

## Chapter 1

### The Nonliterate World of the Greeks

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#### 1. Introductory

The great majority of those who spoke Greek in the archaic and classical period (700-400 BCE) were illiterate. “Philosophy” was produced by a small literate minority. But there was “wisdom” — both about the world and about human life and society — long before there was either philosophy or literacy. Every human social group united by an effectively common language has a stock of shared views about the natural environment, and about the right way for us to live together in it. Typically this treasury of general opinions is preserved in stories which parents and nurses tell to children, and which recognized “storytellers” retail to all who will listen.

The Greek word for a story was *mythos*; so in our literate world we have come to call these anonymous products of the preliterate imagination “myths.” Greek “philosophy” largely *replaced* the traditional myths — although in part the philosophers simply *revised* the myths, and made the presence of a deeper universal meaning in them fully explicit. Almost everything that we now call “science” grew out of the Greek philosophy that was *antimythical*, the speculation that consciously aimed to *take the place* of mythical consciousness. But we must not restrict the range of “Greek philosophy” to the reflective activity that aimed at “science.” The philosophers who sought to be at home with the myths were (and are) important; and their “philosophical” myths are different in

important ways from the naive variety. (We shall see in the next chapter that even Hesiod was not a *naive* storyteller.)

All the same, the urge towards a neutral “objective” explanation of the world, an account of the natural environment that was “impersonal,” was what distinguished Greek philosophy from the “wisdom” traditions of other communities, when the Greeks became literate. The Greek philosophers did not generally assume that the operations of nature were the work of beings somewhat like ourselves. Greek philosophy arose because Greek life (and the stories that they told one another about the Immortals who inhabited the natural environment) was different from that of their “barbarian” neighbors (some of whom created high cultures earlier than they). We can see two great ways in which the Greeks were different from their neighbors. They had “Homer”; and they lived in “cities” (*poleis*) — fairly small communities that were fiercely jealous of their “freedom” — that is, of their right to govern themselves independently as they thought fit.

These two differences were closely connected, but logically independent. We shall discuss them here separately (and briefly); but we must begin by noticing how they combined together. Greece — the mainland and the islands — is naturally suited for the formation of a lot of small, and relatively isolated, communities. There have always been several distinct Greek dialects; and without “Homer,” the passionate commitment of the small communities to independence would have turned the dialects into separate languages, that were mutually unintelligible. The bards who chanted the traditional stories of the Homeric heroes stopped this from happening. This was especially important, because mainland Greece is for the most part a rather poor country, and population-pressure was always severe. The “cities” spawned “colonies” (new communities just like themselves) all over the Eastern Mediterranean. Ties of tradition and sentiment were maintained by the colonies with the mother-city; but without “Homer” the bonds of effective communication would have been broken. The traditional songs were chanted everywhere; and “Homer” has seven birthplaces. The “colonies” were completely independent; they usually had a “constitution” modelled on that of the mother-city, but their future was in the world of the neighboring tribes with

whom they lived and mingled; the ancestry of Thales, for example (with whom our story rightfully begins) was not Greek.

## 2. “Homer”

Plato saw it as the most essential task of “philosophy” to replace “Homer” as the “educator of Greece.”<sup>1</sup> In his time (and all through the period in which we are interested) the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were the staples of all schooling. Everyone (literate and unlettered) listened to the chants; and they listened because they were enjoyably entertained. But they were all conscious of learning something vitally important as they listened; and the children in schools learned Homer’s stories and verses by heart, because his world was their world, and his heroes were their heroes. Poets, generally, were entertainers; but from the standpoint of every responsible adult they were moral educators. The great Greek dramatists took their material sometimes from Homer himself, or more often from other traditional stories about the Gods and heroes of long ago. What the Gods and heroes did and said (in the words of the poets) expressed the truths that were generally believed, and provided models for later and lesser mortals to follow. Whatever went into poetry (of any kind) was important, because it was meant to be remembered; so it ought to be *good* (in every possible respect); and Homer was the supreme poet, the one who belonged to all the Greeks together.

