Citizen-State and Virtuous Republic:
Ancient Greeks, Romans and the Early American Imagination

Mark W. Graham Ph.D.

I should as soon think of closing all my window shutters to enable me to see, as of banishing the

Classicks to improve Republican ideas.

John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 1789[1]

That early Americans drew inspiration from Greek and Roman antiquity almost goes

without saying. Patrick Henry famously called the classical world "The Lamp of Experience,"

and it was a common sentiment expressed by the editor of *Port Folio* who reckoned that the

ancient world is "of inestimable value to us in the administration of our republic, by teaching us

what it would be safe to imitate, and what it would be prudent to avoid."[2] John Adams counseled

the young John Quincy in 1781: "In the company with Sallust, Cicero, Tacitus, and Livy you

will learn Wisdom and Virtue . . . . You will ever remember that the End of Study is to make you

a good Man and a useful Citizen."[3] Classical citizenship at its best was considered broadly into

the nineteenth century as the basic model for responsible civic action in the American Republic.

The ancient world, in fact, produced several different models of citizenship from which the

Founders were able to select. There was no such thing as "ancient citizenship," if by that we

mean a single model of citizenship emerging in the ancient world. What the American Founders

managed to produce was a dynamic amalgamation of ancient models. The models themselves

were encountered both on the pages of ancient texts—which they read eagerly—as well as

---

[1] Cited from Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 222.
[2] *Port Folio*, 2,1 (January 1816), 18.
[3] Richard, *Founders and Classics*, 37.

mediated by political theory inspired in part by these same texts, emerging in the Italian Renaissance, and later within English Republicanism. American citizenship has a long, rich and diverse history, a history explored from many angles at this very conference.

My purpose in this paper is three-fold: to introduce the basic ancient Greek institutions and conceptions of citizenship, then the Roman, and finally explain briefly how the American Founding Fathers selectively incorporated these classical ideas into the American Republic. I speak as an ancient historian and classicist for the first two of these sections. For the final section on the Founding Fathers, I will be leaning on excellent research of American interaction with antiquity carried out primarily by historians in the past several decades. My goal is that you come away with a basic sense of what Greek and Roman citizenship looked like historically and catch a glimpse of what the American Founding Fathers gleaned from both.

The Greek Citizen-State

For Greeks, the very core of identity and citizenship was the *polis*, the term and concept from which come all our words cognate with "politics"—political, polity, metropolitan, etc. Often, this fundamental term is simply translated as "city-state," an autonomous and independent polity or state, where the single city is a government unto itself. By definition, it is not governed or governing as part of a larger entity such as a kingdom, Empire, or Federation. This simple definition of city-state, though, is grossly insufficient for expressing the dynamic and influential entity that was the Greek polis. The polis was indeed technically a "city-state," but it was much more. Long before the rise of the classical Greek world, the Ancient Near East and the Levant (roughly Palestine) had known the institution of a simple city-state—famous examples from Mesopotamia include Ur, Uruk, Babylon, dating back at least to the fourth millennium B.C.; in the Levant we find the maritime city-states of Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos. Over time, all of these

Near Eastern city-states would either launch or be engulfed by the famously expansive Empires of the Near East, effectively ending their existence as city-states. The city-state ideal remained, though, as a powerful one which continued to proliferate even amidst the clash of Empires. Most likely—the extent is much debated among scholars—the Near Eastern city-state model did influence Greek political ideas via trade and other types of contacts during the so-called Greek Dark Age (c. 1200-750 B.C.). What ultimately emerged in the Aegean world was distinct in some elemental ways.

This difference is all-important to understanding the Greek ideal of citizenship (and our own), so much so that *polis* should be translated not as *city-state* but rather as *citizen-state*.[4] The city-states of the Ancient Near East and Levant had consisted of two basic entities—rulers and subjects. In these city-states, divine or divinely appointed rulers dominated over subjects, whose heavy taxes, paid in kind, built and maintained the famous ziggurats, temples and palaces, fed rulers, and maintained bureaucracies. The Greek polis, by contrast, was not made up of rulers and subjects, but rather citizens. It did not matter what type of specific government arose in these citizen-states. Aristotle noted six major forms, three legitimate and three deviations or perversions; but all were emphatically made up of citizens.[5] Given modern misconceptions, it bears mentioning that democracies were extremely rare (only four out of 750 known *poleis*), but even in the monarchies or even rare dual monarchies, such as Sparta, most free males were citizens; and that fact ultimately distinguishes the Greek polis from anything preceding it.

