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## Peasants, Politics, and Popular Culture

A lot of grassroots history is like the trace of the ancient plough. It might seem gone for good with the men who ploughed the field many centuries ago. But every aerial-photographer knows that, in a certain light, and seen at a certain angle, the shadows of long-forgotten ridge and furrow can still be seen.

—E. J. Hobsbawm<sup>1</sup>

THIS BOOK ATTEMPTS to understand the ways that ordinary farmers, craftsmen, and slaves in ancient Greece made sense of their world and their place in it. Unlike the wealthy elites, who produced written texts illustrating their worldviews, the ordinary people of ancient Greece left little or nothing from which their experiences and perspectives can be recovered. Like the “trace of the ancient plough,” the culture of these groups is largely lost since it existed in “living” forms such as festivals and oral storytelling. Yet when seen from the right angle, the surviving evidence can reveal traces of this lost culture. This study is an attempt to excavate popular forms of culture that lie barely discernable beneath the surface of ancient Greek literature.

Yet this book is not simply an antiquarian inquiry into some curious cultural relics, but an attempt to show that forms of popular culture were vital to the practice of politics in ancient Greek communities. While the intimate linkage between popular culture and politics is not surprising to historians of other time periods, it has received less attention by historians of ancient Greece. The remarkable sophistication of the ancient Greek city-state, and especially of the classical Athenian democracy, has seduced historians into believing that the formal institutions, rather than informal social practices, were the primary locus of politics.

By contrast, I argue that diverse forms of popular culture such as festival revelry, oral storytelling, and the spontaneous collective punishment of social offenders were crucial aspects of ancient politics. Drawing on

the approaches of historians of other pre-modern societies, as well as the interpretations of social scientists who study modern peasant cultures, I show that these and other forms of popular culture were sites of vital political discourses and practices that, at different times and places, operated alongside, within, and sometimes even in opposition to the formal institutions of the Greek city-state.

Although I make some strong claims about the importance of popular culture in the classical Athenian democracy, I also draw material from a variety of different ancient Greek city-states. By looking broadly at popular culture throughout Greece, this book puts Athens in perspective and shows, contrary to much modern scholarship, that Athens had more in common with other city-states (e.g., Sparta), and indeed pre-modern and modern peasant societies in general, than is currently recognized.

### The Comparative Method: A Problem-Oriented Approach

Each essay in this collection begins with a question. Why did slave-owners on the island of Chios establish a hero-cult for a runaway slave? Why did the ruler of Sicyon name the tribal divisions of his city after lowly animals such as pigs, asses, and swine? Why did the poor citizens of Megara invade the houses of the rich and abuse them verbally and physically? Why were adulteresses in Aeolian Cyme mounted on a donkey and paraded around the town? I suggest that the answers to these questions reveal something fundamental about ancient Greek civilization, namely the centrality of popular culture to the political discourses and practices of the Greek city-state.

Yet in order to arrive at this answer, I reach far beyond the confines of Greek history to examine, for example, images of the grotesque body in popular culture of the Middle Ages, slave tales of trickster animals in the antebellum South, or the ways that landlords and peasants in contemporary Malaysia engage in an ideological struggle to define the terms of their mutual dependence. I draw from this comparative material in part because so much of the evidence for the ancient Greek past—particularly the everyday life of ordinary citizens and slaves—has been lost. By comparing ancient Greece to other historical societies, we can sometimes recognize similarities and patterns that help illuminate the relatively scanty evidence for popular culture in ancient Greece.<sup>2</sup>

There are great risks, of course, in using comparisons in this way. Critics will be quick to charge me with intellectual dilettantism—picking and choosing superficial points of similarity between societies while ignoring fundamental differences of social structure and historical context.<sup>3</sup> In response, it is important to emphasize that I am not claiming *identity* of

either social structures or causal relations between various social and political phenomena in different historical periods. Rather, the comparative evidence is used in one of two ways. First, it is used to support and in some cases provide texture (allow for “thick description”) of cultural practices that are only hinted at in outline in the ancient evidence. For example, the social context of an ancient Greek song in which a group of boys appear to threaten a wealthy landowner if he does not give them food and drink can be illuminated by comparison with similar, potentially violent rituals of hospitality between rich and poor in Early Modern Europe.

Second, the comparative evidence is used to construct general models by which the ancient evidence might be understood.<sup>4</sup> For example, patterns of riot and protest in Early Modern Europe can provide the framework for understanding some of the ways in which ordinary citizens in ancient Greece negotiated their relations with those more powerful than themselves. In the latter case, the applicability of the early modern evidence is based not on a single point of comparison—the fact of riot—but rather on a pattern of elements that is evident in both cultures, for example, a concurrence of economic distress among ordinary citizens and extra-institutional, ritualized forms of collective action. I claim neither that the causes of economic distress were identical, nor that the social structures of the ancient Greek city-state and Early Modern Europe were the same. And, as we shall see, the rituals of protest took different forms in different historical societies. English peasants made cacophonic music before the houses of the wealthy, while French journeymen engaged in ritualized forms of cat torture as a mode of protest against exploitation. In ancient Greece, youths sang songs outside the houses of the wealthy and demanded lavish fare. On occasion, these rituals of hospitality resulted in assaults on wealthy landowners’ property and even their families.

While acknowledging the cultural specificity of each historical society as well as their differences of social structure, economy, and political regime, I nevertheless argue for a common pattern, namely the tendency of ordinary citizens and peasants to use ritualized forms of popular culture as a medium for expressing discontent. Through the use of such general comparisons, I hope not only to shed light on some hitherto neglected features of Greek civilization, but also to add some case studies from ancient Greece to the available pool of empirical examples through which historians can understand the dynamics of pre-modern societies.

Whereas this study places considerable emphasis on such patterns of similarity between ancient Greece and other societies, I do not intend to obscure the historical specificities of each civilization. My emphasis on similarities is in part a reaction to the tendency of ancient historians to stress the exceptionality of ancient Greece (a term which usually refers

to the Athenian democracy).<sup>5</sup> Certainly ancient Greece was a distinctive society with its own cultural traditions, social structures, and historical trajectories. Yet these differences should not lead us to think that ancient Greece was unique in every aspect. A central argument of this book is that by recognizing certain parallels in non-elite worldviews between ancient Greece and other periods of history, we can recover a largely overlooked terrain of the political life of ancient Greek communities.

### Popular Culture: How to Recover It?

While this book is aimed in part at ancient historians, I also hope to pique the interest of historians of popular culture in other time periods. Despite the deficiencies of our sources in some regards, ancient Greece provides rich historical material that can illuminate some fundamental problems relating to the study of non-elite culture. I have already touched upon the first such problem, namely the methodological issue of how to recover the culture of ordinary people of the past. This question arises from the obvious fact that the mass of farmers, craftsmen, and slaves left little in the way of material remains, let alone written texts. How then can we confidently reconstruct the ways that they viewed and experienced the world? How can we know the fears, hopes, and fantasies of the mass of laboring humanity in past ages?

On the surface, the difficulties of recovering the culture of the masses might seem to be less severe for historians of ancient Greece. After all, ancient Athens was a democracy during its “Golden Age” (fifth and fourth centuries BCE) and hence the cultural achievements of this period were at least in part a product of the people—the ordinary citizens who farmed the fields, attended festivals, and voted in the political assembly. Yet this view is problematic for several reasons. First, Athens was unique in the degree of involvement of the masses in the institutions of the state. Most ancient Greek states were oligarchies, and, although there were other democracies, these were less radically egalitarian than Athens. If we want to understand the culture of ordinary people throughout the Greek world, we cannot look to Athens as representative. Second, even among historians of Athenian democracy, there is a vigorous debate about the degree to which the surviving evidence reflects a genuinely non-elite perspective. For example, scholars have noted that most surviving speeches given in the political assembly and law courts were by politicians from wealthy Athenian families and that elite values feature in the arguments made by these speakers.<sup>6</sup> Other scholars have argued, conversely, that elite speakers were compelled to appeal to the beliefs of the mass of ordinary citizens in their audience and that therefore the surviving speeches reflect non-elite

or democratic culture.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of one's position in this debate, it is an undeniable fact that all the literature that survives from ancient Greece was written by wealthy elites. How then, can we be sure that any surviving text reflects a non-elite world view?

By comparison, historians of the early modern period have the "chap-book," a cheap printed book, as evidence of the popular culture of their period.<sup>8</sup> These scholars can also reasonably rely on the collections of oral tales gathered by folklorists in the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, historians of slavery in the modern era have oral and written testimony that has allowed them to reconstruct aspects of the culture of, for example, slaves in the antebellum South.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, no popular books or recordings of oral tales survive from ancient Greece.<sup>11</sup> Ancient popular culture has been lost—at least in its direct form—to later researchers.

