

The drawbacks of the polis model

The polis as the first model of a “state” society in western history was not, however, a perfect one. In fact, it was saddled by a major geographical disadvantage, as it was only able to govern and administrate the relatively small area of the city. Every polis was independent and different in its organization, ranging from aristocratic Sparta to democratic Athens.

The Greek polises sometimes united into coalitions, but they never managed to establish an organized model which would make territorial expansion possible. When a population increase rendered the economic survival of its inhabitants impossible, the polis organized expeditions to found colonies elsewhere. This settlement, however, did not form part of the founding polis, but became an independent city-state.

Polises never managed to establish an organized model which would make possible territorial expansion, which condemned them to fight each other and paved the way for their ultimate conquest by Rome.

1. The division of Hellas

Coalitions of polises were forged, of course, though these were of an ad hoc nature. Thus did the Greeks unite against the threat of the Persian invasion (the Persian Wars). After the victory against the Persians, however, each polis went back to defending its own interests.

Athens launched an imperialist policy championed by Themistocles, an ambitious character who would end up being exiled in an official act of ostracism, but not before he managed for Athens to become a military power, heading up a federation bringing together most of the cities on the Cyclades: the Delian League (an island located in the geographical center of the archipelago), a volunteer association of a military nature which became mandatory when the Athenians, after forbidding the allies from leaving the League, transferred the federal treasury from Delos to Athens itself.

Pericles died in 429 BC, but not before delivering his famous Funeral Oration for the first victims of the Peloponnesian Wars (431-404 BC). In this clash between Greeks, two leagues of cities, led by Athens and Sparta squared off. Sparta would ultimately win the war, with Athens surrendering in 404 BC, ephemerally marking the end of democracy upon the provisional restoration of the oligarchic regime (The Tyranny of the Thirty) following Alcibiades' victory.

Athens was subjugated by the Spartans until they, in turn, were defeated at the Battle of Leuctra (371) by the army of the city-state Thebes, led by two great generals (strategos): Epaminondas and Pelopidas. The battle featured a decisive role played by the famous “Sacred Band of Thebes” composed of an elite 300 hoplites. It was their strategy upon which Alexander the Great would model his invincible Macedonian phalanx. Although Theban hegemony would last only 10 years (until the death of Epaminondas in 362), Sparta would never again be a major power, after the Romans occupied the city in 146 BC.

2. Attempts to improve upon the polis model

The polises tended towards separation and, though there were some attempts at union, they were symbolic and ephemeral. Among the cooperative efforts were the Olympic Games. Institutionalized in the year 776 BC, they constituted one of the rare occasions on which all the Greek cities gathered peacefully, in order to compete in athletic events. Initially imbued with a religious dimension, they soon served to augment the prestige and fame of the victors' home cities. In fact, they would become so prestigious that in ancient Greece time came to be measured with reference to the Olympics.

The other attempt to unite all the Greeks appeared in northern Greece, in Macedonia, beginning with the reign of Philip II (359-336 BC), who was able to establish a dynasty, subduing nobles and lesser kings as he created an all-powerful military monarchy. Philip built a modern polis, issued high-quality coins and established an excellent government administration, all leading to an era of splendid artistic and cultural development, including the work of Aristotle. He was, above all, a great military leader who, after dominating northern Greece, occupied Thessaly and the sanctuary at Delphi, and conquered the Greek cities of the south. His feats were met with resistance and rejection by the democratic polises, including Athens, where Demosthenes vehemently repudiated Macedonian policy in his famous Philippics. The Macedonians defeated the Athenians at Chaeronea (338 BC) but, intelligently, did not impose a tyranny, but rather respected the Greek principle of civil liberty. Instead of presenting himself as the king of Greece, he invited cities to join together in a Pan-Hellenic league, ruled from Corinth. The league – joined by all the polises but Sparta – was commanded by the king of Macedonia, its objective being to organize a joint expedition against the Persian Empire.

Though Philip was assassinated in 336, his son, Alexander the Great, continued his policy in the most brilliant fashion. Once he had wiped out the Theban resistance, in the space of 11 years Alexander would occupy the entire Persian Empire, reaching as far as India, thanks to his forging of an extremely effective army. Alexander wished to establish a synthesis of the Greek and Persian worlds; though he founded a dozen Greek cities bearing his name, at the end of his life he sought to become a Near Eastern-style monarch, which sparked resentment among many Greeks. His early death (323 BC) prevented the consolidation of his empire, which fragmented into a series of monarchies led by his generals (the Diadochi -plural of the Latin Diadochus, from Diadokhoi: successors-), such as that of the Ptolemies in Egypt or the Seleucids in Asia Minor. They all end up being conquered by Rome during the 2nd century BC.