

THE IN A HURRY SERIES

Ancient Greece

in a Hurry

City states, philosophy, and the birth of
democracy

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Contents

The Whole Thing in One Page 4

Why You Should Care 7

The Core Ideas 10

How It Actually Works 28

What People Get Wrong 38

Use It 44

Terms 51

Go Deeper 55

Notes and Sources 58

Bibliography 65

The Whole Thing in One Page

Ancient Greece is the civilisation the West appointed as its parent, and the appointment has done it no favours. Being everyone's ancestor is a kind of flattery that makes you invisible. The Greeks arrive pre-digested: marble, philosophers, the birthplace of democracy, a set of white statues and noble phrases doing duty as a founding myth for people who have never read a word of them.

This book is about what they did, and it reduces to one thing. Egypt built an answer. Mesopotamia kept the record. Greece invented the argument.

Begin with the rock, because it is the cause rather than the scenery. Greece is four-fifths mountain, shattered into pockets and flung out into islands, with no great river and no plain worth taking whole. Nobody could impose a single answer and end the discussion, so several hundred small states sat within a few days' walk of each other, quarrelling. Thin soil pushed them out across the Mediterranean, where they found other people arranging life differently and getting away with it.

Then the second condition, which is stranger and which most accounts miss. Greek religion had no scripture, no creed, no theology, and no church. Homer and Hesiod were poems, not revelation. There was no orthodoxy and therefore no heresy. Egypt had Maat and Mesopotamia had the gods' labour rota, and you argued with neither. Greece had gods without a book, which left every question open because nothing existed that could close one.

What grew in the pockets was the polis, a city that was not a place its people lived in but a club they were members of. Once the city is yours rather than the god's or the king's, its decisions become arguable, and the Greeks argued about all of them.

Everything they are credited with is that one habit wearing different clothes. Democracy is argument with a vote at the end, and theirs was direct, ran on lotteries, and would file your version as an oligarchy. Philosophy is argument with the answers withheld. Tragedy is argument that refuses to take sides. History, invented here, is argument about what happened, as against myth, which is agreement about what happened. Science is argument about what the world is made of, begun by a man who said water and was contradicted within a generation. And in geometry they found the one kind of argument nobody can walk away from, which is why it is the only one that ever finished.

Then the bill, because an argument has no stopping rule. Twenty-seven years of Greeks destroying Greeks, Athens beaten, Socrates executed by vote. Philip of Macedon walked in while Demosthenes was still making speeches about Philip, because uniting would have required somebody with the authority to end the debate, and the entire point of them was that nobody had it. Rome finished the job in 146 BCE.

And then the conquerors picked the thing up and carried it, which is why it reached you. Egypt was preserved and became a monument. Mesopotamia was overrun and became the operating sys-

tem. Greece lost every war that mattered and became the curriculum.

Two warnings. There was no Greece, only hundreds of mutually hostile cities sharing a language, and Athens is one of them with exceptional publicity. And the argument was for a minority: perhaps thirty thousand men could vote, out of a quarter of a million people, alongside some eighty thousand slaves, with women excluded entirely. The leisure to argue was bought with other people's labour.

That is the book.

Why You Should Care

At some point you will probably receive a letter informing you that you have been selected at random to serve on a jury. It is an irritation, a disruption, and a piece of bureaucratic imposition. It is also the last working fragment of Athenian democracy in your life, and very likely the only piece of it you will ever touch.

The Athenians filled most public office by lottery. Not the generals, who had to be competent, but the council that set the agenda, the magistrates, the archons, and the juries of several hundred citizens, all drawn by lot from whoever came forward, using a stone machine built for the purpose. Scholars argued about what that machine even was until one was dug up and identified in 1937. And the Athenians did this on principle. Aristotle records the principle not as a controversial opinion but as a commonplace of political analysis: allocating office by lot is the democratic method, and filling it by election is the oligarchic one.

Read that twice, because it is not trivia. Elections reliably favour the rich, the famous, the well-connected, and the good-looking. A lottery does not. Which means the Greeks would examine your political system, with its parties and campaigns and donors and career politicians, and file it, without hesitation and without malice, as an oligarchy with a voting ritual attached. You may think they are wrong. The point is that they ran the experiment for two centuries, they had an argument, and the argument is harder to answer than is comfortable.

That is the first reason to care. The thing you have named after them is not the thing they had, and the gap is instructive rather than embarrassing.

The second is larger and invisible, because you are standing on it. The format of your intellectual life is Greek. Not the content: the format. Two sides putting a case and a third party deciding. A claim, an objection, a reply. The courtroom, the seminar, the peer review, the opinion column, the committee, the scientific paper with its obligatory paragraph conceding the rival explanation. All of it assumes that truth is reached by collision rather than announcement, that the person contradicting you is performing a service, and that a question can be held open in public without the roof coming in. None of that is natural. Most societies in history have read it as a symptom of breakdown. It was assembled by a few thousand people who could not stop bickering, and you have inherited it so completely that you cannot see it.

The third reason is the theatre, which is the strangest thing they did. Somebody in Athens worked out that you could put a real moral problem on a stage, give the strongest available case to both sides, and then decline to say which one was right. The city made this a civic festival and required its richest men to fund the productions as a public duty. A society deliberately staged the argument it could not settle, in front of everyone, and paid for the privilege. Nobody had done that before.

Then the limits, which are severe. These people held slaves in enormous numbers and barely troubled to justify it. They kept half

their population indoors. Athens at its most enlightened voted to massacre a neutral island, and later voted to execute its most famous philosopher. They would find you incomprehensible and you would find them monstrous. The reason to read them is not that they were like us.

It is that they started the argument you are still having.

The Core Ideas

1. A Land That Could Not Be Unified

Start with the rock, because it explains the rest. Greece is not a place so much as a pattern: a peninsula roughly four-fifths mountain, thrown out into a sea and shattered into islands. There is no Nile here and no Tigris. There is no broad plain a single power could take and hold. There are small pockets of workable land separated by ridges, each with its own harbour and its own weather and its own stubborn opinion of itself.

This is the third book in the series and the first with no river, and the contrast is the point. Egypt was one valley, which meant one king, and the geography made unification nearly automatic and dissent nearly unthinkable. Mesopotamia was one open plain, which meant a succession of empires that took the whole thing at a stroke. Greece was terrain that made a single answer physically impossible to enforce. Nobody could conquer the lot, because the lot was a hundred small fortified pockets behind mountains, and subduing the next valley usually cost more than the next valley was worth.

So you get several hundred separate states, most of them tiny. Not a country with regions: separate states, with their own laws, calendars, coins, dialects, gods, weights, and foreign policies, permanently at war or preparing for it, all within a few days' walk of one another. That last clause is the important one. The cities were too

far apart to be governed together and too close together to be ignored, which is the exact condition that produces argument rather than either uniformity or indifference.

The sea did the rest. It was a road, not a barrier, and it connected the pockets to each other and to everywhere else. Plato has a line about the Greeks living around their sea like frogs around a pond, which is affectionate and precise: clustered at the edges, all facing inward, all audible to each other.

And the soil was thin, which forced them out. From the eighth century the Greeks planted colonies around the entire Mediterranean and the Black Sea, from Spain to Georgia, because there was not enough good land at home to feed the children. This mattered far beyond food. A Greek merchant saw Egypt, and Persia, and Scythia, and came home with the most subversive information available to anyone: that other people arrange things differently and it works for them. Herodotus is what happens when a culture absorbs that at scale. He observes that if you invited every nation on earth to select the best customs, each would choose its own, and he does not say it to congratulate anyone.

Here is the engine, then. An argument needs two conditions. First, that nobody has the power to impose the answer and end it. Second, that visible alternatives exist, so that the way you do things looks like a choice rather than like reality. Greece had both, and had them by accident of rock and water rather than by virtue. The civilisation of the open question was built on ground where no question could be closed by force.

2. The Polis

The Greeks did not have cities in the sense the previous two books used the word. They had the polis, and the difference is not size but ownership.

