Third Edition

THE ANCIENT WORLD

A Social and Cultural History

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For Pat, Garrett, and Eliza

Preface

Modern authors of social and cultural history can generally assume that their readers will share a number of fundamental presuppositions about the nature of present-day society. They can take for granted, for example, that there will be no argument with the proposition that society is something very different or even opposed to the state and its institutions. Similarly, they do not have to establish that the modern state is a complex mosaic of classes and cultures which interact in turn with a large number of public, semi-public, and private bodies such as churches, corporations, educational institutions, labor unions, branches of government, cultural organizations, and the like.

Unfortunately, a similar set of shared presuppositions does not exist for the ancient world. In a majority of cases none of the institutions mentioned above existed in antiquity, and those that did functioned at such a rudimentary level that they counted for little. Even the ancient world's class system operated on quite a different set of principles than that of the modern state. Particularly in their classical formulations, ancient societies were tightly knit communities in which political, cultural, and religious life closely intermingled. Society was not something set apart from the state but was, instead, closely identified with it. As a result, it is possible to write of ancient society as an independent sphere of human activity in the modern sense only in a very limited way, but what this book seeks to do is to pursue the distinctive forms society took in the ancient world and especially the unusual relationship between society and the state that characterized the social order of antiquity. Detailed descriptions of the highly integrated world of the clas-

sical period are given, placing special emphasis on its culture, social structures, moral values, and political processes. The inner workings of the Athenian democracy and the Roman Republic are discussed at length, and art, literature, and religion—especially how they functioned vis-à-vis society—receive prominent attention. At the same time, recognizing that the closely unified societies of the classical period changed radically over the course of time, special consideration is given to the much-altered world of the Hellenistic period (third to second centuries B.C.) and the Roman Empire (first to fifth centuries A.D.). The last chapter describes the new society that began to make its appearance toward the end of antiquity, laying the foundations for the modern world.

In the years since the first edition of this textbook appeared, a great deal has been written on the social history of antiquity. Despite this outpouring, the social history of the ancient world remains at an early stage of its development. Any attempt, for instance, to write a comprehensive survey of the family or of gender relations from Sumerian to Byzantine times will quickly demonstrate the sketchiness of our sources and the lack of scholarly investigation into particular periods or areas. Enormous strides, however, have been made, and this new edition makes a special point of adding to and updating the social material in the text. Chapter 4, on early Greece, has been completely rewritten. Where appropriate, emphasis has been placed on the interconnections that permeate the history of the Middle East, Greece, and Rome.

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matters. Various committees acted as a kind of executive branch, implementing policies of the Assembly and supervising, for instance, the food and water supplies and public buildings. This wide-scale participation by the citizenry in the government, though it varied in degree, is what distinguished the democratic form of the Athenian *polis* from other, less liberal forms.

The effect of Cleisthenes's reforms was to establish the superiority of the Athenian community as a whole over local institutions without, however, destroying them. National politics rather than deme politics became the focal point. At the same time entry into national politics began at the deme level and gave local loyalty a new focus: Athens itself. Over the next two centuries the implications of Cleisthenes's reforms were exploited to the full.

During the fifth century B.C. the Council of 500 was extremely influential in shaping policy, but in the next century it was the mature assembly that took on more and more decision-making responsibility. By any measure other than that of the aristocrats, who had been upstaged by the supposedly inferior "people," the Athenian democracy was a stunning success. Never before—or since—have so many people been involved in the serious business of self-governance. It was precisely this opportunity to participate in public life that provided a stimulus for the rapid and brilliant unfolding of classical Greek culture. The seeds for this unfolding were thus sown in the Archaic Age.

POLIS SOCIETY

Modern societies make a very clear distinction between society and the state. We generally assume that if the two are not in opposition to one another, there is at least a good deal of tension between them. Bureaucracies, police forces, armies, and other elements of the "public" realm are clearly set off against those of the "private" sphere, which is made up of voluntary associations of all kinds. There is no danger in modern life that we would confuse the legislative, judicial, or executive branches of government with society itself.

