

War, Stasis, and Greek Political Thought

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In an influential essay, Arnaldo Momigliano has identified an extremely important but perhaps little remarked oddity of ancient Greek historical writing and political thought. He argues that

political thought in Greece tended to concentrate on the internal changes of states, on constitutional problems. Causes of war, external conflicts remained marginal issues rather than central problems.

He finds this situation to be a paradox since, he notes, "war was an ever present reality in Greek life." And he further suspects that the reason for this emphasis is that "the Greeks came to accept war as a natural fact like birth and death about which nothing could be done."¹

Yvon Garlan's recent book on war in antiquity repeats this idea. For him, "it is paradoxical that the ancients were so unsuccessful at "thinking through , war, when it absorbed so much of their time and energy." He continues:

Perhaps this was because it was so widespread and perennial that it appeared to be outside human initiative and to fall within the domain of nature or the realm of the gods. ...

In contrast, forced to take cognizance of the effectiveness of human interventions in constitutional development and constitutional struggles, the ancients discovered political philosophy.²

It is surely true and significant that political thought in Greece did concentrate on internal changes and on constitutional problems, that Greek political thought was (to use Sheldon Wolin's word) "introspective,"³ and that for the Greeks, there was (in Leo Strauss's phrase) a "primacy of domestic policy over foreign policy."⁴ But the "explanation" by Momigliano and Garlan of [more]

¹ Arnaldo D. Momigliano, "Some Observations on Causes of War in Ancient Historiography," in *Studies in Historiography* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 120.

² Yvon Garlan, *War in the Ancient World: A Social History*, Janet Lloyd, trans. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 17-18.

³ Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960).

⁴ Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

this fact seems implausible in a most obvious way. Indeed, to see this we need only to consider the wealth of Greek inquiry into an enormous range of "natural facts" about which "nothing could be done." Consider, for example, Aristotle's extensive work on the heavens. Moreover, this explanation fails to take into account what ancient political theory does say about war and especially the fact that one lengthy and important writing, Plato's *Laws*, begins with a discussion and analysis of the proper object of the legislator's concern. Should it be "external" war or "internal" war, the civil strife of stasis?

An alternative explanation seems demanded. And it must begin, I believe, with a reexamination of the premise which generates the paradox—the assumption that “war was an ever present reality in Greek life.”⁵

There is a real historical difficulty here because, despite the easy confidence we have over the idea, it is not easy to get a clear picture of war in the Greek world—of what it was and how it was perceived by the Greeks. The available evidence is quite scant and, as we shall emphasize, it is subject to easy errors of selection and distortion. Moreover, scholarship, especially the older scholarship, has tended to concentrate on mechanics of war—arms, tactics, and reconstruction of important battles—and has tended to treat war in antiquity as a unitary phenomenon encompassing the entire span from Homeric prehistory to the fall of Rome. This vantage point, while useful for many purposes, has encouraged a de-emphasis of important historical junctures and, worse, has encouraged a tendency to ignore crucial questions, e.g. , assessments of the importance of war to everyday life in particular places and periods.

It is not the purpose of the present essay to fill in all these lacunae. Instead, the intent is to identify some critical problems, to suggest an alternative understanding, and to offer some additional explanatory hypotheses. In what follows, I restrict my comments to the archaic and classical periods—from Greek prehistory to the battle of Chaeronea (338 B.C.). In itself, this is a long period within which there are significant periods to be identified. But the key to the meaning of war in ancient Greece is a firm understanding and grasp of the Greek city-state, the polis. A failure to keep even the most elementary facts about the polis-world in mind has been the source of much confusion and misunderstanding.

What then of war in Greek antiquity? Thucydides is probably correct in judging that on this score there were serious differences between the entire period which precedes “the war of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians”

⁵ This assumption is explicit or implicit in almost all accounts of the ancient polis-world. One important and notable exception is the late Frank Adcock who, in his posthumously published account of Greek diplomacy, wrote that 'it is rash to assert, as has been done by some, that war was the permanent characteristic of all Greek communities.' See Sir Frank Adcock and D. J. Mosely, *Diplomacy in Ancient Greece* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 12.

and the twenty-seven-year period which his justly famous history details. Except for the battles between the Greeks and the Persians--an enormously significant "international" conflict minimized by Thucydides--the former period was, as he says, characterized by piracy and what he calls "frontier skirmishes," local affairs between neighbors.⁶

Thucydides is vague on the frequency of these clashes and intrusions but he seems to have identified their nature with considerable accuracy. We may assume that this period was the period of the gestation of the polis and that, if so, there are strong analogies possible to the preliterate societies familiar to the ethnographic record.⁷ In such societies, "war" typically was a raid, limited in terms of its objectives and in terms of the numbers of persons and sorts of organization involved. Conducted on a private basis, these archaic wars were, as Thucydides writes, pillaging forays conducted "under the lead of their most powerful men, whose motive was their private gain and the support of their weaker followers."⁸ But despite the Hobbesian picture of general danger and insecurity which Thucydides does sometimes suggest,⁹ if the ethnographic record is to be trusted, there is little to the idea of persistent primitive bellicosity and enmity. Indeed, if anything, this record suggests that indifference was the normal relation between neighboring groups and that intergroup violence was the exception not the rule. As regards Greek prehistory, of course, in the last analysis we can only guess.

