



Ancient Utopias: imaginary cities in Greek political thought

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Imaginary Cities



The idea of the *politeia*

- The soul (*psyche*) of the *polis* is nothing other than its *politeia*, since it has as much power (*dunamis*) over it as the rational mind (*phronesis*) does over the body.
- ἔστι γὰρ ψυχὴ πόλεως οὐδὲν ἕτερον ἢ πολιτεία, τοσαύτην ἔχουσα δύναμιν ὅσην περ ἐν σώματι φρόνησις.

Isocrates, *Areopagiticus* 14

- It is evident that the **city** belongs to the class of things that exist by nature, and that man is by nature a **political** animal.
- ἐκ τούτων οὖν φανερόν ὅτι τῶν φύσει ἡ πόλις ἐστί, καὶ ὅτι ὁ ἄνθρωπος φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῶον

Aristotle *Politics* 1.2.1253a1-3

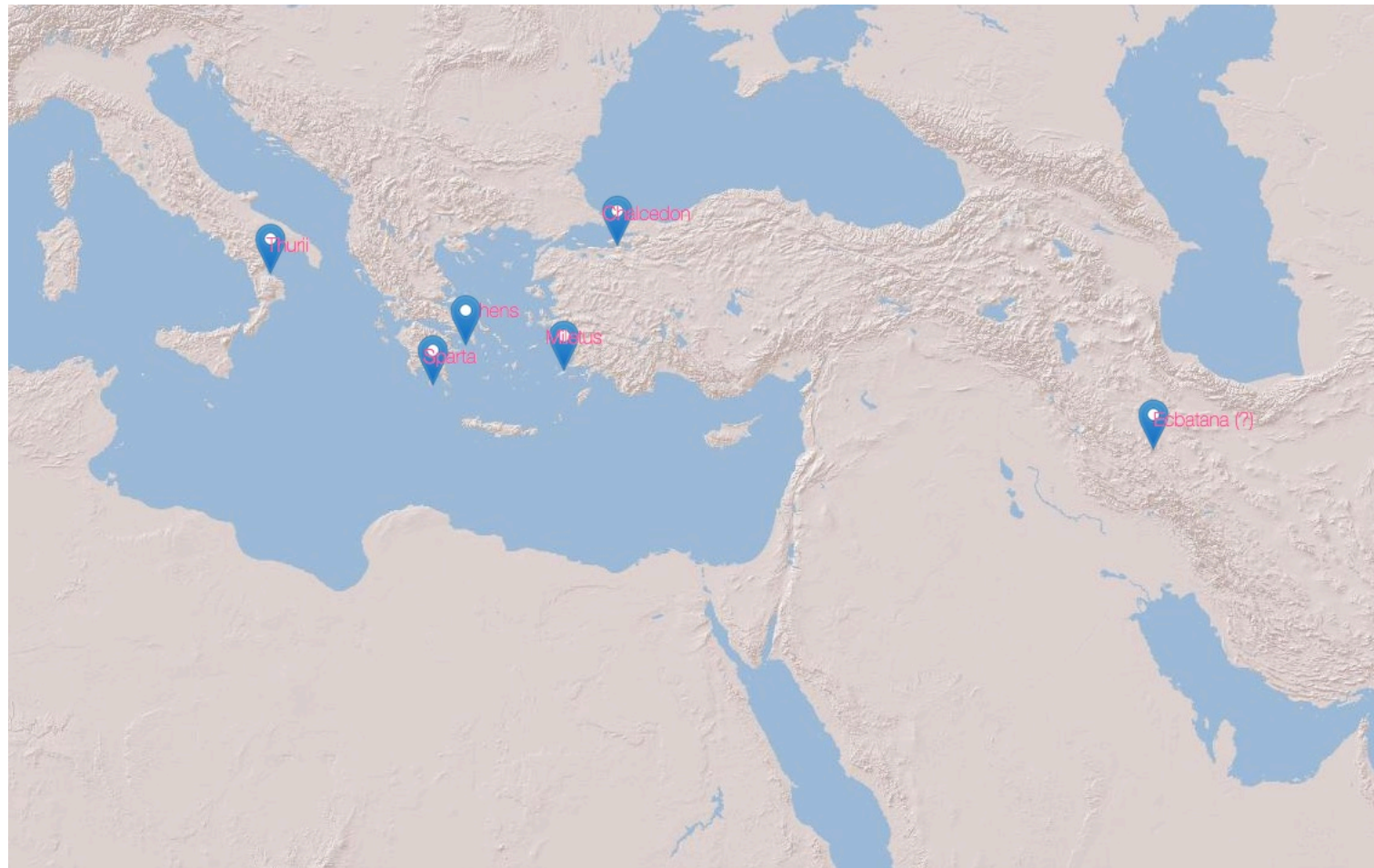
Imaginary cities in the ancient Greek world

