

Homotopolis: Immigration, Ethnicity and the Ancient Greek City

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Introduction

For the modern reader, one of the most conspicuous features of the ideal city that Plato developed in the *Republic* is the exclusion of non-citizens¹; considered in relation to this injunction, the provision for the metics, or the immigrant population, in the *Laws* is equally striking². Although this reversal is perhaps confounding, the allowance is indicative of the shift in his thinking from conceiving the city as an abstract mental construct to envisioning a city that was practically possible. The earliest definition of who was considered a metic comes from Aristophanes of Byzantium (c. 257-180): "A metic is anyone who comes from a foreign (city) and lives in the city, paying tax toward certain fixed needs of the city. For so many days he is called a *parepidemos* and is free from tax, but if he overstays the specified time he becomes a *metoikos* and liable to tax."³ This passage indicates that, at least for purposes of law and taxation, the ethnicity of the metic mattered little, only that the person was from another *polis* (i.e. Athenian vs. non-Athenian⁴). As a result, the metics were a heterogeneous group that had undoubtedly immigrated for a number of reasons, including the economic opportunities that were present in a large city with an active port.

Due to the heterogeneous nature of the population of alien residents in Athens, it is impossible to make general claims concerning the social and economic status of the metics as a cohesive group; however, it is clear that there were a large number of metics and that they were economically significant in Athens as a result of their involvement in trade and the taxes levied upon them⁵. The one claim that can be made with certainty is that metics were not, nor could they become citizens, except in extraordinary cases.

Although they could not own land or participate in government⁶, metics could possess slaves and some even attained great wealth: in one of his orations, Lysias relates that his brother owned a shield factory that employed 120 slaves. In addition to reporting what must have certainly been one of the extreme cases with regard to the wealth attained by a metic, this case serves to represent the tenuousness of the life of the metic in Athens. For Lysias goes on to state that his brother's factory and home were confiscated by the government in a time of financial shortage brought about by the debts incurred as a result of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC)⁷. This case of Lysias's family also illustrates the inherent paradox of the metic in Athens:



Fig. 1. Athenian vase painting showing a cobbler at work

economic importance combined with the lack of political participation.

Because the metics were excluded from public life, their interests were represented by the *polemarch*, an Athenian official appointed by lot. Based on the fact that the metics were a heterogeneous group with varying degrees of wealth and social status, it is reasonable to conclude that all interests could not be equally represented. However, there is evidence to suggest that those metics with greater standing may have acted to protect the

interests of those in less fortunate circumstances.

The question of why metics immigrated to Athens is closely bound to the question of why they were allowed residency: the metic possessed a skill or was engaged in a profession which would have been of service to the city and therefore would have provided an income in excess of the taxes levied upon them.⁸ As would be expected in a group as diverse as the alien population in Athens, its members were involved in a wide variety of occupations; however, studies have concluded that the majority of metics were craftsmen or involved in commercial enterprises (Figs. 1 & 2).⁹

The allowance of the metics in the city that Plato proposed in the *Laws* was based on two conditions: that the metic have a *techné* [craft] and would then only be allowed to stay for twenty years after the time of registration upon entry into the city.¹⁰ In contrast to Athens, the alien population was not subject to tax but they were required to leave the city after twenty years; however, Plato qualifies this statement by saying that a metic could attempt to persuade the government to extend the period of residency, even for life, if the service to the state had been meritorious. As for the children of metics, they too could remain for a twenty-year period beginning on the date of their fifteenth birthday, provided that they were equipped with a craft.

As Plato had certainly observed in his native Athens, the alien population, or the *metoikia*, were necessary for the economic welfare of the city as a result of their involvement in craft and commerce. However, in contrast to Athens where the metics freely populated various parts of the city, Plato devised an urban plan which led to the spatial segregation of the metics in the fabled city of Magnesia outlined in the *Laws*. The following sections discuss how Plato proposed to separate the metics from the citizen population and their status in the *Laws* and present an analysis of the way in which this apportioning can be understood in relation to the values regarding craft and commerce expressed in Athenian literature and spatial practices.

