

Classical and Hellenistic Greece

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During the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. Greek civilization reached its apex. Historians have been fascinated with this period of Greek history for several reasons. First, Classical Greece is considered the most direct foundation of Western civilization, more so than the civilizations of the ancient Near East that preceded it. Second, many Greeks took a rationalistic and naturalistic approach to almost all fundamental questions; thus they developed scientific explanations for the world around them and applied reason to questions of politics, ethics, history, and philosophy. Third, the Greeks explored and experienced the range of human emotions, above all in their literature and in the triumphant and tragic wars they fought. Fourth, they produced stunning aesthetic creations, particularly in their sculpture, architecture, and drama. Fifth, Greeks strongly believed in the dignity and power of human beings and in balance and control as a human ideal. Sixth, the Greeks experienced and experimented with a large variety of political forms. In short, we often recognize ourselves and our own concerns when we study Classical Greece.

This chapter surveys Greek civilization as it evolved from the Classical Age (500-323 B.C.) to the Hellenistic Age (323-31 B.C.). Three overlapping topics are discussed. The first concerns the nature of the *polis*, of central importance to the ancient Greeks. Greeks perceived the *polis* as the appropriate political and geographic context for the good life, as well as the center of social, economic, religious, and cultural life. How should it be ruled? How strong was the obligation to one's own *polis* compared to an allegiance to the Greek world as a whole? What was the proper balance between the individual and the state? To explore these questions, it is useful to look at divisions between rival *poleis* of different political and social forms, as exemplified by the Peloponnesian War. It is also helpful to examine Greek ideas about the political nature of humans and in particular Greek ideas about democracy—one of the many forms of government experimented with by the Greeks. And finally, the student of Greek civilization can learn a great deal by investigating the tension between the individual and his or her obligation as a citizen of the polis.

The second topic is the nature of Greek thought. Historians have traditionally been impressed by the "modernity" of Greek thought. This is particularly the case with the scientific and rationalistic nature of Greek thought and the Greek tendency to generalize and abstract their ideas without resort to religious or supernatural assumptions. A number of questions are examined to demonstrate these traits. What was the nature of scientific thought for the Greeks? How did they apply such thought to medicine, history, and politics? What methodological differences were within this rationalistic thought? In what ways did they tend to abstract and generalize their ideas? What was the role of irrational thought and belief in the supernatural among large portions of Greek society?

Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women and Work in Athens Sarah B. Pomeroy

The traditional image of Greek society is based primarily on what men did and thought. In recent decades historians have focused on the roles women played in Greek society and how those roles differed from men's roles. In the following excerpt from her well-known study of women in Greece and Rome, Sarah B. Pomeroy analyzes the economic roles played by women in Athens during the Classical Age. Here she emphasizes the effect of urban living on their lives.

Consider: How the position of women differed from that of men in Athens; the possible effects of urbanization on women; the kind of work women engaged in and how it was valued.

By the late fifth century B.C., owing to the need for the safety afforded by city walls, urban living replaced farming for many Athenians. Thus, when one compares Sparta to Athens, it is necessary to remember that the former never comprised more than a settlement of villages, while Athens was one of the largest Greek cities. The effect of urbanization upon women was to have their activities moved indoors, and to make their labor less visible and hence less valued.

Urban living created a strong demarcation between the activities of men of the upper and lower classes, as well as between those of men and women. Men were free to engage in politics, intellectual and military training, athletics, and the sort of business approved for gentlemen. Some tasks were regarded as banal and demeaning, befitting slaves rather than citizens. Naturally, a male citizen who needed income was unable to maintain the ideal and was forced to labor in banal employment. Women of the upper class, excluded from the activities of the males, supervised and—when they wished pursued many of the same tasks deemed appropriate to slaves. Since the work was despised, so was the worker. Women's work was productive, but because it was the same as slaves' work, it was not highly valued in the ideology of Classical Athens. The intimacy of the discussions between heroines and choruses of female slaves in tragedy and the depictions of mistress and slave on tombstones imply a bond between slave and free, for they spent much time together and their lives were not dissimilar.

Women of all social classes worked mainly indoors or near the house in order to guard it. They concerned themselves with the care of young children, the nursing of sick slaves, the fabrication of clothing, and the preparation of food. The preparation of ordinary food was considered exclusively women's work.