What then did Homer teach? The *Iliad* presents many individual stories, and a great image of youthful arrogance, passionate violence, and indomitable courage, in the central figure of Achilles. In its social perspective it was the story of a group of tribal chieftains, controlled very loosely and insecurely by their High King Agamemnon, but united in their determination to overthrow and loot a great *polis*. On the Trojan side, Hector, the great defender of the City, goes knowingly and willingly to his death for the sake of his City; on the Greek side, we do not see Achilles die; but he knows that he will be killed, and he thinks only of the glory of dying undefeated. That is the “future life” to which he looks forward.

Above the human level, the Gods on Olympos — very loosely and insecurely controlled by *their* High King, Zeus — watch the conflict. They know how it must end; but they take sides

nevertheless, and each has her favorite (or favorites) among the heroes (of both sides). The Gods rage at one another; they laugh and weep; and they seek to deceive one another. They also treat humans very unfairly.

In the *Odyssey* we have first an image of indomitable persistence against all difficulties, and of truly infinite resourcefulness. Odysseus has the Goddess of Wisdom (Athena) on his side; and the great God of the Sea (Poseidon) is implacably opposed to him. For much of the story he is a friendless stranger; so his adventures provide a model of how foreign visitors, strangers and beggars *are* treated, and of how they can and should be treated. The Gods, meanwhile, behave very much as they did in the *Iliad*.

There is no question in Homer of how the world has come to be the way it is. This is the way that things always have been, and they always will be so. An inexorable Fate presides over everyone, and everything — even over Zeus. The Mediterranean, where everything happens, is at the center of a great land-mass. All round that land-mass circles the great “river” Ocean. Zeus is the Sky-God; with his thunderbolt, he has sovereignty of a kind over all things. But his proper sphere is the heavens and the land-mass of Mother Earth. The waters belong to his brother Poseidon; and the waters go under the Earth, for Poseidon is the Earth Shaker — he can cause earthquakes. Somewhere beneath the Earth there is the dark region of the Underworld — the house of Hades, another brother of Zeus.<sup>ii</sup> The “shades” of the dead, dwell in Hades’ house; their existence is feeble and miserable, gibbering and squeaking like bats — except for the fortunate heroes in the Elysian Fields (or the Isles of the Blest)<sup>iii</sup>. Far down below the Hades of the Shades, in Tartaros — the furthest depths of the Underworld — the Titans (the old Gods displaced by Zeus and his Olympian family) are now confined. In the sky with Zeus, his son Apollo is Helios, the Sun; and Apollo’s sister Artemis is the Moon. Iris (the rainbow) is a benign messenger of Zeus; and Hermes, his herald, is the regular conductor of the souls of the dead to Hades.<sup>iv</sup> Between sea and sky, the Winds are a divine law unto themselves, sometimes aiding Odysseus, and sometimes helping Poseidon to torment him.

All this, with much else from other poets, and from traditional myths, was what every child learned in or out of school. There was no standard of orthodoxy; the stories existed in many forms, and the poets retold them with imaginative freedom, to suit their own needs, and the desires or prejudices of their immediate audience. If someone spoke, loudly and openly, against the Gods, the political community would be likely to take punitive action, because they expected divine punishment (or interpreted some communal misfortune *as* divine punishment). So in times of disaster, or of great social stress, it was always possible to rouse popular emotion against those who did not speak or behave “piously.” Every man was (in the first instance) his own judge of the limits of piety; but it was communal opinion that was ultimately important.<sup>v</sup>

### **3. The *Polis***

We can see something of the probable evolution of the *polis* in the *Iliad*. Agamemnon orders his tribal-kings to marshal the whole army (except for Achilles and the Myrmidons). The “kings” are “shepherds of the people”; and together they form a sort of royal council; but the whole assembly of the peoples must approve in principle of what they decide. There are rumblings of dissent at times. Thersites takes a beating for his criticism of the kings; but he speaks out in the hope of popular support, and his punishment is only what general opinion considers legitimate. The distribution of booty is approved by the Assembly, and Agamemnon expects them to do right by him, when he has to give up his prize; the quarrel with Achilles erupts because his seizure of Achilles’ girl is a breach of the customary norms of social behavior. But there is no clear rule about what should happen in these circumstances. Achilles is within his rights when he withdraws his forces and sulks in his tent; but he must not do violence to Agamemnon.<sup>vi</sup>

