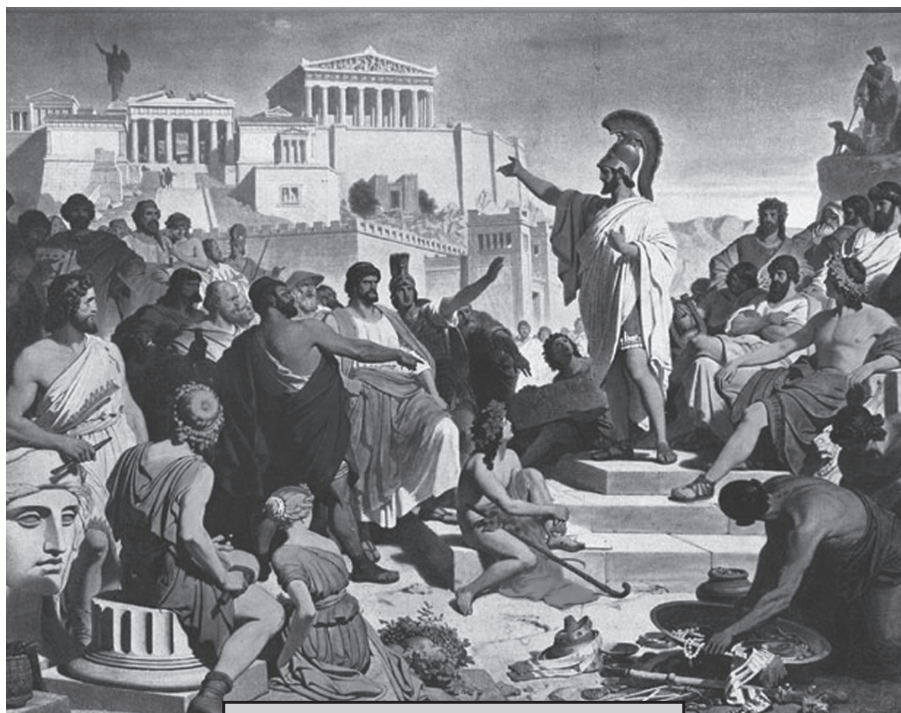


ANCIENT VOICES



AN INSIDER'S LOOK AT

CLASSICAL GREECE

LOUIS MARKOS



STONE TOWER PRESS

Ancient Voices: An Insider's Look at Classical Greece
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This book is dedicated to Stewart Morris
For laying the foundation for the University that I call home
For his deep commitment to the teaching and preservation of history
And for teaching me that history, like the business world,
turns on personalities



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PREFACE

The ancient world may seem ancient to us, but it was not so to the people who lived their lives and dreamed their dreams and struggled with their demons in fifth-century BC Athens. They were real people, the men and women who cherished their lives, their families, and their callings, who tried their best to make sense of the world into which they had been born.

If we would understand, *really* understand, the people of the past, then we must pay heed to their voices and enter into a vigorous dialogue with them. We must not stand over them in judgment, eager to feel superior to their quaint and antiquated ideas, but must be ready to learn from their hard-won wisdom and willing to change our beliefs and our behaviors on account of that wisdom.

In seeking to hear clearly the voices of ancient Greece, I will not scour public buildings for graffiti, or study the material cultures of town and city, or attempt to theorize what life was like for slaves, women, and outcasts. I respect historians who do that kind of leg work, but I am also aware of the danger that accompanies such social history: the danger of projecting modern identity politics on to the past, and, by so doing, silence our ancestors even more.

If we would discern their authentic voices, we need to read more closely the documents that have stood before us for centuries. J. R. R. Tolkien revolutionized *Beowulf* studies in his groundbreaking “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” by convincing his fellow philologists to pay attention to the poem *as a poem* and not just as a linguistic artifact of a bygone era. By reading closely and sympathetically the story itself, the future author of *The Lord of the Rings* helped uncover the fatalistic fears and darkly hopeful desires of the people who carried down the oral tales of their Scandinavian monster-slayer, and of the anonymous poet-monk who gathered them together.

