



# The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome

*By Numa Denis Fustel De Coulanges*

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## **The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome** By Numa Denis Fustel De Coulanges

From the Introduction: "The Necessity of Studying the Earliest Beliefs of the Ancients in Order to Understand Their Institutions" It is proposed here to show upon what principles and by what rules Greek and Roman society was governed. We unite in the same study both the Greeks and the Romans, because these two peoples, who were two branches of a single race, and who spoke two idioms of a single language, also had the same institutions and the same principles of government, and passed through a series of similar revolutions. We shall attempt to set in a clear light the radical and essential differences which at all times distinguished these ancient peoples from modern societies. In our system of education, we live from infancy in the midst of the Greeks and Romans, and become accustomed continually to compare them with ourselves, to judge of their history by our own, and to explain our revolutions by theirs. What we have received from them leads us to believe that we resemble them. We have some difficulty in considering them as foreign nations; it is almost always ourselves that we see in them. Hence spring many errors. We rarely fail to deceive ourselves regarding these ancient nations when we see them through the opinions and facts of our own time. Now, errors of this kind are not without danger. The ideas which the moderns have had of Greece and Rome have often been in their way. Having imperfectly observed the institutions of the ancient city, men have dreamed of reviving them among us. They have deceived themselves about the liberty of the ancients, and on this very account liberty among the moderns has been put in peril. The last eighty years have clearly shown that one of the great difficulties which impede the march of modern society is the habit which it has of always keeping Greek and Roman antiquity before its eyes. To understand the truth about the Greeks and Romans, it is wise to study them without thinking of ourselves, as if they were entirely foreign to us; with the same disinterestedness, and with the mind as free, as if we were studying ancient India or Arabia. Thus observed, Greece and Rome appear to us in a character absolutely inimitable; nothing in modern times resembles them; nothing in the future can resemble them. We shall attempt to show by what rules these societies were regulated, and it will be freely admitted that the same rules can never govern humanity again. Whence comes this? Why are the conditions of human government no longer the same as in earlier times? The great changes which appear from time to time in

the constitution of society can be the effect neither of chance nor of force alone. The cause which produces them must be powerful, and must be found in man himself. If the laws of human association are no longer the same as in antiquity, it is because there has been a change in man. There is, in fact, a part of our being which is modified from age to age; this is our intelligence. It is always in movement; almost always progressing; and on this account, our institutions and our laws are subject to change. Man has not, in our day, the way of thinking that he had twenty-five centuries ago; and this is why he is no longer governed as he was governed then. The history of Greece and Rome is a witness and an example of the intimate relation which always exists between men's ideas and their social state. Examine the institutions of the ancients without thinking of their religious notions, and you find them obscure, whimsical, and inexplicable. Why were there patricians and plebeians, patrons and clients, eupatrids and theses; and whence came the native of those Lacedaemonian institutions which appear to us so contrary to nature? How are we to explain those unjust caprices of ancient private law; at Corinth and at Thebes, the sale of land prohibited; at Athens and at Rome, an inequality in the succession between brother and sister?

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