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Exploring the Greek Needle’s Eye: Civilizational and Political Transformations

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The argument to be sketched in this chapter is perhaps best understood as a variation on a theme developed by Christian Meier: the emergence of the political in ancient Greece (1980). I translate Entstehung as “emergence,” rather than “invention” or “discovery” (the latter term is used in the English translation [1990] of Meier’s principal work on the subject); to stress the emergent character of the innovations in question is to link them to broader horizons of socio-cultural creativity instead of reducing them to advances of cognitive or constructive rationality. To foreshadow the main points of the proposed alternative, there are good reasons to reject the idea that no distinctively political sphere or dimension of social life existed before the Greek breakthrough. The change supposed to set the Greek experience apart from other cases must be understood as a transformation that entailed the emergence of new patterns. As I will argue, it was not the only transformation affecting political thought and practice during the same world-historical period. And although there is no denying the specific features and the momentous significance of the Greek reorientation, its political roots and results appear as aspects of a complex field which also includes innovations in other areas. While that view is certainly not alien to Meier’s approach, the present interpretation will cast it in more explicitly civilizational terms. Another major implication of this move should be noted. The archaic period of Greek history, increasingly recognized as an eminently creative phase and a decisively formative background to the more familiar classical sequel, was marked by a combination of intercivilizational encounters and
The Greek experience in long-term perspective

civilizational expansion. (The latter is still known by the traditional but misleading label of “colonization,” whereas the former is now less obscured by notions of a self-contained Greek miracle than by the opposite tendency to assume a linear all-round and one-way transmission from East to West.)

Intercivilizational Connections

With the above qualifications, the response suggested here will be close to the spirit – if not to the letter – of Meier’s argument, as well as to the ideas of others who have developed similar interpretations in different conceptual terms (most notably Cornelius Castoriadis), and I would not object to the description of ancient Greece as a “needle’s eye of world history” (Meier 1980: 13 = 1990: 2). The all-round and intensive appropriation of Near Eastern skills and sources did not prevent the Greeks from transforming older legacies in ways that opened up new historical horizons of universal significance. I do not question that the Greek innovations can be seen as aspects of a broader set of changes going on in the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean during the early and middle centuries of the last millennium BCE. They included the revival of imperial traditions on a novel scale and with a significantly strengthened emphasis on the religious and ethnic identity of the empire-builders (Assyria and, in a much grander style, the successor empire of the Achaemenids); a restoration of archaic models accompanied by an unprecedentedly emphatic traditionalism, but also by geopolitical retrenchment (Egypt); and a far-reaching reorientation of marginal polities towards maritime and commercial activities, without any significant cultural rupture (the Phoenicians). But the same period also saw the religious reorientation of a small and particularly exposed ethno-political community on the margin of the larger intercivilizational zone between Egypt and Mesopotamia. The Jewish “invention of monotheism” (a term open to criticism, but not easy to replace) is commonly seen as one of the key axial developments; historical research on its sources and contexts has gradually revealed complex relations to the historical experience of a whole region.

The Greek version of the axial breakthrough began on a more distant periphery, exposed to cultural influences from the Near Eastern centers but largely beyond the sustainable borders of their imperial reach. Not that the latter factor was absent: the expansion of the Lydian kingdom, with massive consequences for the Greeks in Asia Minor, was one of the post-Assyrian bids for empire, and when the Persian empire that prevailed over all rivals attempted to conquer the Greek heartland, the war which it lost transformed Greek politics and cultural attitudes in multiple ways. On the other hand, internal constellations and dynamics of the Greek world were conducive to autonomous developments, both on the level of cultural themes and in response to geopolitical threats. Following Kurt Raaflaub (2009a: 38), “it is not very useful… to focus on the question of whether Greek culture was independent or derivative: it was both.” One is tempted to add that the Greek way of being
derivative was unusually original, and the path to independence was quite exceptionally innovative.

Even more than the Jewish case, the ancient Greek trajectory thus exemplifies the close links between two aspects sometimes taken to indicate a choice between different approaches. A comparative focus is then seen as incompatible – or at least not easily combined – with the more recent interest in cultural transfers (the latter term appears as a more precise alternative to the traditional tracing of “influences”). A more comprehensive analysis of transfers then leads to the construction of “entangled histories,” to use an increasingly popular formulation, and at its most ambitious, this notion conveys a claim to replace the comparative paradigms that have supposedly taken mutual isolation for granted. There is no more conclusive case for the interdependence of the two perspectives – the comparative and the transfer-centered – than the ancient Greek record. During the period described by some historians as “orientalizing,” there was a massive and many-sided transfer of skills, themes, and models; this process did not come to an end with the transition from the archaic to the classical phase, although the changing context set new limits to its impact. But it is equally clear that the significance of cultural borrowings from the Near East cannot be assessed without careful comparison of both sides, with a view to factors reinforcing the process as well as to those which minimized the dynamics of transfer in particular fields or favored transformative responses.

In addition to these general considerations, more specific historical points should be noted. Notwithstanding the radical difference between Greek and Judaic achievements during the Axial Age, both cases can be seen as geopolitically marginal but culturally pioneering parts of a larger domain that also included the original centers as well as other peripheries of the Near East (Liverani 1993). Traditional views of the Axial Age have placed a unilateral emphasis on the two breakthroughs most obviously conducive to new visions of the world and new modes of cultural creation; the more recent search for a common core structure of “axiality,” defined in highly abstract terms, has further singularized the Greek and Judaic cases (in the double sense of separating them from others and bringing them closer to each other). Conversely, closer attention to the regional context is in line with a broader effort to re-historicize axial transformations, and to re-focus on a more varied spectrum of innovative developments. In the Ancient Near East, this enlarged field includes – as noted above – the upgraded versions of imperial traditions that emerged in the first millennium BCE. Their legacy to later history was significant enough to put them among the epoch-making features of the age. Certain cultural trends should also be taken into account. As Jan Assmann has shown, the first millennium saw the formation of different “memory cultures” in Egypt, Israel, Mesopotamia, and Greece, and this was in turn connected to different cultural implications and interpretations of the respective writing systems. Even if the older cultural centers did not experience the same kind of radical cultural reorientation as the younger ones, the overall picture speaks in favor of an expanded comparative view.
Aspects of the Polis

After these introductory comments on the intercivilizational setting of Greek history, the argument will now turn to the main topic and begin with an outline of assumptions and qualifications that enter into the revised case for a political thrust of the trajectory in question (Raaflaub 2005; see also Raaflaub, this volume). It should, first of all, be underlined that we are dealing with long-term processes punctuated by major shifts and turns: neither an evolutionary differentiation nor an abrupt emergence of the political, but a whole sequence of political transformations linked by an ongoing dynamic. This is not simply a matter of doing justice to the archaic period – now recognized as an eminently creative phase in its own right – and grasping contrasts as well as connections between it and the classical sequel. There is an even longer perspective to be applied. Attempts to trace the Greek polis back to Mycenaean or even Cretan origins do not carry conviction, but the long-drawn-out transition from the crisis of the Mycenaean palace regimes to the beginnings of polis formation must be included in the proposed genealogy of political innovations. This background is of threefold importance. In the first place, the collapse of the Mycenaean order and the following civilizational breakdown cleared the ground for new beginnings on a different basis. The Greek case thus contrasts with other experiences of collapse and revival, where efforts to recreate traditional structures or at least to implement models associated with them are more pronounced. Even so, it can be argued that aspects of the Late Bronze Age crisis, especially the diffuse pattern of political power that seems to have prevailed after the collapse of the palace regimes, were in some way indicative of political patterns to come (Schnapp-Gourbeillon 2002). Finally, cultural memories of the Mycenaean past, too diffuse to crystallize into formative traditions, served to sustain the vision of a heroic world, intermediate between the human and the divine as well as between remote origins and recent past. The particular importance of this imaginary domain for the culture of the polis is beyond dispute, while the extent and the exact character of the connection to the Bronze Age world remain controversial.

