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Aristocracy, Greek

ALAIN DUPOUY

As an analytical and historical concept, aristocracy has long been defined as a conjunction of wealth, power, and nobility. The word actually appeared during the fifth century BCE when historians and philosophers began to think about their political history. Two principles soon offered the frame of the classical taxonomy of political regimes: the number of rulers and the positive or negative assessment of their action. In ancient Greek thought, and notably in Aristotle's *Politics*, aristocracy normally applies to a form of constitution of the Archaic period in which the few "best citizens" (*aristoi*) rule for the common interest. Although *aristokratia* only applies in ancient Greek thought and language to a political regime (see *POLITEIA*), modern historians normally use the term "aristocrats" or even "aristocracy" to designate the members of this regime: that is the ruling elite who hereditarily monopolized every office in the *polis*. Since the nineteenth century, Greek aristocracy has also been thought to be framed by *gene*, enlarged associations based on kinship ties, and so appears as a kind of *ancien régime* nobility. This gentilician conception of aristocratic leadership won favor among historians during the twentieth century. As landowners and enriched entrepreneurs, aristocrats naturally formed a leisure class who spent their time in hunting and banqueting at home or abroad, enjoying the hospitality of their peers. They consequently had no interest in their fellow citizens, until the time they were forced by the *demos* to share authority and political power with it. In Classical times they eventually became resentful and sometimes plotted revolution.

However, recent literature has deeply challenged this traditionally accepted definition of the concept. It denies a political, economic, and gentilician view of an aristocratic leisure class ruling the Archaic cities and rather develops a notion of enterprising people who

perform their status through various strategies of distinction. In fact, ancient documents (literary texts, inscriptions, and monuments) reveal a set of behaviors used by individuals to express but also to promote their social status. Through a continuous investment in time-, money-, and energy-consuming practices one could thus enhance one's position in the social hierarchy. There were many prestige-generating behaviors, pertaining to various fields of social and civic life, that were different in each city and at different times. Ostentatious dedications in sanctuaries, sumptuous burial customs or original tomb-markers, elaborate weddings, gentilician strategies, military achievements, athletic victories, and many others were aimed at demonstrating and enhancing the prestige of the promoter. Individual status depends on public esteem, which has to be constantly built up. It was granted by the community, whether a small group of symposiasts or the whole population of a city, and it appears as the essential tool in shaping the social order. Actual boundaries between social classes were much more permeable than has been previously thought, and the civic social structure mainly appears as a continuum of statuses. During the Archaic period there was apparently no social group whose composition was exclusive. Access to the elite remained constantly open, so that in many cities aristocratic status can be defined as achieved rather than ascribed. Consequently, Greek aristocracy has to be conceived as the result of a process of accumulating social prestige by a continuous succession of behaviors increasing one's respect and popularity, which could eventually lead to a dominant position in the community and to a monopoly of power.

Social mobility, upwards or downwards, was therefore a dominant feature among the citizen group. Being the son of a well-respected man could certainly be a serious advantage, but it was no insurance against social downfall. Likewise, examples of social ascension were not uncommon. The elite was in constant social flux: from one generation to another, some of its members lost their prestige and their

privileged position, but other people rose with the success of their social strategies. Agonistic mentality conditioned the whole social hierarchy. Competition was thus an essential feature of Greek culture. “Always be the best and superior to others,” claimed HOMER (*Il.* 6.208). This ideal was constantly repeated by later poets, historians, rhetors, or epitaphs and deeply influenced action.

SEE ALSO: *Genos, gene*; Oligarchy.

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