A genuinely juridical concept of war becomes gradually appropriate with the emergence of the polis. War, so understood, implies "a confrontation between two distinct political communities demanding total commitment from their members."¹⁰ This shift was doubtless slow and imperceptible, coinciding, as it must have, with the gradual articulation of the polis as a form of political organization. Piracy and brigandage did continue but, as Thucydides suggests, with less frequency, and for the same reasons, the "frontier skirmishes" became better organized and more reasonably identified as wars,

Such wars must have varied considerably in their extent, ferocity, and consequence, ranging, we must assume, from brief and highly ritualized encounters between relatively small groups, e.g., the confrontation of 300 Argives and 300 Spartans reported by Herodotus,¹¹ to the remarkable, be-

⁶ Thucydides, *History of Peloponnesian War*, C. F. Smith, trans. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919), I, 15.

⁷ For some survey studies, see Morton Fried, *The Evolution of Political Society* (New York: Random House, 1967), esp. I 02ff; Pierre Clastres, *Society against the State*. Robert Hurley, trans. (New York: Urizen, 1977); Marshall Sahlins, "The Origin of Society," *Scientific American*, September 1960.

⁸ Thucydides, *History*, I, 5.

⁹ E.g., in Thucydides, *History*, I, 6. 10 Garlan, *War*, 23.

¹¹ Herodotus, *History of the Greek and Persian War*, G. Rawlinson, trans. (New York: Twayne, 1963), I, 82.

cause unusual, invasion of Messenia by the Spartans.¹² But again, there is simply no convincing evidence for the commonly held Hobbesian picture of Greek cities engaged in a war of all against all.

The pervasiveness of this picture itself needs explaining. Thucydides no doubt contributed to it, perhaps especially through his first English translator, Thomas Hobbes. And it was Hobbes, who in turn, gave us the first full articulation of the "natural condition" as a "state of war."¹³ But having forgotten that Hobbes's account was inspired by Thucydides's description of Corcynaeian stasis, and having absorbed the idea of the modern state, born presumably in response to conditions of parcelized sovereignty and baronial gangsterism, we assume uncritically that because "the Greeks" - considered now a potential nation-state-lacked a unified political structure, individual Greek cities were in a constant state of war. The historical question becomes, however, where precisely was the polis-world like, and where unlike, the world of the emerging modern state.¹⁴

The problem of assessing the frequency and importance of ancient war is complicated, to be sure, especially since "importance" is itself a relative notion. And if we are to speak comparatively, we need at least to examine the effects of war in Greek cities and other societies, and also the significance of these effects relative to other problems and concerns. Thus, what were the adjustments in social structure demanded by the requirements of war, and how did they compare to other changes? To what extent was daily life seriously interrupted or altered by war and how did this situation compare to that in other societies and to the other problems faced by societies at different times and places. Indeed, once these questions are raised it appears that, if anything, war was much less the "ever present reality" to the Greeks than it was to other later societies.

Several sets of considerations support this thesis. First, there is the constant problem of historical selectivity. The so-called First Messenian War, of which we know very little, the war of the Greeks against the Persians reported by

¹² *Ibid.* V. 49.

¹³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: I. M. Dent, 1950), I, 13. Significantly, ancient Greek stories of the origin of the political association differ consistently with early modern "origin" stories. For the Greeks, the political body was "natural" and born of the need of mutuality; for the tradition beginning with Machiavelli, it was born of the need for security, against other individuals and, more important, against other, aggrandizing bodies.

¹⁴ On the important point of "the Greeks," see M. I. Finley, "The Ancient Greeks and Their Nation," in his *Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Viking, 1971). As Finley argues (p. 120ff.), being a Greek meant a great deal to the Greeks, "but it had no political content apart from the one point of not assisting Greeks to defeat and subjugate Greeks." It is thus simple anachronism to hold that the Greeks *failed* to form a unified state. When this nineteenth-century anachronism is coupled with the seventeenth-century Hobbesian premises about aggrandizement and competition, the "frightful disunity" of the Greeks naturally becomes a self-evident condition of permanent bellicosity. But as I suggest in what follows, the condition of the polis-world was radically unlike the early modern period.

Herodotus, and the series of clashes detailed by Thucydides which we call the Peloponnesian War rightly command our attention because these are the events which "make" history. And, similarly, we can expect these great historians to make references in their accounts to the war between Chalkis and Eretria, to the aggressive behavior of Polycrates of Samos (*ca.* 530) and later of Dionysius I (*ca.* 360), and to the destruction of Sybaris by Croton (*ca.* 510). But if we are talking about war in ancient Greece, and therefore remember that we should be considering several hundreds of years and the interpolis relations between perhaps as many 1,500 autonomous poleis, then we must not only make the effort to see war as Greeks saw it, but we must also put the wars of our histories and historians into perspective.