The qualifying phrase, *at least in its direct form*, is a crucial point. Some elements of popular culture survive as refracted through the writings of elites.<sup>12</sup> Occasionally, elite writers mention elements of popular culture in the course of pursuing other agendas. For example, Plato and Aristotle provide evidence for popular festivity even as they construct an ideologically motivated argument connecting festivity with social disorder and democracy. By stripping away this ideological bias and by analyzing the Greek evidence in relation to popular festivity in other cultures, one can recover something of its significance for non-elites in ancient Greece.<sup>13</sup>

There are two other ways in which Greek popular culture has entered the surviving literary record. First there are literary genres that bear a clear genetic relation to popular non-literary forms. Most important among these genres are iambic poetry, comedy, satire, and the novel.<sup>14</sup> These literary genres often preserve clearly identifiable popular themes (especially reversals of normal relations, obscenity, and grotesque imagery) even if we cannot take for granted that these elements are exact copies of their popular versions.

Second, there are those genres that—though not derived from popular forms—nevertheless draw material from them. For example, Herodotus makes use of folktales, fables, and proverbs in his *Histories*.<sup>15</sup> More broadly speaking, the theme of the downfall of the mighty in Greek tragedy may owe something to the reversals or leveling of hierarchical relations in both popular ritual and storytelling. Plato's representation of Socrates in his philosophical dialogues similarly seems to bear some relation to the popular grotesque (as Bakhtin has called it) both in his personal appearance and in his penchant for using analogies drawn from the world of ordinary laborers.<sup>16</sup> Again, however, we cannot assume that these appropriations are direct reflections of popular culture and can therefore be simply lifted from elite texts unproblematically.

What are we to do, then, with these diverse and indirect remains of popular culture? How can we move responsibly from surviving literature to popular culture? The problem is not new, even for historians of popular culture in later periods. Peter Burke has described the popular culture of Early Modern Europe as “An Elusive Quarry” and spends several chapters of his book dealing with the problem of recovering a culture that was largely oral and articulated in “living” forms such as festivals.<sup>17</sup> Even Bakhtin’s brilliant discussion of the popular culture of the Middle Ages has come under severe criticism for its acceptance of Rabelais’s comic novels *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* as a direct source for peasant culture in sixteenth-century France. Most notably, the literary scholars Stallybrass and White have challenged Bakhtin’s attempt to understand popular culture through the lens of a literary text.<sup>18</sup>

The arguments of these scholars are worth considering. Stallybrass and White propose that there are no separate domains, such as authorship and popular festivity, but rather each “are constructed in interconnection with each other.”<sup>19</sup> Using the example of Ben Jonson’s play *Bartholomew Fair*, they write: “there can be no question of understanding the play either as a homology of the ‘real’ Bartholomew Fair, or as a mere thematic pillaging of popular custom by an aloof and appropriative high culture.”<sup>20</sup> According to these scholars, sites and domains of discourse emerge out of an “historical complex of competing domains and languages each carrying different values and kinds of power.”<sup>21</sup>

The idea that popular culture is not a monolithic entity, neatly separated from other realms of non-literary and literary expression has been one of the major theoretical breakthroughs of recent scholarship.<sup>22</sup> Historians of popular culture in such diverse periods as Early Modern Europe and twentieth-century America now agree that “popular”/non-elite and “official”/elite culture must be studied in relation to one another. As Natalie Davis puts it,

[T]he hegemonic model of late medieval and early modern “official” cultures (whether of clerics or of kings) that suppressed “popular” cultures for their own ends has been modified to allow for some exchange of motifs and circulation of images across boundaries of learning and power.<sup>23</sup>

The recognition of the hybrid nature of mass and elite cultures presents both a challenge and an opportunity. On the one hand, popular culture is an inextricable blend of popular and elite elements. Furthermore, we only have direct access to the composite forms of culture that survive in literary texts written by elites. On the other hand, the very fact that popular culture has infiltrated or been appropriated into elite literary texts means that some aspects of the “living” culture of non-elites have survived (al-

beit in mediated ways) to be studied by scholars. The trick is to recognize these appropriations and to decode what these images and themes would have signified to non-elite audiences. Below, I outline the main points of my approach to these methodological problems in relation to ancient Greek popular culture. In the chapters that follow, I present some concrete examples of how this methodology can reveal the hidden landscape of popular culture that lies below the surface of Greek literature.

The way that we approach Greek literature as a source for popular culture depends in part on whether it was written for an audience of fellow elites (e.g., philosophy and historiography) or for performance before a mixed audience of elites and non-elites (e.g., tragedy and comedy). Literature written for elite audiences often draws on popular themes. Yet, as Stallybrass and White argue, we cannot speak simply of “appropriation” or “transference” of elements of popular culture to elite contexts. Rather, elements of popular culture are recreated for their new contexts in ways that make use of popular forms, but also adapt them to their own agendas. While we need to take seriously how these popular elements have been put to new uses in their surviving literary contexts, nevertheless, we can often identify elements that do not quite fit the narrative or ideological context of the surviving literary text. I suggest that these incongruous elements reflect earlier instantiations of popular themes which have been only imperfectly adapted to their new contexts. In other words, elite appropriations leave traces—vestiges—of earlier popular performances. While it must be recognized that these “popular performances” were themselves a hybrid mix of elements drawn from both high and low culture, these vestiges nevertheless can provide insight into the themes and meanings of popular culture.<sup>24</sup>

A different methodology is appropriate for Greek literature that was composed for a mixed audience of elites and non-elites. Tragedy and comedy, for example, were performed at publicly funded festivals.<sup>25</sup> When popular forms such as the folktale, fable, or proverb appear in dramatic plays, therefore, we might entertain the possibility that elites and non-elites understood them differently. In particular, by thinking about what these tales and proverbs might mean from the perspective of ordinary farmers, craftsmen, and even slaves, we may be able to understand the uses of these cultural forms among non-elites.

It should be emphasized that the performance context for some ancient literature is not well known. Was iambic poetry, for example, performed at public festivals or at elite drinking parties?<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, some ancient Greek literature, though aimed primarily at elites, may have been read aloud by slaves to their masters. In this latter case, we cannot assume that this literature reached elite ears alone, or that slaves understood the text in the same way as their masters.<sup>27</sup> By thinking about our



surviving texts from both elite and non-elite perspectives, in other words, we can see how the same story could have very different meanings for these different audiences.

We are aided, finally, in the task of identifying popular meanings of ancient Greek literature by the work of scholars of popular culture in better-documented eras, especially the medieval and early modern periods. By comparing the themes of popular culture in these periods with those of elite texts from ancient Greece, it is often possible to identify imagery and symbolism that would have resonated particularly strongly for non-elite audiences. By following the lead, then, of scholars of the popular culture of the Middle Ages, the Early Modern period, and even of slave and peasant societies of the modern era, we are put on the track of the imaginary of the ordinary Greek citizen and slave.

A brief example may help illustrate these methodologies. Greek literature frequently uses the language of food consumption and images of grotesque bodies to characterize bad leaders of the civic community. For example, in Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles calls Agamemnon a "king who devours his people."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the poet Hesiod addresses some village leaders as "gift-eaters."<sup>29</sup> The poet Alcaeus not only accuses his political rival, Pittacus, of "gobbling up the city" but abuses him by calling him "pot-bellied," "big-bellied," and "one who eats secretly by night."<sup>30</sup> Whereas in these Greek texts, this language is put in the mouths of elite speakers—or, in the case of Hesiod, at least a reasonably prosperous farmer—comparison with the use of such imagery in other historical periods suggests that these texts are drawing on a rich set of metaphors used popularly to describe the exploitation of the poor by the rich.<sup>31</sup>

As scholars of Early Modern Europe have observed, the culture of peasants is often characterized by bodily images, and frequently draws its "themes, motifs and patterns from hunger."<sup>32</sup> Contemporary peasant societies provide even more striking parallels with these Greek expressions. In Malaysian peasant speech, to collect interest is "to eat interest," to take bribes is "to eat bribes," and to exploit another is "to eat their sweat."<sup>33</sup> As James Scott comments, "[h]ere the peasantry's historical preoccupation with food and the accusation of ... cannibalism are joined together in a powerful, suggestive metaphor."<sup>34</sup> The pattern is the same in other South East Asian countries. In a striking parallel with Alcaeus' claim that his political rival, Pittacus, "gobbles up the city," an official in pre-colonial Burma was called the "eater" of a district.<sup>35</sup>

These parallels suggest that the elite writers of Greek literature and the elite characters within these texts have appropriated metaphors commonly used by non-elites *to critique elites*. The paradox of elite appropriation of non-elite critiques of elites not only reveals that some of the rich texture of Greek literature is drawn from non-literary culture, but



also that non-elite culture was highly politicized. This point leads to the second major historical theme addressed in this book, the relation between popular culture and politics.

