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Aristocracy in Asia Minor (Antiquity)

Summary :

Much has been said and written about Greek “aristocracy”, and the word has been used in several ways, from a general “elite” to a restricted “nobility” of birth. However, the exact nature of Greek aristocracy has never been fully investigated. Recently several paths of research have promoted new definitions in the field of political history, sociology or economic studies.

DATE

Archaic period

GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION

Asia Minor

1. A political regime

Aristocracy was first defined by Ancient Greeks themselves; the word appears during the 5th century BC when historians and philosophers began to think about their political history. In ancient Greek thought “aristocracy” always applies to a political regime, to a form of constitution where the political power is in the hand of the few “good” citizens (*aristoi*).¹ In a famous passage, [Herodotus](#)² sets forth the number of governants as distinction between the different sorts of regime: one alone, a small group or the entire population. To this first taxonomic principle was soon adduced another one that assesses positively or negatively the governant's role. Systematic application of these two principles appeared in Platonic political philosophy. In *Politics*, Plato defined three fundamental forms of government: monarchy, the rule of a small group, and the government of the masses. Depending on the good or the bad side of these forms of government, Plato distinguished, in the first case, between kingship and tyranny, in the second, between aristocracy and oligarchy, but left to democracy a unique position.³ To Aristoteles we finally owe the well known classification between six different regimes; this question concerns the whole *Politics*, and in particular the Book III. According to Aristoteles,⁴ if rulers rule for the common interest, constitutions are necessarily good; if they rule for their own interest, constitutions are deviations. Adding to this principle the traditional distinction of the number of governants, Aristoteles defined the six classical regimes, as it will be used by all political philosophers or historians from Antiquity to modern historiography. Kingship, aristocracy and republic belong to the good regimes; [tyranny](#), oligarchy and radical democracy to the bad.

The definition of these political categories was developed aside of an historical vision of the past. Each regime was assigned to a precise period and ancient historians thought of a cyclic historical scheme. Since Plato and Aristoteles⁵ there was a definite idea about the regular succession of political regimes. In the remotest past, in the time of heroes and of foundation of cities, kingship was the regular form of government. With time, there were more men equal in virtue so that aristocracy succeeded to kingship after a revolution. Soon people get more and more interested in money and neglected the common wealth; rulers became oligarchs. Those regimes evolved to tyranny, when one of the rulers, searching support from the masses, monopolized the head of the state. When people get tired of an autocratic rule, a revolution sanctioned the passage to democracy. Monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy and tyranny were thus classified as typical regimes of the Archaic period, and democracy was thought to be characteristic of the Classical period. From kingship to democracy, the political history of Greece seems clear for many historians since the 5th century BC.

There is, however, a recent debate on the emergence of the “political”, defined as a space where decisions regarding the whole community are discussed and formalized.⁶ According to Chr. Meier, the political space only emerges in the Classical period and is strictly bounded to the appearance of democratic institutions.⁷ On the contrary, P. Schmitt-Pantel thinks that the passage to the 5th century simply represents a transformation of the political, its reformulation in institutional terms.⁸ Before the democratic turn, the political was embedded in a series of social institutions —for instance the symposion (see below)—, where matters concerning the whole community could be discussed. Other studies strongly argued for an anthropological vision of the political power and questioned the validity of the classical distinction between the six political constitutions. For instance, numerous studies have shown that tyranny was in fact an informal system of accumulating power and prestige and so was not distinct from the natural aristocratic



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game.⁹ Tyrants often integrated an office of *basileus* in the city, albeit the term does not necessarily entail any monarchic meaning.¹⁰ Consequently political categories defined by the Greek political thought become less and less operational to conceptualize the reality of Archaic and Classical political life of the Greek city. Neither tyranny nor oligarchy seem to be fundamentally different from the agonistic and aristocratic game.¹¹ Even democratic Athens, permitted the survival or the formation of several elites. So one has now to forget the long-standing and exclusive association between aristocrats and the Archaic period.