Many of these ancient cities, so far as we can tell, were largely undisturbed by war in any way, e.g., isolated Massalia and tiny, dry Seriphos. Many, many more were uninvolved in interpolis hostilities for long periods of time, e.g., Miletus and Corinth seem to have experienced continuous peace for over one hundred years. Still more of these cities, though involved in war from time to time, were never in the situation of Athens during its war with the Peloponnesians.¹⁵

Moreover, we are talking about a relatively uncomplicated social structure. For the Greek, the idea of total war or of war economy could make no sense. As Hans Delbrück has pointed out, not only was the technology of war at a very low level but, less obviously, the Greek cities, with the notable exception of Sparta, did not have significant citizen military levies and could not be considered to have had either long or strong military traditions. Most of the people continued to be engaged in peaceful occupations even at the height of the most significant wars of the period. Thus, at the famous battle of Marathon, to give some idea, there were but between 4,000 and 6,000 fighting men on each side.¹⁶

We must be reminded, in addition, that Greek wars were not generally fought on a continuous basis. With few exceptions--and these mainly occurred later in the Peloponnesian War period--actual hostilities were restricted to the summer months, ideally between planting and harvesting, and were typically mere day-long engagements. There were few sieges and, even more important, the idea of a war "without decision"--a war without decisive battles which settle the issues which prompted the war--makes no sense [more]

¹⁵ The trap of speaking of Athens and Sparta as the Greeks, or of Athens and Rome as the ancient world, is not easily avoided. A good example is the opening pages of Garland's otherwise careful book, mentioned earlier. Even Kathleen Freeman's useful book, *Greek City-States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950), does not escape, despite the fact that she deliberately excludes Athens and Sparta in her study of nine "representative" city-states. Indeed, when she begins to generalize, it is Athens and Sparta in the late fifth century that she clearly has in mind.

¹⁶ Hans Delbrück, *Antiquity*, Vol. I of *History of the Art of War*, Walter J. Renfroe, Jr., trans. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975). This work is a mine of useful information.

until the Peloponnesian War period.¹⁷ That is, typically, a war began, the forces gathered for the clash or series of clashes, and it ended, one side victor and the other side vanquished. Both the beginning and the end were defined by highly ritualized declarations and symbolic acts-with a symbolic victory sometimes being the *only* prize.¹⁸ Thus, what we call cold war was not possible either. Not only was it clear to all when one was at war but, once the fighting formally ended, there was (with exceptions of course) little of the lingering enmity between former adversaries which we take for granted. And , because of the level of technology and organization, at the cessation of hostilities, the polis returned to completely peaceful conditions.¹⁹ This helps to explain the amazing readiness of Greek cities to ally themselves for a specific purpose with a city with which they had quite recently been at war. To cite but one famous example, as the result of a war with Corinth about a disputed boundary, Megara, long aligned with Sparta through the Peloponnesian League, deserted it in *ca.* 460 to ally herself with Athens, a recent adversary , and then returned again to the Spartan fold in 446.

Finally, the enormous emphasis on ritual and symbol which attended ancient war need not suggest that ritual was important for the Greeks because war was ever-present. Indeed, an exactly opposite interpretation is possible and even more likely; it was because war was seen to be such a clear departure from the ordinary that it was so fully articulated in ceremony. Similar considerations might well apply to the treatment of war themes in fifth-century drama, for example, as in the *Oresteia*, *Antigone* and, of course, in Euripides's *Trojan Women*, produced in 415 at the height of the Peloponnesian war.

Apart, then, from the sort of argument adduced in the foregoing, there are a number of additional considerations which help us to construct the context of war as it existed in ancient Greece and which further undermine a Hobbesian picture.

Most critical to that context is the idea that the polis was "territorially inelastic": it could not be expanded beyond certain limits without fundamentally altering its nature. This put definite limits on wars of expansion. It is unarguable that Greek political theory is polis-bound and almost certainly this circumstance reflects a central Greek attitude. Explaining this attitude, however, is another matter, and I do not make that effort here.²⁰

¹⁷ This important point is made in Delbrück, *Antiquity*. 135. Also see Sir Frank Adcock, *Greek and Macedonian Art of War* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), 7, who aptly refers to the battle as a "mass duel... It was, he continues, "a trial of strength; and the verdict of the trial was accepted."

¹⁸ The symbolic aspect is well treated by Garland, *War*, but he makes no effort to explain its significance.

¹⁹ See Adcock, *Greek and Macedonian Art of War*, 8, who notes that "Greek states did not, in general, see the utter destruction of each other by war conducted ? outrance. ...And so states passed from war to peace easily, or more easily than from peace to war."

²⁰ The idea that a polis is inherently limited in size is, of course, carefully defended by "classic" Greek political theory, especially by Aristotle. In *Politics* (H. Rackham, trans.

There is but one possible counter instance and that is the Spartan conquest of Messenia in Greek prehistory. This act made Sparta unique among the cities. For Sparta, polis and territory were not coincidental. The polis comprised a single class of Equals (*homoioi*) ruling over a relatively large territory and subject population. In consequence of this, Sparta evolved a definite quasi-professional military function which was primarily a police function. As M. L. Finley says, "to preserve the difficult position of a ruling class in these special circumstances, the whole society was structured to fulfill the police function."²¹ Nevertheless, Sparta's military prowess (won no doubt at considerable sacrifice to her development), her stability and relative freedom from civil strife, or stasis, and her substantial self-sufficiency gave her a recognized and frequently attested preeminent power among the cities. And this, as we notice below, had important consequences for later Greek interpolis politics.

