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1

In Search of *Polis*

The human being is by nature an animal that lives in a community of citizens.

—ARISTOTLE, *POLITICS*

The Goats of Hērakleia (ca. 270 BCE)

In 1895 or 1896, the French scholar Jules Delamarre, while exploring the island of Amorgos, studied a worn and fragmentary inscription found in modern Irakleia, a small islet in the Eastern Cyclades (or more dramatically, the *Erimonisia*, the “desert islands”), located to the south of Naxos and to the west of Amorgos (figs. 1.1, 1.2).¹ The text, though fragmentary, is nothing less than extraordinary in its implications. In short, it concerned the struggles of a community on ancient Hērakleia to reach a decision about goats; and it deserves full quotation.

[καὶ τὸν Ἡρακλε]-
α καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους [θεοὺς τοὺς τὴν νῆ]-
σογ κατέχοντας, εὐορκοῦντι [ι μὲν μοι εὖ]
εἶη, ἐφιορκοῦντι δὲ τάναντία τῶν [ἀγαθῶν].
ἐὰν δέ τις βιασόμενος αἴγας εἰσάγ[ειν ἦ]
τρέφειν ἐν τῇ νήσῳ παρὰ τόδε τὸ ψήφι[σ]- 4
μα καὶ τὸν ὄρκον τῶν κωλύοντων τινὰς
κτείνει, ἐπεξιόντων αὐτὸν οἷ τε προσ-
ήκοντες τοῦ παθόντος καὶ τὸ κοινὸν τῶν 8
νησιωτῶν ἅπαν· ὅ τι δ' ἂν εἰς τὴν κρίσιν
ἀνήλωμα γίνηται, τὸ μέρος ἕκαστον εἰς-
[φ]έρειν· ἀναγράψαι δὲ τόδε τὸ ψήφισμα τὸν
[ι]εροποιὸν Ἐπιστροφίδην<v> εἰς στήλην λιθί- 12
νηγ καὶ στήσαι εἰς τὸ Μητρῶιον· τὸ δὲ ἀνή-
λωμα τὸ εἰς τὴν στήλην καὶ τὴν ἀναγρα-
φὴν ἔστω ἀπὸ τοῦ κοινοῦ. ταῦτα δ' εἶναι εἰς
τε φυλακὴν καὶ σωτηρίαν Ἡρακλειωτῶν 16
πάντων καὶ τῶν οἰκούντων [v ἐν τῇ νήσῳ].



FIGURE 1.1. Irakleia, in the Little Cyclades. The view is taken towards the east and includes some of the agricultural land of the island. To the left, one of the two harbor inlets; cf. fig. 18.2. Photo by Z. Tankosic.

[. . . I swear by . . . and Heraklē]s and the other [gods] who hold sway over the island, and if I keep to my oath, may it turn out [well] for me, and if I break my oath may it turn to the opposite. If someone, in trying by force to introduce goats or to raise them, in contravention of this decree and the oath, should kill some men among those who try to prevent it, let the relatives of the victim and the whole commonwealth of the islanders prosecute him; as for whatever expense is incurred for the judgment, let everyone contribute his share; and let the *hieropoios* inscribe this decree on a stone stele and set it up in the shrine of the Mother of the Gods; let the expense of the stele and the inscription come out of the public treasury. These matters are to be considered as concerning the protection and safety of all the Herakleiotēs and of the inhabitants [of the island].²

As analyzed in a luminous article by French historian Louis Robert, the inscribed document, datable to the first half of the third century BCE on paleographical grounds, preserves the end of a momentous decision by a political community, the Herakleiotēs. In a formal meeting (the details of which are now lost), framed by the working of their institutions, the Herakleiotēs decided not to keep goats on the island. They further took care of the implementation of this decision, through the imposition of an oath to respect the decision (this is where the preserved text starts). They also offered the guarantee of communal prosecution in case any attempt at stopping the introduction of goats onto the island resulted in death. The decision mobilized common institutional resources—deliberative, judicial,³ financial, but also ideological. Its measures were formally declared necessary for the community's safety (*phulakē kai sōtēria*), a legal category protecting it against amendment or reversal, but also an invocation of the public good.⁴ The document, transcribing the whole transaction of the

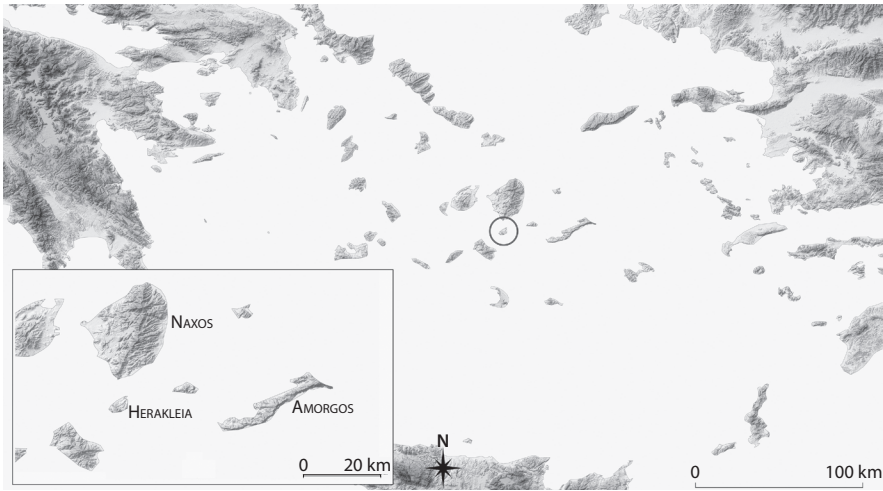


FIGURE 1.2. Hērakleia in its geographical context.

meeting in its institutional setting (including the motion as proposed, and almost certainly procedural details such as the proposers of the motion and the presiding bodies at the meeting), was inscribed in permanent form and displayed in a sacred space, the shrine of the Mother of the Gods, as a record and as a monument of the political community in action. Such inscribed decrees are a major source for the history of ancient Greek communities and their account echoes down this book.