---

[4] Major sources on the *polis* include Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); François de Polignac, *Cults, Territories, and the Origin of the Greek City-State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Anthony Snodgrass, *Archaic Greece: The Age of Experiment* (London: J.M. Dent, 1980); Mogens Herman-Hansen, *The Ancient Greek City-State* (Copenhagen: University of Denmark, 1993); Oswyn Murray and Simon Price, eds. *The Greek City: From Homer to Alexander* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990).

[5] Kingship, aristocracy, "constitutional government" were the legitimate forms; the deviations were tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy. See *Politics*, 1279a.

Why and how the citizen-state emerged in this peculiar way is an ongoing discussion among historians. Most studies point to the topography of Greece in combination with a rapidly-expanding population over the course of the eighth century B.C. The Greek heartland consists of fertile valleys completely isolated amidst hills and mountains. Within these fertile valley areas, small communities expanded in number rather suddenly around the eighth century. As they grew in number, ideals of small, participatory communities and face-to-face familiarity of the inhabitants remained and/or expanded over subsequent centuries. These inhabitants made up the city; they were its citizens. Everywhere that these Greek *poleis* spread colonies, as many did over and over again between the 8th and 6th centuries B.C., the citizen-state model went with them—to southern Italy and Sicily, the western coast of Asia Minor, North Africa, and even southern France and Spain. While divine-right type rulers did remain in a few areas, over the centuries the citizen-based model came to dominate throughout the Aegean and well beyond.

In a unique way in human history, the *polis* emerged primarily as a people rather than simply a place. This conception has had far-reaching effects on subsequent western history; it nourished a sense of freedom and identity which had not been seen previously. The Athenian, the Corinthian, the Theban, the Spartan identified not so much with a spot of ground with boundaries; rather each lived, fought, and died for their fellow citizens. With this identity as an Athenian or a Corinthian or a Spartan came a sense of political participation and relative equality of citizens.

Elements and standards of citizenship varied from polis to polis. Within the common institution of the citizen-state throughout the Aegean and beyond, there was much variety. In Athens (and in colonies founded by Athenians), for example, all free males were enrolled as citizens. In some *poleis*, a citizen was required convincingly to claim descent from a distant

ancestor (real or imagined). In some *poleis*, one had to own land in order to be truly trusted to defend the polis as a citizen. All of these models would have subsequent influence in the western world, but they ultimately derived from the basic and multi-faceted citizen-state.

Greek ideals of political participation and visions of equality registered in all facets of Greek life, but perhaps most famously in the characteristic Greek military organization—the phalanx. The phalanx arose directly from this sense of participation, citizenship, and identity as a people. The organization itself was a closely packed formation, consisting of heavily armed infantrymen (known as hoplites) lined up eight deep (later more). The hoplites stood shoulder to shoulder in battle, each relying on the shield of the hoplite to his right for protection. The front line of hoplites would project long spears for the attack, and those in the rows behind would back them up, ready to take the place immediately of any who fell. Building on ideals of wide political participation and visions of citizenship and equality, the hoplite phalanx assumed a certain measure of trust and respect for one's equals, a morale which could only be built up in the citizen community of the polis. The phalanx would have been impossible without this sense of the polis as a people, for on the battlefield that was exactly what each hoplite was defending—the person next to him and the one next to him, and by implication, all the ones back at home.[6]

The "people-rather-than-place" concept of citizenship also shaped (and was shaped by) a unique and unprecedented form of political discourse. The Greeks developed comparatively open institutions within which rational discussion played a key role. The world's first known discussions of the nature of government, varieties of government, citizenship, personal responsibility within a community and the like were all aired in these settings. The Greeks came to think of citizenship in these discussions in ways we today might think of shareholders in a

---

[6]This section and the previous one draws heavily from my *Ancient Empires: From Mesopotamia to the Rise of Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), coauthored with Eric H. Cline.

