

CLAH4005: Defenders, Conquerors, Vanquished

Lecture 3: The World of the Polis



The main type of political
unit in the Greek world in
the classical period was the
POLIS



What is the Polis?

➤ The polis is an urbanised community

Its main features are

- small size
- political autonomy
- social homogeneity
- sense of community
- respect for law

The polis has two integral
parts: the **asty** and the
chora



The Asty

1. The asty is the urban centre.
 2. The urban centre is the place of domicile of all or part of the population depending on the size of the polis.
 3. It is also where the main political, religious and legal institutions of the polis are.
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- The bottom of the slide features several decorative concentric circles in a lighter blue shade, resembling ripples in water, positioned in the lower right and bottom center areas.

The Chora

1. The chora is the countryside surrounding the asty.
2. In small poleis, the chora is mainly used for agricultural and industry purposes.
3. In larger poleis, the chora may also be where people live, most often in villages.

Asty vs Chora in Athens



The size of the polis

- The **average** size of a Greek polis is small. Usually a polis would not have more than 10,000 people.
- There are also **larger** poleis.
- Athens is the largest known with a population of about or more than **300,000 people**.

The development of the polis

- The polis was not born in a day but was a long process of development, both as a civic centre and as a political community from the 8th to the 6th centuries BCE.
- In the 8th century we get the first signs of urbanisation.
- **Urbanisation** is the movement of population from fragmented clusters dotted around the country to a specific centre.

The development of the polis

- In the 7th century, the process really took hold.
- This is detected archaeologically by the casual **abandonment** of countryside settlements and the **growth** of the urban centres.
- This process of centralisation of population is called **synoikismos**.
- **Synoikismos** is the combination of several smaller communities to form a single larger community.

More importantly than any
detected development
relating to urbanisation,
the polis was a
COMMUNITY, political,
economic and social.



The polis as a community

1. As Themistocles said this, Adeimantus the Corinthian attacked him again, advising that a man without a city should keep quiet and that Eurybiades should not ask the vote of a man without a city. He advised Themistocles to contribute his opinion when he provided a city--attacking him in this way because Athens was captured and occupied. [2] This time Themistocles said many things against him and the Corinthians, declaring that so long as they had two hundred manned ships, the Athenians had both a city and a land greater than theirs, and that none of the Hellenes could repel them if they attacked. Herodotos 8.61.

2. Herodotus, with an English translation by A. D. Godley. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1920. Perseus CL: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Hdt.+8.61.1>

The polis and its people

The polis was comprised of different
classes of people:

citizens

metics

slaves

The Citizens

1. Citizens were those members of the polis that had a right to participate in political processes.
2. Depending on the system of government the extent of that participation may have been determined according to individual wealth.

The Metics

- Metics were non-citizens domiciled in the polis.
- Often these were foreigners or ex-slaves.
- Metics had no political rights but had the right to be subject to the laws of the polis and may have participated in militarily, economically and religiously in the life of the polis

The Slaves

1. Slaves were either Greeks or foreigners.
2. Slaves were items of property.
3. They had no political rights but they may have participated in religious ceremonies in some poleis.

Polis and Politics



The characteristics of the polis

The two main political characteristics of the polis as an institution were:

- Autonomy
- The rule of law.

What is autonomy?

- Autonomy is the state of affairs where a community is responsible for its own laws. The nearest modern definition is self-determination.
- Autonomy must not be confused with freedom (eleutheria). Eleutheria is not an internal matter but refers specifically to a polis' independence from foreign intervention.
- Thus a polis may not be free (for example if it was a member of the Athenian Empire) but it could be autonomous.

Polis and Political systems



Political systems in the Greek world

- There was no one political system in the Greek world.
- Different poleis had different political systems but these usually can be broadly defined as the following:
 1. **Monarchy**
 2. **Oligarchy**
 3. **Democracy**

Monarchy

- Monarchy is the rule of a **single individual**. There are two types of monarchy found in the Greek world: **kingship** and **tyranny**.

Kingship

- Kingship is a hereditary monarchy and it was a very rare political system in the polis.
- A good example is the 6th and 5th century monarchy in Kyrene (the Batiads).

Tyranny

- The more common type of monarchy in the polis was tyranny.
- A tyrant might either rule directly or retain the existing political institutions but exercise a preponderant influence over their working, and his rule might be benevolent or malevolent.
- Tyrannies were more common in the archaic than in the classical period.
- In the classical period, tyrannies were particularly common in Italy and Sicily.

Oligarchy

- Oligarchy is a form of constitution that excluded some of the free population even from basic political rights, and might exclude even more of them from office-holding and reduce the amount of business which came the way of the full citizen body.
- Most of the early constitutions were oligarchies. In the classical period many of the great poleis were under an oligarchic constitution, such as Corinth and Sparta.
- The strictness of the constitution depended upon the polis.

Democracy

1. Democracy was the rule (kratos) of the people (demos).
2. The best known democracy in the classical period was the **Athenian** democracy, which was one of the most extreme forms of this constitution.
3. It is important to remember that the ancient democracy was a **direct** democracy, unlike the modern democracies that are representative.