Transporting water in a pitcher balanced on the head was a female occupation. Because fetching water involved social mingling, gossip at the fountain, and possible flirtations, slave girls were usually sent on this errand.

Women did not go to market for food, and even now they do not do so in rural villages in Greece. The feeling that purchase or exchange was a financial transaction too complex for women, as well as the wish to protect women from the eyes of strangers and from intimate dealings with shopkeepers, contributed to classifying marketing as a man's occupation.

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Wealthier women were distinguished by exercising a managerial role, rather than performing all the domestic work themselves. Poorer women, even citizens, went out to work, most of them pursuing occupations that were an extension of women's work in the home. Women were employed as washerwomen, as woolworkers, and in other clothing industries. They also worked as vendors, selling food or what they had spun or woven at home. Some women sold garlands they had braided. Women were also employed as nurses of children and midwives.

The Greeks: Slavery Anthony Andrews

It has long been known that the Greeks, like other ancient peoples, practiced slavery. But focusing only on the glories of Greece sometimes leads one to forget how much slavery existed at that time and the role slavery played in supporting the Greek style of life. A historian who takes this into account is Anthony Andrews, a professor at Oxford University who has written a major text on the Greeks. In the following selection he examines Greek assumptions about slavery and the relations between slaves and masters in the Greek world.

Consider: How this analysis undermines an image of Athens as an open, democratic, and just society; what distinctions might be made between slavery in different times and societies—such as between slavery in Athens and in eighteenth-century America.

In the broadest terms, slavery was basic to Greek civilization in the sense that, to abolish it and substitute free labour, if it had occurred to anyone to try this on, would have dislocated the whole society and done away with the leisure of the upper classes of Athens and Sparta. The ordinary Athenian had a very deeply ingrained feeling that it was impossible for a free man to work directly for another as his master. While it is true that free men, as well as slaves, engaged in most forms of trade and industry, the withdrawal of slaves from these tasks would have entailed a most uncomfortable reorganisation of labour and property...

No easy generalisation is possible about the relations between slave and master in the Greek world, since the slave's view, as usual, is not known. In the close quarters of Greek domestic life, no distance could be preserved like that which English middle-class families used to keep between themselves and their servants—and the Greek was unlikely to refrain from talking under any circumstances. The closer relation of nurse and child, tutor and pupil, easily ripened into affection, nor need we doubt stories of the loyal slave saving his master's life on the battlefield, and the like. But at its best the relationship was bound to have unhappy elements, as that when a slave was punished it was with physical blows of the kind that a free man had the right to resent....

The domestic slave who was on good terms with his master stood some chance of liberation, and the slave 'living apart' and practising his trade might hope to earn enough to buy his release. Manumission was by no means uncommon, though the practice and the formalities differed a good deal from place to place. The master often retained the right to certain services for a fixed period, or for his own lifetime. Some of those 'living apart' prospered conspicuously, giving rise to disgruntled oligarchic comment that slaves in the streets of Athens might be better dressed than free men....

But the domestic slave with a bad master was in poor case, with little hope of redress, and the prospects were altogether bleaker for those who were hired out to the mines and other work—and we are not given even a distorted reflection of their feelings. But, after the Spartans had fortified their post outside Athens in 413, Thucydides tells us that over 20,000 slaves deserted to the enemy, the bulk of them 'craftsmen' (the word would cover any sort of skilled labour and need not be confined to the miners of Laurium, though no doubt many of the deserters were from there). We do not know what promises the invaders had held out to them, still less what eventually became of them, but the suggestion is clear that the life of even a skilled slave was one which he was ready to fly from on a very uncertain prospect....

In the generation of Socrates, when everything was questioned, the justice of slavery was questioned also. Isolated voices were heard to say that all men were equally men, and that slavery was against nature. The defence of Aristotle, that some were naturally slaves, incapable of full human reason and needing the will of a master to complete their own, rings hollow to us, quite apart from the accident that 'naturally free' Greeks might be enslaved by the chances of war. But this was a world in which slavery, in some form or other, was universal, and no nation could remember a time when it had not been so. It is not surprising that there was no clamour for emancipation. It has been convincingly argued that the margin over bare subsistence in Greece was so small that the surplus which was needed to give leisure to the minority could only be achieved with artificially cheap labour. If that is right, there was not much alternative for Greece. For Athens, it had come, by the opening of the sixth century, to a choice between reducing citizens to slavery or extensive import of chattel slaves from abroad. Only a greatly improved technology, something like an industrial revolution, could effectively have altered these conditions.

