"The Polis"
from The Greeks (1951)
H.D.F. Kitto

Editors' Introduction

At its peak ancient Athens had only about as many residents as Peoria, Illinois (1990 population 113,504) – not a city that leaps out as a great center of world civilization. But British classicist Humphrey Davy Findley Kitto (1897–1982) reminds us not to commit the vulgar error of confusing size with significance. During its golden age, Athens and the 700 or so other tiny settlements of ancient Greece made a monumental contribution to human culture. What the Greeks achieved in philosophy, literature, drama, poetry, art, logic, mathematics, sculpture, and architecture has exercised a profound influence on Western civilization.

A Greek invention of enduring interest to urbanists is the polis. Since we have not got the thing, which the Greeks called “the polis,” Kitto notes, we do not possess an equivalent word. “City-state” or, perhaps, “self-governing community” come closest.

The classical Greek polis came of age in the fifth century BCE, about halfway between the emergence of the great Mesopotamian cities Childe describes and the present time. The physical form of the polis stressed public space. Private houses were low and turned away from the street. In contrast the Greeks emphasized public temples, stadiums, the agora (a combined marketplace and public forum), and theaters like Athens’ magnificent Theater of Dionysus illustrated in Plate 2. In the larger poleis, like Athens, these public buildings were spacious and often beautifully constructed of marble. Even in the smaller ones the community devoted many of its resources to them.

If the physical form of the polis was often stunning, it was the social organization of the polis that remains of particular fascination. The polis represents a form of community, which has exerted a powerful fascination for more than two millennia.

In the following selection Kitto describes how the polis made it possible for each citizen to realize his spiritual, moral, and intellectual capacities. The polis was a living community; almost an extended family. While the Greeks were very private in many ways, Kitto notes that their public life was essentially communistic. The polis as a social institution defined the very nature of being human for its citizens.

Not that the polis supported development of every resident: women and slaves were not citizens and did not participate in much of the life of the polis. Foreigners could attend plays in the Greek theater, but were barred from many institutions reserved to the (free, non-foreign, male) citizens. Sir Peter Hall in Cities in Civilization further questions the extent to which many citizens actually participated in public affairs. He hypothesizes that only a small percentage of those eligible to participate in public decision-making actually did so. He also notes that while farmers and other of the least educated and least articulate citizens of the Greek polis may have been physically present and possessed the same voting rights as educated upper-class Athenians it is unlikely that they participated very effectively compared to the higher classes. For the most part, Hall believes, they were passive spectators rather than active participants in the public affairs.
While a balanced view of the polis must acknowledge the existence of slavery, exclusion of women from civic life, limitations on the rights of foreigners, and the influence of education and class on social relations, Athens and the other Greek poleis were astonishingly democratic compared to any other urban civilization that preceded them. It is easy to dismiss Kitto as a hopeless romantic and his depiction of the Greek polis as an ivory tower depiction of a Camelot that never was. But that may be too harsh. The Greek polis as a social institution did represent a remarkable advance over social relations in any previous society. And the values it represented for its citizens are of enduring importance in an imperfect world.

In the debate about why the polis arose in Greece when it did, Kitto rejects deterministic answers such as the argument by geographical and economic determinists that the mountainous terrain required little, separate city-states. Rather, Kitto attributes the rise of the polis to the character of the Greeks themselves.

Kitto expresses nostalgia for human qualities of life in the polis that appear threatened today. Compare the vision of the polis as a supportive, humanistic structure for human fulfillment with the vision of large modern cities as centers of alienation and anomie depicted by Louis Wirth (p. 90), or ghettos housing the Black underclass as described by William Julius Wilson (p. 110). Note the connections between humanistic values Kitto felt that the polis nurtured and Robert Putnam’s concept of “social capital” growing out of civic engagement (p. 120), idealized life in J.B. Jackson’s “almost perfect town” (p. 184), and the return to human-scale community Peter Calthorpe and William Fulton advocate in The Regional City (p. 342).


Two masterful accounts of the role of cities in civilization give particular emphasis to the contribution of the Greek polis. See Lewis Mumford’s chapter on “The Emergence of the Polis” and “Citizen Versus Ideal City” in The City in History (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1961), and “The Fountainhead,” the second chapter of Sir Peter Hall’s Cities in Civilization (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

“Polis” is the Greek word which we translate as “city-state”. It is a bad translation, because the normal polis was not much like a city, and was very much more than a state. But translation, like politics, is the art of the possible; since we have not got the thing which the Greeks called “the polis”, we do not possess an equivalent word. From now on, we will avoid the misleading term “city-state”, and use the Greek word instead... We will first inquire how this political system arose, then we will try to reconstitute the word “polis” and recover its real meaning by watching it in action. It may be a long task, but all the time we shall be improving our acquaintance with the Greeks. Without a clear conception what the polis was, and what it meant to the Greek, it is quite impossible to understand properly Greek history, the Greek mind, or the Greek achievement.

