

U3A

THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL POWER SERIES

COURSE 3

**THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL POWER:
From the Bronze Age to Alexander**

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From the Bronze Age to Alexander

The course will look at some of the changes in human society during the Bronze Age, through the Greek invention of "politics" to the Hellenistic period, focusing on the interaction between changing economic, technological, and social pressures and emerging ideas about politics.

Detailed course notes may be obtained from the office.

Background Reading

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by Homer are a good read and provide a useful background. Almost any general history of ancient Greece available in the Public Library system should give an adequate overview of the period.

The Bronze Age

The period of the rise of the great Bronze Age empires is also important as the period of the great Indo-European migrations. The Indo-European-speaking peoples appear to have originated on the east-European/west-Asian steppes south of the Ural Mountains and north of the Caucasus Mountains. Indo-European is a language-group (there is no necessary racial implication), and the speakers of these languages were pastoralists, metal-workers and farmers, who migrated into Italy, Greece, western and northern Europe, western China, Asia Minor, Persia, and North India around 2,000 B.C., to become the Latin, Greek, German, Slavic, Hittite, Persian, Pali, and Sanskrit-speaking (amongst many other languages) peoples. The nature and the scope of these migrations are the subject of a great deal of scholarly controversy. The Indo-European socio-political organization was based on the warrior-band, democracy by mass-meeting of the warriors, and a king chosen from the most able members of a limited number of high-status families. It seems likely that the high-status families were the owners of cattle, sheep and horse herds, whilst the lower-status families were the metal-workers and farmers, but this is far from certain. Their deities were the elemental forces of nature, including the motivators of human conduct and action. The heads of families were the priests of the family cults; where that cult was of major importance to the community, the priesthood conferred high status to even poor families; the king had particular sacral duties. Custom, perceived tradition, was the dominating social, political, legal, and moral force.

To set up the relative basic dates for the beginning of our period, "civilization", meaning a culture possessing some degree of urbanization, a social hierarchy, and a system of writing, can be said to have begun in Sumer (modern Iraq) by 3,600 B.C.; contact between Sumer and Egypt has been dated to 3,300 B.C., with Egyptian civilization beginning around 3,100 B.C. Cretan (Minoan) civilization, probably stimulated by contact from Egypt, began around 2,900 BC., with the Harappan civilization, stimulated by contact with Sumer beginning at about the same time. Civilization in the Chinese zone began about 2,500 B.C., or a little later; whether this was an independent development or a result of influence from Sumer is unclear; a recent discovery of a major urban culture in the south of the region may alter our perceptions about the beginnings of civilization in the area. It has long been postulated that the Sumerian culture was stimulated by a still earlier civilization which is thought to have been sited in the area now covered by the waters of the northern Persian Gulf.

All these civilizations were "palace cultures", with the political and economic life of the community focused on the residence of a king. The palace was at once the political centre of the community, a warehouse for the receipt and distribution of goods, and a focus for the religious life of the community. We cannot read the Cretan or Harappan script, so that our knowledge of these cultures is very limited: the Harappans were superb civil engineers, with drainage systems that were not to be equaled for thousands of years, and they carried on a lively trade with Sumer and the Indian hinterland; the Cretans were a seafaring culture which traded all over the eastern Mediterranean and with Egypt; their settlements were not fortified, suggesting that they were not warlike and did not fear aggression. With the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt in 3,100 B.C., Egypt seems to have

deliberately shut itself off from foreign influences. Egyptian society was apparently matrilineal, and a man, usually a close relative, even a brother, became pharaoh by marrying the queen, although occasionally a woman would rule as pharaoh in her own right. Sumerian society was patrilineal, and the endemic warfare fostered rule by the most able warrior leaders.

Sumer's wide trading network and porous borders opened the land to a broad variety of influences, and a Semitic-speaking presence in the population is apparent by about 2,800 B.C. Despite (or perhaps because of) their physical proximity (the inhabitants of a Sumerian community could see the buildings of the neighbouring community[s] from their own) Sumerian "cities" were at constant war with one another. Despite the logistical difficulties (their war-chariots were ox-carts with solid wheels, making a long-range strike-force a clumsy affair) the land of Sumer was for brief periods wholly or partially united under the rule of one city or another. C. 2,300 B.C., Sargon of Akkad (to the north-west of Sumer) embarked on a career of conquest and empire-building, uniting Akkad, Sumer, parts of Elam (modern Iran), and possibly even Cyprus with the aid of lighter, more mobile chariots and the recurved bow: this successful takeover of the core by the semi-periphery was itself conquered by invaders from the northern periphery in 2,190 B.C., and Sumer resumed its old pattern of internecine warfare with occasional unification, until the formation of the first Babylonian Empire under Hammurabi in 1,792 B.C. About one hundred years later, the Indo-European-speaking Hittites established their capital at Hattusas in central Anatolia (modern Turkey) and began trading local tin for textiles with the Assyrians. It is at this time that the Greek-speaking Mycenæan culture appears in mainland Greece. An increasing foreign element in the communities of the Nile delta, collectively called the

Hyksos, who were possibly Canaanite and Bedouin, overthrew Egyptian control with the aid of horse-drawn chariots and ruled from 1,700 to c. 1,600 B.C. This interregnum exacerbated Egyptian xenophobia.

The Hittites introduced a new concept into international relations, the peace-treaty. Instead of trying to hold conquests that would have been logistically difficult to control, or to save them from having to defend their territories from potential aggressors, they negotiated agreements with neighbouring rulers. These rulers often had difficulty understanding this innovation, and frequently, and very mistakenly, mistook a willingness to negotiate for weakness. The Hittite horse-drawn chariotry, military discipline, and superior (just possibly, iron) weapons dominated the Near East intermittently for hundreds of years.