- Dramatic cities
 - Cloud-Cuckoo Land, Aristophanes *Birds*
 - Thebes, Sophocles *Antigone*, Euripides *Suppliant Women*
 - Argos, Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*
- Philosophical cities
 - Kallipolis, Plato *Republic*
 - Magnesia, Plato *Laws*
 - Atlantis, Plato *Timaeus/Critias*
- Practical cities
 - Unnamed proposed city, Hippodamus of Miletus
 - Aristotle, *Politics* books 7 and 8
- Re-imagined cities and places:
 - Ecbatana (under Deioces), Herodotus *Histories*
 - Sparta (under Lycurgus), Xenophon *Constitution of the Spartans*
 - Persia (under Cambyses and Cyrus), Xenophon *Cyropaedia*
 - Egypt (under Busiris), Isocrates *Busiris*

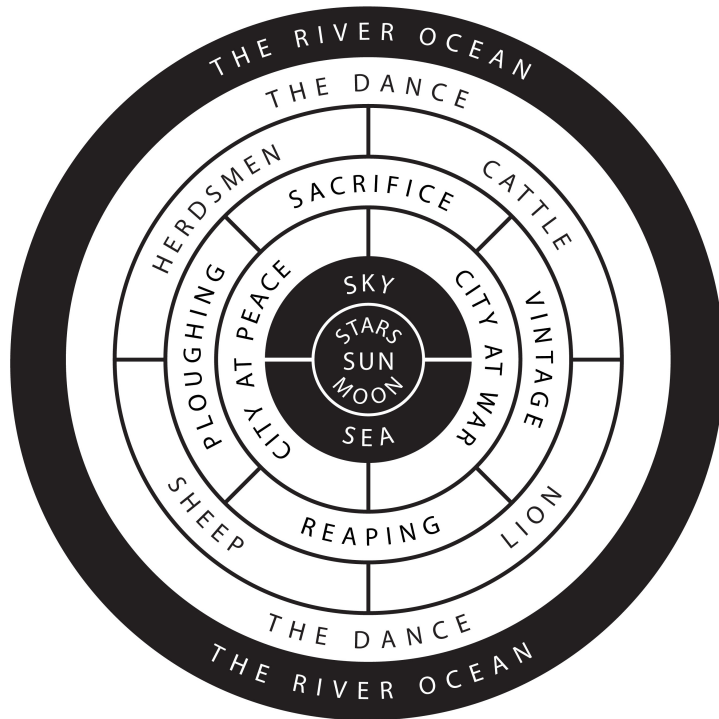


Attic black-figure chous, c. 500-490 BCE, British Museum, London

Locations



Imaginary cities in the *Iliad's* Shield of Achilles



First of all he forged a shield that was huge and heavy...
He made the earth upon it, and the sky, and the sea's
water,
and the tireless sun, and the moon waxing into her
fullness...

On it he wrought in all their beauty two cities of mortal
men. And there were marriages in one, and festivals.
They were leading the brides along the city from their
maiden chambers

under the flaring of torches, and the loud bride song was
arising...

But around the other city were lying two forces of armed
men

shining in their war gear. For one side counsel was divided
Whether to storm or sack...

Homer *Iliad* 18.478-607, translation Lattimore.

kosmos and *polis*
ὁ κόσμος ἡ πόλις

Imaginary cities in Homer's *Odyssey*



Claude Lorrain, *Departure of Odysseus from the Land of the Phaeacians*, 1646, Louvre, Paris

