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The Function of Competition in Archaic and Classical Greece

Jacob Burckhardt's characterization of ancient Greece as an agonistic society has long been a commonplace in classical scholarship. This is not surprising in view of the prominence of competition in numerous spheres of Greek life. What is surprising is that the importance of agonistic behavior as a fundamental structural element in Greek society has not been widely recognized. The goal of this paper is to highlight the extent to which competition for social status served as the centripetal force counteracting strong centrifugal tendencies that had the potential to tear Greek communities apart.

It need hardly be said that the basic social unit of Greece during the Archaic and Classical periods was the *oikos* and that individual loyalty to the household always had a privileged place in shaping behavior. Individuals had powerful incentives to pursue self-interested courses of action that benefited their household regardless of the consequences for other *oikoi*. This made the construction of stable political units difficult because of the necessity for cooperative behavior in which the interests of the household were at least intermittently subordinated to those of the community. The problems involved are of course a classic concern in political theory. Part of the solution virtually always lays in a sense of enlightened self-interest based upon the realization that the welfare of the individual (or in this case the household) is to a certain extent dependent upon the welfare of the community. In and of itself, however, enlightened self-interest is not typically sufficient to overcome the tendency toward egocentric behavior, primarily because the benefits derived from membership in a stable community are rarely directly contingent upon the actions of any given individual in any given situation. This form of behavior, typically described by sociologists and political scientists as free riding, is catastrophic if widely practiced.

The roots of the free-rider dilemma lie in the tendency of individuals to act in a fashion that they perceive to be to their advantage. The trick, from a societal perspective, is to utilize the power of self-interest to encourage behavior that benefits the community. And this in fact is precisely what we observe in the case of ancient Greece. Self-interest frequently entails the acquisition of non-material "goods". Among the most sought after goods in ancient Greece was social status, which households achieved through incessant competition, which was in turn based upon the extent to which households acted in a fashion that was advantageous to the community. The outcome of intra-community competition was determined by the judgment of the community as to the degree to which each *oikos* contributed meaningfully to the welfare of the community. Competition for social status was a zero-sum game in which the success of one participant could only come at the expense of the other members of the competitive hierarchy.

The result was an atmosphere of continuing opposition and hostility as each participant sought to improve its own position while suppressing gains by its rivals. Despite this hostility, the participants were inextricably bound together since competition was impossible without the existence of other competitors playing the same game by the same rules. The result was the odd admixture of conflict and cooperation that was so

characteristic of ancient Greece. Competition for social status thus served as the centripetal force that bound fractious households into functional communities.