

The Rise of the *Polis*

The Archaeological Evidence

ANTHONY SNODGRASS

(Respondent: JENS ERIK SKYDSGAARD)

Anyone comparing the state of our understanding of the rise of the *polis* today with its condition twenty years ago will probably agree that we have come a long way in a fairly short time. Archaeology can claim some share of the credit for this, as I think can be shown objectively: not merely by citing the increase in the volume of relevant evidence, but by consideration of a different point. The issues on which the nearest approach to consensus has been achieved are the issues in which archaeological evidence can play a major role; where archaeology is by its nature less effective, radical disagreement persists. To illustrate the former category of issue, I would point first to the rise of the major cult-centres of the individual *poleis* and *ethne*, which is in most cases attested first by the sudden growth in the numbers of portable dedications, then later by the construction of the first monumental temple to the deity. Later epigraphical and documentary evidence is of course important too in establishing the identity and role of the deity; but the point still stands that it is the essentially archaeological processes of quantification and dating that have made it possible to identify the critical moment in the life of the cults, and to suggest the political significance of that moment.¹

More fundamental, and therefore even more direct, has been the contribution that archaeologists have been able to make by seeking out and excavating *settlement* sites of the relevant period. Here it has been calculated² that, of some 176 excavated sites with domestic structures of Early Iron Age to Archaic date whose evidence (even if not yet fully published) is nevertheless available for use, over 160 were first dug after World War II and some 118 since 1970. No wonder, then, that there has been an access of new information. One of the important aspects of these new sites, from our point of view, is the degree of *planning* or other centralised activity that they display. Sometimes it is the individual constructions, religious or military, that tell us most about collective endeavour; but more widely usable is the discovery that, at a certain moment, the model of settlement sometimes changed from one of sporadic centrifugal growth

to one of a regular layout, clearly planned by some kind of central authority that was concerned with the community as a whole. Present evidence suggests that that moment arrived in the eighth century B.C. at the latest, after which the process was strongly reinforced by the colonising movement. This has helped us to focus our interest in the same period as was suggested by the evidence of the cults.

The next aspect is demography, which might indeed have been given pride of place, were it not for the fact that it exhibits the weaknesses as well as the strengths of archaeological thought. The obvious weakness (of which I myself plead guilty) is the temptation to take the evidence at face value, a form of positivism to which archaeologists seem to succumb most readily. It was already clear, several decades ago, that the sheer volume of Greek ceramic material from the later eighth century – in technical language, the Late Geometric – represents a huge increase, per unit of time, over that available from the preceding centuries.³ Other media of production, especially bronzework, terracottas and stone buildings, tell a closely similar story.⁴ The mistake lay in inferring from this that population had therefore grown by a comparable factor. The first setback for this line of thought came with Ian Morris' argument, in his book *Burial and ancient society* (1987), that changing selectivity of burial was an additional factor that had to be built into such equations. If a different proportion of the population were receiving formal burial at different periods, then careful adjustments had to be made to the raw counts of graves, and therefore to the quantification of the materials, including pottery, of which such a high proportion had occurred in these graves. The balance of the picture had already been somewhat altered by the discovery of new settlement- and cemetery-sites, such as Nichoria and Lefkandi, whose heyday fell in periods *before* the later eighth century. A colloquial archaeologist's dictum of the late 1960's, "All Geometric is Late Geometric", no longer seems a tolerable exaggeration. When we digest Morris' argument about Athenian burial, and envisage the possibility of its having a counterpart in the case of sanctuary-dedication – presumably, that dedication became an overwhelmingly more frequent practice *for each individual actor* in the later eighth century – then a cloud of doubt and reconsideration envelops the once clear picture of burgeoning population-growth as an accompaniment to the changes of the later eighth century.

It remains true, however, that even after every reasonable adjustment has been made for such distorting factors, present evidence still suggests that there were more people, living in a larger number of settlements, of a

larger average size, and spread over a wider geographical area, in the later eighth century than at any time in the preceding four centuries. Morris himself acknowledged this with his graph of the changes in the incidence of Athenian burials after the hidden factors had been allowed for; and by his statement, referring to the numbers of sites of all types in three different regions, that “the eighth-century increase is most impressive.”⁵ But this growth was hardly the explosive one that it had appeared to be on a first quantification of the evidence. This gives us an opportunity to remind ourselves that, in any case, orthodox demographic theory suggests that population-growth has seldom been a prime mover, but much more often a simultaneous accompaniment or an immediate result, of socio-political change. On this view, what happened to the population of Greece and the Aegean is merely useful confirmation that we are right in identifying the later eighth century as a period of critical transformation.