Plato's Athenian Stranger on the Cyclopes

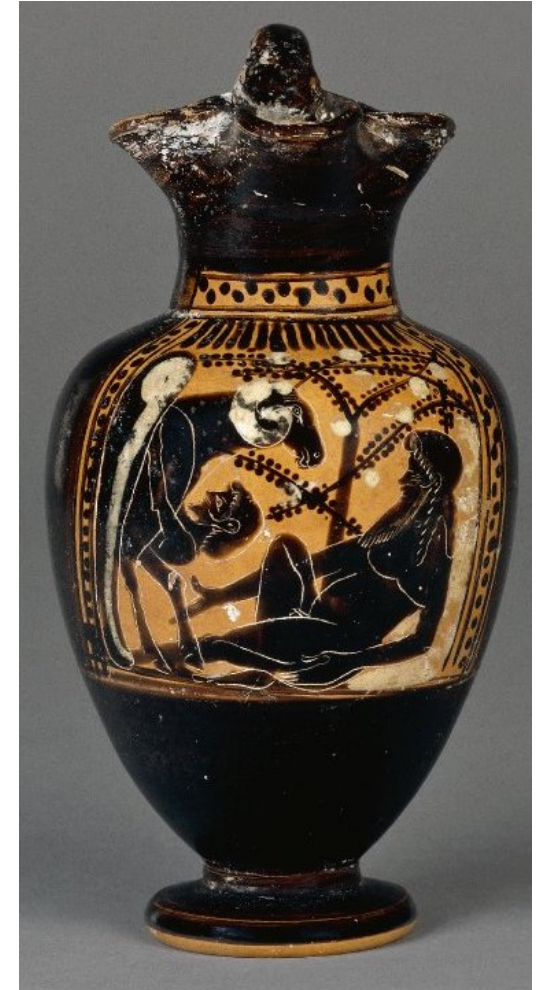
I think I'm right in saying that the name everybody gives the political system (*politeia*) of those times is autocracy, which is still to be found to this day in many parts of Greece and among barbarians.

It is what Homer is talking about, I imagine, when he describes the households of the Cyclopes. He says of them:

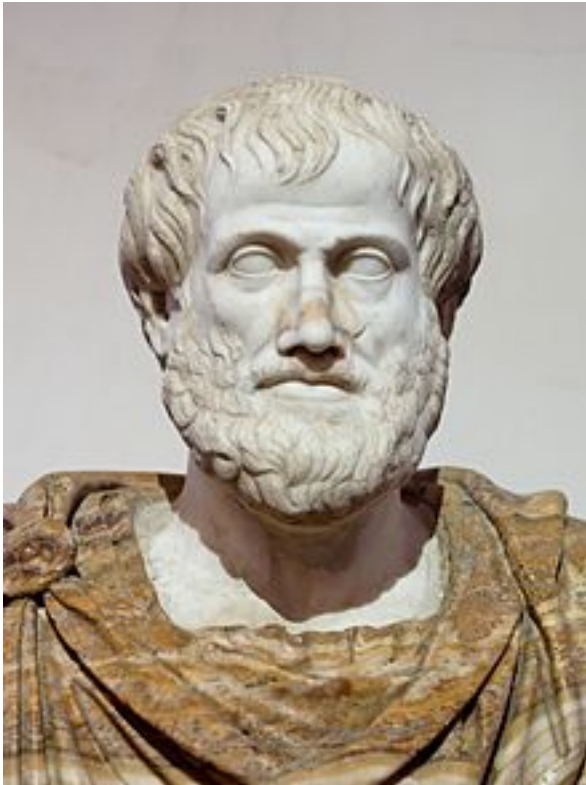
They hold no meetings to deliberate
Obey no law. In hollow caves they dwell,
High in the mountain peaks, and each provides
Himself his own law for his wives and children
And cares not for his fellows.

Plato *Laws* 3.680bc/ Homer *Odyssey* 9.112-115
(translation Griffith)

Black-figure oenochoe, c. 500-490 BCE, British Museum,
London



Aristotle on political arrangements



Our purpose is to consider what form of political community (*koinonia politike*) is best for people able so far as possible to live as they would wish. We must therefore consider not only constitutions (*politeiai*) actually in force in cities that are said to be well governed (*eunomeisthai*), but also other forms of constitution which people have proposed if these are thought to have merit.

Aristotle *Politics* 2.1.1260b27-32

Building a new city – Deioces the Mede and Ecbatana

Once firmly on the throne, Deioces compelled the Medes to build a single great city (*polisma*)... and the city now known as Ecbatana was built, a place of great size and strength fortified by concentric walls, these so planned that each successive circle was higher than the one below it...

The circles are seven in number, and the innermost contains the royal palace and treasury. The circuit of the outer wall is much the same in extent as at Athens...

Herodotus *Histories* 1.98, translation De Sélincourt/Marincola.