### Popular Culture and Politics

The relation between culture and politics is a topic that lies at the intersection of the disciplines of anthropology, history, and political science.<sup>36</sup> A central debate in these fields has been whether the mass of ordinary laborers are capable of developing their own political culture or whether they are dominated both culturally and politically by elites. While some cultural historians (e.g., Bakhtin) have constructed celebratory narratives of the ways that “the People” resisted elite authority, others, including major political theorists such as Marx, Gramsci, and Althusser, have conceptualized the lower classes as the passive pawns of a dominant ideology. Both poles in this debate have been subjected to substantive criticism. For example, Bakhtin’s concept of a sphere of unofficial culture that subverts official ideology not only artificially separates “official” and “unofficial,” culture, but seems to reflect conditions in Stalinist Soviet Union rather than the popular culture of the Middle Ages. On the other hand, Marxists and neo-Marxists like Gramsci and Althusser have been criticized for conceptualizing the masses as the passive consumers of elite cultural constructions, especially those that justified the conditions of elite domination. Critics of this school of thought point out that this view leaves “no room for autonomous action by the people” or for their “reflexive understanding of the structure in which they are embedded and the possibility of their doing something about it.”<sup>37</sup>

Recent scholarship has found a middle ground between the two positions outlined above. These scholars have proposed a more nuanced model of pragmatic interaction between high and low, official and unofficial culture in which each side deploys cultural symbols in order to maximize gains for itself in ways that acknowledge the constraints of material conditions and the realities of the balance of power. Rather than viewing “official” culture and “popular” culture as distinct spheres, moreover, these interpretations argue that there was much overlap and interaction. For example, the British Marxist historian of the French Revolution, George Rudé, describes popular ideology as “a mixture, a fusion of two elements, of which only one is the peculiar property of the ‘popular’ classes and the other is superimposed by a process of transmission and adoption from outside.”<sup>38</sup>

Rudé distinguishes between the “inherent” or “traditional” beliefs of the people and the “derived” element that comes from the educated elite (the

liberal aristocracy and the bourgeoisie). Among the inherent beliefs of the people, Rudé counts the notions of a right to land and to a fair price for bread. In contrast to these rather limited and “backward-looking” views, popular ideology also absorbs from intellectuals more “forward-looking” political concepts such as individual liberty, the social contract, and the “Rights of Man.” Despite his emphasis on the importance of acknowledging the beliefs of ordinary peasants for understanding popular protest, Rudé ultimately argues that without leaders from the outside versed in the more sophisticated political ideologies of the times, popular protest was not able to change the status quo.<sup>39</sup>

The work of George Rudé and other British Marxist historians like Eric Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson has done much to further our understanding of the culture of the masses and its role in protest.<sup>40</sup> In essence, these scholars have shown how peasants mobilized their own modest cultural and material resources, sometimes in highly sophisticated ways, to secure their basic well-being. These studies have demonstrated that while peasant movements were unable to overthrow the system, they nevertheless played an important role in resisting greater exploitation. Peasants did so by constructing and reinforcing an ideology of reciprocity between rich and poor—Thompson’s so-called moral economy. Far from being a passive class, thoroughly brainwashed by a dominant ideology that obscured the realities of their condition, these scholars have shown that subordinate groups operated in active and pragmatic ways to improve the conditions of their existence.

Other scholars from different national and political traditions have further elaborated our picture of non-elite worldviews. In France, historians working from the *Annales* school have mined local archives to show the ways that the environmental and material conditions of peasants influenced their worldviews (mentalités).<sup>41</sup> Foremost among these are the well-known works of E. Le Roy Ladurie, whose studies of peasants of Languedoc have forever enriched our understanding of the details of everyday life in fourteenth-century France.<sup>42</sup> Other historians, such as Carlo Ginzburg and David Sabeau, have produced micro-histories of particular individuals or villages that illuminate wider peasant perspectives in early modern Italy and Germany respectively.<sup>43</sup>

In the 1960s and 1970s, American scholars turned to anthropology and borrowed models to show how peasant culture not only partook of “rites of reversal,” but deployed these in ways that articulated their visions of the world and occasionally challenged the status quo. Particularly important among the scholarship evincing the “anthropological turn” in historical studies is the work of Natalie Zemon Davis, who examined various aspects of early modern French society in light of Victor Turner’s theories of ritual reversal.<sup>44</sup> Davis argued that periods of popu-

lar festivity and protest in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France were not simply occasions when the peasants “let off steam” only to be more firmly put back in their subordinate social positions once the festival was over (Turner’s so-called safety valve theory). Rather, Davis suggested that for the mass of peasants, women, and children who participated, these rites helped articulate a common identity and even presented them with new possibilities for restructuring social relations. Similarly Robert Darnton, inspired in large part by the cultural anthropology of Clifford Geertz, showed how relatively powerless apprentice printers in seventeenth-century Paris could thumb their noses at those above them through sophisticated manipulation of certain cultural symbols (cats) in both popular and elite culture.<sup>45</sup>

Davis’s work helped to inspire a whole field of work in the late 1970s and 1980s on popular culture, especially as manifested in the “public life” of towns and villages. Parades, processions, and festivals became the center of analysis in the work of historians of medieval and Early Modern Europe.<sup>46</sup> For these scholars, public ritual was a site of complex negotiation of cultural symbols that articulated, and at times contested, the norms by which the community was ordered. Historians, anthropologists, and political scientists of the modern era soon joined in the trend and produced analyses of power as articulated through forms of public spectacle.<sup>47</sup> While some of this work has been reflected in studies of ancient Greece—especially the interest in processions—not enough has been done to examine how civic forms of ritual appropriate and blend popular and elite cultural traditions in complex ways.<sup>48</sup> One of the aims of this study is to show that while scholars naturally focus on the institutionalized forms of these rituals, much of the political work performed by these rituals takes place through their informal manifestations in the villages and towns of ancient Greece.

Another group of historians working on Indian history has also challenged Marxist views of the inertia of the peasantry.<sup>49</sup> Drawing inspiration from Gramsci’s acknowledgment of the raw energy and turbulence of the peasantry, these scholars have argued that subordinate classes do indeed have an autonomous sphere of thought and action. During the 1980s, these scholars produced a series of publications entitled *Subaltern Studies*, by which they endeavored to re-inscribe the lower classes into the political history of colonial India. Central to the mission of these studies was to show that the mass of laboring people did have a particular form of political consciousness, as evidenced by their formation of peasant movements and rebellions.

Historians of slavery in the antebellum South have similarly challenged the idea that slaves were subject to false consciousness and were the helpless victims of unequal distribution of resources and the hegemonic ideas

of the ruling class. Historians such as Eugene Genovese and Lawrence Levine, for example, have argued that slaves were well aware of the conditions of their oppression but were realistic about their chances of emancipation. Rather than risk almost certain death through violent revolution, these groups chose lesser paths of resistance, including working slowly, breaking tools, and generally thwarting the will of their masters. Some slaves, of course, used the system of rewards to gain emancipation from their masters. But what these scholars show most strikingly is the ways that slaves used the cultural tools around them (for example, African cultural traditions and Christianity) to shape a vision of the world that strengthened their sense of identity and helped them go on under conditions of enormous adversity.

Similarly, James Scott has examined the ways that peasants in contemporary South East Asia engaged in everyday forms of resistance that helped them struggle against the changes to their way of life brought about by the introduction of modern machinery and techniques of irrigation and fertilization (the “Green Revolution” of the 1960s and ’70s).<sup>50</sup> Far from being passive in the face of increasing economic hardship, peasants used every means at their disposal to defend their way of life, including machine-breaking, strategic work strikes, and moral censure of the rich. Scott shows how even everyday language was a site for ideological contestation between rich and poor. For example, whereas wealthy landowners described the rice given to workers who had helped with the harvest as a “bonus,” the workers themselves considered it part of their expected “payment” for labor. For the workers, the rice was a customary right, whereas the landowners “wish[ed] to maximize the discretionary character of the benefit ... because it [was] precisely this aspect of their power that yield[ed] the greatest social control.”<sup>51</sup>

Scott’s focus on language as a means of resistance is important for the present study and is worth expanding upon. Scott presents a typology of peasant speech based on both his ethnographic study of a Malaysian village and his wide reading of comparative history and political theory. According to Scott, peasant speech falls into three categories. First there is the “public transcript,” namely, the ways peasants speak in the presence of their superiors. In such forms of speech, peasants assume a stance of deference and willing submission to authority. Scott argues that to focus on this realm (often the most accessible, especially for historical studies) is to miss out on a wide range of speech that takes place either among peasants themselves in the absence of their social superiors (the “hidden transcript”) or in public, but in coded forms which mask their subversive content. Included in the latter are all sorts of informal speech, including jokes, riddles, proverbs, fables, and folktales—in short, popular culture. By reading popular culture as a form of coded speech with a political

meaning for subordinate groups, Scott opens a new terrain for the study of the politics of ancient Greek popular culture. In chapter 2, I pursue this approach by examining the many fables, proverbs, and folktales preserved in Greek literature. I argue that many do not fit well in their surviving literary context, and can be better understood when re-contextualized as a form of coded peasant speech.

