

CHAPTER 7

“ AN INSCRIPTION OF
A GREEK LAW FROM
CYRENE AND HOMER

GREECE SPREADS ITS WINGS

COLONIES AND CITY-STATES

“ An inscription of a Greek law
from Cyrene, late seventh
century BCE

If anyone is unwilling to sail when sent by the city, let him be subject to the death penalty and let his property be confiscated. Whoever receives or protects such a person—whether a father his son or a brother his brother—shall suffer the same punishment as the person who refused to sail.

It seems harsh to put someone to death for refusing to sail to a new colony. What’s going on here?

Things were changing in the Greek world. When the glorious days of the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations ended, many ways of life were altered in the lands around the Aegean Sea. We call that time (1200–750 BCE) the

“Dark Age,” partly because we know so little about it that it seems shadowy to us, and partly because what we do know appears

very gloomy. In the Dark Age, most people in Greece were very poor. The population dropped, leaving some areas deserted. No large constructions like the palaces on Crete and in Mycenae were built, and very little art was produced. There isn’t any Greek literature from that time period—in fact, it appears that for hun-

dreds of years the entire culture forgot how to read and write. After the collapse of the palaces, there were no records to keep and nobody to pay the scribes who kept them.

The rulers of most early Greek cultures claimed they were descended from the gods, or from a particular god. Toward the end of the Dark Age this changed, and people



Cups like this enable historians to understand what Greek ships looked like. Founding colonies was so important for the Greeks that the state could execute a person who refused to sail off to a new place in a colonization venture.

were no longer governed by one powerful ruler. Instead, small groups of landowning men took over. They called their form of government an **aristocracy** because they thought they were better than everyone else. The rest of the people, who felt unfairly excluded from ruling, called it an **oligarchy**.

The Dark Age gave way to what we call the Archaic period. Greece was changing once more and so were Greek ways of looking at the world. The Archaic period wasn't a dark age at all. People made beautiful statues and wrote poetry. They asked questions about society.

Many of these questions concerned the best form of government. By the time the Archaic age was over, around 550 BCE, the Greeks had organized themselves into hundreds of little countries (probably more than 1,000), each of which was called a *polis*.

There's no exact equivalent for the word *polis* in English, so we have to call it a city-state—a small area governed by a central town or city. A *polis* usually comprised fewer than 10,000 people (Athens and Corinth were huge by Greek standards, with about 100,000 inhabitants, as far as historians can tell).

Each *polis* had to be fairly self-sufficient, governing itself, providing most of its own food and other supplies and protecting itself from enemies. The Greek terrain made this necessary. Even today, it's hard to get from one part of Greece to another. On a map a distance may not seem too great, but with so many mountains to go around, you can drive and drive without getting very far at all. The same journey on foot or on a donkey would take an adventurous person or a person in desperate need of something. One *polis* would have problems trying to control settlements separated by such difficult roads. So each *polis* had to rely on itself.

The *polis* was politically independent. It had everything that defines a nation today: a government, laws, customs. Every *polis* had a sort of capital—a central town or village—and included land around it. Most *poleis* (the plural of *polis*) had an acropolis—a high fortified part of the city—and an agora—an open-air gathering-place. Most of all, a *polis* was

{ *aristos* + *cratia* = “best” + “rule”
Government by the people
best suited to rule.

{ *oligos* + *archein* = “few” + “to
rule” Government by a few
people.



The “Antikythera Mechanism” (found in 1901 in the sea off the island of Antikythera) was probably made around 65 BCE. The clock-like device calculated the motions of stars and planets and was used to navigate ships. It has been called an ancient computer.

inhabited by people who thought about the best form of government and tried to put it into practice. One aspect they questioned was the system of oligarchy.

Historians are very eager to know how this thinking developed. Why did people stop just accepting government by oligarchs?

The answer lies in more than one area. Political and economic life are interconnected. During the years of relative peace under the oligarchs, the population grew. Greece’s rocky islands and mountains leave little ground that can be farmed, especially when there are more people to be fed. It became impossible for one *polis* to support itself entirely. Aside from food, people had to think of new ways to acquire goods that their *polis* couldn’t supply. So some people took up trading. At the same time, better navigational instruments were invented that helped sailors to travel farther away from home.

But what does this have to do with getting rid of the oligarchs?

