

*Book Review*

**THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF ARCHAIC GREECE AND  
THE PROBLEM OF CIVILIZATIONAL CHOICE**  
***(Reflections on Albert A. Stepanian's Monograph  
Ancient Greece: Research Sketches)*** 

Smbat Hovhannisyan 

*Yerevan State University*

**Abstract**

This review essay examines the first volume of Albert A. Stepanian's monograph *Ancient Greece: Research Esquisses*, which reconceptualizes the transformations of post-Mycenaean and Archaic Greece through the analytical concept of the "transitive society." The article situates Stepanian's argument within contemporary debates in Classical Studies and historical sociology, foregrounding his central thesis that, between the twelfth and eighth centuries BCE, the Greek polities faced not merely the task of recovery but a profound civilizational choice. It traces how this framework structures the monograph's two complementary parts – on the formation of the polis world and on the Spartan model – and assesses the author's treatment of technological change, the polis revolution, the agon, the Great Colonization, early tyranny, the Lycurgan Rhetra, and Plato's *Republic*. Particular attention is devoted to Stepanian's reinterpretation of Sparta not as an exception but as a distinct paradigm of Archaic social organization, a move that challenges the stereotype of Spartan exceptionalism prevalent in Anglo-American historiography. While affirming the methodological coherence and interdisciplinary scope of the work, the essay also identifies several issues that call for further clarification, most notably the relationship between historical agency and structural constraints and the operational content of the concept of *oikoumene*.

**Keywords:** Archaic Greece, transitive society, civilizational choice, polis revolution, Sparta, agon, historical sociology, Greek colonization.

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The history of post-Mycenaean and Archaic Greece has long since outgrown the confines of purely political or institutional history, evolving instead into a broader field of historiographical and theoretical inquiry. Over the past several decades, debates concerning the genesis of the polis, growing social complexity, technological change, colonization, and the nature of civilizational transformation have come to constitute one of the most dynamic currents in the study of classical antiquity (Morris 1987; Osborne 2009; Hansen 2006; Raaflaub and van Wees 2009). Spartan studies, meanwhile, have undergone a parallel methodological reorientation: Sparta is no longer treated as an exception standing apart from the history of the Greek world, but rather as one of the possible responses to the crises of the Archaic age (Cartledge 2002; Luraghi 2008; Powell 2018). It is precisely within this historiographical and theoretical context that the first volume of Albert Stepanian's monograph *Ancient Greece: Research Esquisses* should be situated. The volume is centrally concerned with the relationship between the transformations of Archaic Greece and the problem of civilizational choice.

The analytical point of departure of the work is the concept of the "transitive society," through which the author reinterprets the institutional and civilizational transformations that followed the collapse of the Late Bronze Age world. According to Stepanian, between the twelfth and eighth centuries BCE, the Greek polities faced not merely the task of recovery but a profound civilizational choice. He formulates this fateful dilemma in explicit terms: "either to return to the previous state of palatial civilization or to create something that had not existed before" (Stepanian, 2025, p. 14).

The entire analytical architecture of the monograph rests on an examination of the motivations and consequences of this historical choice. The theoretical significance of the concept derives not only from its internal logic, but also from its capacity to engage with competing interpretations of social change and state formation. In this respect, the contrast with J. Ober's institutional-economic approach proves especially fruitful: Ober explains the Greek rise not in terms of value-based choice, but through participatory institutions and the reduction of "transaction costs" (Ober 2015, pp. 101-122). Where Ober sees a universal logic of institutional optimization, Stepanian emphasizes conscious, value-centered choice, thereby restoring historical agency to the center of analysis (cf. also Renfrew and Cherry 1986; Eisenstadt 1986).

The monograph is divided into two complementary analytical parts. The first section ("The Archaic Period. From Social Crisis to Development") examines the general mechanisms by which the polis world took shape, while the second ("Ancient Sparta. Life between Vertical Imperative and Corporative Justice") analyzes the Spartan model of these same processes. The structure itself is conceptually significant, reflecting the work's central thesis that Sparta

must be regarded not as a deviation from the broader patterns of Greek development, but as an alternative response to the same historical challenges.

