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Colonies and politics

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Thucydides 1.1.: Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, beginning at the moment that it broke out, and believing that it would be a great war, and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it… the rest of the Hellenic race taking sides in the quarrel; those who delayed doing so at once having it in contemplation… (Translation of Richard Crawley, *The Landmark of Thucydides*)

To understand how and why it happened, we have to start, like Thucydides, with the pre-history of the event and, first of all, discuss some important terms.

πόλις – polis

The usual translation is *city*, traditional interpretation – *city-state*,

but it is neither a *city* – most of them had no urban centres at all, nor a *state* in the modern sence, rather something like a *joint-stock company* where shareholders were πολίται – *citizens*.

That’s why the designation of the people appears often as a name of an acting political unit, not the name of a city or land: Athenians, Peloponnesians, etc., as we see already in the first sentence.

According to the context, πόλις could be translated as *land*, *city*, *people* and only in very few cases as *state*. The modern sence of *state* is often expressed by other terms, for ex.:

ἀρχή (2.36) – power, empire

πολιτεία (2.37) – political system, constitution

*Polis* was held for the only civilized form of social and political organization and the opposition *Hellene-barbarian* reflected in classical times rather the difference between those who lived in a polis-system and those who had another political organization than the difference between ethnically Greeks and non-Greeks. By Thucydides (1.3-7) we see the concept that the designation *Hellene* is somehow connected with life-style.

The ancient settlements/ cities and political units are designated, of course, by the term *polis* (see for ex., 1.7, 1.8) and, despite good knowledge of the socio-political history of Greece in general, Thucydides describes or explains some historical events as if he regards the kingdoms of Minos and Agamemnon as the classical *poleis*.

1.4. He (Minos) made himself master of what is now called the Hellenic sea, and ruled over the Cyclades, into most of which he sent the first colonies (lit.: was the first colonizator – [οἰκιστὴς](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=oi%29kisth%5Cs&la=greek&can=oi%29kisth%5Cs0&prior=kai\) [πρῶτος](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=prw%3Dtos&la=greek&can=prw%3Dtos0&prior=oi)kisth\s)), expelling the Carians and appointing his own sons governors; and thus he did his best to put down piracy in those waters, a necessary step to secure revenues for his own use.

1.8. But as soon as Minos had formed his navy, communication by sea became easier, as he colonized most of the islands, and thus expelled the evildoers… For the love of gain would reconcile the weaker to the dominion of the stronger, and the possession of capital enabled the more powerful to reduce the smaller cities ([πόλεις](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=po%2Fleis&la=greek&can=po%2Fleis0&prior=e)la/ssous)) to subjection.

1.9. What enabled Agamemnon to raise the armament was more, in my opinion, his superiority in strength, than the oath of Tyndareus, which bound the Suitors to follow him… First of all Pelops, arriving from Asia with the vast wealth among a needy population, acquired such power that, stranger though he was, the country was called after him… Atreus complied with the wishes of Mycenaeans, who were influenced by fear of the Heraclids – besides, his power seemed considerable and he had not neglected to seek the favour of the populace – and assumed the rule of Mycenae and of the rest of the dominions of Eurystheus… To all this Agamemnon succeeded. He had also a navy far stronger than his contemporaries, so that, in my opinion, fear was quite as strong an element as love in the formation of the expedition.

In my opinion, we see here more *Realpolitik*, more democracy, inter-city-relations more corresponding to classical times, than we may expect from the empires of the Late Bronze Age. Some indirect proof of existence of such an empire in Mycenaean Greece we can see in Egyptian and Hittite texts, but also by Homer. The hierarchy of rulers – ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν, ἄναξ, βασιλεύς, attested in the epos corresponds with the Mycenaean data, especially with Linear B texts from Pylos.

Thucydides, of course, recognizes supremacy of Minos or Agamemnon over some lands or cities, but does not speak about their conquest. This would be a normal thing for the Late Bronze Age, but unusual for the *polis*-world.

1.15… wars by land there were none, none at least by which power was acquired; we have the usual border contests, but of distant expeditions with conquest the object we hear nothing among the Hellenes. There was no union of subject cities round a great state, no spontaneous combination of equals for confederate expeditions; what fighting there was consisted merely of local warfare between rival neighbors.

