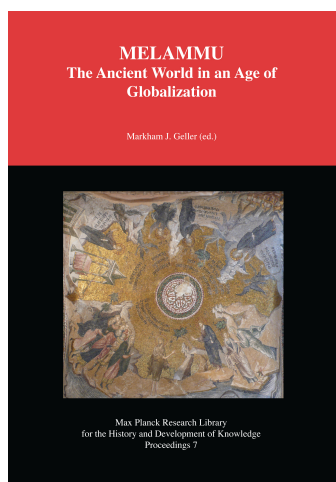Max Planck Research Library for the History and Development
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Kristoffer Momrak:

Ancient Near Eastern Polities and the Greek Polis: Secondary States, Structural
Similarities and the Problem of Diffusion

Chapter 16
Ancient Near Eastern Polities and the Greek Polis: Secondary States, Structural Similarities and the Problem of Diffusion
Kristoffer Momrak

16.1   Introduction

The Greek city-state or polis emerged in the first millennium BCE. Earlier polities in Greece were palace societies like that at Mycenae or Pylos. The most powerful polities contemporary with the polis in the Mediterranean were empires like that of the Assyrians or Persians. From about 650 BCE there is literary and archaeological evidence from Greece of urbanized political communities where the citizens ruled themselves through collective organs of decision making. The polis was born. Apparently, something unique had happened. Power was in the hands of the citizens, not in the hands of a despotic ruler or a closed oligarchy. The polis is a comparatively late development compared to the ancient city-states of Mesopotamia or Syria. How does the Greek polis fit into the political developments of the Ancient Near East?

Herodotos tells a story that he warns some Hellenes will find hard to believe. The seven Persians that led the revolt against Cambyses held council to discuss how the country should be run now that they had dethroned the king. Otanes warns against a new monarchy, and argues that power should be in the hands of the people. Monarchy leads to uninhibited authority and will corrupt the ruler, just like what happened to the deposed king Cambyses. Instead, Otanes lauds rule by the people, what he calls equal rule, isonomia. It is characterized by offices being drawn by lot, officers being held responsible, and that all decisions are taken after common deliberation. A second Persian, Megabyxos, proposes oligarchy. He warns against the dangers of mob rule, and prefers the rule of the best men among the Persians. The third of the rebels to propose a new constitution for the Persians is Dareios. He argues that monarchy is to be preferred before all other constitutions, because oligarchy leads to strife among the rulers, whereas democracy leads to corruption of the citizens and power to demagogues or tyrants. Monarchy is the best form of constitution, then, given that the perfect ruler is king (Hdt. 3.80–84).

Aristotle, discussing kingship and its different types, claims that there is a peculiar kind of kingship found among non-Greeks, where the king has powers approximating that of a tyrant. The reason is that non-Greeks are more slavish than Greeks, and the Asians are more slavish than the Europeans, so that they tolerate master-like rule without resentment (Arist. *Pol.* 1285a16–1285a29).

From these sources, it seems pretty clear that the polis does not fit into the political traditions of the Ancient Near East at all. The Greeks believed that Asians were natural slaves and hence unable or unwilling to rule themselves. Political thinking was a reserve of the Greeks; all others were slaves to kings.

The episode of the Persian constitutional debate is taken by all historians as a fantasy. This conversation that never took place is intriguing for what it tells us about our own expectations of cultural roles. The Persians can not possibly have discussed politics in this way, only the Greeks knew political thought. Herodotos had no problems imagining Persian noblemen discuss politics like in Greece, although he points out that Greeks may well not believe it. By the time of Aristotle, it was apparently a widely held opinion that Asians were natural slaves. What lies behind this perceived difference between Greeks and all others? The Archaic Greek polis was established in the same period as the violent expansion of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, the eighth century BCE. The Classical Greek polis was born in the flames of the Persian invasion in the early fifth century BCE. Despotism was to the Classical Greeks what characterized Near Eastern rulers most of all. The end of the Archaic period was a time when new borders were drawn between the Greeks and the others. The Greeks came to view their own political traditions as unique, all other people were natural slaves. Arguably, this negative view of the outside world as in many respects inferior to the Greeks was a product of historical circumstances. It was not always thus.

The Archaic age was not only a time of war and conquest. The Phoenician city states of the Levant were eager to trade with Greeks. Colonies were established around the Mediterranean basin and the Black Sea. Important innovations took place in Greece in the Archaic period. Greece was a periphery to the Ancient Near East, and developed new cultural traits under its influence. The Phoenician alphabet was adapted for the writing of Greek. The orientalizing style in Greek art was invented. There was an explosion in new motifs for decoration on pottery, in metal and in textiles. The list goes on. Is it not a paradox that the development of the Greek polis had nothing to do with this process of cultural changes?