Uruk belonged to Inanna, and you were staff. Egypt belonged to Pharaoh, who was the state in a single body. The polis belonged to its members, and this shows up in the grammar, which is the tell. Athenian decrees do not say Athens has decided. They say the Athenians have decided. The state is not a thing standing above the people that the people live under; the state is the people, in the plural, doing something. There is no Athens to appeal to, or blame, or petition, that is distinct from the men who voted. That single grammatical fact is the whole of Greek politics, and it is why the decisions of a polis are arguable in a way that the decree of a god-king is not. You cannot argue with Maat. You can argue with your neighbours, because it turns out that is all the state was.

When Aristotle calls a human being a political animal, the phrase has been worn smooth by quotation. What he says is that we are the animal that lives in a polis, and that a man outside one is either a beast or a god, which is to say not fully human. Citizenship was not a legal status you held. It was an activity you did, and a man who did not do it had a name: *idiotes*, the private person, minding his own business, from which we get *idiot*. That is the Greek view of political disengagement, preserved as an insult, in your language, right now.

Where did the claim to membership come from? The traditional answer is armour, and it needs a warning label. The classic account, going back to George Grote in the nineteenth century and orthodox for a hundred years, runs like this: when warfare shifted from aristocratic champions to the phalanx, the massed rank of heavy infantry, the men who decided battles became the middling farmers who could afford their own bronze, and a man who buys his armour and covers his neighbour with his shield acquires a claim on how the city is run. It is a beautiful story, it is the one most people have been told, and over the last thirty years revisionists have attacked nearly every plank of it: the dating, the tactics, the class of the men in the line, and the causal arrow itself. The correlation between phalanx and polis is real. The causation is a live fight, and anyone who tells you the hoplite made democracy is telling you the 1850s.

What is not in dispute is the question, and that the Greeks answered it in violently opposed ways. The polis asks: who is in the club, and what does membership buy? Sparta and Athens are the extreme replies, which is why they have been used as a rhetorical pair ever since.

Sparta answered with equality, purchased by atrocity. Its citizens called themselves the *Similars*, lived communally, ate in the same messes, trained for war and nothing else, and were forbidden trade and farming. That was possible because Sparta had conquered neighbouring Messenia and enslaved an entire people, the *helots*, who did all the work and heavily outnumbered their masters. The Spartans lived in permanent fear of them and form-

ally declared war on them each year so that killing one was not murder. The most equal citizen body in Greece stood on the largest atrocity in Greece, and those are not two facts. They are one.

Athens answered by widening the club until it took in men with no property at all, which meant admitting the poor to the argument, which is precisely what its enemies could never forgive.

3. Gods Without a Book

Here is the question the previous two books make unavoidable. Egypt had Maat, and you did not argue with Maat. Mesopotamia had gods who made you out of clay to dig their canals, and you did not argue with them either. So what was different here?

The answer is that Greek religion gave you nothing to argue with.

It had no scripture. No holy book, no revealed text, no authorised account of anything. Homer and Hesiod came closest, and Herodotus says flatly that those two gave the Greeks the descent of the gods, their names, their spheres, and their shapes, which is a remarkable thing to say about your own religion: not that the gods disclosed themselves, but that a couple of poets wrote them up. Nobody treated the poems as binding. They were common stock, retold in whatever version suited the occasion, and the details varied by city and by century and nobody minded.

It had no creed. Nothing to affirm, nothing to sign, nothing to profess. The Greeks had no word for religion in our sense, and no Greek writer ever sorted the gods and their rites into anything resembling separate religions. There was no orthodoxy, and therefore, exactly, no heresy. The concept is missing from the language because the thing was missing from the world.

And it had no church. No centralised authority over practice or belief anywhere in the Greek world; change was regulated, when at all, city by city. No priestly caste holding knowledge that laymen could not have. Priesthoods were civic offices, often annual, sometimes filled by lot, held by ordinary men and women with other jobs. There was nobody with standing to declare an account of the world false, because there was no institution whose business that was.

What there was instead was practice, and a great deal of it. Religion was not a set of propositions but a set of things you did, and it saturated everything: the calendar was the festival calendar, rites preceded any public or private act, and no part of Greek life was cleanly separable from the gods. But the requirement was that you sacrifice, not that you agree. What you privately thought while holding the knife was largely your own affair.

Now see what that permits. If there is no authorised account of how the world was made, a man in Miletus can say it is all water and nobody can produce the document that says otherwise. If there is no doctrine, there is nothing to contradict, and cosmology stays open. Xenophanes could observe that people make gods in

their own image, and that if horses could draw they would draw gods like horses, and nothing happened to him at all. This is the precondition the first two ideas do not supply. Geography meant nobody could enforce an answer politically. The absence of a book meant nobody could enforce one intellectually. Between them there was no mechanism, anywhere in the system, for closing a question.

Now the limit, because the freedom was real and it was not unbounded. Athens did have a charge of impiety, *asebeia*, and it had no codified definition, which made it elastic in the way that vague charges always are. But notice what it covered: refusing to acknowledge the city's gods, mocking the rites, desecrating what was sacred. It was a civic offence rather than a doctrinal one. You could think what you liked about Zeus. You could not skip the sacrifice, and you certainly could not chop up a statue for firewood.

And here is the fact that settles the case, and it is not the famous one. The roll-call of philosopher-martyrs is often produced as evidence that Athens persecuted thought, and most of it will not survive inspection: the prosecutions of Anaxagoras, Protagoras, and the rest rest on late or thin sources, dates that do not work, and episodes with a political motive plainly visible underneath. There is exactly one trial in the whole record that is beyond doubt an impiety prosecution, and it is Socrates'.

Hold both halves at once. A civilisation that built almost no machinery for punishing thought, because it had no doctrine that needed protecting, and which then used the little it had, once, de-

cisively, on the man who thought hardest. That is not a refutation of the freedom. It is the measure of it, and it is the subject of the next idea.

4. Argument With a Vote at the End

Athenian democracy did not begin in idealism. It began in 508 BCE when Cleisthenes, losing a factional brawl among aristocrats, did what nobody had tried: he took the people into his faction. He won, and then he had to pay, and the payment was a constitution.

His method was administrative and it was brilliant. He re-sorted the entire citizen body into ten artificial tribes, each deliberately mixing men from the coast, the city, and the inland, so the old regional loyalties that fed the old feuds were cut across by design. Athenians were shuffled, on purpose, so that they had to deal with strangers. Democracy was not proclaimed. It was engineered.

The machinery that resulted is stranger than its reputation. The Assembly was sovereign: it met on a hillside called the Pnyx around forty times a year, in a space holding about six thousand, out of perhaps thirty to forty thousand eligible men, with roughly five thousand typically present. Any citizen could speak. Decisions went by show of hands, simple majority, final. No appeal, no upper chamber, no constitutional court, and no representation whatsoever. You did not send anyone. You went. The Council of Five Hundred, chosen by lot, set the agenda and met daily, and its chairman was drawn afresh by lot every day and could hold the job once in his life, so the nearest thing Athens had to a head of state

was, for twenty-four hours, a random citizen who would never do it again. The courts ran on juries of several hundred, with no judge directing them, no lawyers, and no appeal: you spoke for yourself, timed by a water clock, to a crowd of your neighbours who voted on the spot.

And there was ostracism, which best shows the temper of the thing. Once a year the Assembly asked whether it wanted to hold one. If it did, citizens scratched a name on a broken potsherd, and if six thousand votes were cast, the man with the most left for ten years. No charge. No trial. No accusation of any crime. He kept his property and his citizenship and simply had to go. The Athenians used it ten times between 507 and 416, and then never again.

Now the exclusions, flat, because the rest of the book depends on them staying visible. Women were excluded entirely, in law and in practice, and Athenian women of the citizen class were kept indoors to a degree other Greeks found extreme. Metics, the resident foreigners who ran much of the economy, were excluded permanently however many generations they had been there. And there were something like eighty thousand slaves against perhaps thirty thousand citizens, in the fields, the houses, the workshops, and the silver mines at Laurion, where publicly owned slaves in the tens of thousands dug the ore that paid for the fleet. Do not resolve that tension. Hold it. The leisure to spend forty days a year on a hillside debating foreign policy was bought by somebody else's labour, and the Athenians knew it and did not care, and the same city produced both facts.

