

Washington University Law Review

Volume 7 | Issue 4

January 1922

Cities of Ancient Greece

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Recommended Citation

Eugene McQuillin, *Cities of Ancient Greece*, 7 ST. LOUIS L. REV. 200 (1922).
Available at: http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_lawreview/vol7/iss4/2

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CITIES OF ANCIENT GREECE.

While Greek civilization was the greatest it was not the earliest of the ancient world. A long series of civilizations preceded it. The practice of free debate and public discussion, the contact of mind with mind, the free form of government, the popular assembly and the common council, held for the common good, are first found in Greece. The development of politics in public life among the Greeks is due to two main causes: First, the habit of free and open discussion in their every day life in vogue as early as the days of Homer; and second, the growth of so many city-states with small territory managed by a limited few known as free citizens.

All of the little promontory and peninsula known as Greece or Hellas project into the Mediterranean Sea from the European continent on the south. It is a land admirably situated and conditioned to develop in man a high civilization, the best physical, mental and moral culture. Greece proper is a land of mountains, hills, valleys, gulfs and islands; of fertile rich, alluvial soil; and of temperate congenial climate: Long ranges of lofty hills intersect each other and divide Greece into isolated strips of land or valleys. Some of these valleys open upon the sea, others are completely encompassed by

*NOTE.—Sources of literature; Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, (Ed. 1914) Ch. 78, pp. 267, 268; Fairlie, *Municipal Administration*, Ch. I; Fowler, *The City-State of the Greeks and Romans*, Chs. II, IV, VI; Freeman, *General Sketch of History*, 27, 28; Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, Book III, Chs. III and IV; Greenidge, *Greek Constitutional History*, Chs. II and VI; 2 Grote, *History of Greece*, Part II, Ch. I; Guizot, *History of Civilization* (Knight's Ed.) Lecture II; Mahaffy, *Old Greek Life*; *Greek Life and Thought*; *What have the Greeks done for Modern Civilization?* (Lowell Lectures 1908-09); Morgan, *Ancient Society*, Part II, Chs. VIII, IX, X; Reid, *The Municipalities of the Roman Empire*, Ch. XIII; Rowe, *Problems of City Government*, Ch. I; Webster's Speech in United States House of Representatives, January 19th, 1824, on the Greek Revolution.

mountains or high hills. The territory of Greece, therefore, presented physical conditions favorable to separate communities. Its hills, mountains, valleys and islands suggested a multitude of centers of population which in time developed into free, independent, self-governing, autonomous cities, with the exception of Attica, which never became sovereign.

Not only by physical conditions were the Greeks separated but they were divided also by their intense individuality. A strong spirit of independence was the dominating characteristic of every Greek. "Every man of them had a mind of his own." This lofty spirit of independence of the individual was strikingly true of their political unity—the city. They loved councils and cities and hated tyrants and solitude. The city as the almost universal form of Greek society justifies the conclusion that the city was the whole of Greek life. It has been said that an "ineffaceable passion for autonomy marks every epoch of Greek history and every canton within its limits."¹ And under the Roman Empire with undeviating tenacity the Greeks clung to their municipal institutions, even in places where the population had dwindled to the vanishing point. "They maintained with glowing fervor all that connected them with their ancient and better days."²

It is known, moreover, that Greece produced the first great cities of western civilization which reached their eminence in the 5th century B. C. when they became the centers of the civilization of the world. In Greece the city was in fact "the center and sum of political life."³

Thus, in view of the spirit of the people the country regions of early Greece presented little attraction as places of habitation. The people lived in the cities and owned the land beyond their walls. Slaves cultivated the soil. To be regarded as a

1. Mahaffy, *Greek Life and Thought*, Ch. I, p. 6.

2. Reid, *The Municipalities of the Roman Empire*, Ch. XII, p. 415.

3. Fairlie, *Municipal Administration*, Ch. I, pp. 4, 5.

citizen of one of the city-states, especially of Athens, was the summit of Greek civic ambition. As one writer quaintly puts it, in old days the fear of pirates and plunderers, in later days the taste for talking, and for politics, kept men from staying in the country and brought them into town where they found safety and contentment in society. In Hesiod's time it was the poor farmer only who dwelt in the country: fashionable and idle people always came together in the towns.⁴

Each community was distinctive and individualized. People living on opposite sides of a mountain range practically remained strangers from generation to generation.⁵ The physical environments of each municipality were such as to nurture and stimulate strong local attachment. To a people whose hearts glowed with such intense love and veneration for their city political unity and central government seemed impossible. But the ties of common blood, language, literature, customs and religion, and the impending danger of a foreign foe, often fired the Greek heart with devotion for the entire country, as attested at Marathon, Plataea and Salamis.