The Greek *polis,* on the other hand, had none of the semipublic bodies such as business corporations, unions, churches, universities, professional societies, and newspapers (nowadays referred to as "civil society") that have such an important role in modern societies. The *polis,* by contrast, was a highly integrated type of community where society and state were so closely linked that it was difficult—and mostly unnecessary—to make a distinction between them. In fact, the two generally coincided. The state was the citizenry, and the citizenry was the state. Power was not delegated to permanent institutions such as legislatures, courts, or professional classes of soldiers, lawyers, administrators, or politicians. There was no separate "government" apart from the citizenry. No *polis* citizen could ever say, "The government can do nothing right." Power was not scattered, as it is in the modern state. It rested fully in the hands of the people, however narrowly that term was defined. Understandably, it was over conditions of entry into this happy decision-making group that most of the internal battles in Greek cities raged. *Polis* citizenship was worth having and protecting; hence its exclusivity.

Since the Greek city-state was a kind of hereditary or family-held corporation with membership based on the possession of a certain amount of "stock"—at the minimum citizen parentage—it was understandably difficult to obtain admission to its ranks. Foreigners might reside for generations in a particular city without being accepted into the community. Part of the reason for this was economic. Unlike the modern state, which tends to regard the right to accumulate money as an individual's privilege, the *polis* looked on wealth with a communitarian eye. The rich were expected to perform expensive public services or liturgies, which could range from giving banquets to erecting public buildings or maintaining warships. Money coming into the state from any source—whether as booty, tribute, or tax—was regarded as the property of the community. Citizens could thus hope to benefit by the corporate profits of the state and hence were unwilling to admit outsiders whose numbers would reduce the "take" of birth citizens. At a deeper level, Greeks had trouble with the idea of allowing aliens access to land, the economic basis of *polis* life. Possession of land implied a right and a duty to participate in community affairs. Besides, in any given *polis* the amount of land available was fixed and could only be increased by conquest. Naturally, in times of emergency or revolution these rules were bent for the moment, but there was always a tendency to return to exclusivity.

Citizens and Slaves

The citizens of a *polis* constituted only a portion—sometimes only a small portion—of its total population. The remainder was composed of a variety of people with different statuses. Some were foreigners, and they in turn could be either permanent residents *(metics)* or just visitors. There were also slaves and freed slaves; the latter did not possess citizenship but instead had the statues of *metics*. And among citizens themselves there were gradations. A great deal of diversity existed among individual city-states, and there is no way of telling what percentages of the different groups might have been found in any particular *polis* at any given time.

Slavery itself varied greatly according to region and the characteristics of the situation (for example, whether it was urban or rural, domestic or industrial). In Sparta, for instance, land was worked by *helots* owned by the state. In other parts of the Greek world, such as Thessaly and Sicily, large holdings were worked by a variety of tenants, serfs, and slaves. In most of Greece, however, small holdings were the rule. If the farmer owned a slave, the owner and slave worked side by side. In cities and towns, slaves, if not used for domestic purposes, were often rented out by their owners. They were allowed to keep a portion of their earnings and might, if lucky, eventually save enough to buy their freedom (which did not, however, usually include citizenship). There were no slave-specific tasks, as in slavery in the Americas, and Greece, of course, had no equivalent to the modern factory system, where workers endlessly perform the same, repetitive tasks. Instead, skilled craftsmen, whether free or slave, worked in shops, independently or in small groups, and each person was usually responsible for performing all the tasks needed to

produce a particular item, such as shoes, furniture, or wheels for carts. The mines were, understandably, the worst places for slaves to work, and it is here perhaps that we find the closest parallels to the slave systems of the Americas or of some of the developing countries of the world.

Although slaves and freemen often worked side by side, there was an essential difference between the two: free laborers, independent craftsmen, and small farmer or traders almost never worked full-time for someone else for wages. Strange as it may seem, it was hard for Greeks to distinguish full-time employment for wages from slavery. Working for someone else meant that hours were fixed. Workers could not choose to come or go as they desired or produce what they wanted or in the way they wanted. They had no control over the circumstances of their work. They could be let go at will, without an explanation. Most demeaning of all, they had to compete with others just to have one of these "jobs." Better to have a small farm and independence than be subjected to the whims of an employer. Naturally, this attitude depended on long-established cultural practices, a willingness to accept a low standard of living, and, for the most part, the simple absence of any other alternative.

Gender and the Family

Anyone observing another culture, either past or present, does so as an outsider. Inevitably, we see it, at least at first, through the lens of our own cultural values. Even after we think we know it well, natives will tell us that we still do not understand it. This is especially true in the matter of gender and the family, where our own values and assumptions are hard to dismiss. In the case of ancient Greece, this is especially taxing because, even apart from its remoteness in time, almost all information comes to us through male interpreters and tends to concern the better-off segments of society. Perhaps one way to break into the mentality of Greeks of the *polis* age regarding gender and the family is to look at some of our own presuppositions about these subjects and then try to make comparisons with Greek ways of thought.