First then, what was the polis?...

... In Crete... we find over fifty quite independent poleis, fifty small “states”... What is true of Crete is true of Greece in general, or at least of those parts which play any considerable part in Greek history...
It is important to realize their size. The modern reader picks up a translation of Plato’s *Republic* or Aristotle’s *Politics*; he finds Plato ordaining that his ideal city shall have 5,000 citizens, and Aristotle that each citizen should be able to know all the others by sight; and he smiles, perhaps, at such philosophic fantasies. But Plato and Aristotle are not fantasticks. Plato is imagining a polis on the normal Hellenic scale; indeed he implies that many existing Greek poleis were so small — for many had less than 5,000 citizens. Aristotle says, in his amusing way... that a polis of ten citizens would be impossible, because it could not be self-sufficient, and that a polis of a hundred thousand would be absurd, because it could not govern itself properly... Aristotle speaks of a hundred thousand citizens; if we allow each to have a wife and four children, and then add a liberal number of slaves and resident aliens, we shall arrive at something like a million — the population of Birmingham; and to an independent “state” as populous as Birmingham is a lecture-room joke...

In fact, only three poleis had more than 20,000 citizens: Syracuse and Acragas (Girgenti) in Sicily, and Athens. At the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War the population of Attica was probably about 500,000, half Athenian (men, women and children), a tenth resident aliens, and the rest slaves. Sparta, Lacedaemon, had a much smaller citizen-body, though it was larger in area. The Spartans had conquered and annexed Messenia, and possessed 3,200 square miles of territory. By Greek standards this was an enormous area: it would take a good walker two days to cross it. The important commercial city of Corinth had a territory of 330 square miles... The island of Ceos, which is about as big as Bute, was divided into four poleis. It had therefore four armies, four governments, possibly four different calendars, and it may be, four different currencies and systems of measures — though this is less likely. Mycenae was in historical times a shrunken relic of Agamemmon’s capital, but still independent. She sent an army to help the Greek cause against Persia at the battle of Issus; the army consisted of eighty men. Even by Greek standards this was small, but we do not hear that any jokes were made about an army sharing a cab.

To think on this scale is difficult for us, who regard a state of ten million as small, and are accustomed to states which, like the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R., are so vast that they have to be referred to by their initials; but to the adjustable reader has become accustomed to the scale, he will not commit the vulgar error of confusing size with significance...

But before we deal with the nature of the polis, the reader might like to know how it happened that the relatively spacious pattern of pre-Dorian Greece became such a mosaic of small fragments. The Classical scholar too would like to know; there are no records, so that all we can do is to suggest plausible reasons. There are historical, geographical and economic reasons; and when these have been duly set forth, we may conclude perhaps that the most important reason of all is simply that this is the way in which the Greeks preferred to live.

[Here Kitto describes the evolution of the Greek acropolis from a fortified hilltop strong-point built for protection against Dorian invaders to a place of assembly, religion, and commerce.]

At this point we may invoke the very sociable habits of the Greeks, ancient or modern. The English farmer likes to build his house on his land, and to come into town when he has to. What little leisure he has he likes to spend on the very satisfying occupation of looking over a gate. The Greek prefers to live in the town or village, to walk out to his work, and to spend his rather ample leisure talking in the town or village square. Therefore the market becomes a market-town, naturally beneath the acropolis. This became the center of the communal life of the people — and we shall see presently how important that was.

But why did not such towns form larger units? This is the important question.

There is an economic point. The physical barriers which Greece has so abundantly made the transport of goods difficult, except by sea, and the sea was not yet used with any confidence. Moreover, the variety of which we spoke earlier enabled quite a small area to be reasonably self-sufficient for a people who made such small demands on life as the Greek. Both of these facts tend in the same direction; there was in Greece no great economic interdependence, no reciprocal pull between the different parts of the country, strong enough to counteract the desire of the Greek to live in small communities.