company. Citizens collectively had a sense of shared responsibilities; these included voting, fighting, judging, administration and privileges, which included access to land, various types of grants, and social and political power. Although the specific character of these varied from polis to polis, the fundamental notion was that citizens were joint proprietors. These citizens were known in Greek as *polites*. Greeks had a special phrase—*metechein tes politeias*, meaning "to have a share in the polity." The phrase had a wide range of applications, from delivering political speeches, listening and responding to them, voting in elections, or simply carrying out basic life in the polis, treating oneself and others as integral parts and all that that entailed in each individual polis.[7]

The *polites*, citizens, had their counterpart in the person who did not wish to participate in the workings of civic life and did not make it a high priority *metechein tes politeias*—to have a share in the polis. This was the presumably rather rare person who held his own personal, family, and business interests paramount, and was not much interested in furthering the life of the citizen-state. The Greek term for such a person translates "one who keeps to himself." But harsher connotations are evident when we look at the Greek word itself – *idiotes* – those who keep to their own affairs and are not directing their energies toward the common good which was the polis. Yes, just in case it is not crystal clear – our word *idiot* ultimately derives from the Greek counterpart of "citizen."

The classical writer who reveals most about how the whole system worked is Aristotle, especially via his work *Politics*. Aristotle was, along with Plato, a lover of the polis (and both, it must be noted, hated democracy). But where Plato proposed an imagined system, Aristotle describes the actual workings of the polis, a fact which was not lost on the American Founding Fathers. Aristotle held that men in association with one another defined the social basis of the

---

[7] The shareholder image here is adapted from the "citizenship" entry of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

polis. These men in association with each other (i.e. citizens, *polites*) could pursue their ends as human beings most nobly and most effectively in the setting of the citizen-state. Aristotle would claim that essentially the highest form of human life was a citizen ruling his household even as he both ruled and was ruled as part of a community. The general good was, thus, pursued by each at the same time that each contributed to the general good. This never meant that all citizens were identical; each pursued his own ends and priorities, and thus, each enjoyed special bonds with others who shared the same priorities.[8] But all contributed ultimately to the community as citizens. The second part of Aristotle's most famous and oft-quoted political statement, "man is a social and political animal," could more appropriately be translated as "man is a creature of the polis." In other words, the human is most fully realized and only fulfills his fundamental ends within the participatory milieu of the polis, where each citizen is a share-holder.

Yet just as share-holders are by nature an exclusive group, a basic touchstone of Greek citizenship in any polis was exclusion. It did not encourage the inclusion of outsiders, nor were there essential mechanisms in place for incorporating new citizens. This was a powerful and exclusive identification with the people into whose community one had been born. We saw above that the exact terms of citizenship varied from polis to polis, but all had strong restrictions on true citizenship. Greek dialects preserve a whole range of terms for those who might inhabit a general area in or around a polis but who were not allowed to claim the status of citizen. These terms, translating "dwellers-around," "resident free aliens," and the like—all inferior statuses— show that some status was accorded, but by nature inferior to the status of citizen. On occasion (and this was remarkably rare), citizenship could be granted to men of particularly desired resources or talents. The Greek historian Herodotus records one rare example where an effective

---

[8] J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 67-68.

diviner named Tisemenus was granted full citizenship by Sparta, even though he was from the polis of Elis. Tisemenus had deeply impressed the Spartans enough that they offered him a position as a war leader. He, sensing their deep respect and thanks, raised the stakes and asked for citizenship. At first, the Spartans angrily refused to grant such an outrageous request, even by one of their own war leaders; only under an extreme threat from the Persians did they later relent.[9] Taking advantage of the dire situation (and in response to their delay), he further bargained for the citizenship of his brother as well.

As impressive, unique, and influential as the *polis* was and would be, by the fourth century B.C. it had largely collapsed after war within Greece and then conquests by Philip II and then Alexander of Macedon. In fact, even as Aristotle reflected on the polis system, it was already well in decline. *Poleis* would then be incorporated into larger confederations and Empires, the most important of which had long been developing its own independent and ultimately influential notion of citizenship off to the west of the Greek heartland.

Roman Citizenship in the "Virtuous Republic"

The ancient Byzantine writer Procopius once described the Romans as "the most city-proud people known."[10] From their earliest history, they would connect their sense of civilization to the *urbs*, a term which could refer to any civic entity, but most usually and specifically to the city of Rome itself. While there were some similarities, this was a radically different set-up from the Greek civic model in important ways.