Pieter Brueghel the elder, *Tower of Babel*, 1563, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Colonies and foundations

SICILY: As for the Greeks, the first to arrive were Chalcidians who sailed over from Euboea with Thucles as their founder and settled in Naxos. They established there the temple to Apollo as 'First Leader' that now stands outside the city... The following year Syracuse was founded by Archias, one of the Heracleidae from Corinth, after he had first driven the Sicels out of the island on which the inner city stands...

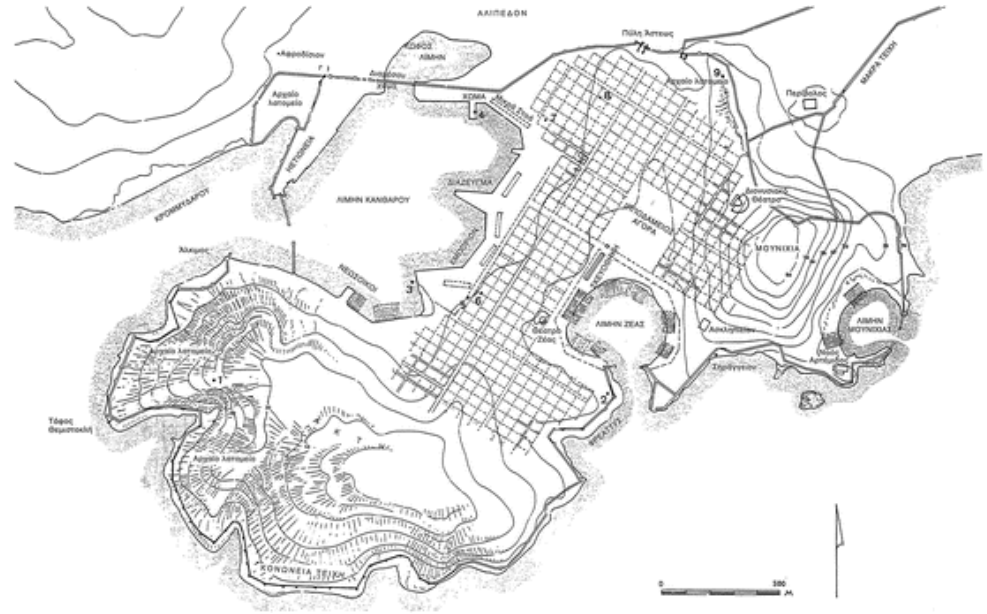
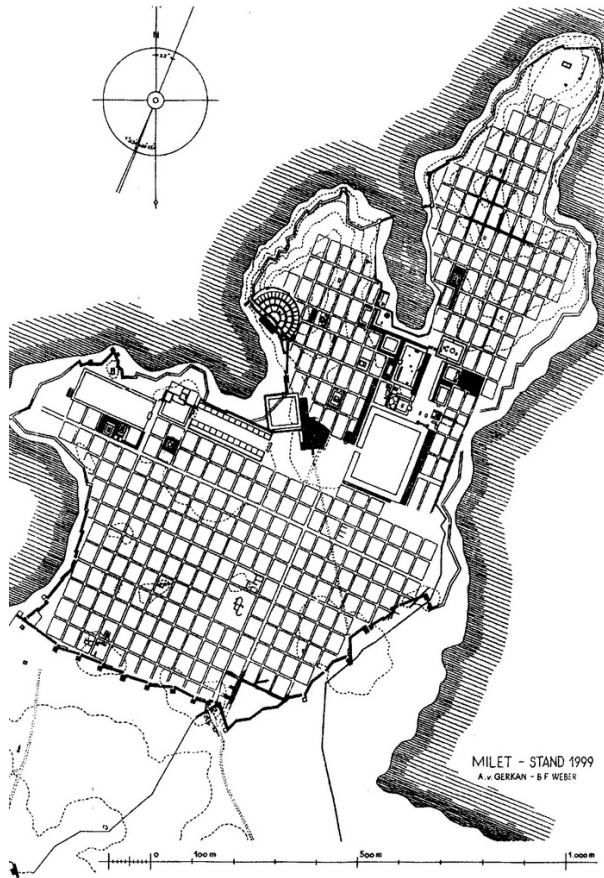
Thucydides 6.3.1-2, translation Mynott.

THURII: When Lysimachides was archon in Athens...the Sybarites who were fleeing from the danger threatening them in the civil strife made their home on the Trais River. Here they remained for a time, but later they were driven out by the Brettii and destroyed. And in Greece the Athenians, regaining control of Euboea and driving the Hestiaeans from their city, dispatched, under Pericles as commander, a colony of their own citizens to it and sending forth a thousand colonists they portioned out both the city and countryside in allotments.