This brief survey of historical scholarship on peasants and politics gives an indication of the major influences on this book. Yet I also hope that this book will make its own contribution to the ongoing debate about peasants, politics, and popular culture. One advantage, for example, of studying the relation between popular culture and politics in an ancient society such as classical Greece is that it demonstrates that the kinds of conflicts between wealthy landowners and peasants that historians of later periods attribute to specific events (such as the enclosure of common lands or the introduction of combine harvesters) in fact go much further back in time. Indeed, I suggest that the conflict between rich and poor in ancient Greece followed patterns of exploitation and resistance very similar to later periods of history. Whereas scholars such as James Scott imply that in an “older agrarian order” there was a balanced reciprocity between rich and poor that had only recently been threatened by new practices, my studies demonstrate that the poor have always had to struggle to enforce this norm. The idea of an earlier era in which rich and poor engaged in uncontested mutual reciprocity is a myth constructed by the poor as part of their ongoing attempts to secure their livelihood.

On the other side, the rich have always introduced new practices in their attempts to increase profits. Double-cropping, modern machinery, and changes in the ways loans are contracted can be genuinely new, but they are only the most recent weapons in the timeless drive of the rich to get richer. In other words, my argument is that rich and poor have engaged in an ideological and practical struggle that followed similar patterns from ancient Greek to modern times. Certainly, there have been moments of crisis in which patterns of conflict become particularly clear, but there has never been a time when the rich were wholly constrained by “traditional” values, or where the poor lived in contented interdependence with the rich. Not in ancient Athens, not in pre-industrial Europe, not in contemporary South East Asia.

The studies of popular culture surveyed above have had relatively little impact on the study of ancient Greece. Indeed, Kostas Vlassopoulos’s recent critique of the practice of Greek history emphasizes that ancient historians need to engage much more systematically with developments in other fields of history.<sup>52</sup> Vlassopoulos calls on historians to use comparative methods and specifically mentions the movement known as “history from below” as well as the Subaltern Studies movement. With a few

notable exceptions, historians of ancient Greece have focused on the city-state (*polis*), its political institutions, and the cultural artifacts it produced (e.g., temples, tragedies).<sup>53</sup> Yet historians of other periods are increasingly dispensing with the nation as a focus of analysis. Transnational or global history is becoming more mainstream, and this shift in focus has allowed for new objects of study that cross geographic and temporal boundaries.<sup>54</sup> Ancient Greece has much to offer these broader historical debates, and I hope that this book is a step in that direction.

### Key Arguments

At this point, it may be useful to summarize some of the key assumptions and arguments of the book. Following this overview, I provide a more detailed discussion of the economy, social structure, and political institutions of the Greek city-state in comparison with those of later societies discussed in this book. In addition, the final section of the chapter emphasizes the heterogeneous character of “the People” and the multiple ways that this category can be subdivided (e.g., men and women, craftsmen and farmers, free and slave). By recognizing the diverse identities and subdivisions of non-elites, I attempt to avoid oversimplification of the worldviews of the many groups who contributed to the production of popular culture.

1. Farmers, craftsmen, and slaves in ancient Greece participated in a rich and vibrant culture that is only indirectly attested in the surviving evidence. This culture consisted of both discourses (e.g., oral storytelling) and practices (e.g., festival ritual and various forms of popular justice).
2. Popular culture is political. The key political functions of the popular discourses and practices examined in this book include the articulation of non-elite worldviews and the negotiation of relations between powerful and weak, both the rich and the poor, as well as masters and slaves.
3. Popular culture existed alongside the formal institutions and official civic discourses of the Greek city-state, and played a vital political role in the regulation and reproduction of the social order.<sup>55</sup>
4. Major methodological difficulties face the historian who attempts to recover the culture of farmers, craftsmen and slaves in ancient Greece. Direct evidence (material or textual) is largely lacking. For this reason, indirect methods must be used.
5. The method of this book is to examine Greek literature for traces of popular culture. We cannot, of course, assume that the

themes, imagery, and symbolism of Greek literature—even those genres performed before popular audiences—are direct copies of these elements as they existed in non-elite contexts. Rather, Greek literature is a complex blend of elite literary culture and the “living” and largely oral culture of non-elites. The hybrid nature of Greek literature does, however, mean that elements of popular culture are not completely lost to modern scholars.

6. Several complementary methods for detecting and reconstructing the indirect remains of popular culture in Greek literature are possible:
  - a. For texts written for elite audiences (e.g., philosophy, historiography), the identification of elements that do not fit the narrative or ideological context.
  - b. For texts written for mixed audiences of elites and non-elites (e.g., tragedy, comedy, iambic poetry), the consideration of what a given theme or image might mean from a non-elite perspective.
  - c. Comparison of the themes and imagery of Greek literature with those of the culture of peasants and slaves in better documented eras. In this book, I make particular use of comparative examples drawn from medieval and early modern Europe, the antebellum South and contemporary South East Asia. These comparisons in no way are intended to elide crucial differences of historical context, social structure, and culture. Despite these differences, however, significant patterns remain that help the historian of ancient Greek popular culture make better sense of the evidence.
7. The methods outlined above reveal certain central themes and images of non-elite culture in ancient Greece, particularly the reversal of normal relations, images of the grotesque body, and obscene humor.
8. These themes and images played a vital role in affirming certain elements of non-elite worldviews and normative outlook. The norms emphasized in this book include the following:
  - a. Those lower down on the social order (ordinary farmers, craftsmen, and slaves) have a right to the basic means of survival including, most importantly, land and food.
  - b. The greed of the powerful threatens the well-being of the weak and undermines the stability of the social order.
  - c. The powerful have an obligation to ensure the basic well-being of the weak.
9. While non-elite discourses and practices seldom overturned the social order, they nevertheless played a vital role in affirming



non-elite collective identity and values. These articulations were the means by which subordinate groups resisted the ever constant threat of further exploitation.

10. While the phrases “popular culture” and “non-elite worldviews” may suggest that free Greek farmers, craftsmen, and their (often) non-Greek slaves shared a common culture and worldview, it is important to recognize that popular culture in ancient Greece was not a monolithic entity. Rather, popular culture was a dynamic and ever-changing field of speech and action in which various groups participated to varying degrees over time. In some instances, the interests of free citizens and slaves did, in fact, converge. On such occasions, these groups participated in a common set of practices and discourses that articulated a common worldview. In other instances, we can isolate particular practices and discourses that were distinctively the province of free citizens or of slaves. Recognition of the parallels and fissures between these two groups among others (outlined in the next section) allows us to appreciate the fluidity and flexibility of popular culture in ancient Greece.

It should be emphasized that this book is not an extended, comprehensive treatment of all aspects of popular culture and politics in the ancient Greek city-state. Rather, it presents a series of case studies, connected by a common purpose—to uncover some of the ways that non-elite groups conceptualized the world, regulated and reproduced the social order, and interacted with those in positions of authority above them.

