

BUILDING A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE:
REFERRING TO MYTHOLOGICAL GREECE
FOR INSPIRATION

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Our fall meeting convenes in Greece. What a godsend for the solution seekers of our group! Such an unpredictable gift can bear with it immeasurable opportunities to enlighten our path and enrich our thinking. This pending chance is, among others, not only related to the proximity of Greece to the Middle East arena. Just by itself, this quality is capable of making of it a land of predilection for the exchange or the confrontation of ideas related to conflict solving, leadership patterns and institution building in the area. But, there is also and mainly a potentially positive effect of the rich mythological history and the wealthy philosophical and political thought of this land. If it can't firmly facilitate a relative matching of credos, it can, at least, help in timidly laying down a few solution patterns.

Greece is definitely a space of thought and reflection. It also is, and has certainly been, one of the main cradles of the modern thinking that led to the growth of western civilization. The wisdom carried through the ages by Greek mythology as well as relevant aspects of the history of antique Greek cities such as Athens, Sparta, Corinth and many others, undoubtedly supply the learners with numerous and meaningful teachings. From some of these considerations stems this circumstantial interest in exploring these ancient paths in the search for the potential teachings of Greek mythology and, to a certain extent, Greek history and political thought to some persistent present day issues and conflicts, particularly in the neighbouring Middle East.

Not that it is at all intended to reproduce or analyse all the wealth of the Greek ancient thinking. Numerous volumes of writing will thus be necessary to hope reach or achieve such an objective. Nor is it at all pretended that ancient Greek solutions can blindly be applicable to present day conflicts, leadership crises or state institutionalising. Their respective natures as well as the realities surrounding them are so different. Yet, it is still possible to assert that Greek ancient history as well as its mythology and schools of thought are rich of extremely revealing facts, myths and state models. It is mostly so that Greek history is not the history of a single state. It concerns more than 150 separate and independent political communities, involved most of the time in military conflicts and violent confrontations. It is more so in its mythological aspects that the flow of Greek imagination has supplied us with numerous heroes, gods, legends and supra-natural beings. And it is definitely more so with the constantly up to date content of antique Greece political thought.

But still, let's warn against drawing any quick conclusions. Mythology is so ambivalent morally. It also allows for a multiplicity of explanations that it might appear daring to automatically draw from them any hazardous moral lessons. Many examples could have been chosen though for illustration. But, let's just pick a small random sample and unveil its content both as an introductory overture towards our hosting land and also as a modest linking invitation of present scenes to past mythical, theoretical and historical imageries.

I. Miscellaneous Mythical Teachings :

Mythology in the Ancient Near East, and particularly, in the Antique Greek Peninsula conveys the atmosphere of fear, superstition and constant anxiety which were the daily lot of most Hellenes. Stories about Gods were quite common. But other heroes and, in some cases ordinary people, found also their way to immortality through mythical legends. It is not always necessary that the heroes of these myths do what is right or admirable. Poseidon, Artemis, Aphrodite, Eros and Hermes illustrate some of these mythical stories at times. But monsters such as Centaurs, Cyclops and Gorgons also enrich the wealthy imagination of the Ancient Greeks along with heroes such as Jason, Heracles and Perseus or legends such as Oedipus, Antigone or Semele.

Here again, the illustration will be limited to just very few. Numerous sources can furthermore supply the interested reader with numerous fascinating readings.

1. From Prometheus and Pandora to Deucalion and Pyrrha:

Some aspects of human behaviour get so irritating to the Gods that they generate celestial punishment. Since the creation of the world, Zeus has had to intervene at various occasions to reset the pendulum.

According to ancient Greeks, in the aftermaths of creation, four-footed beasts occupied the land, while fishes took the seas and birds took possession of the air. But, there still was a need for a nobler animal. One of the then existing gigantic race of Titans, Prometheus took some of the earth, added some water to it, and made man in the image of the Gods. He then called upon Athena, the Goddess of wisdom, to help him go to heaven, light a torch from the sun, and bring down fire to man. This new energy enabled the new creation to make tools and weapons.

