

LOCALISM *and* THE
ANCIENT GREEK
CITY-STATE

Hans Beck



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Ancient Greek
City-State*

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*To my dad
champion of the local
and to my boys
who navigate the global so easily*

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Preface

The tidal wave of studies on connectivity and network exchanges in the ancient Mediterranean world has amounted to nothing but a true paradigm shift in classical studies. Albert-László Barabási's (2002) verdict that everything is connected to everything else, and that the connection matters, has fully arrived in our field. Along the way, scholars have established a potent theoretical framework that makes the tenets of globalization meaningful to the study of Greek and Roman antiquity. In both cases and, to be sure, under different premises, the exploration of sociocultural and economic exchanges in the Mediterranean, grounded in the distinctiveness of time, place, and culture, effected a knowledge advancement that is as extensive as it is exciting. A book on localism in ancient Greece might therefore appear against the spirit of the day.

Appearances can be deceptive. Globalization scholars recognize the importance of the local as a world where the strands of connectedness translate into real-life constellations, with all triggers and adaptations across the global/local binary. This is how, and why, the terms *glocal* and *glocalization* have entered the debate. In similar vein, the notion of “globalization from below” seeks to accentuate a bottom-up perspective on the process. Yet while the former part of the contraction *glocal* has received tremendous attention in scholarship, the latter continues to be neglected. Postcolonial theory has provided a forum for the development of ideas about the intrinsic value of local culture and “globalectics” (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 2012). A full-fledged debate, however, remains out of sight. The most common view is to assign to the local the capacity to formulate counterstrategies and defend distinctiveness and individuality against the advancement of globalization—an intellectual figure that itself betrays an implicit primacy of the global over the local. The present book can and should be read as a complement to ongoing

conversations about connectedness and globalization, and the forces they wield over humans across time. Indeed, as a sociocultural phenomenon with its own historical depth, the globalization paradigm requires that the local enter the scholarly dialogue as a quantity in its own right. The claim that is raised here is therefore straightforward, if not simple: that we should take the local seriously.

Microhistory, so prominent in the human sciences since the 1990s, makes an important contribution to this endeavor. The study of small constellations, often based on bodies of local documents from a narrow time period, offers valuable insights into the local horizon. In the study of the ancient Greek world, where such sources are of a limited availability, microhistory and local history are thus often considered the same. The trend to study larger questions through small places—cities, microregions, etc.—has become extremely influential, as it directs the focus of the investigation to city-states with only an average or low “fame score” (Josiah Ober). In doing so, local history beautifully captures the rich diversity of ancient Greek culture. But the writing of local history and the study of localism are two different exercises. The quest for the governing force of the local entails more than the narration of history in a discrete local context. Rather, it seeks to break into discourse environments that are not only confined in place but relate to it; that prioritize place, real and symbolic, as a source of inspiration and meaning; and, in turn, that receive orientation from the local horizon in changing circumstances that occur in the world writ large.

Classical Greece is particularly well-suited for this type of inquiry. Combining numerous city-states, each one energized by a vivid ideology of self-governance and independence, and shaped by a natural environment that is both dense and diverse in terms of climate, soils, and resources, Greek culture was geared toward local distinctiveness. As their world grew larger, from the Archaic period to the Hellenistic period, the Hellenes were exposed to ever-new degrees of connectedness. In the aftermath of the Persian Wars, and partly in response to them, Aegean Greece witnessed a dazzling increase in the interaction between communities. The driving themes of their interstate affairs inspired the Greeks to intensify their engagement in areas previously out of reach—the rapid rise of spheres of interest beyond the regional horizon of the polis and the establishment of a Panhellenic protocol of political practices and policies to govern their exchange were but two such themes. Survey archaeology has disclosed a substantial growth of settlements and population figures throughout mainland Greece in the period. In some places, the corresponding numbers reached an all-time peak. The demographic development was paralleled by new heights of economic productivity and trade.

Participation in interstate affairs and thriving cultural exchange further increased the volume of travel on land. At sea, technical innovation in shipbuilding and advanced nautical skills allowed communities to interact with each other faster than ever; on average, it would take less than a week to reach the most remote destinations in the Mediterranean world. All this is to say that Classical Greece was a tight, high-powered, interstate environment, one in which countless locally bound city-states grappled with the challenge to position themselves in a swiftly expanding universe of change.