There is a geographical point. It is sometimes asserted that this system of independent poleis was imposed on Greece by the physical character of the country. The theory is attractive, especially to those who like to have one majestic explanation of any phenomenon, but it does not seem to be true. It is of course obvious that the physical subdivision of the
country helped; the system could not have existed, for example, in Egypt, a country which depends entirely on the proper management of the Nile flood, and therefore must have a central government. But there are countries cut up quite as much as Greece — Scotland, for instance — which have never developed the polis-system; and conversely there were in Greece many neighbouring poleis, such as Corinth and Sicyon, which remained independent of each other although between them there was no physical barrier that would seriously inconvenience a modern cyclist. Moreover, it was precisely the most mountainous parts of Greece that never developed poleis, or not until later days — Arcadia and Aetolia, for example, which had something like a canton-system. The polis flourished in those parts where communications were relatively easy. So that we are still looking for our explanation.

Economics and geography helped, but the real explanation is the character of the Greeks ... As it will take some time to deal with this, we may first clear out of the way an important historical point. How did it come about that so preposterous a system was able to last for more than twenty minutes?

The ironies of history are many and bitter, but at least this must be put to the credit of the gods, that they arranged for the Greeks to have the Eastern Mediterranean almost to themselves long enough to work out what was almost a laboratory-experiment to test how far, and in what conditions, human nature is capable of creating and sustaining a civilization ... This lively and intelligent Greek people was for some centuries allowed to live under the apparently absurd system which suited and developed its genius instead of becoming absorbed in the dull mass of a large empire, which would have smothered its spiritual growth ... No history of Greece can be intelligible until one has understood what the polis meant to the Greek; and when we have understood that, we shall also understand why the Greeks developed it, and so obstinately tried to maintain it. Let us then examine the word in action.

It meant at first that which was later called the Acropolis, the stronghold of the whole community and the centre of its public life ... "polis" very soon meant either the citadel or the whole people which, as it were, "used" this citadel. So we read in Thucydides, "Epidamnus is a polis on the right as you sail into the Ionian gulf." This is not like saying "Bristol is a city on the right as you sail up the Bristol Channel," for Bristol is not an independent state which might be at war with Gloucester, but only an urban area with a purely local administration. Thucydides' words imply that there is a town — though possibly a very small one — called Epidamnus, which is the political centre of the Epidamnians, who live in the territory of which the town is the centre — not the "capital" — and are Epidamnians whether they live in the town or in one of the villages in this territory.

Sometimes the territory and the town have different names. Thus, Attica is the territory occupied by the Athenian people; it comprised Athens — the "polis" in the narrower sense — the Piræus, and many villages; but the people collectively were Athenians, not Attics, and a citizen was an Athenian in whatever part of Attica he might live.

In this sense "polis" is our "state" ... The actual business of governing might be entrusted to a monarch, acting in the name of all according to traditional usages, or to the heads of certain noble families, or to a council of citizens owning so much property, or to all the citizens. All these and many modifications of them, were natural forms of "polity"; all were sharply distinguished by the Greek from Oriental monarchy, in which the monarch is irresponsible, not holding his powers in trust by the grace of god, but being himself a god. If there were irresponsible government there was no polis ...

... [T]he size of the polis made it possible for a member to appeal to all his fellow citizens in person, and this he naturally did if he thought that another member of the polis had injured him. It was the common assumption of the Greeks that the polis took its origin in the desire for Justice. Individuals are lawless, but the polis will see to it that wrongs are redressed. But not by an elaborate machinery of state-justice, for such a machine could not be operated except by individuals, who may be as unjust as the original wrongdoer. The injured party will be sure of obtaining justice only if he can declare his wrongs to the whole polis. The word therefore now means "people" in actual distinction from state.

... Demosthenes the orator talks of a man who, literally, "avoids the city" — a translation which might lead the unwary to suppose that he lived in something corresponding to the Lake District, or Purley. But the phrase "avoids the polis" tells us nothing about his domicile; it means that he took no part in public life — and was therefore something of an oddity. The affairs of the community did not interest him.
We have now learned enough about the word polis to realize that there is no possible English rendering of such a common phrase as, “It is everyone’s duty to help the polis.” We cannot say “help the state”, for that arouses no enthusiasm; it is “the state” that takes half our incomes from us. Not “the community”, for with us “the community” is too big and too various to be grasped except theoretically. One’s village, one’s trade union, one’s class, are entities that mean something to us at once, but “work for the community”, though an admirable sentiment, is to most of us vague and nebby. In the years before the war, what did most parts of Great Britain know about the depressed areas? How much do bankers, miners and farmworkers understand each other? But the “polis” every Greek knew; there it was, complete, before his eyes. He could see the fields which gave it its sustenance – or did not, if the crops failed; he could see how agriculture, trade and industry dovetailed into one another; he knew thelanders, where they were strong and where weak; if the malcontents were planning a coup, it was difficult for them to conceal the fact. The entire life of the polis, and the relation between its parts, were much easier to grasp, because of the small scale of things. Therefore to say “It is everyone’s duty to help the polis” is not to express a fine sentiment but to speak the honest and most urgent common sense. Public affairs are an immediacy and a concreteness which they cannot possibly have for us.