The voices of the ancient Mediterranean are there waiting to speak to us if we will only listen. They are there in the mythology of Hesiod, the

philosophy of Parmenides, the poetry of Solon, the history of Herodotus, the political science of Thucydides, the comedies of Aristophanes, the dialogues of Plato, the leadership of Xenophon, the romances of Menander and Apollonius, and, especially, the Funeral Oration of Pericles and the Apology of Socrates: history's supreme celebrations of what democracy can be when it is most worthy of itself and of what it means to be a citizen of such a democracy.

Although my focus will be on drawing out those voices so that we can hear them today, I will begin with a historical overview of Greece. In keeping with the ancient historians themselves—Herodotus and Thucydides, Xenophon and Polybius, Livy and Plutarch—I will adopt a narrative approach that I hope will prove both compelling and accessible. The goal of the overview will be to ground the ancient voices in their geographical and historical time and place without thereby reducing them to mere products of their political-social-economic milieu.

Of all the subjects that American students take in grade school and college, the one in which they are weakest and most deficient is history. If we are to hear the voices of the past, we must first immerse ourselves in the issues and events that shaped and influenced (but did not determine) their lives. We must break out of our contemporary box before we can reach back across the years to take the hands of those who called the ancient Mediterranean their home.

C. S. Lewis, author of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and a close friend of Tolkien who shared Tolkien's mission to rehabilitate the negative reputation of the Middle Ages, once wrote that the best way to understand the medieval knight is to put on his helmet and look at the world through his visor. That is what I will seek to do in the chapters below—to get an insider's look into the strange but thrilling world of classical Greece.

Studying people from the outside affords us knowledge and even some insight, but to transform that knowledge and insight into wisdom and discernment, we must open ourselves to seeing the world through the eyes of the people we are studying. Only by so doing can we gain the kind of sympathetic imagination it takes to embrace a world and an ethos that may at first seem radically different than our own. And only by so doing can we

accurately gauge—and be thankful for!—the debt that we owe to those who came before us.

Though I hold a great love for, and have written often about, Homer and the Greek tragedians, in this book I shall turn my attention away from them toward other voices that may seem less strong and insistent but that nevertheless offer a window into antiquity. Some of my selections might seem a bit eclectic, but it is my goal and my hope that the combined symphony of voices that I will marshal in the below chapters will call back the past in a fresh and accessible, but also bracing and convicting, way.

May we all have ears to hear the ancient voices of our ancestors!

CHAPTER

ONE



THE GLORY THAT WAS GREECE

Whenever the life and legacy of ancient Greece are invoked, the city that immediately springs to mind is Athens. And that is as it should be, since what we call the Golden Age of Greece is essentially equivalent to the Golden Age of Athens. Still, in the annals of ancient Greece, Athens is a relative latecomer on the scene. She was not, in fact, the first or second or even third center of Hellenic power and culture. Those centers sprang up to the south and then to the east of the city of Athena.

FROM BRONZE AGE TO IRON AGE

The first great civilization of ancient Greece did not appear on the mainland but on the island of Crete. Located, like Sicily, at the crossroads between Europe (to the north), Africa (to the south), and Asia (to the east), Crete built a trading empire that was both highly advanced and richly cosmopolitan. The palace of Knossos, home to the legendary King Minos, boasted modern plumbing, solariums, frescoes of great beauty and delicacy, and an intricate maze of rooms that may have given rise to tales of the labyrinth where Minos kept the dreaded Minotaur imprisoned.

Minoan Crete, named for Minos, held sway for half a millennium (2000-1500 BC), until, weakened by the volcanic explosion of Thera (modern day Santorini) around 1500, she slowly yielded supremacy to the city-states of the Peloponnese. Eleven centuries later, Plato would invent a timeless tale about the lost continent of Atlantis, modeling it, so I believe, on ancient memories of the Minoan Empire.

According to Plato's *Timaeus*, Atlantis reached its height 9000 years before the time of Solon, the founder of the Athenian democracy (about 600 BC). If we read 9000 as an exaggeration of 900, and then count backward from Solon, we arrive at the exact period when Thera exploded, forming a tsunami that would have hit the coast of Crete with the same fury as the legendary wave that cast the proud Atlantis into the sea. The fact that Plato—who would have been well aware of the legendary/mythological claim that Theseus, Prince of Athens, ended Crete's hegemony over Athens by braving the labyrinth and killing the Minotaur—presents Atlantis as a rival to Athens offers further evidence that Plato had the distant rumors of Minoan Crete in mind when he fashioned Atlantis.

