

How important was farming

(socially, economically, politically, and culturally) for a Greek *polis*?

For almost all Greek *poleis* farming and agriculture were the economic base, as well as the main economic activities, for all citizens. It has been estimated that in the fifth to third centuries BC up to 90 per cent of citizens in a *polis* would have been involved in agriculture.¹ As such farming was central to the social, cultural and political structure of the *polis*, and all of these aspects were intertwined entities.² Access to land was critical to physical, social and political survival for most people in the ancient world, and commerce and agriculture were vital to a functioning *polis*.^{3 4} It is impossible to think of the economy of the Greek *polis* without also thinking of the social aspects, and the same for the political and cultural aspects. Farming was an intrinsic activity for almost all Greeks, whatever their status or social standing, and all would have been involved in some way, whether it was farming their own land, having slaves farm their land, or even leasing their land to others.

Due to the Mediterranean climate, there were a number of crops that grew particularly well throughout Greece and therefore formed the base of the average diet. These included grains, which were a crucial staple of the Mediterranean diet, olives, vines for wine, and other crops that would have been grown to support income as well as for diversity in food. These included nuts, such as almonds and walnuts, figs, beans, and lentils.⁵ As well as crops, many farmers would increase their use of the land by grazing animals such as goats and sheep,

¹ S. Pomeroy, S. Burstein, I. Donlan and J. Roberts. (1998) *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social and Cultural History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 4.

² M. Austin and P. Vidal-Naquet. (1977) *Economic and Social History of Ancient Greece*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 8.

³ *Money, Labour and Land: Approaches to the economies of Ancient Greece*, (2002) ed. By Paul Cartledge, Edward E. Cohen and Lin Foxhall (Routledge: London) 210.

⁴ Pomeroy, Burstein, Donlan and Roberts (1998) 285.

⁵ R. J. Hopper. (1979) *Trade and Industry in Classical Greece*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 60. Aineias the Tactician, *How to Survive under Siege*, trans. D. Whitehead (Cambridge, MA: Bristol Classical Press, 2002) 29.4-7.

especially if they had steep hilly plots that they could not afford to terrace.⁶ Agriculture was intensive and all members of the family, alongside slaves if they were considered cost effective, would have been involved; additionally, so would hire workers if the landowner had enough land to justify this. As well as being intensive, farming was an incredibly risky venture, especially with the temperamental weather patterns in the Mediterranean. There are many examples of failed crops due to lack of rainfall or other mitigating circumstances, and *poleis* would try to combat famine by storing extra crops, importing crops in years of bad harvests or finding ways of extra income in order to buy the crops needed to survive another year. In addition to agriculture, pasture of animals was also integral to the *polis*. Sacrifice was an intrinsic part of the *polis* life both socially and culturally, and the animals had to be reared in order to appease the Gods. Goats and sheep were the most commonly sacrificed as they were the dominant livestock due to the less arable nature of the land in a lot of the Greek countryside. The animals would have then been sold to citizens, in an attempt to appease the gods and to add some variety to the diet of many citizens, as meat was not something that would have been wasted.⁷

Farming and trade were intrinsically linked in the ancient world, and there were various ways a farmer could go about trading excess crops, especially grain. The ‘diversity of natural resources in the ancient world made trade a necessity’: no *polis* had everything they needed and therefore trade was the easiest way to ensure they could survive.⁸ One method would be trade in the market place of the main centre of the *polis*, between neighbours. This could have been done through bartering for crops that were needed, or exchanging for coins,

⁶ T. Van Andel and C. Runnels. (1987) *Beyond the Acropolis: A Rural Greek Past*. Stanford, CA; Stanford University Press, 104.

⁷ M. Jameson, 'Sacrifice and animal husbandry in Classical Greece', *Pastoral Economies in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge Philological Society, Vol. 14. (1988, 87-119) 87-88.