Other Indo-European-speaking peoples enter the international relations of the civilized world around 1,600 B.C.: the Mitanni of Northern Mesopotamia, the people of Tarim in the west of Modern China, and the Aryan-speaking successors of the Harappan civilization, while the Hurrians and Kassites of Syria and Mesopotamia appear to have been ruled by an Indo-European-speaking aristocracy. C. 1,450 B.C. the Mycenæan Greeks established themselves on Crete, Cyprus, and Sicily: the Mycenæan script (called Linear B) has been deciphered, and is an early form of Greek. Treaties cemented by royal marriages were a feature of international relations by 1,400 B.C. From c. 1,300 B.C. the Phœnician cities of the Syrian coast were thriving and, to service the needs of trade, they invented an "alphabet" of consonants (no vowels): this was a quantum leap in information technology over the traditional syllabaries. Then, c. 1,250 B.C., the established order was swept away: a great mass movement of a variety of

peoples, "the peoples of the sea", destroyed the great Bronze Age civilizations of the Near East and Greece; only Egypt was able to halt their destructive advance. In Greece, Athens survived. In Palestine, the Phœnician cities survived and Mycenæans from Crete (the Philistines) and the Israelites established themselves. "China" was, like the Near East, a geographical area inhabited by peoples of many different cultures and languages, occasionally wholly or partly united under the dominance of one people: as with the Near East, invasions from the steppes often resulted in changes in the political landscape.

The patterns of power during the Bronze Age are repetitive. A people would appear on the scene from the periphery with new and superior weaponry and military techniques allied to a toughness consequent on a harsh lifestyle, establish itself on the semi-periphery for a time (gaining economic power by "taxing" trade and learning from the "core" culture) and then emerge as leaders of, or conquerors of, one or more of the core civilizations, ruling the new empire for a time, with more or less success, until a new invader achieved dominance. These incomers were usually few in number and formed an aristocracy over the original population. Some peoples, such as the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Kassites, were resilient, largely due to the strength of their self-identity (their ideology), and were resurgent over and over again. Another key to power was control over valued resources, or control over the trade routes. Political power was usually dependent on military success. It may be said that constant pressure on the core cultures from the nomadic pastoralists was the engine that drove the development of civilization. However, it must be emphasized that the pace of change was essentially very slow: the period of the great Bronze Age civilizations lasted for about 2,400 years. Social change over this period was minimal;

technological change diffused slowly; political systems were characterized by changes in rulers, not by changes in the mode of political organization.

The Bronze Age was an age of endemic violence, the age of the warrior-hero. Bronze was extremely expensive, and often the resources of an entire community would only be sufficient to equip one warrior in full panoply, an expense which could only be borne by the highest-status families. The hero would be borne to the battle by a horse-drawn chariot, often accompanied by an archer, spearman, or slinger and the driver. In earlier times, the massed charge of chariotry would attempt to break the line of the lightly-armed foot-soldiers; at later periods, the chariot would leave the hero at the point of battle, to withdraw to a safe distance and harass the opposition with missiles whilst the armoured hero, the tank of his day, hewed his way through the opposition. The chariot had to be ever-ready to sweep into the action to rescue the hero at need. This form of warfare was to persist (or possibly be re-invented) in some places until Roman times. The violence of the Bronze Age was a consequence of competition for scarce resources, especially arable land. During the Paleolithic Period there is little (but still some) evidence for violent conflict between human groups; rising populations resulted in the domestication of plants and animals in order to increase the resources available to support the groups within their territories, engendering the Neolithic period: the increased and stable food-supplies resulting from farming permitted further population expansion, often beyond the carrying-capacity of the land, this resulted in violent competition for scarce arable land; warfare took advantage of the new technology of bronze metal-forging. Settlements and forts appear on hilltops and inaccessible places all over Eurasia during this period.

Bronze had developed from the copper glazes used in high-quality pottery, and the high kiln-temperatures needed to achieve them. Some copper ores are naturally associated with arsenic or tin, thus providing a natural bronze when smelted. As experience and knowledge of metallurgy increased, deliberate and expertly-judged alloys with tin and other metals were manufactured. Improvements in the technology of smelting enabled higher temperatures to be achieved, leading to the capacity to smelt iron, a much commoner, and therefore cheaper, metal, by c. 1,340 B.C. The massive social and political disruptions of the end of the Bronze Age ushered in the Age of Iron, the "democratic metal".

The Development of the Greeks

The collapse of the Mycenæan palace culture is not well-understood. Mycenæans appear to have been amongst the "peoples of the sea" who brought down the Bronze Age cultures of the Near East and attacked Egypt. On the Greek mainland, the archæological record shows a reduction in the number of inhabited sites (that is, depopulation) and the destruction of those remaining towards the end of the Bronze Age; only Athens survived. The art of writing was lost as the palace culture which had supported the scribes disappeared. A flood of refugees colonized the seaboard of Asia Minor, according to tradition, mainly through Athens; Mycenæans from Crete settled on the Palestinian coastline: the Biblical Philistines. This movement is known as the Early Migration Period and began c. 1,100 B.C. At some time during this period, Greeks speaking the Dorian dialect moved down from the north and settled in some parts of Greece. The horse begins to appear as a riding animal at about this time. For future reference, one should note that this is also the period when the

Etruscans appear in Northern Italy, possibly as refugees from the disturbances in the Near East.

The Greek world represented by the Homeric epics can be roughly placed between 1,000 and 800 B.C., although "Homer" purports to portray the Mycenaean period. The society of Greece at this time is shown by archæology to be characterized by a settled village life, increasing prosperity, and a rising population. Greece is a rugged land, and the communities were separated from each other by mountains or sea, and were often quite different from each other in their local customs. Warfare, usually with the aim of harvesting another community's crops, was common. The Greeks were at once bound together by their common language and basic culture, and separated by the fierce independence of each community: the same word, *xenos*, means "enemy", "stranger", and "friend".

The "bards" of the Homeric period composed *in performance*, unlike the later "poets" who composed their works beforehand, often with the aid of writing. We are not here talking about an illiterate community, but a non-literate community which did not know the technique of writing. The bard belonged to the oral tradition, living and composing in a society where the written word was unknown. The songs of the bards were:

primarily a preservation device subserving
the cultural requirements of something like
a public Greek record and for a "book" of
moral and technical precedent which could
then be available to all Greeks for education
in the widest sense. (Robb, K., "Greek Oral
Memory and the Origins of Philosophy", in
The Personalist, No. 51, 1971, p. 7.

That is, social knowledge and social values were expressed for the purpose of, and made available to the Greeks for, transmission to

future generations by means of the performances of the bards. Every Greek knew the general story-lines. It was in the details of the performance and the interaction between the bard and the audience that the myth received its contemporary relevance. The interpretation of the story was only known in the moment of actual performance.