For one thing, it meant that some Greeks decided to leave their native states and go to other parts of the world and set up colonies. Between 750 and 550 BCE, thousands of people spread out in all directions from mainland Greece.



The Acropolis still dominates modern Athens. The word acropolis means “high city” and many ancient Greek city-states were built around it, so the residents could seek refuge there in times of invasion.

Travel gave the Greek colonists different perspectives on life and opened their minds to new ideas.

When they arrived in their new homes, the colonists had to come up with new ways of governing themselves. Many colonists thought an oligarchy wasn't the best way to run their new settlements. They preferred to have the best rulers, not ones descended from earlier leaders. And when visitors to the colonies returned home, they talked about what they had seen in the new settlements. The idea of a different type of government intrigued the people in the home states. More and more *poleis* sprang up, both in the colonies and back in the homeland.

The Greeks also picked up other ideas. For example, in Lydia, a country on the west coast of what is now Turkey, the government had begun issuing coins. Greek *poleis* were so impressed with this great idea that they started doing the same thing. It was much easier to buy and sell things with a piece of metal stamped with the symbol of a strong *polis* that you could trust—and much more convenient to purchase cargo with a sack of coins than to go home and fetch six cows to exchange.

Colonies spread further as the need for land and trade increased, just as they would centuries later when Europeans

THE *POLIS* IN ENGLISH

Polis gives us many English words: politics, political, polity, and others. Since the Greeks tended to think of people who lived in the country as less refined or less sophisticated than city-dwellers, you might think that “polite” comes from *polis*. However, the Latin word *politus* (“polished”) is its real ancestor. If a *polis* of 10,000 people seems too small to have been called a separate country, just think of the smallest country in the modern world: Vatican City. In 2004, its population was only 921 people!





founded colonies in the Americas. Many Greeks went off to establish trading posts in Syria and Egypt.

All sorts of resources were found in the colonies, such as timber, crops, and metal. In the *Odyssey*, the goddess Athena disguised herself as a metal trader. The poet Homer said that she told people who were curious about why she was sailing around, “I have come here with my ship and crew . . . with a cargo of iron, and I shall bring back copper.” Everyone in the story believed her, which shows that this kind of trade was common.

When the colonists established their new homes, it must have been exhilarating. They finally had enough land to make a living and they were making their own new *poleis*. The Greeks thought that many of their cities had been founded by gods or mythical heroes, and here they were, just normal people, doing the same thing.

These *poleis* spread all around the Mediterranean, leading to a kind of network of Greek city-states. Although they were so far apart from each other—or maybe *because* they were so far apart—the colonists remained proudly Greek. They continued to speak their own language. They worshiped the

“ Homer, *Odyssey*, about 725 BCE

Greek gods. They built temples that looked like the ones at home—in fact, some of the most beautiful Greek temples are in Sicily. They brought their favorite crops to the new lands. Nowadays, for example, Italy is the world's largest producer of wine. But no grapes grew in Italy until the Greek colonists planted them there.

In fact, Italy was so heavily colonized that it became almost another Greece. It even became known as “Magna Graecia”—greater Greece.

Once they arrived in their new home, the colonists had a lot to do. In the *Odyssey* Homer describes the task of the leader of a new colony:

He led a crowd of folk to Scheria. . . .
 Around the city he had placed a wall.
 He had made houses; also for the gods
 He saw to it that there were temples, and the land
 He carefully divided up.

The Greeks not only had recovered from the Dark Age, but also had developed the *polis*, a political unit that would change and grow into a form that would change much of the world. The Greek world had expanded to create a vibrant, far-flung, and prosperous civilization.

That prosperity, however, came with a price. Just because Greeks had been thinking about and experimenting with government didn't mean that they had solved all the problems of living in communities. In earlier times, prosperity had come only from land. Now there was another route to wealth: trade. Conflict often erupted between those who had made their money in agriculture and the successful merchants. And not everybody was prosperous. In some places, those who were still poor were unhappier than ever, seeing the success of others.

It was impossible to be certain what was going to happen next, but the people who guessed there would be revolutions and civil wars were on the right track.

“” Homer, *Odyssey*, about
 725 BCE

Some temples in Greek colonies are in better shape than those in Greece itself, partly because they are made of less-valuable material than the highly prized marble, which would have been plundered to be used in another building. That the temple of Segesta in Sicily was built using the honey-colored local stone may have spared it from being plundered.