Conquest was incompatible with the *polis*-world, especially with a very important sign of *polis* – its size. All shareholders had to have a possibility to take part in the decision-making process, so in an ideal polis the longest distance had to be a one-day-way from the political centre.

That’s why the strong cities had mostly subordinate allies in neighbourhood or oversees, and the case of Spartans that conquered and enslaved the neighbours – Messenians, was a rare exeption. In general, Sparta was an exeption in many other things also.

If the land became too small to hold and feed its population, Greeks usually sent out colonists in the quest for new territories.

1.2. The most powerful victims of war or faction from the rest of Hellas took refuge with the Athenians as a safe retreat; and at an early period, becoming naturalized, swelled the already large population of the city to such a hight that Attica became at last too small to hold them, and they had to send out colonies (ἀποικία) to Ionia.

1.12. Even after the Trojan war Hellas was still engaged in removing and settling, and thus could not attain to the quiet which must precede growth. The late return of the Hellenes from Ilium caused many revolutions, and factions ensuued almost everywhere; and it was the citizens thus driven into exile who founded the cities ([τὰς](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=ta%5Cs&la=greek&can=ta%5Cs0&prior=e)kpi/ptontes) [πόλεις](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=po%2Fleis&la=greek&can=po%2Fleis0&prior=ta\s) [ἔκτιζον](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=e%29%2Fktizon&la=greek&can=e%29%2Fktizon0&prior=po/leis" \t "morph)). Sixty years after the capture of Ilium the modern Boeotians were driven out of Arne by the Thessalians, and settled in the present Boeotia, the former Cadmean land... Twenty years later the Dorians and the Heraclids became masters of the Peloponnesus; so that much had to be done and many years had to elapse before Hellas could attain to a durable tranquillity undisturbed by removals, and could begin to send out colonies (ἀποικία), as Athenians did to Ionia and most of the islands, and the Peloponnesians to most of Italy and Sicily and some places in the rest of Hellas.

So, a few waves of migrations and colonizations shaped the Greek world of classical times. At the verge of the second and the first millenia BC the Greek tribes find their places in continental Greece, islands of the Aegean Sea and the Western part of Asia Minor, in the 8th-6th centuries BC they colonized the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

The majority of the colonies, called ἀποικία – *apoikia*, were new independent political units. They had, of course, some ties with the “mother-city” (μητρόπολις – *metropolis*). Even if the colonists were driven by force from the homeland, they had much in common with *metropolis* – the same dialect, the same cults, calendar and festivals, personal relations, etc. That’s why they stayed in close contact and were often allies. Sometimes *metropolis* had some formal rights over its colonies (cf. Corinth vs. Corcyra in the case of Epidamnus, 1.24 ff.).

The colonies were founded mostly at the new places, which were convenient for strategic and trade reasons. Sometimes they were taken by force from local tribes.

If the colonists came to a powerful country, they had to recognise its supremacy and found a commercial emporium – [ἐμπόριον](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=e%29mpo%2Frion&la=greek&can=e%29mpo%2Frion0&prior=pote), with some kind of autonomy. The best-known is Naucratis in Egypt.

In Colchis, modern Western Georgia, there were also a few Greek settlements. The most famous, Phasis is, unfortunately, not jet found and, respectively, we cannot judge, whether it was a fully independent *polis* or a self-governing *emporion*. In other cases, the archaeological remains, some of them identified with names from Greek sources and some not yet, suggest that the Greek trade centres were part of barbarian cities. Even the presence of Greek population is not easy to prove. Of course, there are Greek inscriptions since the 5th c. BC, Greek letters on coins and ceramic roofing tiles and graffiti. The majority of Greek graffiti of ancient times is concentrated in Phichvnari (ფიჭვნარი) near modern Kobuleti. So, this is the only place where we can argue about relatively stable Greek population in the *emporion*.

This colonial system was an important element in the configuration of the sides in the Peloponnesian war.

However, the main divider was the socio-economic and political system.

Schematically we may summarise it so:

on one side – agriculture, infantry and oligarchy,

on the other – trade, navy and democracy.

