

# The greek polis



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The Greek polis in many ways led to or fostered the Greek idea of citizenship. The polis was a complex hierarchical society put together around the idea of citizenship. Even though governmental functions were reserved to a small group of persons nevertheless the equation of the polis with the entire citizen body sets it apart from the other ancient states (Rich & Wallace-Hadrill, 26). We are made aware of the fact that one of the singular traits of the polis was that of citizenry and not being subjects. If by any chance the citizens became subjects then that community would cease to be a polis.

One point that all historians seem to be in agreement over is that the polis was a hallmark of Greek civilization. It was a city-state that was male-dominated and was characterized by its small independent community. The membership to a polis was hereditary and it excluded women, slaves and resident aliens from its body of citizens. The origins of the polis are somewhat debatable. One school of thought says that originally the polis referred to a defensible area to which farmers of a particular area could retreat in the event of an attack. Over time towns expanded surrounding these defensible areas in a haphazard manner.

The philosophers Aristotle and Plato suggested that size was an essential trait for a polis. It had to maintain its smallness because it was important that the citizenry get to know each other. Aristotle believed that it was necessary for the citizens to be of such a number that they knew each other's personal qualities so that they could elect their officials and judge their fellows in a court of law sensibly. This could only be accomplished if the body of citizens was as small or as large for them to know each other well.

Plato went even further by proposing the optimal maximum number of adult males that could dwell in an ideal state to be 5, 040.

In such a polis society we are informed that all citizens were intimately and directly involved in military service, religious ceremonies, politics, justice, intellectual discussion, athletics and artistic pursuits. Within the polis, citizens did not have rights but duties. Shirking one's duties was rare and unfathomable. It was reprehensible not to undertake one's responsibilities. Each polis was different from the other. The ancient Greek world consisted of hundreds of independent poleis for example Athens and Sparta. The Spartan ideal was austere, severe and limited while at Athens it was more democratic and open for example small families could work their way up economically and achieve positions of leadership.

The Greek political culture and the institution of Greek citizenship are at the core of Greek civilization, and an understanding of the polis enhances our knowledge on this issue. Probably finding answers to the following key questions would enable us to come up with a better comprehension of Greek culture and civilization. What forces shaped the emergent polis culture? Were they the military institutions in Greek culture? Were they influenced by the religious practices? Or were they modelled on the agrarian life of small and independent Greek farmers? All these questions have been the subject of intense debate among different historians.

The original Greek polis is best understood as an exclusive and yet egalitarian community of farmers. This argument for the agrarian origins of the polis suggests that the material prosperity that was a resultant of

intensive agriculture by the small independent farmers bore a new breed of Greeks. To this new breed of Greeks, agriculture was no longer a means of subsistence but an ennobling way of life (Hanson, 180). The subsequent efforts by these small farmers to protect their wealth led to the establishment of the other institutions that characterised ancient Greece, namely, social, political and military.

According to Polignac (trans. Janet Lloyd, Chicago, 1951) the creation of political organs in ancient Greece could by themselves achieve nothing without the backing from a social body whose motives and desire for unity were inspired by something other than war. He asserts that religion was the only agent that permeated and affected the entire social body. Therefore the polis was shaped when the community seemed to acquire self-awareness through this common sacred character.

The military institutions influence on the polis would best be exemplified by one of the renowned Greek city-states, Sparta. Boys from the age of seven to 18 left home and were organized into troops that played competitive games. From 18 years to 28, they lived together in barracks and became citizens in their own right at 30. Moreover, some historians believe that hoplite armies shaped rather than merely echoed the history of the polis.

In a nutshell, the role of the polis in the development of Greek culture is a wide area of discussion and arguments. The only fact that historians seem to agree about is that the polis emerged as a new form of social and political organization around the eighth century B. C. and that it is one of the

remarkable characteristics that set ancient Greece apart from other ancient cultures and civilisations.

**Works Cited:**

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