Modern Assumptions about Gender   We assume, for instance, that as we enter adult life we have available a wide variety of career choices as well as lifestyles. Connected with this is our belief that the primary role of parents is to raise and educate their children to function well in a world of business, industry, and the professions. We assume that the accumulation of money is largely for the purpose of personal consumption for an improved lifestyle. We think of work, usually performed for others outside the home, as the normal full-time occupation for men and women alike. We admire and praise hard work, while at the same time are suspicious of those noted for their relaxed attitudes, lack of punctuality, and other kinds of "undependability."

Formal education, we assume, occurs outside the home in schools and universities. Marriages are seen as the product of mutual affection and compatibility; spouses generally do not differ significantly from each other in age, education, or

income. The ideal family is one where warm, loving relationships predominate. We accept that most children born to parents are likely to grow to maturity. Children are cherished for their own worth and not because they represent some investment in the future as a kind of old-age insurance policy. On the contrary, we feel that parents are themselves responsible for providing for their own old age. That parents and their adult children may be separated by vast distances and often see each other only rarely is a given (and sometimes a welcome one). No one feels uncomfortable with the idea of men and women living singly in their own separate households, leading their own independent, unsupervised, strictly private lives. Divorce we regard as a necessary evil, although it is often an extremely difficult, wrenching experience. In recent times women have obtained the right to vote, control property, serve on juries, stand for public office, and generally have independent careers on a par, at least de jure, with men. With some restrictions, women have the same legal public position as men. Above all, men and women both assume a great deal of freedom and especially privacy in how they choose to live their lives. Our identity is generally formed by our activity in the private, not the public, sector.

Polis *Expectations of Gender*   When we come to consider, however, just about any premodern society or even contemporary traditional societies, we need to put most or even all of our modern assumptions about gender out of our minds. This is especially true of ancient Greece, in particular during the time in which the *polis* was dominant.

Polis life was like life in a large village. Everyone knew everyone else and also knew everything about everyone: what each family was worth; who was married to whom, when, and for how long; and who had been involved in which scandals, past as well as present—all was common knowledge. The term sociologists use for this lifestyle is an apt one: *face-to-face existence.* For comparison, we might next consider some assumptions about what is properly a man's sphere of activity and what is a woman's. In our society the lines between the two are often blurred, as both men and women may care for children and do household chores in addition to working outside the home. In *polis* society, on the other hand, there was rarely any overlapping between male and female roles; each had its own very clearly demarcated areas of activity. It was considered shocking and even shameful for one gender to intrude on the other's turf.

COMPLEMENTARY OPPOSITES   In general, only men could function in the public realm, while a woman's proper sphere was the private world of the household and other women. For obvious functional reasons (not to mention ancient custom), women did not serve in the army or the navy. Juries, assemblies, the gymnasium, and the Agora (the public meeting place) also belonged in the male realm. The bulk of discussion in the assemblies, or at least the most important issues, involved war and things related to war, the quintessential sphere of males. Judicial procedures were often rowdy affairs. Since there was no police force and no public prosecutor's office, the appearance of witnesses in court and the enforcement of judg-

ments depended on the ability of plaintiffs to round up their friends and coerce the compliance of their opponents. Conversely, men were not supposed to intrude in the domestic affairs proper to women.

Whether this separation of male and female realms represents gain or loss for either sex is a subjective affair that can be argued indefinitely. It betrays bias to assume that glory lay only in one area and repression in the other. In reality, neither men nor women had much choice in life. In the *polis,* the basis of the division between male and female roles and spheres was largely functional: given that most *poleis* were in just about a perpetual state of war with some neighbor or other, the military character of the culture was inevitably predominant over all others. We can see this most clearly if we compare life in a Greek *polis* with, say, life in Egypt under the pharaohs, where there was virtually no civil society, and military matters were peripheral to those of the ordinary family. In Egypt, accordingly, there was less need to sharply distinguish men's and women's affairs. The most extreme expression of this dichotomy of spheres occurred, of course, in Sparta, the most militaristic state in Greece, where men and women lived virtually separate lives.