Town planning and trade in the *Laws*

With regard to the physical placement of the city proposed in the *Laws*, Plato stated that it should be situated near the center of the country, suggesting rather vaguely that the location must have "all the other conveniences also which a city requires, and which it is easy enough to perceive and specify."¹¹ He then rapidly proceeded from the general to the specific, and outlined his system of land distribution and spatial organization in Magnesia (Fig. 2). The center of the city, the acropolis, was to be encircled with a ring wall¹² and dedicated to Hestia, Zeus and Athene. The land was then to be divided into twelve "equal" regions, the term equal applying to land quality rather than to actual area: regions with inferior land were divided into larger lots, while those regions with better land resulted in smaller plots. The next step was to further divide the land into 5,040 allotments, which corresponded to the number of citizen-farmers¹³. These allotments were then further divided into two portions:



Fig. 2. Vase painting showing work taking place in a smithy

one just outside the city and another more distant, each including a house.¹⁴

The attention paid to dividing the land in this way was meant to ensure that each household headed by the citizen could produce the necessary harvests to attain self-sufficiency. In *The Acharians*, one of Aristophanes' characters speaks of his loathing for the town and longs for his village home where the banter of sellers did not exist and everyone shared equally in the yields.¹⁵ In devising a system that distributed land equally according to its capacity to produce, Plato also expressed a wish for a self-sufficient society that was free from dependence on trade.

Literary and epigraphical testimonia from Homer onwards establish that self-sufficiency was one of the supreme values in ancient Athens, e.g., Odysseus is praised for his abilities to supply his household with all it required, down to the "well-wrought" bed upon which he slept.¹⁶ This example is worthy of note not only because of the emphasis on self-sufficiency in the Homeric myths, but also because the idealized notion of the head of the household as craftsman changed dramatically from the time of Homer until the Classical Period. As Athens moved from the Dark Age characterized by rule by clans to the *démokratia*, many came to disdain engagement in crafts or trade, arguing that it denied the possibility of the leisure necessary to engage fully in public life.¹⁷ Among those with an aversion to commercial activity, the ideal of self-sufficiency persisted; for example, in the *Politics*, Aristotle argued for independence from "traders, money-making craftsmen, importers and the like."¹⁸

In the city of Magnesia, Plato assumed that the alien population would play a vital role in achieving self-sufficiency by supplying the citizen-farmers with the necessary goods and services and ensuring that they were free to tend to agricultural

