

## A History Survey on the Rising of the Philosophy Schools in Polis Athens in the 4th Century BC

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### Abstract

The first Philosophy school appeared in Polis Athens in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, the education ideal it advocated appealed to numerous intellectual elites from the Mediterranean area, they together made contributions for the classical Greek Culture era with Athens as its center. The economy, culture, political system, scientific research, artistic creation had reached their peaks during this time in Athens. They played an important role in human's civilization history. By a history survey on the rising of the philosophy schools, here summarized the main historical conditions it needed were: the development of social division of labor and slave-owning economy, the formation and development of democracy of the city-state, the growth of population, the differentiation of social class and the philosophy ideological trend; the further clarification for the social soil it needed for the nurturing and growth of the philosophy schools as the institution of higher education in Athens, helped us to expand the understanding for the social basis of the evolution of the higher education institutions.

**Key words:** Classical period; Polis Athens; Philosophy school

### INTRODUCTION

Today, democracy, freedom, scientific spirit and humanistic spirit have been defined as the cultural characters of ancient Greece. Democratic spirit, liberal

education, humanistic idea, national idea, citizen consciousness of the western world were all rooted in the life of the city-state of Athens, which was closely related to the rise of the philosophical schools in Athens in the fourth century BC. The spring of philosophical schools and rhetorical ones made Athens a beacon of the Mediterranean, attracting all the intellectual elites. In 387 BC, Plato's Academy, the first institution of higher education in the history of western civilization appeared in Athens. Soon afterwards, within less than one hundred years, other philosophy schools quickly sprung up in Athens, with the rising of the Macedonian Empire and the Roman Empire, they became popular in the whole Mediterranean world. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, there were four greatest philosophy schools, they were all renowned philosophy schools co-existed in Athens: Plato's Academy founded by Plato in 387 BC, Lyceum by Aristotle in 355 BC, The Stoa School by Zeno around 310 BC and The Garden School by Epicurus in 306 BC. The rising of philosophy schools not only laid a solid foundation for the development of Greek philosophy, but also made a major contribution to the prosperous Athens culture, established the foundation for Hellenization and the development of ancient Greek universities during the period of Roman Empire, which made an important contribution to the development of human civilization.

The academy of Athens in the fourth century showed the following distinctive features: Firstly, they were philosophical school, each one of them represented a philosophical school; secondly, they took on the clear characteristics of the times, the academy of Plato and that of Aristotle showing the distinct feature of the city-state politics; thirdly, among the four great academies, the heads of three of them were not Athenian. Although they had no Athenian citizenship, these outstanding philosophers were highly regarded by the society, being entitled to the uttermost civil liberties except those in the political activities. Why did the philosophical academy

which had an important place in European civilization grow up in Athens? After analyzation, this paper would survey in the following the historical basis of it from aspects of economy and society, politics and culture, population and class, and philosophy ideological trend.

## 1. THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BASIS OF THE RISING OF THE PHILOSOPHY SCHOOLS

Athens was located in the plains of Attica, the convergence of Corinth and the Aegean Sea, at the south end of Balkan Peninsula, one of the three European peninsulas. It had Asia the Minor on the east with the Aegean Sea in between, Crete was not far from the south of it, Peloponnese on the west where the city-state of Sparta was located, Egypt of the advanced culture to the south end of it across the Mediterranean Sea. Every great leap of human civilization is always the product of technology innovation change. Before the advanced science and technology were introduced to Athens, the economy of Athens had been resting mainly on agriculture: grain was the staple food; figs, olives, and grapes were the main economic crops of Athens. The introduction of iron implements promoted the development of agricultural economy in Athens. The invention of the iron “started from Hittite, which was brought from them to Mesopotamia and Egypt in the middle of the second thousand years BC. When it was brought to the Aegean Sea area, the iron caused a revolution of the iron age.” (Sarton, 2010, p.132) Athens absorbed science and technology introduced from Minor Asia, assimilated astronomy and calendar from Egypt and mathematics from Babylon. Along with the progress of smelting technology and the wide use of the iron, agricultural income of Athens greatly increased. The discovery and exploitation of silver mine provided the support for the rise of Athenian naval supremacy; Piraeus Port and Faliro were set to trade in 485 BC., which made Athens the biggest trading center in the Aegean Sea area.

In the fifth century BC, Athenian economy mainly depended on cereals, and began to import food from around the Black Sea with the city developing into a huge trade center. After the Greco-Persian Wars, the business center transferred from Minor Asia to the Greek east coast. As Collins had declined, the Aegean island been conquered, Athens became the first large commercial and industrial center. (Fenner, 2014, p.366)

Especially the victory of the Greco-Persian Wars in 479 BC had furtherly consolidated the position of Athens as the leader of the Delos League, the gifts from other allies as devotion to it further improved the development of its economy and culture. All these directly promoted the social development, which constituted the macro foundation for the rise of academy in Athens.