16.2   Methodological Considerations

The political economy of the Mycenaean Late Bronze Age palace society was characterised by the mass of the population being agricultural producers whose

surplus was redistributed by a restricted elite and a palace centred bureaucracy, a so called agro-literary society. The polis society of the Archaic and Classical period was characterised by independent farmers who were citizens and soldiers of their community and ruled their own city in collective institutions of decision making, a so called citizen state. Ian Morris emphasises that the citizens of Greek communities of the Iron Age held the citizen assembly as their highest authority (I. Morris 1997, 100–102). The Mycenaean Bronze Age palace society is hardly recognisable in the polis society of Iron Age Greece. With the rise of the polis, a citizen state evolved out of an agro-literary society. How is this change to be understood? Was it an internal development in Greece or part of a larger process of cultural changes?

An internal development of the polis would need an explanation based on evolution. Neo-evolutionary theory and the concept of the Early State have been used as a framework to understand the developments of polities in the ancient world for at least three generations of scholars. This step-ladder theory of successive levels of societal complexity places much emphasis on hierarchy and the horizontal divides in society (Fried 1967). Neo-evolutionism has been criticized, however, for being a theory of classification, and not of social change (Yoffee 2005, 31). The neo-evolutionary theory has been challenged by approaches to state formation that emphasise the role of vertical solidarity between different economic groups in society and the semiautonomous functioning of lower level sub-systems over hierarchy (Stone 1997, 16). A weakness of neo-evolutionism and the Early State model is that because of their focus on relations of domination and subordination, they do not explain city-states such as the polis.

In order to understand ancient societies beyond the Early State model, scholars have started to discuss the concept of a duality of the so called corporative and elitist strategies for social integration in ancient societies. The elitist strategy is characterized by exclusive access to prestige goods, a patrimonial view of society, divine rulership, and imperialism. Power is usually in the hands of monarchs or councils with restricted access. The corporative strategy, on the other hand, is decentralized regarding prestige-goods systems and sources of power in general. It is characterized by reflexive communication, which involves accountability of the ruler. Power is organized as a form of commonwealth government (Blanton 1998, 144–145). The dual-processual theory, developed by Richard E. Blanton and his colleagues, involves a discursive analysis of the ways power is distributed, exercised and expressed by actors and groups in society, according to two main strategies, viz. the elitist and the corporative strategy (Blanton et al. 1996, 2). This approach is useful for a comparative study of ancient polities, because it focuses on human action, not theoretical typology.

Thus, the change from palace to polis can well be analyzed as an internal change, from the domination of an elitist strategy to that of a corporative strategy. However, as will be argued, under this method of analysis, it becomes evident that the polis shared several traits with Ancient Near Eastern city-states that fall within the categories of both the corporate and the elitist strategy. The polis does not appear unique, but as an extreme subtype of a city-state dominated by the corporative strategy. This opens up for a comparative study of the polis and other city-states.

The polis is a so called secondary state formation, formed long after the earliest, or pristine, state formations of the Near East. These pristine state formations were city-states. Thus, the city-state was not a Greek innovation. The last decades have seen a wealth of new research on the polis and city-states, not least the publications of the Copenhagen Polis Centre and their comparative study of city-state cultures (Hansen 2000). Yet, for all their merit, the methodological individualism of the separate investigations overshadows the comparative approach, and the result is more a catalogue of city-state cultures than a comparative study.

There is sufficient evidence to argue that the Greek polis was not formed in a vacuum. Were there any outside influences that contributed to the development of the polis? The structures of some Ancient Near Eastern city-states share traits with the structure of the polis. Therefore, a role for Ancient Near Eastern city-states in the development of Greek political culture should not be ruled out. Diffusion is an approach that has largely fallen out of favor with scholars today, and for good reasons. Most cultural traits do not simply diffuse from a place of origin. The involvement of human actors who negotiate the terms under which foreign customs and traditions are received must be taken into consideration. A useful approach to the cross-influences of cultures in the ancient world is the concept of hybridization, a term coined by Peter van Dommelen (1997). It describes a process where foreign and indigenous cultural traits influence each other and create new traditions. As will be argued in this paper, the political changes in Greece were part of international developments in the Mediterranean and beyond. The structural similarities between Greek and Ancient Near Eastern city-states have indeed been pointed out long ago. There has, however, long been a tendency to treat the Greeks as fundamentally different from any other culture of the ancient world.