It was Moses Finley who first pointed out to me the major significance of the next archaeological finding, the abrupt discontinuation of many kinds of grave-goods in burials after the eighth century. Two observations about this phenomenon seem especially appropriate to our subject: first, that it was regionally selective, being detectable in some of the more advanced *polis*- (or prospectively *polis*-) communities of Greece from about 700 B.C., in certain other regions like Crete a little later, and in many of the areas of the future *ethne* not at all. Secondly, in those communities where it did occur, it was a mass-phenomenon, in which the whole community seems to have changed its ways. Thus it is not subject to the effects of another important element of archaeological theory which has recently emerged to complicate the naive, positivist picture: the doctrine of social rationing,⁶ whereby access to certain material goods, or even certain categories of surface decoration, of the kind that we have traditionally called ‘decorative’ or ‘artistic’, was strictly controlled by an exclusive elite. In the rejection of many kinds of grave-goods, we have a practice which seems to show a new cohesion on the part of whole societies.

With the advent of alphabetical writing and the general diffusion of representational art we enter the orbit of another recent archaeological theory: ‘peer polity interaction’, whereby communities, or at least their leaders, appear to be motivated by the feeling that certain innovations are legitimised by the fact that neighbouring communities have adopted them.⁷ Neither of these two changes, writing and representationalism, is universal in the sense that every member of the community practised or

even directly benefited from them. But both are communicated across large areas of the Greek world in a way that can be explained by peer polity interaction. That is to say, they are swiftly adopted by the nascent or future *polis* communities, and more slowly in the areas of the *ethne*; and the adoption takes place in circumstances where no obvious rational or external pressure for it seems to have existed, apart from a desire to emulate neighbours. So alphabetic writing was a marvellous invention, but several generations were to elapse before it was to be used to anything approaching its full potential; meanwhile, it apparently served as a somewhat exclusive curiosity. Figural art, though more broadly diffused, was still at first used only in those selected media which had the legitimation of being employed by other Greek communities. The figure-scenes on Late Geometric pottery are the prime example of this, appearing as they do in at least a dozen regional styles, and following a set of ground-rules that appear to have evolved first in Attica. A few other media for figure-scenes are accepted too – small figurines of terracotta and solid-cast bronze, occasional bronze relief-strips, mould-made gold bands, incised fibulae – before regional independence begins to assert itself with further products such as carved gem-stones and relief-decorated pottery.⁸ An obvious consequence of this slightly convention-bound development was that the scenes were readily intelligible across the boundaries of individual polities – more readily, no doubt, than the epichoric inscriptions, which offered potentially bewildering local discrepancies in sign-values, and which in any case were often not applied to easily portable objects.

In elucidating the diffusion of Greek culture overseas, partly but not only through the medium of colonisation, archaeology has had a time-honoured role; but in recent years, that role has expanded. From addressing themselves largely to chronological problems, archaeologists have begun to apply their minds to more abstract questions, notably to determining the material criteria for inferring the permanent or ephemeral presence of Greeks (and others) at a given site. In the colonial world, this has led to a refinement of the facile equation between the date of the earliest Greek pottery and the documentary evidence for the date of a colony's foundation. Elsewhere, there has been a reconsideration of the old certainties about the Greek presence at eastern sites like Al Mina, Tell Sukas and Ras el Basit. Some of the arguments used – for example, about the relations between visiting Greeks and indigenous states or communities – have repercussions for the question that concerns us here, the rise of the state in the Greek homeland.

Yet of all the material advances so far reviewed, on which archaeology has shed some light, it would be hard to argue that any one was possible *only* in the context of the transition to statehood. Not even alphabetic writing, in the sporadic and improvisatory form in which it first occurs, can carry so strong an implication. It would have been perfectly possible for a pre-state society to undergo this or any other of the changes without an accompanying political or social transformation. The chiefdoms of Iron Age Europe, to look no further afield, offer parallels for some of these and indeed of other, more developed advances; at the same time, they display just the kind of competitive emulation that is the hallmark of peer polity interaction. What is distinctive about the phenomena that we have observed in the Greek world is, first, their concentration in a short period of time; and secondly, the fact that in this case they introduce a progressively better-documented, and ultimately fully historical, epoch. From observing the direct sequel of these advances we can move on to argue that, for processes which took place not long afterwards, state organisation is a necessary prerequisite. This makes it a much stronger inference that the previous developments did indeed signify state-formation.

