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Areté: Greek Ideals and the Rise and Fall of the Polis Culture

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ARETÉ

BY RYAN WALKER

*Greek ideals and the rise
and fall of the polis culture*

The polis culture of Greece was a bright, brief moment in human history. The Greek experiment still fascinates and perplexes two thousand years later as questions and issues raised by the Greeks remained unsolved. The history of ancient Greece has never lacked attention from scholars. There is no scarcity of scholarship on either their political or intellectual developments—in fact no stone has been left unturned. The purpose of this paper and the inquiry behind it is to explore and assess the interplay between the two and how they may have influenced each other, in hopes that the decline of the ancient Greek πόλις might be better understood.

ἡ πόλις (pl.) πόλεις: **POLIS**

One's city or government. English words like politics, political, etc. are derived from this word.

ἡ ἀρετή: ARETÉ

Loosely translates to virtue or excellence.

The Greeks were always slaves to their ideals. Ideas became their greatest asset and eventually became their greatest weakness. Chief among them was ἀρετή. The term has no easy equivalent in English, and it takes a Greek like Herodotus to describe it. In his *Histories*, Herodotus tells a story about a Corinthian tyrant named Periander. Seeking advice on how to best govern his πόλις, Periander sends his messenger to another tyrant named Thrasybulus. When he hears Periander's question, Thrasybulus silently takes the messenger to a field and cuts cornstalks that have outgrown the rest. Upon hearing the report, Periander quickly grasps the message: kill any possible competitors.ⁱ Thrasybulus's philosophy is the opposite of ἀρετή. Instead, the Greeks (tyrants excluded) embraced and celebrated the drive to compete, to be the best, to achieve virtue, excellence, and glory in the eyes of their peers and Gods. This is ἀρετή.ⁱⁱ

Greek ideas about ἀρετή intertwined with the πόλις. The word πόλις itself comes from the older πτόλις, which meant fortress.ⁱⁱⁱ Even though the meaning shifted from fortress, to city, then to the abstract concept of the citizen-body of a city-state (the community), it is clear that πόλις always retained a militaristic connotation.^{iv} A citizen's first duty to his polis was to fight and to die if needed for his country.^v This reflects the harsh world from which Archaic Greece emerged in the sixth century.^{vi} In archaic Greece life was dangerous and harsh. Ἀρετή grew out of

the need for members of the πόλις to protect their home. Thus the πόλις took on a defensive tendency during the archaic period. As the πόλεις grew prosperous, the meaning of ἀρετή expanded to serving one's πόλις in all aspects of life, whether defending the πόλις, winning glory for the πόλις in athletic competition, or guiding the πόλις through politics. Indeed, ἀρετή especially influenced political theory in the archaic period. The Greeks began to realize that it was difficult to achieve ἀρετή with men like Periander and Thrasybulus cutting others down.

As the πόλεις developed, a few powerful families controlled most arable land. In agrarian societies, where currency does not control the market, arable land grants one both prestige and independence. It also grants one the wealth needed to purchase arms, allowing one the ability to fight and win glory in battle. In other words, these families became the wealthy aristocrats of the πόλις.

The age of the ὀπλίτης had begun. Eventually, they controlled a disproportionate amount of the land, dominating the decision making within the πόλις, and held the exclusive right and responsibility to fight, which in turn granted them more wealth, prestige and power. For anyone outside of the aristocracy, it was a vicious circle. As the ὀπλίτης revolution gained momentum, more fighters were needed. This new

ὀπλίτης: HOPLITE

The citizen-soldier of the polis. The name comes from their shields (the hoplon). They were usually free citizens wealthy enough to purchase their own bronze armor and weapons. They often fought in the now famous phalanx formation, which allowed the hoplites to protect each other while they fought.

στάσις:

literally, 'a standing' but the Greeks used it to refer to times of civil strife.

