

Chapter 8: The Greek Adventure: 8-3 Early Hellenic Civilization
Book Title: World Civilizations
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8-3 Early Hellenic Civilization

Starting about 800 B.C.E., the Greek mainland slowly recovered the levels of civilization created during the Mycenaean Period and then went on to far greater heights. During and after the Dark Age, the institution of the [polis \(\(POH-lihs\) The political and social community of citizens in ancient Greece.\)](#) (POH-lis; plural, *poleis*) gradually developed. In Greek, *polis* means the community of adult free persons who make up a town or any inhabited place. In modern political vocabulary the word is usually translated as “city-state.” A polis could be almost any size. It is thought that Classical Athens, the largest and most powerful polis, had almost 300,000 inhabitants at its peak (about the size of present-day Buffalo, New York), whereas the smallest were scarcely more than villages. At one time the Greek mainland and inhabitable islands (all told, about the size of Maryland) were the home to more than two hundred poleis. Each thought of itself as a political and cultural unit, independent of every other. Yet each polis also considered itself to be part of that distinct and superior family of peoples calling themselves Greek.

A polis was much more than a political territorial unit. It was the frame of reference for the entire public life of its citizens and for much of private life as well. The mutual interdependence of the citizenry was exhibited in different ways. A sense of common life and shared destiny was promoted by governmental policies and techniques. The inherent superiority of the local format of governing for the public welfare was taken for granted, even when these ways might differ sharply from one polis to its nearest neighbor. Citizenship was greatly prized, and by no means was everyone who lived in a polis a full citizen. Women were entirely excluded from political life. There were many resident aliens, who were excluded from citizenship, as were the numerous slaves. Normally, only free men twenty years of age or older possessed full civil rights. That meant that as much as 80 percent of the population might be excluded from political life because of their gender, age, or social status.

Each large polis had more or less the same economic and demographic design: a town of varying size, surrounded by farmland, pasture, and woods that supplied the town with food and other necessities. In the town lived artisans of all kinds, small traders and import-export merchants, intellectuals, philosophers, artists, and all the rest who make up a civilized society. Life was simpler in the countryside. Like all other peoples, most Greeks were peasants, woodcutters, ditch diggers, and the many other workers of whom formal history knows little except that they existed.

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