Because of the interaction between bard and audience the oral tradition was both ever-changing and extremely conservative. Myth was traditional knowledge; the preservation of what was known and trusted, incorporating the social experience of succeeding generations. A major problem in interpreting the language-use of other cultures is the use of metaphor: never more so than in dealing with oral or near-oral traditions, as the life-experience and mind-experience of such cultures is so very different from our own.

Ancient history is a very peculiar kind of history. Written records tend to be scanty, unreliable, open to diverse interpretation, or simply absent. For some periods our only sources of information are the results of archaeological excavations and the interpretation of works of art. For these reasons there is considerable scholarly controversy about "what" happened, when "it" happened, why "it" happened, even if "it" happened, and what any passage of writing really means. Why do some societies keep voluminous amounts of writings and others none at all? Most of our knowledge of ancient Greece comes from the mass of writings left by the Athenians, yet Corinth has been excavated down to bedrock without revealing any written records.

Society was based on the, *oikos*, "family", which included father, mother, children, lands, possessions, and slaves: the

"estate", plus the dead ancestors and the rituals and beliefs that constituted the family cult. The rituals and beliefs that constituted the family cults were of overriding importance. The *raison d' être* of the *oikos* was its continuance: everything, including marriage, was subordinated to the need to perpetuate the *oikos* through its male line, so that even otherwise-considered-incestuous relationships such as the marriage of women to their nearest agnatic male relatives were permitted to ensure the continuance of the individual *oikos*. Expulsion from the *oikos* would cut off the individual from the family worship and might call his citizenship into question. Thus citizenship was a function of birthplace and family connections. And the extinction of a family meant the loss of the worship of the immortals that were the focus of the family cults: and no community wished to risk the anger of the spurned immortals; the continuance of an *oikos* was a civic, and therefore a political issue.

The forum for political and legal decision-making was the *agora*, "assembly". (The word later came to mean the place where the assembly was held and later still the market-place.) The participants in the assembly were all mature males; "important" citizens were the heads of *oikai*; their wealth was the visible proof of their prowess in both peace and war: booty gained in war and presents received in peace. The chief man of the community was the *basileus*: not chief by virtue of his birth, or by election, but by tacit recognition of his leadership capacities. Assemblies were called at frequent, if irregular intervals, and were presided over by the *basileus*. No vote was taken. The "sense of the meeting" was demonstrated by acclamation of the speaker whose words met with general approval. Decision-making was performed within the terms of myth, of traditional knowledge. Judgment was arrived at by applying customary usage, as revealed in the songs

of the bards, to particular circumstances. The elders of the community, whose age gave them the greatest experience and the larger knowledge of myth, were the judges in legal matters. The traveling bards affirmed and re-affirmed mythic lore as they performed the epics that carried the tradition in the Greek communities.

In Homeric society moral and ethical terms were descriptive of the functions of persons. "Shame" is the result of failing to perform one's socially allotted rôle. "Praise" is the result of fulfilling one's socially allotted rôle. For example, the word *agathos* is usually translated as "good". But *agathos* is synonymous with "kingly, courageous, cunning", so that while in English it makes sense to say that someone is "good, but not kingly, courageous, or cunning", in Homeric Greek such a statement would be an unintelligible contradiction in terms. Again, *arête* is usually translated as "virtue": it means, however, the "good performance" of a function: the *arête* of a knife is its cutting edge; the *arête* of a warrior is courage; the *arête* of a *basileus* lies in his being *agathos*. That is, if certain factual conditions are satisfied, then certain evaluative propositions logically follow in Homeric discourse: recent philosophical discussion would deny this logical connection.

Hesiod was a didactic poet: that is, he was a teacher consciously concerned to instruct his audience through the medium of his poetry. The invention of the new technique of alphabetic writing enabled Hesiod to compose his work with the aid of the written word.

Greek traders had adapted the Phœnician consonantal alphabet to their own language, using some left-over signs to represent

vowels. For the first time, the sound of the spoken word was represented by the written word. It is also noteworthy that writing entered Greek, not as the communication system of a privileged class, but as the communication system of the lower middle class. The technology of alphabetic writing permitted the poet to minimize the "story" content of his work and stress the instructional aspect, as Hesiod was no longer solely dependent on traditional myth and its content for the expression of his ideas. He was able to visually manipulate the words as well as recalling them from memory and testing them orally. Thus Hesiodic expression is more concentrated than Homer's, and Hesiod's poems, although composed in the same epic hexameters as Homer's, are much shorter than the Homeric epics.

The introduction of the technique of alphabetic writing was not the only change which took place in Greek society between Homer's time and that of Hesiod. Rising populations had forced some people into the cultivation of marginal hillside land, where even unremitting toil was often insufficient to gain subsistence, forcing some persons into risky trading ventures in order to supplement their incomes. In Homer's time, trade - socially, poorly regarded - was in the hands of the Phœnicians: now the Greeks were involved in the sea-trade, spurred on by poverty. Hesiod's time was the early period of Greek (wooden) temple building, as economic want caused people to turn to religion (c. 800-750 B.C.). New deities, unknown to Homer, make their appearance in Hesiod's thought. And the assumed authority of the *basileus* was no longer taken for granted: many citizens were not happy with the administration of justice. Social change, brought on by economic change, resulted in population movement as poverty forced people to seek for a place where they could find a sufficient livelihood. This social change resulted in increased

religious activity and considerable pressure being placed on the political institutions.

Some Comments on Early Greek Thought

Politics, religion, law, morality, and tradition were as yet undifferentiated categories, so that a comment on law, for example, was at once a comment on religion, morality, tradition, and politics. The Greek deities were personified concepts that were perceived as cosmic powers. The ordering of these concepts into "families" - in Hesiod and with later Greek thinkers - was an attempt to describe a relationship between concepts. For instance, when in Hesiod's *Theogony* (886-900), Hesiod portrays Zeus, the ruler of the gods, as swallowing his wife, *Metis*, "Cunning Intelligence", so that he, rather than his wife, should give birth to *Athene*, the act shows Zeus taking into himself the capacity for acting wisely through foresight. The act also shows the assumption of the power of procreativity by the male, by implication justifying patriarchal dominance of the family unit. The birth of *Athene* (*Athene* is the goddess of the *polis*, ["city-state"?) and hence of both peace and war, that is, politics) from Zeus' head shows the *polis* as generated from wisdom by the dominant male. While the personification of abstract qualities stemmed from the need to describe qualities that were both non-material and non-representational, the genealogies were attempts to express relationships between these qualities. Such genealogies did not form an immutable religious canon, but were individual expressions of perceived connections between ideas.