δῆμος:

'the people' often as a political entity

middle class was happy enough to fight for the πόλις, but it did not take long for them to realize that they shared in the dangers with the aristocracy yet enjoyed none of the privileges.^{vii} Often these discrepancies led to periods of **στάσις**, or civil unrest, as the lower classes clashed with the upper classes over land redistribution. In the worst scenarios, one aristocrat, a Periader or Thrasybulus, would promise the people, the **δῆμος**, the land they were clamoring for and overthrow the aristocracy, planting himself as tyrant.^{viii} This struggle went on throughout the archaic period and forced the Greeks to reconsider their laws. How could they distribute the land fairly? Could laws help men share well?

Many communities understood that a compromise had to be made or their πόλις would collapse. They called on sages and lawgivers to redistribute land and create laws to prevent hostile internal takeovers and civil war.^{ix} By 500 BCE, the Greeks were characterizing this solution as **εὐνομία**.^x Semi-legendary men like Solon and Lycurgus

εὐνομία:

'good laws' or 'good order'

ὁ νόμος (pl.) νόμοι: LAW

Law or custom. English gets words such as economy, autonomy, etc. from this word.

created laws, **νόμοι**, in efforts to distribute the land more equitably while empowering the middle class by protecting their ownership. Again, since land ownership meant more wealth, and more wealth meant more political power, new organs of government were created in order to give the ὀπλίτοι a voice.^{xi} Often the ὀπλίτοι made up the assembly (ἐκκλησία), while the aristocrats retained some of their power through the council (βουλή), senate (γερουσία), or as magistrates (ἄρχοντες).^{xii} For the first time most men, as citizens of the πόλις, had a say in whether or not they would go to war and which laws they might pass.^{xiii} Through **εὐνομία**^{xiv}, they were now empowered politically, economically, and socially. They all shared the power of a king with each other, meaning they could now all compete for ἀρετή. The playing field was now level.

Only the Gods and νόμοι now ruled a citizen of the πόλις.^{xv} Herodotus claims in the third book of the *Histories* that 'Custom (νόμοι) is king of all.'^{xvi} Demaratus tried to inform Xerxes that the Spartans' 'master is the law and they're far more afraid of it than your men are of you.'^{xvii} The words of Demaratus are misleading. The Greeks did not fear the law in the same sense Xerxes's troops feared him. The law gave a citizen his power to speak and to be heard. The law guaranteed the citizen his land. Illegal actions could indeed result in punishment from men and gods, but the Greeks loved their laws, the children of their ideals, above all else. Plato and Aristotle reiterate Herodotus when they describe the ideal state as one that controls every detail of a citizen's life. In the Greek mind, there was no distinction between the state and the citizen.^{xviii} Herodotus's views concerning polis culture are summed up in the book five, section 78 of the *Histories*:

"So the Athenians flourished. Now the advantages of everyone having a voice in the political procedure are not restricted just to single instances, but are plain wherever one looks. For instance, while the Athenians were ruled by tyrants, they were no better at warfare than any of their neighbors, but once they had got rid of the tyrants they became vastly superior. This goes to show that while they were under an oppressive regime they fought below their best because they were working for a master, whereas as free men each individual wanted to achieve something for himself."^{xix}

The pursuit of ἀρετή and εὐνομία culminated in 480/479 BCE with Greece's famous victory against the Persians.^{xx} While there are numerous reasons for Greece's success, one reason stands paramount; the Greeks were compelled to fight harder than the Persians for the sake of ἀρετή—the law demanded that they defend their homeland at all cost. This victory marks the Greek Moment. A disparate army from many πόλεις, prone to bickering amongst themselves, defeated the mightiest army of the period. In retrospect, this victory would prove bittersweet. Such a great victory sowed the seeds of the πόλις culture's demise.^{xxi}