Here is the consequence nobody plans for. If the Assembly decides, and the Assembly is five thousand men who can be talked to, then the ability to talk to five thousand men is not influence. It is power. It is the whole of power.

So a market appeared, as markets do. From the middle of the fifth century, teachers travelled the Greek world selling persuasion for cash: the sophists, the first professional intellectuals in history and the first people paid to think. Their reputation is a wreck, the wreck was Plato's doing, and it is worth asking whether they deserved it. Protagoras held that man is the measure of all things, which relocates truth from the cosmos into the human being, and was said to teach that every matter has two opposed accounts and one could argue either. Set that beside a debating society and it looks like intellectual honesty. Set it beside a court where a guilty man walks because his speechwriter was better and it looks like the end of everything. Both readings were available then and are available now, which is why the sophists were at once the most sought-after teachers in Greece and a byword for fraud. Plato won that argument so completely that we still use their name as an insult.

Into which walks Socrates, who is the hinge of this book. He charged nothing, wrote nothing, and claimed to teach nothing. What he did was ask questions, in public, of confident men, until the confidence came apart in their hands. He said he knew only that he knew nothing, which sounds like modesty and functions as a weapon. He was not a sophist and spent his life being mistaken

for one, including by Aristophanes, who put him on stage in 423 as a swindler in a hanging basket talking rubbish about the clouds.

And in 399 BCE the democracy tried him for impiety and corrupting the young, and a jury of several hundred of his fellow citizens voted to convict, and then voted that he should die, and he drank the hemlock. Legally. In public. By majority.

Sit with the shape of that, because it is the thing this civilisation never got past. The society that invented public argument used its most democratic institution to kill the man who was best at arguing, entirely by the rules, in the one impiety trial we can be certain of. Plato watched it and drew the conclusion he never abandoned: that the many are not competent to judge, that democracy is rule by the flattered, and that his teacher's death was the proof. The greatest political philosopher the West produced spent his career arguing against the system that produced him, because of what it did to his friend.

5. The Argument Staged

Theatre is invented here, and calling it entertainment misses what it was. It was state machinery, and it was a religious festival, and the fact that those are the same sentence is the point.

The plays were performed at the City Dionysia, a festival of the god Dionysus, in a competition, before thousands, with the productions funded by compelling the richest men in Athens to pay as a public duty. So: a religious rite, organised by the state, at

which the state's wealthy underwrote a public argument about whether the gods were just. Only a religion without a book could permit that. Aeschylus and Euripides put the gods on trial at the gods' own festival, and no one had standing to stop them, because there was no one whose job that was.

What was invented was not drama. Egypt had ritual and Mesopotamia had epic. What was invented was the idea that a story could pose a real problem, give the strongest available case to each side, and then refuse to say who was right. Sophocles sets a woman's duty to bury her brother against a ruler's duty to defend the city that her brother attacked; both are right; both are destroyed; the play does not adjudicate, and two and a half thousand years of readers have failed to adjudicate either, which is not a defect in it. It is the play.

That move repeats. Aeschylus stages the cycle of vengeance and can resolve it only by inventing a law court, which is Athens congratulating itself and also conceding that nothing else had worked. Euripides puts the case for the losers, the women, the captives, the mad, so persistently that Athens rarely gave him first prize. These were not dissidents smuggling criticism past a censor. The city paid for it.

And comedy went further, in a way with no parallel anywhere. Aristophanes put living, named, powerful Athenians on the public stage and ridiculed them while they sat in the audience. He savaged Cleon, the most powerful politician in the city, repeatedly, and Cleon could do nothing but sue and lose. The state funded a

festival at which the state was mocked by name, and then the men who had been mocked went back to running it.

Hold that against the strand. Egyptian art held one style for three thousand years and never depicted a king in doubt. Mesopotamian literature is bleak and honest and never stages a public disagreement about whether the king is a fool. Athens built a theatre for it and charged its plutocrats for the tickets.

One caution. We have roughly thirty-two tragedies. Sophocles wrote perhaps a hundred and twenty and we have seven. We are judging the most famous body of drama in history from about three per cent of it, selected largely by which scripts were copied for school use in late antiquity. Our picture is not a sample. It is a syllabus.

6. The Argument About What Is True

Three domains, one move. In each, the Greeks replaced because we say so with here is why, and you may check.

The world.

Around 585 BCE a man in Miletus called Thales said everything is made of water. He was wrong. That is not the point, and treating it as the point is the standard mistake. Every civilisation before him explained the world by telling you who did it. Thales explained it by telling you what it was made of, with no god in the account, and by

doing so made the explanation the kind of thing somebody else could contradict.

And they did, immediately, which is the proof that something new had started. Anaximander said no, it is something indefinite, and drew a map and argued the earth hangs unsupported because it has no reason to fall one way rather than another, which is an astonishing piece of reasoning for the sixth century BCE. Heraclitus said fire, and that everything flows. Parmenides said, with a straight face, that change is impossible and your senses are lying, and constructed an argument for it that nobody could break for a century. Democritus said everything is atoms and empty space, arriving by pure reasoning at a picture nobody improved on for twenty-two hundred years.

Most of this is wrong. The method is the invention: an account of nature that invites its own refutation. And note where it happens. Not Athens. Miletus, on the coast of Asia Minor, at the seam with the Near East, where Babylonian astronomy and Egyptian measurement were arriving by ship.

The past.

Herodotus is the first person we know of to investigate what happened rather than transmit what is told, and the distinction the whole book turns on is this: myth is agreement about what happened, and history is argument about it. He gives rival versions, names his sources, and repeatedly says he is reporting what

he was told without being obliged to believe it, which is an extraordinary sentence to find at the start of a discipline.

Then Thucydides arrives, sneers at him for entertaining his readers, and does it harder. No gods, no oracles, no charm, human causes only, and an explicit statement of method. Where Herodotus is curious about everyone, Thucydides is cold about everything, and between them, in one generation, the past stops being a story you are handed and becomes a claim you can test.

The necessary.

Around 300 BCE Euclid assembled the Elements, and it is the strangest object here, because it is where the Greeks found the one argument that cannot be resisted.

Everything else in this book is persuasion, and persuasion can fail against a stubborn man. He can shrug. He can outlast you. He can be unmoved by your best case and there is nothing you can do about it, which is why rhetoric had to be taught and why the sophists got rich. A proof is not like that. Grant the axioms and the conclusion has you by the throat: you may dislike it, and you must accept it, and no eloquence will help and no stubbornness will save you. It is the only place in human affairs where being right is sufficient.

That is a different species of argument from anything on the Pnyx, and the Greeks knew it, and it is why mathematics is the only human argument that ever actually ends. Everything else in this book

is still running. Euclid is finished. The Elements stayed in use as a working schoolbook for over two thousand years, a record no other text can touch, and Lincoln read it in his thirties to learn what it meant to demonstrate something, which is exactly the right reason.

After Aristotle, who tried to systematise the lot, the argument professionalises into schools with premises and fees. Two of them lasted and became answers to how a person should live: Zeno's Stoics and Epicurus's Garden. Both have their own book in this series, and this one stops at their door on purpose.

7. The Inheritance

Now the bill, and the loop closing.

An argument has no natural end. That is its virtue when you are chasing the truth and its catastrophe when the ships are waiting. The cities that could not stop asking could not stop fighting, and the second follows from the first more tightly than anyone wants it to. Section 4 tells that story properly: twenty-seven years of Greeks destroying Greeks, an expedition to Sicily debated and voted and annihilated, a neutral island exterminated by majority, Athens beaten, Socrates dead, and then a century of exhausted states unable to win and unable to stop while Philip of Macedon walked south.

Demosthenes, the finest orator Greece produced, spent years making magnificent speeches warning Athens about Philip. The

speeches are still taught. They are masterpieces. Philip took Greece anyway, in 338, because the cities could not combine, and combining would have required somebody with the authority to close the argument, and the entire design of them was that nobody had it.

