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The Wisdom of the Ancients, Part 1: Greek City-States as Ethnostates – The Occidental Observer

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14-17 minutes



Lycurgus bas relief from the chamber of the U.S.
House of Representatives

Like too many of our generation, I was raised and
“educated” without acquiring any real knowledge of

European identity or our Western tradition. The Classics lay unopened. Though I may have tried once or twice to read them, they always left me baffled. I was too ignorant to even attempt to lessen my ignorance through them. I then did not know where we, our great civilization and family of nations, came from, and I took them for granted. “The West” meant little more to me than a set of very recent and highly questionable values largely imposed in the last century or so.

Having become conscious of my ignorance, I sought to rectify this, and I began reading some of the Classics — especially those of the [Ancient Greeks](#) — and, to my joy, I found that this time I could read them and that they often had very relevant insights for our times. I believe the difference is that I am a bit older, a bit wiser, and that I have been able to emancipate myself from the very impoverished view that postwar consumer democracy represents the highest possible form of human life. Having removed my [liberal blinders](#), I could finally appreciate these works.

For the most part, I have not reviewed these works, for they are too subtle and my lights are too feeble to do them full justice. (I have, however, because the relevance and insight were too great, written for *The Occidental Observer* on the ethnocentric and eugenic themes in [Plato's Republic](#).) I fear my inferior paraphrases are not much use and I instead encourage the curious to read the Classics themselves.[\[1\]](#)

Nonetheless, I do wish here to highlight a few major insights and themes which I have drawn from my (by no means comprehensive) readings. In so doing, I hope to provide a useful introduction and whet the appetite of my readers to discover our peerless Western tradition. This should not be done in an antiquarian spirit. The Greeks, a brilliant people living in the harsh world of the ancient Mediterranean, discovered truths and techniques of timeless value, things to not memorize, but *to live by*. If one has understood anything, one begins to see life in a different way, and one begins, however modestly, to change one's life, day by day.

1. The Primacy of Love and War

In our world, at least so far as living creatures are concerned, all revolves around a ceaseless struggle for survival and reproduction. All creatures exist as the culmination of a magnificent chain of generations, each of which triumphed in vicious competition both nutritional and sexual — eat, or be eaten, mate or see your lineage die with you. We all exist because each of our ancestors was ultimately successful in this ceaseless struggle of love and war. The very lessons of that struggle are inscribed as the hardest-won wisdom upon our genes: in our propensity for pleasure and pain, hunger and lust, boldness and timidity, intuition and rationality, and indeed in every aspect of our physique and personality.

Whether by intuition or reason, the oldest Greek literature which comes down to us ascribes foundational and even cosmic significance to these two basic forces, love and war. The poet Hesiod, in his genealogy of the gods, puts the god of love, Eros, at the beginning of creation, enabling every

other divine and animal generation:

Eros, the most handsome among the immortal gods, dissolver of flesh, who overcomes the reason and purpose in the breasts of all gods and men. [2]

The philosopher Heraclitus, called as “the obscure” for his cryptic sayings, is known through some of the most ancient fragments of Western thought. His famous saying on war has virtually become a proverb: “War is the father of all things.” More exactly, he said:

War is father of all and king of all. Some he reveals as gods, others as men; some he makes slaves, others free. [3]

This is as true in the animal world as in the human. The Greeks knew this intimately: any city-state deficient in martial valor and organization was enslaved or destroyed, whether by fellow Greeks or by the expanding Persian Empire. The fate of the vanquished was often supremely grim: the men could be exterminated, the women and children enslaved as so much war booty. Our generation

too often forgets that our political order exists by virtue of a succession of wars — from the revolutionary wars of the enlightenment to the world wars of the twentieth century — and it cannot be otherwise.

Homer too tells a significant story about the gods of love and war: Aphrodite and Ares. The two wished to make love, but the lame smith-god Hephaestus had been promised Aphrodite as a wife. The smith forged a metallic net to put above his conjugal bed and, finding Aphrodite and Ares making love there, trapped them inside, to their humiliation. A metaphor for the unconquerable sex drive's crude taming by the constraints of civilization?