Zeus, the King of Gods, God of the Sky and Earth and God of Heaven, then punished Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus, for stealing fire from heaven by creating woman and sending her to them. The first woman thus created by Zeus was named Pandora. She was made in heaven with the contribution of all Gods: Hephaistos designed her body from the earth and waters and gave her voice, Aphrodite gave her beauty, Hermes gratified her with persuasion, Apollo taught her music, Athena gave her dexterity and skill, etc...with her arrival on earth, all the woes and sorrows escaped out except hope that remained still.

In these conditions, and with these first inhabitants on earth, humanity lived through five eras:

a . The Golden Age : It was characterized with innocence, happiness, truth and right. There was no need for swords or any other weapons.

b . The Silver Age : During this era, conditions of life started becoming tougher and man dwelled in caves. Harder efforts were henceforth expected for a better living.

c . The Brazen Age : Things grew wilder and the need for arms and weapons developed. Growing aggressiveness launched trends of hostility and belligerence.

d . The Age of Heroes : It was the age of Blood and Glory, the period prior to the Trojan war. Sons and daughters of the immortals populated the earth side by side with the humans.

e . The Iron Age : Violence grew bigger. Truth and honour diminished. Land was divided into possessions thus generating conflicting claims on land property. War sprang up.

Trust lacked. Aggressiveness and slaughter developed. As a result of the growing unconsciousness of the bellicose humans, the Gods progressively abandoned the earth.

Burned with anger from the behaviour of that degenerating race of mankind, Zeus reacted violently. He flooded the land and furthermore, called his brother Poseidon to even aggravate the drowning of humans. All existing beings perished, except Deucalion (a just man) and his wife Pyrrha (a faithful worshipper of the Gods) who both managed to seek refuge on top of the only un-flooded mountain peak : Parnassus.

They later obeyed the commandments of the oracles by throwing stones which progressively grew into the form of human beings, thus generating a new existence.

2 . Titanic warmongering and the Resurrection of Dionysus-Zagneus.

The anger of Zeus ineluctably falls on the oppressing Titans who unjustly prosecuted their weak prey and massacred it in the person of the infant Dionysus.

Dionysus was a non-Olympian God resulting from a secret love between Zeus and his sister Demeter. Other mythological sources attribute his motherhood to Demeter's daughter, Persephone, Queen of the underworld. It is said that Zeus took the shape of a snake when he impregnated the conceiving mother.

Zeus & Hera

When she learnt about the birth of the young infant, initially named Zagneus, Hera, Goddess of the Wedding and an other sister of Zeus, was extremely jealous. She sent the Titans to massacre him. They lured him with attractive toys, sliced his throat and cut him up into pieces that they boiled and roasted.

According to one mythological version, Zeus was attracted by the smell of the cooking, and when he realized that they were cooking his son Zagneus, he sends a thunderbolt to kill the Titans and then resurrects Dionysus.

An other version states that the Titans actually consumed the roasted pieces except the heart which was saved by the Goddess Athena. A new Zagneus, carrying the name of Dionysus, was to regenerate from the saved organ which symbolizes life and love. Then Zeus later decided to strike the Titans down by lightening when he learnt about their mischief. From the remaining ashes of the Titans, he later gave birth to a human gender, eternally oscillating between Titanic heritage of bellicose behaviour and Godly magnanimity resulting from the shared presence of Dionysos-Zagneus within all beings. Present day human aggressive attitudes and titanic nature would be due, within this thinking pattern, to the initial human formation from Titan ashes. In this sense, blood shedding would be part of the legacy of the Titans.