Here is the loop. The fragmentation that made argument possible, the mountains and pockets and hundred stubborn cities of the first idea, is exactly what left them unable to unite against a man who was not arguing. They argued their way into irrelevance. That is not a slur. It is the mechanism, and it belongs beside the achievement rather than behind it.

But watch what happened next, because it answers the question of why you are reading this. The conquerors took it. Macedon spread Greek across an empire from the Adriatic to Afghanistan. Rome conquered Greece militarily and was then culturally annexed by it: teaching its sons Greek, copying its statues, importing its philosophers as tutors, rebuilding its arguments in Latin, and producing in Horace the observation that captive Greece took her savage conqueror captive. The Greeks lost every war that mattered and won the peace by two thousand years.

Why did it travel when Egypt's did not, to anything like the same degree? Because of what kind of thing it was. Egypt's achievement was embedded: the god-king, the temple, the ritual, the Nile. You cannot export Maat, because Maat requires Pharaoh, and Pharaoh requires Egypt. Mesopotamia's inheritance travelled because the plain was open and each conqueror carried the culture out with

him, which is transmission by accident of geography. Greece's travelled for a third reason, and it is the important one: an argument is portable in a way that an institution is not. A proof works in Baghdad. A question works in Latin. You do not need the polis to run Euclid, or Athenian citizenship to feel the force of Parmenides, and that is precisely because the Greeks had stripped the authority out of their claims and left only the reasons. A decree needs the decreer. A demonstration needs nobody.

So the three books end in three different places. Egypt was preserved and became a monument, which you visit. Mesopotamia was overrun and became the operating system, which you run without noticing. Greece was conquered and became the curriculum, which you are still inside, because the only thing it ever asked of you was that you follow the argument, and that offer stays open no matter who wins the war.

The cities are gone. Every one of them lost. The argument is still running.

How It Actually Works

Section 3 laid out the ideas. This is the story, and it needs two warnings.

The first is that this is an Athenian story and cannot help being one. Athens produced the writers, so Athens supplies the evidence, and the evidence is therefore the account one city gave of itself and its neighbours. Sparta wrote almost nothing and we know it mostly through Athenians who admired it, which is roughly like reconstructing a country from the memoirs of its foreign fans.

The second is the strangest fact in the strand. Egypt wrote continuously for three thousand years. Mesopotamia wrote continuously for three thousand years. Greece invented writing, lost it completely, and spent three centuries illiterate before starting again with a script borrowed from somebody else. Nothing else in this series does that, and the break is why the story has two beginnings.

The first Greeks, and the palace world

Before any of the argument, there were palaces, and they looked like the Near East.

From around 2000 BCE the Minoans on Crete built a wealthy maritime civilisation with enormous palace complexes, plumbing, frescoes of startling liveliness, and a script we call Linear A. We

cannot read it. It remains undeciphered, along with the Cretan hieroglyphic script before it, which makes the Minoans the one literate people in this book who are still silent.

From roughly 1600 BCE the Mycenaeans on the mainland took the model and militarised it: fortress-palaces at Mycenae and Pylos and Tiryns behind walls so massive that later Greeks assumed giants had built them, warrior burials with gold death masks, and a script called Linear B.

Linear B we can read, and what it says is the same joke Mesopotamia told. It is inventories. Sheep, wheel-axles, rations, textiles, chariot parts, personnel, and quantities of oil. No poetry, no law, no history, no thought. Writing here is again the servant of a palace bureaucracy that needs to know how much of everything it has.

The palace world matters for what it was not. It was a redistributive command economy run from a fortress by a king with scribes, which is to say it was Uruk with better frescoes. No polis, no assembly, no argument. Everything this book is about postdates its destruction.

The forgetting

Around 1200 BCE the entire eastern Mediterranean came apart. Empires fell, cities burned, and trade networks that had run for centuries stopped, in a collapse historians still argue over and can only partly explain, though drought, migration, systems failure, and the Sea Peoples all feature.

Greece did not merely suffer this. Greece fell out of history. The palaces burned, the population dropped hard, the metalwork got worse, and Linear B vanished with the bureaucracy that was its only reason to exist. Nobody in Greece wrote anything for roughly three hundred years.

Sit with the size of that. Not a decline: a civilisation losing literacy entirely and staying illiterate for ten or twelve generations, so that when the Greeks came back they had no records of their own past, only stories about it. Homer sings of a Bronze Age his audience could not read about, and got much of it wrong, and it did not matter, because there was nothing to check him against.

That gap is the hidden foundation of everything after it, and it belongs beside the third Core Idea. A people who forget their own past have no inherited authority to cite. No ancient scribal tradition telling them how things must be done, no unbroken priesthood, no three-thousand-year-old canon to defer to. They had to make it up again from the ground, and they knew it. It is much easier to argue about how the world works when nobody in the room can produce a document from the old days settling the matter.

The restart

From around 800 BCE the lights come back on, and everything happens at once.

The Greeks acquired writing again by borrowing it. The alphabet is Phoenician, taken from traders in the Levant, and the Greeks made one change that mattered enormously: the Phoenician script recorded consonants, and the Greeks took the leftover signs and used them for vowels. That gave them about two dozen letters, learnable in weeks rather than years, which is a different social object from cuneiform or hieroglyphs. Writing in Egypt and Mesopotamia was a profession. In Greece it became a skill, and a skill is not a priesthood.

Note the direction of travel, because Section 5 will need it: the defining technology of the Greek mind was imported from Phoenicia, and the Greeks said so cheerfully.

Then, at speed: Homer, whatever Homer was, written down. The Olympic games, traditionally 776 BCE, the first date in Greek history and a Panhellenic institution in a world with no Greek state. Colonies flung around the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Hesioid. Coinage arriving from Lydia. Temples in stone. And the polis consolidating everywhere out of villages, several hundred of them, each convinced of itself.

Lawgivers, tyrants, and the road to 508

The Archaic cities had a problem: aristocrats owned the land, the poor fell into debt, and debt in Greece meant slavery, exactly as in Mesopotamia and with the same result.

Two solutions were tried. The first was the lawgiver, a man handed emergency authority to write the rules down and go away. Athens got Solon in 594, who cancelled debts, banned enslavement for debt, and then, having satisfied nobody, left the country for ten years so he could not be asked to amend it. Note the move: he wrote the law down, which makes it public, which makes it arguable.

The second was the tyrant, and the word is a trap. A Greek tyrannos was simply a man who took power outside the rules, and many were popular, competent, and backed by the poor against the aristocracy. Athens had Peisistratus, who was rather good at it. Tyranny was the normal Archaic path, and it mattered because tyrants broke the aristocracy's grip without ever intending to hand power to anybody else. Then came Cleisthenes, and the third Core Idea has already told you what he did with the wreckage.

Persia, and the event that made them

In 490 BCE the Persian Empire, the largest state the world had yet seen, sent a punitive force to Athens and was beaten at Marathon by an Athenian army that had no business winning.

In 480 it came back properly, under Xerxes, with a force Herodotus numbers in the millions and which was certainly enormous. Three hundred Spartans and rather more allies held the pass at Thermopylae and died. Athens was evacuated and burned. And then the Greek fleet, mostly Athenian, trapped the Persian navy in

the straits at Salamis and destroyed it, and the following year the land army was broken at Plataea.

Understand what this did to them, because it explains the next fifty years. A coalition of small, quarrelsome, mutually loathing cities had beaten the superpower, twice. The Greeks concluded, not unreasonably and not modestly, that free men who chose to fight had defeated slaves who were driven to it, and that their way of doing things was not merely theirs but better. Every confident thing about the fifth century starts here.

It also handed Athens a fleet, and a fleet is rowed by the poor, and men who row the ships that saved the city acquire a claim on it. The most democratic phase of Athenian democracy is downstream of Salamis.

The golden age, and who paid for it

In 478 the Greeks formed the Delian League, an alliance against a Persian return, with its treasury on the sacred island of Delos and members contributing ships or money.

