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# The Internal Commotion of Greek Culture: Jacob Burckhardt on the Defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War

Tobias Joho

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# KTÉMA

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# KTÈMA

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## The Internal Commotion of Greek Culture: Jacob Burckhardt on the Defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War

RÉSUMÉ-. Cet article est consacré à l'interprétation de la défaite d'Athènes dans la guerre du Péloponnèse, telle qu'on peut la lire dans l'*Histoire de la civilisation grecque* de Jacob Burckhardt. Ce dernier pensait que la civilisation grecque s'était épanouie dans une large mesure grâce à trois moteurs distincts : le principe de la polis, l'esprit agonistique et la montée de l'individualisme. Pour lui, ces idéaux essentiels se réalisèrent de manière exemplaire à Athènes à l'époque classique, mais leur interaction eut des effets destructeurs, qui produisirent des contradictions internes insurmontables à l'intérieur de la polis athénienne et provoquèrent finalement la défaite d'Athènes dans la guerre du Péloponnèse. À mon avis, cet événement a pour Burckhardt un caractère tragique, parce qu'en renversant Athènes le reste de la nation grecque abattit la cité qui avait réalisé de manière exemplaire les idéaux les plus élevés des Grecs. La défaite d'Athènes est donc symptomatique d'un élan autodestructeur et révèle ainsi l'impasse de la culture grecque à la fin du v<sup>e</sup> siècle.

ABSTRACT-. This paper investigates Jacob Burckhardt's interpretation, provided chiefly in the *Cultural History of Greece*, of the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War. Burckhardt thought that the flourishing of Greek civilization was promoted to a significant degree by three distinctive forces: the polis principle, the agonistic spirit, and the rise of individualism. At Athens, these guiding ideals were realized in exemplary fashion during the classical era. Through their interaction, however, they also came to have a destructive effect, which led to insurmountable internal contradictions within the Athenian polis and eventually caused the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War. As I argue, this event had a tragic character for Burckhardt because in overthrowing Athens the rest of the Greek nation brought down the city that had realized the Greeks' highest ideals in exemplary fashion. The defeat of Athens is thus symptomatic of a self-destructive momentum and reveals the impasse reached by Greek culture at the end of the 5th century.

Why should the *Cultural History of Greece* (hereafter *GK*), Jacob Burckhardt's most in-depth and wide-ranging engagement with ancient Greece, concern itself with the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War? After all, Burckhardt's goal was not to provide an event-based account of the political history of ancient Greece, an approach exemplified by Ernst Curtius' *Greek History*, a magisterial work that Burckhardt held in high regard,<sup>1</sup> but rather, as Burckhardt himself put it, "to treat the history of Greek habits of thought and mental attitudes, and to seek to establish the vital *forces*, both constructive and destructive, that were active in Greek life" (*GKI*, 4 [4]).<sup>2</sup>

(1) On the intellectual relationship, which features both similarities and differences, between Curtius and Burckhardt, see KÆGI VII 1982, p. 27–28; CHRIST 1996, p. 139–141.

(2) In citations, Roman numerals refer to the volume, and Arabic numerals to the page numbers, of the dtv paperback edition of Burckhardt's *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, which is based, with some minor exceptions, on the text printed in volumes

Stressing Burckhardt's divergence from "political history, with its focus on acts and events," Lionel Gossman observes that "cultural history, as Burckhardt understood it, raises the reader [...] above the immediate and momentary, opens up a wider and longer perspective."<sup>3</sup> Given these concerns, it might seem that a specific political event such as the defeat of Athens was unlikely to become the focus of Burckhardt's attention.

However, Gossman also points out that Burckhardt's effort to uncover underlying general principles should not be misconstrued as a neglect of the concrete in favor of the abstract: "There is never any question for him that the particular, the material, the ephemeral are contained, explained, and redeemed—without ever being obliterated—by the general, the typical, the spiritual."<sup>4</sup> In the *Cultural History of Greece*, Burckhardt's overriding epistemic goal was to grasp the formative forces of Greek culture, not in abstract isolation, but as they became visible in concrete events and pursuits. Karl Weintraub rightly remarks that in the *Cultural History of Greece* Burckhardt aimed at combining a "Zustandsschilderung" of the fundamental forces animating and shaping Greek culture with the account of a dynamic process whose two major stages are "the gradual formation of a harmonious life and its disintegration."<sup>5</sup> If asked to identify a palpable watershed that separated these two phases, Burckhardt would most likely have called attention to the defeat of Athens.

The defeat of Athens represents, on Burckhardt's view, a moment in which the interlacing of destructive and life-giving forces in Greek civilization crystallized with unusual clarity, revealing that the animating principles of Greek civilization had evolved, by the time of the Peloponnesian War, into vehicles of self-destruction. The driving forces in question were the nature of the Greek

VIII–XI, edited by Felix Stähelin, of the *Jacob-Burckhardt-Gesamtausgabe* (Basel, 1930–1931). In the main body of the paper, I provide quotations from Burckhardt's works in English translation. These are either my own or derive from the abridged English translation, if they are there incorporated, of the *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, which bears the title *The Greeks and Greek Civilization* (New York, 1998) and to which I refer by italicized numbers in square brackets.

It may strike the reader as odd that I am not quoting from the newly established text of the *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* printed in volumes 19–22 of *Jacob Burckhardt Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Basel, 2002–2012). The reasons for this decision are as follows. During his lifetime, Burckhardt never published the work that we now know as his *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*. A book under this title was published only after Burckhardt's death by his nephew Jacob Oeri, whom Burckhardt had appointed as his literary executor. Oeri based the posthumously published book on papers that were in Burckhardt's literary estate. Between 1872 and 1886 (see L. BURCKHARDT *et al.* 2002, p. 524 and 527), Burckhardt had delivered, altogether seven times (L. BURCKHARDT *et al.* 2002, p. 541), a lecture course on Greek cultural history at the University of Basel. There is good evidence that he had initially planned to rework these lectures into a book. For this purpose, Burckhardt had composed a running text that makes up most of volumes one and two of what Oeri published as the *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*. For volumes three and four, however, Oeri only had the notes, at times quite sketchy, that had provided the basis for Burckhardt's lectures. In order to remedy this shortcoming, Oeri drew on the extensive stenographic transcript, unfortunately now lost (L. BURCKHARDT *et al.* 2002, p. 545), of Hans Trog, who attended Burckhardt's lecture course in the winter semester 1883/84 (see STÄHELIN 1930, p. XXXIV–XXXV). Based on the combined evidence of Burckhardt's own notes and the transcript, Oeri composed a running text for volumes three and four.

The editors of the recent *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* have adopted a different procedure: in an attempt to establish the authentic pre-Oeri Burckhardt, they decided to base their text exclusively on Burckhardt's posthumous papers. There is no doubt that the new edition enhances our understanding of Burckhardt's thought and his way of working (for an example, see MURRAY 2004, p. 273–274). Nevertheless, the faithful lecture notes, when combined with Burckhardt's own jottings, provide the best possible access to Burckhardt's actual words in the lecture hall (see KAEGI VII 1982, p. 17, n. 50)—and an approximation to this oral delivery ought to be, given the lack of a formulated written text for volumes three and four, the standard of authenticity. This procedure is the strategy that Jacob Oeri adopted, who, besides, was, as Felix Stähelin and Oswyn Murray have stressed, an intimate connoisseur of Burckhardt's thought and style and was thus as well equipped as anyone to accomplish the task of producing a reasonably authentic text (STÄHELIN 1930, p. XXXV–XXXVI; MURRAY 1998, p. XLII). In light of these considerations, I have decided to quote from Oeri's text in the slightly improved version produced by Felix Stähelin, who corrected, after a renewed perusal of the manuscripts, some previous reading errors.

(3) GOSSMAN 2000, p. 311–312.

(4) GOSSMAN 2000, p. 308. See also WEINTRAUB 1966, p. 151–153.

(5) WEINTRAUB 1966, p. 143.

polis, in particular its unconditional claim to the service of its citizens, the agonistic spirit of Greece, and the flourishing of the individual.<sup>6</sup> The first two tendencies had their roots in the archaic age, but at 5th century Athens each came to manifest itself in a new form. In conjunction, they enabled the rise of individualism in the classical era. While these principles were largely responsible, on Burckhardt's view, for the greatness of classical Greece, he also thought that the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War directly resulted from their problematic interaction.

The proposed interpretation chiefly takes its cues from Burckhardt's account in the *Cultural History of Greece*, which will be supplemented by various pertinent observations made by Burckhardt in his so-called *World Historical Investigations* (hereafter *WB*).<sup>7</sup> The paper is divided into four sections. The first three sections will successively elucidate the three animating principles of classical Greek civilization as well as the specific manifestation of each trait at fifth century Athens. The fourth section will show how the interaction of these three motive forces precipitated the defeat of Athens.

#### I. THE POLIS PRINCIPLE AT ATHENS: WELCOME TO THE INFERNAL CITY

Burckhardt saw the polis as a characteristic creation of Greek civilization, one that was "unique in the history of the world" ("ganz eigenes Produkt der Weltgeschichte"; *GK I*, 76 [57]). The central tenet of Burckhardt's account of the polis, for which Fustel de Coulanges' *La Cité Antique* published in 1864 was an important forerunner,<sup>8</sup> was his claim that the polis required the total identification of every individual citizen with the collective represented by the city.

The starting point for the characteristic self-conception of the polis is the mentality of the small city state that controls no greater territory than the immediately surrounding countryside (*GKI*, 60–61 [43–44]).<sup>9</sup> Given its small size, the citizens are known to each other through direct

(6) Oswyn Murray credits Burckhardt with the discovery, or at least the definitive formulation, of the first two of these three basic principles: "It [sc. Burckhardt's account of the agonistic principle] is a brilliant and essentially correct insight into the nature of Greek aristocratic culture, and ranks alongside Burckhardt's definition of the polis as a uniquely Greek phenomenon, as one of his two main contributions to the understanding of Greek culture" (2006, p. 257).