16.3   Eastern and Western Assemblies

Athens, the most famous of ancient democracies, was not alone among the polities of the Ancient world in having a powerful assembly in its political structure. Such collective organizations of power are typical of a corporate strategy of power that

was arguably at work in polities in Greece as well as in the Ancient Near East. There is a tendency, however, to contrast the primitive and tribal background of Ancient Near Eastern assemblies with the modernity and humanism of Greek assemblies. Collective forms of local self-rule in Mesopotamia are interpreted as dead-end survivors of antediluvian times, whereas Athenian democracy is lauded as the beginning of Western civilization.

The division into two fundamentally different interpretations of collective power in ancient societies goes back to the essays of Thorkild Jacobsen (1943) and Geoffrey Evans (1958) on "primitive democracy" in Mesopotamia. They both investigated the role of assemblies in Ancient Near Eastern states, and their articles were seminal in spreading an awareness of the existence of power outside the confines of the palace in Ancient Near Eastern societies. Jacobsen, Evans and later writers have been sure, however, that any role played by assemblies was a remnant from the times of tribal society, when the elders and the assembly held power before the rise of kings.

The rise of kingship out of the basis of an egalitarian society is familiar. It is the neo-evolutionary explanation of the development of politics: from an egalitarian band evolves the chiefdom, and from the chiefdom evolves the Early State. The Early State model allows little room for collective organs of decision making and an integration of these institutions into the political structure. Since the important divisions in society are horizontal, the ruler and his administration are separated from the general population.

As will be seen, councils and assemblies of Near Eastern city-states were urban in nature, and have no real link to tribal or nomadic society. Although there are similarities between tribal assemblies and city-assemblies, the urban tradition should be regarded as a separate development. It is difficult to explain why an urban assembly should be in any way a remnant of the past, since tribal groups continue to exist throughout Near Eastern history. It is equally difficult to explain why such assemblies should be gathered in a city, unless a mass migration of tribal people into the city can be proven. Quite the contrary, assemblies in the Ancient Near East are attached to urban features.

In the Ancient Near Eastern city-states, the city-gates were a place of business as well as judgement. *Bābtum* in Akkadian is known as a kind of district authority where the elders judged in cases concerning the locals. This is known from the *Codex Hammurapi* (126, 142 and 251) and contemporary documents of the Old Babylonian period (*VS* VII 16, *VS* VII 56). In Late Bronze Age Ugarit, there was a judiciary authority seated in a gate: the treaty *RS* 18.115 was made by king Initešub between Karkemiš and Ugarit, and concerns murder of merchants from either city. If the sons of Karkemiš do not succeed in apprehending the murderers of a merchant of Ugarit, the sons of Ugarit together with their men of the

gate (*mārū* ^{*māt āl*}*Ugarit qadu amīlī ša bābišunu*) are to go to Karkemiš where they are to swear to the loss of their brothers' goods and be reimbursed by the sons of that city.

The judiciary capacity of institutions at the gate is reflected in Ugaritic legend. In the legend of Aqhat, Aqhat's father Danel is some kind of ruler that judges at the gate (Smith 1946–1947). He resides in a palace (*hkl*) with a court (*hgr*) (*KTU* 1.19 IV 10). His duty is among other things to act as judge. He regularly sat at the opening of the gate (*b'ap šgr*) at the threshing floor (*bgrn*) and judged (*yšpt*) the cause of the widow and tried the case of the orphan (*KTU* 1.17 V 6–8; *KTU* 1.19 I 19–25).

A council of elders passing sentences in the city-gates (*baša'ar*) is found in the *Old Testament*, for example, the *Book of Ruth* where Boas goes to the elders to solve a problem of inheritance of land (*Ruth* 4.1–4). Though this is a rather late source (perhaps fifth–fourth century BCE), the institutions they describe are probably ancient. The function of the council of elders is to witness an agreement, and this is done in a public space, in the city-gates. There are many instances of courts being seated in the gates, which also served as the market place. In the *Old Testament*, appeals go out not to tread on the wretched in the city-gates (*Pr.* 22.22; *Amos* 5.7, 12–15), which is a warning against denying justice to the poor.

In the Greek polis, the assembly was also tied to certain physical features of the city. In Homer, there are references to councils and assemblies in an urban context. The Trojans are ruled by a king and a council of seven elders, who meet by the city-gates (*heiato dēmogerontes epi Skaiēisi pylēisi*; *Il.* 3.149). In Troy, both young and old participate at the assembly by the doors of Priamos (*Il.* 2.785). The similarity with the Ugaritic and Hebrew sources are obvious. The city-gates and palace gates were public places.

