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The making of early Greek cities: Reason or competition?

Alain Duploux

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Maximilian Rönningberg – Veronika Sossau (Eds.)

Regions and Communities in Early Greece (1200–550 BCE)



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Regions and Communities in Early Greece
(1200–550 BCE)

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EDITORS' PREFACE

This book has its origin in a conference on 'Regional Approaches to Early Greek Society, 1100–550 BCE' held at the Institute of Classical Archaeology of Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen on 14–16th December 2018. The meeting was organized in association with and funded by a programme of the university's graduate academy and excellence initiative, which allows doctoral students to meet and present their research alongside more experienced experts. We would like to thank these institutions very much for giving us this opportunity and for their support. The Fritz Thyssen Stiftung für Wissenschaftsförderung generously provided additional funding for our conference and thus allowed us to further enlarge the programme, originally bringing together twelve doctoral students and thirteen more experienced researchers.

Moreover, the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung für Wissenschaftsförderung financed the publication of the conference proceedings, for which we are most thankful. We would also like to acknowledge the support we received from the members of the Institute of Classical Archaeology, especially Richard Posamentir, Katy Opitz, Luisa Balandat and Hanni Töpfer. Furthermore, we would like to thank the series' editors, Alexander Heinemann, Richard Posamentir and Thomas Schäfer, for their inclusion of the volume into *Tübinger Archäologische Forschungen*. Pia Lehner has turned the manuscript into a book and we thank her for the accurate typesetting. Last, but by no means least, we would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to the anonymous peer reviewers whose observations have been of great help for us as well as the individual authors.

THE MAKING OF EARLY GREEK CITIES: REASON OR COMPETITION?

Alain Duplouy

Abstract: As many scholars have long made clear, the subject of the birth of the polis is intimately related to the question of its very nature. A great variety of diverging models have been proposed. One of these models focuses on the rationality of the Greeks, leading to the idea of a 'city of reason'. This paper explores the implications of this historiographical choice, which has set reason at the core of the development of Greek cities, both for historians and archaeologists. In distancing itself from such an approach, this paper also presents an alternative model by setting competition at the core of the making of early Greek communities.

How have Greek cities come into existence? As many scholars have long made clear, the question of the birth of the *polis* is intimately related to how the Greek city is defined. If one looks back over a century of scholarship, multiple answers have been proposed, implying diverging models of the Greek city.¹ If, following Aristotle (Pol. 3.1276a 23), “the word *polis* has several meanings” (*pollachōs gar tēs poleōs legomenēs*), this paper will mainly explore two models that allow us to conceive the making of early citizen communities: a well-established model – especially in French scholarship – based on the alleged rationality of the Greeks, and another, perhaps more challenging model based on competition as a driving force of socialization.

Before entering into a discussion on the nature of the early *polis*, it is necessary to explain the time frame of this inquiry. Until now, and despite the great diversity of conceptions about the Greek city, there has been an overarching consensus on the date of the appearance of the *polis* itself as a cultural and

political entity. As Victor Ehrenberg most authoritatively established it more than eighty years ago,² this epochal creation, which makes a sharp distinction between a time before and a time after, has been set sometime during the eighth century. If this date was mostly text-based in Ehrenberg’s time, it has long been validated by archaeologists, especially when, during the seventies and the eighties, they promoted the idea of a ‘Greek Renaissance’ in the eighth century.³ Since then, however, there have been more archaeological discoveries that have shed new light on what had long been considered as pre-*polis* ‘Dark ages’, i.e. the near half-millennium spanning between the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces c. 1200 and the great transformations in eighth-century material culture. Thanks to spectacular discoveries such as Lefkandi-Xeropolis and ground-breaking studies,⁴ the gap between the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age has shrunk to such an extent that John Papadopoulos, underlying the enduring continuity of living spaces and burial areas in Athens during these centuries, has recently promoted the notion of resilience, stressing the contribution of the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces to the making of the early Greek cities.⁵

Without going that far, more or less recent archaeological discoveries offer material evidence to assert that there were no fundamental differences between Late Geometric and Early Iron Age societies, especially when considering how gods were worshipped and how mortals were buried, two major elements contributing to the shaping of the community. There is no reason anymore to ascribe

¹ For the diversity of approaches, see for example Gawantka 1985; Sakellariou 1989; Vlassopoulos 2007; Azoulay and Ismard 2007. I wish to thank Mariana Silva Porto for revising my English.

² Ehrenberg 1937.

³ Hägg 1983.

⁴ See, for example, the surveys by Schnapp-Gourbeillon 2002; Lemos 2014 and the exhibition Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe 2008.

⁵ Papadopoulos and Smithson 2017, 973–84.

the rise of the Greek *polis* solely to the eighth century. We must instead consider the regional and chronological variations of this phenomenon without any preconceived ideas. Beyond the ninth and the tenth centuries – which were accepted by Moses Finley, back in the fifties, as the right timeframe for the world of Odysseus –, the eleventh and even the twelfth centuries (LH IIIC) should be increasingly considered as a new frontier for the history of the Greek city – although in some cases, such as in Tiryns,⁶ there were various attempts to re-establish some type of palatial system in this period. Setting aside these exceptions, considering post-Mycenaean communities as polities in the making, rather than as remnants of the past struggling to survive in times of desolation, is undoubtedly a promising avenue for research, and one which the promoters of this conference fittingly endorse. There is no provocation therefore in looking for the origins of the Greek *polis* further back in time, well before the so-called eighth-century Renaissance, especially if we consider – as I will argue here – the *polis* to be mainly equated, among a wide array of local experiences, with a politically self-conscious community.

