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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, εὐορκοῦντ[ι μέν μοι εὖ]
εἴη, ἐφιορκοῦντι δὲ τἀναντία τῶν [ἀγαθῶν]·
ἐὰν δέ τις βιασόμενος αἶγας εἰσάγ[ειν ἢ]
τρέφειν ἐν τῆι νήσωι παρὰ τόδε τὸ ψήφι[σ]-
μα καὶ τὸν ὅρκον τῶγ κωλυόντων τινὰς
κτείνει, ἐπεξιόντων αὐτὸν οἵ τε προσ-
ήκοντες τοῦ παθόντος καὶ τὸ κοινὸν τῶν
νησιωτῶν ἅπαν· ὅ τι δ' ἂν εἰς τὴγ κρίσιν
ἀνήλωμα γίνηται, τὸ μέρος ἕκαστον εἰσ-
[φ]έρειν· ἀναγράψαι δὲ τόδε τὸ ψήφισμα τὸν
[ἱ]εροποιὸν Ἐπιστροφίδη<ν> εἰς στήλην λιθί-
νηγ καὶ στῆσαι εἰς τὸ Μητρῶιον· τὸ δὲ ἀνή-
λωμα τὸ εἰς τὴν στήληγ καὶ τὴν ἀναγρα-
φὴν ἔστω ἀπὸ τοῦ κοινοῦ. ταῦτα δ' εἶναι εἵς
τε φυλακὴγ καὶ σωτηρίαν Ἡρακλειωτῶν
πάντωγ καὶ τῶν οἰκούντω[ν ἐν τῆι νήσωι].

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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 Herakleiotes 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 Herakleiotes. In a formal meeting (the details of which are now lost), framed by the working of their institutions, the Herakleiotes 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

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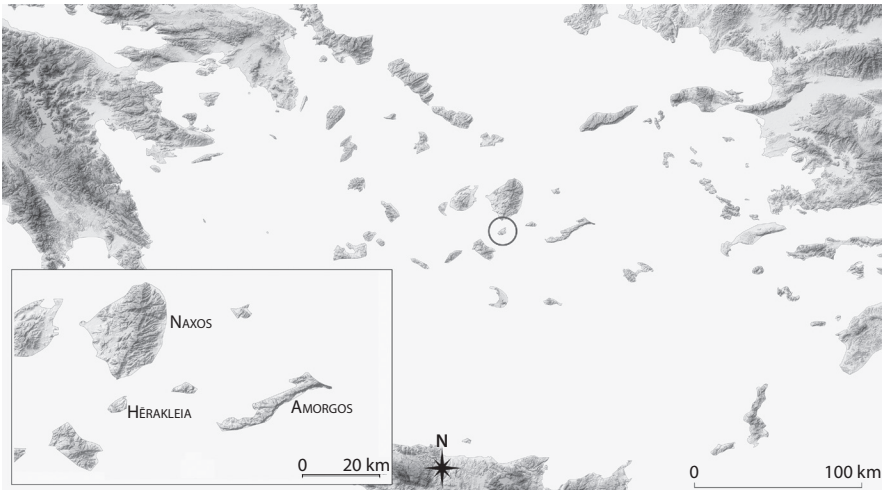

FIGURE 1.2. Hērakleia in its geographical context.

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

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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 Herakleiotes.[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 Herakleiotes 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 Herakleiotes. 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 Herakleiotes 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

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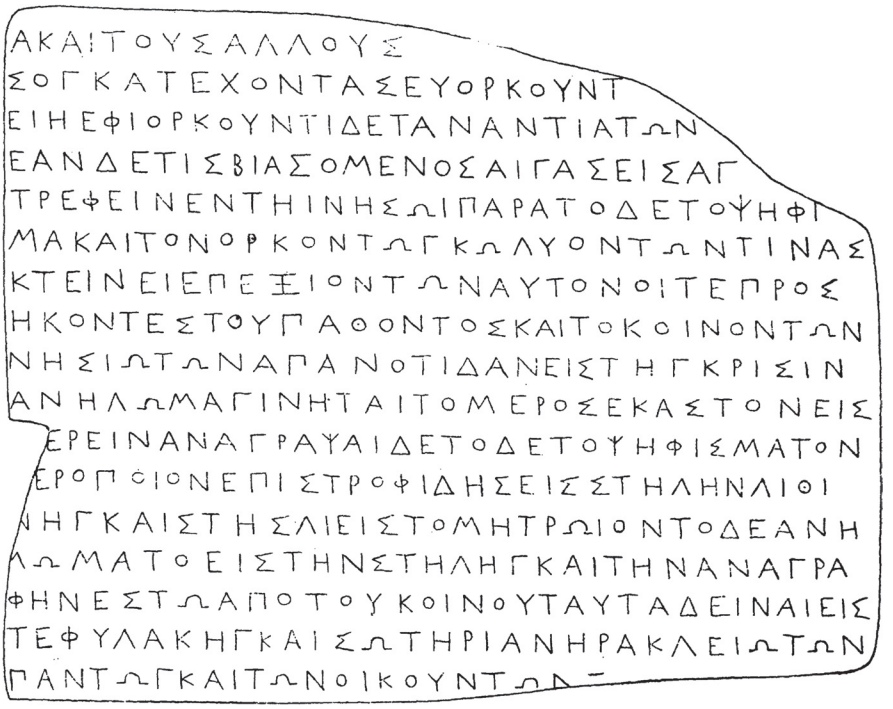

FIGURE 1.3. Fragmentary decree of the Hērakleians on goats. From Delamarre 1902.

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

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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

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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

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