Robert contrasted the ancient community with the later fate of the island, as seen by early modern travelers: a “goat island” used as pasture by absentee landlords, with no human inhabitants except for two or three shepherds. Hence, in Robert’s view, the fragmentary decree showed an episode in “the eternal war between peasant and shepherd.” The choice seems to be a political community, or something like the island of the Cyclops—a desert with goats and a few shepherds.⁵ Yet the alternative is more complex. The local historian Ph. Gavalas gives a glimpse of the harrowing agrarian history of the island. The peasants seen by the German archaeologist L. Ross in 1840 were sharecroppers installed by an absentee landlord, the monastery of Panagia Hozoviotissa on Amorgos, on emphyteutic leases involving the surrender of half the harvest. (Interestingly, the leases stipulated the ownership of plough-oxen, a cow, and a donkey, but make no mention of goats: were they banned or supplementary to the lease requirements?) In the 1860s, the conditions were harsher still, with the monastic landlords granting harsh short-term leases and sometimes farming out the whole island to entrepreneurs, leading to multiple conflicts, defaults, and lawsuits.⁶ In contrast, third-century BCE Hērakleia was neither a wilderness of many sheep and a couple of herdsmen, nor a depressed feudal world of sharecropping peasants dealing with absentee landlords and hostile

laws, but the site of an egalitarian political community with the collective capacities to decide its own fate.

What should we call this political community? It regulates itself; it can take independent decisions in deliberative assembly, without referring to a higher authority (hence the *phulakē* clause safeguarding the measures). It has institutions—political, administrative, judicial, religious—and controls its own spaces, from a whole territory to the shrine where the decree was inscribed. It is immediately tempting to call it the *polis*, or city-state, of the Herakleiotēs.⁷ However, it is also true that the word *polis* never occurs in our fragmentary text. Instead, it mentions legal action taken by “the whole *koinon* (community) of the islanders,” and at the end, “all the Herakleiotēs and those who inhabit the island.” Hence, another interpretation would be to see this decision as taken by an association of inhabitants on the island (dealing with encroachment by herd owners on Amorgos) rather than a city-state, since the term *koinon* can be used for groups and associations, as proposed by C. Constantakopoulou. Another possibility, tentatively mentioned by P. Fröhlich, would be that the decree was passed by a local subdivision or official body within a larger *polis* (for instance Amorgos).⁸

My own understanding of the nuanced poetics of community in the decree is the following. There exists a corporate group of entitled and enfranchised men, the *Herakleiōtai*, with a reified name (an *ethnikon*, to use the technical term) which shows that they claim to be the stakeholders of political community on the island—in other words, that they constitute a *polis*. That they can take their own independent decisions, wielding a *phulakē* clause (of a type that is only found used by *poleis* as states) shows that they are a *polis* endowed with state capacities, drawing notably on common funds (*koinon*, a term which can designate things owned by the *polis* but also the *polis* itself as community).⁹ The introduction of goats is an internal affair (since those who do it would infringe their own oath), and hence the decree is about an effort at autoregulation by a community of citizens.

But there also are other people on the island, who do not have access to state-institutional power—women, children, foreigners, enslaved people—and appear in the last clause as the inhabitants of the island: the *phulakē* clause concerns more than just the *polis* or the *dēmos* (the People constituted by citizens), but all inhabitants. Analogously, the *polis* of Magnēsia on Maeander, in western Asia Minor, celebrated rituals in honor of Zeus *Polis*-savior, “for the safety (*sōtēria*) of the *polis*, the territory, the citizens, the women, the children, and the others living in the city and in the territory.”¹⁰ The *polis* of Hērakleia is a set of political institutions but also a society, whose welfare is directly concerned by the decree formally passed by the Herakleiotēs. The “whole *koinon* of the islanders” is a striking expression, insisting not just on the community (*koinon*) that is represented by the group of citizen Herakleiotēs but putting forward a new, more capacious category of all those that occupy the island. The practical purpose is to explain that everyone in the social assemblage on Hērakleia will be liable for taxation—an exceptional levy, *eisphora*—to cover the judicial costs potentially involved in enforcing the ban; but this sense of the broader community

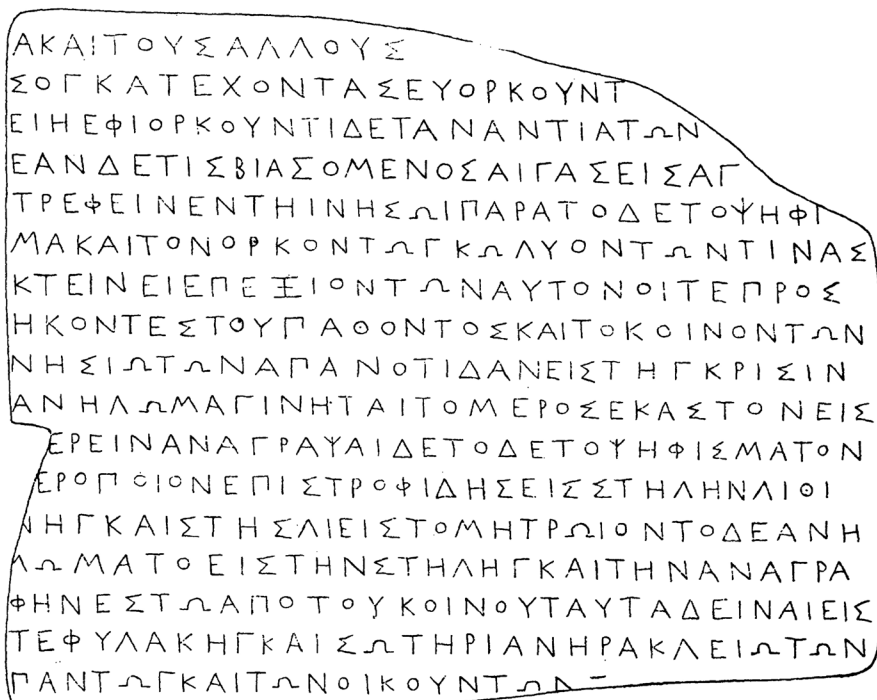


FIGURE 1.3. Fragmentary decree of the Heracleians on goats. From Delamarre 1902.