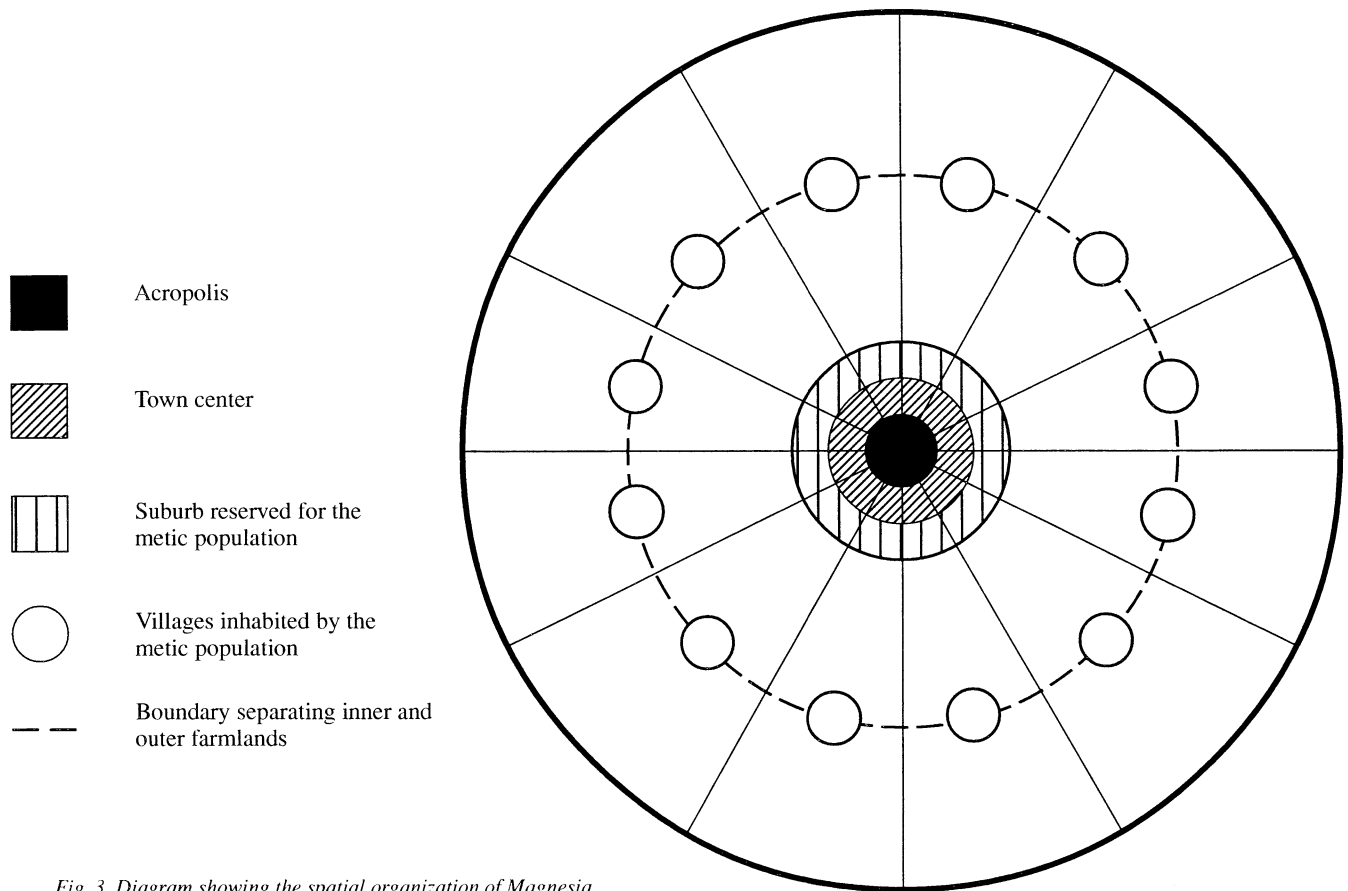


Fig. 3. Diagram showing the spatial organization of Magnesia

pursuits. This role required that they reside and conduct their business in an area accessible to the citizen-farmers; therefore, the metics were divided into thirteen administrative groups and each group was assigned to a specific area. Twelve of the groups were placed in villages corresponding to the twelve major regions of the *polis*, while the last group was relegated to a suburban "ring" encircling the town center. This "ring" was further subdivided into twelve smaller areas. While the twelve villages were centrally located on the border between the allotted plots nearest the town center and those closest to the outlying border, were meant to provide for the needs of the farmers, the twelve areas of the suburban "ring" were intended to supply goods and services to the town center.

The allocation of the metic population was decided by two administrative authorities: i) the "land-stewards", who were responsible for determining the distribution of metics in the villages based on the needs of the respective region; and ii) the "city-stewards," who were to allocate and supervise the metic population in the suburban "ring".

The proposed *polis* plan, and specifically the relegation of the metics to particular areas within it, is inherently connected to the status of the alien population in the *Laws*. Plato believed that the alien population should be placed "so as to be of least trouble and greatest use to the farmers."¹⁹ As stated in the introduction, Plato's acquiescence with regard to the metic represents a reversal of his policy of exclusion in the earlier *Republic*. The ideal city imagined in the *Republic* was entirely self-sufficient and consisted of

a population equipped with the skills necessary to ensure that all needs would be met: the *Laws* conceded the impossibility of this proposal and devised a system by which a specialized labor force, the alien residents, would provide goods and services to supplement citizen-farmers attempting to attain a level of agricultural production that would supply the population.

Craft and commerce were occupations reserved for the metic population because they were disdained and viewed as morally inferior to land ownership and activities that resulted in agricultural production. Plato's view of those involved in commercial activities, which was shared by many of the conservative factions in Athens at the time, is concisely summarized in the following passage:

It is an old and true saying that it is hard to fight against the attack of two foes from opposite quarters, as in the case of diseases and many other things; and indeed our present fight in this matter is against two foes, poverty and plenty, of which the one corrupts the soul of men with luxury, while the other by means of pain plunges it into shamelessness. What remedy, then, is to be found for this disease in a State gifted with understanding? The first is to employ the trading class as little as possible; the second, to assign to that class those men whose corruption would prove no great loss to the state; the third, to find a means whereby the dispositions of those engaged in these callings may not quite so easily become infected by shamelessness and meanness of the soul.²⁰

