

Nicholas Kyriazis

WHY ANCIENT GREECE?

The birth and development
of democracy



Why ancient Greece?

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*To the memory of my father Kostas Kyriazis
and my mother Artemis Kyriazis
who both fought for democracy, freedom
and “isigoria” (freedom of speech).*

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INTRODUCTION

IN SEPTEMBER 2010 WE celebrated the 2500th anniversary of the Battle of Marathon. Most people from around the globe recognize the name “Marathon” as the athletic event that closes the Olympic Games as well as one that is organized by more than 800 cities worldwide. Fewer know of the battle that was fought on the small plain of Marathon in Attica and even fewer realize that it was a battle that, together with the battles that followed during the Persian Wars –at Salamis in 480 BC and Plataea in 479 BC– saved democracy. The Athenian and Plataean victory at Marathon, and the Greek victories at Salamis and Plataea were decisive for human history because they preserved democracy and the freedom associated with it. Without democracy, the subsequent flourishing of the arts and sciences that formed the basis of Greek and Greco-Roman culture, then of European and today of the world, would not have come about.

The arts have also flourished under non-democratic

regimes, such as the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian empires, as have sciences such as astronomy and mathematics. But certain arts and sciences, notably those that require freedom of thought and expression, were born and developed only under democracy, philosophy, “political science” as exemplified by the works of Aristotle, rhetoric, theatre, economics (the father of which is now increasingly recognized to have been Xenophon, author of, among other works, *Oikonomikos* or “Household Management”) and history were born in democratic city-states, most prominent among them Athens, which became the home of many non-Athenian Greeks, such as Herodotus and Aristotle, as well as the “School of Hellas”.

For these reasons, the president, Mr. Guy Fiaux de la Croix, and the members of the Marathon Friends Club thought it appropriate to produce a book on democracy and honored me by entrusting me with the task.

The book poses the question, “Why Ancient Greece?”, and already the answer is provided by the subtitle “The birth and development of democracy”. Ancient Greece is important because of democracy –specifically direct democracy– upon which the most progressive Greek culture was based, and which was subsequently inherited by the rest of the world. But direct democracy also enjoys a revival in many countries today. Thus, it is interesting to understand, remember and analyze how Greeks faced problems of government, politics and public choice for the first time, and solved them, sometimes in ingenious

ways that became an inspiration for later democracies, and are of relevance today.

This book is written for a wide, non-specialist public. Notes are thus kept to a minimum, as are references to sources. Nevertheless, “experts” will recognize that I am offering some new interpretations on various aspects of democracy, such as the conditions of its birth, the creation of values in the military field and their transfer to politics, the role of the initiator, public choice under direct democracy, and the idea and implementation of a “social contract”, more than 2000 years before it was rediscovered by such thinkers as Montesquieu, Locke, Rousseau, and so forth.

I have tried to cover specific aspects of ancient democracy and provide a brief overview of its rediscovery, as well as its functioning in the 21st century. Ancient democracy was evolutionary, not static, like a tree: an idea with a main trunk but many branches. So should modern democracies be. Their enrichment and development concern us all as citizens. Therefore, if the present book helps to reawaken interest in democracy and make its readers think about the workings of –and ways to improve upon– modern democracy, it will have served its purpose.

I dedicate this book to the memory of my father Kostas Kyriazis: journalist, writer, owner of the daily newspaper *Ethnos*, and for eight years president of the National Tourism Organization of Greece who twice fought for democracy, freedom and freedom of the press. The

first time was during the Nazi occupation of Greece during World War II, when he published a clandestine newspaper with a group of others, the second during the colonels' dictatorship in Greece, when he again fought against them with *Ethnos* and was condemned by a military court to four years in prison.

And also to my mother, Artemis Kyriazis, a journalist and the first elected woman deputy mayor of Athens, who also fought for democracy and freedom, both alone and at my father's side.

I wish to thank professors P. Castledge, D.T. Engen, A. Karayannis, C.H. Lyttkens, J. Ober, B. Scheffold and Ambassador J. Christophilis for their very useful comments.