also emerges in the unusual extension of the *phulakē* clause to concern the safety of all the inhabitants. The very complexity of the relations between the political community of adult male citizens, and the rest of the human society within the same space, is an indication that we are looking at a *polis*.

The goal pursued by the political, shared effort of the *polis* of Hērakleia is not completely clear: why was the decree a matter of common safety, to the point of imposing an oath and expecting violence? Robert's picture of "the eternal war between herdsman and farmer" is too simple, since the traditional Mediterranean architecture combines gardens, intensive agriculture, and animal husbandry, including the raising of sheep and goats (that convert waste and scrub into important byproducts such as manure, fibers and protein).¹¹ Under the mask of civic consensus, what were the stakes? The question takes on greater urgency if we look at conditions on the island, with its 18 square kilometers, one good water source (on top of the highest eminence in its center) completed by cisterns and by a few wells sweet or brackish, limited arable land (one swathe from north to south, one small strip next to one of the harbors), and plentiful scrubland (fig. 18.2).¹²

The mystery thickens when we realize that the inscription with the decree barring goats is the only written artifact from the *polis* of Hērakleia (fig. 1.3); there are

no other documents, and no record of material remains (such as the monumental shrine of the Mother of the Gods serving as an archive for inscribed public archives, let alone private housing, urban or rural). Did the *polis* manage to maintain itself after this particular crisis, recorded in an inscription, now broken, as isolated as a meteorite? At least, the document shows clearly the *polis* as a political form (decision-making, law, ideology), as a social form (small property owners free from direct control by landowners but subject to communally decided restraints on rights), and as a social relation (political community of adult male citizens, within “the whole *koinon*” of society). These three aspects form the theme of the present book.

Priēnē (120 BCE), Panopeus (160 CE), Palmyra (250 CE)

At Priēnē, in Asia Minor, there is no doubt that we are looking at a *polis* (fig. 1.4).¹³ The term appears frequently in the rich epigraphical documentation from Priēnē, sometimes as an absolute to designate the political community in action: a priest might receive specific portions “from the animals which *polis* sacrifices” (*hōn polis thuei*; the Greek leaves out the definite article).¹⁴ This documentation allows for rich, yet uneven history, with a notable emphasis on interactions with other *poleis* and on honors for deserving citizens (especially toward the later second century BCE). Much of this evidence was discovered during the great excavation of the urban site (1895–98). The German excavators uncovered and explored the urban fabric of Priēnē, its fortification system (including a redoubt on a cliff high above the city), its public spaces (*agora*, theatre, gymnasia, *stadion* . . .), its main shrine, dedicated to Athēna, its private housing, organized in equal-sized blocks, and some of the material culture produced in this setting. The publication (Wiegand and Schrader 1904) recreates a densely packed world of forty hectares laid out on an orthogonal plan against a stiff slope. From the excavation emerged the image of a rational, egalitarian, harmonious, indeed beautiful city in its dramatic natural setting, which some scholars implicitly or even explicitly designated as emblematic of *polis* culture; notably, W. Hoepfner and E.-L. Schwandner focused on the equal-sized “normal” and normed houses within modular habitation blocks alternating with large public spaces in a regular grid plan, as the symptom and the setting of an egalitarian, democratic polity.¹⁵

Continuous interpretive research and recent excavation on the site have sharpened this image without abolishing it. For instance, among the greater detail about the material lives of the Prienians, we learn not only that the denizens of this seaside city consumed vast quantities of seafood, including shellfish, but also that consumption of animal protein varied between private contexts (where mutton and pork was eaten) and official contexts such as the *agora* (where beef was consumed in common feasts, reflecting public resources). The distinction mirrors the public-private principle which structures the urban fabric. Most importantly, the urban

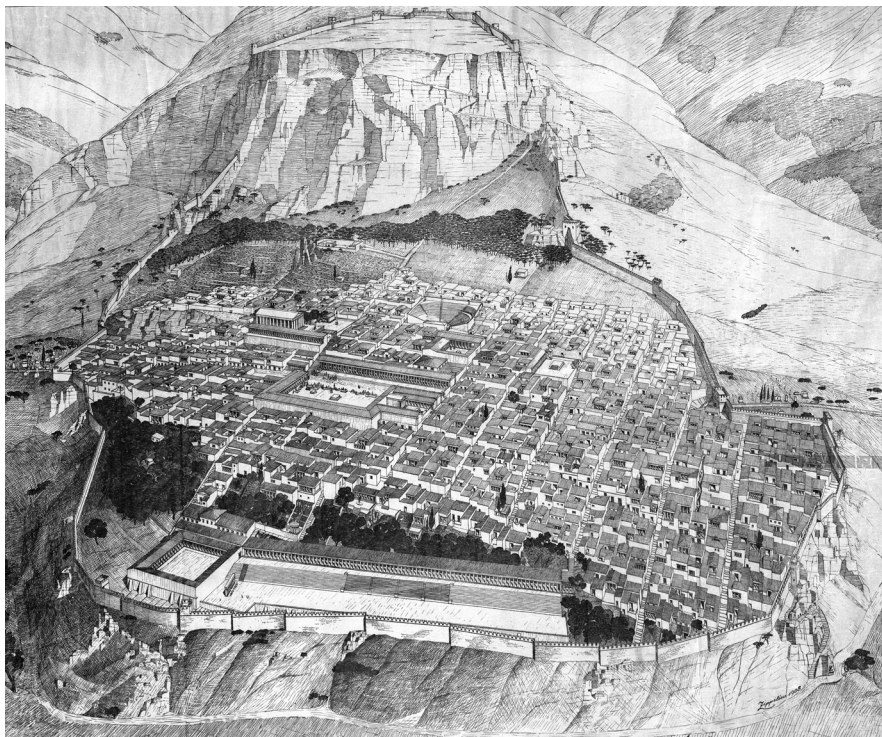


FIGURE 1.4. Imaginative reconstruction of Priēnē. Pen-and-ink drawing by A. Zippelius (1908).