Diodorus Siculus *Library of History* 12.22



Laying out the city: Hippodamus of Miletus and ancient town planning



Above: street plan of the Piraeus, Athens' port
Left: street plan of Miletus
Both 5th century BCE plans by Hippodamus of Miletus

Hippodamus' ideas

Hippodamus... was a man who invented the planning of towns in separate quarters, and laid out the Piraeus with regular roads.

The city he planned to construct was of 10,000 citizens, divided into three classes: the first of artisans, the second of farmers, and the third a defence force equipped with arms.

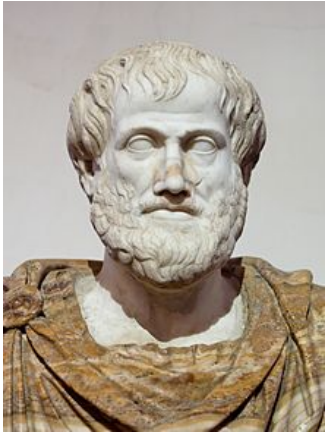
The territory was to be similarly divided into three parts. One was intended to be for religious purposes, the second for public use, and the third private property.

Aristotle *Politics* 2.8.1267b22-34

- Rewards for citizens with new ideas.
- Public support for education of war orphans
- Write-in rather than yes/no verdicts in the courts



Aristotle's verdict on Hippodamus



- Status of the three groups. Are the workers and farmers effectively the slaves of the guards?
- If the guards are farming their land, how are they differentiated from the farming class?
- Impossible to run trials if jurors have anything other than binary choice.
- Rewarding innovation is dangerous. Keep your laws the same unless they're ridiculously out-of-date.

Phaleas of Chalcedon – equality of property

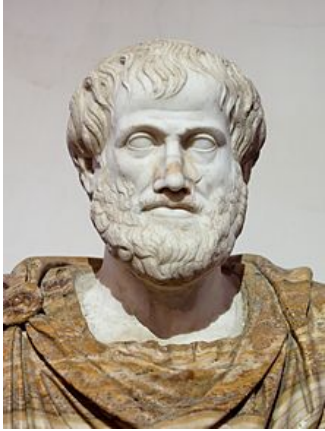
There are some who hold that the proper regulation of property is more important than any other object, because it is about this issue that factional conflicts (*staseis*) always arise.

Phaleas of Chalcedon was the first to suggest this, and he proposed that all the citizens should have equal amounts of property.

He thought that in new colonies this could be achieved without difficulty, at the moment of their foundation.

Aristotle *Politics* 2.7.1266a31-b8

Aristotle's verdict on Phaleas



- Difficult to maintain equality:
 - What about inheritance? Families have different numbers of children.
 - Are you going to have to restrict the sale and purchase of property?
- Need to equalize people's desire (*epithumia*) for property:
 - Phaleas achieves this through education
- Competition for political office as destructive as competition for property

Sparta as an imaginary city: education



It occurred to me one day that Sparta, though among the most thinly populated of states, was evidently the most powerful and most celebrated city in Greece; and I fell to wondering how this could have happened. But when I considered the institutions of the Spartans, I wondered no longer...

...Lycurgus, instead of leaving each father to appoint a slave to act as tutor, gave the duty of controlling the boys to a member of the class from which the highest offices are filled...

He gave this person authority to gather the boys together, to take charge of them and to punish them severely in case of misconduct.

He also assigned to him a staff of youths provided with whips to chastise them when necessary; and the result is that modesty and obedience are inseparable companions at Sparta.

Instead of softening the boys' feet with sandals he required them to harden their feet by going without shoes. He believed that... a youth who had accustomed himself to go barefoot would leap and jump and run more nimbly than a boy in sandals.

Xenophon, *Constitution of the Spartans*, 1.1, 2.2-3

Plato's *Republic* (*Politeia*)