Watch what happens to it. Members who preferred to pay rather than row were allowed to, and then encouraged to, until Athens had the ships and everyone else had a bill. Cities that tried to leave were prevented, by force, which tells you what the alliance had become. And in 454 the treasury was moved from Delos to Athens for safekeeping, though Delos was in no more danger than before, at which point many historians simply stop calling it a

league. The Athenians themselves stopped pretending: their inscriptions changed from talking about allies to talking about the cities which the Athenians rule.

From that money Pericles built the Parthenon.

This is the fact to hold when you look at the photographs. The most famous building in Europe, the visual shorthand for Greek civilisation and Athenian democracy, was funded with protection money extracted from other Greeks under threat. And it was controversial at the time, not merely in hindsight: Plutarch records that Pericles' opponents attacked him in exactly those terms, saying Athens had disgraced itself by taking the common fund of the Greeks and gilding itself with it. The golden age of Athens, its drama, its buildings, its confidence, its leisure to argue, was underwritten by an empire. The Athenians argued about that too, in public, and then kept the money.

The war

In 431 it broke. Sparta and its allies against Athens and its empire, for twenty-seven years, with a plague in the middle that killed perhaps a quarter of the Athenians and Pericles with them.

Thucydides wrote it up, and the reason his book is still the most disturbing thing in the subject is that he shows you the arguments. In 415 the Assembly debated an expedition to Sicily. Both sides made their case. The people listened, and voted, and sent the fleet, and the fleet was annihilated, army and navy together,

and Athens never recovered. The disaster was not imposed by a tyrant or delivered by an oracle. It was reached by debate, in public, on the merits, by majority. The year before, Athens had told the neutral island of Melos that the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must, and then killed the men and enslaved the women and children, which was a democratic decision too.

Athens surrendered in 404 with its walls pulled down to the sound of flute girls. Sparta installed a junta, the junta murdered its way through the propertied classes, and the democracy came back within a year, which is the most impressive fact about the Athenians in this section. Then it killed Socrates.

Macedon, Alexander, and the end of Greek politics

The fourth century is the sound of exhaustion. Sparta won and could not govern. Thebes broke Sparta and then lost its one great general. Athens rebuilt a smaller empire and lost it. Nobody could win, nobody could stop, and everybody hired mercenaries because the citizen-soldier was tired.

Meanwhile Philip II turned Macedon, a half-Greek kingdom the southern cities regarded as barbarous, into the best army in the world, and moved south while Demosthenes made speeches. At Chaeronea in 338 he beat a coalition that had assembled far too late, and Greek political independence ended there.

His son Alexander then conquered Persia, Egypt, and as far as the Punjab, died at thirty-two in Babylon, and left an empire his gener-

als carved into kingdoms. Greek became the language of government from the Adriatic to Afghanistan, which is the paradox of the whole business: Greece lost, and Greek won. Rome arrived in the second century and finished it. In 146 BCE Corinth was destroyed and Greece became a province, and that was that, forever.

How we know

Here the contrast with the other two books is total, and it is the most important thing in this section.

Mesopotamia survives because clay is indestructible and fire bakes it, so its record was preserved by accident and by arson. Egypt survives because it built in stone and its sand is dry. Neither civilisation needed anybody to want it.

Almost nothing of Greek literature survives that way. Papyrus rots, and Greece is not dry. What we have, we have because somebody copied it, and then somebody copied that, by hand, in an unbroken chain across two thousand years, and every link in that chain was a decision. Nearly every classical Greek text you can read exists because a Byzantine scribe or a medieval monk judged it worth the parchment and the months of labour. The oldest complete manuscripts of most Greek authors are medieval. We are reading copies of copies, and the machine was a person with an opinion.

The consequences are severe and unevenly distributed. We have seven plays by Sophocles out of perhaps a hundred and twenty,

and those seven are, near enough, a late-antique school syllabus. Our Greece is a curriculum, selected by teachers, for teenagers, a thousand years after the fact. Aristotle survives because the Islamic world took him seriously when western Europe could not read him, and came back into Latin through Arabic. Whole schools of thought are known only as quotations inside the works of men attacking them, which means we hear the Presocratics through their opponents, in fragments, chosen to lose.

Two things follow. First, when this book says the Greeks thought something, be aware it may mean the Greeks whose books were chosen. Absence of evidence here is not evidence of anything except editorial taste. Second, and more cheerfully, the pile is still growing. Papyrus does survive in the Egyptian desert, and rubbish dumps at Oxyrhynchus have yielded scraps of lost plays and poems, with more recovered as imaging improves. This is one of the few subjects in ancient history where the evidence base gets better rather than worse.

And the Bronze Age came back by a different road. Linear B was cracked in 1952 by Michael Ventris, an English architect doing it in his spare time, with no bilingual key of any kind: no Rosetta Stone, no Behistun cliff, nothing but statistical analysis of sign frequencies and a refusal to stop. He proved the language was Greek, five centuries older than anyone had believed, and died in a car crash four years later at thirty-four. Much of the groundwork was Alice Kober's, the foremost scholar of Aegean scripts in the 1940s, who catalogued the patterns that made the break possible and died in 1950 without seeing it, and whose name almost nobody knows.

What People Get Wrong

“The statues were white”

They were painted, and not tastefully. Reds, blues, greens, yellows, gold leaf, patterned fabrics, painted eyes, painted hair. The Greek world was closer to a fairground than to a mausoleum, and the marble you have seen in every museum is a corpse: pigment is organic and soluble, and two thousand years of weather took it off.

The interesting part is why the correction will not stick. It is not that nobody knew. Scholars found visible red and blue on temple sculptures at Aegina in 1811. Winckelmann, the founder of art history and the man most responsible for the white ideal, was aware that ancient writers described painted statues, was troubled by it, and resolved the trouble by deciding those must have been exceptional cases. He was wrong, and the influence of his decision ran into the twentieth century. Then the technology reinforced it: archaeological publication from the 1840s onward used black-and-white plates, which cannot record colour and therefore cannot record its absence, and the plaster casts that taught sculpture in every university were white by convention. Generations were trained on a monochrome record of a polychrome art.

And whiteness curdled into an argument. Colour got coded as barbarian, on the reasoning that the refined Greeks would never have daubed their marble; the whiteness of the stone was read as the whiteness of skin, and taken as evidence of the physical and

moral superiority of the Greeks and of the Europeans who had appointed themselves their heirs. A pigment failure became an aesthetic, and the aesthetic became a race theory.

One honest caveat, because the correction has its own zealots: some specialists argue the modern reconstructions overshoot, reaching for the most saturated version of every pigment they detect. The Greeks painted their statues. Whether they painted them quite that loudly is a live question.

“Athens invented the democracy you have”

Athens invented a democracy that would find yours unrecognisable and probably contemptible. Theirs was direct: no representatives, no parties, no politicians as a profession. Ours is representative, which they had no word for and would have read as an oligarchy, since the citizens hand power to a small group of professionals and then go home. Theirs filled office by lot. Ours elects everything and calls that the essence of the thing.

The lineage is also fictional. Athenian democracy ended and stayed dead. When modern democracy was assembled in the eighteenth century its architects were mostly against Athens and said so: the American founders cited it as a warning about mob rule, and the word democracy was an insult in respectable political argument until well into the nineteenth century. We did not inherit it. We revived the name, attached it to a different machine, and backfilled the ancestry.

“Greece was a country”

There were several hundred separate states, sharing a language and some gods and nothing else. Different calendars, coins, weights, dialects, and laws, and they spent most of their history at war with each other. There was no Greek capital, no Greek army, no Greek government, and no Greek anything.

What they had was a word for everyone else, barbaros, meaning people whose speech sounds like babble, and it was almost the only thing they agreed on. Panhellenic identity was real but thin: the Olympics, some shared shrines, a sense of common descent, and it was never once enough to make them combine except under extreme threat, and then only partly, and briefly, and with fury.

“Sparta was a nation of warriors”

Sparta is the most successfully marketed society in history, and it did the marketing by leaving almost no evidence. Spartans did not write. Everything you know about them comes from outsiders, largely Athenian aristocrats who admired Sparta precisely because it was the opposite of the noisy democracy they lived in, and who described it the way disaffected people always describe somewhere they have never had to live. Scholars call the result the Spartan mirage, and it has been fooling people for two and a half thousand years.