In a recent study, John Davies considers the various ‘operative forces’ in the formation of Early Iron Age polities, distinguishing six ‘forms of generative social energy’ – the exceptional individual, population, the environment, the supernatural, convertible resources, and a sense of identity – and setting them as ‘bottom-up’ forces in a post-Mycenaean world characterized by the absence of any ‘top-down’ power.⁷ Following this model, I will discuss the roots of social action by insisting on the importance of competition and its socialising effect in the process of community making. Before doing so, I wish to distance myself from another interpretive trend, which has been especially active in French scholarship over the last fifty years, and to which I shall dedicate the first part of this paper.

Cities of reason

When considering the early days of the *polis*, scholars have often set rationality – or reason – at the core of their descriptions.⁸ The topic has been raised a good number of times, but it is worth remembering the origins of the debate and investigating the

implications of some historiographical choices that have been made over the last decades, especially in French scholarship.

The idea goes back to Antiquity. For Aristotle, as stated toward the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1181b [10.22–23]), an inquiry into ethics should necessarily follow into politics, or the things concerning the *polis*. Aristotle not only considered man as a ‘political animal’ (*zōon politikon*) (*Pol.* 1.1253a 3), meant by nature to live in cities, but also as a creature endowed with reason (*logon echon*) (*Eth. Nic.* 1098a [1.13]), capable of rational behaviour and having the ability to make balanced choices and to carry out soundly formulated projects. Being the product of a rational man, the *polis* could thus best be investigated as a rationally structured political entity.

In modern times, starting at least with Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges’ *La Cité antique* (1864), the *polis* has often been apprehended as a highly rational entity, theoretically planned in all its aspects right from its creation. Accordingly, historians have long listed the main physical and political elements of a typical Greek city: a town enclosed within its city-wall, a tutelary god or goddess, a central hearth and sacred fire kept inside the prytaneum, a small number of citizens distributed into tribes and phratries, a well-defined constitution and political regime, a council and its seat in the bouleuterion, an agora used both as a marketplace and as the seat of the assembly, tribunals and various officials, as well as a restricted territory.⁹ Although many of these features were accepted as being embryonic during early times, the *polis* is supposed to have quickly developed by implementing institutions that had previously been dormant. This process eventually led to the paradigm of the Classical city, best typified by the city of Athens, which was promoted by Pericles as the ‘School of Hellas’ and has been seen for centuries as the root of Humanism and of the Western world.

In 1951, Eric Robertson Dodds published his famous essay *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Although he was mainly looking at features relevant to a ‘primitive’ mentality among the Greeks, to irrational beliefs and judgments, Dodds actually subscribed to the common idea of a gradual passage from *mythos* to *logos* in the history of Greek

⁶ Cf. Maran 2000.

⁷ Davies 2018.

⁸ On rationality itself, see Lloyd 2018.

⁹ See for example Glotz 1928, 27–41. In relation to material evidence, see Coldstream 1984 and Mazarakis Ainian 2017.

thought, an idea that was then well established in scholarship. Consecrating the triumph of reason during the Classical age over the “inherited burden of irrational custom”,¹⁰ he assimilated the rise of rational thinking in sixth-century Ionia to a Greek *Aufklärung*, before the movement was being taken over by the Sophists. But, even before that, notwithstanding his nonrational impulses, Dodds’ Homeric man was unambiguously envisaged as fully rational.

Despite this long tradition of assimilating the Greeks with reason, nowhere other than in the French scholarship of the last decades has the idea of a ‘city of reason’ been so popular, beginning with Jean-Pierre Vernant’s seminal essay *Les origines de la pensée grecque* (1962), which firmly established the link between the rise of the city-state and that of rational thinking.

The resonance of this essay in French scholarship has paved the way for at least one or two generations of French historians, being translated into English only twenty years later by (and mainly for) American scholarship. In the wake of the decipherment of Linear B, Vernant enquired the relationship between the newly discovered Mycenaean world of palace bureaucracies and the invention of politics by the Greeks, from the twelfth to the fifth century. To him the answers lay in the rationality of the Greek *polis*. He recounted how the Greek world was progressively transformed over the centuries, from the Mycenaean monarchy to the democratic *polis*, with the decline of mythical thought in favour of rationality. When Mycenaean society collapsed and gave way to the agora, the change had profound social and cultural implications. According to Vernant the rise of rational thinking and sciences went hand in hand, with the development of the *polis*, culminating in the consecration of the ‘political animal’ (*zōon politikon*), as Aristotle defined the Greek man. According to Vernant, the institution of the city-state and the birth of rational thought were two interdependent innovations. The connection itself was certainly not completely new, but Vernant’s brilliant and authoritative demonstration gave it a wider resonance. The radical alterity of the Greek *polis* – when considered in comparison with the palatial civilization of Mycenaean Greece or with Near-East empires – was rooted in an absolute faith in the superiority of rational thinking above any other forms of solidarity. Vernant wanted “to docu-

ment the birth of this Greek rationality, to follow the path by which it managed to divest itself of a religious mentality, to indicate what it owed to myth and how far it went beyond it”, comparing and contrasting “with its Mycenaean background that turning point, from the eighth to the seventh century, where Greece made a new start and began to explore paths that were peculiarly its own”.¹¹ Greek reason was a “creature of the city”,¹² he concluded, because the forms of verbal exchange that were developed in relation to civic duties and public debate were at the core of a citizen’s life. According to Vernant, “The advent of the *polis*, the birth of philosophy – the two sequences of phenomena are so closely linked that the origin of rational thought must be seen as bound up with the social and mental structures peculiar to the Greek city”, adding “When Aristotle defined man as a ‘political animal’, he emphasized what differentiates Greek reason from today’s reason. If in his eyes *Homo sapiens* was *Homo politicus*, it was because reason itself was in essence political”.¹³ In sum, in Vernant’s thought, there was a homology between rational thinking and political thought, and a synchronicity in their common development.