The Archaic Period began c. 750 B.C., and was characterized by rising populations, the emergence of the *polis* as the typical Greek political entity, the development of *hoplite* (heavily-

armoured infantry armed with long spears and fighting in close order) warfare, institutionalized homosexuality, and the Second Colonization Movement.

An increase in the volume of trade had resulted in a general, though uneven, expansion of wealth. Associated with these changes, developments in iron and bronze tool-forging resulted in a large section of the male population being able to bear arms, previously the prerogative of the wealthy. *Hoplite* tactics, the mass charge of heavily-armoured infantry, began to appear in warfare at about the same time. The homosexual bonds which united men beyond family loyalties gave the *hoplite phalanx* great cohesion. These circumstances, taken together, ensured that a high proportion of Greek men had the weapons, the loyalty to each other, and the fighting experience to enable them to challenge the existing order, as represented by the *basileis*, for a greater share in political and legal decision-making.

Populations had for some time been rising above the carrying-capacity of the land. As the marginal cultivations failed, (through bad seasons, or over-cropping) the areas in the immediate vicinity of easily-defended geographical locations - where the dominant landowners, the *basileis*, lived - began to gain in population as destitute farmers looked to the market and political centres of their communities for a livelihood. The *polis* began to develop. The *polis* was, essentially, a political foundation where the heads of families manœuvred for social and political status. The presence of a surplus population of armed, experienced fighting-men, who often demanded a re-distribution of land or otherwise challenged the existing order, created pressures on local resources and political institutions. The Greek answer to the problem was colonization. The focus of colonization was

arable land; the centres of settlement were the Black Sea area and *Magna Græcia* (Sicily and South Italy). The surplus (male) population (together with volunteers from other *poleis*) was sent out to found a new *polis* in a place where each man could have sufficient land; wives were usually taken, willingly or no, from the local population. The land was, in the first place, evenly divided and the colony was usually independent of the mother-*polis*.

From this time (roughly 750 B.C.) the role of purely oral discourse in the articulation of knowledge and values gradually diminished. But an audience for the written word had to be created, and it was to be over three hundred years before Plato could consciously write for an audience of readers rather than an audience of listeners, so that the composer had to compose for public performance even though the process of composition was no longer a part of the performance. The eventual development of prose-writing accompanied the establishment of history and philosophy as forms of discourse. Even so, readers read *aloud*, so that the rhythms of writing remained the rhythms of speech for over two thousand years.

Social change, obvious to all, challenged the "timeless present" world-view promulgated by myth. The Greeks became aware that the past was different from the present (social, political, and economic change was happening quickly enough for people to be aware of the fact - unusual in the ancient world) and that the future might be different again. This awareness was heightened as the written word permitted the values and ideas of one generation to be "frozen" and preserved for future generations. The contrast between past and present ideas can be pointed up by considering the character of Homer's hero, Odysseus, a polymath who could turn

his hand to anything (Odysseus is Homer's ideal Greek) in contrast to the fragment from Archilochos (c. 660 B.C.):

The fox knows many tricks, the hedgehog only one.
One good one.

In other words, you can't trust someone who is too smart. The brilliant all-rounder, an "aristocratic" type, was no longer an object of universal admiration. Such obvious differences in attitudes eventually brought forth inquiry into such matters as what was the "right" attitude.

It was in the Archaic Period (the period from 750 B.C. to 500 or 450 B.C.) that the Greeks developed the forms of thought and ways of social organization that we think of as being uniquely Greek. The "town" of the *polis* was, in origin, the place where the dominant landowners lived. These "aristocrats" - by now a hereditary group - monopolized the *polis*, controlling its military and political offices and functions. In time - the Later Archaic Period - the area inside the *polis* walls began to provide a site for an independent industrial and commercial activity which was to some extent cut off from agriculture.

By extending the military privileges of the aristocracy to the entire body of small-scale peasant landowners who made up the civic community, the *polis* itself took over the warrior function. The *polis* was a community of warriors and military organization was an extension of, and continuous with, civic organization. The military was the assembly under arms. This equivalence between a man's military function and his citizenship is underlined by the fact that when, some time later, Athens became a naval power, and the poorest citizens, the *thetes*, became militarily important as rowers in the fleet, they gained almost full citizenship rights.

The Greeks saw warfare as the normal expression of rivalry between states. By their confrontation with one another, the *poleis* were brought together in a community united by its language, religion, customs, forms of social life, and ways of thought. The *xenos* was a partner in social intercourse: the enemy is the stranger, *xenos*; this term also applies to the guest who is welcomed to the hearth to establish a link of hospitality between one house and another.

This recognizably "Greek" world does not represent any radical break from the world of Homer, and the Homeric epics remained the basis for popular moral and ethical education until at least the 4th century B.C. In the Homeric world we encounter for the first time a form of thought which was to become dominant in the Archaic Period: the mode of polar opposites. Qualities were only conceived if opposites were conceived at the same time. The tension of opposites is characteristic of Archilochos' poetry. With the development of philosophy in the second half of the Archaic Period, in the intellectual world of the Greek philosopher - in contrast to the thinkers of India or China - there is a radical dichotomy between being and becoming, between the sensible and the intelligible. It is not simply that a series of oppositions between antithetical terms is being set up. These contrasting concepts which are grouped into couples together form a complete system of antimonies defining two mutually exclusive spheres of reality. On the one hand there is the sphere of being, of the one, the unchanging, of the limited, of true and definite knowledge; on the other, the sphere of becoming, of the multiple, the unstable and the unlimited, of the oblique and changeable opinion.

In this intellectual world, mythical personifications of abstract ideas were never distinct from real life usage: Alkman's

poetry, with its numerous usages of proper names, demonstrates a direct equation of name and thing.