2. A nobility of birth

Although “aristocracy” only applies in the ancient Greek thought and language to a political regime, modern historians began to use the term “aristocrats” or even “aristocracy” to designate the members of this regime, i.e. the “ruling elite”. Since the 19th century, Greek aristocracy is thought to be framed by *gene*, enlarged associations based on kinship ties. With the help of a late and restricted historical documentation, scholars like Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, Johannes Toepffer and Eduard Meyer reconstructed an original *genos*, of which decline was supposed to correspond with the history of Archaic aristocracy.¹² According to Fustel de Coulanges, Greece and Rome were two faces of the same Indo-European civilization and their respective social organizations were thus necessarily identical. Since the Roman *gens* was much better known than the Greek archaic *genos*, he used Latin texts to describe both institutions, Roman *gens* as well as Greek *genos*. Before the birth of the city, patriarchal family was for a long time the only social group; it originated with a mythical founding father, whose worship forever united the enlarged family. Each *genos* possessed its land, its gods, its laws and no superior authority commanded it. When the city emerged by association of several *gene* into *phratry*, then *phratries* into tribe and finally tribes into a city, the enlarged families formed an aristocracy that ruled the city during the Archaic period. Men who do not have a mythical ancestor and who do not share a family cult honoring a founding father were excluded from the civic political organization; they formed the lowest ranks of society and benefited no property rights, neither laws or justice. With time, this plebeian population conceived to take a part in the political life and civic religion. According to Fustel de Coulanges, no city in Greece or in Italy escaped this process. By several revolutions, they drove away the aristocracy of *gene* from the head of cities. Soon nobility of birth did no more conceal any advantage and the domination of family chiefs vanished in democracy. All citizens, with or without noble ancestors, became equal and *genos* did no more cast any aristocracy.

With modern historians, Aristotelian aristocracy, defined as a political constitution, got a social content and was transformed in a category of noblemen, whose nobility was founded on birth and blood rights. This gentilician conception of aristocratic leadership won great success among historians during the whole 20th century. According to Gustave Glotz, whose authority upon French scholars was long lasting, Archaic history can be described as a struggle between two social structures, first the *genos*, a very ancient but declining force, and second the city, a newly born form of political organization that finally subdued the former at the end of several revolutions.¹³ However, in 1976, Felix Bourriot and Denis Roussel concurred to ruin the whole theory.¹⁴ They convincingly demonstrated that no ancient Greek document supports a social perception of the Greek aristocracy that had been constructed mostly on Roman texts. The social features once attributed to the *genos* and the privileges reportedly accorded to its members never existed in Archaic period or were not associated to a dominant social structure. The *genos* that was theorized by former historians is actually a chimera, as well as the traditional conception of Greek aristocracy. The very few Archaic or Classical *gene* which are well attested all over Greece are those rare families to which belong religious offices, like Eumolpidae and Kerykes in Eleusis or Clytidae in Chios; but their members were not necessarily aristocrats, since their sacerdotal attributions were mostly humble. Besides, as remote as we can go in the past, aristocrats and non-aristocrats were mingled in every social and civic institutions, like *phratries* or tribes. Definitely, after the demonstration of Bourriot and Roussel, the way to conceive Greek aristocracy has forever changed, even if some historians continue to work on outdated misconceptions.¹⁵

3. Re-thinking Greek aristocracy and social mobility

How can we re-think Greek aristocracy, since it was neither a political regime nor a strictly closed nobility of birth? During the whole Archaic and Classical periods, the *oikos* (i.e. the nuclear family) was the only familial association supposed to act with the Greek citizen, to improve his relationships or to help him in time of crisis. Consequently boundaries of social classes were much more permeable and porous that one has thought before, and social mobility—from poverty to aristocracy or from power to indigence—was a dominant feature inside the group of citizens.¹⁶ One has not to forget that the male citizen group is itself a restricted and



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exclusive aristocracy regarding inferior inhabitants (women, foreigners, slaves). But inside the civic community, there was probably neither legal barrier to social ascension nor inborn protection to fall in obscurity during one's life or from one generation to another. Moreover, Michael Stahl set forth that the Archaic history was not a period of aristocratic downfall in front of a resentful demos, but a time of rising for a diversity of elites which continued of emerging during the 5th and 4th century.¹⁷ If access to the elite remained constantly open, aristocratic status can be described as achieved and not ascribed, even if being the son of a well respected citizen could be a serious advantage to begin one's public life. Consequently, aristocracy could be defined as the result of a process of accumulating political power and most of all social prestige by a continuous succession of behaviours which increase one's respect and popularity.

4. Permanent competition

Competition was an essential feature of Greek ethic. "Always be the best and surpass the others", claimed Homer.¹⁸ This ideal was constantly repeated by later poets, historians, rhetors, epitaphs... and exerted its influence upon each citizen.¹⁹ Agon was not restricted to panhellenic festivals and athletic competitions, but was a permanent obsession that can be discovered in many activities of Greek citizens. Dedications in sanctuaries were often different, so that rich dedicators can be recognized as unique by their fellow citizens. They called for renowned artists or imagined new kinds of offering, sometimes brought from far away (such as Urartean cauldron handle or Cypro-Ionian coroplastic). Many wanted to make a great impression by their offerings. German archaeologists recently discovered a precinct along the Sacred Way between [Miletus](#) and [Didyma](#), where some aristocratic association was used to have ritual dinners.²⁰ A series of seated statues set on a semi-circular basis was found in the precinct. With their representations watching the procession which yearly went from Miletus to Didyma, these aristocrats remembered to the whole civic community the prestige and power they once needed to obtain the right of building such a pretentious precinct along the Sacred Way. Wealth invested in funerals by mean of vases, weapons, jewels... is another mean of enhancement. It generally tended to increase until another burial custom was introduced and represented a more prestigious way of expressing status.²¹ In Ionian, tumulus graves were a common way of expressing wealth and gaining social prestige, for example in [Clazomenae](#). But from the necropolis of this city also comes a totally different burial marker, a Milesian kore, which certainly was an expensive and prestigious funerary monument ordered to a foreign artist.²²