The same trend was at work in Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Pierre Lévêque’s *Clisthène l’Athénien* (1964), translated into English only thirty years later as part of the (American) commemoration of the 2500th anniversary of the birth of democracy.¹⁴ Despite the limited interest and reverence of the ancient Athenians for Cleisthenes, the two French historians made him the ‘grand architect’ of Classical Athens, the geometer of a new civic space and time, which materialized the “political vision of a rational and homogenous city”.¹⁵ As Vidal-Naquet recorded later, *Clisthène l’Athénien* followed Vernant’s line of research. If they agreed that “the great reform certainly did not spring fully armed from the brain of a theoretician”, Lévêque and Vidal-Naquet nevertheless conceived it as an “intellectual act inscribed both within a very practical political perspective [...] and in a mental history that had taken decisive turn at Miletus with Thales and Anaximander”. But most significantly for them, Cleisthenes’ reforms

¹⁰ Dodds 1951, 182. For a modern reading of this classical essay, see Finkelberg 2012.

¹¹ Vernant 1982, 11.

¹² Vernant 1982, 132.

¹³ Vernant 1982, 130.

¹⁴ Lévêque and Vidal-Naquet 1996. Regarding the reception of the book and new ways to conceive the Cleisthenic reforms, see Azoulay and Ismard 2011.

¹⁵ Lévêque and Vidal-Naquet 1996, 81.

constituted “a veritable recreation of Athens, comparable to the civic creations of the colonization era”: “Cleisthenes, a former exile, had refounded Athens as Demonax had refounded Cyrene, or, as early as the eighth century, as Megara Hyblaea had been thought out along the line of a rational form of urban planning”.¹⁶

In France, Vernant’s, Lévêque and Vidal-Naquet’s ground-breaking books led the way for many studies on ancient Greece for the last fifty years, and they remain milestone studies in today’s writing on Greek history. These books were so stimulating that scholars often went far beyond the realms of political and philosophical thought that were Vernant’s initial topic. ‘Rationality’ became the cornerstone on which to establish the Greek city, whether politically or materially, not only for the late sixth century in the wake of the Milesian philosophers, as Vernant, Lévêque and Vidal-Naquet claimed, but right from the beginning. These new studies were helped in this by the discovery of Megara Hyblaea, excavated by Vallet and Villard, which offered an early testimony of urban planning for the late eighth century and a basis for pushing rationality back in time to the origin of the *polis*.

In 1949 Georges Vallet and François Villard started excavating Megara Hyblaea, a Megarian colony founded towards the end of the eighth century on the oriental coast of Sicily, on behalf of the *École française de Rome*. The French archaeologists unveiled an early planned settlement, with a clearly defined plan nearly three centuries before the time of Hippodamos of Miletus. The plan of the archaic city consists of a series of streets, dividing up the settlement into blocks. The results of the excavation were published in 1976.¹⁷ Beyond the presentation of the material evidence, the archaeologists initiated a discussion about Megarian urbanism, which had a wide resonance because it also implied the creation of a public space and its representation in political thought.¹⁸ Although the Megarian urban plan was not based on a strictly orthogonal grid, as is the case in other later Sicilian colonies (such as Naxos, Akragas or Himera) and Hippodamian cities (Thourioi, Rhodes or Piraeus), archaeologists were impressed by the early existence of a series of streets defin-

ing several settlement units, lined up according to different orientations – five different alignments are documented to this day –, and leaving room for an agora. According to the French archaeologists, the design of Megara’s town plan could not be posterior to the end of the eighth century, although its full execution took decades, if not centuries. Not only are the earliest Megarian houses aligned on the grid, but the course of the streets and the location of the agora were also left free from any construction from the start. Since public monuments were not erected before the second half of the seventh century, Vallet and Villard, explicitly referring to Vernant, Lévêque and Vidal-Naquet, concluded that the area located at the junction of various streets and differently-oriented settlement units had been ‘set aside’ (*réserve*) within the town plan from early on, attesting to the rational design of the initial urban planning and its enforcement over generations.¹⁹

Since then, further excavations were conducted in different areas of the town, eventually leading to a new synthesis presented in 2004 by Michel Gras, Henri Tréziny and Henri Broise, which confirmed the existence of an early urban plan of Megara Hyblaea and developed the idea of a rational process.²⁰ After a – mostly hypothetical – initial ‘phase of encampment’, within the first and second generations, Greek settlers laid out the town plan in an attempt to materialize on the ground a coherent and well devised project, which was the result of the accumulation of the immigrants’ practical knowledge and theoretical thinking. Gras and Tréziny wondered: “If J.-P. Vernant convincingly opposed the rational vision of Anaximander in the sixth century to that of Hesiod in the previous century, one may wonder, in the face of archaeological documentation such as that of Megara Hyblaea, whether rational Greek thought was not being developed long before Hesiod”.²¹ Beyond Vernant and the sixth-century Milesian school, the French archaeologists intrinsically linked the appearance of rational thought with the development of the Greek city, Megara’s early urban planning being the ultimate “proof that the *polis* existed” as early as the eighth century, hence

¹⁶ P. Vidal-Naquet, “1993 Preface”, in Lévêque and Vidal-Naquet 1996, xxxi–xxxvi.

¹⁷ Vallet et al. 1976. See also, in synthesis, De Angelis 2003, 17–39.

¹⁸ See for example Svenbro 1982.

¹⁹ Vallet et al. 1976, 417–18, referring to Vernant 1962; Lévêque and Vidal-Naquet 1964, but also Detienne 1965 and Martin 1951.

²⁰ Gras et al. 2004. The same model was simultaneously applied to the German-excavated Megarian subcolony of Selinus, see Mertens 2003.