3. Zeus, Bellerophon and the Erinyes :

Various metaphoric formulas can also be called upon through a few mythological examples to suggest potential issues of real situations. Gods, heroes and spirits equally contribute to such illusions.

a. *The Lord of the Skies*: This is an other name used to refer to the “Leader of the Immortals” and the “God of the Gods”: Zeus. He plotted against his father Cronos and deposed him from the throne of eternity. They were three plotters: His brothers Hades and Poseidon along with himself. As a superior God, he hurls thunderbolt as a fatal weapon. Even his sister and wife, Hera, rose against him in a revolt of Gods. She successfully drugged him and helped the other Gods binding him with a multitude of knots during his sleep. Managing to free himself thanks to the help of a repented God, Briareus, Zeus angrily grabbed his thunderbolt and was about to launch his anger. But all Gods fell on their knees begging and pleading for mercy.

b. *The downfall of a mortal hero* : This is the story of a mortal whose outrageous pride caused his misfortune and decay. Bellerophon managed to raise himself up to high company, relations and positions. He even succeeded to obtain Athena’s help for successfully bridling and riding the untamed horse Pegasus. With such a prestigious mount, he became so invincible as to kill the terrible Chimaera, conquer the Solymi tribe, defeat the Amazons and exterminate all of King Lobates’ soldiers. No one could ever dare beating him. His glorious deeds became widely sang...until his arrogance led him to consider riding Pegasus to Mount Olympus to visit the Gods. Zeus immediately put an end to his unwise venture, turning him crippled and lonely for the rest of his life.

c. *The Retributive Justice of the Avenging Spirits*: The twin sisters Alecto, Megaera and Tisiphone are known in mythology as the “Furies”, the “Erinyes” or the “Eumenides”. They are said to be avenging spirits who relentlessly pursue wrongdoers. They exercise retributive justice by punishing crimes not reached by human justice. It is said that their brass wings made escape impossible and that their ripping claws made torment horrible. They are referred to by both Homer and Euripide. They are also mentioned by Pausanias in the following terms:

“In Keryneia is a sanctuary of the Eumenides, which they say was established by Orestes. Whosoever enters with the desire to see the sights, if he be guilty of bloodshed is said at once to become insane with fright. At the entrance to the sanctuary are statues of women, made of stone and of artistic workmanship. The natives said that the women are portraits of the former priestesses of the Eumenides.” *Corneli Nepotis Pausanias 7.25.5*
“Near Megalopolis is a sanctuary of goddesses. They call the goddesses themselves, as well as the district around the sanctuary, Maniai (Madnesses). This is a surname of the Eumenides; in fact they say that it was here that madness overtook Orestes as punishment ... Here too it is a sanctuary of the Eumenides.” *C. N. Pausanias 8.34.1*

II. A Few Relevant Historical facts :

Ancient Greece was divided into many autonomous city-states, with a variety of political systems ranging from democracy to oligarchy. These tended to form two main alliances around Athens and Sparta which generated endless periods of truce and war that finally led to the collapse of the whole Hellenic civilization. Although Greek history is rich with examples of heroes, army generals and political leaders, as well as with instructive solutions to awkward situations, just a few revealing cases among them will be exposed here for the mere purposes of illustration, hoping to generate enough curiosity from the reader too seek a much deeper insight into Greek history and the lessons it certainly carries for present day conflicts.

1. Pericles' leadership Patterns in Athens :

Pericles was a political and a military leader of Athens during the fifth century B.C. He was known to be a pure patriot and a convinced democrat who rendered highly important services to his City. He was also known to be liberal, and probably the first liberal in history. He was so tolerant as to be able to accept the liberty of others to even do things that he didn't like. In line with pure Antique Greek virtues, one of his favourite quotes is said to be "*Happiness is freedom and freedom is bravery*".

Pericles (495-429 B.C.)

Most of the glory associated with ancient Greek culture is squeezed into the half century of wealth, creativity and great works attained by Athens under his leadership. Most of the monumental works of architecture such as the Acropolis were built at that time.

He was a key figure in the promotion of democratic reforms in Athens. Yet, the elimination of his opponents allowed him at times to govern as an absolute master of Athena. He was respected and trusted, but very scarcely loved. He had all the means to govern: vast territories, a strong fleet and a well trained army. At times, some relative success stories tended to dope him, thus drastically turning his attitude into that of a stiff ruler. He would, however, apply gentleness and persuasion when applicable and call upon force and constraint when necessary. He juggled with fear and hope as complementary means to overcome resistance.