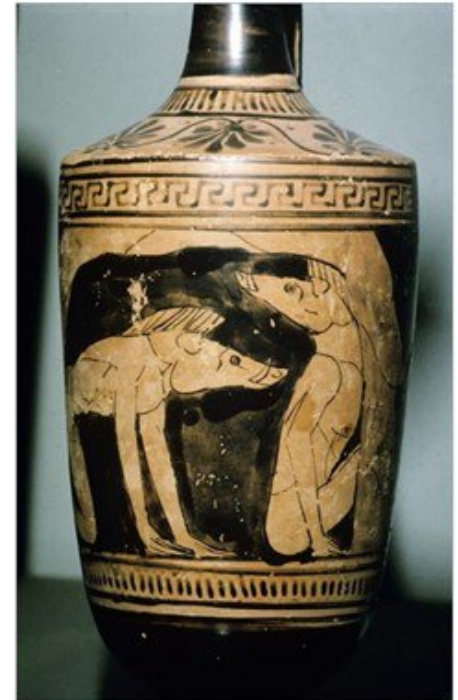


Contemporary versions of Plato's imagery:
Above: 'Lego Plato's Cave', (Godbricks blog).
Right: David Pope cartoon on the end of the
Obama presidency, *The Canberra Times*,
14 January 2017.



Plato's *Republic*: the *polis* develops

- Small and simple groups who provide each other with services such as shoe-making
- 'City of Pigs' not a realistic model of the complex world of the polis
- Socrates' next proposal incorporates more luxury and variety of consumer goods – but also raises question of war with other cities



City and soul: justice and harmony (1)

One who is just does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allow the various classes within him to meddle with each other. He regulates what is really his own and rules himself. He puts himself in order, is his own friend, and harmonises the three parts of himself... and from having been many things he becomes entirely one, moderate and harmonious.

Plato *Republic* 4.443de



City and soul: justice and harmony (2)

If a city is to achieve the height of good government, wives must be in common, children and all their education must be in common, their way of life, whether in peace or war, must be in common, and their kings must be those among them who have proved to be best, both in philosophy and in warfare...

none of them should acquire any of the things that the other rulers now do but that, as athletes of war and guardians, they should receive their yearly upkeep from the other citizens as a wage for their guardianship, and look after themselves and the rest of the city.

Plato *Republic* 8.543a1-c3

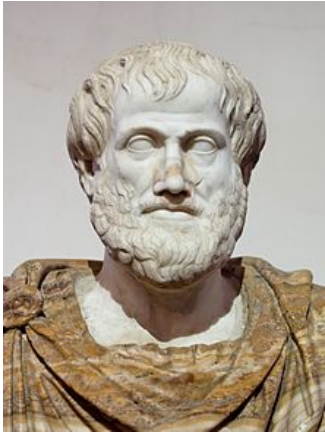
Communal life in Kallipolis

- Community of property (at least for the guardian class)
 - This includes wives and children.
- Compulsory education system for both men and women.
- Women can be guards and soldiers.
- ‘Myth of the metals’ (the ‘Noble Lie’) justifies the class system to all, as based on the innate abilities of individuals
- Possibility of transfer between classes
- Philosophers rule as if they were kings, with absolute authority,
 - based on their superior knowledge of the cosmos and lengthier education
 - Which has equipped them with knowledge of the Form of the Good



Women athletes at the bath house, Attic stamnos, 440-430 BCE, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

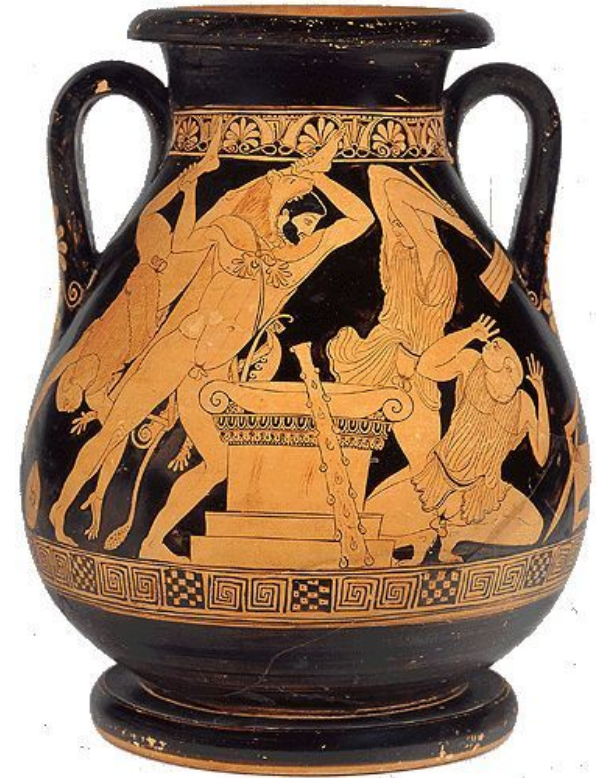
Aristotle's verdict on Kallipolis



- Too much unity in the city turns it into a giant household, not a city at all.
- The loss of family loyalties will mean that relationships are weak and children not properly cared for.
 - Communal property is usually neglected
- Destroys the grounds of friendship which is the 'chief good of cities' and best protection against civil conflict.
- Problems of transfers between classes.