(7) Just like the *Cultural History of Greece*, this work was never published by Burckhardt himself, but derives, in large part, from lecture courses delivered at Basel under the title *Über geschichtliches Studium*. It was again Jacob Oeri who posthumously published the lectures in book format. He also chose the title *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, under which the work has been known ever since. An English translation gained currency under yet another title: *Force and Freedom*. In accordance with the editorial principles, expounded in fn. 2 above, of the Basel *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Peter Ganz produced a new edition of the text that is exclusively based on Burckhardt's lecture notes and whose title *Über das Studium der Geschichte* reflects that of Burckhardt's original lectures. In a singularly informative postscript to a reprint of the *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* from 1949, Rudolf Stadelmann has offered a critical assessment of Oeri's editorial practice and arrived at a highly favorable conclusion: "Die Hauptleistung Jacob Oeris besteht darin, daß er in einer weithin unübertrefflichen Weise die Zusätze, Einschübe, Verweisungen Burckhardts in den Text eingereiht hat und in jedem Einzelfall mit außerordentlichem Takt entschieden hat, ob sie im Text oder in den Anmerkungen Platz finden sollten" (1949, p. 334–335). While acknowledging Oeri's achievement, Stadelmann also discusses various interventions on the part of Oeri that he rightly finds questionable (STADELMANN 1949, p. 340–346). However, these alterations do not occur in any of the passages that concern Burckhardt's assessment of classical Athens. After comparing with Burckhardt's written record Oeri's rendition of every passage to which I make reference, I have decided to quote Oeri's text: I did not find a single instance of Oeri misrepresenting what one finds in Burckhardt's notes. In this paper, therefore, references to the German original are followed by italicized numbers in square brackets that direct the reader to the aforementioned English translation entitled *Force and Freedom*, which is based on Oeri's text.

(8) On the relationship between Burckhardt and Fustel de Coulanges regarding their respective views about the polis, see REIBNITZ 2006, p. 291–293. Taking his cues from Oeri, Kaegi remarks that Burckhardt came to the knowledge of Fustel's book relatively late in the course of his work on the lectures on Greek cultural history, see KAEGI VII 1982, p. 77–78.

(9) Compare EHRENBURG 1965, p. 34; HANSEN 1998, p. 54–55.

acquaintance and an immediate connection exists between the fortunes of the city and those of every individual citizen. The population of this type of small-scale state, whose external and internal circumstances are easy for every citizen to grasp, is fervently committed to maintaining the city's independence from larger, more powerful, and external political entities, which would inevitably compromise the foundational ideals of autonomous government, autarky in material resources, and localized manageability. Thus, every polis had to be able to defend its independence against its immediate neighbors, which were also poleis and, as such, both eager for possession of the limited material resources that would enable autarky, and also animated by the same ideal of combative autonomy.

The ensuing permanent potential for military conflict induced every polis to set itself the goal of forming "a solid political body"<sup>10</sup> ("einen festen politischen Körper"; *GKI*, 61 [44]), a tight and intransigent collective. An uncompromisingly belligerent orientation, though defensive in origin, was therefore from the outset part and parcel of the identity of the polis. Given the small size of the polis and its exposure to roughly evenly matched neighbors who were potential, if not open, enemies, it could not afford to let any of its human resources lie dormant. Total mobilization down to the last citizen was, therefore, an existential prerequisite.

Due to the small size and the strong emphasis on forming a tight unity, the citizens did not experience the polis, in a mode familiar from modern states, as a remote bureaucratic imposition. Instead, the Greeks considered the city constitutive of their own personal existence. This attitude was reflected in the frequent habit of identifying the name of a polis with the entirety of the citizen population. As Ehrenberg writes, "the Athenian State was called [...] 'the Athenians.' The citizens, they and they alone, made up the State, which was embodied in the person and idea of Demos, the people."<sup>11</sup> Necessity drove this identification since, without the city's protection, the life of the individual would be in desperate jeopardy, exposed to the violence and browbeating of whoever happened to be stronger. Thus, the polis had, in Burckhardt's own words, "come into being to make life possible" (*GKI*, 74 [55]). Because the polis saved the individual from a constant death struggle, every citizen came to define himself as a part of the organic whole constituted by the polis (cf. *Arist. Pol.* 1253a, 20: τὸ γὰρ ὅλον πρότερον ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι τοῦ μέρους). Burckhardt calls the polis "a higher product of nature" ("ein höheres Naturprodukt"; *GKI*, 74 [55]), thereby implying that the polis was just as essential for the continuation of the individual's life as, say, the function of his or her bodily organs.

The stipulated co-extensiveness between the polis and the personal existence of the individual led to the unmitigated, total claim of the polis over the service, life, and concerns of each individual citizen, its expectation that the citizens would permanently "dedicate their entire existence"<sup>12</sup> to the polis community ("Hingebung der ganzen Existenz"; *GKI*, 74 [55]). Burckhardt shared this position with Fustel de Coulanges<sup>13</sup>, and both ultimately draw on the distinction between two

(10) The translation of this phrase is my own.

(11) EHRENBURG 1951, p. 337. See also EHRENBURG 1965, p. 107; MEIER 1980, p. 253; FINLEY 1982, p. 3; HANSEN 1998, p. 56–57.

(12) The translation of this phrase is my own.

(13) Burckhardt and Fustel de Coulanges usually receive joint credit for this insight into the nature of the ancient polis. Although he became aware of Fustel's work only relatively late (*GKI*, 320 [Nachtrag 9]), Burckhardt acknowledges the ground he shares with Fustel (*GKI*, 77n.68). For an illustration, see the following passage "C'est donc une erreur singulière entre toutes les erreurs humaines que d'avoir cru que dans les cités anciennes l'homme jouissait de la liberté. Il n'en avait pas même l'idée. Il ne croyait pas qu'il pût exister de droit vis-à-vis de la cité et de ses dieux" (*La cité antique* 269). Despite the points that Burckhardt's analysis shares with Fustel, Oswyn Murray stresses that Burckhardt's intervention was decisive: "[I]t was Burckhardt who invented the modern conception of the polis as a specifically Greek form of social organization, and who set out to determine in what ways it was different from other types of 'city-state' organization [...] Burckhardt



kinds of freedom that Benjamin Constant put forward in a celebrated essay entitled *De la liberté des Anciens comparée à celle des Modernes*. In this work, Constant argued that the ancient conception of freedom differs fundamentally from its modern counterpart: “[c]hez les Anciens, l’individu, souverain presque habituellement dans les affaires publiques, est esclave dans tous les rapports privés [...] Chez les Modernes, au contraire, l’individu, indépendant dans sa vie privée, n’est, même dans les États les plus libres, souverain qu’en apparence” (*Liberté* 262). Constant’s distinction rests, at its core, on a differentiation between positive and negative freedom, in other words between freedom to do something versus freedom from suffering something<sup>14</sup>: whereas the ancients had, according to Constant, a positive conception of freedom, taking freedom to consist in the citizens’ participation in collective government without any interference by a superior, adherents of modern liberalism conceptualize freedom negatively as the protection of the individual against encroachment by the community on his or her private affairs.<sup>15</sup>

Because the polis provides the sphere in which, and the standards according to which, the Greeks realized their highest aspirations, Burckhardt held that it represented the true “religion” of the Greeks (*GKI*, 77 [58]), a comparison implying that the polis aroused the same type of martial fanaticism characteristic, for instance, of the religious wars that beset a much later period of European history (*GKI*, 81). Burckhardt remarks: “The citizen realized all his capacities and virtues in and for the State; the whole spirit of the Greeks and their culture was closely bound up with the polis, and, in the golden age, by far the highest achievements in poetry and the arts belonged to public life, not to the realm of private pleasures” (*GKI*, 74 [55]). Thus the polis was woven into every sphere of cultural and religious life, such as the cults, the festivals, and the local myths (*GKI*, 77 [58]). Through its right to prosecute those who did not worship the city’s gods, it also had the function of a religious authority (*GKI*, 77 [57–58]). While disagreeing with the view taken by Burckhardt, Hansen nonetheless summarizes his position nicely: “Since 1864, when Fustel de Coulanges published his pioneer monograph *La cité antique*, most ancient historians have believed that the polis permeated all aspects of human life: law, religion, family, education, production and trade.”<sup>16</sup>

Burckhardt thought that this pervasive grip of the polis on every sphere of life had tremendous consequences. Whereas, as Burckhardt (following Constant) observes, in modern times the individual is prior to the state, the converse relationship obtains in the Greek polis (*GKI*, 74 [55] and 76 [57]): because the city is conceptualized as an integrated organism that is prior to its parts, the citizen, who is a mere part, is relegated to an inferior position. Martin Ostwald has, without referring to Burckhardt, made explicit what relationship between part and whole underlies this conception of the relationship between citizen and state: “[W]e have to think of a ‘share’ [...] in the terms in which each limb has a share in the human body: my leg ‘shares’ or ‘participates’ in my

therefore stands at the beginning of all attempts to understand the individuality of Greek political life, whether or not we agree with his portrayal” (1998, p. XXXVI–XXXVII). Burckhardt’s view has been shared by distinguished historians: FINLEY 1973b, p. 116 and 1982, p. 10; MULGAN 1984, p. 15. Some scholars agree in principle, but stress the need for some nuancing: EHRENBERG 1965, p. 111–112 (calling the polis “eine alle Lebenssphären umfassende Gemeinschaft”); WALLACE 1996, p. 107–108 and 115. Mogens Herman Hansen is the foremost critic of the line of interpretation inspired by Burckhardt and Fustel de Coulanges (cf. 1998, p. 90, 92–93 and 2010, p. 318–328).