The end of the Persian Wars marked the start of the Pentekontaetia, a fifty year period characterized by two important developments: the beginning of the intellectual revolution Greece is most remembered for and Athenian imperialism. During the Pentekontaetia, Greek intellectual investigation gradually shifted from the community of the πόλις to the individuality of Man.^{xxii} This shift in thought ultimately yielded dire consequences for Greek πόλις culture. Though the new humanist movement further empowered the Greek individual, opened up new ways of thinking about the world, and gave birth to science and philosophy, it came at the expense of the culture the Greeks held so dear. It warped the most important aspect of the πόλις culture—ἀρετή. The change in thought began with thinkers like Hippocrates. His empirical study of man's body signaled a gentle inward turning of the Greek mind.^{xxiii} Hippocrates wanted to better understand how the human body functioned. His works stressed using empirical knowledge rather than mythical explanations. He makes the claim that any clear knowledge of nature cannot be obtained from any source but medicine.^{xxiv} Hippocrates and the physicians pioneered this new way of thinking, and the philosophers pursued empiricism in subsequent decades. The Sophists, however, were the catalyst that changed Greek thought.^{xxv}

The Sophists were professional teachers.^{xxvi} They tended to reside in Athens, teaching young nobles many subjects, usually focused on politics and the art of persuasion.^{xxvii} Many of these men were skeptics; Protagoras is quoted as saying 'There are two contradictory λόγοι about everything.'^{xxviii} Protagoras believed a truly good speaker

could argue persuasively for any side of any argument. Another important shift came in the new view of νόμοι. The Sophists began to see the νόμοι as mere conventions that limited man's potential to achieve ἀρετή. The value of the νόμοι was soon determined by their relevance to contemporary social and political concerns.^{xxix} More importantly, conceptions of ἀρετή also changed during this period. Before, the term referred to the degree of virtue or perfection achieved through contributions to the community. Now it referred to the degree to which man could achieve honor and success for himself.^{xxx} While this might be a noble goal for the individual, it proved disastrous for the πόλις culture. The πόλις could not survive as a political entity without its citizens consciously maintaining and supporting it. Relativism and subjectivism had now seeped into the Greek mind.^{xxxi} The celebration of the individual coupled with such skepticism about the world proved a very dangerous combination.

The effects of these teachings manifested at the end of the Pentekontaetia and continued into the fourth century. Politicians throughout Greece began to pursue their own personal interests over that of their πόλις. This had, of course, been going on since the start of Greek history, but the magnitude of such actions was now greater. In the seventh and sixth centuries this might have resulted in tyrannical rule; in the fifth century, new ideas led to imperialism.^{xxxii}

Returning to the start of the Pentekontaetia, when these new ways of thinking were beginning to take root, Greece had two leaders: Sparta and Athens. The latter led her allies in

ὁ λόγος (pl.) λόγοι: REASONS

Originally a word meaning, 'plea' or 'opinion,' its meaning expanded to 'word,' 'speech,' 'account' and 'reason. Philosophers like the Sophists and Aristotle used it to mean 'argument'.

the creation of the Delian league.^{xxxiii} This league was created to ravage the **Great King's** holdings, to liberate subjugated states and to protect Asiatic Greek states as autonomous entities.^{xxxiv} From the start, this league set precedents. It was the first league of Greek πόλεις centered on the sea. Before the creation of the Delian league, Greeks fought primarily on land in phalanx formations. It was also an offensive organization, very different from the defensive posture of the πόλις. Military endeavors had always focused on defending the πόλις, not conquest. Alliances up to this point had been defensive pacts. Finally, unlike other leagues, membership turned out to be permanent.^{xxxv} By the 430s the league had transformed into an Athenian empire. This transformation was subtle and gradual. How could such a situation arise without any other Greeks (except possibly the Lacedaemonians) noticing?

One factor was money. Before even the Persian Wars Athens had struggled to pay for a navy.^{xxxvi} Ironically, the Athenians found a solution from the Persian tradition. They instigated a system of tribute, based on a historically successful Persian mode, in which vulnerable πόλεις paid tribute to the League for protection from the barbarian king.^{xxxvii} The introduction of monetary tribute, or a φόρος, instead of manpower, further alienated the league system from the πόλις culture, both within the league and within the πόλεις paying tribute. The πόλεις which paid tribute, could not claim equality with the Athenians in League matters, since the Athenians were at the forefront of military action and therefore the risk.^{xxxviii} The arrangement also gave the Athenians greater martial experience than the πόλεις which paid tribute, disrupting εὐνομία within the league. The power differential increased throughout the Pentekontaetia. Moreover, in the 450s the Delian treasury moved from the island of Delos to the city of Athens which proved Delian policy was transforming into Athenian policy.^{xxxix} The Athenians were able to argue that the treasury should be kept with the πόλις that was providing most of the ships. Even Thucydides was forced to admit that Athens purchased its power.^{xl}

GREAT KING:

A term used by Greek Authors to refer to the King of Persia.