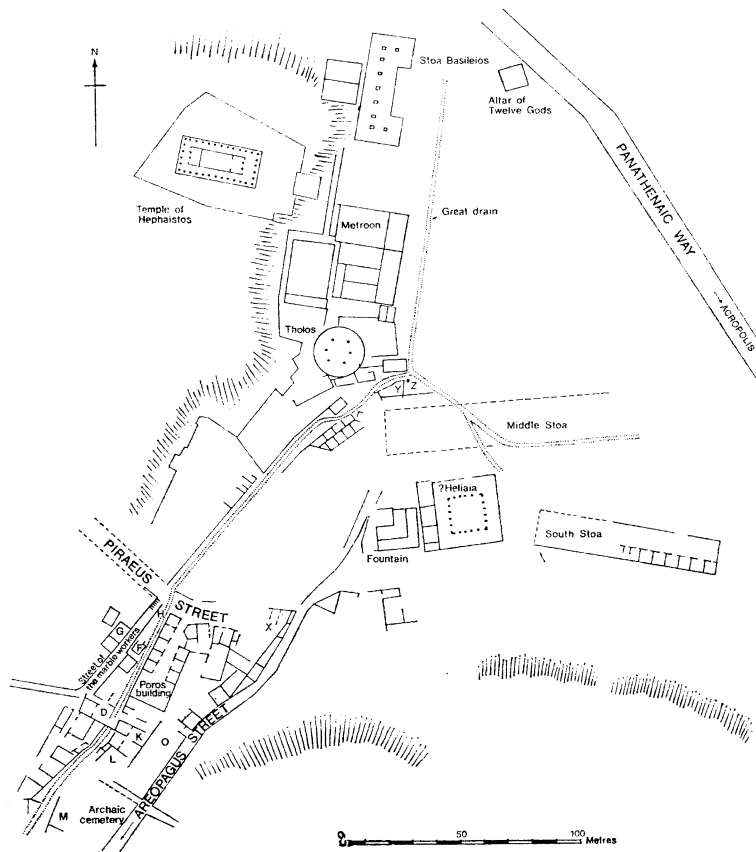


Fig. 4. Map showing the agora and workshop district in Athens Poros buildings contained marble masons during the fourth and fifth centuries BC: D, smithy; F, industrial buildings; G-K, marble masons; L, terracotta factory; M, marble workshops; O, bronze workers; Y, shoemaker; Z, agora boundary marker.

The prejudice against trade was not only overtly stated, but also incorporated into the actual laws governing the *polis* of Magnesia: none of the citizens belonging to the 5,040 households were allowed to engage in craft or commerce²¹. The strong sentiment against craftsmen was often expressed in comparisons to farmers in which those responsible for agricultural production possessed the necessary qualities for citizenship. In his work on household management, the *Oeconomicus*, Xenophon writes that craftsmen were both "bad friends and bad defenders of the city" and that if an invasion were to occur and the farmers and the craftsmen were asked which course of action would be appropriate, farmers would fight in defense of their country while those involved in crafts would withdraw to the fortress. On these grounds, he concluded that farmers would certainly make the "best and most loyal citizens"²².

While the views expressed by Xenophon and codified into law and made manifest in the town plan in Plato's ideal *polis* were perhaps extreme, they can not be understood in isolation from the cultural values regarding craft and commerce expressed in Athens. The following section will discuss these values and certain planning practices and demonstrate how they influenced the planning system adopted by Plato in the *Laws*.

Athenian precedents

Although the metic population could live freely anywhere in Athens, the areas reserved for craft and trading activities were

segregated. The separation of certain crafts was practical, as in the case of tanneries, which were renowned for their strong odor. In the *Peace*, Aristophanes did not pass up an opportunity to comment upon the statesman Kleon's connection with tanning, ironically praising his "Heracleian valour in braving the stenches of his trade." This case serves to demonstrate an important distinction between Athens and Plato's Magnesia: whereas Plato denied craftsmen land and participation in government and reserved citizenship for farmers, Athenian citizens engaged in trade and often owned workshops in addition to their land.²³ However, as with Kleon, those involved with the crafts and commerce were often the object of ridicule or derision as a result. This is clearly demonstrated in accounts of the rivalry between Kleon and Nicias, both elected to the board of ten generals after the death of Pericles in 429 BC. A member of an aristocratic Athenian family, Nicias was portrayed as a gentleman of dignity and prudence, in spite of his commercial activities. In contrast, Kleon was a commoner believed to be self-promoting and brash; he was often disparaged for his association with a tannery, from which both his wealth and manners were said to have come.