It’s well-known that the term *democracy* originates from the [Greek](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Greek) δημοκρατία (*dēmokratía*), which was coined from δῆμος (*dêmos*) “people” and κράτος (*krátos*) “power” or “rule”, and denotes the “rule of the people”. *Polis* as a *joint-stock company*, where shareholders were πολίται – *citizens*, was in modern sence a democratic political unit. All the citizens were more or less involved in making decisions about its affairs and the interests of individuals were more or less respected.

But if the power of daily decision-making was held by an individual, or by a small number of individuals, for Greeks it was another system. The creators of the term only reserved it for a system where all citizens were directly involved in governing the *polis*. Greek *democracy* – the term and the system – was born in Athens. Athenian democracy was not only direct in the sense that decisions were made by the assembled people, but also the most direct in the sense that the people through the assembly, boule and courts of law controlled the entire political process and a large proportion of citizens were involved constantly in the public business. Surprisingly this system functioned well during ca. a century and its weakness became clear only at the late stage of the Peloponnesian war. In critical situations the assembly was not able to make quickly correct decisions and was heavily influenced by talented adventurers and demagogues.

Thucydides and other Greek political philosophers tried to find out how to combine the best sides of democracy, monarchy and oligarchy, how to select the right persons for government. Their recommendations were quite different, often utopic, but on their basis was built a system, that functioned quite well for centuries in Rome and, with some modifications, is functioning in modern civilized world. Despite whole diversity of modern political models they are based on common principles of division of powers and representative, elective democracy. This wouldn’t be called democracy by the Greeks, but it is the only possibility of having a stable democracy outside of classical Athens.

The forms of organization of the power are, of course, very important, but subordinated to the main principles of a fair society, which are common for Athenians and modern civilized mankind. And the funerary speech of Pericles, as presented by Thucydides (2.35-46) is, in my opinion, the best manifesto of democracy.

The definition of the *polis* as *joint-stock company*, where shareholders were *citizens*, corresponds well to the fact that the grade of democracy, the organization of power is dependant on economy and warfare. In the lands, where agriculture was the main economic activity, the landholders were the most respected people. They were able to produce goods and arm *hoplites*, and, respectively, their value, their rights and their share in power was higher than that of others. This is true even for Athens of the 6th century BC. Solon’s reforms enabled the rise of Athenian economy and power, but he divided the citizens into different groups according to their income. Only rich Athenians were allowed to be elected to high positions in administrative and judicial offices.

The first real step towards classical democracy was ἰσονομία – equation of rights by Clisthenes (if we may speak about human rights in classical Greece). It was followed by building the powerful fleet under Themistocles. This was not only decissive in the war with Persians, but also transformed the whole Athenian society: on the one hand, trade became an important branch of economy, while on the other hand, poor citizens, now able to be useful for Athens serving as rowers, gained political weight.

Cities with similar political and socio-economic systems had also common interests, which made them allies. Strong cities tried to spread their political influence on other cities by supporting political systems or parties according to their preferences (for ex.: 1.19: The policy of Sparta was not to exact tribute from her allies, but merely to secure their subservience to her interests by establishing oligarchies among them; Athens, on the contrary, had by degrees deprived hers of their ships, and imposed instead contributions in money on all except Chios and Lesbos.).

The differences between two systems, two ways of development became obvious after the Greco-Persian war. Two leaders of the antipersian coalition – Athens and Sparta – became leaders of the opposing sides.

The growth of two opposing powers led to a conflict.

1.23. ... The real cause, however, I consider to be the one which was formally most kept out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevictible...

The conflict could be solved in two different ways:

One was the war, and that happened in reality. First part of it was more successful for Athens, the second – for Sparta. But the price of the victory was too high, it costed too much human and other resources.

1.23. ... The Peloponnesian war went on for a very long time and there occured during it disasters of a kind and number that no other similar period of time could match. Never had so many cities been taken and laid desolate, here by the barbarians, here by the parties contending (the old inhabitants being sometimes removed to make room for others); never was there so much banishing and bloodshedding, now on the field of battle, now in political strife...

Spartan hegemony in Greece lasted not for a long time and after some other internal conflicts the polis-world was conquered by Macedonians.

The other way could be constructing a big territorial state, something like „the United Cities of Hellas“, but the main reason that made this way impossible, was the same, that led to the rise of the Hellenic world – the *polis* – its size was a system-building element and Greek democracy was not ready to function in other dimensions.