In military affairs, he was known to be very cautious. He had a sound reputation of prudence, patience and justice. He wouldn't risk any fight when the odds were not heavily in his favour. His common advice to impetuous generals would be to generally expect to "**be ruled by time, the wisest counsellor of all**". He has also been reported to have said once to his fellow army commander, Sophocles, "**A general must have as pure hands as are his eyes**".

In the aftermaths of the first Peloponnesian war, and subsequently to a disastrous campaign against Persia that almost decimated the Athenian navy, the Athenian Empire, known as the Delian League, faced many internal rebellions. Their weakening effect on Athenian power compelled Pericles to accept, in 445 B.C., a thirty year peace with Sparta: Both sides then got what they wanted. Athens gave up some political power over a few neighbouring territories and Sparta recognized the Athenian Empire as a legitimate political institution. Henceforth, both cities grew more powerful and knew more opulence.

Yet, on the eve of a new war with Sparta, occurring after a truce of 14 years, and known also as the Peloponnesian war, the Lacedemonians asked the Athenians to get rid of Pericles. But this had an opposite effect than the intended one: Pericles became a hero in Athens despite his numerous detractors just because it became clear that he was hated by the enemy.

So, the war with Sparta burst. The Spartans invaded the territory of Athens, cutting down trees and burning farms.... Aware of the fact that his army was outnumbered by the

Spartan army, Pericles pursued a strategy of passive resistance, trying to push them to leave without having to fight them directly. He rather encouraged individual strikes back in the midst of their own territory, eventually causing enough damage as to oblige them to consider going back to guard it better. Sparta's siege of Athens lasted very long though...and so did Pericles' reciprocal siege of the sacred city of Epidauria...until the plague exerted the weakening effects that precipitated Pericles' decay along with the dusk of Athen's Golden Age and Glory.

2. The Peace of Nicias :

Nicias was born in a family known as being one of the biggest slaveholders in Athens as well as one of the richest silver mine owners. His full name was Nicias Niceratou Cydantides. He lived between 470 and 413 B.C. He was an Athenian statesman and general. As a military commander, he was very much respected. As a political leader, he managed to gain experience along with the affection of his people. He was much of a modest and humble person who had a serious professional approach, popular manners, a generous temper, strong religious beliefs and considerable political and military talents. He owed due respect to the Gods and to religious institutions.

In positions of responsibility, he tended to seek peace at any price, be it at his own expense. He was generally so terrified of public criticism that he would never make appearances at public amusements. He was known to avoid taking any risk.

After the Athenian defeat in Amphipolis (422 B.C.), and the death of his direct opponent, Cleon, who then was in command of the Athenian Army, Nicias was sent to Sparta to negotiate a truce. His respectful reputation among all Hellenes paved the path for his personal diplomacy allowing him to arrange for a fifty year peace treaty that ended the war between the two rival cities of the Greek Peninsula (in 421 B.C.). Both parties agreed on the terms of a treaty of mutual defence against all other potential aggressors.

Plutarch wrote about him (in "Plutarch's Lives", English translation by Bernadette Perrin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1914) that: "*Nicias found that the Spartans had long been eager for peace, and that the Athenians were no longer in good heart for the war; that both were, so to speak, unstrung, and glad to let their arms drop to their sides. He therefore strove to unite the two cities in friendship...The men who were well-to-do, and the elderly men, and most of the farmers, he found inclined to peace from the first; and after he had talked privately with many of the rest, taught them his views, and blunted the edge of their desire for war, then he at once held out hopes to the Spartans and urgently invited them to seek for peace. They had confidence in him, not only because of his usual fairness towards them, but especially he had shown kind attention and treated humanly those of their men who had been kept in prison at Athens... Choirs later sang: let my spear lie unused for the spider to cover with webs*".