Behind it: a state of a few thousand citizens sitting on an enslaved population that outnumbered them several times over, so

frightened of a rising that it declared formal war on its own slaves annually to make killing them lawful. Not a martial paradise. A permanent counter-insurgency that could not afford to do anything else, and which was slowly dying of a citizen shortage the whole time. Thermopylae is real and it is magnificent. The rest is fan fiction.

“The Greeks invented it all from nothing”

They said the opposite themselves, loudly and repeatedly, and were believed until the nineteenth century decided otherwise.

The alphabet is Phoenician and the Greeks never pretended otherwise. Their mathematics and astronomy rest on Babylonian foundations, and the sixty-minute hour they handed you came from Iraq, as the previous book set out at length. Greek philosophy begins in Miletus, on the coast of Asia Minor, at the interface with the Near East, not in Athens. Herodotus went to Egypt and wrote at length about what Greece owed it. Plato has Egyptian priests telling a Greek that the Greeks are children with no old traditions of their own.

This is the substance behind the Black Athena controversy, and it deserves better than either shouting party gave it. Martin Bernal argued in 1987 that the Greeks’ own account, that Egyptians and Phoenicians had colonised and shaped them, was displaced in the nineteenth century by an Aryan model manufactured out of Romanticism and racism. On the ideology he landed real hits, and few would now defend nineteenth-century classical scholarship

as racially innocent. On the specifics he did not: linguists rejected most of his etymologies and archaeologists rejected the colonisation. He also conceded that the extreme Afrocentrist claims, that Socrates or Cleopatra were black, were false. Meanwhile his chief opponent's position, that Greece derived nothing significant from Egypt, was more absolute than most classicists were willing to go.

Where does that leave you? With the boring, defensible middle. The Greeks borrowed enormously from Egypt and the Near East, acknowledged it, and were then edited by Europeans who found the debt embarrassing. What the Greeks did with the inheritance was still theirs. Both halves are true and neither cancels the other.

“Philosophy was democracy's ally”

The two most influential political thinkers Greece produced hated it. Plato watched the democracy kill Socrates and spent his life arguing that the many are incompetent to judge, that democracy is government by flattery, and that the state should be run by trained specialists who do not want the job. Aristotle, more moderate, still classed democracy as a deviant form. Almost every Greek political thinker whose work survives was, to some degree, on the other side.

This is not an awkward footnote. It is the argument doing what the argument does. The system was strong enough to fund and tolerate the men who dismantled it in print, and their attacks survive because Athens did not suppress them. The most damning critique of Athenian democracy in existence is a product of Athenian

democracy, and that is closer to a defence than most of the compliments.

“Western civilisation began in Greece”

The line you have been shown is straight: Greece, Rome, Christendom, Renaissance, us. The actual route is a scandal.

Western Europe lost Greek. For most of the Middle Ages almost nobody in Latin Christendom could read it, and most of the Greek canon was gone from the West: not suppressed, not disputed, absent. It survived elsewhere. The Byzantines kept copying it for a thousand years, which is why anything survives at all. And the philosophy and science went east, into Syriac and then Arabic, where scholars in Baghdad and Córdoba translated, preserved, argued with, and improved on Aristotle, Euclid, Ptolemy, and Galen for centuries. Aristotle came back to western Europe in the twelfth century largely through Arabic, with Muslim commentators attached, and reshaped Christian theology on arrival.

So the West did not inherit Greece. The West lost Greece, and had it handed back by Byzantine scribes and Muslim philosophers, and then in the nineteenth century constructed a genealogy that wrote both of them out of it. The Greeks are not the childhood of the West. They are a body of work that several civilisations kept alive, and the one now claiming sole descent is the one that dropped it.

Use It

Egypt asked you to look at something finished. Mesopotamia asked you to notice something still running. Greece asks for something harder, because what it left is not a monument or a substrate but a habit, and a habit is only inherited by being practised. Five lenses, then the bill.

Notice who is not in the room

The Athenian assembly made excellent decisions for the five thousand men on the hill and catastrophic ones for everybody else, and it never once experienced this as a contradiction, because the people it was ruining were not present to mention it. Melos was debated by Athenians. No Melians attended.

This is the most portable thing in the book and the least comfortable. Every deliberating body has a boundary, and from the inside the boundary is invisible, because the excluded do not show up as absent. They show up as nothing at all. The room feels complete. It always feels complete.

So the question to carry into any meeting, committee, board, or parliament is not whether the argument was good. It is who is affected by this and not here, and would I be able to tell? Athens could not tell. Athens was the most self-examining society that had ever existed and it could not tell, which should not reassure you about your own.

Give the other side its best case

The Greek move nobody has improved on is the one Sophocles made: put the strongest available version of each position on the stage and decline to say which wins.

Note what that is not. It is not balance, which splits the difference. It is not tolerance, which lets the other side speak and then ignores it. It is the discipline of making your opponent's case better than your opponent made it, and then living with the fact that it is still standing.

Most argument in your life does the reverse. It builds the weakest version of the other position, defeats that, and reports a victory. The tell is how easy it was. If the opposing case, as you have described it, is obviously stupid, you are not arguing with anyone. You are arguing with a version you built, and you built it to lose.

The hard part is the second half. Sometimes you steelman the other side and the problem does not resolve: both are right and both are destroyed and the play ends. The Greeks were willing to stage that in public and go home unresolved, and it is worth asking when you last did.

Ask what would change your mind

The sophists and Socrates looked identical from the outside. Both questioned everything. Both made confident men look foolish.

Athens could not tell them apart, which is part of why it killed the wrong one.

The distinction is entirely about the aim. The sophist argues to produce assent, so any argument that lands is a good argument. Socrates argued to find out, so an argument that lands and is wrong is a disaster. From outside, in the moment, you cannot see which is happening, because the technique is the same.

You can see it in yourself, though, with one question: would I accept this argument if it pointed the other way? If the study supported the opposite conclusion, would the methodology still look sound to me? If the answer is no, you are not reasoning. You are a sophist with a cause, and being right about the conclusion does not save you, because you did not get there by thinking.

Ask what your stopping rule is

Greece proved the failure mode and paid for it. An argument has no natural end. It ends when someone imposes an end, and the whole design of Greek politics was that nobody could. So they argued while Philip marched, and the speeches were superb, and Greece was over.

Every deliberating institution needs a mechanism for closing that is not itself an argument, because otherwise the person with the most stamina wins, which is not the same as the best case winning. Athens had one for policy: the vote, at the end of the day,

final. It had none for strategy across cities, and that is exactly where it died.

So when you are in a process that will not converge, the useful question is not what is the right answer. It is what would count as this being finished, who has the authority to say so, and does that authority exist. If it does not, you are not deliberating. You are having a hobby.

Read the survivors

Everything you know about Greece exists because a chain of scribes chose to copy it. Seven Sophocles plays out of a hundred and twenty, and those seven because they were the syllabus.

Generalise that. Every archive is a set of decisions about what was worth keeping. Every institutional memory is what survived the people who left. Every history of a field is written from the papers that got cited, and the reason you cannot name the failures is not that there were none. The pattern is always the same: the record does not look like a selection, it looks like the past, because the discarded material is not marked absent. It is simply not there.

The question is therefore never what does the evidence show. It is what would be missing if I were wrong, and would I be able to see the gap. Usually you cannot. Knowing that you cannot is most of the benefit.

The limits

Be clear about what this civilisation cannot do for you.

The argument is a procedure, not an oracle. The Greeks argued magnificently and were wrong about almost everything factual: the elements, the body, the cosmos, the shape of the good life, the status of half their population. Good process does not produce truth. It produces the conditions in which being wrong can be discovered by somebody else later, which is much less than it sounds and much more than the alternatives offer.

It did not civilise them. Twenty-seven years of Greeks killing Greeks, a neutral island exterminated by vote, and the wisest man in Athens executed by the most democratic court in the world. Nobody should leave this book thinking a culture of open argument makes people decent. It makes them articulate.