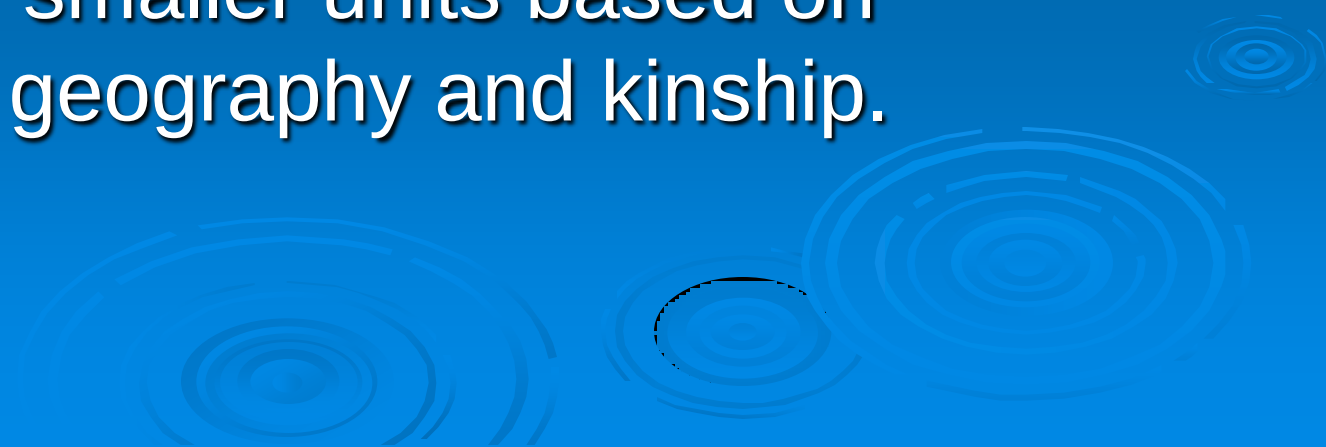
Characteristics of democracy

Democracy according to the Greeks had three main characteristics:

- Political liberty to participate in the democratic institutions
- Private liberty to live as one pleased
- Equality before the law .

The Polis and its Parts

The polis was comprised of
smaller units based on
geography and kinship.

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The oikos

1. The fundamental unit of the polis as a community was the oikos: the **household**.
2. The oikos included usually a number of kin-members and a number of non-kin members.
3. The kin-members were citizens and often were members of one extended family.
4. The non-kin members were usually slaves that belonged to members of the household.

Gene and Phratries

- All oikoi belonged to greater kin-groups such as the gene and the phratriai.
- These were kin-based groups organised on the principles of heredity and usually shared common rituals and sacred spaces

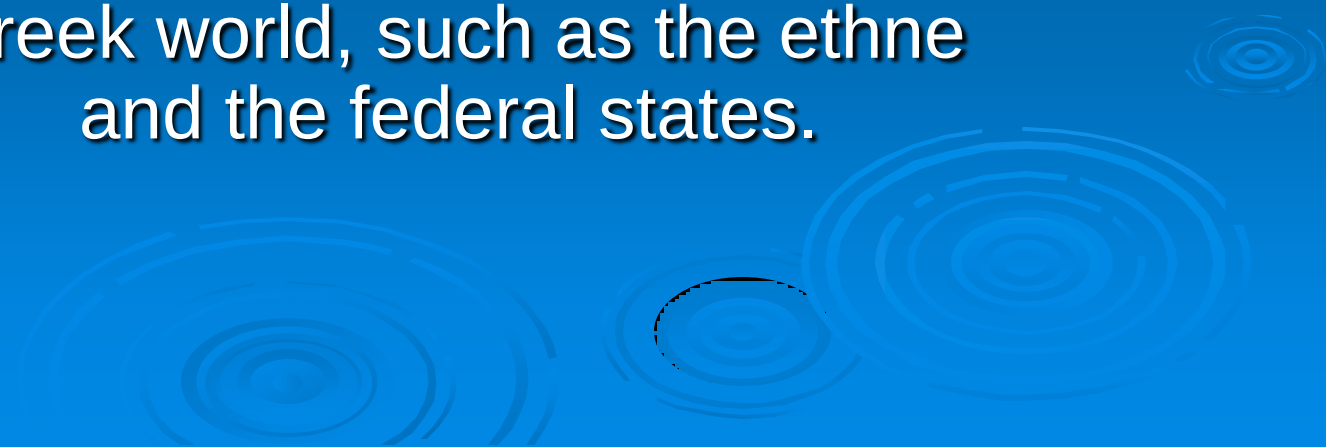


Demes and Tribes

- Beyond the oikos the main political sub-groups in the polis were the **demes** and the **tribes** (phylai).
- Depending on the polis these sub-groups may be kin-based or they may be geography-based

Beyond the Polis?

Beyond the polis, there were also other forms of political institutions in the Greek world, such as the ethne and the federal states.



The Federal States

1. Federal states were organizations in which the separate city states of a geographical and ethnic region were combined to form a single entity at any rate for purposes of foreign policy, while for local purposes retaining their separate identity as city states and their separate citizenship.
2. An example of a federal state is Boiotia

The Ethne

1. Ethne were another form of political institution, mainly characterised by its differences from the polis.
2. An ethnos was a collection of people and villages or towns that had kinship ties to one another, were to an extent independent of each other but had a common assembly for government, mainly in foreign policy.
3. There were several ethne in mainland Greece, such as the Thessalians, the Aetolians, and the Epirotes.

A final note...

➤ 1 polis

➤ Many poleis

Questions?



Follow-up Reading and Task

- You will find the follow-up reading on Moodle.
- You will have to read both the introductory article to the Inventory and the three entries of poleis/settlements that you choose.
- Then complete the follow-up Task!
- This is also on Moodle. You need to complete this task before the next lecture.