fabric of Priēnē fits within a protracted history: the city, the urban center of an old *polis*, was rebuilt ca. 350 BCE on an extensive plan, which filled out slowly and with modifications to the original grid, starting with the public spaces. The city underwent a building boom in the late second century BCE, accelerated by the need to repair the damage caused by an earthquake ca. 130 BCE. Much of the large, monumentalized public spaces date to this time—for instance, the reshaped main public square (*agora*), separated from the utilitarian food market, or the refined spaces of the Lower Gymnasion.¹⁶ The evolutions that appear in the building activity coincide with the debates and shifts in political language, as can be seen in the epigraphical material of the same decades (below, pp. 279–81).

But the *polis* of Priēnē was more than just the spectacular urban settlement. From the top of its akropolis, its citizen militiamen could survey other parts of the *polis*—a rural territory (fig. 1.5) in the Maeander valley (which was at least partly farmed by subordinate villages, the “Plainsmen”), at the mouth of the Maeander where the *polis* controlled saltpans, and also in forbidding Mt. Mykalē. The urban site was laid out on the steep south side, but the *polis* also controlled part of the

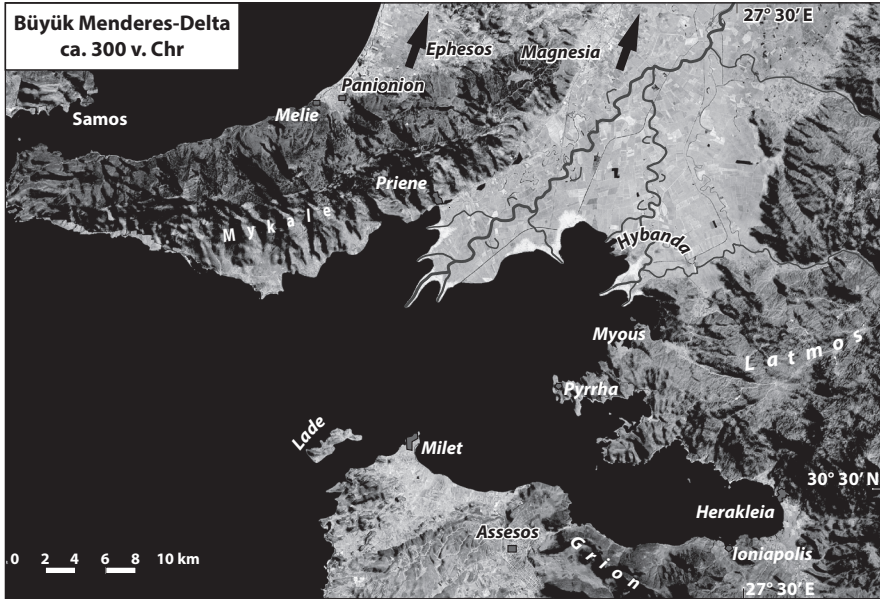


FIGURE 1.5. Territory of Priēnē, and neighboring *poleis*, based on Müllenhoff 2005, fig. 50.

milder northern slopes down to the sea.¹⁷ This territory, of around 450 sq. km, is still poorly known as concerns ancient settlement and occupation. There is no clear image of what “the whole community of those who inhabit the territory” looked like, even though there are occasional mentions of “dwellers-by” (*paroikoi*) who might be resident foreigners in the urban center, or rural inhabitants.¹⁸ At least it is clear that the territory of Priēnē was limited by that of other *poleis*—the island *polis* of Samos (that had continental holdings), Ephesos, Magnēsia on Maeander, Myous, and Milētos. Priēnē’s relations with these neighbors would be close but occasionally conflictual, even involving open clashes; a dispute with Samos over frontiers and holdings on Mt Mykalē would last from (it seems) the eighth century to the second century BCE.¹⁹

These are the *poleis* Priēnē could even see from its urban center or at least its territory, but the Prienians had formal, highly normed relations with many other *poleis*—for instance, to provide arbitrators for internal disputes or to ask for arbitration in inter-state disputes. This form of *peer-polity interaction* involved mutual recognition by actors in a system of *poleis*, and indeed is one way in which we can see both the existence of a category of *poleis*, and one mechanism for recognition of the category as a status.²⁰ For instance, when a *polis* asked for one of its festivals to be acknowledged as having equal status to the ancient, prestigious panhellenic festivals, usually on the grounds of some religious event that could justify the

recognition of the *polis* as “holy and inviolate,” such a diplomatic transaction involved sending sacred ambassadors (*theōroi*) to peer polities, namely other *poleis*. The transaction, and the monumentalized record of responding entities (that had received the *theōroi* by appointing *theōrodokoi*, “sacred-envoy-receivers”), constitute prime evidence for *polis*-hood as being a formalized status, distinct from existence as an urban settlement.²¹ Some contexts of local peer interactions could thicken to the point of taking the form of federal institutions, which still depended on the existence of building blocks endowed with stately powers of decision.