Another point to be emphasized is the plurality of emerging centers and unfolding developmental paths. It is fundamental to the view taken here that the polis can be seen as a defining civilizational phenomenon; but this should not obscure the fact that other forms of socio-political organization developed alongside it, both within and on the margins of the Greek world. Moreover, research on the origins of the polis has unequivocally come down on the side of a multi-central genealogy (Hansen 2006): the new form of socio-political life emerged in various parts of the Greek world during the same period, and although this makes the basic similarities all the more remarkable, it is also true that diverse origins led to different foci on aspects and alternative possibilities of the polis. It is perhaps worth adding that the regional foci most frequently singled out for their role in early polis formation were, in one way or another, markedly exposed to intercivilizational contacts. Cyprus,
where Phoenician presence combined with marginal but continuous Mycenaean culture (most visibly typified by the survival of strong kingship and syllabic writing), is a significant place for those who stress both the role of Phoenician models and the persistence of Bronze Age foundations. But well-founded doubts about Phoenician sources of the polis (Raaflaub 2004) make this part of the story seem less relevant, and the Cypriot city-states were in any case – not least due to the imperial dominance of Near Eastern powers – less involved in the civilizational expansion of the archaic period than Ionia or the Aegean islands.

The Ionian cities, heavily involved in “colonizing” activities, developed in close proximity to the Anatolian frontier – so much so that some authors have been tempted to transfer the credit for Greek achievements to an Anatolian koinē. Crete also seems to fall into this category, even if the record is more elusive than elsewhere: the island was without doubt an important point of contact between Greeks and Phoenicians, and at the same time, the little known but evidently significant transformation of the Minoan legacy must have left its mark on the culture of the local poleis. Saro Wallace (2010) has proposed a very interesting interpretation of Cretan ways of managing the crisis of the Late Bronze Age and developing new patterns of settlement in response to changed conditions; as she sees it, this background helps to understand both the large number and the peculiar stability of the Cretan oligarchic poleis. Finally, the mislabeled “colonies” in the Western Mediterranean (Sicily is widely seen as one of the most prominent birthplaces of the polis) did not borrow from more advanced neighbors, as the pioneers on the eastern margins did, but many of the Western Greek settlements were founded by the very protagonists of “orientalizing” encounters, and it has been plausibly suggested that this expansion into a new cultural environment was important for the formation of cross-political Greek identity (Domínguez 2006).

A third line of preliminary reflection concerns the socio-cultural setting of political transformations. This has been a central theme of recent work on ancient Greek history, and it should be duly integrated into the debate on the emergence, independence, and relatively self-contained dynamics of the political sphere. If the emphasis on the latter aspects is to be maintained, there is more to be said on the contextual factors that enabled the polis to foreground and upgrade politics. We must, in other words, contextualize the very autonomization of the political domain. Athenian democracy represents the culmination of that trend, and the most striking illustration of its inherent paradoxes. According to the scholar who has in recent years done most to explore the historical lifeworld of Athenian democracy, it:

went part and parcel with an Athenian way of life which we would judge illiberal, culturally chauvinist and narrowly restrictive. It was, essentially, the product of a closed society... Observing the narrowness and exploitative nature of Athenian democracy, we should be challenged to stop taking cover behind ‘democracy’ as a term at which only cheering is allowed, and instead ask seriously how we might attain the political openness (and cultural achievement) of Athens while taking pride in a society that is heterogeneous and determinedly open (Osborne 2010: 37).
The usefulness of the notion of a “closed society” is debatable, and so is the implicit celebration of contemporary Western society as “determinedly open” (it is, for one thing, hard to square with the neo-liberal closure of hearts and minds); but that said, Osborne’s account of Athenian particularism, its exclusionary practices, and its exploitative underside is largely convincing. The paradox of political openness and exceptional cultural creativity, achieved on this less than attractive basis, is all the more intriguing. Reflections on the “paradoxes of democracy” (Eisenstadt 1999) have proved particularly fruitful in the modern context; Osborne’s conclusion suggests that a similar approach to the Athenian experience could be useful, but that the specific paradoxes in question would be of a different kind.

Cultural Extensions of the Political

If the exceptional autonomy of the political sphere in the Greek city-states – and, in particular, the extreme degree reached in democratic Athens – rested on socio-cultural preconditions, another part of the picture is no less crucial to our argument. The autonomy of the political entails a primacy that can only be understood in terms of reinforcing factors extending into other spheres. Some attempts to theorize this superadded meaning of Greek politics may be noted; they have singled out different aspects of a field that still awaits a more comprehensive treatment. Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s brief description of ancient Greece as a “civilisation de la parole politique” is an obvious case in point. It sums up strong claims about the projection of political experiences into forms of discourse, whose broad reach was in turn conducive to a more intensive and reflective political life. For Vidal-Naquet, the key connection between politics and discourse is the logic of binary oppositions, already at work in political disputes and choices but translatable into a general and highly adaptable scheme: “Greek thought reasons in alternatives and couples” (1981: 33). The contrasts thus articulated are very diverse: gods and humans, Greeks and barbarians, masters and slaves, but also art and knowledge as well as justice and hubris. The spectrum seems vast enough to justify a civilizational view. As Vidal-Naquet saw it, the Greek use of opposites brought a much older mode of thought into the open, while at the same time making it more responsive to historical experience. This line of interpretation enabled him and Jean-Pierre Vernant to apply models derived from Lévi-Strauss’s work in a very productive way, without taking on board the more dogmatic assumptions about the “savage mind” that had accompanied the original version. On the other hand, the proposed link between political life and intellectual orientations seems somewhat tenuous, and other approaches to the same questions may help redefine the connection in more adequate terms.

Vidal-Naquet focused on what he called “parole politique,” but a reappraisal of political thought – with particular emphasis on the levels and phases of reflection – has affected our understanding of Greek civilization in more fundamental ways. Political reflection, attuned to practical issues and increasingly marked by a
pragmatic this-worldly orientation – an emphasis on “human responsibility for their own and their community’s well-being” (Raaflaub 2009b: 582) – gathered momentum during the archaic age and became a defining cultural feature. A clearer grasp of this tradition, long overshadowed by the more systematic political theorizing that began at a later stage of Greek history, has far-reaching implications for the overall picture of intellectual change. For one thing, it is now widely acknowledged that the apparent absence of democratic thought, as distinct from democratic practices, was an illusion due to inadequate criteria: the Athenian turn to radical democracy did not give rise to the kind of theory later developed by its critics, but it was accompanied and articulated by new rounds of political reflection (Raaflaub 1989). Another important point is the plurality of cultural genres that served as vehicles of political discourse. They range from epic and lyric poetry to tragedy, historiography, and philosophical reflection. But these multiple media of expression do not add up to an integral mode of thought. The conclusion to be drawn from scholarly work on the subject is that there was, at least during the formative phase, no wholesale projection of cosmological models, and no comprehensive application of world-disclosing interpretive schemes to the political domain: “taking into account that our knowledge of these early philosophers is sadly fragmentary, it is hard to claim that either they, or the schools they founded, created an encompassing system of ethics and values, or indeed a set of ideas that could be readily applied to, and effect change in human society” (Raaflaub 2005: 265). The connection between political thought and philosophical perspectives can only be made in more specific and limited terms. At the most elementary level, the distinctive but far from uniform political regimes of the Greek city-states were conducive to more autonomous reflection, and to more varied types of it, than the palace-centered and hierarchical societies of the Near East.

