

# Preface

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*The Copenhagen Polis Centre* is a research institution set up by *The Danish National Research Foundation* in 1993 for a period of five years, and renewed in 1998 for another period of five years. The Centre has two primary aims:

(1) To produce a comprehensive inventory of all known archaic and classical Greek *poleis*, including colonies, attested in contemporary sources. The plan is to compare this inventory with all general references in the same sources to the nature of the *polis*, and then, on the basis of an analysis of both the extension and intension of the concept, to find out what the Greeks thought a *polis* was, and to compare that with what modern historians think an ancient Greek *polis* was (Hansen [1996] 7-14).<sup>1</sup>

The term *polis* is often used synonymously with the term city-state, and the two concepts behind the two terms are often thought to be coextensive. It must be borne in mind, however, that the concept of *polis* reflected the ancient Greeks' understanding of their own political and social order, whereas the concept of city-state is a modern heuristic concept invented by historians to describe not only the Hellenic *poleis* but also a number of other city-state cultures ranging from the Mixtec city-states in Mexico to the Malay city-states in Indonesia and from the Viking city-states in Ireland to the Swahili city-states in Kenya and Tanzania. The Hellenic civilisation from the Archaic period through the Roman Empire is only one out of many civilisations organised into urbanised micro-states rather than forming one or a few large macro-states, each dotted with cities.

(2) Consequently, the second major project undertaken by the Polis Centre has been to search for all occurrences in world history of regions broken up into city-states and to make a comparative study of them all in order to elucidate similarities and differences; on the basis of this investigation, to suggest a re-interpretation of the concept of city-state; and to advocate the introduction of a new concept to be distinguished from the concept of city-state, *viz.* the concept of city-state culture.

The only viable way to implement both projects has

been to form a large international team of experts. To construct the inventory of *poleis* the Centre has built up a team of ancient historians and archaeologists, each responsible for describing all the *poleis* within a well defined region. The team consists of thirty-five scholars from twelve countries. To provide a description of all attested city-state cultures the Centre has gathered a team of historians, philologists, theologians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and sociologists, each an expert on one specific city-state culture. Including respondents, the team consists of forty-two members from fifteen countries, see 8 *supra*.

Twenty-nine members of the team met in Copenhagen in January 1999 for a symposium, and to a large extent this book contains the revised acts of the symposium. During and after the symposium, however, I discovered that there were more civilisations which were relevant for the investigation.<sup>2</sup> By phone, e-mail and fax I established contact with several experts, and I am most grateful to these contributors for their enthusiasm and readiness to write their chapters, some of them at very short notice.

All members of the team were issued first with the relevant part of the Polis Centre's original research programme (Hansen [1994] 10-13) and later with the refined descriptions of the concepts of city, state, city-state and city-state culture set out in the Introduction, *infra* 11-19. Their brief was to treat as many aspects of these concepts as were found relevant for each civilisation and to take a position on whether the civilisation in question could reasonably be described as a city-state culture composed of city-states.

Most of the contributors answered in the positive. In four cases the answer was, as expected, negative: the Indian *mahajanpadas* (*infra* 375-91), the Celtic *oppida* (*infra* 229-39), the Viking cities in Russia (*infra* 263-75), and the German *Reichsstädte* (*infra* 295-319) do not conform to the models suggested in the Introduction and should not be described as city-state cultures. But they are close enough to deserve a treatment, and they serve to remind us that no clear line can be drawn between city-state cultures and macro-states, usually called territorial states.

In one case, however, the answer was unexpectedly negative. Jean-Jacques Glassner, who was entrusted with the Sumerian city-states, argued that the concept of city-state was a synonym for *polis* and should be confined to descriptions of the ancient Greek city-states (*infra* 35-6). Describing, respectively, the Syrian and the Neo-Babylonian city-states both Ingolf Thuesen and Mogens Trolle Larsen take a different view (*infra* 59 and 117), and so do many other scholars who have singled out the Sumerian cities of the Early Bronze Age as a typical example of a system of city-states (*infra* 20 with note 93). The line taken by Glassner, on the other hand, is very close to that of Feinman and Marcus (1998) 8-9, who also would like “to see the concept of city-state phased out” or, at least, restricted to the Greek *polis*. For my response to this approach see *infra* 599-601.

The other contributors found the concepts of city-state and city-state culture relevant and helpful, although some expressed doubt or scepticism about some of the individual criteria adduced in my descriptions of the concepts. Thus, Peter Johaneek (308 *infra*) and Stephan Epstein in particular were sceptical about the concept of the dependent city-state, and John Collis opposed my treatment of the relation between the concept of city-state and the concepts of independence and autonomy. During the symposium Eckart Otto argued that, in his opinion, the city-state should be analysed as a specific transitional type of state formation, a point not emphasised in my Introduction and Conclusion; and Robert Griffeth would like to pay more attention to slavery as an important characteristic of city-states.<sup>3</sup> I want to stress that the conclusion as well as the Introduction represent my own analysis and must not be taken to reflect any consensus among all participants. The contributors, on the other hand, were asked subsequently to revise their papers in the light of the discussions and the comments stated by the respondents.

Let me conclude by stating that I consider this to be the Copenhagen Polis Centre’s main contribution to the comparative study of city-states and the concepts of city-state and city-state culture. Most of the remaining three years of the Centre’s allocated time will

be devoted to the more specific study of the ancient Greek *polis*.

It remains for me to state my acknowledgments. I would like to thank The Carlsberg Foundation, Mogens Kragh, and the staff at the *Carlsberg Akademi* for providing us with a perfect setting for our symposium. I am indebted to the Royal Danish Academy for having undertaken the publication of this book, and to Dr. Thomas Heine Nielsen and Prof. Theodore Buttrey who kindly assisted me with the editorial work. Careful type-setting, by Mr. Bent Nørregaard, and hawk-eyed proof-reading, by Ms. Ann Johnston, have saved me from a four-digit number of misprints and inconsistencies. Last but not least, I am grateful to the participants in the symposium for their valuable papers and stimulating contributions to the discussions, and to those contributors who were unable to attend or who joined the team later than the symposium.

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*Ex-symposiarchos*.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

1. References are to the bibliography, *infra* 32-34.
2. I am much indebted to Nikolai Grube and Michael Smith for drawing my attention to the Mixtec city-state culture, and to Don Wagner at NIAS Copenhagen University, for telling me about the Taklamakan city-states and persuading me to change my view of state formation in Spring-and-Autumn China. On the authority of Paul Wheatley I had, initially, deleted China from my list of possible city-state cultures, see *infra* 605. The inclusion of the Philistine city-states was the result of one of the lunch meetings in the Polis Centre where Thomas Heine Nielsen noticed that they were missing from my initial list of city-state cultures.
3. At the last session of the symposium I suggested continuing the debate in a further volume, devoted to the theoretical aspects of the key concepts of the symposium. All participants were invited to submit contributions to this study before the end of 1999, and I promised to have the volume published before the end of 2000. I have to report that, to date, no contribution has been submitted.
4. As the organiser and host of the symposium I styled myself *symposiarchos*, the ancient Greek term used for the leader of a *symposion*. I invented it for the fun of the thing, and note that some of the contributors to this volume adopted the term and used it in their papers.