### **Economy, Society, and Politics in Ancient Greece**

Since this book draws on comparative examples to illuminate the ancient Greek evidence for popular culture, it is important at the outset to acknowledge the ways that ancient Greece was a distinctive society with its own cultural traditions, social structure, and political systems. What follows, therefore, is a brief sketch of the economy, society, and political structures of ancient Greece that highlights points of similarity and difference with the other historical periods discussed comparatively in this book. This survey will also illustrate the heterogeneous character of “non-elites” in ancient Greece. Indeed, it is important to recognize that the people who participated in popular culture were themselves made up of diverse groups whose worldviews sometimes overlapped and sometimes diverged. This overview, therefore, will outline the different ways of dividing “the People” (for example, by class, status, and gender) in order to

avoid oversimplification of the complex identities of those who contributed to the production of popular culture in ancient Greece.<sup>56</sup>

It is widely agreed that Ancient Greece was an agrarian society. While in some city-states (e.g., Athens), a significant percentage of the citizen population was engaged in manufacturing and trade, in most city-states the vast majority of the population would have been farmers.<sup>57</sup> Yet beyond the broad consensus on this point lies a host of fiercely debated questions. Did all citizens have relatively equal plots of land, or were there significant inequalities? Was ancient farming geared at self-sufficiency, or was there considerable production for market exchange? Was agriculture dependent on slave labor? These are notoriously difficult questions to answer given the available evidence. As Lin Foxhall writes: “ancient ‘peasants’ are like post holes—you can see the places where they ought to have been, but frequently the evidence for their existence is only indirect.”<sup>58</sup>

Despite the methodological difficulties, scholars have begun to frame the general structural features that characterized ancient Greek society and its economy. First of all, despite the much-vaunted principles of self-sufficiency and equality in our literary sources, it is clear that there were significant inequalities of landownership in all Greek states, including egalitarian Sparta and democratic Athens.<sup>59</sup> For example, a recent study of landownership in classical Athens suggests that the richest 5 percent of the population controlled 32 percent of the land.<sup>60</sup> Second, it is clear that the wealthy were producing agricultural and other goods for the market on a large scale.<sup>61</sup> Grains, oil, wine, and a whole host of other agricultural products flowed within and beyond Greece through well-established trade networks. In addition, by the fifth century, wealth was being generated through ownership of skilled slaves, and we hear of numerous prominent individuals in Athens whose income was derived in whole or in part through the manufacture of such goods as leather, lamps, and couches.<sup>62</sup> Some wealthy slave-owners even rented out their slaves to mine operators, thereby generating a steady return on their investment in human capital.<sup>63</sup>

The wealthy elites used the profits from these enterprises to support their leisured lifestyles and pay for the various community services through which they legitimized their superior social and political status. Not only did these men provide the political and military leadership for the Greek city-states, including democratic Athens, but they frequently organized and financed festivals, feasts, and other communal activities. In some states, such as Athens, the obligation of the wealthy to use some of their profits toward communal ends became institutionalized (see below). In other states, this norm was enforced through informal, yet powerful, communal expectations.

The land of the wealthy was farmed either by slave labor (e.g., in Athens, Chios, Corinth, Megara, Aegina) or by serf-like populations (e.g., in

Sparta, Thessaly, Crete). The extent of the use of slaves in agriculture in classical Greece has been a major point of debate in recent scholarship. The emerging consensus seems to be that, at least for classical Athens, slaves were widely used in agriculture as well as in manufacturing and trading enterprises.<sup>64</sup> This acknowledgment of the centrality of slavery to the Athenian economy led Moses Finley to classify classical Athens as one of five historical slave societies, the others being Roman Italy from the second century BCE to the second century CE, and Brazil, the Caribbean, and the American South in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>65</sup>

The classification of Athens and Rome as slave societies, moreover, has allowed for much recent fruitful comparison of ancient and modern slavery.<sup>66</sup> For example, it is frequently noted that the distribution of slaves in classical Greece and in the American South was similar. In both societies, only a few very rich families owned more than fifty slaves, while most slaves worked in groups of fewer than twenty.<sup>67</sup> By contrast, Roman estates (*latifundia*) and sugar plantations in the Caribbean employed large groups of hundreds of slaves. The similarities and differences between these ancient and modern slave societies have been used to explain a wide variety of features of Greek civilization, including the relative frequency of rebellion among Sparta's serf-like population (the helots) in contrast to the absence of revolt in chattel-slave owning states like Athens.<sup>68</sup> The present study accepts the legitimacy and utility of comparison between ancient and modern slavery, and builds on this earlier work. In particular, in chapter 2, I draw on the work of scholars of slave culture in the antebellum South to illuminate and explain some strategies of resistance by slaves in ancient Greece.

With the exception of states like Sparta that conquered a large indigenous population and compelled it to produce food for them, most citizens of ancient Greek city-states farmed their own land with the help of their families and possibly a slave or two.<sup>69</sup> These citizens farmed land of varying sizes and fertility. Some would have enough to produce a modest surplus that could be used to engage in market trade, while others would have been capable only of bare subsistence. The proportions of moderately prosperous to poor farmers are impossible to determine due to the paucity of evidence for all but the wealthiest farmers. As Lin Foxhall puts it: "It seems likely that the social order of Greek poleis was not sharply divided into simple groups of 'rich' and 'poor' or 'large estates' and 'small estates.' However the fragmentary nature of our sources means that we cannot determine with any accuracy the composition of this spectrum."<sup>70</sup>

One key difference between the agrarian societies of ancient Greece and the peasants of early modern Europe, however, is that ancient Greek farmers were fully enfranchised citizens. In classical Athens, most significantly, ordinary farmers and craftsmen exercised political power over

themselves in the world's first direct democracy. Democratic regimes existed in a number of other ancient Greek city-states, moreover, although these were neither as stable as the Athenian democracy, nor as well-documented.<sup>71</sup> Even in oligarchies like Sparta, Corinth, and Chios, however, ordinary citizens had access to some of the political institutions of the state, especially the popular assembly, but also in some cases, a popular council.<sup>72</sup> Unlike peasants in early modern Europe, therefore, and unlike their own slaves and serf-like populations, Greek farmers and craftsmen were not subject to the political control of outside groups.

In many ways (but not all), this distinction in juridical status between free Greek farmers and their slaves and serfs was a crucial factor in ancient Greek society and culture. The political institutions of the Greek state worked to enforce sharp distinctions between free citizen and slave, and the ideological superstructure, including much of the literary production, also reinforced these distinctions. Free citizens could participate in the political and legal processes, and were considered to have the mental and physical attributes suited to these activities. Slaves, conversely, had no political or legal rights and were believed to have bodies designed for physical labor. In contrast to the rational and self-directing citizens, slaves were thought to have mental faculties appropriate for following the commands of others. While the bodies of free citizens were inviolable, the bodies of slaves could be beaten, tortured, and abused at will. Finally, it was considered appropriate for citizens to perform labor for themselves and their family, while servile labor was conceptualized as work for the benefit of others.<sup>73</sup>

Despite the strength of these political, legal, and ideological distinctions, there is considerable evidence that the differences between free and slave were not always apparent in everyday life.<sup>74</sup> As we have seen, slaves worked side-by-side with citizen-farmers in the fields. Furthermore, in the construction of civic buildings and other urban crafts, slave and free workers performed similar tasks for equivalent wages.<sup>75</sup> Some slaves were allowed to keep a portion of their earnings and even lived apart from their masters.<sup>76</sup> Banking slaves, for example, or those employed as agents in the trading enterprises of elites, could live relatively autonomously and sometimes accumulated considerable wealth.<sup>77</sup> Even certain publicly owned slaves, such as the one employed by the state to test the purity of silver coinage, are known to have enjoyed personal autonomy and material prosperity.<sup>78</sup>

In warfare, recent work has shown that slaves not only fought in battles alongside their masters, but also rowed in the fleet side-by-side with free citizens and hired mercenaries.<sup>79</sup> The ideological construction whereby citizens were defined as those who fought in defense of the community had to be insisted upon in the face of considerable overlap between slave

and free, on the one hand, and non-citizen and citizen, on the other. Briefly stated, in some important spheres of life in the ancient city, notably economic production and military service, there seems to be considerable overlap between the activities of the free farmer, craftsman, or soldier and the slave, despite the strenuous construction of ideological distinctions between them. In addition, given that there was no obvious physical difference like skin color between free and slave as there was in the American South, it was significantly easier for a slave to pass himself off as a citizen in daily interactions.

One might expect that Greek citizens distinguished themselves from slaves through dress and behavior. Yet, at least in classical Athens, these means of distinguishing two statuses do not seem to have been rigorously observed.<sup>80</sup> Notoriously, one ancient observer complained that one could not tell the difference between slaves and citizens on the streets of Athens.<sup>81</sup>

There exists the most lack of restraint among slaves and non-citizen residents at Athens, and it is not possible to strike [these groups] there nor will a slave get out of the way for you. I will tell you the reason for this local custom. For if the law allowed a slave or non-citizen resident or freedman to be struck by a free man, then many times someone would strike an Athenian citizen thinking him to be a slave. For the people there dress no better than the slaves andmetics and are no better in appearance.

While this view is clearly exaggerated, coming as it does from a critic of Athenian democracy, it must contain a grain of plausibility in order to be an effective complaint. Moreover, it is a charge that it is echoed in other critical sources.<sup>82</sup> In all likelihood, the evidentiary basis of these claims about the freedom and comfortable lifestyles of slaves in Athens was the skilled slaves who were allowed to keep a portion of their earnings and lived apart from their masters. Although this group of privileged slaves is clearly not representative of slave experience as a whole, it does suggest that in everyday life, the distinction between the two statuses was not always vividly apparent.