As the first flush of activity in the Second Colonization Period subsided, the new foundations began to consolidate internally - economically, politically, and socially. The geographic range of the new foundations stimulated trade from Spain in the west to the entire seaboard of the Black Sea in the north, together with sites on the North African coast. The focus of colonization was arable land - few *entrepôts* became *poleis* - but many foundations grew wealthy on trade. The Eastern Greek *poleis* in Asia Minor also grew rich from economic activity. The *poleis* of mainland Greece - still overpopulated despite colonization and forced to import grain or starve - also engaged in long-distance trade. A new kind of citizen (residents of foreign birth, *metics*, could not be citizens) emerged, enriched by manufacturing and commerce. The land-based wealth of the "aristocrats" came under challenge from the rising merchant/manufacturing class; both groups were threatened by an increasingly impoverished poorer citizenry, who demanded a redistribution of land, publication of the laws, and a share in political power. It is at about this time (c. 650 B.C.) that coinage was invented in Lydia (Turkey): a development which stimulated trade, but **hid the exchange of goods and services from those not privy to the exchange.** The centre of western civilization still lay in the Near East, where the Assyrians were once again dominant; Greek culture was very much on the periphery.

Statements on moral and ethical matters, and about the nature and origin of the cosmos, had hitherto been attached to, and expressed in terms of, traditional religion and mythology. While the poets continued to express their ideas in terms of myth, from

a little after 600 B.C. thinkers appeared whose ideas were independent and self-supporting, despite their continued use of the language of myth and their frequent appeals to the authority of tradition: these were the philosophers, who asserted that the *cosmos* originated in an original unity, and that this substance, now appearing in multifarious manifestations, was still the basis of all being. The models for human conduct had hitherto been asserted and expressed by traditional myth in poetry (song); the philosophers attempted to arrive at such models by reason. The two forms of discourse, poetry and philosophy, continued to compete for pre-eminence as the source of authority for moral and ethical values for some centuries. The reasons for the origins of philosophy may be sought in factors which were unique to that particular time and place: Greece in the 7th and 6th centuries B.C.

The Origins of Philosophy

Trade and colonization brought the Greek world into contact with cultures which used shamanic practices. The evidence for shamanism in Greek thought is sporadic and scanty, but it is there. Two features of shamanism are important here: the authority claimed by one who has visited the spirit-world and the concept of the *cosmos* as a unified whole. In myth, Herakles, Orpheus and Odysseus are amongst the figures that have shamanic characteristics. A few Greek philosophers (Pythagoras and Parmenides amongst them) seem to have had shamanic influences.

The order which the Greeks perceived in the natural world (season following season in due measure, etc) was in contrast with the disorder and strife evident in the *poleis*. The rising

merchant class was in conflict with the "aristocracy" for a share in political and legal decision-making; the small-scale farmers and other "poor" also demanded a share in the government of the *polis*, and often a re-distribution of land as well. Frequently an "aristocrat", heading one of the three factions, would usurp political power and establish a "tyranny", banishing his rivals, who would continue to conspire to overthrow him or his dynasty. Blood was shed. The Greeks had invented Politics, the notion that the very *form* of government could be altered, that there were alternatives to rule by a monarch, or a group of aristocrats. Politics was now not merely about who should rule, but also about **how rule should be organized**. The new ideas were expressed, hesitantly and obliquely at first, in writing.

The Greek script made possible the reproduction of all speech sounds while keeping the necessary signs to less than thirty. As writing entered Greek culture through the medium of trade, it was never, as was usual in earlier cultures, the monopoly of a priestly ruling class.

The works of Homer and Hesiod remained the basis for notions about "right conduct" for some hundreds of years. New ideas were expressed in terms of, and often in the language of, the Homeric and Hesiodic corpus. Philosophy replaced the anthropomorphic capriciousness of the gods with impersonal regularized powers: the inherent order of the *cosmos* provided the paradigm for human social relations.

Thales, who appears to have been active at the beginning of the 6th century B.C., was an almost exact contemporary of Solon of Athens, and came from Miletus in Ionia. He was perceived in the popular mind as the ideal man of science, was credited with having

introduced mathematics to Greece, to have possessed considerable engineering skills, and to have contributed to navigation. Thales' claim to be the founder of philosophy, however, lies in the tradition that he asserted the first principle (or primary substance) of all things to be water.

There is some basis in myth for this claim. Homer (Iliad XIV, 201) says: "And *Okeanos*, first parent of all the gods, and their mother, *Tethys*"; Hesiod makes the pair the parents of a host of personified deities which are descriptive of conditions of human well-being: Wealth, Sex-appeal, Charm, etc. *Okeanos* is ocean; *Tethys* is sea. The rational process that led Thales to make his claim is conjectural. The point is that Thales was the first - to our knowledge - to claim (a) that there is some **one** thing at the basis of all nature (b) to explain the *variety* of nature as the *modification* of something in nature (c) **without** having recourse to gods endowed with special powers acting in sexual terms to explain the evolution of the cosmos. If Thales wrote down this thesis - and he very probably did not - the writing has not come down to us. Thales is also claimed to have asserted that a magnet possessed a soul. At this time the Greeks perceived the *psyche*, "soul", as the cause of movement in animal entities. Thales' reasoning appears to have been that (a) *psyche* causes movement (b) iron moves when in proximity to a magnet (c) therefore a magnet - which has caused movement - has a *psyche*. If the tradition is true, the derivation of one statement has rested on another: an argument has been advanced. Again, our evidence for this thesis rests with later tradition and not on any writings of Thales' own.

Tradition has it that Anaximander was a younger friend of Thales and that he wrote a "book". Rejecting Thales' notion of

water as the primary substance, Anaximander substituted *apeiron*, "the unlimited":

the original material of existing things; further, the source from which existing things derive their existence is also that to which they return at their destruction, according to Necessity; for they give Justice and make reparation to one another for their injustice, according to the arrangement of Time.

Anaximander has here denied that any perceptible thing can be the basis of the natural *cosmos* and asserted that perceptible things consisted of individuated opposites. All activity governed by *apeiron* was reciprocal. This model of the *cosmos* accounted for change, yet portrayed a stable and continuous *cosmos* which excluded the capriciousness of the gods.

