1

THE ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF THE *POLIS* SYSTEM

Aristotle once observed: "Man is a political animal." This famous quotation is usually invoked as evidence of Aristotle's prescience in recognizing the universality of government in human society, an interpretation he would have indignantly repudiated. A more accurate translation would be: "Man is a *polis* animal," a translation that reflects the absolute centrality of the *polis* to the ancient Greek experience. In the Greek view the *polis* set them apart from all other peoples.

The conventional translation of *polis* (pl. *poleis*) is "city-state." That term captures well one of the central features of the *polis* system—namely, that every *polis* is or ought to be independent and sovereign—but otherwise it is seriously misleading in two ways. First, the word "city" conjures up an image of large, socioeconomically diverse urban centers with imposing architecture. An unusual *polis* such as fifth-century B.C. Athens might fulfill such expectations, but the vast majority of the more than 1500 *poleis* scattered throughout the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions rarely had territories exceeding a hundred square miles and had citizen bodies of a few thousand or less, little in the way of significant public buildings, and overwhelmingly agricultural economies. Second, the word "state" suggests a formal governmental structure responsible for the maintenance of internal order and the conduct of foreign relations, but *poleis* normally had few permanent political institutions. Rather, *poleis* had *politai*, "citizens," who, in Aristotle's phrase, "govern and are governed in turn." A *polis*, therefore, was not so much a state in the modern sense of that term as it was a community of self-governing citizens. Because of the high-risk environment of these small communities, this meant in practice that the core of a *polis* was composed of adult males whose citizenship was validated by fictitious claims of descent, usually father to son, from common ancestors. Theirs and theirs alone were the rights both to own land and to participate in all aspects of public affairs and the obligation to defend the *polis* and its interests, as is well illustrated by the fact that Greek documents regularly identify as the agency responsible for political activity not the *polis*, but its citizens, not Athens or Sparta, but the Athenians or the Spartans.

Less clear is the origin of the *polis* system. Historians often claim that its origin is to be found in the rugged geography of Greece, with its limited water sources, scattered patches of farmland, and difficult communications, all of which, it is said, encouraged the political fragmentation characteristic of classical Greece. Geography, however, is not destiny. More than a century of productive archaeological activity, beginning with Heinrich Schliemann's dramatic discoveries at Troy and Mycenae in the 1870s, has demonstrated that the political landscape of second-millennium B.C. Greece was dominated by a small number of kingdoms ruled from fortified palaces. The few surviving records of these kingdoms, which are written in an early form of Greek called Linear B, reveal that, unlike the later *poleis*, these kingdoms had complex class structures and were governed by scribal bureaucracies similar to those of the states of the Ancient Near East. The Mycenaean Age and its kingdoms ended violently around 1100 B.C. Then ensued a period of severe economic and cultural retrenchment and population decline, which historians call the Dark Ages. During the almost 350 years of the Dark Ages, the basic unit of Greek life was the self-sufficient farming village, and it was from groups of such villages that the new *poleis* emerged in the eighth century B.C. The lack of significant foreign enemies during the critical early centuries of its existence allowed the *polis* system to take root and spread from its Aegean home throughout much of the Mediterranean and Black Sea basins. The result was that until the great crisis of the ancient Western world in the third century A.D., almost a millennium later, the Greeks were, as Aristotle said, "*polis* animals."

B. Greek Definitions of the *Polis*

The Politics *of Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) is the fullest and most important surviving ancient analysis of the* polis *system. The central feature of all of Aristotle's works is the attempt to base theoretical analysis on an extensive body of empirical data, and especially so in the* Politics. *The content of the* Politics *was derived from data collected for a survey of political behavior unequaled in scope and scale before modern times: the description of the constitutions (*politeiai; *sing.* politeia*) of 158 Greek and selected non-Greek states. Although not a perfectly finished work—the* Politics *seems, in fact, to be composed of the syllabi of several courses Aristotle gave at his school in Athens sometime*

between 335 and his death in 322 B.C.—the work contains a comprehensive account of the polis *system, including a description of the full variety of known* polis *constitutions (both real and imaginary) and the strengths and weaknesses of their institutions. This selection from the* Politics *provides a theoretical definition of the* polis *as a natural association of rational human beings and an analysis and evaluation of the relationships between the various categories of individuals that compose the citizen body.*[3]