If recent analyses of Greek political thought have drawn attention to its changing forms as well as to its enduring embeddedness in political life, they have also raised the question of its practical impact. Political rationality, in the emphatic sense of coherent and comprehensive rules implemented through political organization, must be included among the themes of the expanded perspective sketched above. The most forceful case for a distinctive and dominant rationality of the polis is made in Oswyn Murray’s essay on “cities of reason.” Murray’s thesis is that the Greek city-state “displays a high degree of rationality, not merely in the sense of internal coherence, but also in the sense of a self-conscious recognition of the reasons for change and the consequences of institutional reform” (1987: 331). The evidence for this view ranges from the rational constructs in tribal disguise, characteristic of the archaic period and long mistaken for genuine survivals of tribalism, to later political changes most clearly exemplified by Athenian reforms. The argument is convincing, and further support can be added. Recent scholarship has cast doubt on the traditional contrast between ethnos and polis, and thus thrown light on another path of rationalization, distinct but not fundamentally different from the one identified by Murray. To quote the author of a pioneering work on the Thessalian state (long seen as a prime case of the ethnos model), “the
ethnos as a political community, the koinon as the organizational form which the ethnos gives itself, and the city are complementary elements, none of which can exist without the others” (Helly 1997: 360). But this broader focus is, by the same token, a reminder of the context-dependent directions taken by political rationalization. Variations are not limited to the twin patterns of ethnos and polis; within the polis type, we can not only distinguish specific frameworks and strategies of reform, but also destinies of the underlying paradigms as such. It has, for example, been suggested that the circumstances of colonization led to an early crystallization of polis structures in Sicily, but that particular conditions – a heterogeneous composition of political units, intermittent conflicts with the indigenous population, and threats posed by Etruscan and Carthaginian neighbors – made the stabilization of precociously developed patterns more difficult than elsewhere (Consolo Langher 1997). The result was a recurrent tendency to combine internal takeovers by tyrants (who came closer to a monarchical transformation of the polis than elsewhere in the Greek world) with expansionist projects on a scale that transcended the city-state framework.

Murray’s reflections on the “cities of reason” raise other questions. If the rationality that creates and transforms holistic structures – not just political institutions in the circumscribed and conventional sense – is to be understood as political, further classification of that term is needed. But a final preliminary point should be considered first. The rational patterning of the polis presupposes a vision of or a way to think about its unity as well as its possible transformations. Drawing on the vocabulary developed by Cornelius Castoriadis, but with some changes to his specific focus, I will refer to this analytical level as the political imaginary. In the present context, it should be distinguished from Mogens Hansen’s “imaginary polis.” Hansen (2005) uses that expression as a covering term for three different intellectual trends: the construction of utopian poleis (including borderline cases of planned colonies), the idealization of existing poleis, and efforts to develop a concept of the polis as such, distinct but derived from concrete historical examples. As defined here, the notion of the political imaginary refers to a more basic constitutive factor and a stronger internal connection between various aspects, some of which can nevertheless be linked to Hansen’s themes. The starting-point is the recognition of imaginary significations, that is, configurations of meaning irreducible to empirical or rational foundations, as components of social life; to the extent that they enter into the making of core institutions, we can refer to an “imaginary institution of society” (Castoriadis 1987). The political imaginary is then, in short, the particular aspect of the instituting imaginary that relates to institutions with the explicit power to impose rules. Castoriadis’ conception of the political sphere will be reconsidered below. At this point, let us only note that for him, the Greek version of politics went hand in hand with more extensive and varied growth of critical reflection, most markedly in the philosophical domain.

With this broader meaning in mind, let us briefly return to the issue of the imaginary polis. The work of Hansen and his collaborators points to a conclusion going beyond the initial terms of inquiry: the imaginary polis is not simply a set of
extensions added to the historical experience of the Greek city-states; rather, its multiple variants add up to a re-elaboration of that experience, in ways still relevant to modern reassessments of the same field. The political imaginary thus expands into significations meant to make sense of a whole historical experience, and they cannot be dismissed as myths incompatible with critical approaches. Debates in modern scholarship suggest that we should expect a permanent confrontation of traditional accounts – derived from Greek sources – with new aspects and understandings of the evidence. One of the most instructive examples is the unending controversy around Athens and Sparta, their contrasting paths of development, and the typical or anomalous character of their respective socio-cultural patterns within the framework of Greek civilization. It is a commonplace that the Greek propensity to think in opposites (this was, as noted above, a key characteristic of Vidal-Naquet’s “parole politique”) found a particularly fertile ground in this polarizing relationship between two powerful states, and that the direction taken by the initial and foundational re-imagining efforts reflects a paradoxical aspect of this relationship: due to the more articulate and intellectually productive character of the Athenian regime, it became the main arena for interpretations of the other side. It was in Athens that Sparta became a battleground for competing imaginations (Hodkinson 2005), but the very uneven distribution of extant sources has made the idealizing accounts loom larger than they now seem to have done in the original setting. Even so, recent work has shown that varieties of the Spartan mirage vary more significantly than has often been assumed, and that its key topoi remain useful as points of reference for further debate. The whole field of Spartan history, institutions, and culture has – during the last two decades or so – been the subject of very intensive discussions, but the revision that is obviously in the making does not amount to a blanket denial of Spartan exceptionalism. As the most authoritative revisionist puts it, the task is “to identify more precisely the ways in which Sparta was distinctive or unexceptional and to ground our assessments upon a more secure comparative basis” (Hodkinson 2009: 418).