If a touchstone of classical Greek citizenship was a powerful community identity that assumed exclusion, a central theme of Roman citizenship through time was inclusion of outsiders. There were limits to this inclusion, but recorded Roman debates on who or who not to

---

[9] Herodotus, *Histories*, 9.33.
[10] *The Gothic Wars*, trans. H.B. Dewing (Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1928), 8.22.7.

include demonstrate over and over again that the Roman default position was inclusion. As a related aside, this simple fact goes a long way toward explaining how "[Rome] was one of the most successful conquering states in all history, but it was *the* most successful *retainer* of conquests."[11] As in Greece, topography most likely played a central role here. Like the early Greeks around the eighth century B.C., the early inhabitants of Italy also lived in small communities, the most important of which was Rome, some of which functioned from time to time as city-states in their own right. But while Greek communities tended to be isolated from each other by impassable or nearly impassable mountains, Latin city-states were not at all geographically isolated:

> The Latins could find safe refuge in their hill-tops, but the lands from which they drew their livelihood were separated by no mountain barriers from those of their neighbors. Latium is a plain, and that plain forms a natural unity; it is not broken but encircled by its hills. This geographical factor must guide discussions of the political history of the various communities which formed the population of the Latin plain . . . . It was not possible for a state to develop internally and remain isolated in the fashion of the Greek cities, which felt the inconvenience of isolation only when social order was far advanced.[12]

From the earliest Roman legends, a theme of inclusion and interchange rather than isolation and exclusion is unmistakable. At the core of these stories, not surprisingly, are key ideals that Romans passed on from generation to generation—stories of their origins, their mores, etc. One of the most famous stories, recorded by the historian Livy (from whom John Quincy Adams, as might be recalled in the introduction, was to learn how to be "a good Man and useful Citizen"), is that of the capture of the Sabine women. In this story, an immediate inspiration for the American musical "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers," we see how the Romans held inclusion as a central part of their identity. Livy writes,

---

[11] Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 250.

[12] A.N. Sherwin-White, *The Roman Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 5. This text remains the standard work on Roman citizenship.

> Rome was now strong enough to challenge any of her neighbors; but, great though she was, her greatness seemed likely to last only for a single generation. There were not enough women, and that, added to the fact that there was no intermarriage with neighboring communities, ruled out any hope of maintaining the level of population.[13]

After a peaceful attempt by the founder of Rome, Romulus, to get neighboring communities to consent to intermarriage failed, Romulus came up with a more sinister plan. He put on an elaborate festival to which nearby communities were invited. With foreigners thus gathered within Rome, at a signal, the Romans seized women from among their neighbors, particularly from the Sabines, and forcibly made them their wives. Not long afterward, the Sabine army descended on Rome seeking revenge. As the two armies came together, the Sabine women, "with loosened hair and rent garments," then:

> Braved the flying spears and thrust their way in a body between the embattled armies. They parted the angry combatants; they besought their fathers on the one side, their husbands on the other, to spare themselves the curse of shedding kindred blood. 'We are mothers now,' they cried; 'our children are your sons—your grandsons; do not put on them the stain of parricide.'[14]

The daring move worked, and both sides immediately concluded a peace. "Indeed, they went further: The two states were united under a single government, with Rome as the seat of power. Thus, the population of Rome was doubled," says Livy. Whether or not the Sabine women story ever actually happened is beside the point. The Romans continued to tell it; Livy records it many centuries after Romulus—because it revealed something about who they were and who they imagined themselves to be. They were a people with a deep tendency to incorporate outsiders. They would do so even to conquered people. "A result of the fall of Alba," Livy writes, "was an increase in the size of Rome. The population was doubled."[15] The Romans amazed Greeks by the way they would incorporate whole communities at times.

---

[13] *Ab Urbe Condita*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), 1.
[14] *Ab Urbe Condita¸* 1.
[15] *Ab Urbe Condita*, 1.30.

None of this means that Roman citizenship itself was easy to come by for everyone. The general pattern was to extend citizenship rights to the elites of incorporated or even captured communities. Famously, by the time of the Apostle Paul, citizens made up only somewhere between 5-10 % of a population somewhere between 50 and 70 million people. The Romans also had a variety of gradations of partial or semi-citizenship – some with a vote, for example, and some with no vote. With the rise of the Roman Empire (as opposed to the Republic), Roman citizenship continued to expand and more and more inhabitants were enfranchised. By the year A.D. 212, the Emperor Caracalla extended citizenship to all free inhabitants in the Empire, showing that by that time the political rules of the game had changed markedly.