A second consideration regards the limitations put on waging war to gain economic advantage. The point is important, if often missed or misunderstood. In ancient Greece one could war for booty-slaves, gold, or riches--or one could war to alleviate a scarcity of domestic necessities- timber, iron, or grain--or one could war to ensure the supply of such necessities. And finally, one could go to war to establish a tribute-paying empire. But given the stage of economic development, a war (or indeed, any other state activity) directed or caused by competition for markets or for trading advantage or motivated by other forms of mercantile or capitalistic imperialism was simply not possible.²² To be sure, "commercial rivalry" and other economic explanations of ancient wars appear in our books, but these must be dismissed as anachronisms.²³ Similarly, the charge sometimes made that Herodotus or Thucydides "failed" to see or to grasp the "deeper" or "less obvious" "economic" causes and conditions of war is for the same reason unwarranted.²⁴ Thucydides could not understand a war motivated by com-

(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), bk. VII, 4), he declares that "the optimum size of a *polis* occurs when the numbers are the greatest possible for self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) while living within sight of each other." We do suggest, below, that anti expansionist foreign policy was related essentially to the citizen army as that specifically developed in the polis. On the other hand, it is too easy to argue as, e.g., Adcock and Mosely, *Diplomacy*, 128. do, that "in view of the scale and conditions of ancient warfare it was difficult for a state to follow up its victory with territorial extension and military occupation on a large scale. Few states could either afford or provide the manpower, whether of citizens or of mercenaries, to maintain their own territory." This is admittedly true insofar as one assumes that the states being referred to are and remain poleis. But what needs explaining is why the Greeks so stoutly clung to their polis form of organization.

²¹ See M. I. Finley, "Sparta," in *Uses and Abuses and History*; G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972).

²² See M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), esp. chs. 1 and 6.

²³ The commercial rivalry hypothesis as regards Corinth and Athens is exploded by de Ste. Croix, *Origins*. See also his brilliant account of the famous Megarian decess, in the same work.

²⁴ See John H. Finley, Jr., *Thucydides* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 117ff, who rightly criticizes the older accounts by F. M. Cornford and G. B. Grundy on this score.

mercial rivalry because there wasn't any, even if he could and did understand a war waged to satisfy material needs, e.g. , as in the Sicilian campaign.

A third set of considerations has direct bearing on the Greek emphasis on stasis and also helps to put into context the Athenian "empire" and the Peloponnesian War. The polis form of political association which evolved in Greek prehistory represented an integration of the earlier clan and tribal forms. And at some point, royal authority and aristocratic hereditary king-ships (*patrikai basileia*) gave way. The period of tyrannies represented a fundamental break in which larger numbers of free men began to figure in the definition and redefinition of citizenship, itself an entirely novel idea. Two other developments occurred. One the one hand, the knightly combat of the Heroic Age disappeared as the military role was extended to a widened base of propertied citizenry--heavily armed foot soldiers called "hoplites." At the same time, the door was opened permanently to stasis.²⁵

There can be little doubt that stasis, whose application ranged from faction to sedition to outright civil war, was a continuous, serious and ultimately unresolved problem in the polis-world. And no doubt it was the special character of the Greek polis--its particularism, its fierce pride in autonomy and, within its own boundaries, its open character--which permitted, and indeed fostered, stasis. The struggle between rich and poor, the struggle for political rights and power, the struggle for citizenship and participation, were struggles not only endemic in the polis-world, but in many ways were unique to that world. Moreover, there seems to be evidence that stasis was a problem which worsened as the decades went by. Again, as noted earlier and as ancient and modern commentators have clearly seen, Sparta was the most important and notable exception. (Indeed it remained the model against which conservative theory measured the emerging conceptions of politics.)

As M. I. Finley has pointed out, although it is true that political rights and power among the poorer members of the poleis varied considerably--not only as between different periods but, at any given time, between, say, oligarchic Corinth and Periclean Athens--a far greater gulf existed between even the poorest of the Corinthian peasants and any Egyptian or Persian peasant. And of course, within the polis, the existence of even a primitive political right made for *politics*. Thus Finley writes:

If the [Egyptian or Persian peasant] wished to alter his condition fundamentally--and . he scarcely ever tried to--he was driven to flight or to rebellion, precisely like a slave, not to *stasis*. a prerogative of free men²⁶

²⁵ See Raphael Sealey, *A History of the Greek City-States: 700-338 B.C.* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), ch. 2, for a good account of the genesis of the polis and the emergence of the tyrants. More recently, see Anthony Snodgrass, *Archaic Greece* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980). P. A. L. Greenhalgh, *Early Greek Warfare* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1973), 3, notes that Aristotle's account (*Politics*. IV, 3, 10) of the dominance of the knights (*hippeis*), due to superiority in war , after the fall of the kings is "proved credible by archeology."

²⁶ Finley, "The Ancient Greeks," 130.

Indeed, there was good reason for the perception, so persistently reflected in political theory, that stasis was the fundamental problem. Moreover, and for purposes of this analysis, vitally important, the problem of stasis has a direct bearing on Greek interpolis relations and on the problem of war.