Other figures of the political imaginary – reconfigurations of history with strong emphasis on political highlights – may be noted before moving on to the next round of our discussion. There is, in particular, an interpretive pattern that plays a key role in Greek visions of the past and remains a source of productive disagreement in modern scholarship: a sustained focus on founder personalities. It is tempting to see this consistent individualizing twist to the historical field as a countermove to the very de-centering and pluralization that were – as has been seen and will be explained at greater length – the most elementary preconditions of political innovation. The personification of historical processes would, on this view, have been a way of adapting a novel experience to more familiar frameworks. It was no doubt grounded in new possibilities for individual action and ambition, opened up by the emerging city-state; but the relationship between interpretive constructs and their experiential basis is – now more than ever – a matter of scholarly debate, and no end to it is in sight. Three main themes of this discussion may be distinguished.
Between Monarchy and Community

In the first place, traditional notions of monarchic rule in the early polis have been demolished by closer examination of the evidence. The interpretation now most widely accepted suggests a long-term devolution and fragmentation of kingship prior to the archaic divide, as well as a further accentuation of this trend due to the eighth-century formation of the polis, but allows for surviving remnants of the roles and distinctions previously associated with royal power. Growing interest in the diversity of the Greek world and the early beginnings of alternative paths has further nuanced the picture: it is a plausible hypothesis that emergent oligarchies and/or tyrannies could relate to vestiges of monarchy in varying ways, depending on the local or regional context (Koiv 2003). On the outer margins of Greek civilization, the new dynamism of the archaic period could even result in lasting consolidation of monarchical regimes. In particular, “Macedonian kingship is not only a case of non-democratic politics but also of non-democratic evolution” (Carlier 2008: 268), that is, a developmental pattern opposed to the trajectory that led the polis to higher levels of inclusion and self-government. In the Macedonian case, conquests gave added strength to a monarchical regime that had retained strong sacral authority, and also made it easier to build a new and variegated elite around the ruler. Drawing on other work by Carlier (1984), and translating its results into terms coined by Castoriadis, we can make another important distinction. As the institution of monarchy receded from the scene in the Greek heartland, the imaginary signification of kingship was elaborated more freely and applied in different contexts, ranging from constructs of eastern despotism to visions of an ideal but impossible ruler.

The focus on imagined kingship has also led to new controversies about the Bronze Age background to the Greek experience of collapse and revival. A major issue was clarified when scholars agreed that the lifeworld of the Homeric poems was linked to the archaic age (the precise character of that connection could still be disputed), but very different from the Mycenaean past; another round of the discussion seems to be signaled by arguments to the effect that archaic and classical notions of kingship have been projected across the divide between polis and palace regimes. The Minoan past of the Aegean world may lend itself to more clear-cut interpretations than later developments on the mainland. Nanno Marinatos (2010) has made a strong case for a Minoan version of sacral kingship, related to Near Eastern models but adapted in distinctive ways and certainly very different from the imaginings of a rebuilt culture. As for the more derivative and syncretic Mycenaean palace regimes (marked by Anatolian influences in addition to the Cretan ones), it seems an open question what kind of kingship was superimposed on the palace model of organization. A documented but not well understood division between sacral-royal authority and military leadership (wanax and lawagetas) suggests a significant deviation from Near Eastern patterns; more revisionist claims in recent scholarship range from the notion of a weak kingship imposed on village communities that retained a significant degree of autonomy (Morris 2000: 100)
to the idea that Mycenaean regimes may have been theocracies in the most literal sense, with kingless palaces and sovereignty attributed to a god (Schmitt 2009).

In short, the relationship between Greek imaginings of monarchy and the historical experience behind them is still a disputed topic and a source of changing conjectures about the background, the environment, and the beginnings of political transformations in the archaic phase. Another offshoot of the same problematic – the underpinnings and illusions of the individualizing political imaginary – is the discussion about the role of founders-legislators (aisymnētēs) in the development of the polis. It is linked to questions concerning the character of early legislation. Narratives about great legislators are more compelling when associated with comprehensive law codes, embodying a vision of the polis and establishing a durable framework for collective life; and conversely, legislation of that kind is easily ascribed to charismatic individuals. Two contrasting cases, Lycurgus and Solon, may serve as a reminder that neither uncritical acceptance nor wholesale dismissal of the aisymnētēs as a figure of cultural memory can be justified. Neither Solon’s historicity nor his role as a legislating reformer can be seriously doubted; controversy is still rife on the scope of his political intervention and its place in Athenian history. As for Lycurgus, the fundamentally mythical character of the figure – underlined by the fact that this was the only legislator to be accorded divine honors – is no longer questioned, and the valid point that traditions are never “invented” without some basis in historical experience does not necessarily mean that the myth crystallized around a historical individual. K.-J. Hölkeskamp (1999) examined the issue from a broader perspective and made a convincing case for radical reappraisal: neither comprehensive law codes nor charismatic legislators seem to fit our present understanding of the archaic polis, at least not as recurrent patterns. There remains, however, some room for doubt about Hölkeskamp’s more sweeping conclusions. Atypical situations and later developments complicate the picture; and it can still be argued that the vicissitudes of the polis were sometimes conducive to individual ventures of exceptional scope.

The last point bears directly upon the third theme to be considered here. The question of archaic Greek tyranny (as distinct from the classical and Hellenistic regimes commonly subsumed under the same label) is still debated, and the long history of tyranny as a figure of thought is bound to affect views on the experience behind it. Comparisons or assimilations to tyranny as the illegitimate mode of rule par excellence became a recipe for discrediting other types of political regimes; at the same time, an underlying ambiguity of ideas, memories, and images relating to tyranny became more explicit in other contexts. As a vision of collective power transgressing normal limits, the notion of the polis tyrannos entered into the self-interpretation of the short-lived Athenian bid for empire. For later historical epochs, dominated by resurgent and re-legitimated monarchies, tyranny was still a model of degenerative possibilities to be avoided. Finally, the distinctively modern additions to the imagery and discourse of tyranny should not be forgotten. In particular, the Bonapartist model – derived from a post-revolutionary twist to the tradition of monarchic rule – has influenced interpretations of ancient tyranny, not only within the Marxist tradition...
most closely associated with this line of argument. Recent scholarship on the subject is characterized by more context-sensitive and less preconceived approaches; despite continuing divergences on many points, the main trend is clear: archaic tyranny is increasingly seen as a deviant but by no means uncommon mode of aristocratic rule, and thus as a detour on the road to more inclusive and strongly integrated forms of the polis, rather than a distinctive regime to be set alongside oligarchic and democratic models. The most radical (and, as far as I can judge, convincing) version of this argument was developed by Greg Anderson, who distinguishes the archaic *turannoi* from tyrants in the retrospectively exacerbated sense. The original use of the term referred to “the individual who, by virtue of his singular accomplishments, connections, and personal qualities, had eclipsed all peers in the governing class and won recognition as the unchallenged leader of the community” (2005: 209). Later developments, not least closer contact with Near Eastern monarchies, transformed the image of the sole ruler. The pre-eminent aristocrat was transformed into an antagonist of the polis and an embodiment of despotic power.

If the essentials of Anderson’s thesis seem acceptable, three qualifying considerations should nevertheless be noted. First, archaic tyranny may be reducible to more or less successful bids for supreme aristocratic power; but the epoch in question appears to have been particularly conducive to individual enterprises of that kind (in addition to the routines of intra-aristocratic competition), and a comparison with the “charismatic epoch of Roman history” suggests itself (Hatscher 2000, on the long-drawn-out crisis of the Roman republic). Notwithstanding the fading image of tyranny as a regime, this perspective is still a defensible view on archaic Greece, and in that sense, the merits and demerits of the individualizing approach to the political field remain a matter of debate. Second (this is to some extent foreshadowed in Anderson’s paper), the tradition based on retrospective upgrading of the archaic *turannoi* could provide cultural support for more genuine monarchic projects of latter-day tyrants. Finally, this ongoingly elaborated experience became a key part of the Greek political imaginary, adaptable to multiple and not always consistent uses. In the fifth-century Athenian universe of discourse, tyranny figured as the extreme opposite of democracy, but at the same time, the new mode of expansion initiated by the most flamboyantly and militantly democratic polis could be envisaged in terms of a tyranny exercised over other communities. This ambiguous labeling reflects the unfamiliar character of Athenian power; whether the modern convention of calling it an empire solves the problem is a matter for brief consideration below.