While many Athenians were merely disdainful of those involved in craft and commerce, there were other Greek city-states that were in accord with the views expressed by Plato and prohibited these occupations to citizens, such as Sparta.²⁴ And, in the *Politics*, Aristotle relates that at Thebes there was a law stating that no citizen could hold office if he had engaged in trade at any time during the previous ten years.²⁵ Perhaps the most ex-

treme case of these prejudices can be found in the example of Thespieae, where it was considered disgraceful for any citizen to engage in gainful labour, even agriculture.

With regard to physical planning in Athens, the district containing workshops was located in close proximity to the *agora* (Fig. 4). Even though it developed sporadically and was not subject to a preconceived plan, the *agora* was a cohesive space with well-defined and easily locatable boundaries.²⁶ It functioned as a preceint and there were laws governing entrance to it; for example, an oration by Demosthenes states that “The lawmakers keep outside of the *agora* any man who avoids military service or plays the coward or deserts”²⁷ and “Those who betray any of the public interests or ill-treat their parents, those who do not have clean hands, do wrong if they enter the *agora*.”²⁸

With regard to the variety of activities that took place in the *agora*, the following passage from Atheneus is instructive: “Again, as Eubulus has said in *The Happy Woman*, ‘In one and the same place you will find all things for sale together in Athens, figs, policemen, grapes, turnips, pears, apples, witnesses, roses, medlars, haggis, honey-comb, chick-peas, lawsuits, beestings, curds, myrtle-berries, ballot boxes, iris, roast lamb, waterclocks, laws, indictments.’”²⁹ A cursory reading of this passage would lead one to conclude that the political and commercial activities were not subject to spatial separation; however, clear boundaries did exist between them³⁰. In fact, commercial activities were further segregated according to the goods sold.³¹

Plato, prescribing the laws regarding sale and exchange in Magnesia, followed the Athenian practice and placed strict controls to ensure that unlike goods were kept to separate strictly defined areas: “when one man makes an exchange with another by buying or selling, the exchange shall be made in the place appointed therefore in the market, and nowhere else”³². If the exchange of goods occurred in any place other than that appointed for the sale of the item, then the rules and regulations protecting those involved in the exchange were no longer applicable.

Conclusion

Both in Athens and the city of Magnesia developed by Plato in the *Laws*, the alien population formed a heterogeneous group residing among homogeneous group of citizens and their households (consisting of the wives and offspring of male citizens and their retainers). Athenian law recognized neither their ethnicity nor their place of emigration of the alien residents, it only confirmed that they were not and, except in extraordinary cases, could not become citizens. While Athenian citizens were not excluded from engaging in craft and commerce, these occupations were deemed morally inferior because they were disconnected from agricultural production which would provide sustenance and allow the necessary leisure to participate in government. In short, craft and commerce were deemed antithetical to public life.

In ancient Greek society, land retained its superiority over other forms of wealth. Land was equated with self-sufficiency and, in addition, moral superiority was implied in land ownership and agricultural production. This view is evident in Xenophon’s conclusion that craftsmen were bad friends and bad defenders of the city and that farmers would make the best and most loyal citizens. One of the supreme values expressed in ancient Athenian literature is autonomy and independence gained via self-sufficiency. It is plausible to suggest that this grew out of many centuries of agrarian activity on land with limited possibilities for production. Marginal soils, climate and the amount of work required to prepare land for cultivation combined to prohibit the possibility of surplus. Because of the difficulties associated with attaining self-sufficiency, the ability to provide for one’s household without the aid of an intermediary would become both a goal and a measure of self worth.