THE GREEK DARK AGE AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE NEW WARRIOR CLASS

THE FIRST GREEK (AND European) era of flourishing was the Mycenaean period during the second millennium BC, and even earlier, the Minoan, on the island of Crete. The latter gave us the famous palaces at Knossos, Phaistos and elsewhere in Crete, the former the impressive fortifications, *tholos* (beehive tombs) and earlier tombs with their treasures trove of arms and gold jewelry (such as the famous “mask of Agamemnon” from 15th-century-BC Mycenae, from which the civilization took its name). We should also mention Tiryns, Pylos (the kingdom of the wise king Nestor of the *Iliad*), Gla in Boeotia and numerous others in mainland Greece as far as Thesaly and on the islands.

Mycenaean society was characterized by the so-called “palatial” economy. Economic activity was centered in

and around the king's palace, where artisans lived and worked, producing gold jewelry, bronze arms and armor, wool, olive oil, clothing, and so forth. The palace was the residence of the *wanax* (king) and seat of government, as well as the major production and distribution center of the centrally governed state. Palace scribes kept detailed inventories of production, storage and distribution of goods on clay tablets, many of which have survived in Pylos and elsewhere, thus providing us with some understanding of the palatial economy.

The majority of the land belonged to the king, some to the community or *da-mo* (subsequently *demos*, meaning "the people"; later *demos* combined with *kratos*, or "power", giving us "democracy," i.e. "power to the people"), some to individuals in return for services to the king, and some to the shrines of one deity or another (similar to land owned by modern or medieval monasteries). A similar situation existed for other goods such as flocks of sheep.

Alongside the king ruled a military elite of aristocrats, many of them his kinsmen. During wartime they rode to the battlefield on chariots to impress the enemy and the common people with their splendor, but also out of practical necessity, to conserve mobility and strength for fighting. Here, we can already see a first differentiation from the battle methods of Asian-African empires: the Ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians and Hittites all used chariots, but also fought while mounted on them, using bows and javelins. Kings and elite warriors

were protected by bronze armor (typically scale armor) and shields made from ox hide or light wood.

Mycenaean aristocratic warriors, on the other hand, wore very heavy armor that protected the whole body, making them look like 14th-century medieval knights. One such suit of bronze armor has been recovered from a tomb at Dendra in the region of Argolis, and thus we know exactly how elite Mycenaean warriors looked. This armor provided excellent protection against arrows, sling stones, javelins and even spears, making their bearers almost invulnerable. Common warriors who could not afford such armor (made by palace bronzesmiths) had no chance against these weapons. The only enemy who could withstand them was a similarly armed one. The major weapon that could inflict harm on such armor was a long bronze sword with a blade length of up to 70 cm (such swords have been recovered from Mycenaean tombs). Mycenaean warriors did not yet ride horses (neither did their contemporaries, the Egyptians, Hittites and Babylonians), so in order to use their swords efficiently, they had to dismount from their chariots and fight on foot.

Thus, during the 15th century BC we already have an important differentiation in the Greek region, compared to Asia and Africa: the emergence of the heavily armed and armored warrior engaging in hand-to-hand combat on foot. This, as we shall see, became a Greek tradition, one crucial to the emergence of democracy, and as eminent American historian V.D. Hanson has written, a

crucial element of the “western way of war”. These elite warriors fought individually, if we are to believe the vivid accounts in Homer’s *Iliad*.

The Mycenaean world was destroyed around 1200 BC, the victim of both internal decay and foreign invasions later attributed to the Dorians¹. The Dorians were the last Greek tribe to enter the Greek world and settled in many regions, mainly the Peloponnese. They brought with them –apparently for the first time in the Greek world, from whence they spread through the Aegean via Crete as far as Rhodes and beyond– iron weapons which negated in part the advantage offered by the bronze Mycenaean armor (the Hittites were already using iron weapons in Anatolia –eastern Asia Minor– during the 13th century BC).

