

The Role of Geography in Shaping a Polis: A Model with Application to Athens and Sparta

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ABSTRACT

The comparison between Athens and Sparta has dominated the study of classical Greek civilisations for a long period of time. While much of the existing literature focuses on the political, social and economic differences between Greek city states, it fails to ask why these differences exist. This paper combines an existing wealth of literature on Greek geography with literature on the ancient Greek polises to analyse the role of geography in shaping a civilisation. It begins by decoding geography as an environmental stressor and then shows its political, economic and social outcomes in Athens and Sparta respectively. The above comparison suggests that the human responses to geography as an environmental stressor are crucial to whether and how a political community exists.

Introduction

Classical Greek civilisations have been one of the most popular subjects discussed by Western scholars. In particular, the comparison between Athens and Sparta has dominated the discourse on ancient civilisations. While one is marine and the other is continental, one is democratic (Carugati et al., 2015) and the other is oligarchal (Robertson, 1933) and one is known for its achievement in philosophy while the other is known as a symbol of physical strength and military discipline (Pomeroy et al., 2019). Thus, a key question in classical studies emerges - how can we explain the crucial differences between these two Greece city-states?

Most scholars tend to focus on the difference between the oligarchy in Sparta and democracy in Athens. What is then behind such differentiation between oligarchy and democracy? A possible answer could be the difference in the natural environment. However, few comparisons have been drawn based on the difference in their geographies. The geographical isolation of Sparta is only mentioned once in the 18-page paper 'The Role of Helots in the Class Struggle of Sparta' (Talbert, 1989, p. 30) and not even mentioned in the 27-page Sparta section of the book 'A Brief History of Ancient Greece' from Oxford University Press (Promory et al, 2004). Nor is it mentioned in the 28-page 'Development and Political Theory in Classical Athens' (Carugati et al., 2015).

This essay will discuss how geography shapes Athenian and Spartan civilisations. It first explores how geography can function as an environmental stressor and then show its political, economic and social outcome it has in Athens and Sparta respectively.

Environmental Stress in Athens and Sparta

As Chapman (1969, p. 38) claims in the book 'Ethics', political communities need a certain combination of internal and external stresses. They also need the resolutions to resist and limit the harm of those stresses to form a dynamic equilibrium. Stresses and their relevant resolutions have determined whether the political communities exist and what this existence looks like.

Classical Athens is a vivid example of co-existence with stresses and conflicts. Located on a coastal plain, it is viewed by many scholars not only as the political and economic centre of Greece but also as the geographical one. Facing the Aegean Sea, it has direct access to Asia Minor, a relatively active part of the Mediterranean world (See Figure 1). It is also connected to the Peloponnese through the isthmus of Corinth (See Figure 2). Although the soil in Athens is too acidic for the production of wheat (Williams, 1915, p. 25), it could still be purchased by the Athenians for being at the interchange of the classical world. Olives (Williams, 1915, p. 26) and silver (Williams, 1915, p. 27) are also produced and exported from the Athenian territory.



Figure 1. Athens, Aegean Sea and Asia Minor (Google Earth, 2021)