The fundamental premise of the first section is that the economic, political, and cultural shifts of the Archaic age constitute a single, unified civilizational process. This approach resonates with the work of I. Morris and R. Osborne, who emphasize the long-term character of socio-cultural transformations (Morris, 1987, p. 171) and the need for an interconnected “total history” as a collective response to the challenges posed by the natural environment (Osborne 2009, p. 17, 248-275). This macrohistorical framing, however, generates a certain conceptual tension with respect to the very category of “choice,” calling for further clarification of the relationship between historical agency and structural constraints. Although the author places at the center of historical dynamics not only deterministic processes but also reformist initiatives and collective decisions, one methodological issue nonetheless requires further clarification: was “civilizational choice” a genuine and conscious option available to historical actors, or is it rather an analytical construct formulated retrospectively, one that accords privileged historical significance to a particular developmental trajectory among several possible alternatives?

One of the monograph’s central concerns is the reinterpretation of technological progress. The author does not treat technology as an autonomous economic sphere, but integrates it into the broader dynamics of political and social transformation. Ironworking, craft specialization, and the expansion of maritime communication are examined as structural preconditions for the formation of a new socio-political environment. This approach bears methodological affinities to the work of Alain Bresson, in which technological and institutional innovations are treated as inextricably interconnected processes (Bresson 2016, pp. 118-132). Although Stepanian’s principal focus is on models of social self-organization, technological shifts appear in his monograph not as self-sustaining forms of progress, but as the vital material foundations that enabled new institutional arrangements and economic opportunities.

Among the central concepts of the analysis of the Archaic age is the “polis revolution.” The author interprets the polis as a new civilizational environment in which public participation and civic responsibility became institutionalized. This view is methodologically close to the approach of Mogens Herman Hansen, who defines the polis as a “community of citizens” (*koinonia politon*) constituted as a city-state and grounded in a particular constitutional order (*politeia*) (Hansen 2006, 56-58, 110), one in which political engagement is not merely a means of governance but a fundamental value of civic life (Hansen 2006, p. 112, 115). In this context, the concept of the “polis revolution”

resonates closely with Anthony Snodgrass's classic thesis that the eighth century BCE marked a period of structural transformation in the Greek world (Snodgrass 1980, pp. 49-54). At the same time, the concept of the "polis revolution" requires a degree of further clarification, since political and social transformations across the various regions of Archaic Greece often followed asynchronous trajectories.

At the center of the discussion of cultural transformations in the Archaic age lies the problem of the appropriation of external influences. While broadly consistent with the approaches of W. Burkert (1992, pp. 9-10) and R. Osborne (2009, pp. 153-154), according to which Near Eastern influences contributed to the renewal of the Greek worldview, Stepanian places his emphasis not on the fact of borrowing itself but on its creative reworking. In this context, *Greek techne* and the creative agency of the *demiourgos* are regarded as the fundamental medium through which external influences were transformed into new social and civilizational possibilities (Stepanian 2025, pp. 30-31).

In parallel with these cultural shifts, the author considers the formation of a competitive culture (*agon*) to be among the fundamental characteristics of the Archaic age. Competition is presented as a universal principle of economic, political, and cultural life, one that stimulated innovation and diversity. Logically continuing the historiographical tradition that emphasizes the agonistic character of Greek civilization, the author extends its interpretive scope: whereas J. Burckhardt interpreted *agon* primarily as a cultural principle (Burckhardt 1998, 160-184), in Stepanian's account it appears as a foundational mechanism sustaining both the internal dynamism of the transitive society and its capacity for transformation. This approach substantially enriches our understanding of Archaic society, while at the same time opening the possibility of a clearer delineation of the functional manifestations of *agon*. In particular, the Spartan systems discussed in detail by the author – the *agōgē* (Stepanian, 2025, pp. 130-137) and the *syssitia* (Stepanian, 2025, pp. 138-141) – may, in functional terms, be regarded not only as expressions of competitive culture, but also as institutional instruments for its control and social channeling (see also Stepanian 2025, 190). Such a differentiation makes it possible to identify more precisely the dual nature of *agon*—as a catalyst of transformation and as an object of institutional regulation.

