

ANCIENT GREECE POLITICAL HISTORY

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Ancient Greece - Government

Greek city states. The ancient Greek polis was itself a slow development, not easily traced even for the disparate communities of Attica, let alone for the multiple small proto-groupings that were forming throughout the Hellenic world, from the early 8th century on, and that were to go on to become the fully formed and generally contentious mini states—more than a thousand of them—of the Greek islands and coastal areas, including Asia Minor, clear through the pre-Christian centuries. The sheer number of these ‘states,’ and their gradual appearance from the sixth century on, is evidence for the importance of the communal *polis* development, whether in fully democratic form or not, as a social condition in which such enriching life forms as the arts—temple, vase, sculpture—were to find their place.

Growth of the Greek State. The social civic environment in which the early temples were constructed, the first *kouroi* sculpted, and the archaic amphoras and aryballoi produced was that of a loosely aggregated set of communities—reference here to the Attic plain and Athens its center—in which coinage, ocean going trade and commerce, a local market economy, the stirrings of a homogeneous law code as under Solon—were beginning to take shape as effective aids to group life. Shedding its roots in the clan culture of the epic age, the Greek city-state, already under Solon known as a *polis*, was trying out versions of democracy, blended with tyrannies and oligarchies, which were the staging grounds, if we go with that fifth century B.C. mythology, for the refined city state of the classical moment.

Pericles and the State. The growth of the democratic polis of Athens was driven forward by the regime of Solon, in the early sixth century; for though he was an autocrat he instituted laws, promulgated them for the city, then went away himself to let the community work with his contribution. This small tale exemplifies the kind of freeborn energy with which the nucleating residents of Athens were increasingly to show their distinctive maturity; a self-motivated involvement, with the *polis*, that for no accidental reason constituted them as makers and audience for artistic and literary work of a maturity unparalleled in world culture. The Funeral Oration of Pericles, given a century after Solon, for the first year’s fallen during the Peloponnesian War (450 B.C.), pays brilliant tribute to the kind of political participants the Athenians had to be, to achieve their distinctive greatness.

The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. There, far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes, or even to indulge in those injurious looks which cannot fail to be offensive, although they inflict no positive penalty.

The political networking of the Athenian people was so fine-tuned, their involvement with one another so earnest, that they did not even give one another dirty looks.

Non citizens. The administrative richness of the *polis*, slowly evolved and by the fifth century made demands on the citizenry which were tolerable only because the age was one of exceptional maturity. To be an Athenian citizen, one had to be male, over eighteen, own land, do military service when required, and be the child of parents who were themselves citizens. (We are about to stress the energy of commitment required *simply to be a citizen of Athens*. What are we missing? Of course we are missing the non enfranchised, women, slaves, foreign residents in Athens. And are we missing much of the population? Indeed we are. It is estimated that the population of Athens in 400 B.C.

was 250,000-300,000, breaking down to roughly 30-60 thousand citizens at various different times during the fifth century B.C. Of the non citizen population, slaves and resident foreigners were almost equally populous; the average family, sometimes even the poorer Athenian family, typically owning two or three slaves, who did everything from domestic to day laborer work. Women, who had no official rights, were generally kept out of sight, in the inmost rooms of the family house.) So the glory that was participatory Athenian democracy, in the fifth century, and in which was embedded astonishing artistic creativity, was the glory of a small part of the total population of Athens.

The workings of the state. That having been said, we can feel proper awe for the energy and maturity of participatory Greek democracy. That participation did not on the whole need to be enforced because it was viewed as a supreme honor to be part of the service of the *demos*, or people. There were three main bodies in which citizens deployed their constant commitment: the *Assembly*, the *Council*, and the *Law Courts*. *The Council* consisted of 500 members, ten from each of the fifty tribes; they prepared the agenda for the Assembly. *The Law Courts*, which proved ultimately too cumbersome, involved citizen juries of hundreds, who heard both sides of cases—prosecution and defence were carried out by the plaintiff and defendant—and who voted straight up and down guilty or innocent. As the cases were argued in three-hour-at-a-time segments, and there was no judge but only a jury, one has to imagine the commitment of time and energy the citizen would be required to expend on this civic responsibility. *The Assembly*, in which there were 6000 members, was the central deliberative body of the polis, and met ten times a year to consider major threats, projects, and administrative regulations of the city. One wonders at the self-discipline required to bring order into such deliberations, and must be reminded of the member sense of real power.

The evidence for that power can be imagined from a single institution. One distinctively Athenian democratic practice that aroused the special ire of the system's critics was the practice of *ostracism*--from the Greek word for *potsherd*. In this reverse election to decide which leading politician should be exiled for ten years, voters scratched or painted the name of their preferred candidate on a piece of broken pottery. At least 6,000 citizens had to 'vote' for an ostracism to be valid, and all the biggest political fish risked being fried in this ceremonious way. For almost 100 years ostracism fulfilled its function of aborting serious civil unrest or even civil war. At the end of the fifth century it was replaced by a legal procedure administered by the jurors of the people's courts. Power to the people, all the people, especially the poor majority, remained the guiding principle of Athenian democracy.

Reading

Zimmern, Alfred, *The Greek Commonwealth* (Oxford, 1969). This will be a central reading assignment for Weeks 5,6,7.

The World of Athens: An Introduction to Classical Athenian Culture (Cambridge, 1985). This will be a central reading assignment for Weeks 5,6,7.