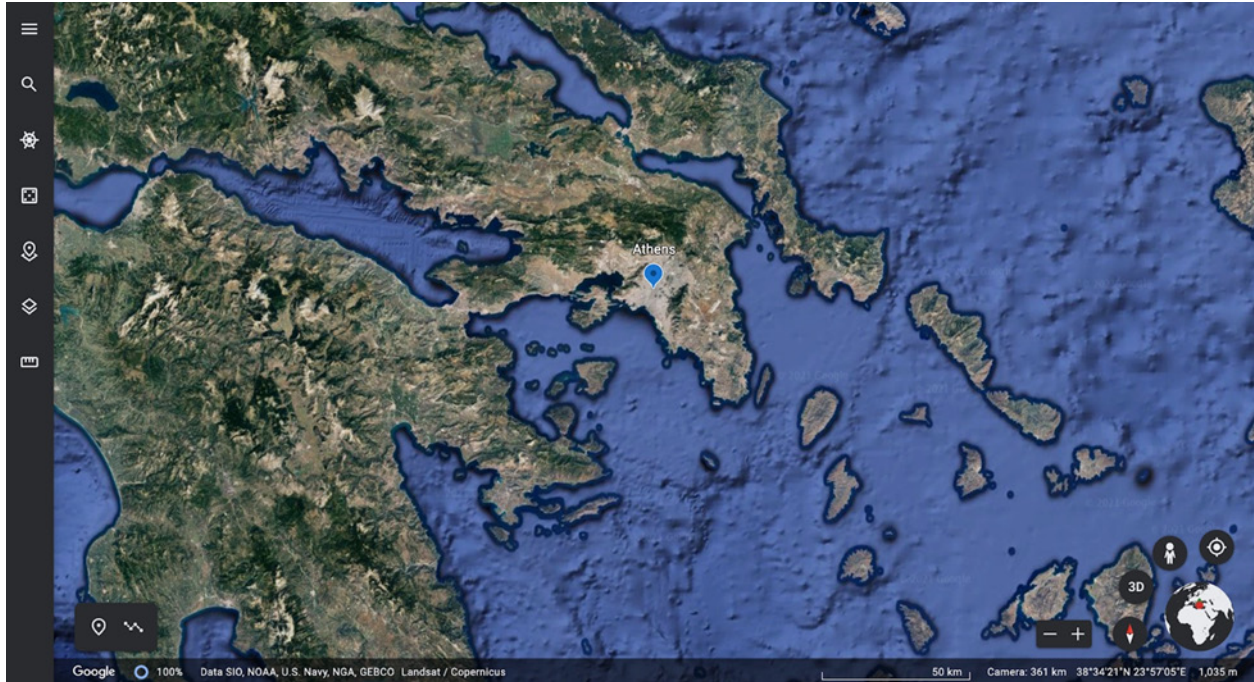


Figure 2. A closer look at Athens (Google Earth, 2021)

On the other hand, stress can hardly be found in the indigenous Spartan community. The spartan land is fertile and homogenous enough so that little observations and intervention is needed for the growth of grain there (Fleck & Hanssen, 2006, p. 125). Located in the closed valley of river Eurotus, it is also isolated from other indigenous communities by the snow capped mountains, which also protects Sparta from the threat of external groups. (See Figure 3) Such lack of stress and conflicts, in the long run, has also led to the lack of the ability of indigenous Spartans to resolve them.

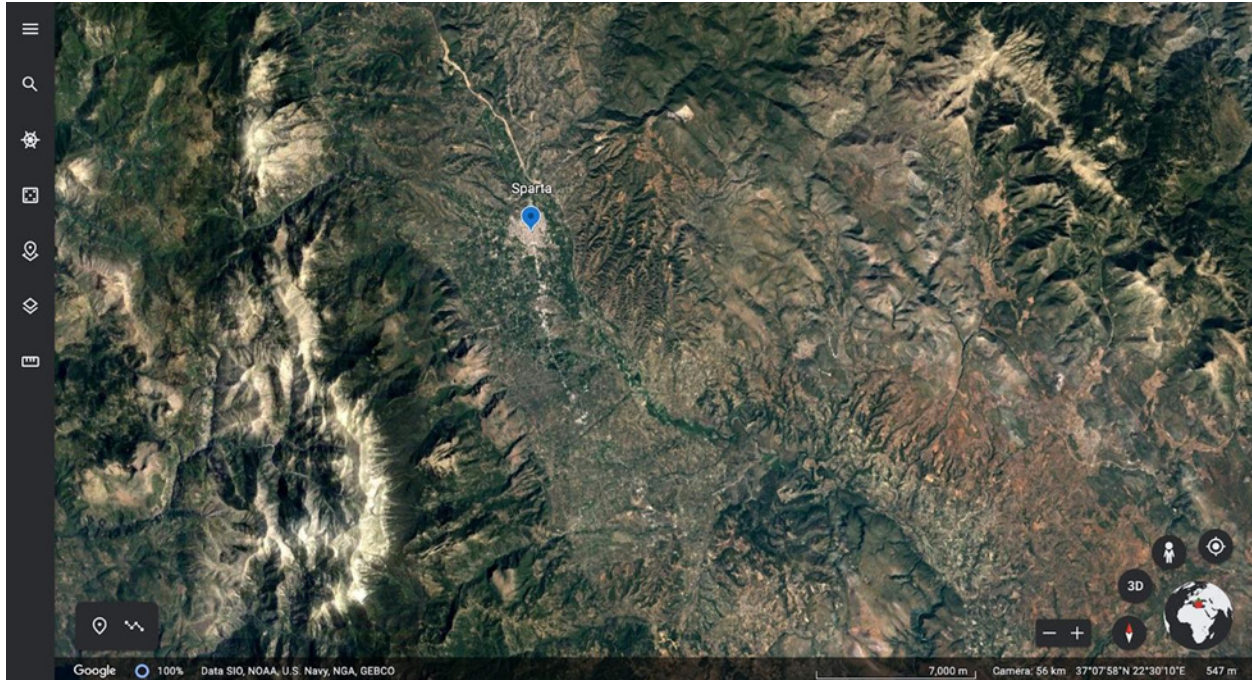


Figure 3. Sparta (Google Earth, 2021)

Outcome in Sparta

From the end of the 12th century BCE onwards (Cook, 1962, p. 17), however, Spartan society was not ruled by the indigenous but a foreign ethnic group known as Dorians who originated in Macedonia of northern Greece (Müller et al., 2010a, p. 6). Macedonia is located inland with relatively poor geographical conditions. The environmental stress led Dorians to migrate southbound through conquering other communities. Sparta was then found with a relatively ideal environment. The Dorians are militarily more advantaged due to such extra environmental stress. They, therefore, become the ruling class of Sparta as well as much of the rest of Peloponnese and transform the indigenous into helots (Cook, 1962, p. 18). The ruling Spartiates with Dorian origin lived as landowners renting their land to helots to cultivate (Hodkinson, 2008, p. 285).