Consider, for example, the Archaic legal inscriptions on stone, often rather exaggeratedly referred to as 'law-codes'.⁹ In fact, they offer only small glimpses of the way in which society was organised, but these glimpses are enough to reveal the existence of a whole apparatus of elective offices, of a remarkably specialised kind. The systems whose existence is thus attested, by the end of the seventh century B.C., must have taken generations to reach such an advanced stage of development. Tyranny, a phenomenon of at least equal age, is equally something that is scarcely intelligible except against a background of state organisation: tyrants survived by manipulating an existing system, rather than by setting up a new one. A third development of the era was the adoption of hoplite organisation – by which I mean neither the new equipment nor the tactics of the heavy infantry phalanx, but the system by which the infantry army was, or came to be, recruited. Such a system could never have worked on a permissive basis, when default on the part of a number of those who could meet the property qualification, or admission of a number of those who could not, would in either case have spelled military disaster. The system presupposed a quite detailed, centralised list of citizens, accurately recorded by age-groups and clearly categorised according to wealth. The compiling of such a list, and the subsequent

maintenance of the system, must have required a small-scale bureaucracy.

These developments of the seventh century strongly suggest that we look for the initial conception of the *polis* organisation in some earlier period. Unless we join hands with those who would pursue the search back to the Bronze Age,¹⁰ we shall find that one period has an overwhelming claim on our attention, namely the second half of the eighth century, which witnessed the constellation of changes that we have been reviewing.

Yet nothing that has been said so far contributes much to the *explanation* of the rise of the Greek state. The changes that we have considered are no more than epiphenomenal. Even if we accept that state-formation was the decisive factor that caused people to establish communal sanctuaries, to adopt planned settlements, to suppress private funerary display, to begin communicating through the new media of writing and figural art, to send organised groups of settlers overseas, to establish the preconditions for population-increase, all at much the same period – even then, we are no nearer to explaining why that influence began to operate when it did. For that, we should need to be better informed about the condition of Greece in the immediately preceding period; and this is an issue which takes us out of the area of consensus.

There is a long-standing division of opinion between those who believe that Greek society of the Early Iron Age was in general rather egalitarian, and those who on the contrary hold that it was markedly stratified. Broadly speaking, archaeologists have tended to make up the former group and historians – though joined of late by a group of the younger archaeologists¹¹ – the latter. The traditional archaeological approach was always diachronic: when compared with the preceding era of the Late Bronze Age palaces and with the succeeding one of the Archaic tyrannies, the material remains of the Early Iron Age cannot but appear modest. Even today, impressive examples of architecture, public or private, remain few in number; there is a long list of technological skills and artistic media which still appear to be entirely lacking; even the burial-evidence, though prolific, remains comparatively unpretentious in terms of wealth and monumentality. The archaeologist is apt to be attracted by comparisons with eras like the Neolithic or the Middle Helladic, when social stratification is widely held to have been absent or in abeyance. Historians, on the other hand, are likely to have Homer in the forefront of their minds; they are less prone to take the material evidence at face

value, and reader to offer alternative explanations for it, often in behavioural terms.

From the point of view of the rise of the state, it makes a lot of difference which side is right, or at least nearer the truth. If genuine aristocracies controlled Greek society for centuries before the appearance of the *polis*, then either something happened to weaken their grip, or they actively turned to state-formation as a means of maintaining or strengthening it – possibly both in succession. If on the other hand social differentiation had traditionally been slight, then the developments of the eighth century take on a different guise, as products of a power-struggle between newly-arisen groupings. On either account, the success of the solution adopted remains remarkable, with *polis*-institutions spreading in a wave across southern Greece, the islands, Ionia and into the colonial world.

There is, however, a yet more fundamental feature of Early Iron Age society in Greece which is a source of difficulty to both the schools of thought just described, but perhaps especially to the former. This is the fact that the settlement-sites of the Early Iron Age remain so fugitive. For a long time, it was possible to put this down merely to a failure on the part of archaeology: excavators had not looked in the right places. But the past twenty years, as we saw at the beginning of this paper, have seen a major redemption of any such failure. With it has come a second realisation: when recovered, the settlements have proved, on average, decidedly small; many of them lack the space to accommodate even a population of a few hundred. A third, less obvious feature, has also now emerged: the length of their occupation is in many cases relatively brief, on the scale of the several centuries or even millennia of continuous habitation that we often find in Greece.¹² There are, as we are often reminded, a handful of exceptions to the last two generalisations: places like Athens, Argos, Corinth or Thebes whose life probably spans the entire Early Iron Age (and much longer before and after that period), and which show a quite extensive spread of settlement too. But they *are* the exceptions.