Discussion questions

For about a century, the fifth, the Athenians managed to maintain civic commitment, from citizens, at a level rare in human history. Can you think of other examples? How about our own industrialized Western democracies? We are more inclusive than the Greeks with our citizenship, but do we maintain a satisfactory level of participation?

Are you surprised at the level of slavery in the midst of the democracy of 5th century Athens? Do you think it surprising that slavery could coincide with participatory democracy? How do you think the system looked from the slave's viewpoint?

What do you think brought this intense participatory democracy to an end? Was it that too much was expected of the citizen? Was it that non-experts occupied too many decisive roles in the polis? Or was it that the people ultimately, after a century of high intensity participation, paid the penalty for excluding so much of their population from the vote?

ANCIENT GREECE – Military History

Homeric times (1200-800 B.C.E.) War chariots; horses; 6-9 foot long spears, with a leaf shaped metal tip and a sharp pointed base; short daggers; laminated shields weighing 18-35 pounds—like The Shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*; bronze greaves; bronze breastplate: these were the hard facts on the ground in the warfare which occupies much of Homer's *Iliad*, and which may be considered the main topic of that epic. The use both of bronze and the new metal, iron, the growing metallurgical skills of the post-Mycenean period, and the increasing savvy for military tactics, as opposed to raids: all these developments were behind the fighting that Homer's epics depict. So potent is the sense of military force, throughout the *Iliad*, that one has to wonder whether the poem is a document about force or about grace—that is, the grudging graciousness of an Achilles toward Priam—and in the end a good case can be made for *force*, which has brought both Achilles and Priam to their knees.

800-400 B.C.E. By the end of the ninth century—loosely speaking—the first signs of writing are visible, coinage has started to be minted—with the resulting facilitation of commerce and trade, and by the seventh century the first city-state formations are emerging, themselves in part consequences of communities' increasing ability to defend themselves militarily. (The concept of military encounter has changed, from Homeric days when battle was between individual fighters, much of it hand to hand, and warriors—at least those of heroic lineage—liked to know who they were fighting and who they were about to kill.) With the development of a polis-centered world, in which *polises*—there were some 150 of them throughout the eastern Mediterranean—began to fight one another for products and turf, came the growth of citizen armies.

Citizen fighting forces These citizen armies—rather like the National Guard in the United States—were composed of men in the middle of citizen life, not of professional soldiers; this state of affairs affected the military conflicts which were rife in Greece right through from Solon (638 B.C.E.-558 B.C.E.) to the end of the Peloponnesian War (431 B.C.E.—404 B.C.E.) and the death of Alexander (323 B.C.E.). The tradition of citizen civil defense, in the world of the polis, meant that without regular standing armies it was not possible for opposing forces to engage in large scale battles over a prolonged period of time. During winter it was too cold to fight, and during harvest times it was too devastating to be away from one's fields. The result was that the bulk of the fighting, in the world of the polis, was done by citizens who had trained for war but were not professionals.

Citizen fighters: their equipment and training The military men, who grew up into this polis-defense system—we speak chiefly of Athens about which we know most—were citizens prepared to fight in armor comparable to that in use in Homeric times. These men—propertied farmers and artisans for the most part—found the armor required of them expensive, so that in many households the family suit of armor was kept available at all times and maintained in top shape. When battle time came, these men—at such times called *hoplites*, for the *hopla* or armor they wore—gathered under their local commander, formed themselves into a *phalanx*, a tight row of fighting men with interlocked shields, and spears positioned for buddy protection, and tightly twined together marched forward against the enemy lines, spears and daggers flying, in what would turn out to be a crashing battle of armed body lines. Set battles, lasting typically an hour or so, would decide the outcome of the struggle, the date, place, and duration of which would typically have been arranged in advance by the fighting parties.

Enlargements on the fifth century military scene The hoplite system, described above, was at its seasoned best at the time of the Persian Wars (499 B.C.E.-448 B.C.E.), for the invading Persian armies, vastly outnumbering the Greeks, were unskilled at dealing with the crushing power of a large phalanx. Later in the century, when Athens and Sparta both found themselves fighting to keep the Persians at bay, it was the Athenian navy, fruit of the long honed nautical skills of the Greeks, and of the wealth influx of fast growing fifth century Athens, that confused and then defeated the huge navy of Persia. Like the hoplites, the naval fighters of ancient Athens were mighty for a time; but that time did not long exceed the wars of the fifth century, which were to be followed promptly by the new military audacity and fighting methods of Alexander of Macedon (356 B.C.E.-323 B.C.E.), a man who thought in continents instead of city-states, and had recourse, consequently, to very different strategies of military conquest.

Readings

Hanson, Victor, *The Western Way of War*, Berkeley, 1989.

Kagan, Donald, *The Peloponnesian War*, New York, 2004.

Discussion questions

With Alexander the Great, in the fourth century B.C.E., a vast program of military conquest extended as far as India. What new tools, weapons, and methods of fighting were needed, to advance such a project of world conquest?

What were the economics of war in fifth century B.C. E. Athens? Who made and sold the armor for the hoplites? What did the average householder have to pay for his armor?

In Homeric times fighters often knew one another, and exchanged genealogies prior to fighting. Does anything of this military tradition persist into the fifth century? Was there any such 'personal' element to the fighting between Athenians and Spartans?