1. THE NATURAL ORIGINS OF THE *POLIS*: "MAN IS BY NATURE A POLITICAL ANIMAL"

Out of the two relationships between man and woman, master and slave, the family first arises, and Hesiod is right when he says—"First a house and wife and an ox for the plough." . . . The family is the association established by nature for the supply of men's every day wants, and the members of it are called by Charondas "companions of the cupboard" and by Epimenides the Cretan, "companions of the manger." But when several families are united, and the association aims at something more than the supply of daily needs, then comes into existence the village. And the most natural form of the village appears to be that of a colony from the family, composed of the children and grandchildren, who are said to be "suckled with the same milk." And this is the reason why Greek states were originally governed by kings; because the Greeks were under royal rule before they came together, as non-Greeks still are today. Every family is ruled by the eldest, and therefore in the colonies of the family the kingly form of government prevailed because they were of the same blood. As Homer says (of the Cyclopes in the *Odyssey*): "Each one gives law to his children and to his wives." For they lived dispersed, as was the manner in ancient times. Wherefore men say that the Gods have a king, because they themselves either are or were in ancient times under the rule of a king. For they imagine, not only the forms of the Gods, but their ways of life to be like their own.

When several villages are united in a single community, perfect and large enough to be nearly or quite self-sufficing, the state comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of a good life. And therefore, if the earlier forms of society are natural, so is the state, for it is the end of them, and the completed nature is the end. For what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature, whether we are speaking of a man, a horse, or a family. Besides, the final cause and end of a thing is the best, and to be self-sufficing is the end and the best.

Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either above humanity, or below it; he is the "Tribeless, lawless, hearthless one," whom Homer denounces—the outcast who is a lover of war; he may be compared to a bird which flies alone.

[3] Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1.1252a–1252b, based on translation of B. Jowett. From *The Politics of Aristotle* (Oxford, 1885).

2. THE NATURE OF CITIZENSHIP: "HE WHO HAS THE RIGHT TO TAKE PART IN DELIBERATIVE OR JUDICIAL ADMINISTRATION IS A CITIZEN"

The modern term "constitution" does not do justice to politeia, *the Greek term used to translate it. A constitution or* politeia *in Greek understanding was not just a set of laws or a legal document, but an entire cultural, social and economic way of life—a* bios. Poleis *differed among themselves according to their different* politeiai. *A democratic* politeia, *for instance, represented a different* bios *and not merely a different political system than, say, the* politeia *of an oligarchy. The following reading is from the introduction to Book 3 of the* Politics, *which is usually thought to contain some of Aristotle's most penetrating political analysis. Note that his idea of the* polis *is not limited to Greek examples, but includes a Semitic language–speaking state, Carthage in north Africa, of which Aristotle had a high opinion.*[4]

He who would inquire into the essence and attributes of various kinds of governments must first of all ask "What is a *polis*?" At present this is a disputed question. Some say that when a *polis* does such-and-such an act it is "an act of a state," while others say no, it is not "an act of the state," but, for instance, "of the oligarchy or the tyrant" that rules the state. Secondly, the legislator or statesman is concerned entirely with the *polis* (*and so we must understand the* polis *in order to understand this activity*). Finally, a constitution (*politeia*) is an ordering of the inhabitants of a state (*according to a particular political arrangement*). Now a state is a composite or compound, and like any other whole it is made up of many parts; in this case, since it is a *polis* we are talking about, these parts are the citizens who compose it. It is evident, therefore, that we must begin by asking, "Who is the citizen, and what is the meaning of the term?"

