PUBLIC AND PRIVATE IN EARLY GREEK
INSTITUTIONS OF EDUCATION

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1. Introduction: private, civic, and public in early Greece

The history of Classical education is often told as a story of steady
diachronic progression, from the performance culture of the Homeric
age, through the choruses, symposia, rites of passage, and athletic
competitions of the 7th and 6th C., to the intellectual-verbal focus
of the first true schools—a progression, as Marrou terms it, from
the “noble warrior” to “the scribe”, or from “sport” to “intelligence.”¹
This story goes hand-in-hand with that of the evolution of the Classical
polis (especially the Athenian democracy), and its need to develop
citizens capable of participating rationally and articulately in the
political process: thus the individual brilliance of Homeric achievement,
and the family-based distinction of athletic display, give way to the
culture of the assembly and law-courts, and to a sophistic-rhetorical
education geared to those contexts. These two narratives both obviously have a sound logic to them;² but they collide awkwardly with
another familiar and powerful story of Greek pedagogical develop-
ment: the clash between “Sparta” and “Athens,” between the rigid
militarism of a state-organized (totalitarian) system designed to produce
brave (but blindly conformist) sons and daughters of the fatherland,

¹ Marrou (1956) xiv, 59–60. See further below, pp. 66–71. I should like to thank David Cohen, Andrew Ford, Leslie Kurke, Ronald Stroud, and Yun Lee Too for corrections and helpful comments on an earlier (and much longer) version of this paper.
² But they do run the risk of understating the continuities between the Archaic and Hellenistic periods, and of overemphasizing those aspects of Greek culture that Classical and humanistic scholars would naturally wish to see predominate—literary study, liberal values, philology, and respect for the activities of the classroom. For example: “The main cause of the decline of athletics [sc. from the 4th C. onwards] was . . . the development of other ‘subjects’, especially literature. This had become the really dynamic element in the culture of the day, and it tended to monopolize the whole of the young people’s time and energy and interest”; Marrou (1956) 130. For a useful corrective, emphasizing the continuing concern for bodily and performative distinction, see Gleason (1994).
and the open-minded cultural experimentation (free-enterprise) of Athenian liberalism, home to the arts and free expression, and to all kinds of intellectual exploration—and to the first universities. This story seems to grant to Sparta a premature (if unattractive, to many) success in developing civic institutions (at least as early as the 6th C.) for the training of model citizens, while acknowledging that Athens, for all its political ingenuity and educational aspirations (this was, after all, the center of operations for Sokrates, Isokrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and was described by Perikles as “the education (paideusis) for all of Greece”, 2.41.1), largely failed to provide any coherent system for educating the mass of its citizens for their civic responsibilities—a failure that both Plato and Aristotle in the 4th C. found quite shocking and in need of correction. Athenian schools were privately run; and citizens were fairly free to choose what kind of education to give their children. Thus the more “advanced” political system apparently demonstrated less interest in education as a civic concern than the more backward and repressive one; and the neat progression from the Homeric individual (the focus of Marrou’s “knightly culture”) and Pindaric athletic family, to the Athenian political community of Sokrates and Isokrates, seems to be turned on its head.

In this chapter, I wish to explore these contradictions, in the hope of elucidating the complex nature of “civic education” during the Archaic period (c. 800–450 BC), given the difficulties of distinguishing satisfactorily between “private” and “public” responsibilities within this kind of society. The time for such an exploration seems ripe. Recent studies have demonstrated, on the one hand, how thoroughly enmeshed in civic concerns the intensely aristocratic field of athletic endeavor and display could be: even a Syracusan tyrant or Aiginetan nobleman had to make sure that his whole community felt itself to be engaged in the celebration and benefits of his achievement; his family’s largesse and style were subject to civic scrutiny, and were a matter of civic pride. Conversely, the mechanisms of the mature

3 Different terms are even employed by modern scholars to describe the two educational systems: the Spartan αγορέα vs the Athenian-style paideia. But this terminological distinction may be Hellenistic in origin; see Kennell (1995), and below p. 50, n. 87.

4 See Ober’s paper in this volume for a more detailed consideration of these issues. Marrou devotes a separate chapter to Sparta (after Homer, and before Athens); and his account is linked to an implicit progression from (fascist) German to (liberal) French cultural values, together with a continuous (but largely submerged) dialogue with Jaeger’s influential volumes: these nationalistic issues emerge explicitly on pp. 23–5.