On the shield that Hephaestus, the divine smith, makes for Achilles, there is an image of the City at peace doing justice in a blood-feud. The dispute is about whether the blood-price has been paid or not; and again the opinion of the people in assembly is crucially important. This is a world

that does not have written laws; but they have sacred customs (*themis*), and they are ready to reward and acclaim the man who gives the decision that is recognized as just.<sup>vii</sup>

Homer's world is an aristocratic one; it is the princes who matter. Back at home they are the landowners; and their serfs are part of their landed property, bound to the soil, and obedient to their every command. But we should not overlook the "democratic" foundations of their authority. Every free man can speak his opinion; and the *general* opinion is very powerful. This is a patriarchal world; only male opinion really counts. With Odysseus away, and Telemachos too young to take over in his place, Penelope is in grave difficulties. Clytaemnestra, Agamemnon's queen, finds a male catspaw through whom she can seize power. But the vengeance of her son was authorized by Apollo himself; and although it raised problems about Orestes' inheritance of his father's throne and authority, everyone agreed that the killing of Clytaemnestra was necessary.

The aristocratic ideal of the *polis* is put before us in the kingdom of Phaeacia (*Odyssey*, Book V ff); but that is only a fairy-story. The realities of early aristocratic politics are much more evident in Ithaca, and in the ruthless cunning by which Odysseus regains his throne. The landowners can do pretty much as they like; and in the absence of a constituted authority possessed of coercive power, they show little respect for the bounds of *themis*.

The Greek cities were all different. But except for Sparta, they fall into two great categories. There were the oligarchies, in which political authority remained principally in the hands of a council of landowners and rich men; and the "democracies," in which the Homeric assembly of all male freemen took control of the magistracies, and participated as a whole in the making of important decisions. Athens was the paradigm of the "democracies." But it is important to remember that even at Athens there were far more slaves than free citizens; and the "free" womenfolk had no political power anywhere (though they had some important religious rights and duties).

Sparta was a special case because it had seriously overstepped *themis* in the early days in its relations with its neighbors. The cities all fought one another bitterly; and there were traditional hatreds that made collaboration between some of them almost unthinkable. But the Spartans had conquered *and enslaved* their neighbors the Messenians. As a result, they had a fairly small body of free citizens, with a large territory, populated entirely by serfs. Their freemen thought of nothing but war; and their essentially oligarchic constitution was a frozen complex of untouchable institutions. In the archaic period, before they violated *themis*, the Spartans had a more noteworthy poetic culture than Athens. In the work of the poet Alcman, they even made a significant contribution to the religious prehistory of philosophy.<sup>viii</sup> But in our period, Sparta is only something for the politically minded thinkers to discuss. In the popular mind the Spartans are known simply for their rigorous conservatism, their military prowess, and their brevity of speech.

Aristotle thought that all of the cities had begun with “kings”; but only the Spartans still had them; and they had *two* royal families, and two kings at all times. The kings were their military commanders; in peacetime administration the Ephors and the Council were more important. The Spartans were universally acknowledged to be the best soldiers in Greece. They played a vital role in the repulse of the Persian invasion; and after the Persian Wars they became one of the two “great powers.” They had a strong prejudice in favor of oligarchies; but they were less prone than Athens to interfere in the affairs of their “allies.” After they had defeated Athens in the great war that lasted more than twenty-five years (431-404 BCE), they sought to establish an Athenian oligarchy (“The Thirty”). But when the exiled democratic leaders fought their way back to power in the next year, the Spartans let them alone — merely insisting that there must be no reprisals.