The offensive posture of a navy also helped change Athens into a tyrant among states. As noted above, participation in the archaic πόλις that granted one ἀρετή often meant engaging in defensive military action. However, participation in the new Athenian/Delian culture was based on feeding the money-hungry navy through offensive operations like raiding. Furthermore, the land owning hoplite was too expensive to form the basic unit of a navy, for navies need far more men.^{xli} The professionalization of the Athenian navy foreshadowed the same process of land-based forces in the fourth century. Instead of middle and upper class landowners defending their plots, the new soldier was paid a wage by his general. The end result of this was that the ὀπλίται lost their social prestige. The new soldier demanded his voice be heard over theirs. Thus, στάσις again began to grip many πόλεις for much of the fourth century.

Whatever their intentions in creating the Delian League, even Athenians called their state an 'empire' by the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War.^{xlii} Despite the shift from πόλις to empire, like other Greeks Athenians still desired ἀρετή. As a πόλις, Athens wanted to compete with Sparta for the title of "guardian of Greek freedom" to be hegemon of Hellas.^{xliii} Most shocking of all for other Greek states was that Athenian desire for supremacy was not considered shameful, for the Athenians were proud of what they had become. They were achieving ἀρετή. To the other Greek πόλεις, Athens had become a tyrant among states, a new threat akin to Persia.

The Megarean Decree, the last straw for the Spartans in series of insults and transgressions, reveals how far down the imperial path Athens had trod. The Athenians accused the πόλις Megara of killing a herald and decreed that Megarian ships were banned from any harbor and marketplace within the Delian league. This event reveals Athenian attitudes towards their allies in the league—the word 'subjects' becoming a more appropriate term.^{xliv} Athens also began taking away the ability of other cities to defend themselves, striking at the core of what it meant to be a πόλις. Two cities, Naxos and Thasos, attempted to leave the league in the 470's and 460's. The Athenians besieged and defeated both cities. Each city was forced to tear down their walls

REALPOLITIK:

A term coined by Ludwig von Rochau to refer to politics based on brute, Machiavellian power.

and their fleets were confiscated. Therein lies the tragedy of Greek history, that the first democracy, a potent and vibrant force, used its potency to subjugate its neighbors and weaken the Greek world.^{xlv} Even Thucydides, a staunch supporter of Athens, argues that the city had begun to grasp at more and more and more.^{xlvi} In 434, the Spartans declared war on Athens. It would later be known as the Peloponnesian War.

Considering the Sophist movement, it is clear why **Realpolitik** became the policy of the Peloponnesian War. Many policy makers in Athens, tutored as youngsters by the Sophists, favored this skeptical mode of thought, especially as the war progressed. Episodes like the near massacre of the Mytilenians show that thinking was never uniform in Athens.^{xlvii} Even so, this new cynical view of the world often prevailed. The tragic example of the Melians shows the stark contrast between the new Athenian worldview and the ethics of the *ὀπλίτης* from the archaic period:

Melians: "Surely then, if you take such desperate action to keep from losing your empire, and those already in thrall do so to be delivered, it is complete baseness and cowardice for us, still free, not to go to every length before being enslaved."

Athenians: "No provided you consider reasonably. For this is not an evenly matched contest over your manliness, lest you incur disgrace, but planning for your survival, lest you stand up to those who are much stronger."