Other verdicts on Kallipolis

- Isocrates: Plato's ideas for an ideal city aren't original.
 - Kallipolis' class structure and institutions resemble those of Egypt under Busiris, founder-king.
 - Busiris wasn't a cannibal (as in the Heracles myth) but a philosopher king.
- Other fourth-century BCE writers also produced idealized *politeia* writing, possibly as satire.
 - Theopompus of Chios – *Meropis* (*Philippica* book 8, BNJ 115 F 75c)



Heracles and Busiris, Athenian red-figure *pelike*, c. 470 BCE, National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

Plato's Cretan city: Magnesia

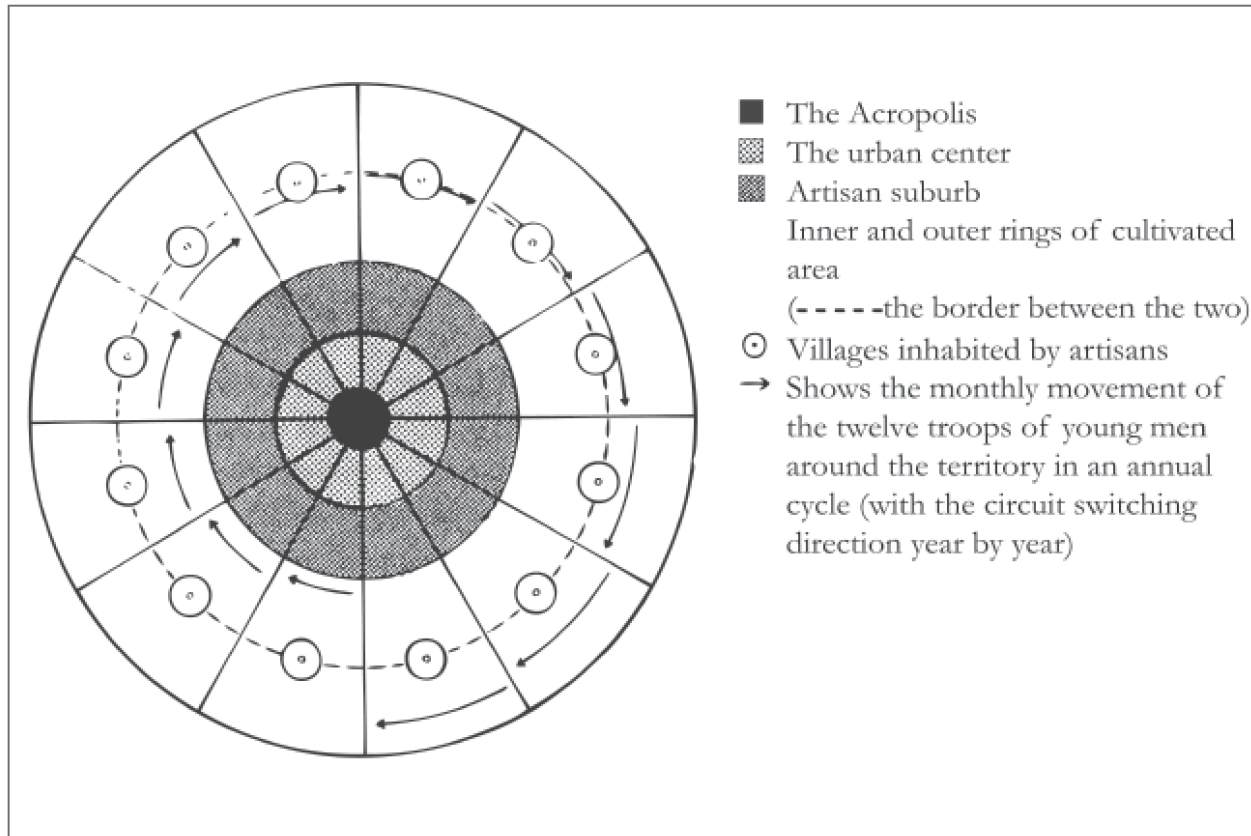
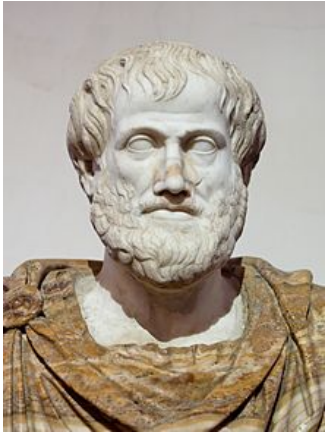


Figure 1. Plan of the city in Plato's *Laws*. Drawing after Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *The Black Hunter. Forms of Thought and Forms of Society in the Greek World* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 225, fig. 3. Courtesy of Johns Hopkins University Press.