Just as the political and ideological distinctions between ancient Greek citizens and their slaves might be less relevant in the realm of everyday life, so the juridical differences between ancient Greek farmers and early modern and modern peasants can obscure certain similarities in their lived experience of the world. First, the fundamental fact of life for both Greek citizen-farmers and peasants in more recent eras is that they have to labor for a living. Unlike the members of the few prosperous families, the lives of the majority of Greek citizens and their slaves were determined by the labor cycles of the agricultural year.<sup>83</sup> The fact of continual agricultural

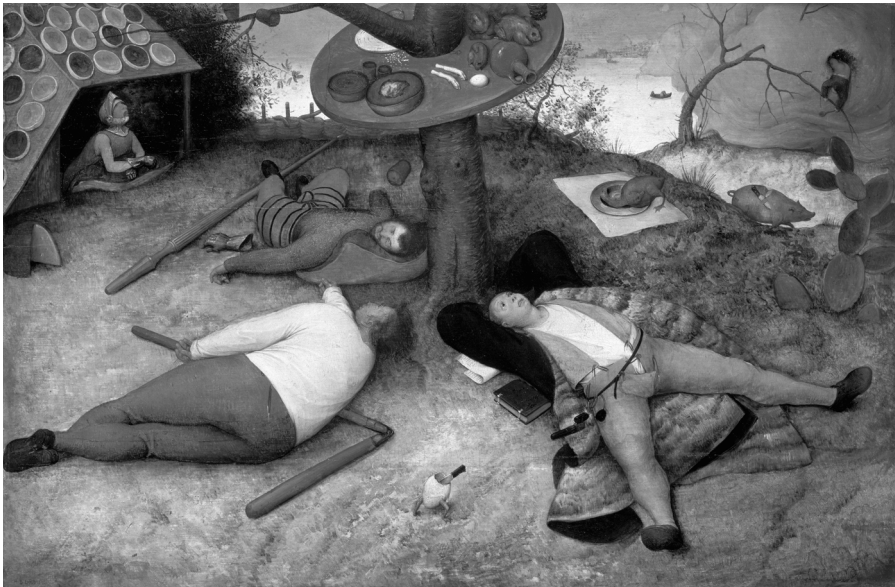


Figure 2.

*The Land of Cockayne*, 1566, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Note the houses roofed with pancakes, the plump, leisured peasants, and the roast pig with a knife stuck in its back, conveniently ready for carving. Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Image © Bayer&Mitko/ARTOTHEK.

labor conditions much of the worldview of these groups and provides an important point of contact with other agrarian societies, both pre-modern and modern.

One simple example helps to illustrate this fact. A notable feature of the popular culture of peasants in early modern Europe is the fantasy of a world in which the earth freely gives up nourishment without the need for human labor (fig. 2). Such utopias crop up frequently in Greek literature and, as I argue in chapter 2, they derive from precisely the same fact of life that drove pre-modern peasants to this fantasy: the unavoidable reality of bone-wearying agricultural toil for the vast majority of ordinary Greeks.

For the (probably) large numbers of families who had only enough land to feed their families and no more, fluctuations in crop yield from year to year made their livelihood precarious.<sup>84</sup> A second point of contact, therefore, between ancient Greece and other agricultural societies is that their lives were colored, and for some, wholly determined, by the need to secure their livelihood not only against a recalcitrant landscape, but in the face of changes in the availability of labor due to the family life



cycle. A major benefit of comparative research in this area has been to illuminate the strategies by which ancient Greek subsistence farmers managed these risks.<sup>85</sup> One such strategy underlies many of the cultural phenomena examined in this book, namely the creation and maintenance of links of reciprocity between ordinary farmers and the wealthier landowners in their communities.

These two facts—the need for continual labor and the difficulties of building a livelihood out of the soil—are the fundamental conditions, I suggest, that shape the worldviews not only of ancient Greek farmers and their slaves but also of agricultural laborers in different times and places. Therefore, although there is legitimate resistance among ancient historians to the use of the word “peasant” to describe ancient Greek citizen-farmers, I suggest that there remain some important similarities of everyday life and worldview between ordinary farmers and slaves in ancient Greece on the one hand, and peasants in early modern Europe and modern East Asia, on the other.<sup>86</sup> As Paul Cartledge puts it: “Provided ‘peasant’ retains its etymological sense of ‘countryman,’ and does not necessarily connote political subordination or subjection, the term is in my view a helpful one, since it points to the fact that most ancient Greeks lived in and off the country and that ... the Greek economy was unalterably rural and agricultural at its base.”<sup>87</sup>

A second characteristic of the peasantry in more recent periods of history, however, is also broadly inapplicable to ancient Greek citizen-farmers, although again it offers certain points of contact. It is generally true of peasant societies in Early Modern Europe and modern East Asia that “the surplus extracted from peasant producers supports other social strata.”<sup>88</sup> In contrast to this feature of early modern and modern peasant societies, the wealthier strata in classical Athens and several other major ancient slave-owning states (e.g., Chios) extracted surplus not from the toil of poor citizen-farmers, but through slave labor. Medieval serfs and early modern peasants, by contrast, “support(ed) the upper strata through the payment of rents, a share of the crop, or labor services.”<sup>89</sup>

Yet behind this basic distinction between free citizen-farmers in ancient Greece and peasants in later periods of history lie some similarities. First of all, even if Greek citizen-farmers were not *formally* subject either politically or economically (as serfs or tenants) to wealthy landlords, “*in practice, however, they were only too likely to be exploited.*”<sup>90</sup> Evidence for this assertion comes from a variety of sources. First, there is widespread evidence for indebtedness among the poor to their wealthier neighbors.<sup>91</sup> This fact is particularly well attested for the archaic period in states like Athens and Megara, where elite leaders were forced by widespread popular unrest to enact measures relieving the peasantry from their debts.<sup>92</sup> As I discuss in chapter 4, these measures, known as the “Release from Bur-



dens” in Athens, and the “Return of Interest” in Megara, seem to have checked some of the most egregious cases of exploitation of the poor by the rich. Yet it is apparent that these measures did not end the unequal distribution of resources or the tensions that arose from this imbalance.

The evidence for class tensions in Greek city-states, both democratic and oligarchic, is plentiful.<sup>93</sup> There is no need to provide an extensive catalogue of instances of civil strife between rich and poor, as the examples have been thoroughly studied.<sup>94</sup> Yet a few illustrative examples show that in many cases the same factors that fueled peasant revolts in early modern Europe and modern South East Asia—namely, for access to land and debt relief—also drove ordinary Greek citizens to rebellion. An instigating event for the gruesome civil war that broke out on the island of Corcyra in 428, for example, was a legal indictment against five of the richest citizens by one Peithias, the “leader of the people.”<sup>95</sup> In the ensuing strife, oligarchs were killed not simply for their opposition to democracy, but “by their debtors because of the money they owed.”<sup>96</sup> In 412, the people on the island of Samos rebelled against the elites, who were also known as “those who hold the land.” After killing or expelling some six hundred of these landowners, the masses distributed the land and property of these men among themselves.<sup>97</sup>

An anecdote deriving probably from the middle of the fourth century BCE further elaborates this pattern of indebtedness leading to violent rebellion of the poor:

Theocles and Thrasonides in Corinth and Praxis in Mytilene valued property but little and displayed magnanimity seeing their fellow citizens in a state of poverty while they themselves were affluent. They also advised others to lighten the burden of poverty for those in need. And after they did not succeed in convincing the others, they themselves remitted the debts owed to them, and thus gained not only money but life itself. For those whose debts were not remitted, attacked their creditors, and, wielding the arms of rage, and proffering the most reasonable claim, that of irresistible necessity, slew their creditors.<sup>98</sup>

A parallel for the enlightened practice of the Corinthian and Mytilenian individuals memorialized in this anecdote can be found in classical Athens. The rich Athenian politician Cimon is said to have opened up his estates for all comers and allowed anyone who liked to come and pick fruit or other produce.<sup>99</sup> Cimon’s generosity, as that of the Corinthian and Mytilenian individuals above, is remarkable precisely because it was the exception. The unspoken norm was that the rich either ignored the needs of the poor, or did the very minimum required to secure the social peace. The poor in turn strove within the limits of their power to obligate

the rich to help the poor. It is no coincidence that conservatives like Plato report that the standard slogans of democrats were for a redistribution of the land and a cancellation of debts, i.e., “the classic slogans of oppressed peasantries” throughout history.<sup>100</sup>

The centrality of land and debt relief to popular unrest in ancient Greece puts ancient Greek rural laborers in alignment with peasantries in other times and places. Even if ancient Greek citizen-farmers were not generally subject to rents and taxation, the experience of strong tensions between a small group of large landowners and a large group of small landowners was similar. As Lin Foxhall observes, even if the distribution of land was relatively egalitarian when judged by the standards of Rome or by a modern perspective, the ancient Greeks themselves may still have perceived great inequalities of wealth and engaged in class warfare to defend their interests.<sup>101</sup> The essays that follow trace some of the ways that ancient Greeks responded to and managed this tension, not only through violence, but on a day-to-day basis through a politics of resistance.