Alien residents in Athens, the majority of whom were involved with craft and commerce, were disconnected from the land: they did not own land nor did they work anyone else’s as a peasant. This divorce from land meant that at the most basic level metics were reliant on outside sources and unable to attain self-sufficiency that may have been possible through cultivation. As a result, even if metics would have attained a degree of wealth that would have provided a level of economic security, their presence would have been viewed with some suspicion because they would have never been able to possess land, which remained the ultimate measure of wealth and status. In Athens, self-sufficiency was not only believed to guarantee sustenance, but was also translated into a commonly held cultural value that, according to Aristotle, was the goal of the formation of the polis.

Self-sufficiency was also articulated as a moderate position between the extremes of poverty and wealth. With regard to the excessive accumulation of wealth, Isocrates stated that “wealth administers to vice rather than nobility of the soul”³³ and Aristotle argued that there was a reasonable limit to the amount of wealth required to live what he termed the “good life”³⁴. While Plato stated that a “remedy” against the extremes of poverty and plenty was to employ the “trading class” as little as possible and, like many others, believed those involved in craft and commerce to be driven by monetary gain, he nevertheless recognized that those involved in these occupations were necessary for the economic well-being of the city.

While basing his town plan on the model provided by Athens in which trading activities were separated according to type, Plato went further and insisted upon not only the segregation of the activities but also of those involved in crafts and commerce. The complete segregation of the metics in Magnesia was the physical manifestation of the disdain for craft and commerce that was most fully expressed by the exclusion of metics in Plato’s earlier work, *the Republic*. By segregating and containing the heterogeneous population consisting of alien residents both by planning and by law, Plato was able to achieve what he wished for his native Athens: a homogeneous population of citizens that, while not entirely self-sufficient, could still remain

independent of outside sources by employing a group of people who dutifully fulfilled the needs of the city but, in his words, "whose corruption would prove no great loss"³⁵.

As this paper has shown, Plato dealt with heterogeneity by segregation and demotion of alien residents to second-class citizens. In doing so, Plato avoided dealing with the reality of life in Athens and Magnesia fortunately remained a mental construction.