The distinction presented here of public and private gender realms is a Greek one, and is not as neat and useful as it may seem. Up to a point the division is valid, but the household, the Greek *oikos,* was the place of integration of male and female, public and private, and the division between the realms within the *oikos* is not always clear.

Take, for example, the matter of the exercise of power inside the household (without, it should be emphasized, considering the comparative strength of character of individual husband or wife, their mutual respect and affection, and related psychological factors).

The Household   A Greek *oikos* generally derived its income from two sources: the property that the husband owned and the income from the dowry that the wife had brought with her. A wife was thus not a slave in her own household, firmly under the thumb of a despotic, patriarchal husband who arranged everything without her knowledge or consent. In fact quite the contrary was true. Wives seem to have been well informed on domestic finances and participated in family decision making. It is perhaps best to think of the household of the *polis* as a kind of corporation, jointly managed by the partners—husband and wife—for a common goal.

A wife's domestic power rested on a number of bases. First was her position as one of the matrons of the *polis.* She thus possessed membership in a powerful group vested by the community with the moral authority and duty to uphold its standards; there was and always has been an important distinction between the status and importance of grandmothers and mothers on the one hand and unmarried females on the other. Men may have made the rules of the community, but it was the matrons who saw that they were obeyed. Secondly, a wife's power also derived from the fact that she belonged to two households—her natal household and the one formed by the partnership with her husband. If she did not like the way her husband was handling domestic affairs as they concerned either her personal life or economic matters, she could bring less-than-subtle pressure to

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CITIZENSHIP

In Athens, as in most *poleis,* participation in public affairs depended on membership in one of the established families of the community and the performance of religious duties. We see this reflected in the questions that were asked of candidates standing for political office in Athens:

> When they [the supervising magistrates] are checking qualifications of candidates they first ask: "Who is your father? What is his place of origin? Who is your father's father? Who is your mother? Who is your mother's father? What is her place of origin?" Then the candidates are asked whether they are enrolled in the cult of Apollo of the Family and Zeus of the Courtyard, and where these shrines are; then whether they have family tombs and where these are; then whether they treat their parents well, have paid their taxes and have done their required military service.
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> —*Aristotle,* Constitution of Athens, *55.3*

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bear on him: improve, or my dowry and I depart. Since in many instances the husband's lifestyle depended on the income of the dowry, this constituted a powerful incentive to conform to a wife's wishes. Naturally, in situations where the wife's dowry was unimpressive, her power was proportionately less. Nevertheless, should his wife and her dowry leave, the husband was still responsible for the support of the children. Divorce could be initiated by either husband or wife, and no stigma seems to have attached to the breakup of a marriage. Divorce did not, as it so often does in our society, imply isolation and descent into poverty for the wife and children; the wife simply returned to her parental household to await the next arranged marriage. Another source of influence for the wife lay in the fact that most marriages were really political or economic alliances between families. Hence, the mistreatment of wives or just the plain mismanagement of household affairs were of concern outside the immediate family. Great pressure came from the in-laws, who maintained a keen interest in the affairs of their female members. In the end, it is true, this kind of social and economic power of wives was negative—a kind of veto—and indeed outside the household women lacked power or visibility.

POLIS EXPECTATIONS OF THE HOUSEHOLD   Gender roles may also be examined in terms of the expectations of the *polis.* First, neither men nor women had much choice about life styles, careers, spouses, or economic roles. *Polis* life decided most of these issues. Men were forced to serve in the army (or navy) for nearly their entire lives, or at least until they were too old to be any use. Public service on juries and commissions and in assemblies was obligatory, morally if not always legally; not pulling one's weight in a *polis* could lead to social ostracism.

Heads of households were responsible for the recreation and perpetuation of their families, the worship of the ancestors, and the maintenance of the family's economic worth. The state insisted on this; it was not a matter of choice. From the viewpoint of the *polis* the family was not a private unit as it is in our society, but an

essential, functional part of the larger community. Loss of traditional families, or their failure to function properly, was a loss to the state itself. Society insisted that families adequately dower their women; not to do so was shameful. Squandering a patrimonial inheritance also brought shame. Parents could not disinherit their children, or at least not without grave difficulty. Property did not exist for the satisfaction of personal needs or wants. In fact, for both men and women property was held in what amounted to trust for the next generation; if lost by neglect or extravagance, it was almost impossible to replace. It was not a matter of just going out and getting a job: there were no "jobs" in the modern sense. One lived off one's inherited land or property, or one left the society. Since privacy was just about nonexistent in the small, face-to-face society of the *polis,* there was little hope that such social obligations could be avoided. At least in Athens even an outsider could interfere in family affairs on the grounds that its improper management was negatively affecting him as a member of the community.