Back in the earliest days of Rome, all citizens voted in the local elections. But as the Republic expanded to include surrounding and even distant communities, a further critical difference arose between Roman citizenship and Greek. Those granted rights of citizenship might live many days' journey from each other and from the center of political power. This was a crucial difference from the type of face-to-face intimacy to citizenship which always characterized the polis.[16] The right to vote was one of the most fundamental to the highest tier of citizen (with suffrage), to Romans. They voted on officials and on all legislation (strictly speaking, the Roman Senate was not a legislature). But all of this was restricted to those who lived in, or could make it to, the city of Rome at election time. Citizenship, thus, gradually came to have less and less of an absolutely necessary connection to active participation in political workings of Rome—unthinkable to Greeks in a polis. The privilege of political engagement was always there, but it was not practical for all to exercise it. By the time of the collapse of the Roman Republic in the late first century B.C., Rome included citizens from Gaul to Spain to

---

[16] Fergus Millar, *The Roman Republic in Political Thought* (Hanover, NH: The University Press of New England, 2002), 3.

Syria to the northern fringes of the Sahara desert. The transition to an official Empire, complete

with an Emperor, thus, did not drastically affect the political lives of most of the citizens per se,

with the exception of those inhabiting the city of Rome itself or closely adjoining regions.

Our most interesting glimpse into the workings of the Roman Republic is in the writings

of the Hellenistic Greek historian Polybius, himself highly influenced by the political theory of

Aristotle. Polybius originally played a role in the Achaean League, which opposed Roman

expansion into the Greek east. After being captured by a Roman army and then put under house

arrest in Rome (where he eventually managed to rub shoulders with the best and brightest of

Rome's citizens), Polybius became a believer that the Roman Republic was the most superior

form of government ever devised by humans. He became a firm apologist for Roman control of

the Mediterranean. The term he used was *symploke*, a metaphor borrowed from weaving: Before

Rome, the world consisted of separate histories (like separate strands of thread); but with Rome's

quick rise, all the histories of the world had become woven together. "The Romans" he writes,

"have brought not just mere portions but almost the whole world under their rule, and have left

an empire which far surpasses any that exists today or is likely to succeed it."[17]

In Book Six of his history of the rise of Rome, Polybius reveals what he saw as the secret

of Rome's success—its very constitution; that is, the way in which Roman society was

constituted, how it was put and held together. Three elements worked together in a balance of

powers relationship to make Rome peculiar and powerful: the consuls, the Senate, and the citizen

people. The consuls led the legions with absolute power on the battlefield; only the Senate could

advise and fund war. The citizens declared war and ratified peace treaties; the people also elected

all the officials, and therefore, could bestow either honor or punishment on them. These three

elements, he claims, presented a most compelling balance of power. I cite the section of

---

[17] *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (London: Penguin, 1980), 1.2.

Polybius' Book Six at some length below, not only because of what it reveals about the role of

Roman citizens, but also because it was the favorite section of the American Founding Fathers,

as we will see.

> These, then, are the powers which each of the three elements in the system possesses to help or harm the others; the result is a union which is strong enough to withstand all emergencies, so that it is impossible to find a better form of constitution than this. For whenever some common external threat compels the three to unite and work together, the strength which the state then develops becomes quite extraordinary. No requirement is neglected, because all parties vie with one another to find ways of meeting the needs of the hour, and every decision taken is certain to be executed properly, since all are cooperating in public and private alike to carry through the business in hand. The consequence is that this peculiar form of constitution possesses an irresistible power to achieve any goal it has set itself.

> Political participation of citizens was, then, intrinsic to the working of the Roman

Republic. But even while Polybius praised the Roman Republic, he issued a basic warning.