²¹ Gras et al. 2004, 560.

offering an interesting archaeological definition of the Greek city. To put it another way, according to Franco De Angelis, “Town plans represent a first attempt on the ground to delineate the community and to structure it and its institutions internally in a way which the community regarded as rational and meaningful”.²²

Another model of urban development had however been proposed by François de Polignac in a 1999 paper on Megarian sanctuaries and urban planning.²³ Arguing against the pre-established principle of an abstract rationality, he proposed to distinguish two stages in Megara’s urban development; a fragmented town made of different boroughs, each one defined by its own urban alignment and its own outlying sanctuary, would have given way toward the end of the seventh century to a more centrally and hierarchically nucleated settlement. Accordingly, there would not have been ‘reserved spaces’ for future public monuments within an early rationally designed urban plan, but rather a process of merging communities, eventually leading to the delineation of a new political common space at the junction of previously diverging settlement patterns. In this case, the historical evolution of the city of Megara would not simply be the monumental elaboration of an early urban design, but the transition from one urban model to another, inducing a non-linear and non-predictable process of historical development. Twenty years later, although more data is coming from the field every summer, the debate should remain open, if only because the idea of an early and enduring urban plan is tightly linked with the particular historiographical approach of the ‘city of reason’.

If Greek settlers abroad are often considered as having been able to organize themselves in landscapes that presented little prior human interference, this conception of a rationally driven development of the Greek city has also been applied to the motherland. For the Swiss archaeologist Claude Bérard, the excavation of Eretria during the sixties and seventies became an occasion to demonstrate the anthropological work of the so-called ‘School of Paris’ on the ground. As he himself admitted, the research conducted in Eretria was meant to show the extent to which the stimulating work pursued by Detienne, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet made it possi-

ble to solve the problems raised by his excavations, whilst these in turn provided an archaeological basis to some of their demonstrations.²⁴ The idea of a political evolution toward a rational form of society was applied to the heroon at the West Gate and to the so-called Daphnephoreion (or temple of Apollo Daphnephoros). According to Bérard, the birth of the *polis* is punctuated with milestone events that embodied the transition from a pre-state society to a truly political stage. At the West Gate, at a good distance from the common people’s burial ground, the ‘Prince’s death’ and the foundation of a hero cult were supposed to signal the creation of a citizen aristocracy, turning its back on a monarchical system represented by the ‘Prince’s sceptre’ and now embedded in the life of the *polis*. In the city centre, the building of the so-called Daphnephoreion, considered as the first *polis* temple, was supposed to represent the foundation of Eretria as a political entity. With Bérard, the interpretation of the material evidence remains totally dependent on a conception of a rational *polis*. However, as recent studies in Eretria have demonstrated, the so-called Daphnephoreion did not exist as such, and there was no sharp division between an aristocratic cemetery at the West Gate and the people’s necropolis by the sea.²⁵ As Claude Bérard recently admitted in a conference delivered in Paris in 2007, “a fresh start is needed”.²⁶ The alleged rational model simply does not fit the material evidence anymore.

Reason also appears in the work of Denis Roussel. Along with Félix Bourriot’s *Recherches sur la nature du genos*, Roussel’s *Tribu et cité* was a ground-breaking study. Before these two studies, it was commonly accepted that the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces would have induced a resurgence of kinship as the primordial principle framing ‘Dark ages’ and archaic societies. In accordance with Aristotle, who considered that the city was like an extended family, formed by the merging of villages that themselves were a merger of households, nineteenth-century German historians envisioned the Greek city as a *Geschlechterpolis*, the fusion of primordial clans or tribes. The groups based on kinship ties would have survived during the whole archaic period as aristocratic entities, imposing their authority on the community until several reforms or revolutions eventually established the rule of the

²² De Angelis 2016, 85.

²³ Polignac 1999.

²⁴ Bérard 1971, 72 n. 69.

²⁵ See Blandin 2007 and Verdan 2013.

²⁶ Bérard 2007, 296.

dēmos, crushing and diluting the remains of these pre-polis entities into democratic institutions. This model of a gentilician archaic society – which had been central in numerous accounts of Greek history – was thoroughly challenged by Bourriot and Roussel.²⁷ Against the long-accepted theory of the creation of the polis through the integration of pre-existing kinship groups, Roussel demonstrated that *phylai*, *genē* and *phratrīes* were not gentilician entities that pre-dated the city, but rather that they were established by the city itself. He also went a step further by asserting that these civic subdivisions were, right from the start, the ‘products of reason’ (“des créations de la raison”).²⁸ They had to be considered as resulting from the creation of the city or from constitutional reforms. According to Roussel, “there is no doubt that the Cities have from the outset organised themselves according to a certain plan to integrate individuals and families into a centralised ‘political’ system”.²⁹ With Roussel the Greek city is conceived, right from the start, as a theoretical entity, whose subdivisions were implemented according to a kind of ‘rational design’. Because Roussel’s book still offers today an attractive reconstruction of the development of the *polis* as a very rational process, Michel Gras and Henri Tréziny have tentatively related the public organizations of Megara Hyblaia, especially the *phylai* and *hekatostyes*, to the city’s urban topography. It is their conclusion, rather than their argumentation, that is illustrative here: “The rationality of the Greek city makes it possible to link the institutional and philosophical dimension to the urban dimension. Everything in Megara Hyblaea speaks of rationality. The urban space was built collectively as a political space, and all the constituent elements of the city contributed to this construction. Decisions concerning the city as a whole were taken according to reason. It is up to us to find the criteria used in this exercise of ‘political reason’”.³⁰