And it was bought. The Athenian could spend forty days a year on the Pnyx because somebody else was down the mine at Laurion. Every argument culture has a cost structure, and the question of who is paying for your deliberation is not a rhetorical flourish. It is an accounting question with an answer.

Then the evidence itself, which is thin, Athenian, and curated by strangers, so hold every confident sentence in this book a little loosely, including this one.

The one thing to keep

Keep the question.

Socrates said he knew that he knew nothing, and it has been worn smooth into a piece of modesty, which is the opposite of what it is. It is a finding. He had gone around Athens interrogating the people who were certain and found that not one of them could say what they meant by the things they were certain about. The claim is not that knowledge is impossible. It is that everyone around him believed they had it and did not, and that he was the only man in the city aware of the gap, and that being aware of the gap was the entire difference.

Athens killed him for it, legally, in public, by majority, in the most democratic institution that had ever existed. And it did not work. Two and a half thousand years later the questions are still being asked, in every seminar and courtroom and laboratory on earth, and you cannot name a single juror.

You have now read three answers to the one problem, which is that you do not get to keep anything. Egypt refused it and built in stone, and the stone is still there and the builders are not. Mesopotamia accepted it and said go home, eat your dinner, love whoever is in the room. Greece did what neither attempted: it declined to answer, and asked instead, and argued about it for three hundred years and lost every war it fought and handed the argument to the men who beat it, and the argument is the only one of the three you are still inside.

That is the inheritance. Not the marble, which was painted. Not the democracy, which was not yours. Not the philosophy, most of which was wrong. What they left you is the willingness to say that you do not know, in public, where it can be heard and corrected, and to treat that as the beginning of the work rather than the end of your credibility.

Most people cannot do it. It is four hundred years older than the New Testament and it is still the rarest thing in any room.

Terms

A glossary of the words this book has used, and the ones that will ambush you in any other book on the subject.

Hellas. What the Greeks called their world. Greece and Greek are Latin words applied by outsiders; the people in this book were Hellenes, and modern Greece still calls itself Hellas.

Polis. The independent city together with its land, understood as a body of members rather than a patch of territory. Usually rendered city-state, which loses the point: it was the citizens, not the walls.

Demos. The people, meaning the whole citizen body, and frequently carrying a sting. In an aristocrat's mouth it meant the common sort, the ones with no land.

Demokratia. Power in the hands of the demos. Coined by Greeks, and used as a term of abuse by a good many of them.

Ekklesia. The Athenian Assembly, sovereign over war, law, money, and everything else, meeting around forty times a year on a hillside. In the fourth century citizens were paid to show up.

Boule. The Council of Five Hundred, which set the Assembly's agenda and ran the daily machinery of the state. Chosen by lottery and capped so that nobody could make a career of it.

Sortition. Filling public office by lottery, using a stone allotment device called a kleroterion. The Greeks took it as the defining mark of a democracy, and elections as its opposite.

Ostracism. A once-yearly vote in which Athenians could exile a man for ten years by scratching his name on a broken pot. No accusation was required and none was made.

Archon. One of the senior Athenian magistrates. Originally the government; reduced by democracy to administration, and staffed by lot.

Strategos. General. One of the few posts Athens filled by election rather than lottery, on the sensible view that military competence is not evenly distributed. Pericles held it year after year.

Hoplite. The armoured infantryman of the citizen armies, who bought his own bronze and therefore had to be able to afford it. The middling farmer at war.

Phalanx. The close-packed rank of hoplites with shields overlapping, in which every man's safety depended on the nerve of the man beside him.

Tyrant. In Greek, only a ruler who took power outside the rules. It implied nothing about cruelty, and several tyrants were popular reformers backed by the poor against the nobility.

Metic. A resident foreigner. Metics paid tax, served in the army, and ran much of the economy, and could never vote, hold office, or own land, however many generations they had lived there.

Helot. The enslaved farming population of Sparta, taken by conquest and held down by terror. They heavily outnumbered their owners, which explains nearly every Spartan institution.

Homoioi. The Similar: the Spartan citizen body, named for the equality it maintained internally, which was financed entirely by the people underneath it.

Barbaros. Anyone who did not speak Greek. The word imitates the sound of speech you cannot follow, and originally implied no savagery at all, only incomprehensibility.

Idiotes. The private man, who took no part in public life. Not an insult in Greek so much as a diagnosis, and the ancestor of a word we still use as one.

Asebeia. Impiety: a criminal charge covering irreverence to the city's gods, mockery of the rites, and desecration. It was never given a codified definition, which is what made it useful.

Sophist. A professional teacher of argument and persuasion, working for fees. The first people in history paid to think, and a byword for dishonesty ever since Plato was done with them.

Rhetoric. The art of persuasion, taught as a formal discipline because in a city that decided by show of hands it was the most immediately profitable skill on offer.

Hubris. Not pride, and not a tragic flaw. In Athenian law it was a prosecutable offence: deliberately humiliating another person for the pleasure of it. The modern meaning arrived much later.

Agora. The open civic space at the centre of a city: market, meeting ground, court, and gossip exchange. Most of the arguments in this book happened in one.

Acropolis. The high ground of a city, fortified and usually sacred. Athens has the famous one. Nearly every polis had its own.

City Dionysia. The Athenian spring festival at which tragedies and comedies were staged in competition before thousands, as an official act of the state and a rite of the god Dionysus.

Liturgy. A public duty imposed on the wealthy: fit out a warship, or fund a chorus, personally. Athens taxed riches by making them conspicuous and compulsory.

Presocratics. The thinkers before Socrates who tried to account for nature without invoking gods. Their work survives almost entirely as fragments quoted by later writers, usually mid-disagreement.

Linear B. The syllabic script of the Mycenaean palaces, cracked in 1952 and found to be an early form of Greek. It records inventories, and that is all it records.

Panhellenic. Belonging to all the Greeks. The complete list is short: the Olympics, a few shared shrines, Homer, and a common word for foreigners. It never once produced a state.

Hellenistic. The centuries after Alexander, when Greek was the language of government from the Adriatic to Afghanistan. Where this book stops, and where two others in this series begin.

Go Deeper

Three thousand years, several hundred cities, and one of the largest fields in the humanities, in about an hour. Here is where to go next, and what each book is for.

The narrative.

Paul Cartledge, *Ancient Greece: A History in Eleven Cities* (2009). Under two hundred pages, and structured in the one way that fixes the problem this book kept complaining about: he tells the whole story through eleven cities, chosen out of more than a thousand, running from Cnossus around 1400 BCE to the founding of Constantinople in 324 CE. You get Sparta and Athens, and you also get Miletus, Syracuse, and Byzantion, which is the only honest shape for a civilisation that was never a country. Cartledge is a Cambridge professor of Greek culture and an honorary citizen of modern Sparta, which tells you he can be trusted on the Spartans and enjoys them anyway.

The war.

Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, in the Landmark edition edited by Robert Strassler (1996). Thucydides is the most disturbing book in this subject and almost unreadable cold, because he assumes you know where every place is and which season it is. Strassler fixes exactly that: maps every few pages, marginal sum-

maries, and appendices, so you can follow the thing. Read the Sicilian debate and the Melian dialogue and then try to hold the view that public deliberation makes people wise. This is the primary evidence for the seventh Core Idea, and it was written by a man who lost the war he is describing.

The trial.

Plato's *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*, sold together as *The Last Days of Socrates* (Penguin). Short, and the hinge of everything here: the argument on trial, defending itself, losing, and declining to run. Better still, find the West and West translation, which bundles Aristophanes' *Clouds* in with them. Then you can read the comedy that mocked Socrates as a fraud in 423 alongside the speech he made when the same city killed him twenty-four years later, which is Section 5 in one volume.

How we know.

L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature* (Oxford, 4th edition). The answer to the question Section 4 raised and could not fully pay off: how did any of this reach you? Fifteen hundred years of hand-copying, through Byzantium and the monasteries and the Renaissance, every link a person deciding what was worth the parchment. Fair warning, it is a scholarly book and leaves Latin un-

translated in places. It is still the only place to watch your own inheritance being physically carried.