### The Transformation of the Political: with Meier against Meier

Until now I have stressed the broader connections that should be borne in mind when discussing the Greek transformation of the political sphere. On that basis, the discussion will return to Meier’s thesis, with a view to a better understanding of his
claim and of the revised view to be defended here. A conventional account of political institutions and their role in human societies, focused on a regulating center with a territorial domain, is enough for a first approach to the field of inquiry; the above reflections did not problematize that notion on its own ground, but a closer analysis of the Greek experience must raise questions in that vein. After a preliminary – and inevitably selective – contextualizing sketch of expanded horizons, we should now shift back to the core of the political and engage with its constitutive meanings. Here I will, to begin with, follow Meier’s line of argument and reconstruct it in three steps.

Meier (1980) takes off from Carl Schmitt’s all-too-celebrated Concept of the Political, but he does not – as some readers have suggested – take Schmitt’s definition for granted. Rather, he goes beyond Schmitt’s viewpoint and overcomes the ambiguity of the latter’s formulations: for Meier, it is clearer than it ever could be for Schmitt that the polarity of friend and foe is only an extreme possibility, inherent in political life, and, as such, it cannot be more than a potential outcome to be kept in mind when theorizing more central and constant features. The positive factors that serve to contain adversarial trends have to do with the creation of an order that transcends conflicts and provides for what Meier (1980: 463) calls *Hegung der Macht*; this expression is not easy to translate, but it clearly refers to the limitation and control as well as the cultivation of power. The point can be taken further than Meier does. In his view, the relations between different poleis were not political (28). However, recent scholarship (most decisively van Wees 2004) has moved away from notions of permanent war between poleis, and the persistent attempts to build durable alliances and – more demandingly – relations of friendship between states can be seen as ways of extending “*Hegung der Macht*” beyond the boundaries of the polis (and as van Wees argues, they were linked to developments that increased the control of the city-state over its own military resources). The federal formations of the Hellenistic period represent a late culmination of this trend, but they developed in a world already dominated by states of another kind.

The second step is to introduce a more abstract conception of the political, covering the aspects distinguished above, and thus to prepare the ground for a comparison of its historical forms. Meier accepts the description of the political as a field of relations and tensions, which Schmitt had – late in life, long after the publication of his most seminal text – borrowed from another source, and gives it a more substantive meaning than it could have in Schmitt’s work. The specific characteristics of the political field will depend on the actors and forces of which it is made up. In the Greek case, its components are citizens, sharing power and acting as members of a community (which also has a religious dimension). This interpretation of the Greek path to politics – the active identification of polis and citizenry – is the third and most decisive part of Meier’s argument. It implies a strong focus on the classical period, and more specifically on Athenian democracy. But this particular historical reference does not exhaust the theme. The polis mode of state formation was from the outset designed to minimize the distance between the state and the political community (see also Raaflaub, this volume). Pressures to
expand the role as well as the ranks of the citizenry seem to have been built into this constellation. Local societies with weakly structured hierarchies, emerging from a civilizational collapse and entering into closer contact with neighboring cultures, were reorganized – and sometimes brought together – along new institutional lines. The changes redefined and dynamized the relationship between leaders, elites, and broader strata of active or potential participants.

The political field evolving through these innovations was both vulnerable to disruption and conducive to ongoing change. Extreme political fragmentation led to frequent interstate conflicts, often with destabilizing and even destructive consequences for the poleis involved. On the other hand, the border-crossing alliances and connections of the “nobility” (a term borrowed from elsewhere and questionable in the Greek context) posed problems for the emerging polis and called for integrative counterweights. The socio-economic processes that empowered the polis also affected the distribution of wealth and power within it in ways that could undermine internal order. All these factors had ambiguous implications for the polis version of the political. They frequently led to the kind of civic conflict that became known under the stereotyping label of stasis; but they also represented challenges to which various poleis responded in inventive and divergent ways.

Instead of a tendential identification with Athenian-style democracy (as suggested by some of Meier’s formulations), a definition of distinctively Greek approaches to institution-building in the political field should allow for the creativity manifested in these variations. Its historical record includes the differences between political regimes in various parts of the Greek world (to the extent that they are known), as well as the transformations that marked the way from the archaic to the classical polis. To stress this broad and changing spectrum is not to deny the exceptional importance of Athenian democracy; but the expanded frame of reference will help to understand why the uniquely Athenian combination of radical democracy with exclusivism and expansion provoked a reaction which led to the most destructive internal conflict in the history of Greek civilization, and also why the Athenian coalition was too disunited to achieve a lasting alternative settlement.

Before moving on to explore – in a very summary fashion – these interconnections and the comparative perspectives that can be derived from them, one more implication of Meier’s argument should be noted. Following Schmitt, he attributes to the modern state a monopoly of the political; but given the more complex understanding of the latter category, outlined above on the basis of Meier’s analysis, the idea of a monopoly over it must also go beyond Schmitt’s claim. We can, moreover, link this point to a seminal insight into the mainsprings of European state formation. Efforts to monopolize the political encompass and transcend the twin monopolies over violence and taxation which Norbert Elias identified as core components of European states in the making. As he argued, decisive steps in both directions were made by the monarchies of the early modern era; their monopolizing structures were inherited and transformed into more impersonal apparatuses by the modern state that moved towards legal domination and more or less far-reaching democratization. As for the monopoly of the political, that aim, always
less attainable in practice than in the envisionings of rulers and their advocates, seems to be the common denominator of the monarchies known as absolutist. Objections to that term, at least the most frontal ones, are often based on the misconception that it equates ambitions with achievements.

The contrast with absolutism may help to underline a basic fact about Greek civilization: its distinctive articulation of the political field provoked countercurrents, among which tyranny became the most prominent one, but no coherent vision or strategy of monopolization emerged during the archaic and classical centuries. Experiences of tyranny were more effectively elaborated in the sense of an anti-model to be avoided than for any constructive purposes. Whether the Platonic turn in political philosophy – at the end of the classical phase – should be seen as a monopolizing project, and whether it was inspired by a real-life attempt to transform a tyranny, is not of direct concern here, but let us note in passing that a retreat from the most uncompromising formulation (in the Republic) was linked to other self-problematicizing turns of Plato’s thought, and that his philosophical response to political problems of the times was in any case unconnected to institutional trends. When major political change came to the Greek world and the neighboring Near Eastern regions in the late fourth century, it owed nothing to intellectual problems of the polis. The new constellation resulted from the takeover of the Achaemenid empire (including its permanently rebellious Egyptian frontier) by the abruptly ascendant Macedonian kingdom, accompanied by massive strengthening of Greek cultural influence. Hellenistic kingship, the most concentrated expression of the changes, drew on all these sources, but although its ideological elaborations included some borrowings from Greek philosophy, the institutional core did not originate from that legacy. The dominant role of Hellenistic kingship in the post-Alexandrine world is not in dispute, but extensive debates on the relationship between kings and cities have shown that it fell short of monopolization in the sense considered here (Ptolemaic Egypt is of course a special case).