Thucydides Book V §§85–113

The Athenians summarized this new way of thinking as 'The strong do what they will, while the weak do what they must.'^{xlviii} It shows the danger of a foreign policy constructed from ideas fostered by the Sophists. *Ἀρετή* at this point became a buzz word, a tool demagogues and ambitious politicians used for their own ends.

The Athenians lost the war to the Spartans in 404, but they had opened Pandora's Box with the Delian League. The era of war was far from over. The Greeks in 404 had

now tasted empire and seen the power, the prestige and especially the wealth that came with it. It is during this period of wars *ἀρετή*, warped and twisted, began to work against the *πόλις* culture from within. Greeks still pursued virtue through excellence, but they were holding on to an old word with different meanings, motivations, and goals.

It is even more disappointing that Sparta was next to fall to the temptation of empire.^{xlix} Certainly the actions of leaders like **Lysander** helped tug Sparta toward an imperial policy, but the notion that she was 'forced' into such a policy is suspect at best.¹ Furthermore, the idea that the Spartans would bring greater freedom to Greek *πόλεις*, whether other communities wanted help or not, understandably infuriated even her oldest and staunchest allies (such as Corinth). Even more infuriating were the Spartan garrisons and governors left to help protect the *πόλεις* from themselves.^{li} Throughout their foray into imperialism, the Spartans claimed they were attempting to hold up traditional ideals, spreading the *εὐνομία* of a simpler time, when Greeks could pursue *ἀρετή* as they wished.

Thebes followed Sparta in a bid for all of Greece, which came close to fruition. The Thebans, unlike the rest of Greece, were able to adapt their tactics in warfare to fit the demands of the time. They built a large professional army and shattered Spartan hegemony permanently at the battle of Leuctra.^{lii} They even invaded Laconia, the heart of Sparta power, and did not cease fighting until the desperate Spartan king stopped the Thebans within sight of the city.^{liii} All of Greece was forced to unite in order to defeat Thebes, which differed from Sparta by openly seeking an empire.^{liv}

A common thread unites each and every *πόλις* mentioned above. Influenced by the players within them, who in turn were influenced by the Sophists, the *πόλεις* sought more power and wealth. Greek leaders justified this desire with

LYSANDER:

Spartan commander whose victories helped bring an end the Peloponnesian War in 404. He spent the next decade working to secure Spartan domination over the rest of Greece until his death in 395 BCE.

the slogan ‘might makes right,’ or attempted to warp tradition and custom (νόμος) to fit their present needs. Often leaders did not bother to justify their actions at all.^{lv}

The long-term effects of the intellectual movement that began in Athens and spread throughout the Greek world fundamentally changed the way the Greeks thought and acted. The πόλις culture died, ground down by the Greeks’ pursuit of an ideal warped by greed and avarice but disguised in tradition. In the emerging culture, the land owning warrior had lost his place, the ὄπλιτος lost his occupation due to the professionalization of the military, and even Spartan kings were forced to become mercenaries out of necessity.^{lvi} The lives of all people became more private, revolving less and less around the agora. The final moment for the πόλις came when a worn out Greece was forced to submit to Phillip and the Macedonians in 338 BCE.^{lvii}

The goal of this paper was not to vilify the Sophists. The intellectual movement of the fifth century sparked the western tradition of critical thinking. It provided the foundation for philosophy, science and democracy. Furthermore, our sources for this remarkable period in history, Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon and others, are all products of this movement. Without Herodotus and Thucydides, history might still sound like Homer. Xenophon himself was a student of the most famous Sophist, Socrates. Yet, he laments the cost of the sophistic influence on Greek thinking.^{lviii} The pursuit of ἀρετή was both the secret to πόλις culture success, and author of its downfall. The Greeks’ views, concerning this idea and how they changed over the course of their golden age, determined which role it played.

While the history of ancient Greece is not completely analogous to modern history, examining how the intellectual movements of the period interacted with the cultural and political trajectories of Greece, and vice versa, is a valuable exercise. The contemporary world is itself in a time of shifting ideas and values. Understanding how the Greeks adapted (or failed to adapt) to a similar shift sheds light on the power of ideas—in any age.