Anaximenes was a younger contemporary of Anaximander. Anaximenes abandoned the *apeiron* of Anaximander and returned to the notion of a substance, in this case *aer*, as the basis of all things:

As our soul, being air, holds us together and controls us, so does wind (or breath) and air enclose the whole world.

Air can be denser or rarer, hotter or cooler, and still remain the same substance, whereas *apeiron*, when it has become differentiated into the components of the *cosmos*, is no longer "unlimited". At first sight Anaximenes' rejection of an unlimited, imperceptible phenomenon as the basis of the *cosmos* in favour of a thing known to experience seems like a regression to Thales' thought, but it is really an advance on both Thales and Anaximander. Air is "one and infinite" and is not "undefined" but definite: in its rarefied form it is fire; as it thickens it becomes wind, then clouds, then

earth, then stones: all other bodies come into being from these. By classifying things according to their relative density, Anaximenes produced a unifying hypothesis which explained the genesis of things and linked the disparate entities of the perceptible *cosmos*. Again, the gods are not called upon to explain any of the factors of the origin of the *cosmos*.

The careers of these three philosophers were set in the background of political, social, and economic turmoil in early 6th century Greece. For these Milesian thinkers the Persian Empire grew from a threat in Thales' day to be the conquering rulers of Anaximenes. Between 560 and 525 B.C., the Persians had expanded from a peripheral Iranian population to the greatest and most efficient empire yet known; by 510 B.C., the Greek *poleis* of Asia Minor were under Persian rule. The impression is that philosophy was an attempt to discover order, form, unity, and stability in an increasingly chaotic and changing world. While it seems obvious that increased contact with the ancient cultures of the East had a stimulating affect on Ionian (Eastern) Greek thought, the work of these philosophers is unique in the ancient world at that time in explaining the natural world without having recourse to the activities of divine beings.

On the other side of the Aegean Sea, at Athens, Solon was announcing his views on justice and order, and implementing them. Solon viewed justice as a universal principle: the order inherent in the cosmos was the overriding principle in ordering the affairs of mortals: injustice was a human disruption of the harmony of the god-established cosmos. In Solon's thought, the gods are symbols for the operation of natural forces - in Homer, they were the natural forces - and the symbolism is universal rather than particular.

In 510 B.C., Athens expelled its tyrants and instituted a democracy, rule by the mass-meeting of the male citizens. Solon's political reforms, which enabled ordinary citizens to share in the exercise of political power, had been maintained under the tyrants, who only repressed their aristocratic rivals. In 490 B.C., the Persians invaded Greece. The Athenian *hoplites* shattered the Persian army at Marathon, an event which at once validated the democracy and conferred great status on Athens. Two hundred and fifty years of constant warfare had developed the Greek *hoplite* into a devastating military force which was to dominate warfare (with some modifications) until its eventual defeat by the Roman legion (itself a modification of the *hoplite* formation. In 480 B.C., the Persians returned, to be defeated by a Greek coalition at the naval battle of Salamis (with a largely Athenian navy) and the land battle of Plataea. The Greek world was suddenly a core of power, with the Athenians and Spartans as the cores within that world; the Athenians being dominant at sea, the Spartans being dominant on land. But Athenian democracy had to contend with a far more complex and sophisticated society than the primitive war-band portrayed in the Homeric epics.

What are the rightful aims of man-in-society? By what means can such aims be achieved? How can we know what conduct is moral and ethical - what is "right conduct"? These questions were of some importance in classical Athens. In the Homeric world the answers were to be found in myth. But Greek society had changed, and moreover, unusually in the ancient world, it had changed at a sufficient pace for the Greeks to be aware of the changes. The real world no longer fitted the "ideological superstructure". An historical awareness had evolved, very different from the "timeless present" of myth. The other question that had to be

answered was: who (the possessor of which knowledge) had the authority to give right answers to the difficult questions about moral and ethical matters?

The main contenders in the debate were the poets, the historians, the sophists, and the philosophers.

The poets, in the persons of the dramatists, had the weight of the bardic tradition on their side. As in the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, stories from myth were combined with religious interpretation to throw light on the proprietary or otherwise, of contemporary events, in this case the limitation on the power of the *Ereopagos* (council of elders?) to trying murder cases.

The historians, represented by Herodotos and Thukydides, attempted to establish norms of "right behaviour" in prose-writing which drew moral lessons from a cause-and-effect view of human relationships in an historical context.

The sophists were teachers, not "seekers after truth". (An over-simplification, but it will do for now.) Their subject-matter was "how to succeed in public life". Noting that notions of "right behaviour" varied from place to place, the sophists denied that there were norms of right behaviour and asserted that moral and ethical values were relative. The sophists taught rhetoric, "the art of persuasion", by which means success in public life could be assured. Such success was the rightful aim of man-in-society. Morals and ethics were mere convention.

With Sokrates, the philosophers turned their attention from the physical *cosmos*, and applying their conclusions about it to civil society, to direct examination of moral and ethical matters.

Sokrates was an oral teacher who left no writings. Our knowledge of his philosophy is derived from the writings of the playwright, Aristophanes, the retired general, Xenophon, and the philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Where these, often quite disparate, accounts coincide, we can reasonably assert such points to be truly Sokratic.

Sokrates was a *hoplite*, a citizen-soldier, whose toughness, endurance, courage and calmness in adversity were famous in his own time. In private life he was a stonemason. In public life he served on the *boule*, the council which determined the business to be brought before the Assembly, and was its chairman (nominal head-of-state) at least once and probably twice. Sokrates was finally executed by the democracy for "impiety" and "corrupting the youth", that is, for asking too many awkward questions and encouraging others to do so, and therefore challenging more traditional ways of thinking. With Sokrates philosophers began to examine moral and ethical problems directly, not as a minor spin-off from some cosmic jigsaw puzzle.

Power in the Classical Greek World

The pace of change in the ancient world was generally very slow. In ancient Greece, unusually, the pace of change was sufficiently fast for people to realize that change had taken place.

The Greek *polis* was a self-governing, small territorial community of urban centre and agricultural hinterland, in which every male member of a landowning family, aristocrat or peasant, born in the territory, possessed freedom and citizenship. The *polis* was the community, rather than the territory.