The homogeneous soil makes annual crops like wheat and barley the main crops cultivated in Sparta (Fleck & Hanssen, 2006, p. 125). As wheat and barley are replaced at a fixed point in time each year, it is easy for centralised power to apply a change to all crops at once. The homogenous texture of land also ensures that a uniform change could be applied to all regions.

These new Spartans' likely controlled an area of 1400km² out of the total area 8500km² cultivated by helots for them (Hodkinson, 2008, p. 285). It has been estimated that there were between 170,000 and 224,000 helots present in around 497 BCE while the population of Spartans fell from 8,000 adult males to 1,000 due to various factors such as the Persian war (Talbert, 1989, p. 23). Therefore, the history of Sparta, like Paul Cartledge claims in his influential study "Agesilaus and the Crisis of Sparta, is "fundamentally the history of class struggle between the Spartans and the helots" (Talbert, 1989, p. 20).

The Spartan resolution for such class struggle was to allow helots to serve in the Spartan army. For example, there were a total number of 35000 helot troops at Plataea in 479 BCE, seven times the Spartiate hoplite (Talbert, 1989, p. 24). Such an opportunity itself of fighting with Spartans against their common external threat, such as the Persians (Talbert, 1989, p. 23), could give the helots a sense of alliance with Spartans. Additionally, the helots could also be rewarded with privilege for their distinguished military service. For example, the survivors among the 700

helots hoplites in the war against mercenaries from elsewhere in Peloponnese, were freed with the privilege of living wherever they pleased (Talbert, 1989, p. 25). This provided helots with a way to be liberated by benefiting the Spartan interest, which could also decelerate them from rebellion.

Recognising the risk of helot uprising and the contribution of the military to the stability of its society, the helot population has become a new source of military manpower in Sparta (Figueira, 1984, p. 108). Regarding the contribution and demographic advantage of helots, the Spartiates also redistribute their surplus from rent back to the helots instead of using it to trade for foreign luxury goods (Figueira, 1984, p. 108). As a result, Sparta became a totalitarian military state with an enclosed primary sector economy.

Outcome in Athens

Olive, the main type of crop cultivated in Athens, can also be used to explain the democracy of Athens. Unlike annual crops like wheat and barley grown in Sparta, olive trees on the heterogeneous hillside of Athens have a gestation period of 10 to 20 years (Fleck & Hanssen, 2006, p. 125). Therefore, it is hard for a centralised power to dictate the production work of peasants, as is with Spartans and helots. Like what Spartans do to helots. Instead, they have to delegate more rights to individual households of peasants on the decision making of agricultural production. As a result, most of the peasants on the Athenian territory are free citizens, and many of them only own one or two slaves (Fleck & Hanssen, 2006, p. 126).

As the olive itself could not be eaten as an essential source of food, Athenians had to trade with other polis for wheat and barley (Williams, 1915, pp. 25-26). Silver is also produced in Athens, which is used as the most widely accepted commodity in the classical world (Williams, 1915, p. 27). There are a variety of other goods exported, including marble, clay, wool, pottery, and imported including horses, cattle, lumber for shipbuilding, etc (Williams, 1915, pp. 26-27). Such intensive trade gives the Athenians great opportunity to comprehend some economic principles from observation. For example, Xenophon has noted that a sudden increase in supply leads to a significant fall in demand (Harris et al., 2016, p. 3) while a sudden increase in demand leads to a significant increase in price with relatively poor quality (Harris et al., 2016, p. 4).

The nature of classical Athens as a merchant city with different ethnic groups has also deeply influenced Athens's legal and political system. To move the conflicts "from bloodline to land" and therefore maintain a peaceful environment for the trade in Athens, the democratic system is invented which entitles every registered citizen with a vote in assembly for political decisions of the government, including those for the legal judgement such as banishment (Gaeta, 2004, p. 475). To reduce the barriers between different ethnic groups, the Athenian law also allows the intermarriage between people of different origins (Wolff, 1975, p. 407). To protect the right of foreign citizens in Athens, it also gave them the right to litigate claims in the court, to protect their bodies and properties against abuses, form civil associations, and criticise the status quo (Carugati et al., 2015, p. 11). Athens, as a result, becomes a merchant city with a democratic government and lazzifair laws.

Conclusion

The enclosed fertile Spartan valley gives the lack of environmental stress to the indigenous population, which makes it possible for Dorians from a harsher environment to take over and form their oligarchy enslaving the locals as the helots for agricultural production. On the other hand, both the lack of agricultural self-sufficiency and the strategic location as the centre of the classical Aegean world made Athens a merchant city with a democratic system. Thus, in the case of Athens and Sparta, geography can be seen as forming the essence of all other political, economic and social factors.

Limitations

As analytical desk research, highly relies on information from field researchers. Nevertheless, due to the lack of importance attached to the role of geography in shaping human history, the available resources relevant is still limited. Therefore, more field research on the interaction between geography and the developments of human civilisations is needed for the future. In addition, satellite and topographical maps without the labels of modern artificial structures are also needed for the demonstration of historical geography.

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