NOTES

- ¹ See Plato, *Republic*, tr. Trevor J. Saunders (Cambridge, MA, 1994) 563A.
- ² For a discussion of the etymology of the term *metoikos*, see David Whitehead, *The Ideology of the Athenian Metic* (Cambridge, 1977) pp. 6-20. Plato, born in 427 BC, wrote the *Republic* c. 380 BC. The *Laws*, which represent Plato's "mature thought", was the last work written prior to his death in 347 BC.
- ³ This passage is quoted in U. Kahrstedt, *Staatsgebiet und Staatsangehörige in Athen* (Berlin, 1934).
- ⁴ David Whitehead has noted that "Metic-status was autonomous, ambiguous, and did not 'naturally' gravitate either downward toward slaves or up to citizens. And the status origin of the *metoikia* as a whole seems to have been no more a talking point than its ethnic origin." (Whitehead, *The Ideology of the Athenian Metic*, p. 115).
- ⁵ There has been considerable debate concerning the actual number of metics that resided in Athens; however, there is general agreement that there were 10,000 living in the city in the late fourth century.
- ⁶ For a discussion of the importance of land in ancient Athens, see M.I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (London, 1973).
- ⁷ Lysias, "Against Eratosthenes". In: *Orationes*, tr. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge, MA, 1967) XII, 4-6.
- ⁸ What is of particular interest is that there was no distinction made between male and female metics, at least conceptually, as they were both taxed; however, the men were required to pay an amount double that of women (twelve drachmas *per annum* versus six). Unique in Athens, this tax was levied on the person rather than a direct tax levied upon the person's activities or property.
- ⁹ For example, see M. Clerc, *Les Météques athéniens* (Paris, 1893) and A. Burford, *Craftsmen in Greek and Roman Society* (London, 1972).
- ¹⁰ Plato, *Laws*, 850A-C.
- ¹¹ Plato, *Laws*, 745B.
- ¹² In establishing a ring wall as the first act of planning, Plato is following a long-standing tradition associated with establishing settlements in Attica that extended as far back as the Dark Age, as evidenced from the following passage from the *Odyssey*: "From thence Nausithios, the godlike, had removed them, and led and settled them in Scheria far from men that live by toil. About the city he had drawn a wall, he had built houses and made temples for the gods, and divided the ploughlands." (Homer, *Odyssey*, tr. A.T. Murray (London, 1919) Book VI, 6-10).
- ¹³ Plato allowed 5,040 households (consisting of the male citizen-farmer and his families and dependents). He believed this number to be well suited for administration purposes: "...our 5,040 admits no more than 59 [divisors] (including 1 to 10 without a break), which will suffice for the purposes of war and every peacetime activity, all contracts and dealings, for taxes and grants." (Plato, *Laws*, 738). It should also be noted that this number corresponds to the Pythagorean method: $1 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4 \times 5 \times 6 \times 7 = 5,040$. Plato's limit of 5,040 citizens and their respective holdings immediately raises questions regarding increases in population and resulting land scarcity. For example, what happened when the population exceeded the production capacity of the land? Plato assumed that, when confronted with shortage or the lack of land, offspring of the citizen farmers would establish new colonies based on the system of laws and planning established in Magnesia.
- ¹⁴ In allowing private ownership of land in the *Laws*, Plato is revising an earlier position characterized by communal ownership in the *Republic*. Although land was privately owned, there were important conditions and reservations, the most important being inalienability: allotted land could not be brought or sold. The lots were to remain forever in the possession of the citizen to whom it was first assigned and his male heirs, either natural or adopted. If there were no sons, then the land holder could deed his holdings to the son of another citizen.
- ¹⁵ Aristophanes, *The Acharians*, tr. Benjamin B. Rogers (Cambridge, MA, 1967) II.30-II.35.
- ¹⁶ Homer, *Odyssey*, tr. A.T. Murray (London, 1919) XXIII, 2.
- ¹⁷ For further discussion on the relationship between engagement in craft and engagement in public life in Greek thought, see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958).
- ¹⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, tr. H. Rackham (London, 1972).
- ¹⁹ Plato, *Laws*, 849A.
- ²⁰ Plato, *Laws*, 919C.
- ²¹ Plato, *Laws*, 919D.
- ²² Xenophon, *Memorabilia and Oeconomicus*, tr. E.C. Marchant (Cambridge, MA, 1968) Book IV, 2-3.
- ²³ While many Athenians were derisive of trade, Athens could have not survived without import/export activity. Athenians imported at least twice as much corn as was grown in Attica, all of the timber used in shipbuilding and all of the iron and bronze used for weapons and agricultural implements. With regard to exports, olive oil, pottery and silver important sources of wealth.
- ²⁴ For a discussion of Sparta, see Anton Powell, *Athens and Sparta: constructing Greek political and social history from 478 BC* (London, 1988).
- ²⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1278a.
- ²⁶ The boundaries of the *agora* in Athens were clearly acknowledged by *perirrhanteria*, lustral basins used for purificatory sprinkling, or boundary stones.
- ²⁷ Demosthenes, *Private Orationes*, tr. A.T. Murray (Cambridge, MA, 1964) XXIV, 60.
- ²⁸ Demosthenes, *Private Orationes*, XXIV, 60.
- ²⁹ Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, tr. Charles Burton Gulick (Cambridge, MA, 1970) Book XIV, 640b-c.
- ³⁰ Although political and commercial activities were segregated in the *agora* in Athens, Aristotle demanded an even stricter functional segregation in the *Politics*. He believed that there should be two separate and distinct areas: a "free *agora*", i.e. an area kept clear of a merchandise which craftsmen and farmers alike could not enter unless summoned by the magistrates, and second *agora* reserved for commercial activity. (see Aristotle, *Politics*, tr. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA,

1950) Book VII, 11.2-11.3).

³¹ With regard to the spatial separation of goods in the *agora*, Xenophon states "For we know, I take it, that the city as a whole has ten thousand times as much of everything as we have; and yet you may order any sort of servant to buy something in the market and to bring it home, and he will be at no loss; every one of them is bound

to know where he should go to get the article. Now the only reason for this is that everything is kept in its fixed place." (Xenophon, *Memorabilia and Oeconomicus*, Book VIII, 22).

³² Plato, *Laws*, 915D.

³³ Isocrates, *To Demonicus*, tr. G. Norlin (Cambridge, MA, 1966) 6.

³⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1256b.

³⁵ Plato, *Laws*, 919C.