But Nicias' peace efforts were to become pointless after the rise of a new generation of impetuous young leaders who fostered mistrust and belligerence. Nicias was to later die after the crushing failure of the Sicilian Expedition in Syracuse which he had vehemently opposed before giving in to the orders of his superiors.

3. The Last of the Greeks : Philopoemen .

He was born in Megalopolis at the dawn of the Greek civilization. He grew up to be known as a model of energy, wisdom, incorruptible integrity and military virtue. He was also said to be gentle, calm, kind and humble. Despite his high rank and origins, he generally behaved like a plain man.

As a general of the Achaeans, he was once invited to a grand reception held in his honour. Arriving ahead of time, dressed in his usual humble clothes, the hostess confused him with a potential servant sent by her husband to help. So, she ordered him to chop out the wood, which he immediately started doing. And, to the surprised host who, upon his arrival, found his guest of honour hard at work, he calmly stated: **"I am paying the penalty of my ugly looks"**.

Philopoemen studied hard to become a general. For him, war was the school of all kinds of virtue. When he was in his thirties, the Spartans invaded and occupied his home town Megalopolis, chasing its inhabitants out. When the occupiers invited them back to their homes, Philopoemen advised them not to return, thus avoiding the trap for them to become captives. The Spartans later left, nonetheless after destroying much of the city.

Philopoemen's reputation later grew all over Greece as a man, who **"in actual fighting was as good as the youngest, and in judgement as good as the oldest"**. He later marched on Sparta and, by threat and persuasion, managed to get it to join the Archaean Confederacy. Reassured for their security by this union, the Spartans presented him with substantial gifts that he gently turned down, reminding them that **"good men and friends are not to be bribed"**. He was also skilful in using diplomacy to keep Sparta within the confederacy and to quiet its rebellion.

But, under the growing pressure of Roman hegemony in Greece, Philopoemen became like a sailor in a highly tumultuous ocean. Called again for army leadership as a general in his mid-seventies, he was due to bravely face his capture, torture, imprisonment in an underground dungeon which entrance had been sealed with a large rock, until he was later poisoned in captivity.

Nevertheless, he heroically represented for historians the image of the leader of the last remnants of resistance to the creeping domination of Rome in Greece. Statues and other memorials were set up to honour him throughout Greece. Even the Roman invaders tolerated them in recognition that **"Honour is never to be denied by good men to each other"**.

III. ASPECTS OF THE POLITICAL HERITAGE :

Needless to reassert the evident influence of Greek antique thought on modern political theories. The apostles of modern democracy haven't added much to what the "Greek Miracle" set forth more than twenty five centuries ago. Names like those of Plato, Socrates, Homer and Hippodamus still bear with them enlightening teachings for modern "politologues". Antique Greece thus offers a wide range of sources of inspiration. Let's explore a few of them for the mere purpose of launching a reflection about the prospects of a democratic culture.

1. Herodote: the Apology of Hellenic Liberty.

As an Athenian reporter and a chronicler of his time, Herodote, who was also called “the father of politics”, recalls the story of the three Persian Wise Men who successively criticize and make the apology of the main forms of government.

He locates his story in Persia, after the death of young Smerdis. The seven plotters then opened a debate about the best suitable form of government for Persia. The Three Wise Men (Otanes, Megabyse and Darius) took part in the debate, presenting their respective views and opinions about each one of the then known forms of government.

For Otanes, the political systems based on a one man’s leadership ought to be avoided. They allow no contradictory criticism and lead to pervert situations. It is preferable for him to resort to the system of multitude sovereignty implying a popular regime based on “isonomy”: law (nomos) and equal (isos). In such a system, it is a large number of people who contribute to decision making and to the appointment in public offices. And, for Otanes, this democratic form of government is the most likeable of all.

As of Megabyse, he disagrees, in his oration, with Otanes, underlining that the power of multitude invests the people, ignorant and impulsive, with mass responsibility that they may not be up to. For him, a tyrant knows what he is doing; but the people do not, because of their lack of appropriate education. Excessive passion of the people is also to be feared. Megabyse compares opinion with an outpouring winter torrent that carries all it finds on its way. He then proposes the oligarchy as a moderate form of government: **“let’s elect a sovereign assembly of the best”**, he says.

