Chapter Three: The Greek Polis

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The Formation of the Polis
Rich and Poor in a Poor Land
The Coming of the Archaic Age
Council, Assembly, and Phalanx
Colonization, Commerce, and Manufacturing
The Cityscape

Justice and the Polis
Law and Tyranny
Lawmakers of Sparta and Athens
Justice in the Classical Age

Private Life of the Polis
The Household: Women’s Place
Beyond the Household: Male Space

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter discusses the rise of the Greek polis, and the role that it played in the economic, political, and social lives of the Greeks. The polis emerged as a political system at the end of the Dark Ages, as the peoples of the peninsula began to identify themselves as Hellenes. Much of the information regarding this period is drawn from Homer’s epic poems The Iliad and The Odyssey. It is clear from the information that people ruled the polis, rather than the other way around. While some of the poleis had only a few people who were in command, the system of kings had been eliminated and the kings demoted. The citizens of the poleis responded to this by creating assemblies in which certain members of the poleis served. In addition, the citizens were responsible for the defense of their cities; to this end, they formed phalanxes, a new military system. In the phalanx, a block of men stood shoulder to shoulder to form a solid line, protected by shields. Only the prosperous could afford the equipment to be a hoplite, or member of the phalanx; the less well-to-do served in other capacities for the military. The phalanx remained a dominant military weapon until the 4th century B.C.

The success of the Greeks led to increases in population, and as a result led to colonization. Greeks from all of the poleis began to migrate to other areas. Many of these colonies were coastal, just as most of the poleis were. Most of the new colonies engaged in trade with each other and with the poleis, and a healthy exchange of goods and services occurred. This trade led to the creation of a monetary system, with each poleis minting its own coins. Writing also emerged as a major tool of the colonial period, as writing was used to record trades and other economic transactions. Another side effect of the colonial period was the burgeoning slave trade, which expanded dramatically as the poleis grew larger and there was a need for non-farm labor. Slaves became the engine of the Greek economy: they performed virtually all tasks, and only in agriculture were there a limited number of slaves.

With the growth of the poleis came an expansion of the cityscapes. More buildings were constructed, and shrines were built everywhere. Other important buildings and areas, including the agora, or marketplace, expanded as the polis did. The total population of each polis remained small by modern standards; most poleis contained between 4,000 and 5,000 people, and there were few cities which were larger than 40,000. The largest of the poleis, Athens, had a combined urban and rural population of 310,000 at its height. Of those, approximately 15%--the free adult males--directed the actions of the polis. The other 85%--women, children, slaves, and foreigners--had no voice in government.

A rapidly growing population meant the need for more laws, and a more structured system of justice. During the Archaic Age, conflicts between wealthy landowners and peasants often led to serfdom for the peasants, who could ill afford to fight with their employers. During the Archaic Age conflict often led to tyranny, which was the rule of an illegitimate ruler who came to power through illegal means. Many of the tyrants were quite successful, but the rule of a tyrant rarely lasted more than a generation or two. Eventually, a belief in equality before the law developed, which helped to make tyranny less common and allowed for more equal
Much of the information about this period was contained in poetry, which emerged as the primary form of cultural expression in sixth-century Greece. Some tyrants favored certain poets, and their works became well known; many fostered public institutions and supported public values. Some tyrants shared the stages with legislators who helped to pass laws that made the tyrants obsolete. The two major examples of the system of the poleis, commonly compared, are Sparta and Athens.

The Spartans came to be known for their remarkable military, and indeed, their entire polis was centered on military service. All aspects of life, from the social to the economic, focused on contributions to the military. Agricultural production, the capture of slaves, even songs and art were designed to improve the military structure of Sparta. The Spartan system was completely hierarchical, with certain groups destined to remain at the bottom of the hierarchy.

On the other side of the peninsula were the Athenians. Athenian lawmakers attempted to create a more just society, one in which all citizens were protected by law. One of the most famous of the Athenian lawmakers, Solon, went so far as to eliminate all debts owed by the peasantry and to rebuild the Athenian economy. Other lawmakers, including Draco and Cleisthenes, also contributed to the law code of Athens. Justice was served by a council of citizens, all men, who sat in judgment of those accused. The tenure of Pericles marked a high point in governing in Athens, but his reign was also marked by the beginning of the Peloponnesian Wars against Sparta. Pericles' death, and the destructive nature of the wars, marked the beginning of the decline of Athens, and by the time Philip II of Macedonia marched on to the peninsula, he experienced limited resistance.

While the Athenians were known for their partial democracy, women had far more important roles in Spartan society. Women had little power in either poleis: the oikos, or household, was patrilineal, and the only descendants worth mentioning were males. Women married at a young age, usually around 15, about the time they began to menstruate, and they married men who were often twice their age. Women were expected to bear numerous children, including at least one male heir, and the chance of a woman dying in childbirth were very high. Women were the subjects of the males in their lives: initially their fathers, and then their husbands. However, women did have some authority due to the useful labor that they performed within their families, including farming, weaving, and in wealthy families, managing the household. Children were also the subjects of their fathers, and fathers had the exclusive decision to accept a child into the household. Children could be unwanted because there were limited resources in the family (although children refused for that reason were usually girls), or because of some sort of defect. Such children were left in a public place, where they either died or were taken in by other adults to become slaves and prostitutes. Many children who were not exposed still died: mortality rates for children in the first year of life ranged between 30 and 40 percent. The upbringing of children was initially the responsibility of the mother: this, coupled with the maintenance of the household, was the primary role for women. Some women were allowed to participate in religious festivals, but this was a small percentage of the total female population.

Men were responsible for representing the family outside the home. This meant not only engaging in some sort of economic role, but participating in government and serving in the military. Men gathered at the symposium or at the agora to discuss politics, debate philosophy, and engage in discussions. Young men were encouraged to form deep bonds with other men, and in some cases these relationships developed into homosexual ones. Clearly, the Greek poleis can be seen as an exclusively male club, in which only certain men were allowed to participate.

KEY POINTS

The Formation of the Polis: Within small cities formed around religious sites, Greeks depose their kings, construct public buildings, organize public spaces, and invent a new kind of politics.

Justice and the Polis: The Greeks form a concept with a momentous future: the purpose of the community is to achieve justice for its members— or at least for some of them. This ideal was achieved in some Greek cities to a higher degree than anywhere else in the world before modern times.

Private Life of the Polis: In the Greek house and polis, women have a small place, and men have all the rest. Men participate in many types of private association, and they alone are admitted to public life.
SUGGESTED FILMS

The Death of Socrates. Time-Life, 45 minutes

Cities of the Ancient World: Athens. Questar, 70 minutes

Man and State: The Trial of Socrates. Bernard Wilets, 29 minutes

Athens: The Golden Age. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 30 minutes

The Glory That Was Greece: The Age of Victory. Time-Life, 40 minutes

The Glory That Was Greece: The Age of Civil War. Time-Life, 40 minutes

Greece: Lost Civilizations. Time-Life, 48 minutes