There followed the Greek Dark Age, or Early Iron Age. During this period, until around 800 or 776 BC (the date of the first Olympiad, according to the method by which later Greeks calculated time and recorded events), there was a population decline of at least one half and perhaps even three quarters, and the average per capita consumption decreased by perhaps one third. But slow and profound transformations were beginning to take place.

Here, we come to the first fundamental and crucial question. Why and how did democracy emerge? What were the conditions for its emergence?

As a regime or form of government, democracy has been an exception throughout the course of history. The

norm has been kingdoms, empires, oligarchies-tyrannies (or their modern incarnation, dictatorships, either military or communist, as in North Korea, Myanmar and Cuba today). We must not forget that it was only during the last ten years of the 20th century that all European countries became democracies (Greece, Spain and Portugal had dictatorships until 1974-1975 and Turkey even later), and only during the 21st century has democracy become a common form of government on a world level. Once again, we ask what specific conditions were unique to Greece for the birth of democracy? My answer is that they were derived from the unique combination of a city-state culture and environment, and the emergence of a new warrior class that had not yet developed anywhere else.

The destruction of the centrally-led Mycenaean palace economy and the substantial decline that followed also led to the fragmentation of political entities. Whereas during the period that bears its name, the Mycenaean world consisted of about a hundred states at most (as evidenced in Homer's famous catalogue of ships) under the largely honorific over-lordship of Mycenae itself, during the Dark Ages many more significantly smaller communities emerged. From 1200 to around 800 BC they developed into early versions of independent city-states. These had governmental structures strong enough to guarantee protection and property, but not strong enough to act as predators, as Mycenaean palaces had to a certain extent. This again transformed the structure of property rights.

We do not know exactly when this transformation occurred, but by the 8th century BC an alliance between aristocrats and poorer free men came about, leading to a reallocation of property rights: free, locally born men could not be made slaves and had rights to land, flocks and herds. But again, how and why did this change in property rights come about?

While during the Mycenaean era there existed about 100 states, during the Dark Ages several hundreds of city-states emerged in the Greek world (covering, by the end of the 8th century, a larger region due to the advent of colonization), about half of them in the old Mycenaean region². This means that for every Mycenaean state there were now five city-states, and as a consequence they were much smaller. These small city-states lacked the economic strength to establish centrally-directed economies and as a result were unable to support an elite fighting force of heavily armed and armored warriors. This type of weaponry became an economic impossibility in most cases.

Thus, the question of who would take over the task of defense and how would it be done was a crucial one for the existence of the small city-states. In Mycenaean times, defense (and of course, offense) were the major tasks and services provided by the central state and the warrior elite. Now that neither existed, a new solution had to be found. The easiest way was to use the cheapest, most abundant and easily manufactured materials available. First among them was wood. Wood could be easily transformed into planks, rounded and joined (with

animal or plant glue and nails) to build shields, and, with the addition of an iron tip, could be transformed into spears. Thus, during the Early Iron Age in Greece, armaments became a domestic “industry”. The inhabitants of a community became its defenders, taking over the task previously undertaken by military elite specialists. This was the first step towards establishing a citizen’s militia. I believe that these proto-citizen-warriors must also have been independent farmers who cultivated their own land. In this respect too, the fall of the Mycenaean palaces had left a vacuum. Central ownership of land evolved into personal ownership by small farmers.

We therefore have a parallel and mutually reinforcing military-economic development: small farmers becoming warriors.

This new type of defensive and offensive armament (mainly the shield and spear) offered the advantage of being easy to manufacture and did not require specialist skills (as Dendra armor and swords did), but it also had serious drawbacks: the new warriors were very much exposed in their flanks and rear, if they were to fight in the old Homeric-style *mêlée* (mixing) battles, or against the emerging cavalry. Thus, in order to maximize the probability of survival and victory in battle, new tactical formations had to be devised. I believe that this happened over centuries through trial and error on the battlefield, with better formations evolving and replacing less efficient ones in an evolutionary process (almost Darwinian in the true sense of survival of the fittest).