In Archaic Greece, the assembly is tied to life in the city. Alkaios in exile on Lesbos around 600 BCE complains to a friend that "I, poor wretch, live with the lot of a rustic, longing to hear the assembly being summoned, Agesilaidas, and the council" (Alkaios 130B). Throughout Greek history, the word polis referred to both the community of citizens and to the city in which they live. Alkaios is one of the earliest sources where the two terms are contrasted: "Cities are not stones or timbers or the craft of builders, but wherever there are men who know how to defend themselves, there are walls and cities" (Alkaios 426). There is no denying that the Archaic polis was regarded as a city by the Greeks, qualitatively different from the countryside, and provided with urban features such as walls of stone and timber.

It has been argued that the Greek polis is different from anything in the Ancient Near East because Greek poleis had an *agora*, an open space for public meetings, whereas Near Eastern cities lacked such spaces. According to R.J. van

der Spek, the Babylonian city was different from the polis to the extent that even in the Hellenistic period, Greeks in Babylon and other Near Eastern cities had their own separate communities, and no *agora* was established. The temple remained the focus of the city-life of the indigenous people (Spek 1987, 74). The gates of Near Eastern city-states and Troy can be argued to fill the function of the *agora*, and thus to obviate the importance of this objection to similarities between Greek and Near Eastern city-states. It is sometimes emphasized by scholars of Greek history that the polis was not a city, but a community, a way of thinking in terms of a society that was a collective of equals. However, as obvious from Alkaios, the Greeks were well aware that the polis was a city.

The two different assessments of collective means of decision making in Near Eastern and Greek traditions rest on two assumptions. The first is that of an Early State in Mesopotamia with no place for corporative power strategies; thus, assemblies and councils can only be explained as primitive and tribal. The second is that of a non-urban Greek polis where the corporate power strategy is not tied to a specific urban locality; thus, democracy is a way of thinking, and not an application of practical solutions to problems of life in the city-state. Both these assumptions tend to obscure any attempt at comparison between the city-state cultures of Greece with those of the Near East.

16.4   The Late Bronze Age Background

The Greek polis had structural parallels in city-states of the Ancient Near East, but the background for its culture must also be sought in the Greek past. Greek society in the Iron Age must be studied with the Late Bronze Age as a background. The first complex societies in Greece that may be termed city-states are the so called palatial societies of Crete and the Greek mainland, the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations. The Mycenaean palaces of the mid-second millennium BCE were all destroyed around 1200 BCE, the end of the Late Bronze Age. A Dark Age followed the collapse, of which little can be said, except that there took place an overall decline of civilization in Greece. There was a continuation in language and religion, however. Ian Morris points out that the "second-generation" of Greeks after the collapse of the "first-generation" society "had only distorted memories of the first, but these notions of a lost heroic age were central to second-generation culture" (I. Morris 2003, 2). Certain features, especially local institutions of power, probably survived the Dark Age.

The Late Bronze Age society of Greece was an agro-literary society on the margins of a larger civilization of societies that had its origins in Mesopotamia. The palace and the temple were the administrative and political centers of these polities. Surrounding the palaces and temples were urban centers, which makes

it possible to characterize these polities as city-states. In the Late Bronze Age, the palace was the most important institution in several of these city-states. The Mycenaean palaces were in contact with the Ancient Near East, especially Syria and Egypt, but also Anatolia. They were known to the Hittites as Ahhiyawa, and one Ahhiyawa king was included as peer of the most powerful of Late Bronze Age monarchs (Niemeier 2002, 297).

An influential model for Ancient Near Eastern city-states of the Late Bronze Age is that of a two-sector economy. Michael Heltzer has popularized the image of a powerful palace at the top of society and a large mass of free peasants outside the palace sector that were sometimes enlisted for work for the palace (Heltzer 1988). Those directly employed by the palace as professionals were in a sense not free, because they did not own the means of production they used, but were given these by the palace. On the other hand, peasants were poor and illiterate, and gave up much of their produce to the palace. The peasants owned land, some of which was held in communal plots. Towards the end of the Late Bronze Age, the professionals or dependents of the palace were increasingly given land as property by the king. According to Mario Liverani, the royal dependents became feudal lords in a sense, with their own base of power. This process ushered in the collapse of the palaces (Liverani 1975, 161). At the end of the Late Bronze Age, several palaces collapsed almost simultaneously, which may indeed indicate a common structural weakness or systems crisis. However, not all scholars agree to a two-sector model.