(14) On mapping the distinction between positive and negative freedom onto the contrast between ancient and modern liberty, see HANSEN 1996, p. 94 and 2010, p. 310–312, 317. The distinction between positive and negative freedom was famously discussed by Isaiah Berlin in his essay entitled “Two Concepts of Liberty” (2002, p. 169–181).

(15) On Constant’s distinction, see GOMME 1962, p. 139–141; MULGAN 1984, p. 11; HANSEN 1996, p. 96 and 2010, p. 313–317; WALTER 2006, p. 99–100.

(16) HANSEN 1989, p. 17.



body in the sense that whatever affects it affects my body, and whatever affects my body affects it.”<sup>17</sup> The well-being of the organism necessarily takes precedence over that of its individual component: if a limb is irreparably damaged, it must be amputated so as to preserve the continuing existence of the organism. Likewise, the individual component of the polis organism must, if necessary, be sacrificed for the greater good of the whole<sup>18</sup>. In order to orient all of its members towards the prior good of the whole, the polis interferes with individuals in ways that moderns would typically consider to be an encroachment on each person’s private business (GKI, 77 [57–58]).<sup>19</sup>

Burckhardt thought that this total subjection of the individual to the polis had horrendous consequences. He prefaces his account of the Greek polis with the words written on the gate of hell in the third canto of Dante’s *Inferno*: “Per me si va nella città dolente” (Dante *Inferno* III, 1). While Burckhardt attributes this infernality to the polis as such, his assessment applies in particular to the democratic form of the state: “Although this enslavement of the individual to the polis and its interests existed under all constitutions, it must have been at its most oppressive under democracy, where the most villainous men, ridden by ambition, gave themselves the appearance of being identical with the polis and its interests and could therefore interpret the maxim *salus rei publicae suprema lex esto* as they deemed fit” (GKI, 77 [58]).<sup>20</sup> Since Athens provided the blueprint for the democratic form of state, the infernality that attached itself to the democratic polis was also, on Burckhardt’s view, realized to a greater extent at Athens than anywhere else.<sup>21</sup>

In making this claim, Burckhardt struck a paradoxical note. The comprehensive and unconditional discretionary power of the polis over the citizens was a reality at Sparta, where a rigid and systematic regulation of social life left little room for free development of the citizens.<sup>22</sup> Burckhardt did not deny that at Sparta the individual had been more ruthlessly subjected to the collective than anywhere else and that, in this regard, Sparta was the most radical implementation of the model of the Greek polis (GKI, 102). In comparison with this situation, Athens left relatively large areas of social life unregulated. Why, then, did Burckhardt not cite Sparta as the fullest realization of the terrifying aspects of the polis principle?

The answer has to do with the intensity of activity and participation that the Athenian democracy expected from its citizens: because the democracy involved, at least ideally, the entirety of the Athenian Demos in a wide array of significant functions of state business, it came to expect

(17) OSTWALD 1996, p. 56.

(18) Compare MULGAN 1984, p. 15–16: “The willingness of the community to sacrifice individuals for the common good is hardly surprising. The Greek states were almost always either at war or in a state of readiness for war. Those opposed to a particular regime in their city would, as a matter of course, align themselves with the city’s enemies, hoping for military and financial support against their political rivals [...] In such a milieu, suspicion of dissent would appear quite natural and tolerance of opposition would require great courage and confidence in the security of the regime.”

(19) For evidence, Burckhardt might have referred to Fustel de Coulanges’ collection of flagrant transgressions of the Athenian state into people’s private affairs, among which there were laws against idleness, the requisition of olive oil from producers, and a law forbidding women to travel with more than three dresses (*La cité antique* 265–269). Some scholars argue that, with the exception of Sparta, the Greek polis did not interfere very frequently into people’s private life, see: FINLEY 1981, p. 92; WALLACE 1996, p. 112–113; HANSEN 1998: 84–86 and 89–90. Burckhardt would respond that what matters is not the frequency of actual acts of oppression, but the ever-present possibility that the city may go after an individual citizen for completely arbitrary reasons.

(20) I have adapted the English translation.

(21) Several other passages feature assessments which confirm that on Burckhardt’s view Athens was the *città dolente* par excellence: GKII, 332 [73] (“permanent terrorism”); GKII, 341 [80] (“diabolic delight in ruining others”); GKII, 361 [96] (“the uncountable numbers of those who suffered”).

(22) This point is even granted by Hansen, who is otherwise a staunch opponent of the thesis that the city was omnipotent: “[T]here can be no doubt that Fustel’s [and, by extension, also Burckhardt’s] picture of the polis fits Sparta. Sparta had public education, public regulation of marriage and family life, public restrictions on production and trade, and an enforced system of commensality incumbent on all male citizens between 20 and 60” (1998, p. 85).

of its citizens an extreme level of commitment, both in terms of time spent and of sheer effort expended. While the Spartan state did regulate the citizens' lives more strictly than the Athenian democracy, it did not expect the same nearly continuous investment in a wide gamut of activities. In Burckhardt's words, "it [sc. the polis] demanded first and foremost of every man that he should be a citizen. Every individual felt that the polis lived in him [...] the polis required of every man that he should serve it" (WB 412–413 [173]). Given the high expectation of active political participation, this aspect of the polis was indeed nowhere more fully in evidence than at Athens. However, this level of dedication did not, on Burckhardt's view, come into being spontaneously, but was the result of considerable pressure brought to bear by the polis. The latent threat was ever present that the city would make short shrift of those who failed to live up to its demands. Thus, the inescapability of the Athenian polis did not manifest itself, as it did at Sparta, in an iron cage of social regulation, but in its expectation that the citizens display total commitment and permanent availability with regard to the various tasks involved in running the business of the state.

While laying down such heavy requirements, the city was, at the same time, "inescapable" ("unentrinnbar"; GKI, 77 [57]). Referring to the speech of Charmides from Xenophon's *Symposium* (Xen. *Smp.* 4. 30: ἀποδηῆσαι δὲ οὐδαμοῦ ἐξῆν), Burckhardt held that the wealthy were not allowed to emigrate (GKI, 212–213). Even if a citizen managed to get away, he found himself plunged into a dangerous world, in which one could become at any moment the prey of others. This emphasis on the impossibility of a breakout was surely meant to resonate with the aforementioned motto from Dante's *Inferno*: the polis of Athens, just as much as the infernal regions described by Dante, was a place from which there was no escape. The only potential option was to live as a metic in another city under the protection of a προστάτης (cf. Lysias 31.9), an existence that was often even less secure than life at home because of the dependency, resulting from the lack of citizenship, upon the mercy and the goodwill of others.<sup>23</sup>

Burckhardt regarded as especially precarious the situation of "the wealthy and of those considered to be wealthy" (GKI, 216). As this double phrase suggests, Burckhardt thought that arbitrariness frequently prevailed in the assessment of a person's alleged wealth and in the consequent requirements for financial expenditures on behalf of the polis (GKI, 218). In addition to taxes, which Burckhardt considers to have been substantial (GKI, 217),<sup>24</sup> liturgies were imposed on the wealthy citizens. Apart from the *trierarchy*, however, the liturgies were not, as Burckhardt observes, levied for the sake of the indispensable needs of the state, be they military or otherwise, but chiefly in order to provide the means for the entertainment of the population (GKI, 217). Burckhardt mentions the *choregia*, that is the financing of choruses and of other aspects of the production of a play at the dramatic festivals, the *gymnasiarchy*, i.e. the responsibility for financing a team competing in the athletic festivals, the *architheoria*, which was the provision for public delegations to a foreign festival, and the financing of a banquet for the members of one's *phyle* or for the Demos at large, the so-called *hestiasis* (GKI, 217). These expenditures weighed heavily on the well-to-citizens (GKI, 216).<sup>25</sup>

However, the most hellish aspect of life at Athens was produced by the various facets of the judicial system that gave the polis the means to proceed, whether with justification or without, against putative dodgers of public duties. Chief among these was the employment of *sycophants*,

(23) In order to illustrate the fearful aspects of the life of metic, Burckhardt refers to Andocides *De Mysteriis* 4–5, 144, 148 (GKI, 330: Nachtrag 22).

(24) Burckhardt is probably thinking of the *eisphora*, a property tax for wealthy citizens in times of war, which was imposed by a specific decree of the Assembly. See JONES 1957, p. 56; BLEICKEN 1995, p. 296; HANSEN 1999, p. 112.

(25) Burckhardt's view that the financial burdens imposed on the wealthy were substantial has the general support of the secondary literature. See JONES 1957, p. 55–58; FINLEY 1981, p. 90–91; BLEICKEN 1995 (especially on liturgies), p. 298–299.

who, in cooperation with the notoriously distrustful Demos, became a source of constant “public terrorism” (GKI, 228). Burckhardt compared the stranglehold of the Athenian sycophants with the French Revolution (GKI, 212–213) and the Spanish Inquisition (GKI, 228 and 229), thus aligning the Athenian democracy with the principal examples of institutionalized terror that European history had witnessed in the centuries before Burckhardt’s day. In Burckhardt’s view, the grounds for indictment were frequently bogus and, more often than not, served the personal enrichment of the sycophants: a depressingly high number of unscrupulous individuals made a habit of pressing phony charges.<sup>26</sup> Those who engaged in these practices usually had, according to Burckhardt, one of the following lowly objectives (GKI, 230): either they were keen on the financial reward that successful prosecutors received as a result of certain types of trials, or they wished to enrich themselves through blackmailing those who were willing to pay in order to avoid a trial, or they wanted to assure payment from some other person who wished a personal enemy to be taken to trial. The problem was considerably aggravated by the circumstance that Athenian juries tended to be biased against wealthy defendants, so that there was always a chance of the People’s Court condemning a wealthy defendant because the confiscation of his property would be a welcome source of income for the state (GKI, 237–238).<sup>27</sup>

The situation was capped by the draconian vehemence of Athenian legal penalties. Burckhardt points out that “any equity and objectivity of the penalty, any adequacy in the proportion between crime and punishment, in other words the primary demands that we make on penal law and the principle that always ought to form its basis, were obfuscated by the idea that the polis had formed of itself” (GKI, 231).<sup>28</sup> As a result of this exaltation of the polis, a strong tendency emerged to treat even offenses that lacked an obvious political motive as crimes against the state: “At Athens, every offense was, quite apart from its other significance, considered to threaten the state and diminish its security; as a result, every trial had the tendency to take a turn towards the political” (GKI, 231).<sup>29</sup> Given that the polis meant the world to the Greeks, Athenian juries meted out exceedingly harsh penalties for such crimes, not least by imposing, as Burckhardt notes, the death penalty for relatively minor offenses (GKI, 232).