Politics and the Political

In the present context, the Hellenistic world interests us only as a contrasting pattern. To return to our main topic, the renewed focus on the political domain can begin with the closely related but sometimes separately defined concept of politics. The simplest way of setting politics in relief is to identify it with agency, strategy, and rivalry; the concept then refers to the whole spectrum of action in pursuit or possession of power, and more specifically state power. This interpretation is the starting-point for Yves Schemeil’s (1999) analysis of the ancient Near Eastern record, intended to show that the Greeks cannot be credited with inventing politics. There is no reason to dispute the existence of politics thus defined (accompanied by some forms of political reflection) in the archaic civilizations of the Near East; it is more doubtful that such arguments suffice to deny the originality of the Greek polis. A strong objection to that view has been linked to another
definition of politics. Cornelius Castoriadis (1991: 143–74) rejected the idea that the political (le politique) had first emerged in Greece, but argued that this claim could be made for politics (la politique). As he saw it, a political sphere exists wherever explicit power, that is, the imposition of regulations by a center, is involved in the institution of human societies, and this category is therefore older than the historical civilizations. Politics was, by contrast, a much more specific phenomenon: a constellation of activities and institutions where alternative possibilities of ordering social life are made explicit and brought into more or less open conflict. For Castoriadis, this was a defining innovation of the Greek polis. The distinction between politics and the political thus becomes more significant than it could be in the perspective adopted by Schemeil. The emergence of politics changes the character of the political sphere. With this observation, we rejoin Meier’s line of thought, but more is needed to clarify the connection.

It is obvious that Castoriadis’ definition of politics presupposes reflection on means, ends, and principles. However, that very point serves to underline a shortcoming of the argument. The change presented by Castoriadis as an abrupt appearance of new patterns is better understood as a process that went through successive stages; we can, as a first approximation, distinguish at least four main transitions. To put the sequence in perspective, it will be useful to recapitulate the modified version of Meier’s model that underlies our approach. The political field, in the sense that prevails at the beginning of archaic Greek history, is constituted by multiple actors without a dominant center but in permanent search of order; moreover, it should be defined in such a way as to include the relations between the poleis, more consistently warlike than their internal life but not devoid of order-building initiatives. With this background in mind, the first archaic phase can be seen as characterized by a very pronounced mobility of the political field. Boundaries between a socio-political elite – known to historians as aristocracy or nobility for want of better terms – and a larger citizen community were uncertain and contested; the division of power between magistrates and the kind of control exercised over them by the polis could be defined in different ways. The evidence is fragmentary, but on both counts, the varied record of polis regimes across the Greek world confirms this view. If we regard archaic tyranny as an extreme but recurrent form of aristocratic rule (along the lines of work discussed above), episodes of that sort fit easily into the picture. On the other hand, there seem to be traces of temporary shifts towards popular rule in several archaic poleis (see various contributions in Raaflaub et al. 2007), but no good case has been made for a stable radical democracy prior to fifth-century Athens. Finally, the conflicts between poleis could lead to conquest and enserfment; as van Wees (2003) has argued, there is some evidence that such expansionist ventures were more common than usually thought, and the Spartan regime, however unique in scale and scope, was in that regard less anomalous than its traditional portrayals had suggested. Institutionalized exploitation of conquered communities affected the whole internal order of the poleis concerned, and this alternative should therefore be included among the variants of the political.
A second transition may be defined in terms of the clear and consistent grasp of order-building as a task for the citizens. This did not remove the gods from the scene (they remained, as some historians have noted, citizens of a higher order), but there was a decisive shift towards understanding the political as a field of human intervention and responsibility. This humanizing turn can hardly be identified with a particular historical moment, but there seems to be general agreement among historians that Solon’s reform of the Athenian polis involved an exemplary breakthrough; it is also a reminder that the phases in question should not be mistaken for evolutionary stages of the polis in general. It is not being suggested that every polis with changing constitutions had its functional equivalent of the Solonian episode. Rather, we are dealing with a logical pattern of possibilities inherent in the polis form of political life.

This applies in equal measure to the third phase: the explicit awareness and – on a more reflective level – reasoned comparison of constitutional alternatives. Again, precise dating is difficult, but the classic distinction between monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy is clearly a fifth-century development, and it is immaterial to our argument whether the regime later known as democracy was first labeled as isonomy. This thematization of alternatives seems to be the main reason why Castoriadis takes politics to be a Greek creation, but it is not the beginning of the story, and we can add that it is not the end either. There was yet another twist to the relationship between the political as an institutional field, politics as an activity with institutional implications and consequences, and political reflection as a way of thinking about institutional models. With the claim that different constitutions represent different forms of life, and as such embody different paradigms of human life, the trajectory of the polis as a self-interpreting formation enters a final phase. There is no doubt that this seminal idea was in gestation during the fifth century (Castoriadis mentions, in particular, a poem by Simonides, and his interpretation of Pericles’ funeral oration is in that vein), but it was political philosophy in the Platonic and Aristotelian mode that made it a central theme. This was the most ambitious project of political reflection (although the emphases of the two founding figures were very different), but neither its internal logic nor the changing geopolitical environment were conducive to practical impact on the political sphere. On the other hand, the innovation that could neither reform nor transform the really existing polis became a crucial part of the latter’s cultural legacy, and of the framework in which the whole Greek experience was seen by later civilizations. With shifting focus on Platonic and Aristotelian themes, this postscript to the polis entered the tradition of political philosophy in a triple capacity: as a set of models to be followed, as a challenge to be met by counter-projects, and as a problematic to be rethought.

Religion and the Political

As I have tried to show, the Greek transformation of the political and the socio-cultural space which it opened for politics must be analyzed in a long-term historical perspective. That will necessarily entail a closer look at the civilizational context,
and the aspect to start with is the relationship between religion and politics. If we think of archaic Greece in connection with the Axial Age, and as a case to be compared with other transformations during that period, there is no denying that the problematic of religion and politics has moved to the center of debates. To quote Robert Bellah’s account of the Axial Age (the most comprehensive one so far), “the very hallmark of the axial age” was “the critical question of the relationship between god and king” (Bellah 2011: 277). From this point of view, the most outstanding facts about the initial Greek constellation were on the one hand the fading of monarchy (not incompatible with shrunken survivals and imaginary projections), on the other an unusually under-structured religious sphere that made it easier to move towards autonomous politics (see also Egon Flaig, this volume). There was no institutionally separate sacral power, no orthodox definition of belief, and no holistic notion of prescriptive traditions (in the Roman sense of mos maiorum); it may be added that there was no parallel to the elusive but decisive fusion of religious and political authority in the Roman senate. The self-limiting logic inherent in this form of religious life was reinforced by specific features of the religious imaginary. The Greek boundary between the human and the divine realm was drawn in a way that invited to expand and explore the spaces of human autonomy. Gods and humans were, as Jean-Pierre Vernant puts it, “gens du même monde” (Vernant 1996: 207); the gods were immortal and immeasurably more powerful, but they were neither rulers of the world nor guides to proper conduct. Relations between them, hierarchical up to a point, were flexible and disputed enough to provide a certain backdrop for political order in flux (see also Robin Osborne, this volume). Finally, the loose texture of religious life opened up possibilities for mythopoetics and “mythospeculation,” to quote a term introduced by Robert Bellah (2011), and these offshoots of the religious imaginary could in turn be adapted to new political horizons and aspirations, such as the radicalized idea of justice. Poets, thinkers, and politicians thus became active participants in the religious field.