The two-sector model has been attacked recently and from two sides. One line of criticism argues that the model is nothing but a variety of the Marxist term Asiatic despotism. David Schloen offers instead a model based on Weber's ideal types; to describe the Ancient Near Eastern state as a patrimonial household (Schloen 2001, 50–53, 221–254). A different line of criticism emphasizes the role played by collective institutions of governance among the peasants over the absolute power of kings, as in the recent work of Daniel E. Fleming on the city Mari in the Old Babylonian period (Fleming 2004, 174–180).

It may be argued that both the two-sector economy and the patrimonial household model are varieties of the Early State model that emphasize the divide between rulers and ruled. Elizabeth C. Stone argues for the use of the term "consensual society" in analyzing ancient polities, and points out that the Greek polis and the Mesopotamian city-states are hardly "compatible with models used by anthropologists to describe state society that stress coercion as the primary source of social cohesion" (Stone 1997, 15). This view is supported by the approach of Fleming that stresses the duality of the corporate and the elitist strategy for power in ancient polities (Fleming 2004, 177–179). The corporate strategy of the citizens of ancient polities, such as the collective organization of

judicial assemblies, can be interpreted as in opposition to the elite strategy of the rulers, such as privileged access to the gods. Both strategies determine what life was like in the societies under question. What can be learned about the social structure of the Mycenaean polities?

The only literary sources to Mycenaean society are the Linear B tablets. These are lists of rations and supplies left behind by scribes, and provide a glimpse into a brief period in LH IIIB when these clay documents where accidentally preserved in fires of destruction. Cynthia Shelmerdine emphasizes that in Mycenae "the real power of the king and his administrators was to harness the diverse resources of a Mycenaean state, both human and material, to the distinct advantage of themselves" (Shelmerdine 2006, 84). The rise of palaces on the Greek mainland can be viewed as a result of a process where an elite managed to allocate important resources to itself, building up a basis of power through redistribution. This led to a centralization and concentration of power; although Ian Morris points out that the palace did not control the whole society, since there are references to property outside palatial control (I. Morris 2003, 4). Nevertheless, a striking feature of the Linear B tablets is the emphasis on hierarchy.

The *wa-na-ka* or *wanax*, regularly translated king or ruler, was the highest authority in the Mycenaean states. There were also local leaders. Carol G. Thomas points out that central authority was not absolute, and local leaders possessed impressive holdings (Thomas 1995, 351–352). One kind of local leader was the *qa-si-re-u* or *basileus*. They were responsible for the distribution of bronze to local smiths. Pierre Carlier suggests they may have been leaders of a local *gerousia*, or council of elders (Carlier 1995, 362–363). Life in the village communities is largely unknown from the Linear B sources. Alexander Uchitel points out the existence of two terms, *da-mo* and *do-e-ro*, in Linear B and suggests that "the category of population called *da-mo* largely remains outside the control of the central authority of Pylos" (Uchitel 1985, 28). Thus, the impression of absolute hierarchy in the Linear B tablets may be a result of the nature of the sources, being administrative texts from the palace.

Mycenaean society has been interpreted as polarized into a central palace and an independent rural population. Scholars such as Cynthia Shelmerdine emphasizes the exploitative nature of the palaces (Shelmerdine 2006). This is recognizable as a variety of the two-sector model for Ancient Near Eastern societies. However, an analysis of society that only focuses on patterns of domination and subordination ignores other aspects of social integration in the polity. How different was the palace from the polis? The exact meaning of Mycenaean political terms is difficult to assess. It is beyond doubt that some of these terms survived into the language of polis society. In the Homeric epics, and later Greek language, *basileus* is the most common word for king. *Anax* is used in the sense of lord or

master. The *da-mo* or *damos* is recognizable in *demos*, the people. A continuity of some decentralized Mycenaean social institutions into the Dark Age is likely. However, it is not possible to reconstruct Mycenaean society from later Greek usage of terms found in Linear B. The tablets simply give too little information, because they are administrative lists, and not political treatises.