Homer's *Iliad*, the oldest Western epic poem to come down to us, is a great tale of love and war. The poet tells of a terrible war for sexual competition, for the heart of beautiful Helen, and its inevitable tragedies. But the maudlin self-pity and effeminacy of our time is unknown to Homer: if tragedy is inevitable in the human experience, the poet's role is to give meaning and beauty to the

ordeal, and to inspire men to struggle for a glorious destiny.

Homer's *Odyssey*, which tells the tale of Odysseus' return from the Trojan War to his homeland of Ithaca, is also a story substantially driven by love and war, or rather, kinship and violence. Odysseus is doomed to wander the Mediterranean amidst hostile strangers who might "bring havoc on men of another stock."^[4] The hero faces savages and monsters, and is often tempted to settle away from home with divine beings. But Odysseus cannot help longing for his wife Penelope and family, his "kith and kin,"^[5] and "his own country,"^[6] that of his forefathers.

Odysseus perseveres by clinging to his identity and triumphs through courage and cunning. His household had "no man left with the mettle of Odysseus to ward off ruin."^[7] He returns to find his home overrun by parasitic suitors who wish to usurp his wife and birthright. Odysseus joins with his son Telemachus to plot revenge. Telemachus himself has had a duty to find his father and

redeem his household, for he is said to belong to “the race of heaven-protected and sceptered kings.”[\[8\]](#) Odysseus’ revenge upon the suitors and their collaborators is ruthless and brutal, a dark deed necessary to restore his honor and authority.

2. The Greek City-States, the First Ethno-States

The Greeks did not conceive of politics outside of the city-state (the *polis*), which reflected very different principles than the ones we have come to know. Many of these principles however are very relevant for any people struggling for self-determination and survival in a world of hostile tribes competing for limited resources.

Before anything else, a good city-state was one with the qualities necessary to survive in the face of aggressive foreign powers. This was ensured by solidarity among the citizens, each being willing to fight and die beside the other. Hence the citizen was also a soldier-citizen. The completion of military training and the ability to purchase the hoplite soldier’s armor for oneself were often criteria for full citizenship. The city-state was small,

most numbering less than 50,000 people, and a minority of the population were citizens. This made politics a face-to-face affair between leaders and fellow citizens who knew each other personally.

For the ancient Greeks, political freedom was a holistic enterprise involving the entire community. They had no notion of individual liberty outside of the *polis*. All would be free or slaves together, depending on the well-being and survival of the community and its state. Hence, Aristotle argued that “justice consists in what tends to promote the common interest” (*Politics*, 1282B14), rather than in the pursuit of some individualist or egalitarian ideal. Aristotle’s political ethics takes a holistic, communitarian approach typical of the Greeks, for: “A whole is never intended by nature to be inferior to a part” (*Politics*, 1288A15).

Xenophon writes eloquently on the self-destructive foolishness of those who believe that there can be freedom without self-discipline (one is then beholden to one’s belly) or by being a stateless rootless cosmopolitan (one’s freedom is then

beholden to the good-will of the foreign state one is residing in). The *polis* was unabashedly authoritarian and collectivist, the good lawmaker being he who could inspire good habits and morals in the citizenry. The citizens themselves accepted the city's disciplines by having a role in their making and by identifying with the community.

But solidarity and group cohesion were ensured not only by the civic participation and familiarity enabled by the small size of the city, but also by ties of blood. Both Athens and Sparta, the leading Greek city-states, limited citizenship to descendants of the original founding population, allowing for few exceptions. The Greek city-states were then not just citizen-states, as they have also been described, but were indeed among the first ethno-states.

Democratic Athens was typical in this respect. The Athenian statesman Pericles, noted for his democratic reforms assisting poorer citizens and giving them more say in government and law, paired his efforts with tightening citizenship

requirements by limiting it to those descending from two Athenian parents. This may shock modern liberal-democrats who advocate an undiscerning and unreciprocated universal altruism. In fact, Pericles' combination of generosity and exclusion is unsurprising: the more discriminating one is between a well-defined in-group and out-groups, the more generous one can afford to be with the in-group.