Athens became the paradigm of democracy gradually. Attica was one of the largest *polis*-territories; and according to the tradition as interpreted by Thucydides, King Theseus had united the smaller tribal groups into one *polis*-community. In historic times, the kings survived (outside Sparta) only as priests. But family traditions were strong;<sup>ix</sup> and the “noble” families held onto their land and their political power for a long time. The slow growth of popular sovereignty at Athens began with the constitutional reforms of Solon. By 594 BCE, when Thales was still a young man in

Miletos, Athens was on the brink of social revolution, because poor peasant tenants were obliged to sell themselves into bondage to their landlords on account of their debts. In that year Solon was accepted by all parties as the best arbiter. His reform made debt-bondage impossible; and he organized the city into four property-classes. All citizens could vote in the Assembly; but only the higher classes could be elected to the magistracies. The Assembly served as a court of appeal against decisions of the magistrates.

For the social conservatives this “ancestral constitution” later became the ideal of how things ought to be; but the democrats thought of it as the first stage in the establishment of the democracy.<sup>x</sup> Solon’s settlement was therefore appealed to on all sides. But it was not really “democratic,” and it did not last very long. There had already been one attempt to establish a “tyranny”; and about forty years after Solon’s settlement, Peisistratos was accepted as the “people’s champion.” “Tyranny” was really a way of controlling the bitter factions within the governing class; and it worked only when the tyrant was politically astute. Peisistratos ruled successfully; but one of his sons (Hipparchos) was killed by two plotters, Harmodios and Aristogeiton. The “tyrant-slayers” became a vital part of democratic mythology; but they were actually members of an aristocratic faction; and this opposition within the governing class persuaded Sparta to intervene. Hippias (the real tyrant) was expelled in 510; and Kleisthenes “took the people into partnership” in 507.<sup>xi</sup>

It was the reform of Kleisthenes that created the Athenian democracy properly. He replaced the four kinship-tribes, by ten tribal divisions based on “demes” (neighborhoods). City and country demes were associated into “tribes” artificially (by lot). The ten new tribes supplied the army (under an elected board of ten “generals”); and in place of the Solonic Council of Four Hundred, Kleisthenes established a Council of Five Hundred — fifty from each tribe, chosen by lot. The tribes had their own religious cults; and the demes kept the registry of citizens.<sup>xii</sup>

The Assembly was now the effective sovereign. The system continued to operate (as in Solon’s settlement) by a combination of election and lottery. The tribe (or the deme) would elect



more candidates for office than were needed; and the successful candidates would then be selected by lot (that is to say chosen by the Goddess herself).

Kleisthenes had made himself the champion of the people; and the democracy continued to choose its noble champions. A successful champion was able to perpetuate his power by getting his majority to “ostracize” his strongest rivals. Ostracism involved temporary banishment from the territory of the City (usually for ten years). Under a series of noble leaders, Athens gradually became the most powerful City in Greece. Athens and Sparta together organized and led the resistance to the Persian invasion (“the Medes”); and the Persian War (together with the silver mines at Laurion) created the Athenian fleet. Soldiering on land involved the ownership of enough property for equipment and maintenance over a campaign-season; but the poorest able-bodied citizen could row in a ship. So after the War Athens became the natural leader of the “Delian League,” a maritime alliance against the Medes. Soon she was compelling her “allies” to contribute tax-money (instead of ships and men) to maintain her own navy. In the time of Perikles, the League was acknowledged to be an “Empire”; and Perikles himself told the Athenians they must think of their empire as a “tyranny.”

On the other side Sparta became the leader of the Peloponnesian League; and in 431 a war broke out between the two sides. Everywhere (even in Athens) the men of property tended to favor Sparta as the friend of oligarchical government; and there were friends of the Athenian democracy everywhere among the poor. In the early years of the War, Athens — crowded with refugees from the countryside — was stricken by a great plague (in which Perikles died). After that the democracy was more radical, and (at least in the eyes of its conservative critics) less intelligent. The struggle between land and sea power produced deadlock; and the Athenians sought to break this with a great expedition against Syracuse in 415 BCE. (Sicily was, so to speak, the granary of the Peloponnese.)