There is more information available for other Late Bronze Age polities. For Ugarit, Alalah and Byblos in Syria and Lebanon textual evidence give the impression of a pyramidal hierarchy with the king in his palace at the top of society. However, the villagers are organized in communities that govern themselves, and collective judiciary institutions played an important role (Heltzer 1976, 77–79). In the Late Bronze Age in Syria, community self rule existed alongside conceptions of power that were focused on absolute and godlike control of society on part of the king. Certain city-state communities actually killed their king, or drove him into exile. Hanoch Reviv points out that in the city of Byblos in the Late Bronze Age the inhabitants discussed political issues in assembly meetings (Reviv 1969, 284). Another example of a city-state with a restricted form of kingship is the city of Emar, where the king played no important role in ritual, whereas the council of elders was powerful (Fleming 1992). These examples show that the corporate strategy of power could influence the society of Ancient Near Eastern city-states. It is not possible to tell whether this held true for the Mycenaean palaces as well. However, the structural similarities between the societies of Ugarit and Mycenae or Pylos are obvious.

Of course, the Aegeans did not sit on the beach and wait for sailors from Ugarit to bring them the gospel of urbanism. Yet, the participation of the Aegean palaces in a wider cultural field that included Anatolia, the Levant and Egypt is acknowledged by all scholars. Although the degree of Mycenaean direct diplomatic contacts with the Great powers of the Late Bronze Age is disputed, the connection is proven beyond doubt (Jasink 2005, 59–60). This could explain the similarities between Mycenaean polities and those of the Ancient Near East. The international world of the Late Bronze Age collapsed around 1200 BCE, and although there was a continuity of life in some places, notably the Levantine city-states, the world of the Iron Age was decidedly different. It was a more regional world, more closed in on itself than in the preceding period.

In the Iron Age, after the fall of the palaces, the polis developed in Greece. The palaces did not survive the collapse, but the memory of important places did. In the eighth century, sanctuaries were established at Mycenaean sites and elements of Mycenaean architecture were copied in the Archaic age. The epics of Homer and Hesiod give us the first written texts in Greek after the Dark Age. Epic society can be interpreted as the survival of village communities in the aftermath of the destruction of the Mycenaean palaces. However, it also represents

something new. It has many traits in common with the polis. Although it clearly was an aristocratic society, the councils surrounding leaders had much influence in politics. The people were also included in the meetings of the assembly. In the *Iliad*, the inhabitants of Troy are regularly being summoned to assemblies, and communal institutions of power existed alongside kingship. The development of the polis may be interpreted as the domination of the corporate strategy for power over the elitist strategy of the kings. The polis developed into a citizen state. However, this development did not happen in a vacuum.

16.5   The Levantine City-States and the Polis

Around 1200, the complex societies of the Eastern Mediterranean were struck by catastrophe. Ugarit and other important cities were burnt and abandoned. In Greece, the Mycenaean palaces were destroyed and never rebuilt. All documentation stopped, and Linear B was forgotten. Little can be said with certainty about the history of Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean from 1200 to 800 BCE, and so, it is called a Dark Age. It was not, however, completely dark. There was a continuity of life at some sites, notably the Phoenician city-states in the Levant. Also, there was some exchange between Greece and the Near East, as evident from the excavations at Lefkandi on Euboea (Lemos 2003, 212–217). The Levantines are likely to have provided the first outside impulses to the development of Greek culture in the Iron Age, in the period that the polis emerged.

The written sources to the Levant are few for the Early Iron Age. One source that is often cited is the tenth century BCE story of the Egyptian traveller Wen-Amun. The other sources are later. The Neo-Assyrian annals are an important source to the history of the Levant, but they begin in the eighth century. Homer mentions the Phoenician cities and their inhabitants. Phoenician sources are mainly short inscriptions. Some Levantine cities were survivors of the catastrophe of 1200 BCE. Thus, information on the Levantine city-states in the Iron Age may be inferred from the Amarna letters, the correspondence of Pharaoh Amenophis IV, better known as Akhenaten, with his colleague kings and his vassals in Syria in the Late Bronze Age (Moran 1992, xxxi–xxxiii). Among the surviving Levantine cities that later became a famous Phoenician city was Byblos, whose ruler, Rib-Hadda, is well known from the Amarna letters.

From the letters of the Syrian vassal king Rib-Hadda to Akhenaten, it is known that Byblos was ruled by a king in the Late Bronze Age (*EA* 102–138 in Moran 1992). The inhabitants of his city, however, made political decisions on their own and were organized as a council of elders and an assembly (*EA* 102–138 Moran 1992).

In the Egyptian text The Journey of *Wen-Amon to Phoenicia* (Pritchard 1969, 25–29), the Egyptian emissary Wen-Amun tells of negotiations with Zeker-Ba'al, the king of Byblos, and of decisions taken by popular assemblies. The text is dated to the early eleventh century.