Polities are organic; they grow, they flourish, and then invariably decline. Part of this was a cycle

of nature to Polybius, but citizens played a major part in this dynamic as well—virtuous citizens

necessarily made up a virtuous Republic. When a new generation arises and the Republic

> Falls into the hands of the grandchildren of its founders, they have become so accustomed to freedom and equality that they no longer value them, and begin to aim at pre-eminence . . . . So when they begin to lust for power and cannot attain it through themselves or their own qualities, they ruin their estates, tempting and corrupting the people in every possible way. And hence when by their foolish thirst for reputation they have created among the masses an appetite for gifts and the habit of receiving them, democracy in its turn is abolished and changes into a rule of force and violence. For the people, having grown accustomed to feed at the expense of others, as soon as they find a leader who is enterprising but is excluded from the honors of office by his penury, institute the rule of violence; and now uniting their forces massacre, banish, and plunder until they degenerate again into perfect savages and find once more a master and monarch.[18]

Citizens, Polybius surmised, must exercise constant vigilance, lest their Republics collapse in the

way Polybius described. Just as the citizen-states of Greece had descended into demagoguery

and then war before their autonomy ended, so would go the Roman Republic if its citizens

---

[18] Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, 6.8.

became complacent. Hardly a century after Polybius, the Roman Republic did, in fact, collapse, and along almost the exact lines Polybius had predicted. For this reason, he would be considered as something of a prescient sage by the American Founding Fathers.

Several centuries later, after the Fall of the Roman Empire, much of Polybius' work disappeared entirely from the West. This particularly clear warning from Polybius' sixth book, then, was not available until the second decade of the sixteenth century, but it rather quickly thereafter became the definitive statement on Renaissance ideas about politics.[19] Machiavelli and others would be informed directly by Roman ideas as they articulated the idea of *vivere civile*— active civic and social life based on citizenship. From the political theorists of the Italian Renaissance, this lesson spread to England where it had a deep influence on the English Republican tradition. From there it made its way across the Atlantic to the American Founding Fathers. The Renaissance and English traditions inspired them to look back at the ancients even as it shaped the way they did so. It is to them that we finally turn.

The American Founders Look Back

Classicist Meyer Reinhold reminds us that although the early American leaders "knew far less about the ancient world than [scholars] do today . . . the learning they acquired, circumscribed though it was, affected their thought and action far more . . . . It is probable that never since antiquity were the classics in one form or another, read by a greater proportion of the population."[20] One of the major topics these early Americans delved into was Greek and Roman citizenship. They read, at various levels, the great ancient political theorists Aristotle and Polybius in particular as well as a wide variety of early modern political theorists applying

---

[19] Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 77.

[20] *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 23-49. When Reinhold speaks of us today knowing more than the early American leaders, he is merely showing the greater understanding that modern ancient historians have of antiquity; he is certainly not referencing rank and file Americans here.

ancient and not-so-ancient ideas. The influence of ancient writers was clear, if sometimes mixed and mediated, even sometimes in ways they did not realize.[21]

Greek and Roman history and political thought, particularly Aristotle and Polybius, inspired the American Founding Fathers as they sought to construct what they called a Republic of Virtue, full of active citizens. They would learn how to do so, they were convinced, by imitating the strengths and avoiding the pitfalls of the ancient citizen-based polities. A contributor to *Port Folio* wrote in 1816, Accurate information of every thing appertaining to the ancient nations of Greece; to the Romans . . . would be of inestimable value to us in the administration of our republic . . . by teaching us what it would be safe to imitate, and what it would be prudent to avoid."[22]

Caleb Strong, the governor of Massachusetts during the Jefferson administration, put it this way: "In modern republicks of Europe, the scenes which were formerly displayed in those of Greece and Rome, have been repeated . . . . Let us take warning from the errours and misfortunes; and may Heaven preserve us from a similar destiny."[23]

---

[21] Over the past several decades, the extent to which the classics shaped the Founding Fathers has been a topic of much discussion. One of the greatest scholars on the topic, Bernard Bailyn, has famously argued that the founding fathers were "amateurish, random, superficial, and selective" in their understanding of the classical world. At best, classical references, allusions, and symbols were *illustrative*, but not *determinative* of thought, to invoke Bailyn's categories. "They contributed a vivid vocabulary but not the logic or grammar of thought." See his *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967). The eminent American historian Gordon S. Wood responds to Bailyn: "Classicism was not only a scholarly ornament of educated Americans; it helped shape their values and their ideals of behavior . . . . Yet it was not as scholarly embellishment or as a source of values that antiquity was most important to Americans in these revolutionary years. The Americans' compulsive interest in the ancient republics was, in fact, crucial in their attempt to understand the moral and social basis of politics." See his *Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969).