Marriage was another field of competition. Clisthenes of Sicyon called all the worthiest men of Greece to compete for his daughter's hand. During one year he enquired the country and lineage of each and made trial of their manly worth and temper and upbringing and manner of life, in order to find the best of the Greeks for his daughter Agariste. For the suitors, winning the hand of Agariste also signified to be recognized by whole Greece as the greatest aristocrat of his time.²³ Civic exogamy was a common way of increasing one's rank and gaining foreign supports. Agamemnon of Kyme married his daughter Demodike to the great Phrygian King Midas (c. 738-696).²⁴ The Lydian King [Alyattes](#) had two wives: the first, a Carian princess, was the mother of [Croesus](#); the second, an Ionian woman, begat Pantaleon.²⁵

[Hippocles](#), the tyrant of [Lampsacus](#), was very proud to marry his son to Hippias' daughter, since after he left Athens in 511/0 he remained powerful and influential upon the Great King [Darius](#).²⁶

5. Civic and aristocratic values of the symposion

Symposium has recently got much attention by scholars. Since kinship groups have been much criticized in the definition of aristocracy, historians now focus on "functional" groups, i.e. associations based on religious, warlike, symposiac, institutional... matters. Appealing to anthropological analogies, O. Murray casted the Greek symposium as a "Männerbund", an association of warriors.²⁷ In order to obtain military support, Homeric basileis offered drinking parties and banquets to mighty warriors, who in return had to follow their host in military expeditions. After the birth of cities, symposion remained a powerful aristocratic association, which enabled its members to lead the State. Considering the anthropological turn of political enquiries in Ancient history, symposion has also been recognized as an important political institution of the Archaic period.²⁸ Symposium was not a private or non-political association; on the contrary, matters concerning the whole community were discussed in such restricted gatherings. Archaic poetry, of



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which Ionian poets such [Callinus](#) and [Hipponax](#) of [Ephesus](#), [Mimnermus](#) and [Xenophanes](#) of [Colophon](#), [Phocylides](#) of Miletus are famous representatives, has often been considered to be typical of aristocratical thought expressed in such gatherings. But since the symposium has a political dimension, this poetry also integrates citizen values. Consequently, symposiac groups were not private associations of a leisure aristocracy, but were focused on communal matters as they needed social recognition, which is a fundamental principle of status enhancement. According to Sanne Houby-Nielsen, several collective burial grounds in Athenian Kerameikos were not family plots but funeral structures of symposiac groups, for which funeral was an opportunity to set forth their presence in the city.²⁹ By emphasizing its aristocratic potentialities, one can see the symposium as an important mean of increasing social status by commonly sharing the prestige of the other members of the symposiac group.

6. Birthrights and eugenic pretensions

Nobility of birth (*eugenia*) cannot support anymore any genetic definition of Greek aristocracy, since aristocratic gene (for example in Chios) or whatever gentilician groups (such the *pyrgoi* of [Teos](#)) probably did not exist in Archaic Greece.³⁰ However, one cannot forget assertions of many citizens during the Archaic and Classical periods of being of noble birth or of having a prestigious lineage. Instead of considering this *eugenia* as a genetic reality, one can meaningfully conceive it, without forcing the ancient documents, as a verbal pretension —fictitious or real— of being born from noble ancestors, intended to increase individual prestige or to support someone's virtue (*arete*). As example, one has to remember that [Hecataeus](#) of Miletus claimed to descend from a god at the sixteenth generation, but was amazed to learn from Egyptian priests about 345 generations of men as their ancestors.³¹