What is certain, as both paintings on vases and writing attest, is that this tactical transformation had been completed by the end of the 7th century³. The new tactical formation was later developed as the phalanx, where warriors stood side by side, the warrior covering not only his own body with his shield on the left, but also the unprotected right-hand spear side of the man to his left. Thus the phalanx presented a compact front of shields and protruding spears, usually held in the right hand high above the elbow, aimed to thrust downwards against the enemy over his shield. The phalanx also acquired a depth of up to eight ranks on average, giving it great strength in the frontal charge, like a human battering ram. By choosing level ground and anchoring the flanks on natural obstacles like rivers, hills or woods, the phalanx was unassailable in the flanks and rear. Phalanxes fought frontally, shields and spears clashing like rams locking horns. During battle, the rear ranks (with the exception of the first and the last) thrust their shield's outward side into the back of the preceding warrior and pushed giving the formation forward momentum and strength, in a tactic called *othismos* (pushing). The warriors in the phalanx were thus nearly joined together⁴.

By the 8th century most of mainland Greece had recovered from the Dark Ages, in terms of both population and economic growth. Surplus population of many city-states migrated abroad, forming colonies in Asia Minor, Italy, today's France and Spain (Massalia by the Phocaeans, Cumae by the Euboeans, and Emporion in Spain

probably by the Massalians, North Africa (Cyrene and round the Black Sea). Economic growth permitted refinement in weaponry. The simple plank shield evolved into the characteristic large, round, concave shield with two grips (for the elbow and left hand), the *hoplon*, which gave its name to a new type of warrior, the “hoplite”. Bronze or leather armor for the front and back of the torso was added, with movable leather “skirts” (or “aprons”), to protect the thighs, as were bronze greaves and new bronze helmets in the Corinthian style with horsehair crests. The helmet covered the entire head, leaving slits for the eyes and nose only, offering excellent protection, though at the cost of diminished hearing and peripheral vision. This new equipment further reinforced the necessity of the phalanx formation, which focused the hoplites’ attention on his front, leaving the protection of his flanks and rear to the other hoplites.

Thus during the Archaic or Lyric Age⁵ the Greek hoplite became the first heavy infantryman to appear *en masse* on the battlefields, following the Mycenaean heavily-armored elite warrior, but with the novelty of disciplined formations rather than individually in duels.

The new hoplite equipment, although lighter and less elaborate than the Dendra type, still weighed about 20 kilograms or more and was relatively expensive. Also, it could no longer be manufactured at home, since it required specialized skills for the bronze armor, shields, iron spear tips and short swords. Production became a specialized task once again.

But there was an important difference from Mycenaean times: first, the hoplite had to cover the cost of his own equipment. Funding was not provided by the state for the elite by palace manufactures as in Mycenaean times. Second, hoplite equipment was produced by artisans and skilled manufacturers who worked for themselves and sold their products in markets. During the 5th and 4th centuries, such factories employed tens of persons (often slaves), for example the factories of the Athenians Kleon and the father of Demosthenes.

We do not know the exact cost of hoplite equipment during the Archaic period; however, it was relatively expensive. Only reasonably well-off landowner farmers could afford it, their farm size being estimated at around 9 to 13 acres. These hoplite farmers were thus transformed into a separate class, the new defenders of their city-state⁶.

WHY ANCIENT GREECE is written for the general reader who wishes to understand the birth and development of democracy, and its influence on modern government. It presents a fresh, innovative and often unorthodox view, using new economic and political theory and methodology to explain how and why democracy emerged when it did, the conditions that shaped it, and the values it inspired.

From the birth of the city-state and the evolution of the hoplite soldier and the phalanx, to the rise of Athenian democracy, the author traces the origins of such essential issues as public choice, civic and human rights, and the world's first social contract.

Taking the reader on a tour of democracy as reinvented by medieval Switzerland, the maritime Dutch Republic, 17th-century England, and America and France in the throes of revolution, Nicholas Kyriazis ends with a short guide to today's Greece for visitors who wish to experience its enduring democratic history.

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