Greek colonization: foundations, motives, consequences

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Stories about cities

Unlike various other famous peoples from antiquity, the ancient Greeks during the Archaic and Classical periods did not build vast territorial empires. Rather, what modern historians call 'the ancient Greek world' by the early fourth century BCE consisted of a network of some thousand Greek cities, or *poleis*, spread out over the coastal areas and islands of the Mediterranean and Black seas. This was an urban network of impressive proportions, especially by pre-modern standards, though many of these *poleis* were rather small (5,000 inhabitants or less). All of these cities were self-contained political entities, even if a number of them were for a time part of cooperative or even hegemonial leagues (the most famous example of the latter being the Delian League led by Athens during much of the fifth century BCE). One of the great questions of ancient Greek history, therefore, is how this vast urban network came about.

An important part of the answer to that question is provided by the phenomenon called ancient Greek colonization, that is, the spread of Greek settlements along the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions, the high point of which occurred roughly during the period 800-500 BCE, the Greek Archaic age. The modern term 'colonization' is a bit of a misnomer for this process, since the settlements founded generally were politically independent from the city or cities from which the settlers derived, but we'll stick with it since it has become conventional. Why, then, did so many Greeks during these centuries choose to leave their home communities and settle abroad? And what actually happened when Greeks founded a colony?

To this last question, many Greeks of later (that is, post-Archaic) periods would have been able to provide a detailed answer. Numerous stories were told, and recorded, among Classical, Hellenistic and even Roman-era Greeks about the colony-founding prowess of their ancestors. Such accounts were popular: Plato for instance notes that the Spartans loved listening to colony-foundation stories (*Hippias Major* 285d). In consequence, the written sources that we have left from Greek antiquity abound with these so-called foundation-narratives.

From such narratives, despite their variation, it is fairly easy to construct a sort of 'model-account' of what happened when a group of archaic Greeks went to found a colony, or an *apoikia* (lit. a 'home-away from home') as they called it, and this is what modern scholars have often done. The model-account goes somewhat like this: the decision to found a colony was generally taken by a *polis*, perhaps in the context or aftermath of some kind of crisis (internal conflict, drought…), and entailed the sending away of a group of its citizens (adult males), led by an elite male, the *oikistes* or 'founder', to establish a new settlement abroad. Commonly the oracle of Apollo at Delphi was consulted, to gain the god's blessing or to ask for advice. Often after overcoming various difficulties, the settlers established a new *polis* in a suitable location, sometimes in (partial) cooperation with, but often after expulsion of, the native population (from whom the colonists nevertheless might take wives). The *oikistes* then generally took the lead in establishing the city physically, planning and overseeing the construction of city walls, public buildings and sanctuaries and assigning (equal) plots of agricultural land to the citizens of the new *polis*, and politically, deciding about its constitution and laws. From the start the new *polis* was politically autonomous, only maintaining religious and cultural ties with its 'mother-city' (*metropolis*). After the death of the *oikistes*, a hero-cult might be established in the colony, in his honour.

This account, which we might call the 'establishing a city from scratch'-model, until recently featured in some form in most ancient historical handbooks. Increasingly, however, historians and archaeologists have come to doubt this clear-cut scenario, for several reasons. First, as already noted, most of the colonial foundation-narratives derive from later, post-Archaic written sources, from the Classical, Hellenistic and Roman-era periods of Greek history. This does not mean that every detail or purported fact they report should *a priori* be considered false, but it does beg the question exactly how all this supposedly factual information was transmitted across the centuries. It is also very evident that many foundation-narratives are highly coloured by political and ideological preoccupations prevalent in the periods when they were written down. Driven by inter-*polis* competition and the demands of political and diplomatic networking (including the quest to obtain privileges from Hellenistic kings and Roman emperors), it suited many cities to provide themselves with (sometimes clearly fictitious) venerable colonial ancestries, complete with stories of heroic founders, blessings from Apollo at Delphi and honourable links to highly regarded mother-cities such as Athens, Corinth, Sparta or Miletus. Some of the standard ingredients of colonial foundation-narratives, moreover, such as the central role attributed to the Delphic oracle or the development of founder-cults, also seem anachronistic for the early Archaic period (eighth-early seventh centuries BCE).