Finally, a further aspect proved to be an obstacle, in Burckhardt’s view, both for a sound political decision–process and for the general stability of the state. In the wake of the aristocratic ethos of the archaic age (GKIV, 117–118 [185]), Greek culture in general, and not least that of democratic Athens (GKIV, 118 [185]), had been infused with a low regard for the dignity of work,

(26) A considerable array of scholars agrees with Burckhardt about the frequently lowly motives, the specious character of many charges, and the terror induced by the system: EHRENBERG 1951, p. 343–345; JONES 1957, p. 58; HARVEY 1990, p. 110–112 (money grubbing), 112–113 (bogus charges), 117–118 (result that many wealthy citizens chose to refrain from public service); CARTER 1986, p. 105–108; BLEICKEN 1995, p. 420–421.

(27) There is substantial evidence that wealthy defendants ran a high risk of being confronted with an unfair jury: EHRENBERG 1951, p. 345; JONES 1957, p. 58–60; MEIER 1980, p. 267; CARTER 1986, p. 104; OBER 1989, p. 200–201.

(28) Stressing the rigid principles on which adjudication was founded, Bleicken describes with greater precision the shortcoming to which Burckhardt draws attention: “Die Starrheit des Rechtssystems zeigt sich ferner auch darin, daß zur Urteilsbildung allein das positive Recht [...] als die einzige Rechtsquelle, welche die Athener kannten, herangezogen [...] werden durfte [...] In der athenischen Rechtspraxis [...] steht [...] die Sinnfrage nicht zur Debatte; die Rechtssätze werden nicht im Hinblick auf den Zweck im Recht interpretiert und ausgelegt. Sie werden lediglich zitiert, und die Schnur der Rechtsanwendung ist die Übereinstimmung der behaupteten Tatsachen mit dem Gesetzestext” (1995, p. 259–260).

(29) For examples, see BLEICKEN 1995, p. 418–419: “[V]iele Klagen, die rein kriminelle Straftatbestände verfolgten, ja selbst rein private Streitsachen [konnten] in das Politische überwechseln [...] Klagen, die Unregelmäßigkeiten bei der Getreideversorgung untersuchten, hatten schon von vornherein eine politische Note; erst recht gehörten bei der engen Verflechtung des sakralen mit dem öffentlichen Bereich die Klagen wegen Religionsfrevl zu den politischen Klagen.” See also BLEICKEN 1995, p. 243.

a so-called antibanausic outlook.<sup>30</sup> Burckhardt thought that the coupling of this distaste for labor with the democratic striving for equality and total participation in the political decision-process (GKI, 254) had led to a situation in which jury service and assembly attendance replaced regular work as the chief preoccupation of large segments of the citizenry.<sup>31</sup> Pericles' introduction of pay for jury service (subsequently augmented by Cleon) provided, at least for those serving as jurors, the material basis for such a lifestyle.<sup>32</sup>

For Burckhardt, the chief trouble arising from constant attendance at juries and assemblies was that the citizens came to consider these civic duties as exciting, entertaining spectacles, and that they became the central and most eagerly practiced occupation in the lives of many Athenians. Flaig observes: "In Burckhardts Schema ist also die als ideologisch vorwaltend angenommene Antibanausie ein unermüdbares Movens, das dazu beiträgt, die Teilnahme an staatlichen Angelegenheiten auf Dauer zu stellen."<sup>33</sup> People's experience at the dramatic festivals, in particular their predilection for comedy, came to infect the ethos that they brought to their roles as juridical and political spectators. This led to an increasingly agitated mindset among the Athenian people, many of whom came to regard their public service as something like a non-stop sensationalist reality show (GKI, 210; IV, 188).<sup>34</sup> According to Burckhardt, the antibanausic outlook made this practice possible in the first place: "What is more, the citizens had become, by all appearances, nervous due to the many popular and juridical assemblies (the activity of ἐκκλησιάζειν καὶ δικάζειν); for many lacked the soothing effect that comes from daily work" (GKI, 210; cf. II, 332 [73]; IV, 189). Burckhardt's account invites the conclusion that the Athenians came to confuse real life decisions with the stage action to which they were exposed in the Theater of Dionysus. This mentality suited them neither for responsible jury service nor for prudent decision-making in the assembly.

## II. INTENSIFICATION THROUGH DEGENERATION: THE AGONISTIC PRINCIPLE AT CLASSICAL ATHENS

The second driving force of Greek civilization was, for Burckhardt, the agonistic spirit. He considered this characteristic so distinctive that he called the entire era in which it arose and came to flourish, i.e. what we nowadays call the archaic period, the "Agonal Age."<sup>35</sup> The agonistic principle consisted in a pervasive desire to prove one's excellence in competition with others, and the paradigmatic arena in which the *agon* took place was the athletic contest. According to

(30) Meier provides the following specification of Burckhardt's position: "Das aristokratische Wertesystem [...] war weiterhin in Kraft, weil der Demos zwar neue politische Normen gegen die Adelspraktiken setzte, aber keine umfassend andere Ethik [...] Indem der Demos die öffentliche Sphäre zur seinen machte, übernahm er gewisse Ideale des Adels. Bürger zu sein war folglich eine stolze Sache im Gegensatz zum gering geschätzten Banausentum, mit dem man sich zu Hause abfinden mußte" (1980, p. 256).

(31) The notion of the idleness of the Athenian Demos is probably an exaggeration: see JONES 1957, p. 17–18, 50; MEIER 1980, p. 257; FINLEY 1981, p. 91.

(32) BLEICKEN 1995, p. 331–332; HANSEN 1999, p. 188. Pay for assembly service was only introduced in 403 B.C., cf. BLEICKEN 1995, p. 332; HANSEN 1999, p. 150.

(33) FLAIG 1987, p. 95.

(34) In his account of Athenian everyday life as conveyed in Aristophanes' comedies, Ehrenberg arrives at a similar conclusion: "The courts were a kind of spectacle where men scrambled for the best seats. The demoralization of jurymen and prosecutors, of heliasts and sycophants, was inter-dependent [...] It led to the worst results that they took the greatest delight in exercising their wide powers" (1951, p. 346).

(35) Burckhardt's view that the *agon* is a distinctive feature of Greek culture has been picked up by various subsequent historians. Moses Finley writes: "Burckhardt's most brilliant 'discovery' was the central place of the *agon* in Greek life" (1985a, p. 3). See also SCHAEFER 1932, p. 175–176; EHRENBERG 1935, p. 90; BERVE 1966, p. 1 and 20; MURRAY 1998, p. XLI and 2006, p. 256–257.

Burckhardt, this contest initially served no practical purpose, such as accruing money or power, nor did it generate personal animosity between the competitors: it was, in its original form, a pure striving for the display of shining, outstanding excellence, taken as an end in itself and “excluding practical usefulness” (“im Sinne der Zwecklosigkeit”; *GKIV* 85 [163]). Burckhardt’s emphasis on the *agon* as an end in itself shares common ground with Johan Huizinga’s account, provided in *Homo Ludens*, of the centrality of the element of play in human culture.<sup>36</sup> Because Huizinga sees play as a universal, he is critical of Burckhardt’s claim that the *agon* was the exclusive prerogative of Greek civilization.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, Huizinga acknowledges Burckhardt’s pioneering work.<sup>38</sup>

The decisive, indispensable prerequisite for the rise of the *agon* was the pivotal importance attached to the value of freedom in Greek life: in an unfree society, be it rigidly hierarchical or despotic, the rulers typically claim a monopoly on glory and do not leave room for the open competition among contestants of equal standing and for the superlative admiration that was to be gained from athletic victory (*GKIV*, 84–85 [162–163]). According to Burckhardt, the appreciation and cultivation of a free demeanor and lifestyle had roots in the deepest layer of Greek civilization, namely in the particular nature of Greek myth, in which the Greek nation found the “ideal basis of its entire existence” (“ideale Grundlage ihres ganzen Daseins”; *GKI*, 35 [28]). The feature that distinguished Greek myth, and therefore also Greek religion, from other religious systems was its ever renewed openness through imaginative development, which, however, did not involve a perpetual restart, but proceeded within the contours established by tradition (*GKI*, 31 [25]; *WB* 423 [191]). This characteristic depended on Greek religion’s thoroughgoing lack of any systematicity, dogmatism, priestly castes, and hierarchical organization (*GKI*, 28 [23]; *II*, 20, 29, 31, 127, 140). The beautiful, dream-like visualizations that were produced by the unencumbered mythological imagination, and in which the entire Greek nation participated, induced in the Greeks a mindset that attached the greatest importance to a free stance vis-à-vis a wide gamut of worldly phenomena, in Burckhardt’s terms a “Freiheit der Auffassung” (*GKI*, 30). As a result, the high appreciation of freedom became a central organizing principle of Greek civilization and ultimately made possible, among many other things, the Greeks’ enthusiastic endorsement of free and open competition.