This kind of ‘rational design’ is also what Henri Van Effenterre and Françoise Ruzé intended when they defined the early Greek city through archaic

legal and institutional inscriptions. In their masterwork, *Nomima*, they insisted on the importance of charters in the founding of cities, especially for colonies.³¹ According to Van Effenterre and Ruzé, whereas accounts of foundation are generally to be considered as ‘fancy tales’, full of unverifiable facts, charters are supposed to relate the exact social and political situation of the colonies, describing their public organizations. Unfortunately, those charters are rare, and Van Effenterre and Ruzé could only present three inscriptions allowing to account for the original spirit that reportedly governed the creation of *poleis* in archaic Greece. These documents are: the Cyrenean ‘Agreement of the Founders’, supposed to refer to the deeds of the late seventh-century founding fathers, which is actually a fourth-century inscription, sometimes even considered as a late Classical forgery or, at least, a recreation; a late archaic inscription from Olympia related to Poseidonia, which is actually a statement of *philia* between the Sybarites and an indigenous tribe, the Serdaioi; and the fifth-century decree regulating the relations between a group of Hypoknemidian Lokrians settling at Naupaktos and their *polis* of origin. Although this collection of documents is restricted, late and even dubious, Van Effenterre and Ruzé were ready to assert that “every new city is the material realization of a precise project of the founders, a well-constituted project, but which will have to face local circumstances largely unforeseeable for them”. To put it another way, every *polis* is supposed to have been deliberately planned as a rational entity, whose implementation through institutions was only a matter of opportunity.

Finally, in a well-known paper, Oswyn Murray, the most French – if not Parisian – of all British scholars, famously defined the ancient *poleis* as “cities of reason”, ascribing a high degree of rationality to the political system invented by the Greeks: “Thus if we can detect an increasing degree of coherence in a society through its reforms, and if the principles governing the social system become clearer through change, then we may say that society itself displays a high degree of rationality, not merely in the sense of internal coherence, but also in the sense of a self-conscious recognition of the reasons for change and the consequences of institutional reform”.³² Appropriately refusing to adopt an evolutionary perspective, Murray did not want,

²⁷ Bourriot 1976; Roussel 1976. Unfortunately, there is a recent revival of this old and disproven model, which ignores the works of the two French historians; see Gaignerot-Driessen 2016; Alexandridou 2016; Dmitriev 2018. For a more balanced account on kinship in pre-Classical cities, see Humphreys 2018.

²⁸ Roussel 1976, 5.

²⁹ Roussel 1976, 311.

³⁰ Gras and Tréziny 2017, 164.

³¹ Van Effenterre and Ruzé 1994, 163–69 n. 41–43.

³² Murray 1990, 8–9. See also Murray 1997.

however, to engage in a discussion about how this Greek rationality emerged in early times, and preferred to focus on the historical period. Alluding to Aristotle, he concluded: “The Greek city is a city of reason because the Greek man is a political animal from Homer onwards: we may trace the development; but this development represents, not a change of nature from one type of social organization to another, but the rational evolution of a system whose basic character did not change”.³³

Just as Athena leaped out from Zeus’s head fully grown and armed, the Greek city has often been conceived as the product of rational thought. It would have been the result of the calculated organisation and deliberate planning of an entity, whose creation and restructuration, sometimes still attributed to specific *archegetai*, lawgivers or reformers, offered a political, legal, social, religious, material, urban or economic structure to the life of the ancient Greeks.³⁴ Although all these studies represent milestone analyses, they tend to transform the history of archaic cities, as François de Polignac warned us, into “the realization, the concretization of a program inscribed in the society and on its soil since its foundation”.³⁵ The trouble with rationality is that it entails a teleological argument. When defining the *polis* as a ‘city of reason’, the historical process is channelled; it serves to explain how the early *polis* came to be the Classical and democratic city, although the former has actually been modelled on the latter. Furthermore, as Josine Blok once explained: “the differences between the *polis*-structures in the early seventh and in the late fourth centuries are such that any relationship between the former and the latter cannot be explained with recourse to an underlying institutional continuity. Instead, the ‘rise of the *polis*’ should be approached as an open process, which at some points might have yielded quite different results than the ones so well-known from fifth and especially fourth century sources”.³⁶ In sum, whether or not the development of the Greek city relied on some kind of rational thought should remain a philosophical question. From a historical perspective, we have to resist the temptation of

retracing our way back from Classical Greece, because it can only lead to linear reconstruction of the past.

Competition as socialization

How could we re-consider, therefore, the birth of the *polis*? I will develop here another model, grounded in the social sciences, rather than on political and philosophical thought. It is based on two main ideas: first, the *polis* should be investigated as a social group and, second, competition between individuals represents a driving force in the process of socialization. As Alcaeus (fr. 112.10, 426) and Thucydides (7.77.7) wrote, *andres gar polis*, ‘men make the city’. In the first instance, the *polis* is thus to be considered, not as an abstract entity, but as a community of people, to be investigated as we would any social group. The *polis* arose from a process of social distinction between insiders – who could take part in the community – and outsiders – who were excluded from or could not afford to take part. Through social interaction and competition, individuals contributed to defining the contours of a citizen community. It consisted in delineating a group of individuals who gradually distanced themselves from others and imagined their fate as a common issue, making them proper citizens, conscious of creating a political community. The main issue in investigating the making of Greek cities is therefore to consider how inclusion and exclusion processes were defined and implemented. It also means investigating how citizen insiders could be both internally and externally identified within the wider population of a city. And finally, in a diachronic perspective, it implies considering how such a political community could have lasted for centuries, and whether it was remodelled in the course of time or, conversely, disintegrated, failing to become a Classical city. In sum, through social agency, historical contingency is restored. This approach to the citizen community and its historical development throughout the archaic period, from the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces to the end of the sixth century, is further developed in my last book, *Construire la cité*.³⁷ What I try to do in this work is to investigate the birth and development of early poleis by focusing on society, offering answers to the following three questions: How was the citizen community delineated? How

³³ Murray 1990, 20.

