

Polis



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The Polis The Polis is the single, greatest contribution of the ancient Greeks to the field of politics. It can be regarded as a powerful influence on, and a direct precursor to the modern democracies we know. The Polis also introduced the concepts that serve as the building blocks for the study of statecraft and politics, and is the foundation for much of the political structure used by Medieval Europe.

The Polis, by definition, is a city, or more accurately, a city-state. These city-states were independent and self-ruled, and were, by any definition, small political units. The Greeks used to be like most of the civilizations of their time - ruled by kingdoms. However, by the 12th century BC, they started living as nomadic or sedentary tribes. By the 8th century BC, these tribes grew into political entities that revolved around trade and commerce. From here, the Polis was born, spurred on by the need for common protection and organization among these entities.

The Polis was not a structure that was bound by territory as much as it was bound by political, religious, or tribal affiliation of the members. A polis would be composed of several tribes, or demes; foreigners, or metics; and slaves. Only the demes would be truly considered as citizens and would have the right to participate in the polis' government.

#### The Advantages of the City-State

The polis, being a small city-state (Sparta was the largest at only 3000 square miles), allowed for much political experimentation. At the beginning, various structures were employed by the Greek states - monarchies (rule by kings), oligarchies (rule by a few), timocracies (rule by the wealthy), tyrannies (rule by tyrants or usurpers) and democracies (rule by the people). The states adopted the structure that they saw most fit for the crises they

encountered.

One other advantage of a polis was its size. Since the polis was a small city-based entity, it was easier to manage, organize. Also, the citizens had a greater influence in city policies and were in a better position for self-determination.

#### Disadvantages of the City State

Since the city-states were small, they were easy prey for larger kingdoms and invading forces. Although federations and alliances were formed in emergencies, they never lasted. Squabbling amongst city states were not uncommon, as was the overthrow of governments.

#### The Role of Geography in the Development of the Polis

The peninsular and costal nature of many of the Greek states allowed for greater sea trade and more trade routes. It was this increased trade that spurred the development of the polis from amongst tribal units since these tribes needed to organize into an entity to protect this trade. The geography of the Greek territories also allowed for city states to be separate geographical territories (especially along the Greek peninsula).

#### Significance Among the Greeks

The Polis also grew out of the Greeks' dissatisfaction of the monarchies and centralized states of the Mycenaean era. Its development may be said to be a response to that crisis. The development of the city-state and the political power it afforded the citizens was integral to the increased trade, knowledge, and culture that defined the Greek civilization during this period.