The existence of strong class tensions between rich and poor citizens in the ancient Greek city-states points to an area of overlap between the lived experience of ordinary citizen-farmers and their slaves. If, as I have suggested above, free Greek citizens labored with insufficient land and often became obligated to richer citizens through debt, then their lived experience of the world would have shared some similarities with that of their slaves, despite differences in juridical status. Just as slaves toiled on the land and resented the easy living of those whose wealth depended on their labor, so ordinary citizens were angered by the disproportionate share of the land controlled by the wealthy, and suffered from the humiliation and hardship of being dependent on these same men for loans and other forms of support in times of need.

Evidence for a common class position and worldview among ordinary Greek citizen-farmers and their slaves can be found in the instances of civil unrest in which slaves and ordinary citizens fought together against the wealthy landowners. For example, in the civil war in Corcyra in 428, both democrats and oligarchs offered freedom to the slaves if they fought on their side. The majority of slaves, however, supported the democrats.<sup>102</sup> Similarly, when the Chian oligarchs rebelled from the Athenian empire in 412, they faced opposition not only from the Athenians (who had established a base in Chian territory), but also from their own slaves. According to Thucydides, most of the Chian slaves deserted to the Athenians at their base in Chian territory and “did the most harm [to the Chian oligarchs] due to their knowledge of the land.”<sup>103</sup> Earlier in the fifth century, finally, a civil war erupted in Syracuse in which the mass of ordinary citizens and the slaves fought together against the “landowners.”<sup>104</sup>

What these examples suggest is the ability of slaves to organize themselves and even channel their collective actions toward common goals, some of which they might share with other groups in society. The fact that both sides offered freedom to the slaves in the Corcyrean example shows that the slaves were not simply motivated by personal interest, but by politics. Moreover, despite differences in origin, language, and location in the countryside, slaves on Corcyra, Chios, and at Syracuse apparently acted collectively against elite landowners.<sup>105</sup> Even more strikingly, despite differences in juridical status, slaves fought alongside the ordinary free farmers and craftsmen who formed the bulk of the democratic faction in these civil wars.<sup>106</sup> As Alain Bresson comments in regard to rebellion of slaves on Chios, there was clearly “un rapport entre population libre et population non-libre.”<sup>107</sup>

These examples of collaboration between ordinary Greek citizens and their slaves do not, of course, completely negate the evidence for tensions between free citizens (rich and poor) and their slaves. Despite the absence of full-scale slave rebellion, moreover, there is considerable evidence that slaves in ancient Greece resisted their masters (rich or poor) through lower risk modes of opposition such as are attested for other slave-owning societies, namely, “malingering, complaints, tool-breaking, mistreatment of draught animals and livestock, work slowdowns, theft, fantasy folklore, flight and, at moments of extreme duress, acts of violence toward masters.”<sup>108</sup>

The flight of individual slaves, for example, was a common occurrence in Greek city-states. Comedy depicts flight as a typical behavior of slaves, and the chore of tracking down a runaway slave is represented as a mundane fact of life in Greek literature.<sup>109</sup> The reception of runaway slaves from one city by another could even be a *casus belli* in some circumstances.<sup>110</sup> More unusual but still significant are those occasions when slaves took advantage of the disruptions of civil war to escape their masters en masse. For example, when the Spartans established a base in Athenian territory in 413 BCE, twenty thousand Athenian slaves took the opportunity to flee.<sup>111</sup> In such cases, we must imagine that slaves belonging to all classes of Athenian citizens, not just those owned by the wealthy, were among those who preferred to escape slavery than remain with their owners.

As already noted, ancient Greece follows the general pattern of slave societies in which full-scale slave rebellion is rare due to the inherent difficulties and dangers of organizing revolt. Ancient Sparta provides somewhat of an exception in that it experienced relatively frequent rebellions of their enslaved serf population (the helots).<sup>112</sup> Most scholars cite two factors to explain the absence of full-scale rebellion among slaves in classical Athens and other ancient Greek slave-owning states. First, there was

considerable ethnic heterogeneity among the slaves who came from a variety of cultures including Thrace, the Black Sea region, Lydia and Caria in Asia Minor. These diverse origins, according to scholars, prevented slaves from forming a common identity or even speaking to one another. Second, it is believed, the employment of slaves in a wide variety of occupations limited their opportunities to mix with one another and prevented them from developing a common class perspective.<sup>113</sup>

Yet the example of coordinated flight among slaves just mentioned suggests that slaves had developed effective channels of communication. Furthermore, the examples of collaboration between slaves and ordinary Greek citizens cited above strengthen the case for considering slaves as quite capable of communicating among themselves and organizing themselves politically. In what language did slaves of diverse ethnic origins communicate with one another? In all likelihood, slaves communicated in Greek or a pidgin form of Greek, as well as in their native languages in those places where significant concentrations of slaves of a certain ethnicity were to be found.<sup>114</sup> It is obvious that most slaves needed to be able to speak Greek, and many even to read and write it, in order to be useful to their Greek masters.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, there are numerous examples from ancient Greece of slaves who were fully literate in Greek and served as accountants, secretaries, and teachers for private individuals, business enterprises, and even the state.<sup>116</sup>

It is likely, moreover, that slaves in Greece became Hellenized fairly rapidly and therefore that Hellenic culture could facilitate the development of a collective identity among them. It is not hard to see that slaves who worked alongside their Greek masters and lived in their houses would acquire elements of Greek culture. For example, in Euripides' play *Ion*, the chorus of slave girls belonging to Creusa say that they have heard the stories of Heracles and Iolaus while weaving.<sup>117</sup> The tombstones of non-Greeks (including slaves and ex-slaves) in Athens, moreover, show that many adopted Greek forms of self-representation, despite their non-Greek origins.<sup>118</sup> In some cases, the dedication on a tombstone reveals mistakes in written Greek, suggesting a grasp of Greek that was perhaps adequate for daily communication, but still imperfect in written form.<sup>119</sup>

Interestingly, sometimes Greek-style funerary monuments and epitaphs were accompanied by a parallel inscription in the native language of the deceased.<sup>120</sup> Similarly, scholars have noted that many non-Greeks adopted names that blended Greek and non-Greek elements.<sup>121</sup> These facts suggest that slaves maintained some sense of their ethnic origins despite considerable assimilation to the culture of their masters. It is likely, therefore, that slaves had contacts with members of their land of origin, something that must not have been hard to do in cosmopolitan cities like classical

Athens, where a sizeable number of foreigners were either resident or temporary visitors.<sup>122</sup>

Finally, the evidence of slave names shows that there were concentrations of particular ethnicities in Athens, and therefore such slaves might have had opportunities to communicate in their native language and maintain ties to their native culture. The frequency of generic slave names associated with certain ethnicities indicates that certain ethnic groups, such as Thracians, were well represented among slaves, even if we cannot always be sure that a specific slave actually was of the ethnicity that his name suggested. Slaves in Athens are frequently called Thraitta, or “Thracian women,” Lydos, or “Lydian man,” Syros, or “Syrian man.”<sup>123</sup> Manes, one of the most common slave names, seems to be associated with Phrygian ethnicity.<sup>124</sup> It appears, moreover, that slaves of certain ethnicities were concentrated in particular sectors of the economy. Phrygians, for example, seem to be overrepresented among mining slaves, and Phoenecian slaves appear frequently among banking and slaves engaged in trade.<sup>125</sup>

It is likely that these ethnic groups found occasions to speak in their native tongues and even maintained their own associations. The Thracian cult of Bendis is perhaps the best known foreign cult in Athens, and it is likely that it served as a focal point for Thracian culture for both free and slave.<sup>126</sup> We can imagine similar meeting points for different ethnic groups, much like the Plataeans, who, after the destruction of their city by the Spartans in 427, met monthly at the cheese market.<sup>127</sup> Ancient slaves seem to have enjoyed considerable freedom of movement, as indeed was necessary if they were to be useful to their masters.<sup>128</sup> It is very likely that all but the most oppressed slaves, therefore, found the opportunity to gather and communicate with one another, as the examples of their joint actions (flight, rebellion) discussed above suggest.