Notes and Sources

Classics has a vast and technical literature. The notes below cover the datings used, the contested points, and the specific claims this book rests on. Dates before roughly 500 BCE are approximate. The evidence is overwhelmingly Athenian and overwhelmingly literary, and where a point is disputed that is flagged in the text.

The Core Ideas

Geography and colonisation. Greece is roughly four-fifths mountainous, with no major river system and no plain comparable to Egypt's or Mesopotamia's. Greek colonisation from the eighth century BCE extended from Spain to the eastern Black Sea. The frogs-around-a-pond image is Plato's, in the *Phaedo*.

The polis. Athenian public decrees are issued in the name of the Athenians rather than of Athens. Aristotle's claim that man is by nature a political animal, and that one who lives outside the polis is either a beast or a god, is at *Politics* 1253a. *Idiotes* denotes the private person as opposed to the one who takes part in public affairs.

The hoplite question. The narrative connecting the phalanx to the rise of the polis and to political rights descends from George Grote in the nineteenth century and was orthodox for roughly a century. Over the past thirty years revisionist scholarship has challenged nearly every element of it, including dating, tactics,

and the direction of causation. The debate is unresolved and this book treats the correlation as real and the causation as open.

Sparta. The Spartan citizen body called itself the *homoioi*. The helots were the conquered population of Messenia and Laconia and substantially outnumbered the Spartiates. The ephors' annual declaration of war on the helots is reported by Aristotle via Plutarch and is generally accepted as reflecting a real institution, whatever its precise operation.

Religion without doctrine. Greek religion had no founder, no authoritative scripture, no creed, and no centralised authority over belief or practice; regulation was civic. Herodotus (2.53) states that Homer and Hesiod gave the Greeks the gods' genealogy, names, spheres, and forms. The Greeks had no term corresponding to religion in the modern sense, and no concepts of orthodoxy or heresy. Priesthoods were generally civic offices, frequently annual and sometimes allotted.

Impiety. *Asebeia* was a criminal charge in Athenian law, covering irreverence towards the city's gods, mockery of divine objects, and desecration; it was never codified, and its scope remains disputed among scholars with no consensus reached. Only one trial in the record is recognised beyond doubt as a *graphe asebeias*, that of Socrates in 399 BCE. The reported prosecutions of Anaxagoras, Protagoras, and Diagoras rest on problematic sources or datings, and in most cases political motives are identifiable; this book follows the sceptical reading. Xenophanes' observation that

people conceive gods in their own likeness, and that horses would draw equine gods, survives in fragments quoted by later writers.

Athenian democracy. Cleisthenes' reforms date to 508/7 BCE and included the reorganisation of the citizen body into ten artificial tribes deliberately mixing coastal, urban, and inland populations. The Assembly met roughly forty times a year on the Pnyx, which accommodated about six thousand; attendance was typically around five thousand from an eligible body of perhaps thirty to forty thousand. A quorum of six thousand applied in the fourth century, when attendance was paid. The Council of Five Hundred comprised fifty men from each tribe, chosen by lot, with a chairman selected by lot daily and limited to one tenure in a lifetime. Juries numbered several hundred, five hundred and one being standard. Ostracism required six thousand votes and carried ten years' exile without loss of property or citizenship; it was used ten times between 507 and 416 BCE and never afterwards.

Exclusions. Estimates for classical Attica give a total population of roughly 250,000 to 300,000, of whom perhaps 30,000 were adult male citizens, with a slave population commonly estimated at 80,000 to 100,000. Figures are reconstructions and are debated.

Sortition. Aristotle treats appointment by lot as democratic and election as oligarchic at Politics 1294b. The kleroterion was known from textual references but not securely identified as a physical device until one was excavated in 1937.

Theatre. Tragedies and comedies were performed in competition at the City Dionysia, a state-organised religious festival; productions were financed by the choregia, a liturgy imposed on wealthy citizens. Roughly thirty-two tragedies survive in total. Sophocles is credited with something over a hundred plays, of which seven survive complete.

Philosophy, history, and mathematics. Thales is conventionally dated by the eclipse of 585 BCE. Anaximander argued the earth remains unsupported because it has no reason to move in one direction rather than another. Democritus' atomism was arrived at by argument rather than observation. Euclid's *Elements* dates to around 300 BCE and remained a standard textbook into the nineteenth century; Lincoln's study of it is recorded in his own account of his education.

How It Actually Works

The Bronze Age. Minoan Crete flourished from roughly 2000 to 1450 BCE. Linear A and Cretan hieroglyphic remain undeciphered. Linear B was used for Mycenaean Greek from roughly 1450 to 1200 BCE and records administrative material almost exclusively.

Collapse and recovery. The eastern Mediterranean collapse around 1200 BCE remains contested in its causes; drought, migration, and systems failure are all argued. Greek literacy lapsed for roughly three centuries. The Greek alphabet derives from Phoenician, with unused consonantal signs repurposed as vowels. The Olympic games are traditionally dated from 776 BCE.

Archaic Athens. Solon's reforms date to 594 BCE and included the cancellation of debts and the abolition of enslavement for debt.

Persia and empire. Marathon 490 BCE; Thermopylae and Salamis 480; Plataea 479. The Delian League was formed in 478 with its treasury on Delos. The treasury was transferred to Athens in 454, ostensibly for security, though Delos was at no greater risk than before; many historians treat this as the point at which the league becomes an empire, and Athenian inscriptions thereafter refer to the cities the Athenians rule. Plutarch reports that Pericles' opponents attacked the use of allied tribute for the Athenian building programme in precisely these terms.

War and conquest. The Peloponnesian War ran 431 to 404 BCE. The plague reached Athens in 430 and killed Pericles in 429. The Melian episode falls in 416 and the Sicilian expedition 415 to 413. Socrates was tried and executed in 399. Chaeronea 338; Alexander died in 323; Corinth was destroyed and Greece annexed in 146 BCE.

Transmission. Classical Greek literature survives through continuous manual copying rather than through material durability. The surviving selection of tragedy substantially reflects late-antique school use. Aristotle re-entered western Europe largely via Arabic translation and commentary in the twelfth century. Papyrus finds, principally at Oxyrhynchus, continue to add material.

Linear B decipherment. Michael Ventris announced the decipherment in 1952 and published with John Chadwick in 1953,

working without any bilingual text. He died in 1956, aged thirty-four. Alice Kober's analyses of the script, conducted from 1947 until her death in 1950, supplied much of the groundwork.

What People Get Wrong

Polychromy. Ancient Greek sculpture and architecture were extensively painted. Traces of red and blue were observed on the Aegina pediment sculptures in 1811. Winckelmann was aware of ancient testimony describing painted statuary and treated it as exceptional. Black-and-white photographic publication and white plaster casts reinforced the monochrome assumption into the twentieth century. The polychromy reconstructions of Vinzenz Brinkmann and Ulrike Koch-Brinkmann, exhibited as *Gods in Color*, are the standard reference; some scholars, including Fabio Barry, argue that such reconstructions over-saturate the recovered pigments.

Democracy's lineage. Athenian democracy was direct and made extensive use of sortition. Modern representative government was not derived from it, and eighteenth-century framers commonly invoked Athens as a negative example.

The Spartan mirage. Sparta produced almost no written record of itself; the surviving picture derives largely from non-Spartan and frequently admiring sources. The term is conventional in the scholarship.

Black Athena. Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* (1987) argued that Greek civilisation was substantially shaped by Egyptian and Levantine influence and that this was obscured by nineteenth-century racism. His critique of nineteenth-century scholarship has been widely taken seriously; his etymological arguments were rejected by linguists and his colonisation thesis by archaeologists. Bernal himself rejected the claim that Socrates or Cleopatra were black. Mary Lefkowitz's position, that Greece derived nothing significant from Egypt, is itself more absolute than the mainstream. Substantial Near Eastern influence on Greek mathematics, astronomy, and the alphabet is not disputed.

Transmission and the West. Knowledge of Greek was largely lost in Latin Christendom for much of the Middle Ages. The Greek scientific and philosophical corpus was preserved and developed in Byzantium and in the Arabic-speaking world, and returned to western Europe substantially through Arabic intermediaries.

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