Because of the high esteem in which athletic victors were held, the training in the gymnasium soon became a central pillar of Greek education. The admiration for athletic excellence, along with the central place assigned to the gymnasium in Greek social life, led to a formidable intensification of the agonistic spirit: many spheres of life, especially its intellectual and cultural dimensions, came to be permeated by the commitment to competition.<sup>39</sup> As Burckhardt writes, “all higher life among the Greeks, active as well as spiritual, took on the character of the *agon*” (*GKIV*, 89 [165]). While only wealthy nobles could afford to dedicate their entire lives to gymnastic excellence and to participation at the Panhellenic games proper (*GKIV*, 90–91 [166–167]), the underlying agonistic spirit became a principle that structured Greek civilization and affected many spheres of life (*GKIV*, 114–116 [182–184]).

In Burckhardt’s estimate, in the 5th century the agonistic principle proper receded, in comparison with its prominence in the 6th century, into the background (*GKIV*, 201 [237]). The

(36) MOMIGLIANO 1974, p. 371–372; MURRAY 1995, p. 12; L. BURCKHARDT 1999, p. 78.

(37) HUIZINGA 1955, p. 72–75.

(38) HUIZINGA 1955, p. 70: “Long before sociology and anthropology became aware of the extraordinary importance of the agonistic factor in general, Jacob Burckhardt coined the word ‘agonal’ and described the purport of it as one of the main characteristics of Hellenic culture.”

(39) Cf. FINLEY 1977, p. 120: “The contest was to play a tremendous part in Greek public life in later centuries [i.e. after the era of the Homeric *Odyssey*]. Nothing defines the quality of Greek culture more neatly than the way in which the idea of competition was extended from physical prowess to the realm of the intellect, to feats of poetry and dramatic composition.”



real import of Burckhardt's claim is easily misunderstood: by using the phrase "the agonistic principle proper" (GKIV, 201 [237]), he is not referring to the competitive orientation as such, but to its specific and, as it were, pure manifestation in the sphere of athletic contests. In the classical era, athletics ceased to provide the uncontested benchmark by which individual excellence was measured. Instead, the splendid Greek, and particularly Athenian, victories in the Persian Wars put the sphere of politics center stage in Greek culture (GKIV, 202–203 [238]). Everybody had seen that the issues at stake, and the admiration to be gained, were infinitely greater in this field than the glory that resulted from victory in the Panhellenic games. As a result, politics and war became the primary arena in which people strove to prove their individual excellence (GKIV, 203 [238]).

However, the competition for political supremacy in the polis constituted, in Burckhardt's words, "a false *agon*" (GKIV, 203 [238]), not only because of the increasing deformation of the political system, which made it ever more difficult for genuine greatness to shine, but also because political success had immediate practical consequences, namely power and material gain, and so the *agon* ceased to be an end in itself. It is one of the many ironies of Burckhardt's account that this degenerate *agon* infused Greek life with a more thoroughly competitive orientation than it had ever displayed before. In its debased version, the agonistic principle achieved a paradoxical climax both in intensity and ambit. Burckhardt calls it "a competition in every area of life" (GKIV, 208 [241]).

As Karl Christ and Oswyn Murray have observed,<sup>40</sup> Ernst Curtius had previously drawn attention, in a lecture entitled "Der Wettkampf," to the importance of competition as an organizing principle and vitalizing feature of Greek culture.<sup>41</sup> Yet, Murray notes that Burckhardt's account is not identical with that of Curtius: whereas "for Curtius it [sc. the *agon*] is an idealised and wholly beneficial force," which provides a stimulus towards personal heroism and the flourishing of culture, "for Burckhardt the *agon* is a dark and demonic power, as dangerous as it is creative."<sup>42</sup> Moses Finley thinks that this dark underside was built into the Greek word ἀγών, which he considers "an untranslatable word, normally rendered by the pale 'athletic competition' or by 'struggle', neither of which captures the overtones as well as its English descendant, 'agony.'"<sup>43</sup> Burckhardt harbored doubts about the wisdom of a way of life that placed the standards for worthiness and success in the purely external standard of the regard of others (GKII, 360 [96]), a stance that abandoned the individual to the mercy of the whims and volatility of an unfamiliar crowd. Moreover, the athletic contests naturally produced very many more losers than victors, and Burckhardt reckoned that "the much more numerous unsuccessful competitors certainly experienced an infinitely greater sum of misery than the sum of happiness that the winners enjoyed"<sup>44</sup> (GKII, 360 [96]). The dark underside of the *agon* also manifested itself in the political struggles: the conception of politics as a contest that resulted in winners and losers produced in the political contestants a general inability to compromise. The incapacity for compromise meant that the aristocratic faction at Athens, far from putting its ideological reserve vis-à-vis the ruling democracy aside in the name of the higher good of the state, was always hoping that the war would provide an opportunity to stab the democratic

(40) CHRIST 1996, p. 136–137; MURRAY 2008, p. 252–253.

(41) See CURTIUS, *Der Wettkampf*, p. 139–140: "So sehr es aber auch der freie Wettkampf der Kräfte war, der wie der belebende Hauch durch die gesamte Thätigkeit, durch alle Leistungen der Griechen hindurchwehte, so waren sie doch weit entfernt, den Trieb, welchen der Wetteifer anregt, seiner natürlichen Beschaffenheit zu überlassen, in welcher er mehr zum Schlechten als zum Guten führt. Sie haben den wilden Trieb gezähmt, sie haben ihn gesittigt und veredelt, indem sie ihn der Religion dienstbar machten."

(42) MURRAY 2008, p. 253.

(43) FINLEY 1985a, p. 3. Cf. BERVE 1966, p. 3: "[D]er Kampf selbst, der nicht selten lebensgefährlich war, verlangte eine derartige Anspannung der Kräfte, daß das Wort 'Agonia' die Bedeutung von Anstrengung oder Angst annehmen konnte und das von 'Athlos' (Wettkampf) abgeleitete Adjektiv 'athlios' zur Bezeichnung von Mühsal und Elend diente."

(44) I have slightly adapted the translation.

polis in its back. As we will see below, Burckhardt considered the defeat of 404, with the ascendancy of the Thirty Tyrants as its immediate consequence, to have been the moment when this hope was realized (GKI, 213).

### III. THE RISE OF INDIVIDUALISM: BOON AND BANE FOR ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY

As previously described (section 1), the polis turned out to be conducive to the rise of the individual because of the high expectations it could not help but place on its citizens: given the absence of bureaucratic and military experts and the equation of citizenship with emphatically active political participation, the survival of the polis was directly dependent on the ability of its citizens to combine a wide range of capacities. Because of the especially high demands that the democracy made on the citizens, the conditions for the flourishing of individuals were particularly favorable at Athens: “In particular at Athens, the polis had, by goading on every single citizen [*indem sie den Einzelnen vorwärts trieb*], achieved the most formidable development of individualism [*die stärkste Entwicklung des Individuellen*]” (GKI, 216; cf. GKI, 269; IV, 220 [248]). Especially among those occupying leading positions, these gifts had to be developed to an astoundingly high degree: the same men had to be capable generals, eloquent speakers, and insightful policy makers.

In this situation, the simultaneous extension and intensification of the *agon* during the classical period proved to be a tremendous catalyst: “While on the one hand the *polis* was the driving force in the rise and development of the individual, the *agon* was a motive power known to no other people—the general leavening element that, given the essential condition of freedom, proved capable of working upon the will and the potentialities of every individual” (GKIV, 84 [162]).<sup>45</sup> The fervent desire to distinguish oneself in as many areas of human excellence as possible translated itself into a stimulus to develop the full range of capacities that would allow a person to shine. Thus, in the wake of the permanent political *agon* fueled by *philotimia* (GKIV, 220 [248–249]), a range of highly developed and gifted individuals arose (GKIV, 208 [241]; 214 [245]).

Perhaps the stimulation of the individual was the greatest of all the paradoxes of classical Greece that Burckhardt traced: although this development was in radical tension with the city’s total subordination of the single citizen under the organic whole of the state, nevertheless the survival of the polis was inextricably bound up with the ability of its citizens to develop their innate potentials and bring them to fruition in the service of the state. This inherent paradox that the polis, in order to survive, had to both suppress and fuel the rise of great individuals was to prove one of the chief causes for the eventual collapse of Athens in 404.

It is important to realize that there is, for Burckhardt, a distinction between the classical variant of individualism and its modern counterpart.<sup>46</sup> The key characteristic of modern individualism is categorical, unrepeatably idiosyncrasy. On the modern view, the individual is distinguished by an unfathomable psyche and a unique, subjective point of view. For this type of individual, freedom consists in independence from the restraining norms that have been handed down by tradition.

(45) See also the following remark: “[D]ie volle Entwicklung des Individuums war davon abhängig, daß man sich unaufhörlich untereinander maß und verglich und zwar durch Übungen, bei denen es auf einen direkten praktischen Nutzen nicht abgesehen war” (IV, 90 [166]).

(46) On Burckhardt’s distinction between classical and modern individualism, see WEINTRAUB 1966, p. 132–135; FLAIG 2000, p. 100, 102–105; GOSSMAN 2000, p. 325–328; SIGURDSON 2004, p. 170–173. Notice that the distinction is not exclusively historical, but also archetypal: for instance, Burckhardt considered Raphael and Rubens to be prime examples of classical individualism. WEINTRAUB (1966, p. 132–133) traces the paradigmatic antithesis that Burckhardt diagnosed between Raphael’s harmonious classical personality and his antagonist Michelangelo, whom Burckhardt saw as the quintessential representative of unbridled modern license (*Cicerone* II, 131).



The positive flipside of this negative notion is the individual's freedom to act in accordance with self-chosen purposes that it has elicited out of the depth of its complex and idiosyncratic psyche.