The Ancient Greeks: Decline of the Polis M. L. Finley

Typically, the fourth century B.C. is seen as a period of decline, at least for the Greek polis. This decline and the reasons for it have long fascinated historians. Some point to the disillusionment following the Peloponnesian War, others to the inability of Greek city-states to control wars among themselves and ally in the face of the threat from Macedonia. In the following selection M. L. Finley, a leading historian of ancient times from Cambridge University, deals with this issue from a different point of view: The Greek polis could flourish only under unusual circumstances and only for a short period of time.

leading historian Of ancient times from Cambridge University, deals with this issue from a different point of view: The Greek polis could flourish only under unusual circumstances and only for a short period of time.

Consider: Additional factors that could explain the "decline" of the polis; what policies or developments might have delayed the decline of the polis; whether the fate of Greek civilization was tied to that of the polis.

All this movement, like the constant stasis, marked a failing of the community, and therefore of the polis. The more the polis had to hire its armed forces, the more citizens it could no longer satisfy economically, and that meant above all with land, so that they went elsewhere in order to live; the more it failed to maintain some sort of equilibrium between the few and the many, the more the cities were populated by outsiders, whether free migrants from abroad or emancipated slaves (who can be called metaphorically free migrants from within)-the less meaningful, the less real was the community. "Decline" is a tricky and dangerous word to use in this context: it has biological overtones which are inappropriate, and it evokes a continuous downhill movement in all aspects of civilization which is demonstrably false. Yet there is no escaping the evidence: the fourth century was the time when the Greek polis declined, unevenly, with bursts of recovery and heroic moments of struggle to save itself, to become, after Alexander, a sham polis in which the preservation of many external forms of polis life could not conceal that henceforth the Greeks lived, in Clemenceau's words, "in the sweet peace of decadence, accepting all sorts of servitudes as they came." . . .

Even fourth-century Athens was not free from signs of the general decline. Contemporary political commentators themselves made much of the fact that whereas right through the fifth century political leaders were, and were expected to be, military leaders at the same time, so that among the ten generals were regularly found the outstanding political figures (elected to the office because of their political importance, not the other way round), in the fourth century the two sides of public activity, the civil and the military, were separated. The generals were now professional soldiers, most of them quite outside politics or political influence, who often served foreign powers as mercenary commanders as well as serving their own polis. There are a number of reasons for the shift, among which the inadequate finances of the state rank high, but, whatever the explanation, the break was a bad thing for the polis, a cleavage in the responsibility of the members to their community which weakened the sense of community without producing visibly better generalship. In the navy the signs took a different form. A heavy share of the costs still fell on the richest 1200 men and the navy continued to perform well, but there was more evasion of responsibility, more need than before to compel the contributions and to pursue the defaulters at law. The crews themselves were often conscripted; voluntary enlistment could no longer provide the necessary complements. No doubt that was primarily because the treasury was too depleted to provide regular pay for long periods, just as the unwillingness of some to contribute their allotted share of the expenses resulted from an unsatisfactory system of distributing the burden, rather than from lack of patriotism. Wherever the responsibility lay, however, the result was again a partial breakdown in the polis.

There is no need to exaggerate: Athens nearly carried it off, and the end came because Macedon, or at least Alexander, was simply too powerful. But Macedon did exist, and so did Persia and Carthage, and later Rome. The polis was developed in such a world, not in a vacuum or in Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, and it grew on poor Greek soil. Was it really a viable form of political organization? Were its decline and disappearance the result of factors which could have been remedied, or of an accident-the power of Macedon-or of inherent structural weaknesses? These questions have exercised philosophers and historians ever since the late fifth century (and it is noteworthy how the problem was being posed long before the polis could be thought of as on its way out in any literal sense). Plato wished to rescue it by placing all authority in the hands of morally perfect philosophers. Others blame the demos and their misleaders, the demagogues, for every ill. Still others, especially in the past century