## 2. THE POLITICS AND CULTURAL BASIS OF THE RISE OF THE PHILOSOPHY SCHOOLS

While tracing the origin of human family, clan and country, Engels said,

In the final analysis, the determinant of the history is direct production and reproduction of life, but again there are two kinds of production itself: on the one hand is the production of the means of subsistence, consisting of food, clothing, housing and the necessary tools; on the other hand is that of people's own production, namely multiplying their descendants. (Engels, p.5)

The political system is the institutional guarantee of the well-developed civic group. The second major social division of labor, handicraft industry separated from agriculture, further promoted the development of the slavery society: The wide application of iron implements brought remaining; business class and monetary appeared; the development of the shipbuilding and maritime technology further boosted the development of the commercial trade. Industry differentiation created different civic groups, contributing to the stratification of slavery society, which was the direct basis of a slave society of the polis politics of Athens. To construct an ideal political system, the Greek people did a great deal of practice and study: Aristotle once visited 158 city-states for that purpose. According to the statics of research results made by “the city-state research center of Copenhagen University in Denmark, led by the contemporary scholar Hansen, “there were more than 1,500 city-states in Greece.” (Yang & Yan, 2009, p.140) In his first volume of *The History of Government*, Finer summed up five characteristics of the Greek polis: “Sovereign independence, political unity, religious identity, agricultural areas around as the extension, and no royalty (only a few exceptions), in other words, they were republic. The last one was the precondition for the existence of the city-state.” (Fenner, 2014, p.354) American scholar P. B. Manville held the view that, Only till Solon's Reforms in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC established the citizenship of Athens, “it was allowed to say that the city-state of Athens was gradually shaped.” (Yang & Yan, 2009, p.189) Athens had being gone through a long time exploration for economic development and political pattern, Solon carried out the democratic reform in 594 BC., classifying the Athenian citizens into four classes in accordance with their quantity owing of grain and oil. At the age of Pericles, Athens thoroughly completed the democratic reform, leading democracy development to its peak: According to its constitution, every citizen having completely equal political rights and opportunities, Athens made it a reality for all citizens to participate in the political activities of the polis by paying allowance for their management. For the first time in history, the city-

state lead all its citizens into an era of direct democracy.

In addition, during the formation of the city-state of citizen community, the role of the religious culture was extremely important. From Homer's age of legend, the city-state had been preliminarily formed in each family and each clan. Every city had its own patron saint, which was worshiped only in a public temple rather than on the altar of the clan. The sacrificial ceremony to the patron saint was an important way for the city-state to rally its own people. A state is formed on the basis of the social class differentiation. But the city-state of Athens "was produced directly and primarily from the internal class antagonisms of the clan society itself." (Engels, p.176)

### 3. THE POPULATION AND CLASS BASIS OF THE RISING OF THE PHILOSOPHY SCHOOLS

Actuation of science and technology as well as the prosperity of trade and economy greatly multiplied population of Athens, which also was the population basis of the further development of polis politics; social division of labor and the existence of the slave were the basis of further class differentiation. Ehrenberg, the Greek history researcher, put it forward in his book *The Greek Polis* that the population of Athens in 432 BC was between 215,000 and 300,000: Citizens and their family members took up about 80,000 to 110,000, only citizens about 30,000 to 45,000, foreigners and their families about 25,000 to 40,000, slaves about 8,000 and 110,000. Finley representing other scholars believed that at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, the slaves in Athens were about 60,000, the population about 200,000 in total. In *The Ancient Greek and Roman Slavery*, the American scholar William L. Westmann according to the ownership divided the slaves into "public slaves, temple slaves and private slaves," (Wittmann, 2011, p.18) and concluded through the analysis of various historical data that in Attica the slaves made up no more than one third of the population, even less than a quarter. He also pointed out that at the early stage of the Peloponnesian War, all the slaves of all ages added up to about sixty thousand to eighty thousand, by which Population of Attica could be estimated to about 180,000 and 320,000 in light of the slave percentage he worked out. In Plato's time, having fifty slaves was having a fortune: "Lyceum leaders' wills showed the number of slaves they owned, Aristotle having more than 14 slaves". (Wittmann, 2011, p.72) Although academic circles had different opinions about the specific number of the citizens of early Athens, the archaeological result showed that Athens had a large increase of population in the sixth century BC.

