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**Citizenship and Freedom in the City State**

The movement of Greeks outside Greece itself produced more than a thousand city-states, most with populations no greater than several hundred or a thousand. The Greek city-state was unusual because all free inhabitants were considered citizens and, usually, all free men could participate in governance. Some historians argue that the Greeks’ knowledge of the older, monarchical cities of the island of Cyprus and of Phoenicia in the Middle East influenced the creation of the Greek city-state, but others conclude that the Greeks on their own originated the concept of citizenship and the sharing of power, which were the defining characteristics of the polis. The most famous ancient analyst of Greek politics and society, the philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) insisted that he city state was natural “Humans are beings who by nature live in a city state.” Anyone who existed outside such a community, Aristotle only half- jokingly maintained, must be either a beast or a deity.



Citizenship was distinctive because it assumed a basic level of political and legal equality---above all, the expectation of equal treatment under the law for citizens regardless of the social status or wealth. Women had the protection of the law, but they were barred from participation in politics on the assumption that female judgment was inferior to male. The most dramatic indication of the political equality in a Greek city-state was the involvement of all free, adult male citizens in governance by attending the voting in a political assembly, where the laws and the policies of the community were ratified. Not all city-states reached this level of power sharing and participation, however. In some, the social elite kept a stranglehold on politics, and a small group or, more rarely, a single person or family dominated . Rule by a small elite group is called oligarchy. Rule by one person is called tyranny.

No matter how incomplete the Greeks notion of equal citizenship remained in practice, the fact that it emerged at all is remarkable because legal inequality between rich and poor in the free population was the rule in the ancient Middle East and in Greece itself before the emergence of the polis. Given the lack of precedent; how and why the poor in Greece gained citizenship and equality before the law remains a mystery. The greatest population increase in the late Dark Age and in the Archaic Age occurred in the ranks of the poor. These families raised more children to help farm more land, which otherwise would have lain idle because of the depopulation brought on by the worst of the Dark Age (Dorian invasion). There was no precedent for extending even limited political and legal rights to this growing segment of the population, but the Greek city-state did so.

For a long time, historians attributed the general widening of political rights to a so-called hoplite revolution, but recent research undermines this theory. Hoplites were infantrymen who wore metal body armor, carried a metal shield in one hand and wielded a spear with the other. They constituted the main strike force of the volunteer militia that defended each city-state. In the eight century BC, a growing number of men could afford to buy hoplite equipment (the use of iron had cut its cost). It seems likely that the new hoplites believed they were entitled to political rights because they bought their own equipment and voluntarily trained hard to defend their community. According to the hoplite revolution theory, the new hoplites forced the social elite to share political power by threatening to refuse to serve in the militia. The problem with that theory is the hoplites were not poor. How, then did poor men too, win political rights, especially the vote in the assembly? The answer is unknown. Perhaps poor men earned respect and political rights by fighting as lightly armed skirmishers, disrupting the enemy’s infantry by hurling barrages of rocks. Whatever the reason for the designation of poor men as citizens with roughly the same rights as the rich, this unprecedented decision constituted the mote innovative feature of Greek society in the Archaic Age.

The inclusiveness of the Greek city state did not extend to slaves. Indeed, the more prominent the notion of freedom , the more common it became to distinguish it from un-freedom, and the practice of slavery became ever more widespread in Archaic Age Greece. Individual Greeks and the city-states themselves owned slaves. Public slaves sometimes lived on their own , performing specialized tasks such as detection counterfeit coins. Temple slaves “belonged” to the deity of the temple, for whom they worked as servants. Private slaves totaled perhaps a third of the population by the fifth century BC. They did all sorts of jobs, from household chores to crafts production to farm labor. Their masters controlled their lives and could punish them or demand sexual favors at will. Most owners did not brutalize their slaves because doing so would have damaged their human property. Lacking any right to family life and having no property or legal rights, slaves were completely alienated from polis society. As Aristotle later put it, slaves were “living tools.” Sometimes owners let slaves earn money to purchase their freedom, or promised freedom at a future date to encourage hard work. Slaves who gained their freedom did not become citizens but instead missed into the population of noncitizens officially allowed to live in the city-state. Despite the bitter nature of their lives, Greek slaves rarely revolted o a large scale except in Sparta, perhaps because elsewhere they were of too many different origins and nationalities to organize. No Greek is known to have called for the abolition of slavery.

Women, like slaves, lacked the right of political participation in the city state. Women, however, did count as citizens, enjoyed the protection of the laws, and played a central role in religion. Citizen women had recourse to the courts in disputes over property, although they usually had to have a man speak for them. Before marriage, a woman’s father served as her legal guardian; after marriage, her husband assumed the same role. The paternalism of Greek society---men acted as ”fathers” to regulate the lives of women and safeguard their interests as men defined them---demanded that all women have male guardians to protect them physically and legally.