As several commentators have indicated, class loyalties could supersede polis loyalties.²⁷ As D. J. Mosely puts the matter,

protestations of patriotism did not prevent factions from seeking external support for their position. The result was that frequently at a time of crisis a state was unable to present a united front to its opponents, who before engaging in full-scale war would employ political means, subversion or diplomacy, to achieve their aims.²⁸

And perhaps ironically, while this circumstance encouraged internal instability, it minimized war; as Wallace Caldwell writes, "civil strife...though it caused bloody wars, nevertheless aided the cause of interstate peace and friendship."²⁹

A further structural fact of the polis has fundamental bearing. The innovation of the hoplite phalanx involved an identity of the citizen and the soldier and thus located political and military functions in the same person. The implications of this are decisive. As Garlan remarks:

So long as the city managed to control the interplay of the social and economic forces internally, and to limit the field and scope of its military activities externally, it was able to preserve the original equivalence of the political and military functions and thus to ensure the theoretical homogeneity of the civic body. This was the fundamental condition of its survival, the nerve center of its organization.³⁰

Without, then, attempting to identify causes, it was a special feature of the Greek polis that a close connection existed between its citizen armies, its problem of stasis, and the limits on the scope of its military activities. In general, an overextension of military activities led to a separation of the military and the political, to a professionalization of the military, and compounded and raised new problems for the maintenance of internal stability. One solution, the Roman, was the abandonment of the polis form of organization altogether.³¹

²⁷ See, e.g., Wallace E. Caldwell, *Hellenic Conceptions of Peace*. Columbia University Studies in History, Economics and Public Law (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1919), 45. Caldwell's account is heavily economic. He also asserts characteristically (p. 50) that despite "movements in the direction of peace, wars were regular and continuous." A better discussion is in Adcock and Mosely, *Diplomacy*. esp. 11, 140ff.

²⁸ Adcock and Mosely, *Diplomacy*, 140.

²⁹ Caldwell, *Hellenic Conceptions*, 45.

³⁰ Garlan, *War*, 93. See also W. K. Pritchett, *The Greek State at War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); A. M. Snodgrass, "The Hoplite Reform and History," *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 85 (1965), 110-22.

³¹ Machiavelli seems to be the first to see this clearly. The problem which sets the framework of discussion in his remarkable *Discourses* is whether, in order to be free and secure, a republic will choose to "extend its empire" (as Rome) or will "confine itself merely to its own preservation" (as Sparta and Venice). Machiavelli argues that with each choice there are serious implications regarding the nature of armies, of citizenship, and thus of internal stability. See esp. bk. I, chs. 5 and 6.

Until the period following the Persian Wars, and especially beginning in the middle of the fifth century, it appears that interpolis relations were relatively stable. And if the foregoing, and Thucydides, are correct, there were no serious or prolonged interpolis hostilities. Again, as part cause and part consequence of this and also because of the nature of the polis military organization, it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a city to establish and maintain any sort of extensive hegemony. It was not difficult to maintain a relative balance of power between cities, especially given the possibility of shifting alliances, which as we know were largely defensive in nature and extensively developed. This meant as well, as Delbrück emphasizes, that wars were "battles" which had *only* a negative, destructive effect.³²

The sociology and technology of hoplite warfare is important here. Not only was it expensive to provide a full panoply for a citizen hoplite but, of the total of "service-qualified" citizens, not all could be relieved of other duties. In addition, the very old and very young would be excluded except in dire emergencies. This meant that relatively few hoplites could be put into the field at the same time. Athens, one of the largest of the cities, could probably mount a force of no more than 9,000 or 10,000 hoplites at anyone time. It was thus impossible, or nearly so, to establish and maintain hegemony in this environment which was so complicated and fragmented, and where, in consequence, alliances could be extremely effective. Further evidence for this conjecture is the relative success which the Greeks had with mechanisms of arbitration, an effect especially predictable in the situation where war could produce only negative consequences.³³

As previously mentioned, Sparta was especially powerful and was acknowledged to be so. Its hegemony over a considerable portion of the Peloponnesus was taken for granted but, as de Ste. Croix has rightly noted, it is extremely unlikely that this performance could have been repeated after the seventh century (and perhaps even earlier). But even Sparta was not a threat further abroad. As Machiavelli saw and as recent scholarship has persuasively argued, Sparta had long since adopted a policy of preservation, and was, of all the Greek cities, the most conservative and certainly the least interested in external involvements which might upset her precarious domestic situation.³⁴

The decisive event in upsetting interpolis stability, then, was the Persian intrusion into the Greek polis-world, decisive not only because it precipitated a shift in the balance of power, but also because it enormously complicated

³² Delbrück, *Antiquity*, 230.

³³ See especially Adcock and Moseley, *Diplomacy*, 210ff., and Adda B. Boxeman, *Politics and Culture in International History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), esp. 81-90. It is difficult to measure the success of arbitration in the ancient world, but one should guard against underestimation, especially when we keep in mind the number of poleis and the complexity of their relations.