In practice, “peer-polity interaction” was made of multiple, overlapping *ad hoc* networks that each city constructed for itself. The *theōrodokoi* lists for different *poleis* exhibit divergence in their networks of contacts, rather than a single uniform list. As far as we can tell, Priēnē’s network of formal *polis* contacts never stretched to Macedonia, in the North Aegean. But the experiences of communities there were shared with Priēnē, at least by the late second century BCE when Priēnē underwent its building boom. For instance, the city of Lētē, occupying a strategic ridge on a road leading from the Thermaic Gulf to the inland highlands and toward Thrace, but also controlling part of the fertile plain around Lake Bolbē on the other side of the pass, can be called a *polis* and shared in the common experiences of the network of *poleis*. It is true that it had a long, pre-*polis* history with its own specificities.²² We can see it as a town of the Mygdonians (a Greek-speaking *ethnos* in a complex region) through its coinage in the sixth century BCE. In the fourth century, Lētē appears as a city colonized by the kingdom of Macedonia with elite settlers, whose customs and especially whose material culture is documented in epigraphical and archaeological material—a *polis* of sorts, but as part of a royal-national state. Two remarkable artifacts (of world-historical cultural significance), a large gilt bronze crater masterfully decorated with Dionysiac scenes in high relief, and a book of learned commentary on a mystical poem (the second earliest book attested in Europe), were found in the tombs of elite settlers, at Derveni (a modern toponym, whence the shorthand “Derveni crater” and the “Derveni papyrus,” under which these artifacts are well known and exhibited in the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki).²³

But by the late second century BCE, Lētē called itself a *polis*, with the normal institutions of People (*dēmos*), Council (*boulē*) and magistrates, public spaces (including an *agora*), and ceremonies to honor benefactors, a major preoccupation of Lētē as of Priēnē and indeed all other *poleis*. One of the benefactors Lētē honored was a Roman officer who in 119 BCE protected the *polis* (and other *poleis* in Macedonia) during a Celtic invasion:²⁴ a major development in the history of the *polis* was the rise of Roman power, which integrated the *poleis* into a monarchical world empire. In more peaceful times (22 BCE), market-commissioners dedicated an entrance, probably to the *agora*, “to the gods and the *polis*.”²⁵

In 121/2 CE, the *polis* honored with a statue another benefactor, a Roman citizen (a descendant of the settlers who came to the area in the second and first centuries

BCE), M' Salarius Sabinus, inter alia, for accepting to sell foodstuffs at an artificially depressed price “during the passage of the armies of the Lord Caesar”; part of the statue base was found in 1916 by British soldiers (Highlanders of the Black Watch regiment) digging trenches on the strategically important ridge where the city was located.²⁶ The presence of a Roman citizen and Roman armies on the march attest to the perennity of Roman power, but the document also shows the continuity in the need for the community to interact with its wealthiest members.

The second century CE was a time of stability, in which the *poleis* of Greece, the islands, and Asia Minor underwent spectacular urban development, with some exceptions. Priēnē is one (it never developed with the colonnaded streets that adorned other cities, and indeed its neighbors such as Ephesos and Milētos). Likewise, the small city of Panopeus, in Phōkis, lacked spectacular spaces or monuments decorated with marble, in the second-century CE style, as noted by the traveler Pausanias, who affected to wonder “if one can give the name of *polis* to those who possess no government offices, no *gymnasion*, no theater, no marketplace, no water descending to a fountain, but live in bare shelters just like mountain cabins, right on a ravine.”²⁷ But this introduction is a play on the “checklist” of items that make for a *polis*: Pausanias then lists markers of *polis* status (walls, representation in the regional federation of Phōkis), and even more, the mythical past that manifests Panopeus’s antiquity, naturalness, and worth (below, p. 410). He does not, however, mention the powerful fortification walls of the city, still partly extant today (fig. 15.1).

Panopeus in the 160s CE was doubtless a *polis*; but what would Pausanias have thought of the city of Palmyra in southern Syria, on the edge of the steppe, in the same decade or perhaps later (ca. 200 CE)?²⁸ It boasted monumental public spaces, ornaments, an *agora*, and magistrates’ offices and the colonnaded streets which were set up in the Roman-imperial *poleis*. In its official epigraphy, the Palmyrenes call themselves a *polis*, are citizens (*poleitai*) and have institutions, such as the People (*dēmos*), Council (*boulē*), and office holders. The institutions also appear transcribed in Aramaic, as *dmws* and *bwl*, since the *polis* of Palmyra inscribed official documents in Greek and in Aramaic, uniquely for the cities of the Roman Near East. The term *polis* is not transcribed in Aramaic, but is once translated by *gbl*, a polysemous term that indicates a human grouping as well as a territorial one. The term appears in 51 CE, in the full expression, using the Aramaic ethnonym, *gbl Tdmory' klhn*, “the community of the Tadmorians, all of them,” in a striking echo of the expression, three centuries earlier, of the “whole community” of islanders in a decree passed by a *polis*.²⁹

From Hērakleia, a small island (indeed small-island) community in the early third century BCE to Palmyra in 250 CE, a great trading city in an Eastern province of the Roman empire, we have covered a vast range of historical, social, and ecological circumstances: is there any justification for applying, like a wet blanket, the term of *polis* to a whole range of different communities?³⁰

In Search of *Polis*

In this book, I will argue that the *polis* can be defined with a unitary definition—but that this definition, to be capacious enough to cover historical, geographical, and ecological diversity, has to admit significant ambiguities.³¹ Hence, *polis* means, initially, an urban settlement of contiguous habitations, a town, and this concrete definition was never forgotten.³² But the city can give its name to human community, designated with a special name derived from the place (such as the Herakleiotas on their little Cycladic island). The full title of a Levantine city was “the people of the Laodikeians in Phoenicia, the holy and inviolate (*polis*),” *ho dēmos tōn Laodikeōn tōn en Phoinikēi tēs hieras kai asyloū*: the *polis* appears in the same breath as a masculine plural noun designating a mass of citizens (“the Laodikeians”), and a feminine singular noun designating the placename (“the holy one”), both united grammatically.³³