³⁴ See also, from a political perspective, Hansen 2003, 264 (n. 25): “as a polity, the *polis* is best seen as a very deliberately planned and highly rational form of political organisation”.

³⁵ Polignac 1999, 211.

³⁶ Blok 2005, 8.

³⁷ Duplouy 2019.

was it possible to be accepted by the other members of the community as a worthy citizen? And, how could such a community in a constant flux be perpetuated over the centuries? These are, in my opinion, the most important questions to address when dealing with the making of Greek cities far from any consideration of a preconceived model of rational design.

This approach rests on several sociological concepts, to which I shall now turn: (a) the *Stand* or status group, (b) *habitus* and performance, and (c) competition and socialization.

From a sociological perspective, citizen communities can be investigated by adopting the Weberian concept of *Stand* or status group.³⁸ According to Max Weber, the notion of *Stand* refers to a social dynamic detached from any economic factor relating to the production or acquisition of material goods – as are the Marxian classes –, even though these commodities may participate in the elaboration of a particular lifestyle, which is often conditioned economically. The notion of status group is tightly linked to a “positive or negative social estimation of honour”. Above all else, it rests on the conventions of a specific lifestyle, which is expected from all those who belong – or wish to belong – to the circle. Members of a ‘status group’ adopt a particular way of life (*Lebensführung*), that is, a set of behaviours and practices that derive their unity from particular dispositions of mind, values, norms and ethical qualities, themselves linked to education, culture, profession, morals, tastes and ways of being, as well as social traditions and conventions. Its members maintain a sense of belonging and share the same statutory markers. Participation in collective practices and conformity to a way of life valued by the group both entail an essential distinction between insiders, who are allowed to take part in the community, and outsiders, who are excluded from it; a distinction that actually helps to establish the boundaries of the group. Eventually, status groups tend to be relatively closed communities. The exclusionary cultural practices create symbolic and social barriers between distinct status groups, sometimes to the point of strict endogamy. Social intercourses might therefore be restricted, confining for example marriages to within the status group and leading to endogamous closure. A legal monopoly of special offices is often established for members only, so

that the status group is exclusively entitled to own and to manage them. Defined as such, the Weberian concept of *Stand* fits quite well with the Greek *polis*, even in its more historically developed forms. Instead of focusing on formal institutions when dealing with the ‘birth’ of the *polis*, we should therefore rather look at the shared values and behaviours, and how they were enforced and transmitted.

If Weber’s definition of the *Stand* rests on social estimation of honour and lifestyle, another concept borrowed from modern sociology might also be useful. It is the notion of *habitus*, popularised by Pierre Bourdieu. *Habitus*, too, refers to the lifestyle, values, dispositions and expectations of social groups that are acquired through the activities and experiences of everyday life. In Bourdieu’s own words, they are “structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures”.³⁹ They are socially acquired schemata, sensibilities, dispositions and tastes that are repeatedly reproduced through individual behaviours, therefore reinforcing the strength of the *habitus* itself. Repeated individual behaviours reinforce the common values and can therefore create the ties of social cohesion. The system is self-reinforcing: when there is a growing consensus on specific behaviours among the whole community, they tend to be repeated, gradually creating a sensation of homogeneity and a more widespread acceptance. Swiftly, they come to constitute the very symbols of participation in the community and, eventually, they become distinguishing features between insiders and outsiders. The notion of *habitus* allows the investigation both of the way people behave and of the socialising dimension of lifestyle in creating specific social groups. In this sense, the citizen community is made of individuals who acknowledge each other’s status through the sharing of a common ethos and the performance of specific behaviours, which themselves contribute to the continuous delineation of the group.

In my recent work, I applied the notion of *habitus* to the definition of archaic citizenship.⁴⁰ Usually considered as a granted status enshrined in legal criteria and institutional affiliations, citizenship has long been defined as a collection of rights and duties, allowing individuals to be considered as official members of a city-state. As it is primarily defined as a legal status, citizenship is meant to be a timeless and static concept, unchanged throughout

³⁸ See Weber 1921, 531–40. For an English translation, Weber 1978, 926–40.

³⁹ Bourdieu 1977, 72; 1990, 53.

⁴⁰ Duplouy 2018.

the centuries except for minor revisions to various statutory details. However, instead of ‘membership’ to a rationally predefined abstract entity, which implies a view from the top, citizenship can rather be described from below, and investigated as a form of ‘participation’ to a community in the making. The result is an active conception of archaic citizenship that emphasizes the role played by individuals in the construction of communities, but also stresses the importance of the social practices that brought these communities to life. Citizenship can therefore be defined as a performance, as the implementation of specific behaviours in daily life. By adopting a lifestyle that is valued by the whole citizen community, individuals act in order to be accepted as insiders – that is as fellow citizens – and to be distinguished from outsiders. In archaic Greece collective practices such as banqueting, hunting or warfare were undertaken by fellow members of the community, while specific behaviours – such as luxury living or athletic practices – were expected from individual citizens and offered as models to the community. On the one hand, performing one’s citizen status was the best way to demonstrate and to constantly re-enact one’s privileges in order to be acknowledged by fellow citizens as an acceptable partner. On the other hand, adopting the normative behaviours of the citizens in all aspects of their lifestyle was also a way to become enfranchised, to be accepted as a citizen. As I repeatedly assert, behaving like a citizen may have been the best way of being acknowledged as a fellow citizen. Of course, patterns of behaviour greatly differ within the archaic world, with each community elaborating its specific lifestyle. Similarly, practices that were highly valued at a time could have been deprecated later within the same *polis*. In sum, instead of the continuous development of a rational entity, the history of early Greek cities would have been a – rather stochastic – history of lifestyles and behaviours, with unpredictable effects in the long run.