³⁴ The best account of Sparta's "natural" foreign policy is de Ste. Croix, *Origins*, esp. ch. 4.

internal politics and the problem of stasis. There were deep cultural and political differences between the Persians and the Greeks. The Persian empire was composed of the Persian nation itself and numerous tribally organized subject peoples who, through tribute and goods, provided the basis for a political and social organization which was radically different from the Greek polis arrangement. The organizational key of the Persian empire was an army, and it too was of a character different from the hoplite armies of the Greeks. Comprised largely of mounted men and archers, and a large number of mercenaries, the Persian armies were professional, and their military prowess depended less on quantity than it did on quality.³⁵

The details of this new factor are complex, and several points bear emphasizing. Perhaps most remarkable, is the extremely narrow self-interest which the Greek cities manifested in response to the Persian threat and the almost entire absence of a national Hellenic "patriotism."³⁶ Indeed, whatever unity the Greek cities did display was all but coerced. Related to this reaction is the extent to which, both during this period and still more in the ensuing decades, conflicting factions *within* the Greek cities were willing, in pursuit of their own interests, to invite Persian intervention. The record here is grim, from the Ionian revolts of 499-37 to the treachery of Pausanias, to Erythrae (*ca.* 450), Samos (*ca.* 440), Lesbos, Colophon, and Notium to those Athenians who believed, as Thucydides reports, that "the King [of Persia] would be their friend and would provide them with money if Alcibiades were recalled and the democracy abolished."³⁸ This tendency to collaborate cannot be under-estimated, especially as it bears on the Greek perception of the problem of polis autonomy, on the new relations which followed Persian expulsion, and in particular on the nature and conditions of the Athenian empire. The Greeks in the eastern cities had of course the most to fear from Persia and initially had urged Athens to stand by them. Were they then to be given a choice of masters (*despotes*), one Greek and the other Persian? Were these cities to accept either Athenian hegemony (*hegemonia*)-a term both wide in its application and shifting with context-or a Persian satrap?³⁹ Here, as so often in history, powers external to a local milieu, powers with different interests and different capacities, provided opportunities and forced choices which might have otherwise been different.

There is little doubt that the Persian intrusion propelled what was to become

35 Delbrück, *Antiquity*, 67.

36 Perhaps the best account on this score remains George Grote, *History of Greece* (London: I. Murray, 1888), IV, V, although Grote laments the "failure" of the Greeks to unite. Also see Finley, "The Ancient Greeks."

37 Herodotus, *History*, IV, 137, and V, 28-36. 38 Thucydides, *History*, VIII, 48.

39 On hegemony, see Grote's helpful discussion, *History of Greece*, V, 380-381. For the pair "autonomy/slavery," see de Ste. Croix, *Origins*, 36ff., who develops the complications as regards the problem of stasis which were introduced by Persian intrusion into Greek affairs.

Athens's empire.⁴⁰ The triremes built with Laurion silver which figured so prominently at the great sea battle of Salamis, the substantial contribution of Athenian hoplites at Plataea and Mycale, the Spartan reluctance to become involved in the eastern Aegean, and Pausanias's treachery all combined to leave Athens at the head (*hegemon*) of the defensive league established to clear the Aegean and prevent Persian reintrusion. It was not long before Athens exploited this situation and converted the league into an empire. As Thucydides has the Athenian report, Athens's new role in the Greek world, occurred "chiefly by fear, then by honour also, and lastly by self-interest as well."⁴¹

This is not the place to provide the details of the Athenian empire, but we must be careful not to confuse its character with those of the empires of Persia or, later, of Rome. The three differed in many ways, of course, but Athens differed in a most important structural way. In particular, Athens was and remained a territorially limited and provincially defined polis and its empire was a thassalocracy--literally a rule over the sea.⁴² This rule or empire (the Greek word for rule *and* for empire is *arche*) was made possible through her great seapower, which, as Thucydides clearly emphasizes, was acknowledged by all the cities.

Of course Athens used her power, forbidding secession from the Delian League and "encouraging," sometimes with force, democratic constitutions in the cities. And of course she benefited from empire, directly through the tribute which had originally been democratically assessed and voluntarily given to sustain the defensive league,⁴³ and indirectly, through the security she gained for vital grain imports and through the increased numbers of tourists and foreign merchants present in Athens.

But those warships built with Laurion silver also created what Thucydides and Aristotle referred to as the "maritime mob" (*nautikos ochlos*), the expanded citizen navy whose members had been recruited from the lowest Solonian class and were paid to man the fleet.⁴⁴ Athens had moved decisively

⁴⁰ See Russell Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); Grote, *History of Greece*, V, esp. 389.

⁴¹ Thucydides, *History*, I, 75, 97.

⁴² See A. H. M. Jones, *Athenian Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), Meiggs, *Athenian Empire*. This alternative is not offered by Machiavelli in his account in the *Discourses*. But both James Harrington in *Oceana* (1656) and Montesquieu were alive to it. Recall Montesquieu's remark to the famous text from Xenophon: "Athens," says Xenophon, "rules the sea; but as the Country of Attica is joined to the continent, it is ravaged by enemies while the Athenians are engaged in distant expeditions. ...But if the Athenians inhabited an island, and beside this, enjoyed the empire of the sea, they would, so long as they were possessed of these advantages, be able to annoy others, and at the same time to be out of all danger of being annoyed." One would imagine that Xenophon was speaking of England (*Spirit of the Laws*, Thomas Nugent, trans. (New York: Hafner, 1966), vol. I, bk. 21, ch. 7).

⁴³ Thucydides, *History*, I, 96. Thucydides reports that *phoron* (tribute), initially did not imply coercion.

