

## CHAPTER X

### THE CITY-STATE AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

**116. The Family and the Gens.** — The Greek family, unlike the Oriental, was monogamic. The complete household consisted of father, mother, children, and slaves. The family was not only a social but also a religious institution. In Attica, it was under the care of Zeus and Apollo. In this connection Apollo is spoken of as “ancestral,” in the belief that he was the common ancestor of all the Athenians.

Family life will be described in another chapter; <sup>1</sup> for the present we need to notice only its general character and its relation to the state. When the sons grew up, they married and founded new families, as among us; and as in the modern world, the families which had sprung from a common ancestor often lost all connection with one another. Sometimes, however, they kept up relations. In that case the descendants of a common ancestor organized themselves into an association called a *gens*,<sup>2</sup> with officers, common property, and treasury. Each *gens* had also one or more gods to whom offerings were made on fixed festival days. At such a time the members held a religious and social reunion. The nobles laid greatest stress on descent, and were in a better position to keep up relationships. Hence the *gentes* were mostly limited to them.

**117. The Phratry and the Tribe.** — Several families (not *gentes*) united to form a phratry — “brotherhood.” As the word itself indicates, the members considered themselves related in blood. Many were in fact kinsmen, though some strangers were admitted to the association. Like the *gens*, therefore, the phratry resembled a large family. It had officers, common property, and periodical reunions of the members for social intercourse and for the worship of Zeus and Athena, the phratric deities. Unlike the *gens*, however,

<sup>1</sup> Ch. XVIII. iii.

<sup>2</sup> Greek form *gen'os*, plural *gen'ē*.

the phratry was political as well as social and religious. All citizens, both men and women, had to belong to these societies. When the state admitted new citizens, it assigned them to various phratries, which thereupon accepted them by an act somewhat like that of adoption. The chief political duty of the phratry was to watch over the citizenship, to keep it untainted by alien blood and religious impurity. It admitted children, both girls and boys, after a strict inquiry as to the legality of their birth; for any irregularity, especially in the marriage of the parents, corrupted the citizen blood. On membership in the phratry depended all the civil and political rights of the citizens. In the study of this exclusive association we begin to appreciate the vast difference between the Greek and the modern state.

The tribe was a group of phratries. Doubtless in the far-off beginnings of the race many tribes were formed naturally by the union of kindred phratries, but in the historical age they were created by the state. The government usually divided the country into districts called tribes, and assigned to each the phratries of the district. However artificial it might be, the members, accustomed to no other bond but that of blood and religion, came soon to regard one another as kinsmen, and the tribe as an enlarged family. The Ionians and Dorians differed in their systems of tribal organization. The early Ionic states usually had four tribes, and the early Doric three.<sup>1</sup>

The tribe was organized like the phratry, though on a larger scale. It was social and religious, too, but in the main political. Each tribe furnished a regiment for the army, and each bore its proportional share of the taxes and other public burdens.

**118. The City-State.** — From what has thus far been said, it is evident that the state comprised several tribes, which were subdivided into phratries and families. The ties which bound the members of the several groups together were not, as with us, territory and neighborhood, except in the slightest degree, but religion and blood. The same is true of the state. We cannot understand the Greeks without a clear conception of the difference between their state and ours. A modern state is a country whose inhabitants,

<sup>1</sup>No tribes have thus far been found in the Aeolian states.

excepting a few transients, are fellow-citizens under one government. The Greek state, on the other hand, was an exclusive religious society of kinsmen who possessed a definite territory. We should rather compare it in one respect to a family, in another to a church. By residence through any number of centuries an alien family could not acquire a right to the citizenship.

The state was not only a large family and religious society; it was also essentially a city. To the eye it seemed (1) a group of dwellings, shops, and offices, like a modern city, though usually protected by a wall, and (2) a little surrounding country dotted over with farm buildings and villages. But the essential fact in the case is that there was not, as with us, a government for the country and another for the city; rather, there was merely a city government, which extended as well over the whole area of the state. For this reason we call the Greek state a city-state to distinguish it from the country states of modern times. As an illustration we may take Attica and Athens. Geographically Attica was a country in which the city of Athens was situated. Politically Athens was a state which included all Attica. All the inhabitants of Attica who enjoyed political rights in the country were Athenians.

**119. Influence of the City-State on History.** — All the citizens were thought to be kinsmen, the descendants of some god. For example, the Athenians were all children of Apollo. The people of each city considered it impious to admit strangers to their brotherhoods, their religious festivals, and their state, as the god loved only his citizens and looked upon all others as intruders. Besides lesser deities and the divine ancestor, each state had some great patron god, who too disliked strangers. Largely because of these religious ideas, the city-states were extremely illiberal in bestowing the citizenship, and were unwilling to combine in greater political units. Hence Greek history has to do, not with empires like the Oriental, but with a multitude of little city-states. Some covered but a few square miles; Athens, one of the largest, no more than a thousand. This very smallness, however, combined with the motives of blood and religion to produce a devotion to country and an energy of thought and action which we find nowhere else in

history. In brief, the city-states, in keenest rivalry with one another and favorably influenced by physical surroundings, created the Greek civilization — the most brilliant in the world's history. The decline of the city-states brought with it a decline in the civilization.

**120. Important City-States about 700 B.C.** — At the close of the epic age and the beginning of a new era, about 700 B.C., there were already hundreds of city-states in Hellas. A few of the more thriving, incidentally mentioned in the preceding pages, are grouped together here by way of summary. The earlier centres of culture, Cnossus, Tiryns, and Mycenae, had declined. Miletus now took the lead in civilization, but had little political importance. Corinth was a great commercial and industrial centre, and was soon to gain political power under a line of able rulers.<sup>1</sup> Thebes was the head of the Boeotian League, and as such was important. Argos was attempting to subdue the other cities of Argolis, so as to convert that country into one great state. In the course of two centuries she succeeded in this undertaking. Athens included all Attica, and Sparta ruled supreme over Laconia. The last two were the greatest states in Hellas. From our point of view, however, they were very small, — about equal in area to our counties.