By contrast, classical individualism does not presuppose resistance against traditional standards, but identification with the inherited culture: the individual adopts the guiding lights passed down by tradition as his or her own, but, far from adopting a slavish stance, fills them with an invigorating vitality, which is the individual's distinct contribution.<sup>47</sup> The appreciation of freedom, which was, despite its tension with the idea of the polis, deeply anchored in Greek culture and was a prerequisite for the *agon*, was just as indispensable for the rise of classical individualism as it was for its modern counterpart. Nevertheless the classical conception of freedom differs fundamentally from the view prevalent among the moderns. As Sigurdson observes, classical individualism is based on the notion that freedom signifies participation in the continuous cultural tradition: "[F]reedom is not licence but rather the opportunity to create within a set of self-imposed rules, freely accepted limits, and inherited themes and traditions."<sup>48</sup> Thus, the difference between the two types of free individualism is yet a further manifestation, albeit in a different domain, of Constant's aforementioned distinction between the two senses of political freedom: the (classical) positive freedom to share in a preexisting framework is set against the (modern) negative freedom from constraining influences, whether in the political sphere or the cultural realm. It is another instance of Burckhardt's penchant for paradox that he sides with the moderns when it comes to political freedom, but that he is on the side of the ancients when art and individualism are at stake.

A review of the following anecdote, which Burckhardt mentions in his account of the great individuals of fifth century Athens (GKIV, 193 [231]), will enable us to get a firmer grip on Burckhardt's understanding of classical individualism. Athenaeus recounts that Alcibiades, when visiting the various areas of Greece, was able to outdo each group of inhabitants in its most characteristic area of excellence (Ath. 12. 534b [Kaibel]; cf. Aelianus, *Varia Historia* 4. 15): in Ionia, he displayed greater luxury than the Ionians, in Thessaly he outdid everybody in horse-riding, in Sparta he excelled in physical strength and hardiness, and so on. Along the same lines, Burckhardt remarks in another passage that during his Spartan exile Alcibiades became "in his manners an accomplished Spartan" (GKIV, 218 [247]). For Burckhardt, Alcibiades was the most complete individual among the many great figures that Athens produced in the fifth century, and the story recounted by Athenaeus helps us to isolate three facets of Burckhardt's notion of classical, in contrast to modern, individualism. First, Alcibiades does not generate his purposes out of the depths of his subjectivity, but accepts as given the traditional standards germane to the various centers of Greece. Second, his distinctiveness does not lie in the infinitely complex specificity of his psyche, but in the specific vitality of his personality, which manifests itself in the unencumbered development of innate potentials. Third, his achievements have to do, not exclusively but to a higher degree, with astounding excellence and versatile all-roundedness, rather than with unrepeatable originality.

Useful though the dichotomy between ancient and modern individualism is for the sake of clarity, one must beware of applying it too rigidly. While Alcibiades fits, in many important respects, the classical variant of individualism, extreme cases like his will always involve some grey

(47) The difference between classical and modern individualism corresponds to a parallel distinction that applies to the notion of artistry. Consider in this connection Burckhardt's characterization of Rubens: "Was Rubens als Object seiner Kunst antraf, war noch eine feste *Einheit* der *idealen* und eines anerkannten Kreises der *realen* Welt, vorherrschend im Sinne der romanischen Völker [...] Diesen Horizont [...] hat Rubens im Grunde nicht durchbrochen; er ist kein Phantast auf eigene Hand geworden, sondern nur der weit mächtigste Zeuge und Herold dieses Gegebenen. Seine ungeheure Erfindungskraft ging im Wesentlichen damit dahin, dieses Gegebene jedesmal *neu* zu empfinden und *neu* zu geben" (*Erinnerungen an Rubens*, 28).

(48) SIGURDSON 2004, p. 170–171.

areas. Alcibiades' unconventionality, flagrant by Greek standards, and his lack of subordination to inherited ethical norms were extremely unusual. Burckhardt attests him "abnormal eccentricity" ("abnorme Absonderlichkeit"; GKIV, 216 [246]), a predicate that is meant to capture Plutarch's remark about Alcibiades' φύσεως ἀνωμαλία (Plut. *Alc.* 16, cited in GKIV 216 n. 190 [404 n. 112]). "Absonderlichkeit" is a character trait that one would sooner associate with the modern type of individualism featured by Michelangelo. Thus, the example of Alcibiades shows that classical individualism, too, presupposes a certain degree of freedom vis-à-vis traditional patterns of behavior. Without such freedom, ossification would threaten and with it the death of classical individualism, which requires, more than anything, the production of a vivid, personal response to traditional norms.

#### IV. THE DEFEAT OF ATHENS AND THE SELF-DESTRUCTIVE MOMENTUM OF GREEK CIVILIZATION

The distinctive way in which the polis principle, the agonistic spirit, and the cultivation of individualism came to interact at Athens was chiefly responsible for the city's defeat in the Peloponnesian War.

As pointed out in section 1, the application of the polis principle at Athens had led to the deployment of large segments of the population in the administration of state business, most notably through service in the popular assembly and the courts. Since spectatorship in public debates was an important component in the fulfillment of these functions, the mindset adopted in discharging this political duty came to be affected by a mentality that the Demos had acquired at another type of collective spectatorship, namely during the attendance at theatrical performances. As a result, the Athenians came to be affected by a permanently agitated state of mind. In addition, the Demos, in playing the role of a sovereign decision-making body, became self-conscious of its unlimited powers. In the wake of the combination of these factors, the Demos adopted an increasingly high-handed attitude and did not concern itself much with due consideration of the obstacles that wayward reality placed in the way of its ambitions. Burckhardt thought that the decision in favor of the Sicilian expedition was the direct result of this state of mind: "And now comes the Sicilian expedition: a city equipped with a modest population and an insecure hegemony attempts to acquire a distant dominion, an enterprise that will always remain an event of the first rank. One can only explain this undertaking as the result of an excessive inner excitation [*innern Überreizung*], a state of mind that would never again befall a polity endowed with a comparable level of organization" (GKIV, 187; cf. WB 473 [272]).

Under these circumstances, the Athenians developed the fateful presumption that whatever objective they had got into their head would turn out according to their desire (GKIV, 188). Apart from the decision in favor of the Sicilian expedition, other blatant instances of their propensity for turning a blind eye to the serious consequences of their decisions were the alliance with Corcyra that set the course for the outbreak of the war (GKI, 210), the frenzy in response to the mutilation of the Herms and the alleged profanation of the Eleusinian Mysteries (GKIV, 182 [229]), and the mad insistence on the execution of the victors of Arginusae (GKI, 224). As a passage from the *Reflections on World History* indicates, Burckhardt considered this type of irrationalism particularly virulent in a democracy, which was therefore unsuited to ruling an empire: because all decisions were taken in heated meetings of the citizen body, demagogues found it easy, through the incitement of collective passions, to nourish imprudent ambitions and to induce rash decisions. Burckhardt remarks: "There lies the root of all the subsequent troubles and of the great catastrophe" (WB 440 [219]), a term that signifies the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War.

One consequence of the rampant collective madness was that politicians became ever less willing to articulate unpopular points of view or to take, when they were generals, military decisions for which they might incur criticism at home. Burckhardt uses Nicias as his prime example of this trend. In opposing the Sicilian expedition in the decisive meeting of the assembly, Nicias lacked the support of other prominent figures, who feared people's suspicion that they were objecting merely in order to avoid the costs of trierarchies (GKI, 217; IV, 188). Once at Sicily, Nicias notoriously refused, when the chance of victory had vanished, to withdraw the Athenian troops because he preferred, as Burckhardt puts it, death at Sicily over the same fate at the hands of his fellow-countrymen upon his return home (GKI, 227; IV, 189). Nicias' decision, which Burckhardt thinks was chiefly induced by the fear of sycophants, led directly to the catastrophic outcome of the Sicilian Expedition (GKI, 229), an event that set Athens on the track towards its eventual defeat (GKIV, 190). Burckhardt supposes that Nicias' attitude was far from exceptional, and that on many other occasions as well the decisions of commanders in the field were encumbered by the concern that they might incur the anger of the Demos back at Athens.

The worst irruption of the irrationalism and arbitrariness of the Demos was the illegal summary trial, and subsequent execution, of the victorious generals of the naval battle at Arginusae. Burckhardt quotes Xenophon's report that people were yelling, when the illegality of the procedure was pointed out to them, that they would not put up with any attempt to bar the Demos from exercising its will (Xen. *Hell.* 1.7.12 with GKI, 224). For Burckhardt, this episode shows that the lack of effective protections for the individual led to incalculable risks for those occupying eminent positions in the state: if the fact that everybody knew a procedure to be illegal was not enough to prevent it, what safeguard did remain? Burckhardt remarks that in circumstances such as these it was little wonder that even well-intentioned generals fostered their foreign connections as insurance against the capricious Athenian Demos (GKI, 227), and that talented individuals ceased to be willing to labor for the city (GKII, 361 [96]; IV, 203 [238]; WB 440 [218]). After the events in the wake of Arginusae, it came to pass more or less inevitably that at Aegospotamoi the Athenian fleet was commanded by incompetent generals (GKIV, 191), a circumstance that sealed the city's fate.

Thus it became increasingly difficult to gloss over the tension, which had always been harsh, between the total subordination of the individual to the polis and another fundamental principle of Greek civilization, namely the cultivation of individualism, which was nowhere more eagerly sought after than among the leading circles of Athens. Outstanding Athenian individuals responded to their precarious situation by developing a puzzling type of split consciousness: while being fervently committed to attaining the leading position in their polis and desiring to display their excellence in the service of the state, they simultaneously achieved an immense detachment from their city. Burckhardt's term for this mentality is "consummate inner independence" ("absolute innere Unabhängigkeit"; GKI, 213). The prime examples of this tendency are Themistocles and Alcibiades, both of whom, once the city turned against them, effortlessly switched sides and, in doing so, apparently did not have to overcome much resistance within their own psyche. Burckhardt even observes a superlatively consequential manifestation of the same tendency in Pericles, who otherwise sought to achieve a harmonious balance between the opposite poles marked by the perfect citizen and the outstanding individual (GKIV, 215 [245]). Burckhardt accords credibility to a view, apparently widespread in antiquity, that Pericles unleashed the Peloponnesian War because his own position at Athens had become untenable. Burckhardt quotes as evidence a passage from Aristophanes (*Pax* 606–612, referenced at GKI, 210) and another from Didorus Siculus (GKIV, 185 n. 88). According to Diodorus' account (12.38–40), Pericles held that in times of war the Demos would be more inclined, due to sheer necessity, to recognize the individual greatness of a man like himself. Burckhardt's willingness to give this rumor the benefit of the doubt indicates

the extent to which he considered the instinctive detachment from the polis to have become second nature for the leading Athenian politicians. Worst of all, this double consciousness primarily prevailed, not among the inner-Athenian enemies of the democracy, but among its foremost leaders.

