus, Halicarnassus, and other towns rebelled against the Persian king Darius I and asked the Greek states of the mainland for help.

The Persian Wars (2)

- Only Athens and the small Eretria sent few ships.
- The Persians crushed the Ionian rebellion in 494 and then attacked Athens and Eretria.
- Eretria was conquered in 490. With the Persian army there was Hippias, the last tyrant of Athens, who hoped to restore his power with their help.
- But the Athenians won at the famous battle of Marathon.

The Persian Wars (3)

- 10 years later, Darius I's successor Xerxes I gathers an enormous army to invade Greece.
- Ancient historians believed he had 1 million soldiers, but more likely they were 100,000.
- Still it was an unbelievable number for the Greeks.
- Sparta, although already wary of Athens, fights against the Persians.
- In 480 BCE the Spartan king Leonidas I manages to slow down the Persians' march at the famous battle of the Thermopylae with his 300 soldiers (and allies from other towns).
- After several famous land and naval battles, the Greeks win the war in 478 BCE.

The Persian Wars (4)

- After the victory, in 477 BCE Athens promotes the creation of an alliance called the Delian League.
- It is a confederation of Greek towns with the goal of creating a large navy to continue the fight against the Persians.
- Sparta accepts the role that Athens is taking in the League because in that period Sparta wasn't interested in exerting its hegemony outside of the Peloponnesus.

The Persian Wars (5)

- In the 460s the competition between Athens and Sparta appears clearly.
- In 454 BCE the Persians defeat Athens and its allies.
- Athens then concentrates the control over the Delian League, that becomes a sort of colonial empire.
- The responsible and main political figure in Athens is Pericles, leader of the popular party.

Pericles of Athens

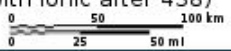
- Pericles reinforces the democratic institutions at home, and increases Athens' power within the Delian League.
- Pericles also greatly supports culture and the arts in general.
- This is a period of exceptional cultural flourishing that makes of Athens the main cultural center of ancient Greece.





The Athenian Empire at the brink of the Peloponnesian War (431 BCE)

- Aegina (456)
- City-state (date captured)
- ★ Cleruchy (Athenian garrison) (date)
- ★ Rebellion against Athens (date)
- Athenian territory
- Territory of allied city-states
- Ⓛ Thrace district
- Ⓜ Hellespontic district
- Ⓝ Ionic district
- Ⓟ Carian district (joined with ionic after 438)
- Ⓡ Islands district



The War of the Peloponnesus

- The rise of Athens conflicts with the League of the Peloponnesus controlled by Sparta.
- A major war breaks out in 431 BCE and ends in 404 with Sparta's victory.
- Sparta establishes an oligarchic government in Athens, the Thirty Tyrants, that lasts for one year.
- Several of these rulers were relatives of the philosopher Plato. Their leader was Critias, a former student of Socrates and uncle of Plato.
- In 403 BCE democracy is restored in Athens, but by now Sparta dominates Greece.

Thebes, and then Macedonia

- The main Greek powers of the 4th century BCE are Athens, Sparta, and Thebes.
- Initially Athens is allied with Thebes against Sparta; then with Sparta against Thebes.
- Thebes prevails but its hegemony lasts only until 362 BCE.
- All towns are seriously weakened and none is clearly hegemon in Greece.
- This situations favors the Northern kingdom of Macedonia.
- Macedonia had a monarchic constitution of traditional, rather archaic nature, and its Greek enemies often denied its being a Greek people.

Philip II of Macedonia

- In 360 BCE Philip II becomes king of Macedonia, and after years of war he takes control of Greece.
- In 337 he creates the League of Corinth, an alliance between Macedonia and the Greek poleis except Sparta, with the aim of invading the Persian empire.
- But in 336 Philip II is assassinated and the throne goes to his son Alexander.

Alexander the Great

- Alexander embraces his father's project to invade the Persian empire.
- First he completely destroys Thebes, that had rebelled.
- Then he conquers Egypt, and founds the town of Alexandria.
- In 331 BCE Alexander defeats the Persians and conquers their empire.
- Then he tries to conquer India but after having passed the river Indus he dies in 323 BCE.

THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD

Diadochi and Hellenistic Kingdoms

- After Alexander's death there are about 40 years of wars among his six former generals, the Diadochi, over the control of the empire.
- After this time, the three main hellenistic kingdoms are established:
- Tolomei in Egypt, Seleucids in Asia, Antigonids in Macedonia.

Rome

- Athens and Sparta continue for a long time to try to free themselves from the Macedonians.
- The wars end in 217 BCE with the Peace of Naupactus.
- This is the last peace made among Greeks without the intervention of a foreign power.
- The emerging power of Rome starts appearing in the Greek area.
- In 172 BCE Rome destroys Macedonia.
- In 146 BCE Rome definitively defeats the other Greek states.
- Greece and Macedonia become provinces of the Roman Empire.

THE POLIS

The polis

- The ***polis*** (pl. *poleis*) was an ancient Greek form of organization of society that was based on the participation of its free members to political life.
- Unlike other ancient non-Greek town-states, the *polis*' main characteristic wasn't the form of government (democratic or oligarchic) but a concept called "***isonomia***".
- *Isonomia* meant "equality of all citizens before the law".
- The relations between the polis and the citizens were thought to be part of a cosmic law, the natural order of the universe.

Origins of the polis

- The *poleis* appeared around the 8th century BCE as small independent communities, with autonomous governments and many different forms of government.
- In the classical period the *poleis* were about 700.
- Probably this fragmentation of the Greek territory into many small states was due to the physical characteristics of the Greek territory, that was mainly mountainy and made communications among communities difficult.
- However, soon the *poleis* started to compete in order to control or dominate the Greek territory and created alliances and confederations.

Independence or Weakness?

- The *poleis*' extreme love of independence and autonomy was in the end also responsible for their fall.
- Another feature of the *poleis*' political life was that they were prone to internal conflict, revolutions, and civil wars.
- In the 4th century BCE the big Northern Kingdom of Macedonia took control of the Greek territory, where the *poleis* were made weaker by their constant (internal and external) conflicts.
- In the Western part of the Greek world, in Italy, Rome conquered the *poleis* between the 4th and the 3rd century BCE.

Societies without state

- We must be careful not to use the modern concept of state for the poleis, because there are important differences.
- Many contemporary historians have pointed out that in the poleis there was no distinction between government and people.
- There was no real state authority, nor an executive power: state and people were indistinguishable.

The tyrants

- Initially the *poleis* were dominated by the aristocracy, but since the end of the 7th c. there appeared in almost all *poleis* the figure of the tyrant.
- The tyrant was an autocratic ruler who was generally a soldier, and who managed to concentrate the power in his sole hands through a coup d'état.
- The tyrants kept the power for about 100 years in all the Greek world.
- The first generation of tyrants was generally supported by the people, but then, especially due to the aristocratic opposition against them, they started to be seen as the evil man by definition, and their form of government as the worst, and unworthy of the Greeks, because essentially not limited by laws.

The tyrants (2)

- The tyrants, however, contributed to the political innovation of the *poleis* and to the weakening of the traditional aristocracy to the advantage of new commercial and industrial classes.
- The tyrants had concentrated the power in their own hands; when they fell, the power was transferred to the polis and its institutions.
- In this period, new forms of military organization and tactics emerged and had important political consequences even in peacetime.

Citizen-soldiers

- The army started to be based on heavy infantry where the soldiers fought in close formations and close to each other (the soldiers called *hoplites*).
- On one hand, this new way of fighting replaced the old, aristocratic way that was largely based on cavalry and on individual duels;
- on the other hand, this new way of fighting developed the solidarity among citizens, the sense of equality, and the sense of belonging to the *polis* over the traditional individualistic concern for personal glory.

Organization of the polis

- Initially the *poleis* developed around religious buildings like temples or holy places.
- Later, there appeared areas and buildings for political activities.
- A complete polis had two "centers": the religious one, called the ***akropolis***, a fortified part of the town;
- and an area with several buildings devoted to political activities:
- the most important was probably the ***agora'***, that was both the main market square and the area for political discussions among the citizens.



Political rights

- Rights and duties of the citizen included politics, military service, and religious duties.
- Only the free male adult citizens (*politai*) enjoyed political rights.
- Women, children, slaves, and free resident foreigners did not enjoy any political rights.
- Political rights included taking up political offices, serving as judges, and participating in assemblies.