Although Crete, unlike Atlantis, was not destroyed by the eruption and the subsequent tsunami, the damage they inflicted and the interruption to trade they caused likely checked Crete's influence in the Mediterranean, allowing her Greek neighbors to the northwest to slowly eclipse her. In any case, Knossos itself was sacked by the Greeks of the Peloponnese around 1420, causing a shift in the center of power. For the next two centuries (1400-1200 BC), the military and cultural headquarters of Greece would be housed at Mycenae, the legendary palace of Atreus and his son Agamemnon.

True to Homer's depiction of it in the *Iliad*, the Mycenaean Empire was really a conglomeration of independent city states, including the Sparta of Menelaus, the Tiryns (or Argos) of Diomedes, the Pylos of Nestor, the Ithaca of Odysseus, and the Salamis of Ajax, with Mycenae being the richest and most powerful. Crete was part of this conglomeration—Homer says her King Idomeneus sent eighty ships to the Trojan War—but she no longer called the shots. Though Homer's Bronze Age warriors surely took part in raids from which they brought back rich spoils, their written language (the cuneiform Linear B), with its endless lists of material goods and slaves, reveals that the Mycenaean Empire was a bureaucratic one grounded in a

carefully regulated trade that included the full Aegean world, reaching as far as Egypt to the south and the Hittites to the northeast.

The Trojan War to which Homer's epics point back took place at the height of Mycenae, between 1250 and 1200 BC, and was likely fought over the lucrative trade to and from the Black Sea, the breadbasket of Greece. Troy was located in northwest Turkey, near the mouth of the Hellespont (or Dardanelles), a location that would have allowed her to monitor, and likely exact tariffs on, ships entering and returning from the Black Sea.



Although the Trojan War marked the height of Mycenaean power, it proved to be the swan song of Greece's glorious Bronze Age. Over the course of the next century, all the mighty citadels mentioned in Homer's Catalogue of Ships (*Iliad* II) would be abandoned and fall into ruin. A similar collapse would engulf the Aegean world, taking down Troy, the Hittites, the Minoans, and the Canaanites; only Egypt would survive, though she would be greatly weakened. Whether the deeper cause was a string of natural disasters, an extended drought, a debilitating plague, a foreign invasion, or a combination of all four, trade in the Aegean was disrupted, causing a domino effect that plunged Greece into a long Dark Age (1100-800 BC). During this period, of which we know very little, Greece lost her written language and centralized bureaucracies and began to build in perishable wood rather than imperishable stone.

But in that darkness, the Greeks continued to dream. To preserve their link to the lost glories of the past, they told stories of the last great expedition of the Mycenaeans, preserving and carrying down those stories via an increasingly elaborate oral tradition. When Dark Age Greece was invaded by iron-wielding Aryans (Dorians) from the north, large numbers of disaffected Greeks abandoned their homes and took to the sea in hopes of building a better life for themselves and their children. Some of these Iron Age refugees sailed to Italy and Sicily, but most crossed the Aegean to set up cities along the Ionian coast of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). It was there, in Ionia, that the oral tradition was systematized and a school of bards assembled and trained to carry down the legends from one generation to the next.

Homer was the last in a long line of illiterate Ionian bards; he likely hailed from the island of Chios and may very well have been blind. Out of the strands of the oral tradition, he stitched together the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the late eighth century, at the same time that the Greeks were constructing a new written language based on the Phoenician alphabet. For the next two hundred years, until successive waves of Lydians, Babylonians, and Persians conquered and absorbed the Ionian Greeks in the mid-to-late sixth century, Asia Minor rose up to be the third, Iron Age center of power and culture in the Greek world.

Indeed, it was the cosmopolitan Greeks who lived in the rich trading cities of Asia Minor, together with their fellow Greek expatriates who lived along the equally rich and cosmopolitan coasts of Italy and Sicily, who laid down the foundations for Western science and philosophy. Hesiod, a contemporary of Homer who lived in mainland Greece as she was slowly emerging from the Dark Ages, had sought answers for why things are the way they are in the loves and battles, the pacts and squabbles of the gods. In sharp contrast, most of the philosophers who lived along the coasts of Turkey and Italy between 600 and 450 BC (a group collectively known as the Presocratics) sought naturalistic answers to the riddles of the cosmos.