This curious psychological mechanism was ultimately based on another capacity that was, according to Burckhardt, deeply engrained in Greek culture, namely the faculty to relate to the world objectively. The objective frame of mind, thanks to which science came to flourish in Greece, had its deepest roots, just like the concern with freedom, in myth, the ever vital breeding ground of Greek civilization. Providing an explanation for phenomena in the natural world was, as Karl Löwith observes,<sup>49</sup> one of the central functions of myth. Because myth imbued the manifold natural world with a plethora of attractive colorful stories, it stimulated the Greeks to take a lively and free interest in it (GKII, 80–83). This relation to the natural world was marked by freedom because it lacked the deforming constraint of preconceived dogmatic constrictions.

This keen striving, untainted by utilitarian motives, after free, uninhibited observation of the world caused the Greeks, as Flaig observes, to adopt an objective stance: “Denn nun plötzlich ist das interesselose Betrachten der Welt, eingeübt im Mythos, die Bedingung für die objektive Erkenntnis der Welt.”<sup>50</sup> The key feature of such objectivity is a stance marked by distance. This detachment goes along with the capacity to hold in check preconceived notions or subjective feelings, whether positive or negative, all of which would cloud the phenomena that are supposed to be grasped as they really are. In this connection, Löwith speaks of the Greeks’ “capacity for abstraction.”<sup>51</sup> Burckhardt finds much evidence for this factual, unsentimental outlook in Attic drama: “It was only here [sc. at Athens] that the Greeks could grasp the objectification [*Objektivierung*] of Hellenic nature that these genres [sc. comedy and tragedy] had to offer”<sup>52</sup> (GKIV, 195 [233]). Burckhardt’s subsequent analysis of several passages from Greek tragedy makes clear what he implies by using the term “objectification”: they feature a strikingly unsentimental openness, a factual kind of self-distance, with which characters on stage disclose and appraise their own motivations (IV, 213–214 [244]).<sup>53</sup> This same capacity to stand back from what is closest to oneself, be it one’s personal motivations or one’s commitment to the polis, enabled the great Athenian individuals to turn their back on their city in next to no time.

The ability in question came to play a crucial role in the Athenian defeat. After Alcibiades had fled to Sparta, he was responsible for inciting the Spartans to renew the war effort against Athens. Moreover, it took Alcibiades to devise for the fainthearted Spartans the strategy that ultimately, though only after the passing of nine more years, forced Athens to her knees: “Without hesitation he suggested the most effective measures for destroying Athens” (GKIV, 218 [247]). There is a tragic component to this aspect of the Athenian defeat. Athens had incited its outstanding individuals to develop their potentials so as to take them into its service, and the city’s success in the Persian Wars and thereafter was largely due to the formidable qualities of men like Themistocles and Pericles.

(49) LÖWITH (1966, p. 87) remarks that on Burckhardt’s view Greek myth “embraced what was known about the natural and historical world and represented the archetypal form of Greek knowledge” (“[der Mythos,] der die Kunde von der natürlichen und geschichtlichen Welt umfaßte und selbst Urgestalt des griechischen Wissens war”).

(50) FLAIG 1998, p. 33. Cf. GILBERT 1990, p. 79: “They [sc. the Greeks] possessed and developed the faculty to look upon the world objectively—as it really was.”

(51) LÖWITH 1966, p. 259.

(52) I have altered the translation.

(53) One of Burckhardt’s examples are the following lines spoken by Eteocles in Euripides’ *Phoenissae*: “If one must commit injustice, it is best to do so for the sake of acquiring tyrannical rule; in all other regards, however, one must act piously” (εἴπερ γὰρ ἀδικεῖν χρή, τυραννίδος περὶ / κάλλιστον ἀδικεῖν, τάλλα δ’ εὐσεβεῖν χρεών; Eur. *Phoe.* 524–25).

Yet flourishing individualism also directly led to Athens' defeat: the man who represented the city's spirit more than anyone else was to a significant degree responsible.<sup>54</sup>

Another byproduct of developed individuality was an increased personal refinement and sensitivity, which made people both more vulnerable against attacks (GKII, 360–361 [95–96]) and less willing unreflectively to acquiesce to their circumstances. Burckhardt explains: “As soon as they emerge from the most elementary barbarism, the representatives of, at least, our race [among whom he counts the Greeks just as much as modern Europeans] require, in addition to the state and the public sphere, a peculiar realm of being, namely a peaceable home and some room for independent thoughts and feelings” (GKI, 216). The Athenian polis had incited its citizens to acquire, chiefly through encouraging Athenian trade, private wealth, which they employed for the sake of cultivating their personal sphere (GKI, 216). Therefore, the polis had implicitly fostered a mentality marked by longing for a modicum of private independency. At the same time, however, it took a radically hostile stance towards the purported invulnerability of private life. In order to gauge the full weight of Burckhardt's critique, one must keep in mind that the idealist school of thought had admired the Greeks' perfect harmony, radically at odds with the artificiality of modern social life, a harmony, on the one hand, between the social realm and the sphere of nature and, on the other hand, between people's private life and their public role.<sup>55</sup> Far from balancing the realms of nature and culture, Burckhardt now described life in the Athenian polis as an act of “violence against both human and Greek nature” (GKI, 216).

While some citizens tried to keep out of politics as much as possible, other members of the old aristocracy and the wealthy citizens, who were organized in the *hetairiai*, plotted in secret to overthrow the democracy. Realistically, this end could be achieved only if Athens lost the war, so that significant parts of the population, whose sheer numbers Burckhardt supposes to have been relatively high (GKI, 212), secretly worked towards the defeat of their own city. When the Thirty Tyrants were installed with the help of Sparta in 404, this antidemocratic camp, which had already raised its head in 411, came out into the open and temporarily established a reign of terror over the city.

In short, the extreme degree of internal tension at Athens had its roots in the agonistic spirit, a mindset that had thoroughly shaped the Greek, and not least the Athenian, mentality and produced, as Stepper has stressed, a general inability to compromise in case of political conflict.<sup>56</sup> The innate

(54) Cf. WB 519 [336]: “Dagegen personifizierte Alkibiades Athen im Guten wie im Bösen; er stand nicht darüber, sondern war Athen selbst. Hier liegt eine Art Größe in der völligen Koinzidenz einer Stadt mit einem Individuum.”

(55) Hegel is a representative of the idealist position according to which harmony prevailed in classical Greek civilization between the realm of nature and the requirements of social and political life. In general, Hegel holds that human beings' unreflective unity with nature and their self-awareness as free agents represent contrary poles in the history of human consciousness. As the following passage shows, Hegel thought that balance between the two poles of naturalness and freedom had been achieved in the Greek polis: “Freie Sittlichkeit konnte und mußte also hier [i.e. among the Greeks of the classical era] stattfinden, da die geistige Substanz der Freiheit die Grundlage ihrer Sitten, Gesetze und Verfassungen war. Weil das Naturmoment noch darin enthalten ist, so ist die Weise der Sittlichkeit des Staates noch mit Natürlichkeit behaftet. Die Staaten sind kleine Naturindividuen” (Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie I*, p. 177). For an example of the view that classical Athens had arrived at a seamless integration between people's private interests and their public pursuits, see the following remarks by Ernst Curtius in a talk on Periclean Athens, which he believed was a uniquely happy and harmonious form of state: “Sie [sc. the city of Athens] mußte nun [...] die ferneren Aufgaben der griechischen Volksentwicklung durchführen und für Alle allein die Grenzen hüten, das Meer sichern und die griechische Cultur auf dem Gebiete der Kunst und Wissenschaft zu vollkommener Gestaltung zu bringen suchen. [...] [E]in idealer Beruf und doch ein unmittelbar praktischer, an welchem sich jeder Bürger persönlich beteiligen konnte und beteiligen mußte, ein Beruf endlich, welcher seinen reichen Lohn in sich trug, indem er für alle Staatsangehörigen eine Erziehung zur Tapferkeit, zu freier Geistesbildung und uneigennütziger Vaterlandsliebe war” (*Die Bedingungen eines glücklichen Staatslebens*, 308).

(56) STEPPER 1997, p. 57: “Die Wettbewerbsethik der griechischen Poleis verkehrte sich nur allzuoft in erbitterte Feindschaft sowohl dem einzelnen als auch anderen Poleis gegenüber.”



vehemence of the Greek character, the perpetual willingness to bring matters to a head (GKI, 212; GKIV, 261 [276]), fueled the violence, and the constriction of both camps in the narrow confines of the polis likewise contributed, as Leonhard Burckhardt has observed, its due share.<sup>57</sup> Burckhardt's account resonates with the following appraisal expressed by Moses Finley: "Athenian politics had an all-or-nothing mentality. The objective on each side was not merely to defeat the opposition but to crush it, to behead it by destroying its leaders."<sup>58</sup> On Burckhardt's view, this tendency, which had its roots in the agonistic principle, ultimately led to an explosion of the internal pressure that had built up for years without having an outlet.