The Great Colonization and early Greek tyranny are examined through the same macrohistorical lens. Whereas contemporary historiography often interprets colonization in terms of demographic growth, resource constraints, or political conflict (Boardman 1999; Osborne 1998), Stepanian conceptualizes it as a process of the "ecumenical dispersion" and "networking" of Greekness (Stepanian 2025, 25). From this perspective, the Greek world is viewed as a unified network of interconnected economic, political, religious, and cultural

relations (Stepanian 2025, 64). Colonization is thereby reinterpreted not only as spatial expansion, but also as a comprehensive process involving the circulation of technological, cultural, and social experience (Stepanian 2025, 25, 65). Early Greek tyranny is situated within the same interpretive framework, presented not as a constitutional or political deviation, but as a possible mode of crisis-driven reorganization and a means of overcoming the post-Mycenaean legacy (Stepanian 2025, 59). This generalizing framework is methodologically consistent and productive, although certain aspects require further clarification. In particular, while the application of the concept of *oikoumene* to Archaic material opens a new interpretive perspective, greater precision regarding its operational content within the historical realities of the period would be desirable.

In the most extensive part of the work, devoted to Sparta, the author examines the Spartan system as one of the possible historical responses to the crises of the Archaic age. In contrast to the tyrannical regimes established in other poleis, Sparta developed a model grounded in stability and collective discipline. This approach is methodologically consistent with Paul Cartledge's interpretation, according to which Sparta represented "the Spartan alternative" to tyranny, while the formation of its political system was shaped by internal social crises, the demand for land redistribution, and the helot factor (Cartledge 2002, 116-117). Stepanian, however, reinterprets the Spartan phenomenon through the lens of civilizational choice: it was not merely an institutional reaction to an internal crisis, but a distinct paradigm of Archaic social organization. Such a reinterpretation of the Spartan phenomenon challenges the stereotype of "exceptionalism" prevalent in Anglo-American historiography, regarding Sparta not as a deviation, but as a distinctive "laboratory" of institutional responses to systemic crisis. This approach, in turn, underscores the need for a comparative perspective: since the present volume concentrates on the Spartan experience, a comparative examination of other political and institutional alternatives within the Greek world remains to be addressed in the author's projected next volume.

The internal logic of this paradigm is especially evident in the analysis of the Lycurgan Rhetra, which the author interprets not as the prototype of a constitutional text, but as a mechanism for the reproduction of social order, directly linking political institutions with social structure, education, and the formation of collective identity. It is precisely this interconnectedness that allows the author to present the various spheres of Spartiate life – the family, the military, and martial discipline – as interrelated components of a single unified order, whose stability rested on the combination of social differentiation and collective discipline (Cartledge 2002; Powell 2018).

This interpretation acquires additional theoretical depth in the final chapter devoted to Plato. The author demonstrates that the Spartan experience became for classical Greek political thought not only a historical example, but also a theoretical point of reference. In this sense, Plato's *Republic* is interpreted not as a simple theorization of the Spartan system, but as its critical reworking and an attempt to refine it. The ideas of the primacy of the common good, discipline, and political unity are preserved, while at the same time an effort is made to overcome the historical limitations of the Spartan system. As a result, Sparta appears not only as a historical polity, but also as a source of political imagination and social design.

The methodological foundation of the work is distinguished by its pronounced reflexivity and interdisciplinary synthesis. Rejecting unilinear conceptions of development, the approach adopted here aligns theoretically with the historical sociology of Shmuel Eisenstadt and Johann Arnason: societies are regarded as unique configurations of culture, power, and social organization that generate differentiated responses to historical challenges (Arnason 2003, 10-17; Eisenstadt 1986, 1-29). This approach makes it possible to interpret the history of Archaic Greece not only in terms of institutional change, but also from the perspective of civilizational self-organization and collective choice. This methodological foundation is in itself highly productive and promising; it must be borne in mind, however, that the monograph is only the first volume of a more extensive project. For this reason, the theoretical solutions advanced by the author – particularly the concept of the “transitive society” – can be assessed in their full analytical scope and comparative significance only in the subsequent volume, within the context of the examination of alternative trajectories of Greek development (first and foremost, the Athenian paradigm).

Overall, Stepanian's monograph is a theoretically coherent and methodologically consistent study of post-Mycenaean and Archaic Greece. Its scholarly significance derives not only from its reinterpretation of Archaic transformations through the concept of the “transitive society,” but also from the integrated approach that demonstrates the functional interconnectedness of communal crises, technological and cultural shifts, and institutional choice. The work thus provides a robust analytical toolkit and constitutes an important contribution both to contemporary Classical scholarship and to the comparative study of social transformations. Its significance extends beyond the study of classical antiquity, as it contributes to broader debates on social and civilizational change by offering a theoretical framework applicable not only to the ancient Greek world but also to transitional societies more generally.

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**Conflict of Interest**

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

**Ethical Standards**

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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