The Laws of Magnesia

- 5040 citizen households, each given plots of land.
- Four property classes.
- Communal meals for male and female members of citizen classes.
- 12 tribes each belonging to a 'village'.
- No division of property on inheritance.
- Metics and slaves provide much of the labour.
- Extensive and detailed law code encourages citizens to participate in shared values, and sets out penalties for misbehaviour.
- Re-education for atheists.

Aristotle's verdict on Plato's *Laws*



- (Has he read the right book? Talks of 'Socrates' rather than the 'Athenian Stranger').
- Difficulties of maintaining steady population and relative equality.
- Doesn't explain how rulers differ from ruled.
- Aims for a mixture of monarchy and democracy, but provides a mixture of oligarchy and democracy.
- Sparta a better example of a 'mixed constitution'.

Plato's Atlantis

They drew their water from springs, one of cold running water and one of hot, which were abundant in quantity, and each of which was wonderfully suited by nature, in the flavor and quality of its waters, for the use to which it was put... they constructed pools around them, some open to the air, and others roofed over for winter use as warm baths; they kept separate the pools for the kings, and for private individuals, and different ones again for the women and for horses and other beasts of burden...

Plato *Critias* 117ab

Plato's Atlantis and Athens

- Described in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias* – a counterpoint to the cosmology of the *Timaeus*.
- Story passed down through Egyptian priests whose records extend far back in time.
- Told to Solon and passed down through Plato's ancestors to Critias (the tyrant?).
- Ten kings descended from Poseidon, but with diminishing proportion of divinity in their blood.
- Fabulous wealth based on 'mountain copper' (*orichalcum*), mined on the island.
- Planned city with central palace-temple complex.
- Hot and cold springs provide water for bathing and the canals.
- Destroyed in the distant past along with primaeval Athens, its opposite, as war was about to begin.



A reconstruction of Atlantis from Plato's description

Aristotle's ideal city, *Politics* books 7-8

- Moderate size and population, not too near the sea.
- Two squares – one 'free agora' for citizens and administration, one for commerce.
 - Temples in the free agora host communal meals.
- Citizen life organized in age classes; older citizens rule the younger ones.
 - Defence.
 - Administration and deliberation.
 - Religious activity.
- No political participation for poor citizens who need to earn wages to survive.
- Compulsory education system.
 - Education for leisure.
 - Emphasis on music.

Early modern utopias



Above: the just city at peace, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, Ambrogio Lorenzetti, 1338-39.

Right: the island of Utopia, Thomas More, *Utopia*, 1516



Classical Athens as an ideal city

Left: Leo von Klenze, The Acropolis, 1846, Neue Pinakothek, Munich



Right: Philipp von Foltz, 1852, Pericles' Funeral Oration, created for the Maximilianeum, Munich.

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Dystopias of the present and future



If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—for ever.

George Orwell, *1984*

COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY –
motto of the World State in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*



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Notes and further reading

Ancient

- Aristotle, *Politics, Constitution of the Athenians*
- Herodotus, *Histories*
- Isocrates, *Areopagiticus, Busiris*
- Plato, *Republic, Laws, Timaeus/Critias*
- Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*
- Xenophon, *Constitution of the Spartans, Cyropaedia*

Modern

- Bruce, S (ed.) (2008) *Three Early Modern Utopias: Thomas More: Utopia/ Francis Bacon: New Atlantis/ Henry Neville: The Isle of Pines*
- Huxley, A (1932) *Brave New World*
- Orwell, G (1948) *1984*

- Walton, J (2015) *The Just City*.

Background reading

- Anderson, D. (2015) *Imaginary Cities*.
- Annas, J. (2003) *Plato: a very short introduction*
- Cartledge, P.A. (2016) *Democracy: a life*.
- Claey's, G. (2011) *Searching for Utopia: the history of an idea*
- Lane, M.S. (2014) *Greek and Roman Political Ideas*.