Furthermore, Montesquieu reports that foreigners found to be illegally voting in the Athenian assembly paid the supreme penalty: death. Such was the price Athenian democrats extracted from those who would dilute the sovereignty of the people and the state. Restriction of citizenship is one of the most striking aspects in the development of the West's first and most famous democracy (the other striking aspect, for me, is the Athenian lawgiver Solon's institution of debt forgiveness).

In contrast with Athenian democracy, the Spartans had an admired "mixed constitution" with

monarchical, oligarchic, and democratic elements, leaning towards aristocracy. Full citizens, known as Spartiates, ruled as a unique class of professional soldiers over a native population of helots (“probably just about the most difficult and contentious institution in the entire Greek world,” notes Plato[9]). The Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus had given that state its peculiar institutions, demanding systematic military training of the youth, eating in common mess halls to unite the citizens, and measures to improve their biological quality (including the killing of deformed newborns). Sparta also had laws to improve fertility: fathers with three sons were relieved from military service and those with four sons paid no taxes (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1270B6).

Lycurgus instituted a harsh system. And yet, it was through such laws, and the unity and disciplined that resulted, that Sparta, numbering perhaps 50,000, had the power to defeat a far richer and more populous Athens of 250,000 in the Peloponnesian War. And prior to this, Athenian and

Spartan power together had been necessary to save Greece from total destruction in the Persian Wars. Indeed, the sacrifice of the Spartan King Leonidas and his 300 men at Thermopylae resonates even in popular culture to this day, most recently with the [300 films](#). In his *Laws*, Plato recounts what would have happened to Greece had the city-states been too weak and the Persians triumphed:

If it hadn't been for the joint determination of the Athenians and the Spartans to resist the slavery that threatened them, we should have by now virtually a complete mixture of the races — Greek with Greek, Greek with barbarian, and barbarian with Greek. We can see a parallel in the nations whom the Persians lord it over today: they have been split up and then horribly jumbled together again into the scattered communities in which they now live.[\[10\]](#)

And that would have been the end of the Greek people and their unparalleled cultural achievements, and Western civilization as we know

it would not exist. Fortunately, “the Persian attack on the Greeks — on virtually everyone living in Europe,” failed.[\[11\]](#)

The Greeks themselves recognized that, whatever loyalty each had to their *polis*, there was a wider spiritual, cultural, and ethnic kinship among all Greeks. This was celebrated through joint religious festivals and the Olympic Games. In light of their shared blood and culture, the Greeks believed that they should be more gentle with one another and unite against barbarian aggressors, but political divisions meant they rarely attained this ideal.

[\[1\]](#) Everyone will have their own preferences, but based on my readings I recommend, in a roughly ascending order of difficulty:

- Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* and/or Xenophon’s Socratic dialogues.
- Plato’s early dialogues dealing with the trial and death of Socrates (*Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*), and possibly Julian’s philosophical works

(To the Uneducated Cynics, To the Cynic Heracleios, Letter to Themistius the Philosopher, Fragment of a Letter to a Priest).

- Plato's *Republic*

There are of course many other fine works and sources (Aristotle's *Politics*, Beothius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, the fragments of pre-Socratics, Sophists, and Diogenes . . .). Not to mention non-philosophical works such as Homer's *Odyssey*, which can be read like a novel. Most can be acquired cheaply from Penguin and Oxford World's Classics (beautiful little paperbacks), or for free online through Wikisource or www.archive.org.

[2] Hesiod, *Theogony*, 96-129, in Hesiod (trans. M. L. West), *Theogony and Works and Days* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1988).

[3] Ed. and trans. Robin Waterfield, *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and Sophists* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2000), p. 40.

[4] Homer (trans. Walter Shrewing), *The Odyssey* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1980), p. 24.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

[9] Plato, *Laws*, 776c, in Plato (ed. John Cooper), *Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

[10] *Ibid.*, 693a.

[11] *Ibid.*, 698b.