All political activities of making domestic and foreign policy concerning economy, culture, politics and war, and having veto rights were only entitled to Athenians, while

foreign population, including businessmen, intellectuals and others, did not enjoy those rights, although in historical records, a large number of mercenaries or even slaves would be integrated into the army at a crisis of foreign war, with the main source of the citizens. From this aspect, it can be seen that in the city-state of Athens of 1,000 square miles with 40,000 to 45,000 adult male citizens, the implementation of democratic rights of all citizens was constrained to some historical conditions. Finley said, "The formation of slave society (the size of slaves reaches about a quarter of the population) needs certain conditions" (Fenley, 2013) : Firstly, the labor demand apart from the housework existing persistently, the result of the considerable concentration of private land in the agricultural society; secondly, the full development of commodity production and market; thirdly, the lack of internal labor supply, a negative condition which forced employers to turn to foreigners. In his view, the three conditions need to co-exist. The basis is the guarantee of the leisure life of slave nobles and the key factor to the appearance of the academy.

### 4. IDEOLOGICAL BASIS OF THE RISE OF THE PHILOSOPHY SCHOOLS

In Morgan's point of view, culture is humanistic and its nature is the process of "humanizing" nature, which includes that people transform and develop nature and they reshape their own mind, finally being presented in various symbols. Philosophy as a representative of the advanced culture enriches and condenses the cultural ideology of a social group, and also best represents the social ideology at that time. The real human civilization did not wake up until the family, the clan, society and state formed, before which the human society had been through a barbarian's state for a long time. The important sign of the awakening was that people began to think of the relationship between themselves and nature; when it came to the fourth century, the focus of philosophical thinking was on relationships between men, the rational beings, specifically on the way of reaching ideal *arête* for the individual citizen and citizen community. Greek philosophical thoughts in this period were in bloom, and some of them developed into eternal schools. There were four philosophical academies co-existing in Athens: Plato Academy founded by Plato, Lyceum by Aristotle, The Stoa School by Zeno and The Garden School by Epicurus. The development of philosophy was the immediate resource of spirit and idea for the academy. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Zeno and Epicurus, etc. were the most representative philosophers at that time. Concerning polis and citizen cultivation, most works handed down from ancient times were written by Plato and Aristotle, and among them were *The Republic*, *The Law* and *the Politics*, *The Economics*, *The Ethics* and so on; in reality, Plato's Academy as well

as Aristotle's Lyceum was the concrete practice of citizen education idea of the city-state, which showed obviously the deep influence of polis politics. Whether it was the polis of citizen community or it was the individual as a part of the group, its highest aim was virtue, as Aristotle said that virtue has a double meaning, one for the whole, the other for the individual. In view of the fact that citizen cultivation was based on the concept of virtue and *arête*, that concept became the philosophical starting point for the analysis of virtue and *arête* of polis and its citizens.

On account of language symbol, specific political symbol and certain religious symbol, the philosophers in Athens at that time advanced a cultivation system of hierarchical education aiming at the citizens of virtue and put it into practice. Aristotle held that it was impossible that there was simply one kind of *arête* in citizens because "the *arête* of citizens lies in ruling successfully or being ruled decently" (Aristotal, 2013, p.80), but the two points were not essentially equal. Since the *arête* of the ruler and that of the citizen could not be the same, the education they received respectively should be different. The citizens who would become the future rulers of the state were supposed to receive some special cultivation, not the technological kind, but the broad and unconstrained liberal education. Aristotle and Plato both believed that people were different in talent, the polis rulers being the kind whose souls were injected with gold, while farmers and artisans were the kind injected with copper and iron, and the god always did so. Therefore, farmers and artisans, who were the indispensable part of the state, could not form ruling *arête* even through cultivation, as their souls only had the *arête* of obedience. Universities of Athens were mainly divided into two categories: the rhetoric university and the philosophical school. In the democratic city-state, rhetoric was an important way to win support and necessary skill for citizens to participate into the political life.

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## CONCLUSION

Greek civilization, as a source of western civilization, represented by the city-state civilization of ancient Athens.

The polis civilization demonstrated the great attempt the human race made for the first time in the evolution of political system civilization, and the rise of the academy in Athens best represented the polis civilization at a certain stage of history. In the fourth century BC, the democratic system of Athens city-state made the conflicts of all kinds of power achieve a dynamic equilibrium within the state, which provided the natural growth of art, culture, education, etc. with basis of peace it needed. To be specific, the establishment of the social division of labor and democratic government in Athens, the class differentiation, the population growth, and the easing political and cultural environment attracting excellent intellectuals at the Mediterranean Sea area were the macro basis of foundation of Athens academy. The shifting focus of Greek philosophy ideological trend was the source of the essential concepts for the rise of philosophy schools in Athens, and the origination of its liberal education idea and the university spirit concept. Studying the history of the rise of the philosophy schools and analyzing the historical features it presented gives us the insight of the concepts, the system of external form and the performance function of the academy, and promotes the understanding of the idea, system and structural function of current universities.

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