⁸ Pomeroy, Burstein, Donland and Roberts (1998) 242.

something which many *poleis* established in the sixth to fifth centuries B.C.⁹ This type of trade was important socially, for establishing a sense of community between neighbours, also economically, by bringing in extra income that could be invested back into the land or saved to prepare for times when harvests were not as bountiful.¹⁰ Another way farmers could trade was by selling their crops to merchants who would then export these crops, searching for places that perhaps had bad harvests, but also that had a commodity that could be transported back, so as not to waste a return trip. Most *poleis* at some point would have to import grain, especially due to bad harvest, but for the most part were not dependent on grain imports, apart from a select few states such as Athens.¹¹ Demosthenes states that the Athenians imported 400,000 medimnoi of grain a year from the Black Sea region alone, but Sicily and Egypt were also large suppliers.¹² Farming was important for Greek *poleis* as it helped, via trade, to build relations politically with other states. Inscriptions, such as the one from Cyrene dating from around 330 B.C., show how they enforced political alliances by directly exporting excess crops across the Greek world. Their export of crops, that may or may not have been given for free, totalled over 800,000 medimnoi of grain, which Rhodes and Osborne estimate being worth roughly 400-700 talents.¹³

For Greeks the ideal was a life as a free landowner able to provide for themselves and their family. Even early sources such as Homer and Hesiod understood that agriculture was central to a civilised life, and later sources such as Aristotle and Xenophon placed farmers and agriculture above artisans and crafts in their importance to the *polis*.¹⁴ In fact, Xenophon

⁹ A. Andrewes. (1967) *Greek Society*. London: Penguin, 139-142.

¹⁰ Aeneias, *How to Survive under Siege*, 29.4-7.

¹¹ Hopper (1979), 48.

¹² Demosthenes, *Against Leptines*, trans. C.A Vince and J. H. Vince (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926) 20.31-32.

¹³ P. J. Rhodes and R. Osborne (2003) *Greek Historical Inscriptions: 404-323 BC*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inscription 95.

¹⁴ Austin and Vidal-Naquet (1977), 11-12.

went so far as to praise agriculture as the mother of all sciences, arts and civilisation.¹⁵ In Homer, land is used in every form, for agriculture; including for vegetables, grains, and produce-bearing trees, as well as for pasture, a criterion on which Homer used to establish wealth.¹⁶ As such farming was a tradition for Greeks, a tradition that had been passed down through the years and as such was fundamental to the success of the *polis*. Most *poleis* were started as small farms and villages that eventually decided it would be mutually beneficial if they established a defensible territory and social centre. This is called *synoecism* – which literally means ‘settling together’. Although many inhabitants of the *polis* would have to walk to the town, it provided security, community and access to trade and goods. These are even written about by Homer, as Austin and Vidal-Naquet tell us, and are shown to be primitive forms of the *polis* known in the Classical period.¹⁷

Farming became a status symbol for many states, an activity at which they were so good that it became synonymous with their name, or was used as a symbol to recognise the state. One such example is that of Metapontum, a colony in the South of Italy that was known for its fertile land. It used an ear of corn on its coinage as a way of showing that they were proud of their grain production and exports. In this way farming was as much a part of their culture, as it was important to the people of Metapontum as a defining feature of their *polis*.¹⁸ Metapontum was set up for agriculture, shown through the layout of the city itself, discovered through aerial photographs. It has been estimated that Metapontum had approximately 700 farms within an area of 6,500 ha. Although it cannot be assured that all of these were inhabited at the same time, there is still a high proportion of habitation that is not centralized

¹⁵ Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, trans. E. C Marchant (Loeb, Vol 168. 1923) 5.1-20.

¹⁶ Austin and Vidal-Naquet (1977), 41.

¹⁷ Austin and Vidal-Naquet (1977), 40-41.

¹⁸ Austin and Vidal-Naquet (1977), 63.

to the main town of the *polis*.¹⁹ Another way that Metapontum showed that farming was important economically, but also culturally, to the *polis* was by sending a ‘golden harvest’ to Delphi, which probably came in the form of a golden ear of grain; the city’s emblem.²⁰ This was a very public declaration, and would have been done to show other states that they were accomplished and proud of their agrarian heritage.