**121. Political Evolution of the City-State.** — The earliest form of government of the city-state was monarchy, such as existed in the Homeric age. The powers of government were in the hands of the king, the council of nobles, and the assembly of freemen.<sup>2</sup> In some of the Greek states the council, growing strong, made itself supreme in place of the king. It did not abolish the office, but degraded it to a mere priesthood. The rule of a council of nobles is called an aristocracy — a “government of the best.”<sup>3</sup> New offices were created to attend to new duties of government as they arose, and sometimes the freemen continued to meet in assembly; but all were subordinate to the council.

Generally the aristocracies became oppressive; the masses, therefore, began to show great discontent. To strengthen themselves

<sup>1</sup> § 144.

<sup>2</sup> § 99.

<sup>3</sup> A good example of an aristocracy is Athens immediately after the overthrow of the kingship; § 149.

against the commons, the aristocrats sometimes admitted certain wealthy families to a share in the privileges. When wealth was substituted for birth as the qualification for political rights, the government became an oligarchy — “rule of the few,” of any number less than the whole citizen body.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes it was agreed that political rights should be graded according to amount of property determined by a census. In that case the government was called a *ti-moc’ra-cy*.<sup>2</sup> Either a timocracy or some simpler form of oligarchy might develop from an aristocracy.

These changes did little to improve the condition of the masses or to quiet their discontent, which in fact grew continually more bitter. Under these circumstances it often happened that a noble, beaten in some political conflict with his fellows, appealed to the commons, promising economic or political improvements in exchange for their support. With their help he would then usurp the government and rule by force. An unconstitutional rule of the kind was called by the Greeks a tyranny. The word did not originally signify a harsh or oppressive rule, in fact, many were the very opposite; but it came to have that meaning as the character of the tyrants deteriorated. Usurpations were common under all the forms of government which followed the kingship.<sup>3</sup>

Generally the tyrant improved the condition of the commons and lessened the power of the nobles; he reduced the people more nearly to an equality. As a rule the usurper was himself a wise and able statesman. His son, and still more his grandson, who inherited the power, in nearly every case became a tyrant in the modern sense. When this condition came about, the people put

<sup>1</sup> So far as the meaning of the word oligarchy is concerned, it might include the aristocracy; but the Greeks drew the distinction mentioned above, and it is a convenient one to use. Necessarily it included the timocracy.

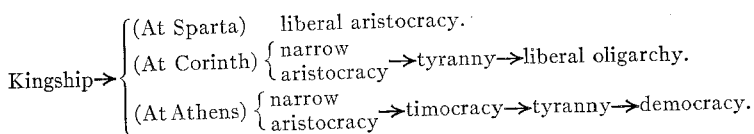
<sup>2</sup> About 650 B.C. the aristocracy at Athens was changed to a timocracy; § 150.

<sup>3</sup> Some writers on Greek history speak of an “Age of Tyrants.” It is true that in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. there were many, and that in the fifth century, when Sparta and Athens controlled a great part of Hellas, they were fewer. But from the fourth century to the end of Greek independence they flourished in all parts of Hellas in greater numbers than ever before. The expression Age of Tyrants is, therefore, misleading. Tyrannies worthy of study were those at Corinth (§ 144), Athens (§§ 161-163), and Syracuse (§§ 207, 276-279).

down the tyrant and established either a democracy or a liberal oligarchy.<sup>1</sup>

These are general lines along which the city-states developed. Some went through the entire cycle from kingship to democracy; others advanced part way; still others remained monarchical to the end. The diversity of government among the Greeks is wonderful; they were as inventive in this field as in science and art.

### Diagram of the Political Cycle



122. **Combinations of City-States.** — Neighboring communities, city-states as well as tribes, sometimes united in religious leagues, the amphictyonies described above.<sup>2</sup> Some of these unions remained religious, others tended to become political as well. Boeotia is an instance of this political development. In time arose leagues which were purely political, like that headed by Sparta in Peloponnese.<sup>3</sup> Toward the end of Greek history the federal unions — a form of the political league — came into great prominence.<sup>4</sup>

### Suggestive Questions

1. What are some of the differences between the Greek city-state and the modern city? between the city-state and the modern state?
2. How did their love of the city-state prevent the Greeks from creating a national state?
3. What advantages did the Greeks derive from the city-state?
4. Would the civilization of the Greeks have reached as high a point, if they had all been united in one state? Give reasons for your opinion.
5. What brought about the change from aristocracy to tyranny?
6. How did the tyrants in many cases prepare the way for democracy?

<sup>1</sup> Athens offers a good example of the change from tyranny to democracy (§§ 164 ff.); Corinth, of the change to a liberal oligarchy (§ 144). It should not be thought that every tyranny affected the government in these ways. The text merely states the rule, to which there were exceptions.

<sup>2</sup> § 104.

<sup>3</sup> § 145.

<sup>4</sup> §§ 338-342.

**Note-book Topics**

I. **The Change from Kingship to Republic.** — Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens*, ch. iii; Bury, *History of Greece*, ch. i. § 9.

II. **Cleisthenes, Tyrant of Sicyon.** — Herodotus, v. 67-69; vi, 128-131.

III. **The General Subject of the Chapter.** — Fowler, *City-State of the Greeks and Romans*, chs. i-iii

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