ENDNOTES

- i Herodotus Book 5 §92
 ii Ehrenberg 60, 273
 iii Hansen 39
 iv Hansen 62–63
 v Hansen 116, 125
 vi Hansen 41
 vii Hansen 125 Ehrenberg 72
 viii Hansen 125–126
 ix Hansen 125
 x Ehrenberg 30, 33, 51, 60
 xi Ehrenberg 56–53
 xii Hansen 113
 xiii Hansen 115
 xiv Ehrenberg 13, 51
 xv Ehrenberg 59
 xvi Herodotus Book 3 §38
 xvii Herodotus Book 7 §104
 xviii Hansen 122
 xix Herodotus Book 5 §78
 xx Ehrenberg 137
 xxi Herodotus Book 9 §78 Ehrenberg 139
 (Ehrenberg points out Herodotus’s subtle warning at the end of his work.)
 xxii Ehrenberg 267–268
 xxiii Ehrenberg 267, 280
 xxiv Ehrenberg 268
 xxv Ehrenberg 270
 xxvi Ehrenberg 270
 xxvii Ehrenberg 271–272
 xxviii Ehrenberg 272 (It must be remembered that he is quoted by Plato. Young Greeks, I believe, confused ἀρετή & ambition and this is essentially what sums up the decline of the polis.)
 xxix Xenophon II.3 §11, VII.3 §3 Ehrenberg 278 (Here using example of Eurphion and thirty, he and others would switch sides and begin manipulating the law to fit their needs, rather than serving it.)
 xxx Ehrenberg 274
 xxxi Ehrenberg 274, 306
 xxxii Ehrenberg 281–283, 303
 xxxiii Herodotus Book 9 §114 Thucydides Book 1 §89
 xxxiv Book 1 §96, Ehrenberg 156
 xxxv Ehrenberg 160



xxxvi Herodotus Book 5 §36, Book 6 §13 Book 8 §§111–112

xxxvii Thucydides Book 1 §16,

xxxviii Thucydides Book 1 §98, Ehrenberg 160, 165, 173, 210

xxxix Thucydides Book 1 §104, Ehrenberg 172, 175

xl Thucydides Book 1 §98, 121

xli Ehrenberg 35, 11/8 Hansen 115–116, 125

xlii Thucydides Book 1 §108, 117, 118, 122 Book 2 §8, 36, 62, 63, 65 Ehrenberg 160, 171, 175, 217

xliii Thucydides Book 1 §70, 97 Ehrenberg 155, 157

xliv Ehrenberg 175–176

xlv Thucydides Book 6 §26 Ehrenberg 177, 239, Hansen 122

xlvi Thucydides Book 4 §21, §41, §65 Herodotus Book 9 §78 Ehrenberg 139 (again Herodotus's warning is very important in revealing attitudes about war-torn Greece.)

xlvii Thucydides Book 3 §§36–50 Ehrenberg 219–220

xlviii Thucydides Book 5 §§85–113 Ehrenberg 234, 278–280 Hansen 128

xlix Xenophon II.2 §19 IV.8 §16 V.1 §2 (Spartans collection of tribute) V.2 §§3, 14, 20, 21 (land mirroring sea system now), 28, 37, 284–288

l Ehrenberg 284 (Ehrenberg feels the Spartans' hands were forced. I disagree. Lysander and the rest were just a little greedy at the time.)

li Xenophon Ehrenberg 281

lii Xenophon VI.4 (entire Chapter) VII.1 §§32–33, 39, 43 (Thebans sending out governors now) Hansen 49

liii Xenophon VII.5 §§12–14

liv Xenophon VII.1 §39 Hansen 130

lv Xenophon VI.3 §11 Ehrenberg 278–281, 304, 306

lvi Xenophon IV.8 §33 VII.4 §6 Ehrenberg 286 Hansen 117 (disappearance of Hoplite in Classical period)

lvii Xenophon VI.3 §11 Ehrenberg 281, 286 Hansen 48–49, 132–134

lviii Xenophon VII.2

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