Athens was not typical in these developments. Athens was an ancient foundation, dating from Mycenæan times. Being already established, Athens did not go through the process of *polis*-formation: rather, its local dominance stunted or prevented the development of other *poleis* within the large (for Greece) Attic territory. Also, Athens did not take part in the Second Colonization Movement, partly because its larger-than-usual land area could absorb some increase in the agricultural population, and partly because some of its marginal population could find off-season work in the local silver mines, as well as in the burgeoning pottery industry, and in trade.

Unlike early modern Europe, ancient Greece had no religious bias against economic prosperity to slough off: on the contrary, wealth lent both social and political status to its possessor, and through the system of liturgies [donations by the wealthy for community purposes] benefited the society. An increased volume of navigation, created by trade both with the "barbarians" and with the Greek colonies, resulted in an uneven expansion of wealth in the Greek world. The invention of alphabetic writing facilitated communication and, with common religious beliefs and other cultural practices, resulted in a distinctively "Greek" world. Greek literacy fixed and reinforced cultural identity, forming the first shared, inter-community, cross-class, stabilized culture of known history, shared by citizens and their families wherever Greek was spoken.

At Athens, a large proportion of the non-wealthy population benefited in wages from state spending on such things as warships, temples, and other public works as early as 540 B.C., while artisans and traders benefited from state protection of trade

routes. Peasant smallholders on semi-marginal hillside smallholdings, unable to grow grain, benefited from cheap grain imports and a ready export market for their oil and wine. Navigation for trade widened the area from which Athens could draw its grain supplies, thus enabling the surplus rural population to settle in the urban centre as artisans, manufacturing weapons, fine pottery, perfumed oils, and other goods for domestic and local consumption as well as export. *Metics*, resident aliens (including freed slaves), swelled the commercial population, but were jealously excluded from citizenship after the institution of the Athenian democracy, thus permitting their exploitation through taxation.

The income of the Athenian state during the 5th century B.C. (from the state-owned silver mines, tribute paid by subject allies, and taxation) enabled the state to employ citizens in public works, as jurors, and as rowers in the fleet, thus raising the general standard of living and stimulating the economy. Ancient Greece, like pre-EEC modern Europe, was a multi-state system, and Athens, like Britain in 19th century Europe, was the leading economic and naval power within that system by the middle of the 5th century B.C.

Greek social organization was formed by overlapping power networks. The democratic *polis*, the product of peasant proprietors with iron ploughs and iron weapons, combined the marketplace and the military organization in a political system, then developed integration between agricultural production and trade, and eventually generated naval power based on (at Athens and some other *poleis*) citizen oarsmen. The entire Greek cultural identity and multi-state system covered an enormous territorial space, including seas, and was a geopolitical, cultural, and linguistic

unit with its own infrastructure of power. Literacy, diplomacy, trade, population exchange, religious commonalities, and overall similarities in customs stabilized linguistic similarities into an enduring, shared, and extensive community for the first time in history.

Like early modern Europe, the ancient Greek multi-state system was characterized by a steady increase in economic growth, improved communications, state support for trade, and the international movement of funds. Although some *poleis*, such as Syracuse, may have been wealthier than Athens and others, such as Sparta, more powerful in purely military terms, it is doubtful whether any Greek *polis* rivaled classical Athens in terms of the totality of its combined resources in population, economic activity, naval power, the ideological power it derived from its pre-eminent part in the struggle against Persia, and its position as "the school of Hellas". Although the parallels are far from exact, Athens in the 5th century B.C. - and a good deal of the 4th - held a position within the Greek multi-state system closely analogous to the position held by Britain within the 19th century A.D. European multi-state system. Neither Britain nor Athens were "typical" cultures within their respective multi-state systems: both were characterized by rising populations, the employment of a large part of the (formally exclusively) agricultural workforce in industry, the formation of a mass-consumption market from within its citizenry, the production of an agricultural surplus (oil and wine but not grain at Athens), and for both the chief highway was the sea and the pace of social change was rapid and readily perceptible.

To the north of Greece lived a number of peoples who spoke a variety of dialects of Greek, worshipped the same deities as the

Greeks, but were culturally simple pastoralists/peasants: Molossians, Pæonians, Macedonians, etc. Some of these, the Macedonians, for example, were ruled by royal families of Greek origin. In 356 B.C., Phillip II was elected king of Macedon, and began to carve out a Balkan empire with the aid of tactics and equipment which he modified from Greek models: his combined use of the new phalanx, heavy cavalry, siege machinery, and other military arms was superlative, and his forces unstoppable. At the battle of Chæronea in 338 B.C., Phillip defeated the combined forces of Thebes and Athens and was soon master of Greece: the mainland Greeks elected him to be the leader of a Pan-Hellenic League which had the aim of liberating the Greeks of Asia Minor from Persian rule. On Phillip's assassination in 336 B.C., his son, Alexander, was elected King of the Macedonians and he succeeded to Phillip's other offices. Greek culture had formed on the periphery of civilization; the expansion of the Persian Empire had drawn the Greeks onto the semi-periphery, and now the semi-periphery was about to take over the core of Western civilization.

The Hellenistic Period

Following the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War of the 5th century B.C., internecine warfare continued between the Greek *poleis*, and modifications to existing military tactics improved the effectiveness of Greek fighting forces. The Athenian general, Iphicrates, demonstrated the superiority, in certain circumstances, of lightly-armed infantry, with longer swords and spears, against *hoplites*. Epaminondas of Thebes introduced a much longer spear to the *hoplite* soldier, and a heavy (fifty men deep) wedge of troops on one wing of the infantry line. The importance of *esprit de corps* to the effectiveness of troops was underlined by the successes of the Theban "sacred band" (371 B.C.). Phillip

of Macedon, a hostage at Thebes in his youth, critically observed these developments before his election as regent, and then king, of Macedon in 356 B.C. Plato founded his Academy in 385 B.C. (it was to exist for over 900 years), and Athens' position as the intellectual core of the Greek world was confirmed by the activities of the many philosophers, historians, poets and sophists who lived and worked there.