In a treaty between the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE) and Ba'al I, king of Tyre, the elders of Tyre are mentioned as a council giving advice, and the ships of the people of Tyre are mentioned together with the ships of the king (Pritchard 1969, 533–534).

The structure of power in Byblos that is met in the story of Wen-Amun or the Assyrian treaty is not much different from that of the Amarna letters. Evidently, parts of the social and political structure of the Levantine city-states survived the destruction at the end of the Late Bronze Age. Together, the texts give an impression of the political organization of the Levantine city-states that is arguably not dissimilar to the Greek polis. What is interesting here is that there is a survival of polities on the Levantine coast with a corporate strategy of power through the Dark Ages to the Archaic Greek period. Just like the Mycenaeans had been involved in Syria, so too were the Greeks of the Archaic period no strangers to the Levant. The Levantines or Phoenicians are frequently mentioned in the Homeric epics.

The Phoenicians act as traffickers and travellers in the Homeric eighth century. They are encountered a couple of times by Odysseus, and have a wide-ranging sphere of action. Odysseus claims to have come to Ithaca from Crete as a passenger on board a Sidonian ship (*Od.*13.271–286). Another time, he was taken from Egypt to Phoenicia and entertained as a guest in the house of a rich merchant. After a while, the Phoenician insisted he needed assistance on a journey to Libya, whereas he actually intended to sell Odysseus into slavery. But off Crete they suffered shipwreck and Odysseus drifted to Thesprotia (*Od.*14.280–315). Phoenician traders sold Eumaios, the swineherd of Odysseus' father Laertes, as a slave. He was actually a prince, but was kidnapped by a runaway serving-woman who fled with some visiting Phoenicians (*Od.*15.414–483). A rather different view of the Phoenicians is given when Telemachos, the son of Odysseus, and his companions visit Menelaos in Sparta. Menelaos shows them the treasures he gathered on his extensive travels back from Troy (*Od.*4.71–91). He gives a golden-rimmed silver bowl he had received from the hospitable Sidonian king Phaidimos to Telemachos as a parting gift (*Od.*4.611–619; 15.111–119). Concerning trade, Odysseus is insulted by Euryalos the Phaiakaean for being a trader, plying the seas on the lookout for gain (*Od.*8.159–164). The type of the greedy trader is contrasted with the honorable sportsman, and is incompatible with an elite lifestyle. The Homeric view of the Phoenicians is split; they are both dis-

honest merchants and members of a wealthy elite, with whom the Greeks have ties of friendship.

The negative view of the Phoenicians soon became the predominant one, and after the Persian wars, the Phoenicians were thrown in with the other cowardly Asians. Thukydides claims that Greek colonists supplanted Phoenicians who had settled on Sicily. Phoenicians had settled along the coast on promontories and islets for trade with the indigenous population, but withdrew to a limited number of sites after the arrival in force of Greeks from across the sea (*Thuc.* 6.2).

The negative Greek view of the Phoenicians belies the Near Eastern background for much of Greek culture. The Archaic period saw the adaption of the Phoenician alphabet to the writing of Greek. Also, the orientalizing style in Greek art was much indebted to Near Eastern motives. Contacts between Greeks and Near Eastern peoples led to a process of hybridization, of cultural change through the adoption and adaption of foreign elements into a new whole. New technologies such as alphabetic writing influenced city life. Temple decorations and new motives in the arts also re-formed the urban environment in Greece, under the influence of the city cultures of the Near East. Contacts between Greeks, Near Eastern merchants and the city-states of the Levant in the Archaic age thus influenced the development of the polis.

Arguably, a corporate strategy of power was prevalent in Levantine city-states. The Phoenicians did not tell the Greeks to organize themselves with a city-assembly, a council and a leader that answered to the community of citizens. However, the Greeks visited and spent time in the Levantine city-states in a period when there was little or no urbanization in Greece. Just as the Greeks were no doubt impressed by these cities, their political organization probably did not go unnoticed.

The Phoenician city-states had kings and collective institutions of decision making. Likewise, some Greek poleis had kings or tyrants, as well as collective institutions of decision making. The elitist strategy of the rulers was confronted by the corporative strategy of the citizens. The dominance of a corporative strategy for power that characterized the Greek polis was not unique to Greek political thinking; it was a possibility in polities of the Ancient Near East. The similarities between Greek and Ancient Near Eastern political traditions have been pointed out long ago. Should these similarities be regarded as structural similarities, or is it possible to establish a connection between these city-state traditions?