The first of these was Thales, who, together with his successors Anaximander and Anaximenes, lived and worked in the Ionian city of Miletus. According to the Milesians, as the three were collectively known, the principle questions that needed to be asked were not who and why but what and how. They called themselves physicists (from *phusis*, the Greek word for nature) because they rejected the supernatural, religious orientation of Hesiod in favor of a more materialistic, scientific approach. Their interest was not in who created or shaped the world but in what the universe was made of. Rather than ask why things are the way they are, they sought to uncover the physical, material processes by which things came into being and passed away.

Most of the Presocratics who followed in their wake—Anaxagoras, Democritus, Empedocles, Heraclitus—held a similarly naturalistic view of things. There was, however, one (Pythagoras) who taught reincarnation and uncovered a deep spiritual significance in numbers and two (Parmenides and his pupil Zeno) who believed that the unseen world that we perceive with our mind is more real than the physical world we see with our senses.

As a group the Presocratics exerted considerable influence on the Mediterranean world. Still, were it not for the great philosophers of Athens (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle), their legacy would likely have been lost. Indeed, what few fragments we have of their writings come mostly from passages quoted in the books of Plato, Aristotle, and the Roman Cicero. The seeds of Greek exceptionalism had been sown, but the full flowering would await the glorious entrance of Athens on to the stage of history.

THE DAWN OF ATHENIAN POWER

Though Athens was occupied as far back as the days of the Mycenaean Bronze Age—according to Homer’s Catalogue, she sent fifty ships to Troy—the fact that there was plenty of room and good soil in Attica meant that most of the people were unconcerned about politics. However, around 600 BC, a series of bad harvests led to the enslavement of large numbers of peasants who, out of desperation, sold first their property and then themselves to rich landlords. Many centuries earlier, the Israelites had established the year of Jubilee—during which all land would return to its original owners—as a way of preventing just such a social catastrophe. The Athenians, lacking this Mosaic safety valve, found themselves trapped in a cycle of increasing separation between rich and poor that threatened to plunge their city-state (or polis) into bloody civil strife.

Fearing that the growing unrest would cause Athens to be seized by an opportunistic dictator, the Athenians, in 594, made a momentous decision: they turned over full legal and political power to a single man who they believed could save their city from the twin dangers of anarchy and tyranny. The man they chose was considered at the time to be one of the Seven Sages (Thales was another), a wise, just, and practical man who seemed blissfully immune to partisan bribes or threats. His name was Solon, and it is no exaggeration to say that every one of his extensive, but not radical reforms paved the way for Western democracy.

Rather than start his rule with an assertion of absolute power, Solon’s first act was to abolish the harsh laws of Athens’ most infamous lawgiver: Draco. The laws of Draco, which were said to have been written not in stone but in blood, proscribed the same punishment for every type and level of

crime—death. By vetoing the Draconian law code, Solon showed that he could temper justice with mercy. Solon then addressed the central issue at hand, the enslavement of the debt-ridden peasantry. Seeking once again to balance justice and mercy, Solon canceled all existing debts while simultaneously refraining from redistributing the land. By so doing, he avoided the (anachronistic) extremes of radical capitalism and communism. Neither social Darwinism nor economic Marxism was to be allowed to reduce the citizens of Athens to cogs in a totalitarian machine.

Solon next turned his attention to reframing the political life of his polis. Understanding well that those who own the most property have the greatest stake in maintaining social and economic stability, Solon set up a class system that kept control in the hands of the rich while granting jury powers to a people's Assembly. By thus preventing the growth of both exclusivist elitism and inclusivist egalitarianism, Solon protected Athens from falling prey to an oligarchic mentality that would have crushed individual merit or a lowest-common-denominator mentality that would have crushed individual distinction. To further prevent these dangers from strangling Athens' freedom and potential, Solon instituted checks and balances by fashioning a bicameral system composed of a Council of Elders known as the Areopagus (rather like the House of Lords or the Senate) and a People's Council made up of 100 men from each of the four tribes (rather like the House of Commons or the House of Representatives).

