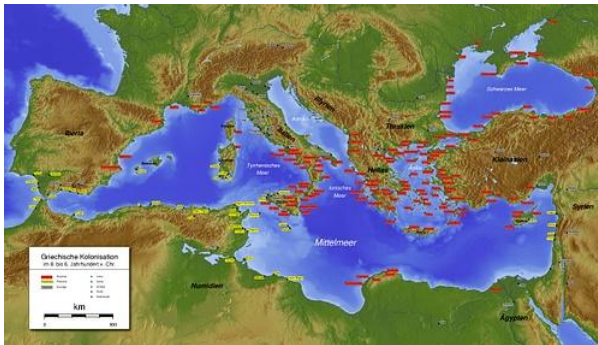


# Polis



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A **polis** (plural: **poleis**) was the typical structure of a community in the ancient **Greek** world. A polis consisted of an urban center, often fortified and with a sacred center built on a natural **acropolis** or harbor, which controlled a surrounding territory (*chora*) of land. The term polis has, therefore, been translated as ‘**city-state**’ as there was typically only one **city** and because an individual polis was independent from other poleis in terms of political, judicial, legal, religious, and social institutions and practices, each polis was in effect a state. Like a state, each polis was also involved in international affairs, both with other *poleis* and non-Greek states in the areas of **trade**, political alliances, and wars. Other cultures had a similar social and political structure, notably, the Babylonians, **Etruscans**, and **Phoenicians**, and the latter are believed to be the originators of the polis as a communal unit.



The polis emerged from the Dark Ages which followed the fall of the **Mycenaean civilization** in **Greece** and by the 8th century BCE a significant process of urbanization had begun. There were eventually over 1,000 *poleis* in the Greek World but among the most important were **Athens**, **Sparta**, **Corinth**, **Thebes**, **Syracuse**, **Aegina**, **Rhodes**, **Argos**, Eretria, and Elis. The biggest was Sparta, although with some 8,500 km<sup>2</sup> of territory, this was exceptionally large and most *poleis* were small in size. However, *poleis* such as Athens, Rhodes, and Syracuse possessed significant naval fleets which also allowed them to control wide areas of territory across the **Aegean**.

It is all hilly and shaded and has many springs...The city is well provided with public buildings, gymnasia, stoas, temples, theatres, pictures, statues, and an **agora** which is excellently situated for all trading purposes.

3rd century BCE description of the polis of Chalcis (Anonymous).

## Common Features

Although individual *poleis* each had their own particular identity and individual institutions and practices differed widely and even evolved over time, there were several features common to the majority. Most of the population of a polis lived in the city rather than being spread across small farm communities in the surrounding territory and the heart of the urban area was usually a sacred space with one or more temples. From the 8th century BCE, these were almost always the most impressive buildings in the polis but sometimes they were separate from the urban area proper, perhaps to take advantage of more impressive natural locations or because those locations had a particular religious significance. From the 7th century BCE, the city was usually fortified with a city **wall** (Sparta being a notable exception) and the agora space was created for civic and commercial activity. From the 5th century BCE, many *poleis* displayed evidence of town planning (especially in newly established colonies) with specific areas of the city designated for private, public, and religious functions. Many *poleis* also had a designated space for public assembly, either for political purposes or also for entertainment, for example, a **theatre** and a **gymnasium**.

## **IN PRACTICE, WHATEVER THE POLITICAL SYSTEM ADOPTED, POLITICAL POWER WAS DOMINATED BY A FEW ARISTOCRATIC FAMILIES.**

A fundamental idea common to most *poleis* was that all male citizens had (at least theoretically) equal political rights based on ownership of property. In practice, whatever the political system adopted - tyranny, oligarchy, or democracy - political power was dominated by a few aristocratic families who held for themselves all the important positions in the polis such as membership of elite councils, magistracies, and the higher military ranks. Also, within these citizen bodies, there were richer and poorer citizens. Over time, and especially following the introduction of money, the richer class, whose status had once been based on land ownership, began to accumulate wealth from investments and loans they made, in effect increasing the difference between rich and poor.

## **A Unique Identity**

Apart from male citizens the social groups which made up Greek society also included **women**, children, slaves, freed slaves, laborers, and foreigners. These could make up as much as 90% of the total polis population and so had to be included and involved in the polis in one way or another if it was to function as a cohesive community. One way of doing this was to create a social identity that differentiated a polis from all others. This identity was achieved in various ways such as the creation of a communal space where people could mix and socialize (the

agora). Another was the practicing of polis-specific festivals and celebrations on specific dates in the year, usually of a religious nature, which also reinforced the idea that the polis had a unique (often mythical) founder and patron deity.



The Parthenon

by Andrew Griffith (CC BY-NC-SA)

Other more practical indicators of the polis as a separate unit were boundary markers, written **law**-codes, **coinage** using specific imagery related to the polis' history (e.g. the owl on Athenian coins representing **Athena**, the city's patron), wars - where soldiers fought a common enemy, often to settle disputed territorial claims, and the production of distinctive goods (e.g. Corinthian **pottery**). A common community history or 'civic memory' was reinforced and commemorated in public statues of local gods, leaders, benefactors, and sporting champions. Finally, the polis founded colonies abroad, especially in **Magna Graecia** and **Ionia**, and became a 'mother' city and provided both a symbolic transfer of identity (e.g. a fire from the city hearth) and a practical transfer of people and community skills (e.g. potters and **metal** workers).

## Pan-Hellenism

Although *poleis* were, then, each a unique cultural and political unit, the common features mentioned above and other factors such as language and broader religious beliefs meant that there were some feelings of connection between *poleis*. Like-minded *poleis* often made political alliances for mutual protection and examples include the Delian and Peloponnesian Leagues. A wider **Hellenic** attitude between *poleis* was manifested in two particular instances - wars against non-Greek enemies (e.g. the **Persian Wars** of the 5th century BCE) and pan-Hellenic festivals such as the **Olympic Games** held at **Olympia** every four years. Many *poleis* participated in these events and sought to advertise their successes in them by erecting commemorative trophies and monuments at sites such as Olympia and **Delphi** where all Greeks would see them for centuries after.

In the late 4th century BCE **Alexander the Great** and his successors spread the idea of the polis throughout the Macedonian **empire** in Asia, typically with re-settled Greeks acting as the ruling elite and the local population becoming subject farmers. In the **Roman** period, the polis continued as a functioning unit but was subordinate to a wider imperial apparatus of Roman-defined provinces. *Poleis*, therefore, became less significant in terms of independent political power but continued to be significant as providers of civic pride based on fine public buildings and the cultivation of the arts and sciences.

From <https://www.ancient.eu/Polis/>