[22] Cited from Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 18.

[23] Strong, "Speech to the Massachusetts Legislature," cited from Winterer, *Culture of Classicism*, 19.

To construct a Republic of Virtue assumed virtuous citizens as well as solid and wise institutions to support them, the wisdom of classical ages.[24] They took particular note of Polybius' warning about the fates of democracies and Republics. For the more wealthy and powerful their Republic became, Polybius warned them, it would be harder to maintain the classical virtues of citizenship which sustained it.[25] Extremely practical, they followed Aristotle and Polybius in their denunciation of idealist schemes, particularly the Republic proposed by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. Polybius would write of Plato: "It is not fair to introduce Plato's *Republic*, which is belauded by some philosophers. For just as we do not admit to athletic contests artists or athletes who have not been in training, so we have no right to admit this constitution for the prize of merit, unless it first give an exhibition of its actual working." Governor Thomas Hutchinson of Massachusetts, one of the best colonial historians, agreed: "Plato's was an ideal creation," and thus, "his characters were not found in real life."[26] Or as Elbridge Gerry, Vice President under James Madison, would laconically declare, "Plato was not a Republican."[27]

It was Polybius's reflection on a well-working Republic which inspired the Founding Fathers the most fundamentally, and it itself was inspired by Aristotle's categories of polities. Consequently, Greece and Rome together inspired the American imagination. Thomas Jefferson owned two separate editions of Polybius, and late 18th-century Americans had a total of four different printings from which to choose.[28] But these politicians and theorists were not simple imitators, but rather continued to improve in the light of the "Lamp of Experience" as well as

---

[24] Of the many important works on the influence of classical antiquity on early America written in the past 40-50 years, almost none, oddly, have specific index entries on citizenship or citizen. This is true of all such works cited in this paper.

[25] Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, 6.

[26] Richard M. Gummere, *The American Colonial Mind and the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 178-79.

[27] Gunmere, *Colonial Mind*, 178-179.

[28] H. Trevor Colbourn, *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1965), 21.

selectively choosing from the classical world. As American author John Corbin would write, "The theory of our Constitution derives from Aristotle, and was put into successful practice in ancient Rome, in eighteenth-century England, and in our early state constitutions, before it was given its most perfect embodiment by the Convention of 1787."[29]

The Greek model specifically would fall in and out of use. In the colonial period, the Greek colony was to the fore of the American mind, with its freedom associated with loose attachment to mother city (metropolis); the centralized Roman system was seen as too unified.[30] Particularly attractive were the Federal Leagues of Greece, which bound *poleis* together in the face of emergency, but allowed for independence and freedom (it was thought) for the basic individual groups. But later, this model came under strident challenge. John Dickinson, delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and author of "Pennsylvania Farmer," along with Alexander Hamilton would insightfully point out that "the leagues among the Grecian Republics were continually at war with each other, and *for want of union*, fell a prey to their neighbors."[31] "The commonwealths of Greece were a constant scene of the alternate tyranny of one part of the people over the other, or of a few uprising demagogues over the whole." James Madison could point out "all the beauties and defects of the ancient republics" in the midst of these important debates.[32]

As the nineteenth century progressed, though, the idea that the classical world was our "Lamp of Experience" fell on hard times.   In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Edward Everett questioned the fundamental Greek model: "Athens was certainly a free state;

---

[29] Cited in Gummere, *Colonial Mind*, 176.
[30] Gunmere, *Colonial Mind*, 179.
[31] Gunmere, *Colonial Mind*, 180.
[32] Gunmere, *Colonial Mind*, 180-81.

free to licentiousness, free to madness."[33] The Roman idea also came under challenge. A rather

different conception of American citizenship shines through in political theorist Benjamin

Constant's famous and influential 1819 speech, "The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that

of the Moderns." He argued that an appeal to the ancient republics for a model of virtuous

citizenship was fundamentally wrongheaded. After positing that modern polities such as the

United States of America are too large to compare to ancient Republics, his argument goes

deeper. Modern citizens defined citizenship and liberty completely differently from their ancient

counterparts:

> First ask yourselves, Gentlemen, what an Englishman, a Frenchman, and a citizen of the
> United States of America understand today by the word "liberty." For each of them it is
> the right to be subjected only to the laws, and to be neither arrested, detained, put to death
> or maltreated in any way by the arbitrary will of one or more individuals. It is the right of
> everyone to express their opinion, choose a profession and practice it, to dispose of
> property, and even to abuse it; to come and go without permission, and without having to
> account for their motives or undertakings. It is everyone's right to associate with other
> individuals, either to discuss their interests, simply to occupy their days or hours in a way
> which is most compatible with their inclinations or whims. Finally it is everyone's right
> to exercise some influence on the administration of the government, either by electing all
> or particular officials, or through representation, petitions, demands to which the
> authorities are more or less compelled to pay heed. Now compare this liberty with that of
> the ancients. The latter consisted of exercising collectively, but directly, several parts of
> the complete sovereignty; in deliberating, in the public square, over war and peace; in
> forming alliances with foreign governments; in voting laws, in pronouncing judgements;
> in examining the accounts, the acts, the stewardship of the magistrates; in calling them to
> appear in front of the assembled people, in accusing, condemning or absolving them. But
> if this was what the ancients called liberty, they admitted as compatible the authority of
> the community. You find among them almost none of the enjoyments which we have just
> seen form part of the liberty of the moderns. All private actions were submitted to a
> severe surveillance. No importance was given to individual independence, neither in
> relation to opinions, nor to labor, nor, above all, to religion. The right to choose one's
> own religious affiliation, a right which we regard as one of the most precious, would have
> seemed to the ancients a crime and a sacrilege.[34]

Constant's thesis "is precisely that the appeal to antiquity as a model for an active, martial

citizenship, matched by the complete submission of the individual to collective values, is

---

[33] Edward Everett in 1824; cited in Winterer, *Culture of Classicism*, 62.
[34] Cited from Millar, *Roman Republic*, 132-33.

18

delusive and inappropriate."[35] There was certainly something to this claim; after all, our motto is *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, we Americans have proposed a New Order for the Ages. Reconciling that ideology with inspiration from antiquity never can be an easy task. The subsequent history of the nineteenth century would show a precipitous decline in emphasis on the classical world.

Conclusion

Alexis de Tocqueville, in 1835, observed of America that "a new science of politics is needed for a new world."[36] What could the classical world offer in terms of a "new science" for such a "new world"? The American citizenship was, in the final analysis, something new in human history. As much as the American citizenship consciously gleaned from the ancient world, it was far from a simple imitation of the Greeks and/or the Romans. As such, much is missing from this particular analysis, much which will be explored at length and breadth in other studies at this Vision and Values Conference. Beyond the scope of this particular study, the American tradition of citizenship had myriad sources other than ancient Greece and Rome, strictly speaking. Common law as well as English Republican traditions, Renaissance Italian civic humanism, and Enlightenment political theory, among others, all played key roles in shaping a dynamic picture of citizenship.

But the examples of Greece and Rome, correctly and incorrectly understood and even refracted through the Renaissance and Atlantic Republican traditions (which I have intentionally avoided here), were paramount. Even those few American Republicans who had little appreciation for the classical world never came close to denying that Greece and Rome had served as models for the American Republic. The appropriateness of these models—whether in

---

[35] Millar, *Roman Republic*, 133.
[36] Cited from Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, ii.

terms of historical accuracy or appropriateness for implementation—is and will continue to be debated by historians and political philosophers.

Some fundamental influence, however, cannot be denied. From the Greeks we have ultimately inherited the notion of a citizen as opposed to a subject and a people as opposed to just a place. Underlying all of this is the notion brilliantly and famously captured by Aristotle: The western human continues to be a creature of his (and, thankfully today, her) polity. From the Roman Republicans we have learned the notion that a virtuous and responsible citizenship is necessary for the functioning and maintenance of the Republic, a basic sense of inclusion in citizenship, and the idea that citizenship can still be maintained at a distance—even a great distance—from the political center. Even in our modern age at two millennium remove, the ancients can still teach us a great deal. While, given the state of modern historical knowledge of the past, it is certainly possible to know quite a bit more about the ancient world than the early Americans did, it might do many more Americans some good to at least learn something about the ancients who so inspired our Founding Fathers.