16.6   The Problem of Diffusion

The nature of Greek interaction with the Ancient Near East has been much debated. Walter Burkert (1992) coined the process the Orientalizing revolution, and

placed most of the action in the Archaic period. Itinerant craftsmen are the main suspects in bringing new impulses to the Greeks. Some place the Near Eastern influences on Greek culture earlier. Martin Bernal (1991) has tried to breathe life into Greek myths about Egyptian origins of Greek culture in the Bronze Age and the Iron Age. Sarah P. Morris (1992) also sees an early start to the process of Near Eastern and Greek interaction, and includes the whole Mediterranean in a broad vista of cross-cultural influences, especially through seafaring. The dynamics of diffusion are difficult to pinpoint. David Small (1997) argues for an important role for the elite in cross-cultural contacts and innovations. Aristocratic houses played a multiregional role in the poleis, and the lack of integration of the economy into politics meant that trade and expeditions was mostly in the hands of the wealthy elite. Especially sanctuaries played a role in the network of contacts within the elite. Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier (2001) also argues for the aristocracy as transmitters of intellectual issues and political ideas in the period in which the Greek polis and its institutions were shaped and refined, a view shared by Kurt Raaflaub (2004).

No doubt the elite were not alone on their travels. Settlement abroad in the period of Greek colonization from the eighth to the sixth century BCE brought heterogeneous groups of Greek settlers into contacts with other cultures. The culture of the indigenous population of Sicily, as analyzed by Peter van Dommelen, is an example of hybridization (Dommelen 1997). The Greek colonists may have been influenced by similar experiences, not only in encounters with the indigenous population, but also in their meetings with traders like the Phoenicians, who established stations abroad.

From the end of the Archaic to the Classical period, there is a contrast between Herodotos and the story of the Persians discussing politics, and the natural slavishness of Asians in Aristotle. The development of the Archaic Greek city-state was influenced by Near Eastern contacts, whereas the Greeks in the Classical period saw a need to distance themselves from the East. On the other hand, Spartan and Athenian politics in the fifth century were very much influenced by Persian gold. The Greeks were more involved with, and indeed more similar to, the Persians than they would have liked to admit. The Melian dialogue in Thukydides reveals that Athens herself became the monster from which she sought to protect the Greek world, as the Athenians insist that might makes right, and empire demands further conquest (5.85–113). Greek identity in the fifth century BCE was defined in opposition to the Persians and the Ancient Near East. Opposition was born from confrontation. The Persians attacked the Greeks in 490 and 479 BCE in what were to them insignificant border skirmishes, whereas Marathon, Salamis and Plataea became the proudest moments in Greek history. The development of anti-oriental sentiments may also be read as a backlash from the favourable view

of the East that apparently was prevalent in the seventh century. The Classical age of Greece was a period where the Greeks distanced themselves from their neighbors.

16.7   Conclusion

The polis has several origins. There is a continuity of Greek culture from Mycenaean times to the Archaic period, although much of what happened in the Dark Age is unknown. The Late Bronze Age world of the Ahhiyawa, peers of the Great kings of the Near East, disappeared around 1200 BCE. The connection to the East Aegean and the Levant was soon re-established. The polis took form in Greece in the course of the Archaic period, that was characterized by an intensification of contacts between the Near East and Greece.

The indigenous Greek contribution to the polis should of course not be underestimated. However, there are two things that point to Near Eastern influences on the development of the polis, and that is the secondary character of Greek urbanism, and the circumstantial evidence of the so orientalizing elements in Archaic Greek culture. The Greek polis was a kind of city-state with thousands of years of predecessors in the Ancient Near East. Life in the polis had an urban character, where leisure time and political participation were signs of status. Public places, buildings and monuments united the community. Several early poleis where ruled by tyrants, but the assembly of the people was also important. Thus, a struggle between corporate and elitist strategies of power can be seen in the polis, between people's power and exclusive leadership.

The developments of the Archaic Greek world were in part the results of Greek contacts with Near Eastern peoples, of which the Phoenicians are the prime example. The adaption of the Phoenician alphabet by Greeks in the eighth century and the profound influence of Near Eastern motifs in Greek arts from the seventh century show the degree to which the societies of the early poleis were part of a larger cultural field. This is not least a result of the Greek colonization movements in the Archaic period, but also of the expansion of the Neo-Assyrian empire and the migration and trading ventures of peoples in Syria and the Levant. Elite networks of exchange, trade and colonization urged the re-establishment of urban centers in Greece. The polis must be explained within the framework of a larger Mediterranean environment both spatially, chronologically and culturally.

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