The members of this community control a territory, so that the name of the *polis* can also designate the whole territory as well as the city: in the constant wars of the fourth century BCE, when an army marches “into Phleious” or “into Aigosthena,” it crosses the border of the land controlled by those *poleis*.³⁴ In practice, the territory is usually small, at least in modern terms. Perhaps a quarter of all *poleis* had territories of 25 square kilometers or less (like Hērakleia); perhaps 90 percent fitted within a territory of 500 square kilometers or less (table 1.1, fig. 1.6; see also figs 9.2, 9.3, 17.1–2, 18.2, for concrete instances).³⁵ Priēnē was located at the upper end of this range, a striking corrective for the temptation to call it a “small *polis*.” The exact relations of power, access and membership between the city, the territory, and the members of the *polis* beyond any theoretical and ideal equation of all three, will constitute a *leitmotif* of this book.

Secondly, at least in the Greek context, a *polis* is self-governing, and exists as a state, with institutions and power. Stately competencies can be illustrated at Hērakleia by the single document that survives, but also at Priēnē by the rich epigraphical evidence, and at Palmyra by the extensive law on customs dues. This point has in fact been in dispute, either on the grounds that the *polis* was a “stateless” social organization, or that it lost its nature as a self-governing organism in the second half of the fourth century BCE. This theme will constitute a central area of concern in this book. It is true that the *polis* is qualitatively different from the contemporary state, with its extension, autonomy, and self-awareness. Furthermore, the *polis* is unlike the modern state of Hobbes’s *Leviathan* as embodied sovereignty, or even the hierarchical, stratified “early states” of neo-evolutionist theory, as proposed for ancient Mesoamerica or Mesopotamia.³⁶ Rather, the *polis* defines itself as commonwealth (*koinon*), a community (*koinōnia*) of citizens, a constitution (*politeia*)—at least, these are the terms that Aristotle explicitly deploys to describe the rise and the essence of the *polis* in his *Politics*. It can hence be described as an auto-instituted organism, using concepts developed by social theorists such as C. Castoriadis or P. Clastres.³⁷

Table 1: Territorial size and population estimates for a hypothetical total of 1,100 Greek city-states.

Polis size	Area km ²	Estimated				Polis count total (est.)	Total pop. (1,100 <i>poleis</i>)	% total pop. (1,100 <i>poleis</i>)	% <i>polis</i> count (1,100 <i>poleis</i>)
		Estimated population range	average population	Polis count known size	Polis count				
1	25 or less	525–2,500	1,000	148	277	277,000	0.03	0.25	
2	25–100	875–10,000	3,500	256	483	1,690,500	0.20	0.44	
3	100–200	3,500–25,000	7,000	95	144	1,008,000	0.12	0.13	
4	200–500	7,000–50,000	17,000	107	124	2,108,000	0.26	0.11	
5	500–1,000	17,500–75,000	35,000	53	59	2,065,000	0.25	0.05	
6	1,000–2,000	35,000–100,000	65,000	10	10	650,000	0.08	0.01	
7	Over 2,000	75,000–250,000	150,000	3	3	450,000	0.05	0.003	
Total				672	1,100	8,248,500			

From Ober 2015, Princeton University Press, whose notes (lightly edited) I reproduce here: *Polis* sizes 1–5 based on IACP. Size 6 = Argos, Byzantion, Ēlis, Eretria, Kyrēnē, Megalēpolis, Mīlētōs, Pantīkapaion, Rhēgion, Rhodes. Size 7 = Athens, Sparta, Syracuse. “Estimated average population” based on Hansen 2006, modified by results in Hansen 2008. “*Polis* count known size” includes 636 *poleis* in the IACP whose size in known or plausibly estimated, along with 32 additions in Hansen 2008 and 4 additions from E. Mackil (per lit.). 109 “size 1 or 2,” 37 “size 2 or 3,” 11 “size 3 or 4,” 8 “size 4 or 5” (including Pergamon and Xanthos from Hansen 2008) are divided evenly between the two relevant categories. “*Polis* count total” assumes that the distribution of known-size *poleis* is modeled in the total count as follows: size 1 and 2: 53% of total are known; size 3: 65% of total are known; size 4: 86% of total are known; size 5: 89% of total are known; size 6 and 7: 100% of total are known. N.B. Hansen 2008 additions to the IACP list of sized *poleis* includes 29 size 4 *poleis* and 3 size 5 *poleis*, but no size 1–3 *poleis*.

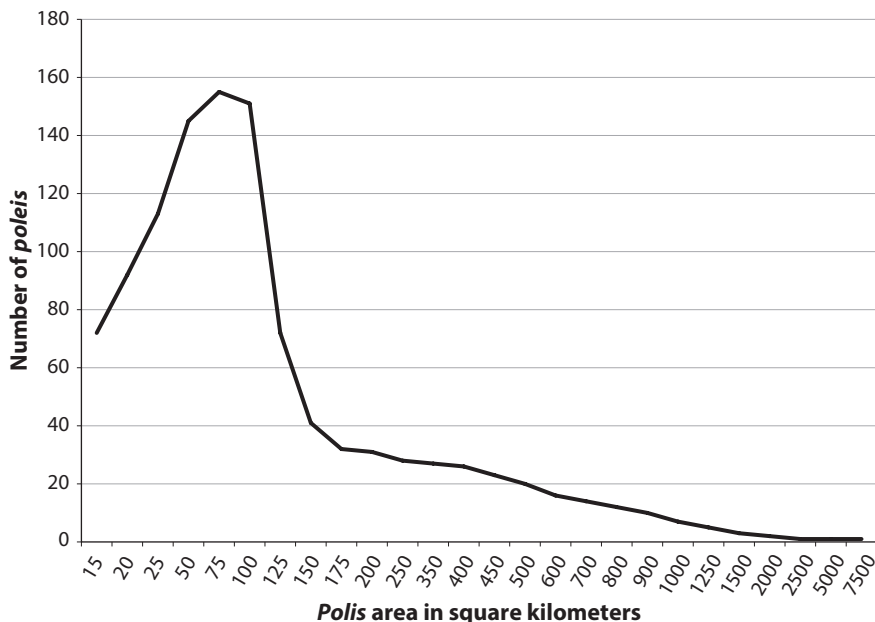


FIGURE 1.6. Distribution of *poleis* by size of territory. From Ober 2015.