Not least in this regard, Athens focused developments that were playing themselves out all over Greece. Burckhardt calls the internal struggle between the democratic camp and the alliance between aristocrats and wealthy citizens "an internal commotion" that accompanied the war ("innere Bewegung": GKI, 211). In the hour of defeat, this agitation fully descended upon Athens under the rule of the Thirty (GKI, 212). In speaking of an "internal commotion," Burckhardt is certainly alluding to Thucydides' famous assertion that in the wake of stasis a commotion affected the Greek world: "Greekness as a whole, so to speak, underwent a commotion" (πᾶν ὡς εἰπεῖν τὸ Ἑλληνικὸν ἐκινήθη; 3.82.1). The connection thus established between the terror of the Thirty and the Thucydidean stasis section, which overtly deals with events at Corcyra, suggests that Burckhardt considers the latter to be a reflection of the former.<sup>59</sup> In Thucydides, the stasis section marks the ultimate collapse of Greek civilization in the wake of the Peloponnesian War. By conceiving of the stasis section as an echo of events at Athens under the Thirty, Burckhardt identifies the breakdown of Greek civilization with the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War, whose immediate result was the terror of the Thirty.

#### CONCLUSION

It is fair to say that Burckhardt's account of the defeat of Athens, and of the contribution made by the democracy to this disaster, neglects aspects that might throw a more favorable light on the polis of Athens. Moses Finley has emphasized that the Athenian democracy proved to be an astoundingly stable political system for almost two centuries, and that it was, with the exception of the period of the Thirty Tyrants, largely free from the extreme forms of stasis that haunted many other Greek cities.<sup>60</sup> If the situation had been as rife with absurdity and self-contradiction as Burckhardt believed, the democracy would hardly have lasted, after the brief interlude of the Thirty, for eighty more years until 322. While putting great stress on the democracy's low points, such as

(57) L. BURCKHARDT 2002, p. 121: "Aber nur innerhalb ihres Rahmens [sc. that of the polis] ist zivilisierte Existenz möglich – sie ist auch für hochbegabte Menschen das einzige Betätigungsfeld. Weil dieses aber so klein und eng ist, erklärt sich dadurch auch die Intensität und Brutalität des Lebens in der dieses konstituierenden Gemeinschaftsform."

(58) FINLEY 1973a, p. 71–72. BERVE (1966, p. 13–14) stresses that the struggles between democrats and oligarchs were seen as an *agon*.

(59) Elsewhere in his work, in the course of an extended analysis dedicated to the Thucydidean stasis section, Burckhardt also uses, when translating the Thucydidean passage just quoted, the word "Bewegung" (GKIV, 260 [275]). Moreover, in the Reflections on World History, Burckhardt remarks that the extreme of violence portrayed in the Thucydidean stasis section was "actually a reaction against the terrorism practiced by the Demos and the sycophants" (WB 476 [277]). This is a further hint that Burckhardt considered the stasis section to be a reflection of the terror of the Thirty, which he regarded in part as inspired by the desire to take vengeance on the sycophants (GKI, 229). Elsewhere, he expresses the view that Thucydides' account, which is also in the stasis section, of the deformation of language was meant principally to apply to Athens (GKIV, 201 [237]). All this suggests that Burckhardt took Thucydides' account of stasis at Corcyra to be, in large measure, a backward reflection from the terror afflicting Athens under the Thirty.

(60) FINLEY 1973a, p. 70 and 1985b, p. 102.

the decision in favor of the Sicilian expedition and the trial in the wake of Arginusae, Burckhardt failed to give the Athenians their due for the shining moments of good sense. Chief among these was the amnesty of 403, which the population observed with considerable self-restraint, despite the atrocities that had happened under the Thirty.<sup>61</sup>

Another objection is that Burckhardt was not sufficiently critical of his sources and did not take into account that the foremost witnesses for the history of classical Athens – viz. Thucydides, the so-called Old Oligarch, Xenophon, Aristophanes, Plato, and Aristotle – were all biased against the democracy. In a way, this shortcoming is inevitable given Burckhardt's approach: the vividness of his style and his immense imaginative insight are inextricably bound up with the immediate relationship that he has with the sources, which were for him living interlocutors rather than neutral documents.<sup>62</sup> Burckhardt's lack of critical reserve was the price that he was willing to pay for the insights generated by precisely this feature of his style, many of which have stood up, as we have had occasion to acknowledge, to the scrutiny of eminent ancient historians. One might also point out in Burckhardt's defense that a considerable part of his evidence derives from the speeches of Attic orators and from Old Comedy, both of which had to be delivered in front of Athenian audiences whose members were largely pro-democratic. If an orator had grossly overstated his critique of, say, sycophancy or of the unfair bias of a jury, he would have risked losing his credibility with the audience. Comedy, by contrast, was by definition bound to overdraw situations; yet, if the jokes and exaggerations were to have punch, they had to reflect situations that people recognized from their day-to-day lives. So Burckhardt would probably point out that a significant portion of the literary sources could not afford to wallow in unfounded anti-democratic bias.

There is some plausibility to Burckhardt's view that the defeat of Athens marked the end-point of the city's dominance as the political epicenter of the Greek world, and that in the following century Athens no longer produced the outstanding political figures that abounded during the period of its political supremacy. According to Burckhardt, this decline resulted from, and revealed, the unbridgeable self-contradictions into which Greek culture had been maneuvered by its animating forces: "The process of depletion of the poleis, which was partly due to internal factors and partly to inter-state antagonism, followed a logical necessity and derived directly from their innermost character; the unconditional will to life [*der unbedingte Lebensdrang*] had resulted in consequences that became both an internal and an external cause of death" (GKI, 254). The polis world persisted for another century in a state of mutual warfare that failed to lead to a lasting new order, until the age of Hellenistic empires dawned, which put an end to the world of free Greek poleis. In arriving at this conclusion, Burckhardt was in agreement with Ernst Curtius, who likewise thought that Athens had never returned to its previous height and that its defeat revealed the incapacity of the Greek world to overcome, on the basis of the prevailing polis mentality, its internecine struggle.<sup>63</sup>

(61) JONES 1957, p. 54; FINLEY 1973a, p. 71, 74.

(62) Compare the following observations that Carl Spitteler, in an autobiographical piece, makes about Burckhardt, who had taught Spitteler at the Basel Gymnasium: "Jacob Burckhardts Ideal ist nicht sowohl das Altertum selbst als das Studium des Altertums. Die 'Quellen' haben für ihn etwas Heiliges, ja sogar, wenn sie in der Ursprache gelesen werden, etwas 'Magisches', wie er selbst sich auszudrücken liebte [...] er taucht mit so weihevoller Andacht in die klassischen Quellen, wie ein anderer in den Jordan" (*Autobiographische Schriften*, p. 164–165). Joachim Fest likewise highlights the gain that Burckhardt's procedure brought with it: "Was man an Burckhardts Darstellung zurecht immer wieder gerühmt hat, ist denn auch die Fähigkeit, komplexe historische Stoffe in schriftstellerische Form zu übersetzen und aus Wissenschaft Kunst zu machen. Der Puls und die Farbe stammten daher, daß die Geschichte für ihn kein abgetanes Geschehen, keine vergangene Vergangenheit war, sondern ein Überlieferungszusammenhang" (1993, p. 82–83).

(63) Curtius, *Griechische Geschichte* II, 736: "Die Größe des perikleischen Athens ist niemals wieder hergestellt worden, aber sie ist ein Schatz des Volkes für alle Zeit geblieben." Curtius also considered Athens to have been the only Greek power that would have been capable of overcoming the dead end into which the polis world had maneuvered itself: "Die Athener



Burckhardt's originality lies in his contention that the defeat of Athens was induced by those forces that had previously led Greek civilization to its phenomenal peak. In this connection, it is important to note that Burckhardt considered 5th century Athens to represent a condensed version, both heightened and paradigmatic, of the paramount concerns and chief character traits of classical Greece as a whole<sup>64</sup>: "[A]fter the expulsion of the tyrants the initiative in all Greek matters remained with Athens [...] [O]ne city had the will and the ability that were wished for by a whole people, just as in one son the specific gifts of a whole family emerge most fully" (GKIV, 172 [222]).<sup>65</sup> That the defining forces of Greek civilization—viz. polis, *agon*, and individualism—took a self-destructive turn at the paradigmatically Greek city showed the dilemma of classical Greece as a whole. In the end, the defeat of 404 was inflicted on Athens by the amassed majority of the non-Athenian Greek nation, a symbolic indication that the political culture of Greece had arrived at a dead-end: the city that the Greeks themselves recognized for epitomizing the greatness of the entire nation had become its nemesis. Burckhardt considered this impasse to have been both irreversible and inevitable, an assessment that marks the tragic component in his reflections about the end of the Peloponnesian War. The great irony, characteristic of Burckhardt's thought, is that the motive forces that had enabled the flourishing of Greek civilization also sealed its fate.

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allein haben dahin gestrebt, an Stelle der veralteten Bundesordnungen eine neue Einigung der griechischen Volkskräfte herzustellen" (734).

(64) I have adapted the following translation slightly.

(65) Compare GKIV, 192 [231]: "Die Athener des V. Jahrhunderts sind nun aber einmal doch das zentrale Volk von Hellas geworden. Vor allem wird ihnen nachgesagt, daß sie die ganz Guten und die ganz Bösen liefern, gleich wie der attischen Boden den herrlichsten Honig und den schnellsttötenden Schierling hervorbringe." See also GKI, 209 ("Maßstab [...] für das, was der griechische Geist überhaupt vermöge"), GKIV, 163 [217] ("das Griechenland Griechenlands, wie ihr großer Geschichtsschreiber sie genannt hat: *Athen*"), WB 440 [219] ("Alles, was anderswo gemischt und umständlich und undeutlich ist, ist hier [sc. at Athens] durchsichtig und typisch, auch alle Krankheitsformen").

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