Then comes Darius, the third Mage; he criticizes both democracy and oligarchy. He advocates instead of them the form of government that lies in one single individual: a prudent, excellent man who manages with care. For him, oligarchy generates rivalry that further leads to competition for leadership, hatred and violence. He also considers that democracy cannot prevent evil. Within it, bad men can agree between them and impose their own will to others. Only a strong, good man can manage to bring about sound and stable leadership.

Monarchy, oligarchy and democracy are thus portrayed, praised and criticized in Herodote’s chronicles; but Hellenic liberty remains present in all his writings as a permanent model for the success of any form of government .

2 . Xenophon: Due Respect of Legality :

Although he was an Athenian and part of his life was linked to Athens, he mostly served Sparta and its various allies. He was even recruited as a Greek mercenary serving in the Persian army of young Cyrus. In his Lacedemonian retreat near Olympus, he produces most of his political writings.

He is a precursor of modern forms of dictatorships. He undeniably favors authoritarian forms of government. For him, strong leadership is a must, no matter what the designation process of the Chief has been. Best leadership skills lay with those who know how to make the best use of their commandment positions. Politics implies adhesion not violence. It calls upon persuasion not constraint.

For Xenophon, the Chief is chosen not to satisfy his own caprices, but to serve the community. **“Chiefs are neither those who have been chosen by the masses nor those designated by fate or heritage. They aren’t either those who have taken power by violence or by trickery...They are those who master the art of commandment”**. Power is not invested in institutions. It results from the qualities of the man invested with it.

For Xenophon, the leader is a “**primus inter pares**” in the service of justice and of the State’s noble interest; the leader is that who governs with due respect of the law.

2. Aristotle : Ethics and Politics :

Aristotle grew up in Macedonia, but linked most of his intellectual work to his Athenian observations. In his analysis of the Constitution of Athens (**tôn Athenaiôn politeia**) , He clearly draws a distinction between the three main political organs of the State. But virtue plays an important role in his conception of power. The main objective of human government is to develop virtue among its citizens. Aristotle’s City is neither a military State nor a mercantile entity; it is a virtue breeding collectivity. To him, all forms of States are acceptable : Monarchy, Oligarchy and Democracy fit perfectly so long as they remain in their pure form. But their deviations lead ineluctably to seeking non honorable objectives and achieving rather personal interests.

Thus, monarchies are drawn by Aristotle under various forms: absolute monarchies (based on patriarchal conceptions of power), heroic monarchies (marked by a hereditary leadership of a former general, invested with military, religious, judicial and political prerogatives), lifelong “generalities” (with supreme powers invested in a military leader, like Agamemnon, during his lifetime) and “asymmetries” (*aisumneteia*), taking mostly the form of a non hereditary despotic exercise of power.

As for the oligarchies, they represent the government of a limited multitude which represents generally a minority in the City. Wealth is most of the time a determinant factor in membership cooptation of the oligarchs. Hereditary traditions and arbitrary patterns of government are most common. But these are not exclusive. Merit and virtue may also play a major role in leadership determination.

Concerning democracies, they are determined by quantitative criteria. But these are not sufficient for the definition of their content and functioning procedures. Elements of reference to the will of the people must be predominant. Popular will reigns solemnly through the enactment process of the laws.

Excess remains however the major enemy of any form of government. Abusive behavior of the governing class generally leads to its fatal collapse through an inevitably growing process of fear, contempt and hatred among the disenfranchised governed : tyrants will need to introduce into their governing styles elements of piety, decency and moderation. Oligarchs will also need to temper their domination with a dose of tolerance and gradual participation of others to the exercise of power. The tenants of democratic forms of government will resort more heavily to election and resolutely appeal to the reigning sovereignty of the law.

Quite a wide range of elements to choose amongst for our modern State builders and action leaders !!

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