Here again there may be a difference of opinion. He who is a citizen in a democracy will often not be a citizen in an oligarchy. We may begin by leaving out of consideration those individuals who have been made citizens in some exceptional manner, by naturalization for example. Nor is citizenship constituted by domicile, that is, simply because a person lives in a particular place, for resident aliens (*metics*) and slaves share a domicile (*with citizens but are clearly not citizens*); nor is he a citizen who has no legal right except that of suing and being sued; for this right may be enjoyed under the provisions of a treaty. Thus, metics (*resident aliens*) in many places do not possess even such rights completely, for they are obliged to have a patron, so that they participate in citizenship imperfectly, and we call them citizens only in a qualified sense, as we might apply the term to children who are too young to be on the register of citizens, or to old men who have been relieved from state duties. Of these we do not say quite simply that they are citizens, but add in the one case that they are not of age, and in the other, that they are past the age, or something of that sort; the precise expression is immaterial, for our meaning is clear. Similar difficulties to those which I have mentioned may be raised and answered about disenfranchised or exiled citizens. But the citizen

[4] Aristotle, *The Politics*, 3.1274b32–1275b, based on translation of B. Jowett. From *The Politics of Aristotle* (Oxford, 1885).

whom we are seeking to define is a citizen in the strictest sense, against whom no such exception can be taken, and his special characteristic is that he shares in the administration of justice, and in public offices or magistracies.

Now of offices some are discontinuous, and the same persons are not allowed to hold them twice, or can only hold them after a fixed interval; others have no limit of time, for example, the office of a juryman or a member of the assembly (*which legislates and makes policy decisions*). It may, indeed, be argued that these are not magistrates at all, and that their functions give them no share in the government. But surely it is ridiculous to say that those who actually have sovereign power do not govern. Let us not dwell further upon this, which is a purely verbal question; what we want is a common term including both juryman and assemblyman. Let us, for the sake of distinction, call such an office "an indefinite or indeterminate office," and we will assume that those who share in such offices are citizens. This is the most comprehensive definition of a citizen, and best suits all those who are generally so called.

Such, more or less, is the definition of citizen which most satisfactorily fit all those to whom the name is applied . . . (*but this still leaves a number of difficulties*). Now we see that constitutions or *politeiai* differ in kind, and that some of them are superior and others inferior in quality; for those which are faulty or perverted are necessarily inferior to those which are free from defect. (What we mean by faulty will be explained later). It follows then that citizenship of necessity differs under each form of *politeia*. Our definition is best adapted to the citizen of a democracy; but not necessarily to other states. For in some states there is no recognized body of the people (*demos*), nor have they any regular assembly, but only extraordinary ones; and in so far as law suits are concerned, they are delegated to special groups of magistrates. At Sparta, for instance, the Ephors (*annually elected officials*) determine suits about contracts, which they distribute among themselves, while the Gerousia (*Council of Elders*) are judges of homicide, and other causes are decided by other magistrates. A similar principle prevails at Carthage; there certain magistrates decide all causes. We may, indeed, modify our definition of the citizen so as to include these states. In them it is the holder of a definite, not of an indefinite office, who legislates and judges, and to some or all such holders of definite offices is reserved the right of deliberating or judging about some things or about all things. The conception of the citizen now begins to clear up. He who has the right to take part in deliberative or judicial administration is a citizen of that state in which he has such a right. Generally speaking, a state (*polis*) is a body of citizens sufficiently numerous for securing a self-sufficient existence (*autarkeia*).

D. Colonization and the Expansion of the *Polis* System: The Case of Cyrene

Between the mid-eighth century B.C. *and the late sixth century* B.C., *Greeks founded hundreds of new* poleis *in the Mediterranean and Black Sea basins. Founding a colony was a difficult and dangerous process with a high risk of failure, and failure could mean death for the colonists. Only strong incentives could induce people to take such risks. Dreams of wealth from trade with non-Greeks such as the iron-rich Etruscans of Italy may have attracted some potential colonists, but for most, colonization represented hope for land and a new start—an escape from the socioeconomic and political tensions of archaic Greece. The hopes and fears of those first Greek explorers and colonists are evident in the* Odyssey: *their fears in the fantastic tales of Odysseus' encounters with savage monsters in his wanderings, and their hopes in Homer's account of Phaeacia, the perfect* polis *founded in a land of plenty at the ends of the earth. For a concrete idea of the circumstances that resulted in the foundation of a colony, historians turn to the fifth-century* B.C. *historian Herodotus' account of the founding of the city of Cyrene in modern Libya and to a remarkable fourth-century* B.C. *Cyrenaean inscription which preserves the original terms under which the colony was organized.*[7]

