

City states in ancient greece and renaissance italy essay

[Art & Culture](#), [Renaissance](#)



The Greek city-states had a distinctive political and social organization. The distinctiveness was mirrored in their democratic systems, citizen rights, understanding of justice and law and strong institutional features. These characteristics distinguished the city-states with others present in various jurisdictions around the world (Mathisen, 2006).

On the other hand, Mathisen asserts that the renaissance in Italy occurred after the devastating Black Death (2006). Unlike in Greece, Italy's city states stressed the restoration of traditional forms of politics, literature and art. Italy's city states were stable, had unique culture identity (MacCormack, 1977).

Conversely, the Greek city- states open democracy and leadership; hence, it was not transferred to a person outside the burgess family. However, in Italy, once a leader ascended to power, he would exploit and suppress other instruments of power to make his leadership look hereditary.

The scale of the Greek city states was small. Aristotle, a philosopher showed that it was necessary for citizens to be small in number, so they can understand each other's unique qualities (Saxonhouse, 1993). Besides his assertion, the small size of city state citizens enabled the population to know each other in electing officials for administrative purposes (Saxonhouse, 1993).

Citizens occupying city states were fixed; hence, fixing was determined by criteria that all citizens should know each other. The citizens in various city states were related by blood. Hence, a family tie was exceptionally strong.

For example, boys formed friendships and mingled together in schools, men served in unity during times of wars.

Similarly, the citizens discussed and debated one another in public assemblies, elected magistrates and had a duty to vote (Saxonhouse, 1993). This, in other words, illustrates the city states influenced direct involvement of citizens in the affairs of governance, military service and politics. Hence, the city states were comprehensive and had close ties.

Evading one's role was rare; in circumstances when it was noted, the offense was a punishable. Similarly, citizens did not have privileges or rights, but duties. A citizen who did not follow his duties was socially disruptive (Saxonhouse, 1993). The power system was made up of a legislative body of male citizens and various elected officials; the system was not purely hereditary.

According to Muir (2002) feudalism was not fixed in Italy, as a result, many city states stretched in the rural areas by subduing the aristocrats and taking their lands. The land owners took up abode in newly formed cities. In the cities, the land owners' began asserting authority in matters of politics and governance (MacCormack, 1977). In a nut shell, the struggle for power was connected with the rise of new classes in the society.

According to Spencer (2005) the invasion by the Dorians was one reason that strengthened the growth of the city states. The vantage position of Greece was conducive to establishing the city-states. The migration, growth

and expansion, was aided by availability of sea transport. Similar factors were also noted to the development of Italian city states.

For security and defense, new immigrants had to live together in 'polis' in Greece (Spencer, 2005). Hence, this eased an inclusion of immigrants in the 'polis'. 'Polis' was used to indicate 'a castle'; however, it gradually evolved to mean a 'city'. Similarly, in Italy, the availability of land and its closeness to peninsular created a favorable environment for migration and for fixing city states.

During the Renaissance, the city states in Italy enjoyed cultural, economic and political domination (Skinner & Strath, 2003). The five leading states political empires were persistent. However, they were vulnerable due to the extension the Ottoman Empire in Italy. The Ottomans swiftly extended their control to Greece and the Balkan peninsular.

Despite the challenge posed by the Ottomans, the Italian cities were incapable of overcoming their differences; this plunged them into an internecine variation that ruined the strength of political influence they had before (Skinner & Strath, 2003). This was similar to Greece city states; they were economically stable, enjoyed cultural plurality and had powerful political democracy.

In Greece, the polis was made up of autonomous communities. They were largely dominated by male and united by race. Also, membership in the city state was inherited. It was not transferred to an individual or person outside the burgess family unit (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Most of the city-states were

comprised of different group of people. They included the elite, peasants, slaves and women.

The resident's aliens did not form part of the body of citizens. In Italy, the city states membership was large; a member automatically belonged to given social class basing on his wealth, profession among other attributes. The administrative system was not hereditary; however, once a person seized power, he would suppress authority to make his leadership hereditary.

The economic development of Greek city states simplified the social classes. As an advance in trade and economic systems, and absent of labor; the common people in Greece mainland became free and the projected egalitarian element that was discontent with the prevailing political formation.

However, in Italy, the social characteristic of the citizens was determined by being a subscriber to guild, occupation and community organizations that imposed monopolies of production or trade. In addition, the social structure was not comprehensive.

At the top of the guild systems were bankers, wholesale merchants, and public administrators (Brucker, 2006). Down, the social ladder were experienced craftspeople and retail merchants while, at the bottom, unskilled and underemployed laborers completed the social system.

All the New Greek cities embraced the rule of self-government and autarky. Thus, the political system was not based on family ties, but on democracy or contracts. Compared to inland transport, where the whole household would be packed on a single cart, a ship was used to take only a certain number of people. Hence, the difficulty in exploration to new land broke the already weakened blood relation.

These assertions contributed to the weakness of the kings. In Italy city states, the political system was dominated by five administrative units. The south was ruled by the hereditary monarchs, in the north was the Papal States governed from Rome (Muir, 2002).

Within the Papal States were many semi-independent cities seeking to aloof themselves from the religious government. The remaining three city-states were found in northern Italy.

City states in Italy differed with those in Greece in the level of urbanization, seven of the largest cities were found in the Italian peninsular while others were scattered around the region (Muir, 1999). Despite the decrease in the population, the city space was packed with men, animals and markets. The social association differed; mostly property association determined ones connection to the place he lived.

In Greece city states, the support for an absolute dictator was not guaranteed. This was because the king belonged to aristocracy class, and that kingship naturally disappeared without a need for revolution. Greek city-

states formed a representative custom within the aristocratic class and evolved gradually into a system with a detailed structure and internal rules.

The democratic process formed the basis of the due process of the law. Also, the law represented the will of the aristocratic elite and the elites assumed priority over the will of an individual ruler. In Italy, there were constant conflicts between the kings. This contributed to the rise of repression. Muir (1999) gives an example of competition between grandi and popolo parties.

Popolo tended to elect its ruler from the nobility, and opposition party. This was because of the supremacy battles between the two parties. They granted the ruler title such as “captain of the people” (Spencer, 2005), once the party clinched the victory, its leader became the head of the city state.

As a ruler his objective was to make his power absolute; suppressing other sources of power and then proceeded to make his leadership hereditary.

The Greek city-states had an inclusive form of administration. This was illustrated in various strong institutions and rights of its citizens. The Greek city-states were small this ensured inclusiveness as citizens could understand each other. In Italy, the city-states authority belonged to rich and the gentries.

Different social classes were established thus; citizens were excluded in the administration process. However, despite the differences in political structures; both cities embraced economic activities such as trade and art among others.

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