I have spent much of my life thus far in Bavaria and Quebec, societies that are renowned for their marked localism. Whether I think of this as a blessing or a curse is difficult to tell. The choice depends on sentiments and convictions that are not only deep and wide, but, at times, contradictory. I would suspect that the embodied experience from daily interactions further informs the assessment, although I ought to acknowledge quickly that such encounters can be highly coincidental, sometimes random. In other words, there is a wide gulf between more general views of the world and the quotidian experience. In Bavaria, it is difficult to ignore, let alone escape from, the omnipresent articulation of bursting self-confidence in what is considered the supreme value of the Bavarian way of life; whereas in Quebec, the opposite, a lack of societal self-confidence, is not uncommon. A standard reaction to critical assertions about Quebec society is to fence them off as acts of Quebec-bashing and, hence, dismiss them as disingenuous to begin with.

From a scholarly point of view, what can be drawn from both examples is that parochial attitudes translate into a broad spectrum of communal beliefs. At the same time, they are united by the self-evident importance they bear for those who nourish them. They are real to society, true. If, as I believe, the accelerated process of globalization will also see an intensification of localism—for some, the rise of a neo-localism movement is approaching promptly—it will become even more critical for us to hear and to understand the local voice. In this sense, too, this study on ancient Greece is part of a wider conversation about one of the pressing challenges of the day.

Localism and the Local in Ancient Greece

Language is a curious thing. Take the harmless word *local*. In its most common usage, *local* appears in an attributive sense, as in local cuisines, local elites, or local weather. The word has hidden connotations of tininess. *Local* insinuates confinement in place and relevance; effectively, it suggests an implicit relation to something of greater exposure. This is even clearer with the noun, when the plural *locals* is used in a patronizing sense, referring to people with a limited understanding of prevailing complexities and a worldview that is characterized as parochial—another harmless word. All the while, *local* also triggers a different intervention. As early as 1983, the acclaimed film *Local Hero* captured the desire for deceleration and secludedness in times of rapid change. In the movie, both are found in fictional Ferness, a village along the remote shores of Scotland's North Atlantic coast. As the plot unfolds, Ferness becomes emblematic of a plain, authentic lifestyle. Although variously connected with the outside world by land and sea, the magnetic force of place ties the lead characters to the local horizon: its natural environment, social practices, and patterns of reasoning. The small town gradually reveals itself as *Gegenwelt* to global networks and faceless corporations, yet this innate quality of the local is understood only if and when translated into an embodied experience.

The movie played at a time when an all-new era of connectivity was only just beginning to loom on the horizon. As globalization turned from fiction to reality, the local became the live wire that grounded its critics, providing them with a robust alternative to the advancement of global capitalism. Prioritization of local governance, culture, and production soon inspired a towering wave of localism. Today, advocacy for the local might often be a commercial cliché or a slogan in support of frontline politics. But it can also be a potent response to the seismic shifts of globalization.

The charged semantics of the term *local* bear heavily on conversations about one of the most basic traits of ancient Greek history and culture: that is, that the city-states of Aegean Greece were through and through local formations. The typical Greek polis was a notoriously small enterprise, with a limited territory and a modest population size. Scholars estimate an average figure of less than ten thousand inhabitants, which puts the casual city-state in the range of a face-to-face society. Everything happened in a small environment. From storytelling to learned discourses in philosophy, from the creation of material styles to self-subsistent economic activities, and from the conduct of politics to the exercise of religion: the local world was the place where relevant conversations took place and related practices played out. It was a stage that was as real as it was inspirational, a rich source of meaning and orientation to all. This is of course not to deny the obvious, that ancient Greece, from the Archaic period on, was a world on its feet. A high degree of mobility and economic entanglement, powered by the adventurous spirit of heroic travelers and their desire for distant shores, induced all sorts of fluid connections near and far that energized Hellenic culture. But there was a notorious flipside, a subtle dialectic that tied those global exchanges to, and grounded them in, the local horizon.¹

This book takes stock of the local part of the dialectic. The local, or epicchoric, horizon of ancient Greece is both the subject and the scope of our investigation. Rather than projecting reductionist images of social slow motion or seclusion, the local lens captures a world of immediacy. As we shall see, the local was not merely subject to the call for self-governance (*autonomia*), articulated by a body of citizens whose political status was typically connected with landholding. Reference to the corresponding social ambience of a farmer's life, itself frequently associated with the tenets of a primitivist economy, doesn't suffice either to unravel the threads of local attachment. Instead, the local was fueled by charged ideas of belonging and intricate ways of knowing; it was an outlet of cultural creativity and competition; bristling with excitement and sensation; home to ambition and the celebration of sweet success; and the place where the community suffered from, and lived through, calamity and cataclysm. In this sense, the local canvas of ancient Greece was as rich and diverse as the human experience itself.

Place-Identity and Boundedness in a Connected World

It has often been remarked that the world of ancient Greece was shaped by fragmentation. Josiah Ober speaks of an "ecology of city-states" (2015, 21), implying that Classical Greece comprised countless poleis that were both united