However, the *polis* also clearly appears as endowed with a whole apparatus of means and monopolies: for instance, institutions in the form of clearly defined and formalized powerholders; collectively decided, uniquely legitimate and binding rules; collectively raised and pooled resources, extracted within a formally defined territory; public goods; exclusivity on the granting of rights, the awarding of distinction, the meting out of punishments; the means of coercion, or at least the claims to legitimate coercion; claims on its members, and the outward pursuit of external violence and power, two interrelated phenomena.³⁸ At a minimal level, the *polis* as apparatus can be described as some form of state, exercising governmental functions. The possession of these capacities amounted to a recognized status. The difference between a *polis* and a *kōmē* (village) was one of sovereignty, not of settlement size or degree of urbanization;³⁹ this is shown by the protocols of peer-polity interaction. Settlements that lost *polis* status ended up peripheralized, and hence could end up shedding urban traits of infrastructure and autarky-directed complexity.⁴⁰

The problem of the stateness of the *polis* raises further issues. If the *polis* was a state, the emergence of governmentality is transformative and constitutes a major explanatory challenge (when and why does the state emerge in “archaic” Greece?). Conversely, if the *polis* was not a state, then its apparatus of governmentality needs minimizing or explaining away; for instance, by anthropologizing it as a religious

and ritual phenomenon, or emphasizing social connectivity, a move fraught with theoretical difficulties and contradictions of its own. In this book, I will continuously argue for the centrality of stateness as a definitional characteristic of the *polis*, and for its persistence throughout its history;⁴¹ this stance determines the shape of the narrative (as summarized below). But I will do so in awareness of the *polis*'s peculiarities as a state—namely, its closeness to social organization, its thinness, its ideological totalizing. The tension between the *polis* as a social organism (which can be described in terms that P. Clastres developed specifically to describe society as a something existing *against* the state) and the *polis* as governmentality, is a major concern of this book throughout its structure (as summarized below).

If we accept the state-like nature of the *polis*, two consequences follow. The first was clearly seen by Aristotle and recurs as an obsession in the *Politics*. In self-governing polities, membership gives access to institutions, and institutional power decides on matters such as dispute resolution, property rights and, especially, the distribution of common burdens: hence the composition of the citizen body is a social but also a political issue, bearing on the pursuit of interests by constituencies, especially the rich and the poor. The traditional alternative between oligarchy and democracy is rooted here; other ways of distributing power (for instance, by excluding the rural population) are also possible. In any case, the relationship between socioeconomic elites and the community, the *dēmos*, both in the sense of the whole body of citizens, and in the sense of the nonelite, will have to be negotiated toward some form of durable social bargain.

The second issue raised by stately self-governance is that of its extension and its limits. As state, the *polis* tends toward autonomy, yet the latter concept is fraught with problems. An autonomous *polis* must negotiate and maintain its existence within collaborative frames that should be compatible with local self-governance. Furthermore, a *polis* must find a way to coexist with other autonomous *poleis*, which can involve relations of force and hence the possibility of hegemony and even subordination—a problematic relationship. Finally, the autonomous *polis* must deal with large supralocal, imperial powers and find accommodations that preserve some margin of agency within which stateliness can be exercised: I will contend that the *poleis*, in dealing with large, supralocal, patrimonial formations, strove to keep acting and being considered as states down the centuries, until the end of Classical Antiquity. All these historical situations illustrate the nature of autonomy as a consequence of stateness but also as a source of tensions and ambiguities.

The free citizens that constitute the *polis* are free adult men—stakeholders in institutional power, slaveowners, heads of their households. The *polis* had a multi-layered existence as a society, both as the organization of social relations around the constitution of a *dēmos* of citizens (what I will call *civic society* later in this book), and the impact of the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion on the wider human ecology within the *polis*'s boundaries (what I will call *civil society*)—the

poetics of *to koinon* in Hērakleia illustrate this tension, which is inherent in the *polis*-hood. In other words, it is easy, and tempting because of the profusion of evidence (especially documentary), to write an institutional history of the *polis*, and a history of the relationship between *polis* and power; it is more challenging to write a social relationship of the *polis* and of the impact of citizenship, and a history of the *polis* in its relationship with more diffuse forms of power.⁴² Finally, the *polis* is the story of the city-state in Greek-speaking lands, starting in an Aegean-centered geography (mainland Greece, the islands, Western Asia Minor), but extending to other Balkan regions (notably Macedonia or Ēpeiros) and, spectacularly, to the western Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Levant, and northern Africa, and hence involving both settlement by groups of Greek immigrants and the adoption of *polis* forms (along with the Greek language) by local communities.⁴³