Moses Finley (1954) argued that the religious universe of early archaic Greece must have been the product of a religious revolution, probably completed towards the end of the preceding “Dark Ages.” For those who favor – broadly speaking – Durkheimian approaches to the sociology of religion, the idea is plausible; it seems very unlikely that Mycenaean references to gods with the same names can reflect a continuity of notions and beliefs from the Bronze Age palace regimes to the vastly different social context of the early first millennium BCE. But it is very hard to see how Finley’s thesis could ever be substantiated. What can to some extent be documented is the development of Greek religious culture – and its political potentials – within the expanding regional and civilizational framework of the eighth and seventh centuries. The process known as Greek colonization, briefly discussed at the beginning of this chapter, was an essential component of the civilizational sea change that set the scene for archaic Greek history. An outer periphery of the multi-civilizational Near Eastern region mutated into a much larger and more self-defining Mediterranean world. There seems to be no comparable case where a
consolidation of cultural unity went hand in hand with massive regional enlargement and a multiplication of political centers. Irad Malkin (2011) has recently analyzed this transformation in a very illuminating way. It is debatable whether the creation of a Mediterranean Greek world should be linked as closely to contemporary network theory as it is in Malkin’s work, but his main point is in any case important and convincing. The combination of shared cultural horizons in an abruptly enlarged world with extreme political fragmentation was a catalyst of changes: it gave rise to new paths of diffusion, interaction, and differentiation. The mobility of ideas and individuals (including the travelling intellectuals invoked by Christian Meier in various writings) became a key factor in the accelerating later history of the archaic period.

Malkin stresses the formation of a Hellenic civilizational community, with a strong cultural identity and a weak territorial one. But it can also be argued that the weakening of the territorial bond vacated a space which could be filled by steadily strengthening political collectivities and identities. If we try to link this line of argument back to the reflections on religion, it would seem that the wave of civilizational expansion had a threefold impact on the religious framework. In the first place, the common repertoire of cults, beliefs, and ideas derived added strength from operating on a much larger scale than before, and not least because the all-round intensification of contacts with neighboring cultures reinforced efforts to find parallel meanings and figures in different religions. A further supporting factor was the mythopoetic potential of a tradition that could serve to integrate the widely dispersed settlements into a common history. On the other hand, multiple and mutually independent political centers could develop their own variants of shared patterns; such divergences were a defining feature of polis religion. They have certainly not been absent from scholarship on Greek religion, but more work seems to be needed. Distinctive aspects of Greek religiosity in the South Italian settlements, not least in connection with a strong presence of Orphic and Pythagorean countercultures, are a recurrent but obviously not exhausted theme (for a recent provocative exercise with major implications for the whole field of polis studies, see Redfield 2003). As far as I can judge, the debate on religious aspects of Spartan exceptionalism is breaking new ground. Michael Flower (2009) has, in particular, drawn attention to specific features of Spartan gods, festivals, and personnel, as well as to the continuing heroization of Spartan kings, which has no parallel.

In short, this dimension of polis religion – its role in regulating the relationship between civilizational unity and political plurality – merits more study. Before moving on to another side of our topic, let us briefly note a third aspect of religious change accompanying the enlargement of the Greek world. As the religiously defined borders of “Hellenicity” (Hall 2005) shifted far beyond all political claims and possibilities, and new channels of communication were established across the emerging area, religious centers – as distinct from political ones – could envisage a new role. Delphi and Olympia were far and away the most important places of that kind, so much so that it does not seem far-fetched to describe them as civilizational centers; but Delphi’s contribution to religious culture, its links to informational
channels, and its direct as well as covert political influence put it in a class apart. In the context of the times, it does not seem surprising that a center of this type emerged. The fact that this particular place achieved its unique status is puzzling – and a reminder of the role played by unrecorded concatenations of events, always involved in the formation of civilizations but likely to be of exceptional weight in circumstances like those of archaic Greece in the making.

To round off this discussion of polis formation and civilizational expansion, another link between the two processes should be noted. Recent scholarship has placed a strong emphasis on the peculiar characteristics of the aristocracy that dominated the scene at the beginning of archaic history, and on the corresponding problems which the integration of this stratum posed for the polis. Mischa Meier (1998) has, for example, stressed this part of the background to the Spartan regime, not given its due by earlier authors. On the other hand, Ian Morris (1996, 2000) has made a strong and widely accepted case for the presence of an egalitarian ideology *sui generis* in the early phase of the polis; it emphasized the dignity and importance of those who later came to be known as “middle people,” and must therefore be seen as one of the key preconditions for democratizing processes, although it would seem very misguided to equate it with democracy *tout court*. If this analysis is taken on board, older arguments about the survival of aristocratic values in the later polis have to be qualified accordingly: the transmission of the aristocratic legacy took place in a setting shaped by tension between rival cultural orientations, and although the victory of the egalitarian principle was more complete in some cases than in others, the very formation of the polis was a step in that direction. The aristocracy, with its translocal connections, was not easily integrated into a community of citizens, however restrictively defined. Polis religion was not irrelevant to this problem: the polis as a “festival community” (Burkert 1987) was, among other things, a response to the demand for strong integration patterns. The tension between aristocratic dominance and egalitarian aspirations played itself out in the arena enlarged by Greek colonization, and however fragmentary the record, some informed speculation seems possible. The greater Greek world opened up new opportunities for aristocratic networking (stories about friendship between tyrants fit into the picture of archaic tyranny as a form of aristocratic rule); at the same time, the new settlements sometimes became pioneers of polis-building, and could in that capacity be seen as models of integration. In any case, the intensification of cultural and intellectual exchanges made it possible to approach the problem on a higher level of reflection. Such a breakthrough was evident in the Solonian way of managing conflicts between aristocracy and community.

**Greece in the Axial World**

As noted above, the present argument is not compatible with the idea that a political sphere emerged for the first time in Greece; nor can it be claimed that Greece was the only case of significant change to the character and understanding
of this sphere during the Axial Age. What remains valid is that the Greek transformation took a very distinctive turn, and on this point Christian Meier’s analysis is – as has been seen – very instructive, though not wholly convincing. To clarify the issue, comparison with other Axial centers is needed; here I can do no more than summarize some results of recent debates on the Axial Age (see Arnason et al. 2005; Bellah 2011; Bellah and Joas 2012).

There are two sides to the question of the political sphere in the Axial Age. On the one hand, it has to do with the changing structures of political power, seen as an integral part of the Axial constellation. In this regard, Greece stands out for several reasons: the path of state formation that began in the Archaic period was unique in its far-reaching fusion of the state with the political community, its extreme multiplication of political units, and its lack of preconditions for imperial ventures. To sum it up briefly, it could be said that the imperial factor was external to Greek history, but became relevant in three different ways in successive stages: first through its absence (the failure of the Assyrian empire to expand into the Aegean area was not unimportant for the Greeks), then as a challenge met in ways that transformed the Greek scene (the Persian invasions), and finally as a peripheral kingdom suddenly mutating into an expansionist power without equal in the region (the Macedonian conquest of Greece and the Near East). It might be objected that the Athenian empire developed from within the Greek world, but it is at least debatable (and to me very dubious indeed) whether this was an empire properly so called. It was too short-lived, relations between Athens and the subordinate poleis too unsettled, and the lack of a coherent imperial project too conspicuous. The label “greater Athenian state” (Morris 2008) seems more adequate. There is no doubt that the Athenians drew lessons from Persian imperial practices (Raaflaub 2009), but when it came to an overall representation of their power, it was Greek tyranny and not Persian empire that served to make sense of it.

