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# The Significance of the Word Polis in the Civilization of Ancient Greece

The word polis comes from the Ancient Greek word ????? or pólis meaning “city-state” or “fortified town.” It is most commonly used to refer to city-states in ancient Greece such as Classical Athens, though it can also mean a body of citizens. These poleis were the way that ancient Greek communities were ordinarily structured. The Dark Ages brought about the blossoming of the first poleis in Greece shortly following the fall of the Mycenaean civilization. Some of the most historically significant were Sparta, Athens, and Syracuse. Each polis was comprised of an urban center, a sacred center which was usually fortified, and were built either on a harbour or a raised area such as an acropolis.

A polis typically only consisted of one city and were small in size. Each one was independent from the others in every way including politically, legally, and religiously. Therefore, each polis functioned like a state and could be involved in international affairs and relationships both with non-Greek states, and with other poleis. The polis was the central political unit of Ancient Greece, so-much so that Aristotle himself once said that it is a biological characteristic of human beings to live in a polis, organized with its own rules, laws, and traditions. Each one signified identity as a community and a sense of pan-hellenism which would impact civilizations for centuries to come.

The polis in the civilization of ancient Greece signified a sense of identity as a community through unique communal spaces, polis-specific events, and boundary markers. Each polis contained many diverse and unique groups that made up about 90% of the population, apart from the male citizens. In order for the polis to function as a united and cohesive community, they had to create a distinct social identity. One way they did this was through public spaces where people could mix and socialize. Social spaces that were accessible to people of all levels were imperative to daily life.

The agora, literally meaning “gathering place” or “assembly,” is one example of central public spaces in ancient Greek city-states. It was known as the center of life in the city, athletically, spiritually, politically, and artistically. It served as a marketplace for merchants, and even as a gathering place to report for military duty. Furthermore, religious celebrations and festivals on certain days of the year were unique and specific to each polis. They reinforced the distinctiveness of each location, often through mythical stories of founders and patron deities of the area, instilling in its inhabitants a sense of pride and identity. Boundary markers like distinctive coins such as the Athenian owl coin, polis-specific goods such as Corinthian pottery,

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and features of civic memory such as public statues of gods or athletic champions, were and continue to be essential to the strong sense of identity of each polis.

Though poleis were unique both culturally and politically, there was simultaneously a strong panhellenic connection between them due to common features that made for political alliances, wars against non-Greek enemies, and panhellenic festivals. As a result, a polis itself signifies panhellenism, the idea that what Greeks have in common distinguishing them from “barbarians,” is more important than their differences. There was actually such a strong connection between poleis that they often united together into leagues for the benefit of mutual protection. Some of the most famous occurrences of this are the Peloponnesian league and the Delian league. Furthermore, there were a series of wars fought between Greeks and non-Greeks. Among the most famous were the Greco-Persian Wars, a series of conflicts between Greek city-states and the Achaemenid Empire in the 5th century BCE.

Lastly, panhellenic festivals were a way for members of a polis to come together and compete to honor the Gods that they worshipped. The panhellenic games were a series of four sports festivals held in ancient Greece; the Olympic Games, the Pythian Games, the Nemean Games, and the Isthmian Games. The Olympic Games were arguably the most well-known of the four. They were hosted at Olympia every four years and allowed poleis to compete against each other and commemorate their success by erecting statues and monuments.

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