The definitions above are partly taken over from a comprehensive attempt to study the *polis*, as undertaken by the Copenhagen Polis Centre under the direction of M. Hansen, culminating in the sum represented by the *Inventory of Archaic and Greek Poleis* (2004), a majestic, team-authored survey of the 1,284 examples which the Centre found as examples of the form, beyond the well-known cases of giant *poleis* such as Athens or Sparta, which are very present in the literary sources and overrepresented in modern treatments of ancient history. Notably, the centrality of urbanness, the coterminality of territory, and especially the stately nature of the *polis* as organization, are investigated with great thoroughness and subtleness. The present book diverges from the Copenhagen version in placing autonomy at the heart of any definition of the *polis*, whereas M. Hansen argues, typologically, that it was not a necessary feature.⁴⁴ I propose to see its importance, but also its contradictions, as a crucial factor of the history of the *polis*. The centrality of stateness and autonomy, but also the nature of social negotiation and bargaining, appear clearly in a long history of the *polis* like the one I will construct here. These themes already receive much attention in Max Weber's treatment of the ancient city, as ruled by a closed political group defined by status (*Bürgerstand*) as a group of peers (*Verband*).⁴⁵

The deep temporality of my account is a second divergence with the work of the Copenhagen Polis Centre. I aim to look for a continuous, yet evolving history of the *polis* beyond the periods where its apogee has traditionally been located, namely the archaic (700–480 BCE) and Classical (480–323 BCE) periods; indeed, many treatments of the *polis* are centered on these conventional periods.⁴⁶ Traditional periodization, I argue, prevents the clear perception of issues such as autonomy and stateness. A great deal of this book is devoted to producing a new narrative of the *polis*. In elaborating this “biography”—if it is possible to write the biography of a form of human organization, while avoiding the pitfalls of the humanizing metaphor (birth, youth, growth, decline)—I have centered my attention on the issues highlighted above—issues of politics, power, social bargaining—in the hope of producing narratives that are at least partly analytical.

I summarize the shape of the narrative below (pp. 403–7), so here will simply mention that my main argument is that after the collapse of quite different forms of political organization (part II), centuries of experimentation (part III) around central political ideas, and of conflict around the issues of autonomy and social power led to a “great convergence” of *polis* forms (part IV), starting ca. 350 BCE, to produce a relatively uniform, stable organism centered on communitarian, democratic forms and bargains between the community and its elites. The causes for the great convergence are contingent (the failure of local hegemony, the rise of empires, the success of *poleis* at preserving their autonomy), but also must be connected to deep structural features. The community of Hērakleia is but one example of the constitutionally minded, democratic *polis* that emerges from the great convergence, as was the diffusion and harmonization of *polis* forms, across the Aegean but also Asia Minor and the Levant.

This *polis*, whose emergence Aristotle witnessed, was a pervasive, normative form of political and social organization during an extended period, 350 BCE to 100 BCE, which might be considered a “long classical” period. It endured, with modifications and simplifications, into the Roman empire, down to 400 CE (part V). My periodization is influenced by the careful work of the epigraphist and historian Ph. Gauthier, as well as that of the historian F. Millar, whose great works on the Roman empire or the Roman Near East are also essays on the *polis*. Hence my periodizing scheme places the long ages of the developed *polis* (350 BCE–400 CE) at the heart of the history of the *polis*, unlike the traditional periodization of the Copenhagen Polis Centre’s explorations. My belief is that this viewpoint allows for crucial insights into the definitional and conceptual issues involved in studying the *polis*.⁴⁷

My extended narrative is above all inductive, drawing on evidence to seek patterns, but is also eclectically structured by the relevant theoretical tools: a constructivist study of ideology and language, informed by speech-act theory; an Aristotelian conviction that political institutions (in the sense of constitutional arrangements) and law matter, as shaping the parameters of social interaction; a “new institutionalist” awareness of interests, constituencies, path-dependency, and individual choices in the aggregate, especially in the pursuit of economic profit. I believe all these tools cohere in offering the possibility of a viable working model of the *polis*, where the Aristotelian emphasis on state power and institutions does not displace but helps to explain social history (chapter 15). At the end of this book (Part VI), I try to revisit the *polis* from a series of theoretical viewpoints, in a series of chapters that amount to a rolling conclusion. My aim is notably to gather, each time, the threads of events into coherent explanatory schemes. Thus, I spin out an idealist history of institutions and ideology (chapter 16), followed by a new institutionalist history of the *polis* as successful collective action or even “good institutions” in economic terms, notably engaging with recent accounts of *polis* history as that of a sustained economic boom (chapter 17). I also test my model of a democratic *polis* against grimmer possibilities, that of continuous

violence as the price of collective action, and that of hidden oligarchical powers (chapter 18)—possibilities for which evidence is still scanty. Finally, I let the repressed social history, notably inhabited by those excluded by the construction of the political community and citizenship (such as women, foreigners, or enslaved workers) burst out to the forefront (chapter 19), drawing on recent work on gender or slavery, to attempt the hard exercise of remembering—and evaluating—the place of domination and violence in the *polis*.

The Aristotelian focus of the book is compatible with my interest in the *polis* as form, as an abstraction. But the theoretical interests are balanced with a constant engagement with detailed exemplification. The cases of Hērakleia, Priēnē, Lētē, Panopeus, and Palmyra, touched upon lightly above, illustrate the method, the sources, and the interest in institutions but also geography and ecology. The history of the *polis* must be written from such testcases, rather than the great and famous *poleis*: the “Third Greece,” in Hans-Joachim Gehrke’s striking, if problematic, formulation. We should look even further, to include places such as Kyaneai, in Lykia, which barely turns up in the canon of ancient Greek literature, but is an extraordinarily well-documented case of how the adoption of *polis* forms affected landscape and settlement.⁴⁸ Such examples serve to constitute a broad basis for the interpretive essays of part VI, even if they cannot match the systematic register of *poleis* established for a limited time span in the *Inventory of Archaic and Greek Poleis*. But they also serve the double, and contradictory, purpose of embedding the existence of the *polis* as a political and social form in a long, concrete history, and of illustrating the texture and singularity of each one of the *poleis* as part of this account.

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