Having set his political house in order, Solon next tackled the relationship between Athens and the world around her. Instead of enflaming the rabid xenophobia endemic to the city-states of Greece, Solon extended Athenian citizenship to foreign craftsmen who could help strengthen and diversify the Attic marketplace. He did not, however, promote an amorphous multiculturalism that would have placed Athenian cultural excellence on the same level playing field as all other cultures. Rather, he did all he could to increase civic pride among his fellow citizens and to invite the new foreign-born citizens to identify with that civic pride and make it their own. Still, though Athenian pride and patriotism were to be celebrated and her own values and traditions to be privileged over those of other city-states, all citizens, whatever their original place of birth, were to be afforded the same legal rights. Law, not culture or tradition, was to be enshrined at the heart of the polis—and the

will of the law, rather than the will of any one man or group of men, was to reign supreme.

Solon the statesman put these laws and innovations into practice, and then Solon the keen student of human psychology did something remarkable to ensure the continuation of those laws. To avoid the envy that he knew his reforms would provoke in *both* the rich and the poor, Solon voluntarily exiled himself from Athens for ten years, making the citizens swear before he left that they would not alter any of his laws while he was away.



The decade during which Solon was absent proved a turbulent one for Athens, with factions rising up in the three different regions of Attica: the plain, the hill, and the shore. The men of the plain, suspicious of Solon's democratic reforms, looked to the oligarchs of Sparta as their model. The men of the hill, in contrast, agitated for a more extreme form of democracy that catered to the will of the people. As might be expected, the men of the shore took a middle position between these two extremes.

The war between the factions might have gone on indefinitely had not the radical democrats of the hill produced one of Athens' most colorful political figures: a quick-witted, charismatic, often shameless demagogue named Peisistratus. Like an ancient Greek Huey Long, Peisistratus used a number of clever ruses—including secretly cutting himself with a knife and then insisting the Athenians give him a bodyguard to protect him, and hiring a stately courtesan to dress up as Athena and drive his chariot into the agora—to seize the reins of power. As Peisistratus took control through popular means, rather than through heredity, he was considered by his contemporaries to be a tyrant.

He proved, however, to be an enlightened and progressive tyrant, using his power and wealth to patronize the arts and to build up Athenian pride, prestige, and commercial influence. It was Peisistratus who established the yearly festival to Dionysus out of which would emerge the uniquely Athenian genre of tragedy. It was Peisistratus as well who founded the Panathenaic festival, during which he would hire bards from Ionia to sail to Athens and recite, over a long weekend, the entire *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Though not all

scholars agree, I believe that it was at this time that Peisistratus paid for an authorized written version of the epics to be put down. This not only helped preserve the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; it ensured that the next several generations of Athenians, the ones who would usher in the Golden Age, would grow up reading and absorbing Homer's vision of Greek heroism.

Just as important as his cultural reforms, Peisistratus, though he was an absolute ruler, maintained the democratic structures and institutions of Solon. Realizing this, Solon did not resist Peisistratus' rule when he returned from his exile abroad, but accepted him as a necessary step on the way to true democracy.

Unfortunately for Athens, Peisistratus' mostly benevolent dictatorship (561-528) was followed by the far harsher tyranny of his son Hippias. Growing hatred of Hippias' excesses led two young Athenian men to rise up in revolt and assassinate Hippias' brother Hipparchus in 514. Though the tyrannicides, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, were executed, they were quickly hailed as martyrs for liberty and, in 510, the citizens of Athens drove out Hippias and reestablished the democracy originally intended by Solon.

Indeed, under the leadership of Cleisthenes, they pressed forward with further reforms that eliminated the threat of future factions by regrouping Attica into ten political tribes that drew equally from plain, hill, and shore. Henceforth, 50 representatives from each tribe, chosen not by vote but by lot, would lead the People's Council (whose number was raised from 400 to 500) for 1/10 of the year. By so doing, Cleisthenes ensured that no single tribe would gain too much power or influence. He also increased the power of the Assembly while simultaneously providing Athens with a system for defusing the threat of charismatic leaders who might try to seize Athens for themselves. Influenced by Solon's ten-year self-exile, Cleisthenes decreed that if the citizens felt a certain man was getting too powerful, they could vote to exile him from Athens for a period of ten years, during which time his property would be held intact. As the voting was done by writing the person's name on a broken piece of pottery (*ostraca* in Greek), the system was known as ostracism.