⁴⁴ Thucydides, *History*, VIII, 72; Aristotle, *Politics*, V, 3, 5.

toward democracy at the end of the sixth century; nevertheless, it seems clear that empire was the basis for its radical extension in the fifth century, first by Aristides and then by Pericles.⁴⁵ Indeed, as Finley has argued, without empire, Athenian democracy might well have been impossible.⁴⁶ But as the increasing professionalization of the military permitted a dramatic victory of the demos in the unabated stasis, there were further implications of the new Athenian hegemony.

Thucydides apparently is not incorrect in his judgment regarding both the cause of the Peloponnesian war and its larger significance. "The truest explanation," he wrote, "was the growth of the Athenians to greatness, which brought fear to the Lacedaemonians and forced them to war."⁴⁷ In the speech of the Corinthians comparing Athens and Sparta and in the even more memorable funeral oration,⁴⁸ Thucydides suggested that the struggle between the Athenians and the Lacedaemonians represented a struggle between two radically differing conceptions of the polis: the innovating, venturesome, and democratic Athens and the old-fashioned, conservative, and aristocratic Sparta. This contrast, never far in the background of fourth-century political writing seems to have reflected an exacerbated and ultimately fatal stasis in the cities of the Greek world.

By 404, the several leading cities found themselves weakened by the indecisive hostilities. The costly and ill-conceived expedition to Sicily (a venture which still might have succeeded had the Athenians been undivided in their resolve), the intrusion of destabilizing Persian gold, and, as Isocrates so well put it, "the running sore of the mercenary system," had left the parties exhausted and unable to attain hegemony. United by Philip II, Macedonia finally moved to bring the era of the classical polis to a close.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens* (London: Macmillan and Company, n.d.). 24.

⁴⁶ M. I. Finley, *Democracy: Ancient and Modern* (New Brunswick, N.I.: Rutgers University Press, 1972), ch. 2. Also see W. R. Connor, *The New Politicians of Fifth Century Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), who traces the breakdown of the older politics of "friendship" (*philoia*).

⁴⁷ Thucydides, *History*, I, 23. For contrasting views of the war, see de Ste. Croix, *Origins*, and Sealey, *History of Greek City-States*, chs. 9-11. Also see Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969).

⁴⁸ Thucydides, *History*, I, 68-71, and II, 35-46.

⁴⁹ On the Sicilian expedition, see Sealey, *History of Greek City-States*, ch. 13; I. H. Finley, Jr., *Thucydides*, ch. 6. As regards mercenaries, Delbrück, *Antiquity*, 145, points out that "fleet service in Athens...except for mass levies, became a purely mercenary service as early as the period following the Persian Wars, and in the course of the Peloponnesian War hoplite service, too, gradually became more and more a mercenary service." In this context, "mercenary" (*misthophoron*) means *merely* paid service, even though by the beginnings of the fourth century, "strangers" (*xenoi*) appeared in increasing numbers in the ranks. As Pritchett, *Greek State at War*, pt. 2, 114, notes, "we lack and presumably always shall lack, any mobilization decree of the fourth century which would explicitly set forth the age-groups of citizens to be called and the ratio of mercenaries, whether domestic or foreign." See also G. T. Griffith, *Mercenaries of the Hellenistic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935).

The brilliance of Thucydides's *History* and the subsequent recognition of the ultimate consequences of the Peloponnesian war are perhaps sufficient to explain our interest in war in the Greek world. Nevertheless, it is easy to jump to false conclusions about war in that world, to derive a false picture of the problems of the polis, and thus to suppose that the emphases of Greek political thought are peculiarly distorted.

By contrast, if one holds that genuine politics emerged in the polis and that the problem of stasis, always present, was exacerbated during the period of Athenian hegemony in the second half of the fifth century, then Greek emphasis on internal and constitutional questions is entirely to be expected. Indeed, it is all the more to be expected if by the time of its fullest articulation in the political writings of Plato, and then of Aristotle, everything was changing and changing very rapidly,

Two contemporaries of Plato shared in the perception that everything had changed. Often in disagreement with Isocrates, Demosthenes, writing in *ca.* 341, did not agree that his time was not like "the time of our ancestors" when the Spartans took the field in the summer and returned home again in the winter. Philip waged his wars not only with a hoplite phalanx, but with light infantry, archers, and cavalry; and perhaps more important, if he did not find his enemy in an open field he went on to besiege him, and "winter and summer were all the same to him."⁵⁰ Plato's most radical political writing, the *Republic*, is radical in part precisely because, as regards war, Plato believed, with Isocrates and Demosthenes, that his time was not like that of his ancestors.

It will be remembered that in the *Republic*, Socrates's initial sketch of the just polis makes no provision for war. That polis is healthy and peaceful because it is self-sufficient (*autarkeia*), satisfies only its needs, and is thus neither aggressive nor the object of envy. For Plato, in this condition, there is no problem of war.⁵¹ But Socrates's interlocutor, Glaucon, objects. Such a polis may be healthy and just, but has not Socrates founded "a community of pigs"?⁵²

Socrates develops the implications of Glaucon's question. If people are not content to live "in a simple way" and instead demand "luxuries," then a multitude of occupations will need to be added to the community: artisans to

⁵⁰ Demosthenes, "Against Philip," in *Phillipics*. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 3.