Culturally, religion was another way that *poleis* showed that farming was important to them. The Greeks had many gods and goddesses that were related to farming. They would hold festivals, make sacrifices and build temples to these gods and goddesses to ensure that they were pleased and therefore would provide a good harvest. Demeter, goddess of fertility and cereal crops, and Dionysus, god of wine, were two of the most important deities worshipped with regards to agriculture. Demeter was particularly worshipped in Eleusis in Attica; the Athenians claimed that she had revealed to them the secret of agriculture there, and that they had graciously shared it. To them, this agricultural tradition was of great cultural importance and was a proud symbol for their *polis*. The worship of Dionysus was much wilder, as one might expect from the god of wine, but it is hard to say to what extent he was worshipped within the *polis*. Dionysus was seen as a god who sent women mad and who was worshipped by the ‘maenads’. His lack of a *polis* may have helped reinforce the ‘wild’ nature of the god.²¹ Another important goddess in regards to agriculture is Persephone. She was the daughter of Demeter and goddess of the grain but her importance came in the way she was used to explain the seasons. It is said that Hades kidnapped and married her and after eating a pomegranate from the underworld, she was required to stay for a third of the year,

¹⁹ S. Isager and J. E. Skydsgaard. (1995) *Ancient Greek Agriculture: An Introduction*. Florence, KY: Routledge, 69-71.

²⁰ Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, Ed. H. L. Jones. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924) 6.264 and *Metapontum, Lucania (Italy)* <http://www.willamette.edu/cla/classics/resources/hfma/coininfo/019.html> [08/11/2013].

²¹ A. Andrewes. (1967) 256-257.

explaining to Greek farmers the seasons in which nothing grew.²² The women of a *poleis* commemorated this with a festival called the Thesmophoria, which was female only and dedicated to Demeter and Persephone. It was a mandatory event for married women, proving to be very culturally and socially important.²³ Festivals, as Aristotle tells us, usually occurred after the harvest as this coincided best with the agrarian calendar in terms of leisure time. These festivals would have used animals and food grown during the season as sacrifices and offerings, as well as during processions, whilst also celebrating the harvest as a community. Socially, they were incredibly important for the people and helped to keep the tradition of farming alive within a community.²⁴

For farming to take place, a *polis* had to ensure that there was enough land to go around and distribution of land varied from state to state. At some point, it is thought that most states would have divided up the land equally between citizens. Ownership of land was often the foundation of a citizen's rights, although this was often reversed in that being a citizen became justification to a claim of land ownership.²⁵ However, over time, through inheritance and marriage, land plots would have been divided, decreased and spread out. A man may own one plot of land that he inherited from his father, and another in a completely different area of the *polis* due to the dowry he received when he married. There were both benefits and problems with this concept to a landowner. If their land was spread over the *poleis*, they had a better chance of a successful harvest, and by growing different crops harvesting these would not be a problem. However, if a man's land was constantly divided for inheritance and dowry, he risked his plot becoming so small that he could not support

²² W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (1985). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 159-160.

²³ W. Burkert, (1985) 242-243.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by H. Rackham. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934) Vol. 19, 1160a.

²⁵ Austin and Vidal-Naquet (1977) 24-25.

himself or his family and therefore would be reduced to poverty.²⁶ However, it was possible to rent land from people or establishments that had a surplus. One example we have of this is an inscription of a lease for the land of a temple in Arkesine, on the island of Amorgos. It details all the conditions a tenant must fulfil in order to ensure that the land is kept in a good condition, and also that they get the most out of the land.²⁷ For some farmers, this would have been a better solution, a way of ensuring that they had enough land to remain self-sufficient. Land ownership and leasing was economically important but also culturally, as shown through this example. The rent given to the temple would have gone straight back into the state and/or the temple itself.²⁸

Those who had extra land, however, may not always have leased it out and many would have preferred to buy slaves to work the land for them. Land ownership had the greatest value politically, socially, and as a status symbol. In many states the majority of the land was controlled by the rich and influential. Slavery was a large part of agriculture and was used over almost all of the ancient world as a cheap workforce.²⁹ Although some Greek workers would have hired themselves out for work, most free citizens avoided this due to the connotations of slavery that accompanied this work; for them it was an ‘obligation to maintain an independence of occupation ... and at all costs to avoid seeming to work in a “slavish” way for another’.³⁰ Weinmann mentions that despite many influential Greeks having slaves, they were ‘hostile to those who traded in them’, and Herodotus tells us how many slaves were kidnapped freedmen. He mentions especially the cases of eunuchs, who were often kidnapped as young, attractive boys and castrated before being sold to non-

²⁶ Austin and Vidal-Naquet (1977) 58.

²⁷ Rhodes and Osborne (2003) Inscription 59.