If we return now from this extended discussion of slaves and slave culture to the free Greek citizens, it must be stressed that just as the slave population was internally differentiated by (for example) ethnicity, occupation, and levels of literacy in Greek, so the citizen population was internally diverse. I have already pointed out that ordinary Greek citizen-farmers possessed land of varying sizes and fertility and therefore enjoyed levels of wealth varying from bare subsistence to moderate prosperity. It is important to stress, moreover, that not all free citizens were farmers. In some city-states, the non-agricultural segment of the economy was considerable, and many ordinary citizens were engaged in manufacturing and trade.<sup>129</sup> Alain Bresson has estimated that in classical Athens, less than half the population consisted of farmers and that ordinary citizens were as likely to be craftsmen or traders as farmers.<sup>130</sup> This estimate corresponds with some of our more qualitative evidence, such as Xenophon’s much

quoted claim that the political assembly of Athenian citizens was composed of “fullers, cobblers, carpenters, blacksmiths, farmers, and traders.”<sup>131</sup>

When we speak of popular culture in Athens and many other city-states, therefore, we are speaking of the culture not just of farmers and their slaves, but also of free and slave craftsmen and traders. There are in fact some indications of the perspective of these latter groups in our sources of popular culture. For example, in the common “peasant” fantasy of a world in which nature spontaneously produces food, the obsolescence of the crafts is envisioned alongside that of agricultural toil:

What need will we have any longer for your plows, yokemakers, sicklemakers, or smiths, or for sowing or staking? Rivers of black broth, gushing abundantly with rich sprinkle-bread and cakes of Achillean barley, will flow of their own accord through the crossroads from Wealth's springs, ready for us to scoop some up.<sup>132</sup>

For large commercial cities like Athens and Corinth, then, we must assume that the culture of the working classes was not wholly agricultural in outlook, but also shared something of the worldviews of artisans and traders. The incorporation of the crafts in the fantasy of a world without toil illustrates the flexibility of popular culture and its ability to absorb the perspectives of different groups within a common cultural form. Recognition of the hybrid nature of the working classes in states like Athens, therefore, does not weaken the argument for (at least in some contexts) a unified popular culture in which all groups could partake.

In some city-states, most famously classical Athens, successful revolutions against elite rule resulted in the establishment of relatively stable democracies. The success of the Athenian democracy, I shall argue, rested in part on its remarkably thorough incorporation of non-elite normative outlooks and practices into the ideologies and institutional structures of the state. Indeed, classical Athens institutionalized some of the customary mechanisms for redistributing the resources of the wealthy toward the poor through the creation of formal civic duties (“liturgies”) to be performed by the rich for the benefit of the wider community.<sup>133</sup> These duties included the obligation to fund a festival through which the poor not only were entertained at the expense of the rich, but were provided with meat, wine, and other foodstuffs as part of the communal feast. As I argue in the chapters that follow, these formal institutions were only one form of a wide array of social mechanisms by which the obligations of the rich toward the poor were enforced.<sup>134</sup>

Much of the evidence for these practices must be gleaned from casual references or indirect sources. Elite leaders in classical Athens, for example, not only brag of their performance of formal civic obligations such as financing a warship or the production of a tragedy, but also occasion-

ally mention informal acts of magnanimity such as paying for the ransom of a poor citizen captured by the enemy in war, or supplying the dowry for the daughter of a poor citizen.<sup>135</sup> In a few cases, we even have fragments of public monuments praising elites for their benefactions in relation to “the crops” of the village.<sup>136</sup> This indirect and fragmentary evidence is only the tip of the iceberg in the sense that regular informal loans and subsidies between rich and poor were probably vital not only to the survival of many small farmers, but also to the bond that held the community together.<sup>137</sup> Despite the wide array of formal and informal mechanisms for redistributing wealth, however, Athenian literary texts reveal that constant ideological struggle between wealthy elites and the mass of ordinary citizens was a prominent feature of Athenian collective life.<sup>138</sup>

A further complication of the major dividing lines in Greek society between rich and poor and between free citizens and their slaves was the existence of a substantial group of free non-citizens. As usual, we know more about these non-citizens in Athens than in any other Greek community. Some were ex-slaves who had been granted or managed to purchase their freedom. In comparison with Rome, these seem to be very few in number. The majority were free Greeks who had left their natal community and immigrated to a new polis, hence their title, *metoikoi* (metics), or “those who have changed their residence.” Under exceptional circumstances, these immigrants could be granted citizenship, but in most cases they remained free non-citizens in their new communities.<sup>139</sup> This group was generally very active in commerce and manufacturing, and we know of particular individuals at Athens who became quite wealthy. On the other hand, metics had no political rights, could not own land, and were required to pay a special tax and be represented by a citizen if they came into legal difficulties.<sup>140</sup>

Once again, however, the political and legal distinctions are not the whole story. Metics served alongside citizens as garrison soldiers and rowers in the Athenian navy.<sup>141</sup> We also hear of metics freely participating in the highest social, political, and intellectual circles at Athens.<sup>142</sup> Citizens, moreover, frequently patronized, socialized with, and sometimes cohabited with free non-citizen women.<sup>143</sup> It is likely that the strict legal rules for citizenship (citizen parents on both sides) were in practice frequently bent to admit the illegitimate offspring of these liaisons. If we believe traditions about the great statesman Pericles, then he not only relied on the metic Aspasia for his political policies, but had his children by her admitted to citizenship.<sup>144</sup> This is not the only noted case of such disregard of legal rules, and we may wonder how many other cases, associated with less famous individuals, have gone unnoticed in the historical record.<sup>145</sup>

In addition to these legal distinctions and their complications in everyday life, we might surmise that the divisions between free and slave or



between citizen and non-citizen were blurred by occupational differences. Rural laborers, whether free or unfree, citizen or metic, might sometimes have more in common with one another than with urban artisans, bankers, and traders. The one banking slave about whom we know a fair amount seems to have identified very strongly with the citizen population, since the benefactions he made to the state resulted in a grant of citizenship to his family.<sup>146</sup> While this case is admittedly an exception, it does suggest that we should not assume that slaves always aligned themselves ideologically with other slaves against their masters. Conversely, we might question whether citizens always provided a united front in keeping slaves in check. The evidence presented above suggests not only that certain subdivisions of the citizenry (oligarchs and democrats) might seek the support of slaves against their fellow citizens, but that individual citizens might favor certain highly skilled slaves over their fellow citizens in employment and in society.<sup>147</sup> In contrast to the American South, where slaves were sharply marked off from the free by their skin color and where even non-slaveholding whites formed militias to hunt down runaway slaves, in ancient Greece the lines between free and slave were often blurred and could apparently sometimes be overridden.

Perhaps the most important distinction that complicated strong class and status divisions in ancient Greece is that of gender. All women, whether citizen or not, were treated like non-citizens and slaves insofar as they were denied full political rights and were considered, like slaves and children, to lack the rational capacities required for self-rule.<sup>148</sup> Yet despite this dominant ideology and the formal limitations on women's public roles, there is considerable evidence that women created a culture of their own, asserted their opinions, and participated in the social and political lives of their communities.<sup>149</sup> As has often been noted, the important roles granted to women in civic cult stand as a potent symbol of their actual importance to the community.<sup>150</sup> Myth and ritual put women at the center of the civic imagination and it is likely that ancient Greek women asserted their power in ways that were not only influential but occasionally even upset the official ideologies of the state.<sup>151</sup>

The point of this overview of ancient Greek social structure is to show that it was composed of a myriad of overlapping social groups, and that different dividing lines could come to the fore in different contexts. In the political assembly, the divisions between citizen and non-citizen, male and female were dominant. In the law courts, male citizens were marked off from free non-citizen metics and citizen women insofar as the latter two groups need a male citizen to represent them in court. Yet these three groups may be considered similarly privileged, in contrast to slaves who had no legal rights at all, and indeed whose (often valuable) testimony had to be extracted under torture.<sup>152</sup> Yet even in legal contexts, divisions

between citizen and non-citizen, free and slave, male and female could also be elided. As I demonstrate in chapter 5, even in classical Athens, women, and possibly metics and slaves, participated not only in extra-judicial punishment of social offenders but also in formal legal procedures when they formed the crowd of onlookers who observed the physical humiliation of offenders in court and participated by heckling.

It is precisely by looking beyond the formal institutions and laws to the informal social practices that we can best see how the “official” divisions of society were elided in everyday life. Far from reifying the fluid and overlapping divisions of Greek society, then, this study demonstrates the ways that formally distinct groups (e.g., free male citizens, free female citizens, and slaves) came together in certain spheres of life and jointly constructed, and often contested, the principles upon which collective life was made possible.