With a pattern of few and mainly small, but nevertheless nucleated, settlements another line of explanation immediately suggests itself: is it possible that the rest of the population at this period had dispersed into a scatter of rural dwellings, which had been overlooked in the traditional hunt for 'major' sites? At this point, intensive field survey enters the archaeological scene. Excavation had reached its conclusion of a low Early Iron Age population not so much through the spatial as through the diachronic dimension: again and again, excavated sites had shown

occupation at many periods (some of them previously unsuspected), but not often in the Early Iron Age. Intensive survey now proposed the objective search of a given stretch of territory without prejudice to any particular period. Some fifteen years' work, by a number of expeditions in several parts of Greece, have now given a clear answer. Far from undermining the provisional interpretation of the excavators, survey has done the opposite: isolated houses, hamlets and outlying graves, though unexpectedly common for some eras, are excessively rare for the Early Iron Age. Of periods between the Neolithic and the present day, only perhaps the Early Byzantine has proved quite so elusive to field survey. The hypothesis of a denucleated Iron Age population has to be abandoned. The assumption based on excavation, that what population there was at this period lived in nuclear settlements, however small, has been reinstated. The "higher order" sites were virtually all that there was.

It is now hard to see how there can ever be an escape from this finding:¹³ what was a widespread impression before is today hardening into fact. We have to base our interpretations of Early Iron Age society, for the foreseeable future, on the datum of a tiny population, based in small, widely-separated settlements, with broad tracts of country having no permanent habitation. It is all the more problematic to see how such a society could transform itself into the rapidly-changing and feverishly active world of later eighth-century Greece.

The peculiarities of the Greek picture make it a somewhat discouraging experience to wade through the mass of comparative archaeological literature on state-formation, with its theoretical polemics and its studied avoidance of the Greek world in favour of even less well-documented (but often archaeologically richer) alternatives. Instead, I wish to detach two features of the process that ran its course in Greece, the first relating to the period of *polis* formation, the second to the preceding centuries of the Early Iron Age. A distinctive new feature of the *polis* organisation was its *territoriality*. The notion of territorial boundaries, the idea that any part of the inhabited space must belong either to one community or to its neighbour must, it seems, have arisen freshly in the course of the eighth century B.C. in Greece. No such understanding can have prevailed in the preceding period, where communities were seldom close enough for their concerns to abut on each other in this way. Either by conscious decisions, or as a result of other decisions, the landscape was subjected to a network of new boundaries. Nor was it by any means an automatic process to decide where the primary boundaries, those between polities, should fall. Small though the average Greek polis-territory was by most standards,

things were not allowed to reach the point where each pre-existing settlement became the centre of a new *polis*. Some communities were, from the first, subordinated to larger neighbours. To take a famous example, Hesiod's Askra (which survey has shown to have then been a community of perhaps average size for the period¹⁴) was incorporated by consent or by constraint into the territory of Thespiiai, a few kilometres distant – or so we have always understood the references in the *Works and Days*. Thorikos, archaeologically a well-known example, was incorporated into the *polis* of Athens, very much further away. Seen from this point of view, the rise of the *polis* meant the taking over by larger settlements of their smaller neighbours with a view to establishing a common boundary round a larger territorial unit. This must have involved either negotiation or a show of force – in cases like that of Attica, at quite a long range. The incentives to state-formation, especially where negotiation prevailed, must have been clearly set out by the proposers. It is likely that allocation of land was one of the incentives. If there were land-allotments at this time, then we can surmise that the size of holding would have much larger on average than it became in later historical times. Citizenship would have been the more attractive as an option if it offered the lure of a secure title to a sizeable plot of land. Once accepted, it would have led naturally to those consequences which we know to have occurred: the rise in population, so often found in a newly-established and secure regime of sedentary agriculturalists; the demarcation of state territory by such devices as the establishment of rural sanctuaries; the rapid recourse to colonisation once the available land had been apportioned; the readiness, a little later, to accept service in a citizen-army to defend the state's territory.