[...] Pericles’ Funeral Speech, recorded or recreated by Thucydides, will illustrate this immediacy, and will also clear the conception of the polis a little further. Each Thucydides tells us, if citizens had died in war — they had, more often than not — a funeral oration delivered by “a man chosen by the polis”. Today, someone should be nominated by the Prime Minister, or the British Academy, or the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation]. In Athens it meant that he was chosen by the Assembly who had often met that Assembly; and on this occasion Pericles was chosen to speak on a specially high platform, that his voice reached as many as possible. Let us consider two things that Pericles used in that speech.

In comparing the Athenian polis with the Spartan, we can make the point that the Spartans admit no political unit, only the community of “strangers”, while we make our polis common and the polis here is not the political unit; there is no “naturalizing foreigners” — which the Greeks did rarely, simply because the polis was so intimate a union. Pericles means here: “We throw open to all our common cultural life”, as is shown by the words that follow, difficult though they are to translate: “nor do we deny them any instruction or spectacle” – words that are almost meaningless until we realize that the drama, tragic and comic, the performance of choral hymns, public recitals of Homer, games, were all necessary and normal parts of “political” life. This is the sort of thing Pericles has in mind when he speaks of “instruction and spectacle”, and of “making the polis open to all”.

But we must go further than this. A perusal of the speech will show that in praising the Athenian polis Pericles is praising more than a state, a nation, or a people: he is praising a way of life; he means no less when, a little later, he calls Athens the “school of Hellas”. – And what of that? Do not we praise “the English way of life”? The difference is this: we expect our State to be quite indifferent to “the English way of life” – indeed, the idea that the State should actively try to promote it would fill most of us with alarm. The Greeks thought of the polis as an active, formative thing, training the minds and characters of the citizens; we think of it as a piece of machinery for the production of safety and convenience. The training in virtue, which the medieval state left to the Church, and the polis made its own concern, the modern state leaves to God knows what.

“Polis”, then, originally “citadel”, may mean as much as “the whole communal life of the people, political, cultural, moral” – even “economic”, for how else are we to understand another phrase in this same speech, “the produce of the whole world comes to us, because of the magnitude of our polis”? This must mean “our national wealth”.

Religion too was bound up with the polis – though not every form of religion. The Olympian gods were indeed worshipped by Greeks everywhere, but each polis had, if not its own gods, at least its own particular cults of these gods ... But beyond these Olympians, each polis had its minor local deities, “heroes” and nymphs, each worshipped with his immemorial rite, and scarcely imagined to exist outside the particular locality where the rite was performed. So ... there is a sense in which it is true to say that the polis is an independent religious, as well as political, unit ...

[...] Aristotle made a remark which we most inadequately translate “Man is a political animal.” What
Aristotle really said is "Man is a creature who lives in a polis"; and what he goes on to demonstrate, in his Politics, is that the polis is the only framework within which man can fully realize his spiritual, moral and intellectual capacities.

Such are some of the implications of this word... The polis was a living community, based on kinship, real or assumed—a kind of extended family, turning as much as possible of life into family life, and of course having its family quarrels, which were the more bitter because they were family quarrels. This is it that explains not only the polis but also much of what the Greek made and thought, that he was essentially individualist; in the filling of his life, he was essentially "communist". Religion, art, games, the discussion of things—all these were needs of life that could be fully satisfied only through the polis—not, as with us, through voluntary associations of like-minded people, or through entrepreneurs appealing to individuals. (This partly explains the difference between Greek drama and the modern cinema.) Moreover, he wanted to play his own part in running the affairs of the community. When we realize how many of the necessary, interesting and exciting activities of life the Greek enjoyed through the polis, all of them in the open air, within sight of the same acropolis, with the same ring of mountains or of sea visibly enclosing the life of every member of the state—then it becomes possible to understand Greek history, to understand that in spite of the promptings of common sense the Greek could not bring himself to sacrifice the polis, with its vivid and comprehensive life, to a wider but less interesting unity...