[Heraclitus](#) of Ephesus gave up the office of *basileus* to his brother, which can mean that they were —or pretended to be— descendant from [Androclos](#) the legendary *oecist* of the city and consequently from his father *Codrus*.³² [Heropythos](#) of Chios gave on his *grae stèle* (c. 475-450) the name of his 14 ancestors.³³ However, historians long demonstrated the partly fictitious lineage of several aristocrats, who proudly presented their ancestors.³⁴ Sometimes they manipulated their genealogy in order to avoid social reprobation. For instance, the father of *Miltiades*, *oecist* of *Chersonesos*, was named *Cypselos* and probably was a grand-son of the Corinthian tyrant *Cypselos*.³⁵ Considering the deep anti-tyrannical feelings of Athenian public opinion, [Pherekydes](#), writing down the *Philaid* genealogy in the first half of the 5th century, substituted *Cypselos* by *Hippokleides* as *Miltiades*' father, although he was his cousin of approximately the same age.³⁶ Consequently, *eugenia* was a socially constructed and subjectively perceived pretension, rather than a biological reality institutionally recognized. Besides, Greek nobility cannot be conceived as a strategy of defense used by noblemen (*agathoi*) threatened by commoners (*kakoi*) of losing their social position, as it has been constantly repeated since thirty years.³⁷ Constructing genealogy, expressing noble birth or appealing to ancestors were tools to accumulate prestige or even to gain the favor of a public court of justice in democratic institutions. It appears that persons brought to trial, although apparently guilty, have been solved by showing forth their ancestors' virtues and their own benefactions.³⁸ So rhetors accorded a great importance to certify the honorability of their clients. Pleading for *Alcibiades*' son, *Isocrates* significantly remembered to the court that his client's father belonged to the *Eupatrids*, “whose noble birth is apparent from the very name”, and that his mother was *Hipponicos*' daughter, “first in wealth of all the Greeks and second in birth to none of the citizens”.³⁹ Among moral arguments susceptible of gaining a popular jury, without necessarily concerning the case, *eugenia* was perceived as a pledge of probity.

7. The power of wealth

Wealth was of course a prerequisite of aristocracy, since it allows to support the cost of all behaviours generating prestige. Actually being rich was not sufficient to be granted of an aristocratic status, because thesaurization and ostentation of wealth have never been positively assessed by public opinion, as *Croesus*' encounter with *Solon* reminds us.⁴⁰ However, in an economic system of gift and counter-gift, wealth redistribution can bring social valorisation. Reciprocity was in fact not restricted to primitive societies, but also extended to political communities such as the Greek city. Wealth circulation by means of gifts was one of the major way of elaborating wide connections in Archaic and Classical Greece.⁴¹ Reciprocity always was a structuring tool of social hierarchy. *Miltiades*' son, *Kimon*, was renowned for opening his gardens to his *demesmen* and for inviting people to his table.⁴² Private generosity was transformed by Athens into *liturgies*, which commanded the richest citizens to pay for the organization of festivals or



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for the equipment of military vessels. In return, these men could soften the resentment of the mass associated to their wealth. Liturgies also placed the demos in a position of moral debt in regard of its benefactors, who could hope social gratitude (for instance, to be favoured in case of trial). Finally they got an enormous prestige, especially if they spent more money than was legally required in the accomplishment of their office.⁴³

8. Specificity of Ionian aristocracy : the vicinity of great Empires

To sum up, there was a permanent social competition between all the members of the civic community and aristocrats were those who managed to be at the top of the pyramid. Actually, the word *aristoi* does not mean anything else than the “best ones”. Agon was meant to generate relative status and social hierarchy was permanently moving according to the deeds of ambitious citizens. *Stasis* (i.e. political strife between competing leader) was not a momentaneous time of crisis, but the normal and permanent state of Archaic cities.⁴⁴

Aristocracy in Asia Minor applies to this definition of Greek aristocracy. It was composed by men who managed to receive prestige and authority from their fellow citizens. Of course tyrants, who are relatively well known considering the scarcity of documentation available on Archaic and Classical [Ionia](#), can be listed as aristocrats. They often received their office because of their fidelity and devotion to Persian kings and satraps, who in return granted them honors and political leadership in their cities. Indeed, the Lydian and then Persian vicinity was an influent actor of Ionian aristocratic game. It allowed aristocrats to search support abroad in time of crisis or dispute in their city. For the Persian Kings, the granting of favours or political leadership to Greeks was part of a very clever political strategy to administer a huge territory and secure peace in Ionia —excepting their failure with [Aristagoras](#) of Miletus. For some Greeks, Persian rule was a way among others to get a dominant position, not in the Persian hierarchy (from which they were definitely excluded), but in their own communities, by emphasizing the honors granted by a mighty lord. This of course did not prevent all powerful citizens to compete and to try to distinguish themselves by personal relationships with mighty men, by offering symposion, by dedicating magnificent offerings to the gods.

The vicinity of great Oriental Empires also induced specific attitudes. According to Xenophanes of Colophon, his fellow citizens learned useless luxury (*habrosyne*) to the contact of the Lydians and used to go to the agora wearing robes of purple and their hair drenched with refined unguents.⁴⁵ Ionian *tryphe* (i.e. luxury) so became a literary *topos* to describe the aristocratic Ionian way of life.

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3. Pl., Pol. 291d-292a.

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5. Pl., R. VIII-IX. Arist., Pol. 1286b.

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