This whole social process eventually rested on the value of competition. The behaviours which led to the delineation of early citizen communities and to their sustainability over time were processes of both inclusion and exclusion: inclusion of some and exclusion of others, which must be investigated dialectically. While some individuals behave according to the standards promoted by the group and were so accepted as legitimate fellows, others who could not have held the required lifestyle – notably due to an economic incapacity – or refused – for whatever reason – to comply with the norms of the commu-

nity were, swiftly or gradually, smoothly or roughly, set aside from the group. Without even alluding to the legal statuses of citizens, metics and slaves, behaviours of enfranchisement include the power to evict all those who could not (or could no longer) and did not (or no longer) wish to play according to the rules that the group laid down and could modify through time. In its most basic form, this social dynamic, which combines inclusion strategies and exclusion processes, is also a particular emanation of the *agōn*, a form of institutionalised competition that ruled Greek life. Homer is undoubtedly the one who expressed this most clearly. Through the voices of Hippolochus (*Il.* 6.208) and Peleus (*Il.* 11.784), he urged his heroes “always to be the first and outdo all the others”. Although the *agōn* has been described, since the late nineteenth century, as one of the major characteristics of the Greek civilization, its exact nature has been the subject of divergent interpretations.

Acknowledging the fundamental importance of the agonistic aspect of Greek life, Jacob Burckhardt in his *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* (1898–1902) – one of the first and best modern account of Greek culture – made the *agōn* an attribute of the (so-called) ‘archaic aristocracy’, and the paramount feature of their privileged life. According to Burckhardt, for Homeric heroes and archaic *aristoi*, “the full development of the individual depended on his constantly measuring himself against others in exercises devoid of any direct practical use”.⁴¹ More than any other, the archaic period would have consecrated this ethic of life. Of the five successive phases through which Greeks would have passed in Burckhardt’s philosophy of history, the second was that of the ‘*koloniale und agonale Mensch*’. The noblemen who ruled the cities – as the archaic elites were then defined, in the late nineteenth century – saw it as a strategy of self-valorisation and modelled their entire life on this principle. Every moment in life was an opportunity to compete with their peers, especially during athletic festivals or private symposia, the only reward being honour and prestige. Burckhardt conceived the *agōn* as a specific feature of archaic aristocracies and oligarchies, which faded away in Classical times with the rise of democracy, considered as a “despotism of the mass” and the “malady of the Greek nation”. In short, Burck-

⁴¹ See the selected texts in Burckhardt 1998, 160–213 (quotation, 166), with an introduction by Oswyn Murray.

hardt's hatred of democracy, which he thought of as a destructive force of civilization, had condemned both one of the most intense creative forces in the history of mankind and the social group on which it was based. It was conceived as a true form of competition which only existed during a specific period of Greek history. Overall, in Burckhardt's mind, competition was more or less the manifesto of a social class, distinguishing aristocrats from mere peasants, from traders and craftsmen, and from all base born. Throughout the twentieth century the *agōn* thus helped to define the behaviours of the 'archaic aristocracy'.⁴²

While investigating the nature of Greek elites, I previously demonstrated that, contrary to the model outlined by Burckhardt a century ago, the Greek agonistic mentality was neither a social particularism, as it was not restricted to a particular social group, nor a chronological singularity, since it could be evidenced from post-Mycenaean Greece (LH IIIC) to the Roman period.⁴³ Instead, I opted for another interpretation of the competitive ethic of the Greeks, one drawn by Friedrich Nietzsche in a short essay completed in 1872 (*Homer's Wettkampf*) when he was a young colleague and great admirer of Burckhardt at the University of Basel.⁴⁴ While he recognized the importance of the *agōn* as much as Burckhardt did, Nietzsche had nevertheless a broader conception of it. Considering the great accomplishments of the Greeks in all kinds of endeavours, he made it "the noblest fundamental thought of the Hellenes" or "the womb of all things Hellenic", that is, a core feature of Hellenism itself, a cultural trait of a civilization as a whole with no social or epochal limits through the entire breadth of Greek history. Although the agonistic element is a condition Nietzsche sought to revive through his later philosophical ethic, his philological approach to the Greeks still offers a fruitful historical model, which is a better fit for the wide diversity of textual and material evidence of competition in ancient Greece. His view of a common culture of the *agōn* was central to my investigation of archaic elites and helped me, more than fifteen years ago, to shape a distinct approach to the dynamic of construction and demonstration of social hierarchies. Although pinpointing its universality in Greek culture, I admitted, at most, a few

regional variations and individual exceptions. I was probably wrong,⁴⁵ as a more historical explanation is actually required and is, indeed, accessible thanks to modern sociology.

Although part of the current historiography considers competition as an anthropological constant, a global drive linked to the very – almost biological – essence of mankind,⁴⁶ Christoph Ulf has demonstrated that the insistence on competition in the case of the Greek civilization was to a large extent a historiographical trend initiated in the second half of the nineteenth century. The popularity of the concept was actually linked to the advent of a new, educated and bourgeois conception of the economy, which was soon applied to the ancient Greeks, especially by Ernst Curtius and Jacob Burckhardt, the latter coining the term '*agonale*' (agonistic).⁴⁷ By retracing the origin of the concept and its application to the Greeks, Ulf also argued for the necessity of more contextual examinations of the manifold historical situations in which men competed with each other.