Citizen's duties

- Citizens didn't pay taxes but only customs duties on trade.
- Citizens, however, were expected to "voluntarily" finance the community with their own money to a great extent.
- This was called "evergetism" (= "being a benefactor") and was for some citizens a good way to start a political career;
- for others, it was their complete financial ruin.

Religious duties

- Military service was compulsory and lasted from 20 to 40 years of age. Until 59 years of age one could be called to arms in extreme cases.
- Religious duties were not clearly separated from political and military ones, but every activity had a religious component.
- Religion had been the initial "glue" of the community and continued to pervade all of the *polis*' life.
- The citizens belonged to different tribes that always retained a certain importance along with the belonging to the same polis.

People without political rights

- The three main categories of people without political rights were women, resident foreigners, and slaves.
- Women were under a strict control and in a completely passive position.
- Their place was the house (*oikos*), that was insulated from the external world.
- Marriages were arranged by the families and in general the role of women was limited to procreation and few other things at home.
- Priestesses and women of low social position enjoyed some more freedom.

Resident foreigners (metics)

- Foreigners who were not Greeks enjoyed almost no rights in the *poleis*.
- Foreigners who were Greeks and lived in another *polis* mostly for commercial reasons enjoyed only a slightly better situation.
- They were called "**metics**" (in ancient Greek "*metoikoi*").
- In Athens, during the democratic period of the 5th and 4th centuries, they were about the half of the free population and were encouraged to stay to practice a craft;
- in other *poleis*, such as Sparta and Crete, foreigners were not allowed to stay.

Resident foreigners (metics) (2)

- Metics were not only resident foreigners but also former slaves.
- Often metics were not allowed to marry local women and to own land or houses.
- They enjoyed no political rights but they had to pay specific taxes and to serve in the army or in the navy.
- They had to have a citizen who represented them and acted as their guarantor.
- The laws had in general much worse conditions for them than for citizens.
- In general the *poleis* tried to avoid the integration of non-citizens into the community even if there were many complaints about the injustice of their condition.

Slaves

- Slaves were mostly prisoners of war or born from slaves.
- They belonged to the polis itself or (most of the times) to private masters.
- They had no rights and were considered as tools, part of the property, not as persons.
- They were necessary to the economy and performed most of the physical jobs.
- Aristotle in his treatise "Politics" calls slaves "animated objects".
- Their economic value, however, meant that there was some kind of legal protection for them.

Stateless persons

- These were Greeks who had been exiled from their *polis*, for example due to a civil war or as a form of criminal punishment.
- They had no citizenship, that is they didn't belong to any *polis*, and their condition was even worse and weaker than that of resident foreigners.
- This was because the Greeks had no notion of individual rights distinct from citizenship.
- The *polis* that accepted stateless persons had no duties towards them, and they could only appeal to the traditionally sacred condition of guest, and hope for the best.
- Many of them became mercenaries or bandits.

The invention of politics

- In spite of these limitations, the Greek *polis* is credited with (nothing less than) the invention of politics.
- The Greek politicians and political thinkers were the first to be concerned not with the execution of decisions, but with the procedure of decision making itself.
- They were concerned with letting reason dictate political decisions through deliberation (careful discussion among citizens to arrive at a decision).
- They linked power with persuasion arrived at with rational arguments, and with generalized participation in debates and in decisions.

“Man is a political animal”

- The Greeks, especially in the classical period, could not conceive a good life separately from politics.
- Aristotle provides maybe the best example of this attitude when he says in his treatise "Politics" that "man is a political animal", and that if somebody lives without a *polis*, that is not a man, but either a god or an animal.
- Most of the concepts and the terms that we use to refer to politics in the Western civilization come from ancient Greece, but their meaning changed significantly during the early modern times.

Isonomia and isegoria

- Besides *isonomia*, that we have already seen, one of the main principles of political life in the *poleis* was *isegoria*, that was “equality in the right to speak” in public assemblies.
- The concept is present already in Homer’s poems, but it doesn’t yet coincide with “freedom of speech” (*parrhesia*).
- This development is more of the classical period, especially in democratic *poleis* such as Athens.