In the same year an outburst of religious hysteria was provoked by the “mutilation of the Hermae”; a band of young nobles knocked the penises off of the old fertility-images all over the City. Alcibiades — then a general in Sicily — was recalled upon suspicion of involvement. He

escaped from his escort, and fled to Sparta. (He was recalled again a few years later, but was soon obliged to flee once more — this time to the Medes.) The Sicilian expedition was defeated and wiped out in 413. But Athens managed to rebuild her fleet, and carry on the war for nearly ten years longer. There was a brief — and abortive — attempt to “reform” the democracy in a “Solonian” direction in 412/11 (the oligarchy of the “Four Hundred”). But the anti-Spartan democratic party recovered; and the war ended in 404 BCE only when the Medes came to the aid of the Peloponnesian fleet.

The victorious Spartans tried to impose an oligarchic government of their friends — “the Thirty.” But the exiled democratic leaders had popular support; and when the Thirty were overthrown in less than a year, the Spartans acquiesced in the restoration of the democratic constitution. They insisted only that the Assembly must pass an “Act of Oblivion” so that there should be no reprisals against the partisans of the oligarchy in the time of troubles.

From Solon onwards the leaders of the Athenian *polis* were quite notably literate; and they were generally very interested in the higher culture, and in philosophical ideas. But the democracy itself was controlled by the illiterate masses. It was always fairly easy to whip up a powerful prejudice against the intellectuals. Many of them were “foreigners”; and if they were not aliens, they were members of the oligarchic opposition. Anaxagoras and Protagoras were driven out of Athens by religious prosecution; and the native sons, Antiphon and Sokrates, were judicially executed. The sculptor Pheidias — another foreigner, and a friend of Perikles — was also prosecuted. Only the great native-born poets were treated as friends of the people — though Euripides was as much of an intellectual radical as anyone, and he ended his life in voluntary exile. The “war between philosophy and poetry” was mainly Plato’s invention; but there was always a real war between philosophy and democracy.

## Notes

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- i. *Republic* 606e.
  - ii. For the Olympian division of the world see *Iliad* 13:187-193.
  - iii. For the Shades, see for instance *Iliad* 23:103-104 and *Odyssey* 24:6. For Achilles' hope of undying fame, see *Iliad* 9:413. The *Odyssey* is inconsistent about the Heroes. Achilles describes the existence of a Shade at 11:489-90; but the Elysian Fields (and Isles of the Blest) are described at 4:563 and 11:568ff.
  - iv. In the Homeric poems Apollo and Artemis have not yet been identified with Helios (the Sun) and Selene (the Moon). Iris and Hermes are messengers, but Hermes may not yet be identified as the general conductor of souls. But schoolchildren and others would have listened to the poems with these additional interpretive assumptions during the two centuries with which we are concerned.
  - v. A good poetic example is provided by Jocasta in the *Oedipus Tyrannos* of Sophocles. She says, bitterly, that Apollo's oracles are quite worthless; and the Chorus is quite vocally disturbed. So in the next scene she returns with offerings for Apollo, and repentant prayers.
  - vi. The war-council and the quarrel of Agamemnon and Achilles are in *Iliad* Book 1. The protest of Thersites against the Princes is in *Iliad* 15 (641ff).

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- vii. See *Iliad* 18:497ff.
- viii. Alas, not enough has come down to us for useful discussion in this book. But see Chapter 2, note 34.
- ix. One of the board of nine *Archons* (“rulers” — the senior magistrates) at Athens was the “King-Archon.” Plato’s father claimed descent from the “kings” of Athens; and Herakleitos belonged to the old royal family at Ephesos.
- x. On the judicial side the democratic appeal was justified. The right of any Assembly member to serve on the jury for court-cases was part of Solon’s settlement (see Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens* 7). Aristotle (*ibid.* 9) emphasizes the importance of this.
- xi. Herodotos, V 69.
- xii. The deme was originally a locality, but membership in it was hereditary; Sokrates and his sons were members of the deme Alopeke, no matter where in Attica they might choose to live.