One essential characteristic of competition is that, given its embeddedness in various societies, it can also be considered as a form of social relation, whose outcomes actually contribute to the making of communities. Accordingly, back in the early twentieth century, the German sociologist Georg Simmel defined competition (*Konkurrenz*), which is a particular form of conflict (*Streit* or *Kampf*), as a fundamental instrument of socialization (*Vergesellschaftung*).⁴⁸ Whereas competition is often considered as having corrupting, destructive or devastating effects on society, Simmel emphasised on the contrary its deeply socialising force, its "immense synthetic power". Why? Because competition does not actually rest on the principle of individualism; as soon as it occurs within a group, it implies "the subordination of all individuality under the integrative interest of the whole". It generates "an acceptance of being driven by shared historical imperatives". Accordingly, each competitor fights under "the mutually recognized domination of norms and rules" that are shared and promoted by what Simmel

⁴² Such socio-cultural approach is still at work in Morris 2000, who opposes 'elitism' and 'middling ideology'.

⁴³ Duplouy 2006, 272–82.

⁴⁴ Nietzsche 1973.

⁴⁵ As Meister 2020, 43 rightly points out.

⁴⁶ See, for example, van Wees 2011, 1: "I shall argue that competitiveness is a widespread human characteristic and has been the driving force behind many of the most dramatic developments in history from 10,000 BC onwards."

⁴⁷ Ulf 2011a.

⁴⁸ Especially Simmel 2009, 227–305.

called a ‘third party’, i.e. the whole community: “the competition of the two for the third [...] brings each of the two into relationship with the third” and “the victory in the contest is not actually the result of a fight, but simply the realization of values that lie beyond the conflict”. Competition in society is therefore “an interweaving of a thousand social threads”. From this perspective, Simmel’s *Sociology* (1908) remains a very stimulating text, worth being rediscovered by historians. The first scholar who recently applied Simmel’s conception to the ancient world is Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp who made it a key theme in his analysis of the Roman Republic.⁴⁹ The book became the manifesto of a branch of German historiography known as ‘*Konsensus-Geschichte*’, which has also been applied productively to the archaic Greek world.⁵⁰

As I further describe it in my book *Construire la cité*, the making of the Greek city actually resulted in an agreement within the community on the principles on which the group can live together; it meant accepting some, but also, excluding others. After the collapse of Mycenaean palace bureaucracies towards the end of the thirteenth century, Late Bronze Age communities were left with no guidelines. Among other ‘operative forces’ – as described by John Davies – in the formation of Early Iron Age polities, competition set new rules for the communities in the making. Through competition insiders agreed on the very principles, the shared norms and values, on which to go further together, which also meant excluding all those considered as outsiders. In this social dynamic, cults and burial customs, as they appear in material culture thanks to archaeology, were essential tools in the shaping of the new citizen communities throughout the Greek world. New cult places were created with feasts becoming the occasion for ritual dining, as a form of ‘Holy Communion’⁵¹ between the participants, but also as a means of separating them from all those who were not accepted or were unable to take part in the rite. Similarly, as Ian Morris once demonstrated, ‘formal burial’ – corresponding to archaeologically recoverable tombs in large cemeteries – offered a primary symbol of full membership of the community. Burial customs were rite of passage ceremonies, which

expressed the symbolic enactment by insiders of the ideal structure of the corporate group, by distinguishing between those who were accepted within the citizen community and those who were not.⁵² Beyond cults and burials individual behaviours were tools of social integration (and exclusion) as long as they complied with the shared values of the whole community. In this respect, Thucydides (1.6) recorded two general lifestyles, which helped define communities for centuries: an old one, enshrined in luxury, which used to be common among Ionian people and in early Athens, and a more austere, athletic lifestyle, which was first adopted by the Lakadaimonians and then by the Athenians. As much as these behaviours were tools in the making of Greek cities, they also contributed to their continuous re-definition, as exemplified by the Athenians passing from luxury to austerity.

To conclude: it is not an easy task to understand how and why Greek cities came into existence. By asserting the rationality of the Greek city, we can of course follow Vernant’s central idea of the radical alterity of the Greek *polis* system in comparison to the Mycenaean palaces and ancient Near East empires, while stressing the importance of the outbreak of the Milesian thought as an intellectual sixth-century revolution. But what about *early* Greek cities? And, of course, by *early* Greek cities we should consider not only the eighth century, the so-called ‘Greek Renaissance’, but also the whole period going back to the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization towards the end of the thirteenth century, which now definitely appears as a new frontier for the history of the Greek *polis*.

The appeal to the rationality of the Greeks, as governing the creation and the development of Greek cities, has had enduring implications in scholarship. In numerous archaeological and historical studies, the Greek city has been conceived as the result of a rational design, that is a calculated organisation and deliberate planning of an entity. This rational was of course at work in the fourth-century philosophical utopia, such as the *Laws* of Plato or the *Politics* of Aristotle, and perhaps in the late Classical and Hellenistic foundations – or re-foundations, such as Cyrene. But the application of such a grand narrative to the rise of Greek cities risks creating a linear development, in which *early poleis* represented an initial stage in an evolutionary historical continuum,

⁴⁹ Hölkeskamp 2010, esp. 98–106.

⁵⁰ See for example, Ulf 2011b, and the papers collected in Meister and Seelentag 2020.

⁵¹ As wrote Murray 1990, 3 for the French approach to the Greek city.

⁵² Morris 1987.

whose full realization has been used to model its beginning.

Instead of placing reason at the root of Greek cities, I propose to investigate how, once unconstrained by the Mycenaean social system, competition could have gradually exerted its socialising effect and eventually shaped new communities, by distinguishing between insiders and outsiders and setting up the rules and norms according to which individuals connected to each other. With its unpredictable effect towards success or failure, competition also allows for an explanation of the strengthening or the splitting of communities, as well as their change over generations, resulting in the closing or the opening of the citizen group. From this perspective, sociological concepts brought into the discussion certainly help to figure out one of the main 'operative forces' in the making of early Greek cities.

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