Marriage   Marriages in the *polis* were, for the most part, arranged affairs. It was taken for granted that any real affection between the spouses would develop after the marriage. Formal betrothals could occur at a very young age. The sister of Demosthenes, the famous Athenian orator, was 5 when she was betrothed, though this may have been an exception, since she was an orphan. Marriages were usually between males aged about 30 and girls aged between 14 and 18. High infant mortality rates meant that husbands and wives had to harden themselves to the loss of many children, especially between the critical ages of birth to 5 years. The strange story circulated among Greeks that it was the custom for Persian men not to meet their children until they were 5 so that they should not suffer the pain of loss, but this tale was clearly a parable reflecting the emotional experience of the Greeks themselves.

Children were an economic necessity: in old age parents expected their children to care for them, and at least at Athens they could legally compel them to provide support. There were, however, limitations on how many children a particular family could support. In particular, there were reasons for not raising all female offspring. Girls without dowries did not have much chance of making a good marriage or even getting married at all, so fathers who knew they could not provide dowries for their daughters felt pressure to abandon them at birth, before they legally became members of the family. Until they had received names or been ritually inducted into the family, these infants had no real existence in the eyes of the community; "exposing them," as abandonment was called, was regarded as a morally neutral act. Many of these infants were "exposed" in clay pots or jars intended to serve as their coffins. Some exposed infants—possibly most—were raised by people who made a job of saving abandoned children and bringing them up for sale as slaves. Sometimes the fathers of dowryless girls set them up as concubines. Prostitution was state-regulated in some cities, and at Athens a percentage of the profits from brothels went to the building of a temple to Aphrodite. Conversely, it might make sense in some situations to raise a daughter rather

than a son. When a family already had a son, an additional son or sons would lead to depletion of the property. Greeks did not practice primogeniture—the transmission of the family property intact to the first-born son—but instead divided the property among the children. In a situation like this, a daughter could be married relatively less expensively, with the additional benefit of creating a new family alliance.

The Economy and Education   Most people worked at agriculture. This type of employment was demanding at certain times of the year but left much free time in the off-season. In Greece, as in most premodern societies, the majority of people were underemployed. Thus there was generally time at least for men for both politics and campaigning. Lifestyles were largely simple and undemanding: there was no fancy cooking, no fast-changing styles in either housing, furniture, transportation, or clothing. Greek culture was not characterized by disposability. Clothes were often passed on from one generation to the next. Dwellings and land similarly passed from parent to child, and formed the main basis of the survival of the next generation. Houses, even those of the rich, were plain and functional, not ostentatious. This is not to say that the wealthy did not display their wealth, but rather did so, for the most part, publicly, by performing liturgies (acts of public service) such as sponsoring choruses or gymnastic displays at festivals, paying for warships, or contributing special war taxes.

Education was largely informal: it was acquired as part of the normal process of growing up. Only later in Greek history did an educational system as an independent institution apart from the city come into existence. Much of a *polis* male's identity was formed in the public realm: meeting people in the agora, palestra, or gymnasium; attending public functions such as the courts, the assemblies, and festivals; or serving with the military. The private realm of work and the household, by contrast, did not have the kind of overwhelming importance or prestige it does in modern societies.

A *polis* was a partnership of partnerships, an alliance of families that was supposed to cooperate to make the whole system work. Roles of male and female, young and old, married and single were clearly subordinated to this goal and thus were clearly defined. There was a certain logical wholeness to the public realm: along with ownership of land and property went the duty of defending it when threatened from within or without. Inside the community defense of one's property meant having a wide network of friends to help in court cases and other emergencies; against outside enemies there was the phalanx consisting of groups of like-minded, self-interested property owners. Drills, maneuvers, exercises in the gymnasium, and discussions of war and peace in the assembly were logical, correlative aspects of self-defense. Civilian and military spheres complemented each other precisely: citizenship depended on ownership of land, and ownership of land enabled the citizen to participate in the defense of the *polis*. It is significant that as soon as the *polis* lost its ability to exercise its independent military power in the age after Alexander, gender roles also were affected.