The unity of the social principle, predominate in Greece, lead to a development of wonderful rapidity. "No other people ever ran so brilliant a career in so short a time." The intellect was the essence, the strength of Greek civilization. On the practical side, it may be, that the Greeks were in some measure deficient. After the fall of the Greek state her civilization lived on.

At first the basic political unit in Greek society was a clan or gens. Each clan consisted of a group of kindred. The

4. Mahaffy, *Old Greek Life*, p. 12.

5. "Between Greek cities jealousies often burned fiercely for centuries." Reid, *The Municipalities of the Roman Empire*, Ch. XIV, p. 471.

The Greeks "were exceedingly jealous of each other, and full of envy if beaten or outwitted by a rival." Mahaffy, *Old Greek Life*, p. 9.

Greek City Life of the 3rd Century B. C., and its Effects upon Civilization of the Age. Mahaffy, *Greek Life and Thought*, Ch. XIII.

mass of the people were small tillers of the soil, but they dwelt together in hamlets or villages. In course of time the union of clans formed tribes, and tribes federated into cities. Historians agree that the development of most of the Greek city-states is enshrouded in obscurity. In the beginning each Hellenic city had its own chief or king; however, he was not an absolute ruler. A council of elders participated in the control of public affairs and advised the king. In course of time the whole people who had full rights of citizenship possessed the power to assemble and decide questions of government for themselves. But soon this form of government passed away and the independent cities became city-states or commonwealths. Originally these city-states were aristocratic in their form of government because only men of particular families could hold public office and take part in the government assemblies. Subsequently most of the city-states adopted the democratic form of government and then all free citizens became eligible to hold public office and had a voice in public matters, but slaves were excluded.

As to the liberty of the Greek citizen (apart from the times and places where a tyrant or a few nobles ruled and where the mass of the citizens had no public duties) it may be said that the Greek states recognized no other person than the free citizen as a member of the body politic, and all public regulations were made with reference to his rights and his demands. Moreover, the life and property of all citizens were within the unlimited disposition of the city-state. To the Greek individual liberty meant to all free citizens personal safety, freedom of speech, right of intermarriage and of holding property. As in Greek society slaves predominated Greek liberty meant nothing more than the right of a privileged class which necessarily resulted frequently in injustice to those not of that class.

The city-state was the political form of organization under

which both the Greeks and Romans lived and made their most valuable contributions to modern civilization.⁶

In Greece, in accordance with the usual plan, kindred families were grouped into brotherhoods; several of these brotherhoods into a tribe; and three or four tribes into a city. The later division served religious, political and military purposes. The term city (the Greek word "Polis") was not limited to the space within the area of the town but included the entire state or kingdom which was wholly under the city administration and was within the city boundaries. In this sense the term city-state is used to designate such ancient communities to distinguish them from the territorial states of our own day.

To understand the Greek conception of the Polis we must understand the Greek mentality. In the first place, it should be recalled that all the citizens of a Greek Polis looked upon each other as close kinsmen, that is, they were all of a common ancestor, and this was true irrespective of the mythical character of these ancestors who were usually quite remote. To the Greeks they were genuine persons. In the second place, in seeking to know the meaning of the city-state, we must have in mind the religious ideas of the people who composed it. We must also bear in mind, moreover, that each city-state had its own religion, a part of which was the worship of a common ancestor. In addition to the physical fact that usually high mountain ranges separated them, this exclusiveness in religion precluded the city-states from uniting. There are instances, however, where the city-states acted together for commercial purposes and for social intercourse. When they so jointly acted they were compelled to adopt a common religion and thus entertain the belief that they were

6. Aristotle was perhaps the best philosophical exponent of the city-state. His method of reasoning is fully set forth in his work on "Politics." Translation by Jowett.

"The city-state was a late development of common life in Greece, and sprang from the loose aggregate of the tribe." Greenidge, *Greek Constitutional History*, Ch. II, p. 12.

all of one kin, descendants from a common ancestor. In that age religion was the only ground upon which individuals thought they could act together.⁷ Among the Greeks and Romans, then, a city-state is an area "in which the whole life and energy of the people, political, intellectual, religious is focused at one point, and that point a city."⁸

We must also bear in mind that with the ancients the foundation of a city was distinctively a religious act; the site should be chosen and revealed by the divinity, and established usages must be observed in its foundation, otherwise the opinion prevailed that the community was sure to meet with disaster. Among the ancients the term *Civitas* signified the religious and political association of families and tribes, and *Urbs* (Roman) or *Polis* (Greek) was the place of assembly, the dwelling place, and above all the sanctuary of the political association of families and tribes. Before a city could be founded the families, the phratries and the tribes who were to compose it must agree upon a common worship, and when founded the city became their dwelling place and the sanctuary for the common worship agreed upon.⁹ To the ancients the city became the religious abode of gods and citizens. Every city was a sanctuary, and therefore, could be called holy. Regardless of the devastations and ravages of time,

7. Botsford, *History of Greece*, Ch. II, pp. 21, 22.

8. Fowler, *The City-State of the Greeks and Romans*, Ch. I, p. 9.

The term city (*Polis*) applied not only to the walled town, but included the entire kingdom. The Greek state was wholly under the city organization and within the city limits; hence we call it a city-state to distinguish it from the territorial state of modern time. Botsford, *History of Greece*, Ch. II, p. 21.

9. Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, Ch. IV, p. 177 et seq., relating the ceremony accompanying the foundation of the ancient city of Rome; see also *Ibid*, p. 183, describing the methods and rituals used in the foundation of many ancient cities.

The Greeks and Romans looked upon their deities as localized in their cities, as belonging to none but themselves, and as incapable of deserting them except as a consequence of their own shortcomings. Fowler, *The City-State of the Greeks and Romans*, Ch. I, pp. 3, 4.

irrespective of wreck and ruin, the area of the city forever remained the dwelling place of the gods worshiped by the tribes.

The ancients firmly believed that they built their cities to be eternal. As is familiar, this tradition was constantly applied to the city of Rome. Neither Greek nor Roman could think of his state as having an existence apart from the spot to which he was forever attached, the city in which his life was centered and his business was carried on.

Finally, the epitome of an eminent Oxford scholar is clear and illuminated. He observes that by the word Polis the Greek "sought to express the whole life and the whole duty of man; that union of human beings for a common end which alone could produce and exercise all the best instincts and abilities of every free individual."¹⁰

The Greek governmental functions included religion, administration, legislative, judicial and military affairs. In the earliest form three chief factors exist, namely, the king, the lesser chieftains and the people. Under the king the government was aristocratic when he was supplanted by leading families of wealth or birth. The privileged families constituted a close corporation. They alone could hold office and select officers. At Athens they called themselves Eupatridae, and the Areopagus was the political organ that represented them. Administrative and executive functions were performed by those elected by the privileged families. During the existence of the Greek city-state Athens experienced three different forms of government, namely, the kingdom, the aristocracy or oligarchy, and democracy. In the days of the oligarchy, apart from the ruling families based on birth or wealth, the ordinary Athenian took small interest in public administration and received little benefit therefrom. Only in a very doubtful sense was he a part of the city-state, and

10. Fowler, *The City-State of the Greeks and Romans*, Ch. I, p. 6.

“politically was not on a much higher level than the Attic slave.”¹¹

Concerning legislative and judicial questions and all matters of vital interest to the city-state as a whole, or the supreme social force, as designated by Sir Henry Maine, the determination thereof was vested in and exercised by the people themselves, directly in meetings assembled, and not by any sort of delegates or representatives, and from their final decisions there was no appeal. When the democratic idea was fully worked out the people (excluding the slaves, constituting the larger part of the population) managed the government in all its details; it was in fact as well as in name government by the people (the favored few). A point to be remembered is that in all their activities, including governmental, there was an impressive sanity and reasonableness shown by the Athenians and their leaders.

The Greek democratic form of government contrasted widely with the modern practice. In England, for example, the constitution is democratic but England is governed by a ministry constituting an agency or committee of the House of Commons elected by the people. The United States and each state in the federation is purely a representative democracy, modified, it is true, by the initiative, referendum and recall, operative in many states and localities through which the people may directly supervise governmental action. It can not be said that the people govern directly in either country as they did in the pure democracy of Athens. In both countries the people of local areas largely manage their own purely local affairs, but in many cases the central government has a direct or indirect control. The early New England town meeting in the United States and the early local governmental areas of England, particularly the parish, were more akin to the Athenian democracy. It was rather “only an

11. Fowler, *The City-State of the Greeks and Romans*, Ch. VI, p. 155.

extension of the privileges of an aristocracy to all pure citizens who were the rulers of a much greater population of slaves and inferiors."¹²

Greek democracy, it must be borne in mind, was never a government of universal free citizens. It could make no such claim, for we know that Greek civilization, as well as Roman, rested upon a basis of slave labor. In our day the first attempt is being made to establish states and communities in which each mature man and woman is recognized as a free citizen, and in fact these citizens are the real governors. Thus it may be that the sage's dream of the ages is being realized, that human government can only rest upon the consent of the governed. That the citizens generally may participate with benefit to society as a whole they, of course, must possess the necessary equipment—knowledge, enlightenment and proper standards or ideals—and moreover, they must manifest a desire to aid and serve. With desire and essential equipment the improvement of human society is limitless. Unselfish, efficient service for the communal welfare may supersede birth, wealth, interest, mere time serving or demagogery which have been in all ages and among all peoples potent deterrents to honest, efficient and progressive public administration.

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12. Mahaffy, *Old Greek Life*, p. 90.