Second, the ever-increasing archaeological evidence from colonial sites appears to suggest a scenario fundamentally at odds with the 'establishing a city from scratch'-model. Rather than the establishment of a new *polis*, as it were, overnight, what the evidence from well-investigated sites suggests is a longer drawn-out settlement history, with a relatively small group of initial settlers establishing a foothold first, whose number was then slowly increased by later arrivals over a period of a generation or more, while the site increasingly acquired an urban character. The heterogenous assemblages of ceramics often found at colonial sites, containing pottery from many parts of the Greek world, also suggest that colonies were part of wide-ranging networks and perhaps housed a diverse settler-population deriving from various parts of Greece, rather than just from a single *metropolis*.

None of this precludes the possibility, however, that the initial smallish group of settlers who first established a foothold derived from one specific *polis*, and that therefore, in later times, the colony was especially associated with this particular *polis*. It is also entirely possible that these initial settlers were led by an enterprising, charismatic elite individual whom later generations might remember as the colony's founder. The names of many founders recorded in later literary traditions are often obscure, and thus seem unlikely to have been purposefully invented later on. They may have been transmitted to later generations along with other genuine information related to the earliest days of the settlement via annual cult rituals or via other traditions and customs of the community (e.g. its calendar of religious festivals), it has been suggested. Thus, scholars have argued, perhaps we should think of the foundation of a colony as constituting both an 'event' *and* a longer-lasting process of settlement and urbanization.

Motives and consequences

According to one modern guestimate, the entire Greek colonization movement encompassed between 30,000 and 60,000 adult male emigrants (plus an unknown number of women and children, if these indeed came along). What motivated so many Greeks to settle abroad? Scholars used to stress commercial motives (the search for new resources and markets), on the (anachronistic) assumption that Greek colonial ventures may have displayed some likeness to early modern and modern European colonization. A more recent explanation stresses population pressure in mainland Greece during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, leading to food shortages, which would have

induced *poleis* to send away part of the population to fend for themselves elsewhere. At best, this could only have been a temporary solution to the problem, however, and besides, overpopulation is a relative issue, not a structural one: in years of drought and consequent bad harvests, demand for food might quickly outstrip supply, whereas in normal years, there would be enough for everybody. Monocausal interpretations such as these generally do not survive confrontation with the sources, however, and nowadays researchers tend to stress a mix of motives, ranging from social conflicts in mother-cities which could be resolved by sending one of the parties away, to fleeing crime, the search for cultivable lands or natural resources (metals), establishing trade links, or simply a search for adventure. What is evident is that the Mediterranean region during the 'Dark Age' and Archaic period was characterized by an extraordinary mobility of groups and individuals (not just Greeks, but also e.g. Phoenicians from the Levant, who were equally busy establishing colonies around the Mediterranean basin): in the last third of the eighth century BCE, a new Greek settlement was established in southern Italy or on Sicily about every other year!

The consequence of all this was the development, over the centuries, of a dynamic and interactive network of *poleis* spanning the Mediterranean and Black sea areas, a network that enormously facilitated trade and political, diplomatic, cultural and religious exchange between *poleis* (and between Greeks and non-Greeks), and thus served as the primary integration mechanism of the Archaic and Classical Greek world. One crucial integrative effect of this network, it has been argued, was the stimulation of *polis*-formation as such, not only abroad (most colonies, as we saw, were founded as, or eventually became, full-blown *poleis*) but also in the original Greek homeland. Some regions of old Greece, such as Achaea before the fifth century BCE, did not have *poleis*, but nevertheless did found colonies. In the colonial context, settlers had room to experiment, with forms of political and social organization, with city planning, public architecture, cults and festivities. Thus, a new, more abstract conception of the *polis* arose, detached from local historical and ethnic contexts, and this, it is argued, reflected back on the original Greek homeland, stimulating *polis*-formation and further socio-political development there as well as in colonial regions, especially in those areas of Greece that had hitherto not known *poleis*. In a sense, then, the history of Greek colonization is only part of the centuries-long history of the Greek *polis*.

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