1. HERODOTUS' ACCOUNT

150. Thus far the history is delivered without variation both by the Theraeans and the Lacedaemonians; but from this point we have only the Theraean narrative. Grinus (they say), the son of Aesanius, a descendant of Theras, and king of the island of Thera, went to Delphi to offer a hecatomb on behalf of his native city. He was accompanied by a large number of the citizens, and among the rest by Battus, the son of Polymnestus, who belonged to the Minyan family of the Euphemidae. On Grinus consulting the oracle about other matters, the priestess gave him for answer that he should found a city in Libya. Grinus replied to this, "I, O lord, am too far advanced in years, and too inactive, for such a work. Bid one of these youngsters undertake it." As he spoke, he pointed towards Battus; and thus the matter rested for that time. When the embassy returned to Thera, small account was taken of the oracle by the Theraeans, as they were quite ignorant where Libya was, and were not so venturesome as to send out a colony in the dark.

151. Seven years passed from the utterance of the oracle, and not a drop of rain fell in Thera: all the trees in the island, except one, were killed with the drought. The Theraeans upon this sent to Delphi, and were reminded reproachfully, that they had never colonized Libya. So, as there was no help for it, they sent messengers to Crete, to inquire whether any of the Cretans, or of the strangers sojourning among them, had ever traveled as far as Libya: and these messengers of theirs, in their wanderings about the island, among other places visited Itanus, where they fell in with a man, whose name was

[7] Herodotus, *The Persian Wars* 4.150–159 (selections). From *The Histories of Herodotus*, vol. 3, trans. George Rawlinson (New York, 1859–1860).