⁵¹ Plato draws the contrast between his day and the (nostalgic) past even more sharply in *Laws*, Book III where he speaks of times when both "stasis and war had equally disappeared" (778E). "Men's loneliness," he continues, "made them sociable and friendly," and "there could be no quarreling over the means of subsistence." There was neither rich nor poor, nor, in consequence, was there rivalry, envy, or violence. Thus, "they were good men, partly for this reason, and partly from their proverbial simplicity" (679C). This is, of course, a "story," but what is important is its moral. Compare Rousseau in *The Second Discourse on Inequality*.

⁵² Plato, *Republic*. F. M. Cornford, trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), 372C.

make furniture of all sorts, confectioners, hunters and fishermen, artists, poets, dancers, servants, barbers and swineherds, none of which was required in the original polis. And if so, there will not be enough pasture and plough-land, so that "we shall have to cut off a slice of our neighbor's territory; and if they are not content with necessities but give themselves up to getting unlimited wealth, they will want a slice of ours."⁵³

Indeed, as war is thus explained, Plato seems as well to hold that Athens's greatness as a civilization and Sparta's ability to resist stasis demonstrated both the problem and the possible solution. Unlike Athens, Plato's archetype of the "unhealthy" polis, the citizens of Plato's republic cannot defend the polis. For this function, an entirely new class of guardians (*phylakoi*) will be needed. "Their work," he insists, "is the most important of all." Accordingly, they "will need the most complete freedom from other occupations and the greatest amount of skill and practice."⁵⁴ Of course, "their work" is the most important not only because without their success the polis cannot be autonomous, but as well because, in a *just* polis, there could be no separation of the military and political functions.

But if circumstances called for a radical restructuring of the polis, Plato nevertheless affirmed what seems to be a characteristically Greek perception regarding the *raison d'être* of the polis. It did not exist merely for the purposes of self-defense or the convenience of trade and barter. Rather, its purpose was moral and pedagogic: to realize the virtue (*arête*) and well-being (*eudaemonia*) of its citizens. In the context of the problem of war and stasis, this idea has important bearing in Plato's last and longest political writing, the *Laws*.

Written perhaps in the years just prior to his death in 347, Plato's *Laws* begins by posing a fundamental question of politics, a question which is raised and answered with exactly opposite conclusions in Machiavelli's monumental sixteenth-century tract, the *Discourses*.⁵⁵ Plato asks whether the law-giver (*nomothetes*) should design his constitution with an eye to peace or to war? Which alternative should have priority in the construction of institutions and which should be the primary object of policy? Plato's answer to this basic problem begins with a critical distinction, that between external war and internal war or stasis. Clinias, the Cretan protagonist of the dialogue, admires his venerable constitution and the similar constitution of Sparta, also a constitution of long duration. But Clinias must surely be wrong, argues the Athenian, if he believes external wars to be "the first and foremost object of [more]

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 373D.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 374D.

⁵⁵ See note 31 above. Perhaps the most striking feature of Machiavelli's modernity as a political thinker is his inversion of the Greek priorities. He believes that domestic policy must be subordinate to foreign policy precisely because, for him, war and expansion are *permanent* conditions of politics. Thus, for him Rome, not Sparta, is the model. See my "Montesquieu and the Eighteenth-Century Vision of the State," in *History of Political Thought*, 1981, 2:313-47.

the law-giver's regard." The constitutions of Crete and Sparta are good, but not for the reasons which Clinias supposes. Despite the common misunderstanding of Spartan militarism, Spartan and Cretan excellence resides in their stability and conservatism. Indeed, not only is it the case that a constitution ought to be aimed at virtue and the happiness of its citizens, but as must not be forgotten, "stasis is the most dangerous kind of war." To be sure, the best condition is neither war nor stasis; nevertheless, as external war is by far "the much milder form," in designing a constitution, it is stasis, first and foremost, that the law-giver must guard against.⁵⁶

This view is hardly original with Plato. It reaffirms the sentiments of the unknown Larisaean pamphleteer who in *ca.* 404 had declared that "war is conceded to be the greatest of all evils by as much as peace is the greatest of all blessings. Yet stasis as far exceeds war in the magnitude of its evil as war exceeds peace."⁵⁷ Thucydides held a similar view and in a famous passage concluded that "stasis gave birth to every form of wickedness in Greece."⁵⁸

We have argued that there is nothing paradoxical about the focus and emphasis of Greek political thought. It may be, of course, that our modern preoccupation with war and foreign policy leads us to believe that people in all times and places believe, with us, that the political association exists primarily for purposes of self-defense. It may be also that Greek confidence that the polis was the final form of political association was misplaced, especially by the time that Aristotle was setting out his ideas. But even if this Greek belief was unwarranted, there is perhaps still much about politics that we can learn from the Greeks. In any case, we will surely fail to comprehend their reflections on constitutions and on war if we do not appreciate that the world of the polis was radically unlike our own.

⁵⁶ Plato, *Laws*, 628A *et passim*.

⁵⁷ Quoted from W. S. Ferguson, *Greek Imperialism* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1913), 22.

⁵⁸ Thucydides, *History*, III, 83.