The conquests of Philip II of Macedon revolutionized Balkan life. His foundations of cities brought urbanization to the area, providing economic foci for what had, in general, been an area based on transhumanance. The peace enforced by bringing the whole heavily populated area, which contained numbers of disparate and traditionally hostile peoples, under one rule, stimulated production and trade. The democratically-elected king owned all mineral deposits and forests in his empire, which was, unlike Greece, rich and self-sufficient in natural resources, providing large revenues from taxation. The founding populations of the cities consisted of discharged troops, who provided an effective military presence at all these strategic points. Phillip modified the *hoplite* armament by substituting a 16-foot pike for the traditional spear in his eight-or-sixteen-man-deep *phalanx*, and providing heavier armour; heavy cavalry was used to devastating effect, and his engineers invented new machines for siege warfare. Where Phillip was a master of infantry warfare, his young son, Alexander, showed an early genius for the use of heavy cavalry: it was Alexander who, at the age of eighteen, led the cavalry charge which wiped out the Theban "sacred band" at Chæronea in 338 B.C. Alexander also added an early talent for the extremely fast movement of troops to the Macedonian military capacity.

In the Middle East, the Persians had been masters of a vast Empire since adding the Babylonian Empire to their other conquests in 539 B.C. At the time of Alexander's accession to the Macedonian throne, aged 20, the Persian Empire stretched from Anatolia (Turkey) in the West to the borders of modern Pakistan in the East, included Egypt in the South and spread northwards to the Aral Sea and Lake Balkhash, including parts of what is now Western China: the eastern and northernmost parts of the Empire were only under nominal Persian control. The Great King ruled this vast Empire through a system of governors (called satraps) of provinces (called satrapies); each satrap administered the civil, military, and financial affairs of the satrapy, and was directly responsible to the Great King. Rapid communications were possible through a system of relays of mounted messengers who sped between stations on the "King's roads". The armed forces which the Persian Empire could muster were enormous but unwieldy, being drawn from all over the Empire from peoples using a wide variety of tactics and armaments in their own traditional ways, and could take many months to muster: Persian garrisons held down an empire of subject-peoples who were always prone to revolt. The economic resources of the Empire were likewise vast, but often disrupted by local disturbances and embezzled by local administrators: the wealth of the Persian Empire was amassed and hoarded by the Great King and his nobles.

Plato had asserted that good government could only be achieved when philosophers became kings: that is, when properly educated people were rulers; his students were advisers to statesmen throughout the fringes of the Greek world and one of them, Aristotle, was responsible for the training of the philosopher-king, Alexander.

Alexander's conquests, which were partly journeys of exploration, united and extended the Persian Empire to include most of the area of modern Pakistan, and established firm political control over areas which had been only nominally controlled by the Persians. Alexander was welcomed as a liberator by many of the Great King's former subjects, including the Jews and the Egyptians: he usually forbade looting and pillaging, and honoured local religious customs. King of Macedon, Hegemon of the Thessalian League, Hegemon of the League of Greek States, Pharaoh of Egypt, King of Asia, Alexander held unprecedented, if sometimes conflicting, political power; he did not allow his Macedonians to become a privileged ruling class over his Empire, but tended to regard all the peoples under his rule as equals, against the cultural chauvinism of the Greeks and Macedonians who held that barbarians were fit only to be slaves. Alexander divided the rule of each satrapy between a civil governor, a financial official, and a military commander - often local people - each a check on the other two, each directly responsible to himself: corruption and other abuses were rare and quickly punished. Local forms of government were usually maintained, though Alexander had a preference for democracy in the Greek communities. Troops from all over the Empire were trained in Macedonian military methods, and many Persians and other non-Macedonians were given high command.

Alexander had begun his career of city-building during his father's reign, and founded *poleis* wherever he went: the North-Eastern part of the Empire had been inhabited by nomadic tribesmen: it was to become "the land of a thousand cities". The new cities were founded with a population of time-expired soldiers, and sick-and-injured troops, usually Greeks; like the cities of the Balkan Empire, the new cities were strategic garrisons, the focus for economic development, and diffusers of

Græco-Macedonian culture. Lavish spending on a variety of projects put the hoarded gold of the Persian Empire into circulation, stimulating economic activity. Greek trade expanded throughout Asia, Asian trade expanded throughout the Greek world, and Alexander caused the transfer of stock, fruits, vegetables, and other crops throughout the Empire, improving breeds and the diets of his subjects. At the time of his death, Alexander was preparing to include the Arabian Peninsula and coastal Ethiopia in his Eastern Empire, and plans were afoot to conquer the Western Mediterranean, where he proposed to reverse his Eastern policy by founding new cities with Asian populations: his vision was one of a united, multi-cultural world. Exploration was to continue: the circumnavigation of Africa was planned.

The Persian land communication system was maintained and expanded and, with the entire Eastern Mediterranean and the coastline between the Persian Gulf and India under one rule, sea-borne communication was facilitated. Babylon was the geographical centre, and the core, of Alexander's Empire: it is probable that, if the conquest of the Western Mediterranean had proceeded, the core would have shifted to Macedon.

The personal ideological power wielded by Alexander was considerable but, in the absence of effective heirs, died with him. The ideological power of Greek culture was a unifying factor throughout the Empire. Social power was diffuse and localized, as no one group possessed such power outside a limited area.

The death of Alexander did not prevent the maintenance of the economic unification of his conquests. The Empire was divided between Alexander's generals, but the resulting continual warfare, being waged by professional armies, tended to have a minimal

effect on civilian populations. This Hellenistic civilization was an international fusion of Græco-Macedonian culture with the various Asian cultures, although the Greek communities resisted social integration with their non-Greek neighbours; the cores of the region constantly shifted with the ebb and flow of political boundaries. The international movement of large numbers of people dislocated many persons from family ties, and the individual became important for the first time in history. Relationships between the individual and the political community were altered, as people were forced to come to terms with the universal power of monarchs who ruled large territorial units, rather than taking part in purely local politics: democratic governments were suppressed.

Philosophy in the time of Alexander and his successors, with the thought of the Aristotelians, the Platonic school, Diogenes, Epicurus, and Zeno (all stemming from the teaching of Sokrates), turned to the development of the self, in a society where important political decisions were made by the governments of empires, rather than by local communities. These philosophies, especially Cynicism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism (particularly Stoicism) were taken up by the Romans when that people expanded to the East, and became key elements in the development of thought and religion.