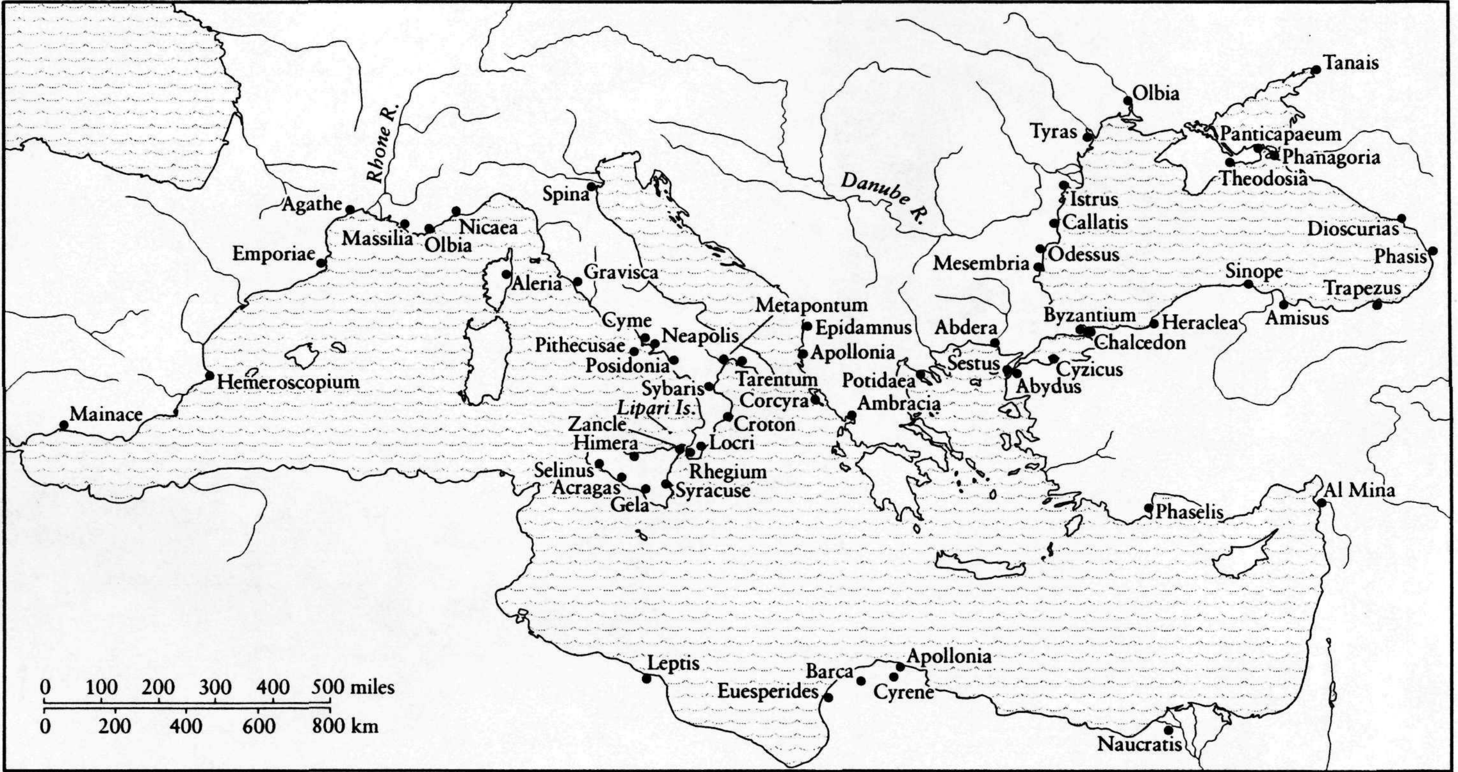

Figure 1.4 Greek colonization: 750–500 B.C.

Corobius, a dealer in purple. In answer to their inquiries, he told them that contrary winds had once carried him to Libya, where he had gone ashore on a certain island which was named Platea. So they hired this man's services, and took him back with them to Thera. A few persons then sailed from Thera to reconnoiter. Guided by Corobius to the island of Plataea, they left him there with provisions for a certain number of months, and returned home with all speed to give their countrymen an account of the island.

152. During their absence, which was prolonged beyond the time that had been agreed upon, Corobius' provisions failed him. He was relieved, however, after a while, by a Samian vessel, under the command of a man named Colaeus, which, on its way to Egypt, was forced to put in at Plataea. The crew, informed by Corobius of all the circumstances, left him sufficient food for a year. . . .

153. The Theraeans who had left Corobius at Plataea, when they reached Thera, told their countrymen that they had colonized an island on the coast of Libya. They of Thera, upon this, resolved that men should be sent to join the colony from each of their seven districts, and that the brothers in every family should draw lots to determine who were to go. Battus was chosen to be king and leader of the colony. So these men departed for Plataea on board of two fifty-oared ships. . . .

157. In this place they continued two years, but at the end of that time, as their ill luck still followed them, they left the island to the care of one of their number, and went in a body to Delphi, where they made complaint at the shrine, to the effect that, notwithstanding they had colonized Libya, they prospered as poorly as before. Hereon the priestess made them the following answer:

> Knowest thou better than I, fair Libya abounding in fleeces? Better the stranger than he who has trod it? O clever Theraeans!

Battus and his friends, when they heard this, sailed back to Plataea: it was plain the god would not hold them acquitted of the colony till they were absolutely in Libya. So, taking with them the man whom they had left upon the island, they made a settlement on the mainland directly opposite Plataea, fixing themselves at a place called Aziris, which is closed in on both sides by the most beautiful hills, and on one side is washed by a river.

158. Here they remained six years, at the end of which time the Libyans induced them to move, promising that they would lead them to a better situation. So the Greeks left Aziris, and were conducted by the Libyans towards the west, their journey being so arranged, by the calculations of their guides, that they passed in the night the most beautiful district of that whole country, which is the region called Irasa. The Libyans brought them to a spring, which goes by the name of Apollo's fountain, and told them, "Here, Grecians, is the proper place for you to settle; for here the sky has a hole in it."