Since Greece and China are sometimes described as examples of axiality centered on politics, the fundamental contrast between them should be underlined. China during the first millennium BCE is probably the most clear-cut case of state formation taking an imperial turn and culminating in long-term imperial rule. The story began with the decomposition of a large dynastic realm that had emerged and expanded roughly at the time of crisis, regression, and fragmentation in the civilizational heartlands of Western Eurasia; the successors of this declining power developed into exceptionally competitive states with steadily improving strategies for mobilizing resources, and the number of contenders in the field shrank until the last round produced the most durable imperial formation in world-history. And the contrast is no less marked on the other level of political developments during the Axial Age. Political reflection was a major part of intellectual activity in China during the Axial centuries, but its most conspicuous characteristic was the sustained focus on the “art of rulership” (Ames 1994). This theme was explored from a remarkable variety of angles, corresponding to different intellectual currents; the emphasis could be on the cosmological framework of kingship, the cultivation of the ruler in the spirit of a tradition transmitted and refined by a new type of
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teacher-scholar, or on the rational maximization of resources at the disposal of the ruler. In short, the spectrum was broad, but Western interpreters have found it difficult to establish clear boundaries between schools. The overwhelming concern of political reflection with monarchical rule and its imperial mission is beyond doubt; these issues were certainly not absent from Greek thought, but there the main focus was on the post-monarchical polis.

As for the other centers of Axial transformations, the political implications of Indian thought – inseparably religious and philosophical – seem particularly elusive. There is scholarly consensus that the “late Vedic breakthrough” (Bellah 2011: 509) reflects changing and problematic relations between priests and rulers, but this connection is not thematized. It is also generally accepted that early Buddhism centered on a vision of liberation through renunciation, without direct political implications. There are good reasons to assume that the spread of Buddhism resulted in “an effort to create something like a parallel community relative to the existing order” (Bellah, 543), but this aim was not articulated in political terms. The most important landmark in the later history of Buddhism was its adoption or appropriation by the Maurya empire under Aśoka in the third century BCE; this experience inaugurated a longer tradition of envisioning the kind of ruler that would adequately reflect Buddhist ideals, but at the same time, more conventional kingship continued to figure as a symbol of imprisonment in worldly affairs. If the political message of this tradition is muted and limited, the political meaning of Axial Judaism is starkly paradoxical. The political theology that transferred sovereignty from earthly rulers to a divine legislator was a response to the threat from Mesopotamian empires, whose vocabulary and rhetoric were thus adapted to a novel purpose, but also – as Jan Assmann has shown – to the Egyptian paradigm of sacred kingship. The paradox became evident in the very long run, as the monotheistic traditions translated divine sovereignty into new ways of legitimizing monarchy.

In short, the political reflection that developed in other cultures of the Axial Age was, in one way or another, centered on the problems, virtues, and possibilities of monarchy. Seen against that background, the Greek notion of a polycentric political field appears exceptional; this is the strong and defensible core of Meier’s thesis. But the above discussion has also, at various points, suggested that the polycentric vision was not unrelated to the geopolitical polycentrism of the Greek world; and to conclude, a few comments on this side of things should be added. The “Athenocentrism” often criticized in recent scholarship owed something to the fact that historians had been able to stress different aspects of the Athenian achievement in different contexts: the triumph of radical democracy, the cultural flowering during the same period (not always seen as closely linked to democracy), and the epoch-making intellectual legacy of democracy’s most articulate critics. A significant shift of perspective can now be taken for granted; Athens was of course an unusual polis in many respects, but the more extreme version of Athenian exceptionalism is no longer a viable option. Although no other case of successfully stabilized radical democracy is known, democratic trends and potentials of the archaic polis have
been documented, and there were democratic episodes in the later history of various poleis. Something similar has happened to Sparta. As noted above, it is still the subject of lively debate, but the shift towards – at least – a more moderate exceptionalism is undeniable. Both Sparta’s record of conquest and its internal regime now appear as extreme versions of general trends at work in the Greek world.

It is, however, noteworthy that exceptionalism can mutate into a kind of uniformitarianism that obscures the plurality of polis cultures and regimes in a different way. In the case of Athens, this happens when democracy is presented as the culmination of a developmental logic inherent in the polis as such, and more specifically in its growing capacity to question existing institutions. Castoriadis’ account of ancient Greece leans strongly towards this thesis (Castoriadis 2004, 2008); one of the problems which it encounters is that democracy’s critics then seem to have moved further in the same direction (Plato was nothing if not capable of questioning existing institutions). Stephen Hodkinson’s reference to Sparta as a “hyper-polis,” developing “certain Greek norms to their fullest” (Hodkinson 2009b: 459) has comparable implications: this view would, if taken to its logical conclusion, portray Sparta as the kind of representative polis that others have seen in Athens.

The alternative to such models seems to lie in a more consistently pluralistic picture of the Greek world. Linking up with Jochen Bleicken’s observation that the early archaic nobility had multiple heirs (Bleicken 1995: 486), we can add that this was not only a matter of multiple actors, but also of multiple regimes. In an essay on archaic Greek political thought, Paul Cartledge (1998) distinguished three interpretations of the relationship between the archaic polis and the later development of democracy. Democracy can appear as the logical outcome of developments prefigured by archaic patterns, as due to a concatenation of events (where victory over the Persians will loom very large), or due to a succession of charismatic personalities. Cartledge adds that it is not so much a matter of choosing between these approaches as of combining them in the right way. Such a combination will work even better if we replace the idea of a developmental logic with that of a spectrum of possibilities. The archaic polis represented a historical opening that could result in a whole range of different paths; democracy was one of them, but so were tyranny and self-perpetuating oligarchy in various guises, and, as the Spartan example shows, mixtures of elements from each of them (not to be equated with the idealized construct of the mixed constitution) could prove very viable. This line of interpretation was prefigured by Castoriadis (1987: 359): “Athens, Corinth, Sparta are neither mere segments of ancient Greek society, nor instances of the ‘concept’ of the Greek city any more than they are societies other than ancient Greek society. The very mode of co-belonging of Greek cities to ancient Greek society is part of the proper and original institution of this society.” To put it another way: multiple polis regimes, not just multiple poleis, were part and parcel of the civilizational pattern that crystallized through polycentric expansion in the archaic period. This approach seems to be in line with the main thrust of contemporary scholarship, and to avoid the uniformitarian reductionism that still haunts the discussion.
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Note

1 It might be objected that this reference to a work published in 1980 ignores Meier’s later writings. But as far as I can judge, Meier has not reexamined the issue of the political and its Greek beginnings. His most recent interpretation of Greek history (Meier 2011) does not raise the question. In view of this, it seems justified to focus on the 1980 text.

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