For the leaders in the pre-existing society, such an agreement could also offer advantages such as to outweigh the losses. The sacrifice of an arbitrary and spontaneous exercise of local power could be offset by the chance to share in power on a larger scale, through a mechanism which gave official sanction and apparent permanence. No longer need family fortunes be entirely at the mercy of chances of fate and character: for some, the state could give old privileges a new lease of life on a more secure basis. A promise of a lion's share in any local land-distribution would doubtless be a high priority. If land-ownership were the dominant issue, and if we are right to infer that there was more than enough land to go round, then the *polis* solution would have been attractive to almost any form of pre-existing society, whatever its degree of stratification.

It is to this last, still unresolved issue, that I wish to return for my final

observation. It is still my conviction that Greek society before the eighth century, taken as a whole, cannot have reached a high level of social differentiation; and for the simplest of reasons. Over much of the country, it seems that the size of the individual communities was too small for this to happen. An isolated community of less than 500 people cannot generate a sharply-differentiated élite; it cannot afford more than a rudimentary degree of craft-specialisation; it cannot muster an army of more than about 100 warriors. The present evidence of archaeology suggests that there were only a handful of settlements of a size any larger than this in the whole of southern Greece, Ionia and the islands. Maybe it was these few, with at least the potential capacity to produce a long-standing local aristocracy, that provided the momentum for change, although it is quite certain that the *polis* movement rapidly spread far beyond their confines.

The further refinement of archaeological techniques, and especially of intensive survey, can do something to elaborate this picture. It should be able, at least, to document the process of internal colonisation of the Greek countryside in and after the eighth century, by bringing to light new rural settlements of the epoch; but, as I have said, it will be difficult now to modify the image of the preceding, Early Iron Age pattern. This is, I know, very much an archaeologist's conclusion. It is archaeology which, almost alone, has conjured up the picture that I have described, in sharp contrast to the Homeric evidence which gives not a hint of the depopulation, and instead portrays a marked degree of social differentiation among quite populous communities. But it is the archaeological evidence on which I am briefed to talk, and it will be interesting to see whether the claims that I have made are seen as being supported by, or even compatible with, the evidence from the written sources.

Notes

- 1 The evidence for this statement is spread over a large number of sanctuary-excavation publications: some of the results are correlated in my *Archaic Greece* (London, 1980), pp. 52-62.
- 2 Personal communication from Alexandra Coucouzeli (in a graduate seminar given in Cambridge in February, 1990).
- 3 This is immediately clear from a perusal of the successive chapters in J N Coldstream, *Greek Geometric pottery* (London, 1968).
- 4 See B. Schweitzer, *Greek Geometric art* (London, 1971).

- 5 I.M. Morris, *Burial and ancient society* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 72-73, fig. 22; quotation, p. 158.
- 6 For this see J. Whitley, *Style and society in dark age Greece* (Cambridge, 1991), especially pp. 11, 182, 193-4.
- 7 See C. Renfrew and J. Cherry (eds.), *Peer polity interaction and socio-political change* (Cambridge, 1986).
- 8 See B. Schweitzer, *op. cit.* (above, n. 4), chapters vi-ix.
- 9 To be discussed by K.-J. Hölkenskap in *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 218 (n. s. 38) (1992), 87-117.
- 10 Most notably, H. van Effenterre, *La cité grecque: des origines à la défaite de Marathon* (Paris, 1985).
- 11 Conspicuously, Morris and Whitley (above, nn. 5 and 6).
- 12 On this, see now J. Whitley, 'Social diversity in dark age Greece', *Annual of the British School at Athens* 86 (1991), 341-365; A. M. Snodgrass, *An archaeology of Greece* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987), pp. 189-192.
- 13 Nicholas Purcell calls the finding "overemphasized", in his interesting paper 'Mobility and the polis', in O. Murray and S. Price (eds.), *The Greek city from Homer to Alexander* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 29-58, at p. 34. This is perhaps a tacit admission that it is also, on present evidence, true. Purcell does argue effectively, however, that low population by no means implies lack of long-range communication.
- 14 See J.L. Bintliff and A.M. Snodgrass, 'Mediterranean survey and the city', *Antiquity* 62 (1988), 57-71, especially 60-61; A.M. Snodgrass, 'The site of Askra', in G. Argoud and P. Roesch (eds.), *La Béotie antique (Cahiers du CNRS)* (Paris, 1985), pp. 87-95.