²⁸ N. Papazarkadas. (2011) *Sacred and Public Land in Ancient Athens*. New York: Oxford University Press, 11-12.

²⁹ T. Wiedemann. (1980) *Greek and Roman Slavery*. Florence, KY: Routledge, 7.

³⁰ *Money, Labour and Land*, 100.

Greeks.³¹ Xenophon, in particular, believed that slaves were important for agriculture and that agriculture was important to men who aspired to greatness:

So if you are going to be a good farmer, you must make your workers cooperative and willing to obey you; and when you lead men against an enemy you must try to achieve this too, by giving rewards to those who behave as brave men should, and punishing those who lack discipline.³²

In this way, Xenophon helps us understand how slaves played a role in the importance of farming to a Greek *polis*. Farming was a way a man could learn how to be a leader and successfully take control if he wished his endeavours to succeed. Since there was little time to train for war, farming was a way that citizens could combine their training with their livelihood, and this enabled the *polis* to ensure that it was ready for warfare, and remain a significant political power.

Sparta is an example of a *polis* that successfully used slaves as their primary workforce, but also embodied this concept, and therefore not only excelled at agriculture, but also at warfare.³³ The Spartan state was built on farming, and without it, it would not have become the state we know it as. In the eighth century B.C., the Spartans enslaved their neighbours in Messenia and took their land, re-branding them 'helots': serf like workers who were bound to the land and forced to pay a quota of their produce to their Spartan masters.³⁴ Since coinage and most forms of economic activity were banned in Sparta, this was

³¹ T. Wiedemann (1980) 102 and Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. By R. Waterfield. (New York; Oxford University Press, 1998) 8.104-106.

³² Xenophon, 5.

³³ Xenophon, 5.

³⁴ T. J. Figueria, 'Mess Contributions and Subsistence at Sparta', *Transaction of the American Philological Society* Vol. 114 (1984), 87-109 (87) and SPARTA. <http://www.portergaud.edu/academic/faculty/mcarver/cmcarver/spar.html> (10/11/2013).

practically the only way they could ensure they had enough food to ensure self-sufficiency. This use of helots to farm, which supported the state, meant that the Spartans could spend their time training and ensuring they were in peak physical condition, ready for war at any moment. However, Cartledge tells us that the very existence of Sparta 'was constantly menaced by the helots', and that Sparta's stability was undermined by the helots and 'shot through with aggressive competitiveness and constant, sometimes unbearable tension at all levels'.³⁵ Helots were both a blessing and a curse for Sparta, providing a workforce that would take the agricultural and economic problems away but that also required constant supervision and subduing if they were to avoid rebellion, something that had problems with in the fifth century B.C. especially. For the *polis* of Sparta as a whole, helots were important to farming, which in turn was important socially, politically, culturally and economically to the survival of Sparta as a military state with significant power in the Greek world.

In conclusion, farming was important to the Greek *polis* in a number of ways. Politically, it helped increase foreign relations through trade, and helped enforce alliances through this trade. Farming also helped provide for the state as a whole; leasing land from the state and paying taxes ensured that the *polis* could grow, with the money being used for festivals, buildings and the military. This in turn helped to increase the sense of *polis* community. Socially, farming increased the sense of community and farmer-citizens would have been willing to die to preserve their freedom and 'ancestral earth'.³⁶ Furthermore, without farming and the original inhabitants of a *polis*' territory, the *polis* would never have come into being. It was only through social agreement that it would be mutually beneficial to form a centre to a territory that the *polis* truly came into being, and farming was instrumental in this.

³⁵ P. Cartledge. (1987) *Agasilaos and the Crisis of Sparta*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 13-18.

³⁶ Pomeroy, Burstein, Donlan and Roberts (1998) 4.

Culturally, farming was influenced by religion, and vice versa as religion incorporated the agrarian calendar, made use of sacrifices grown by citizens of the *polis*, and celebrated that which grew in Greece with patron gods and goddesses of grain and wine, two of Greece's largest grown crops. Most importantly, farming was economically essential to a *polis*. Without farming, the *polis* would never have been able to sustain itself. Self-sufficiency was the aim of every *polis*, and provided a common aim, but it was the economic factors of farming that truly helped it to thrive and flourish, as well as uniting a *polis* in a common goal.

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Written for *Greek City States (CLH264)*

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