

# ANCIENT GREECE – CLASS STRUCTURE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

**Bronze Age.** By the third millennium B.C.E. the Bronze Age had permeated Greek culture, and with it the age of metallurgical sophistication. Implements, shields, and swords were produced at a new level of effectiveness, sharper, stronger, better looking. Lead, silver, and gold joined bronze in building out a new culture. Driving these changes was *homo faber*, now deployed into skill crafts and specialized training settings. The relatively homogeneous class world of Neolithic Greece, in which men (hunters) and women (gatherers) achieved surprising parity of social value, was about to transition into that dynamic interplay of classes in which the class- hierarchy of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. was remotely visible.

**Class structure.** Elites (rich men, not aristocrats) were visible on the horizon, as were various other denizens of the sub-elite class—free independent farmers, slaves (who made up one third of the population of many city states in the 5<sup>th</sup> century), and *metics* (resident foreigners)—and with them we enter the chemistry of a restless and brilliant fifth century in which many winners and many losers appeared. Citizenship, which had been conferred already in the 7<sup>th</sup> century in Athens—on the rich, on those rich enough to ‘buy their own metal armor’, and on the poor—and excluding always slaves and women—citizenship was by the mid-fifth century conferred on all resident adult males in Athens, perhaps 30,000 out of a total city population of 250,000. With citizenship, which brought people together, it was possible to soften the edges dividing one class from another.

**Cultural dynamics.** The abiding mystery of the power of the Athenian fifth century is wrapped into the development of a stratified but still interactive social mix. That fifth century chemistry was not to last. With the opening out, of the Hellenistic cultures of the late fourth and third centuries B.C.E., the gap between rich (divinized kings like Alexander) and lower class—specialized merchants, organized laborers, and independent farmers—grew wider, and at the same time the miraculous homogeneity of citizen spirit, that had marked the fifth century, faded. Why that fifth century dynamic lost its steam, or for that matter where it got that steam in the first place, remains lost in the continuing debate over what makes for the great human centuries—Florence in the fifteenth century; Paris in the seventeenth—and yet the social trigger of the hoplite revolution, in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C., seems a promising kind of account of the Greek steam-building that empowered the fifth century achievement. The new class of adult males who were able to arm themselves, defend their society as phalanx-fighters, insisted (how exactly?) on being recognized as a fully participant social class; the independent farmer gained new consciousness of society’s dependence on him; and from these two social class developments a true *vox populi* made itself heard, in a fifth century programmed for greatness.

## Readings

Farrar, Cynthia, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking: the Invention of Politics in Classical Athens*, Cambridge, 1988.

Martin, Thomas, *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times*, New Haven, 1996.

## Discussion questions

The transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age, in ancient Greece, appears to be a case in which material conditioning and cultural achievement are closely inter-related. Please do some research on this tricky issue, and evaluate the claims of many historians that culture is driven by material developments.

What are the major stages of development of social class relationships in ancient Greece? Track that development from the Neolithic period through the Bronze Age into the Iron Age.

What was the hoplite revolution? Can it be taken as the driver for the growth of the dynamic fifth century B.C.E. culture of Athens?