

Sharing in the *Polis*: Greek Terms for Equality and Fairness

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ABSTRACT:

This article examines the Greek collocation *isei kai homoiai* (ἴση καὶ ὁμοία, “on equal and like [terms]”) as a key idiom through which ancient communities articulated equality, fairness, and civic integration from the Archaic to the early Hellenistic period. Literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence shows that the pairing of *isos* and *homoios* expresses a horizontal, relational conception of the civic body rather than proportional hierarchy. First securely attested in the mid-fifth century BCE yet already fully formed, the formula appears mainly in prescriptive contexts—foundations, synoikismoi, exile returns, citizenship grants, and interstate agreements—often linked to lotteries institutionalizing equal civic standing. Its wide diffusion reveals equality as an operative civic value predating democratic theory.

KEYWORDS: equality (ἰσότης / ἴσος); fairness (ὁμοιότης / ὁμοιος); *isei kai homoiai* (ἴση καὶ ὁμοία); lottery and allotment (κλήρος / ἐπικλήρωσις); civic integration and citizenship (πολιτεία / μετέχειν τῆς πόλεως); Cyrene foundation decree.

If all were at one in their ideas of honor and wisdom, there would be no strife to make men disagree; but, as it is, fairness and equality have no existence in this world beyond the name; there is really no such thing. (νῦν δ’ οὐθ’ ὅμοιον οὐδὲν οὔτ’ ἴσον βροτοῖς, πλὴν ὀνόμασαι; Eur. *Phoen.* 499-501).

These bleak lines from *The Phoenician Women* come closest to articulating a Greek moral conception of “fairness” in negative terms: not as even-handedness, but as its absence—hence, as injustice.¹ In this respect, Euripides antic-

1 I thank Josine Blok for discussions of *isos kai homoios*, including in the context of our joint work (Malkin, Blok 2024). While some overlap in evidence is unavoidable, her twin study in this volume addresses “*Isos kai homoios* in Greek citizenship”, whereas the present article focuses on the values implied by the formula and its modes of implementation. I am also grateful to Elena Iaffe who compiled the database of the vocabulary of drawing lots (<https://kleros.org.il/>) and assisted this study as a research assistant. A previous version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the European Network for the Study of

ipates a position also found among some modern philosophers.² The Greek term for “fair”, *homoios*, means “like” or “similar”, while *isos* denotes “equal” or “equality”. If fairness is grounded in likeness and equality, what do these terms reveal about ancient Greek values and about how equality and fairness were understood, negotiated, or denied in Greek society?

Abstract social concepts of “equality” and “fairness” functioned as guiding principles for various forms of distribution, such as booty, land, and “shares” in the political community. In the Classical period, these concepts were to have far-reaching consequences for the development of political morality and for the emerging notion of law as a “fair portion”.

The collocation (pairing) “equal and like” (ἴσος καὶ ὅμοιος) frequently appears in contexts involving drawing lots, which served as a concrete mechanism for expressing equality of opportunity and, ideally, equality or equity of outcome, such as equal allotments of land in a colony or equitable shares of an inheritance. Unlike the division of war spoils, where the lot guarantees equal chances but not equal value, Greek communities often sought, where possible, to implement arithmetical equality (*isos*). Thus, plots of land in new settlements were typically equal in size, even though differences in soil quality or location inevitably remained.

The result was a distinction between what was “arithmetically equal” (*isos*) and what was merely “like” (*homoios*): each allotment resembled the others without being identical in value. “Fairness”, in this sense, was understood not as absolute equality, but as the closest attainable approximation to it.

This understanding of fairness is by no means self-evident. In other historical contexts, fairness was conceived quite differently. The codes governing the division of booty among Caribbean pirates, for example, deemed it fair to distribute shares according to rank. This, too, was “fair”, but in a proportional rather than an egalitarian sense: to each his due. An aristocrat deserves more than a commoner, which is considered “fair”, but less than another aristocrat, which would have been unfair.³

Such a logic did not generally apply in Greek colonial foundations. There, even the founder and his descendants enjoyed no permanent material or cultic privileges—no monopoly over land, office, or state cult. The sole exception

Ancient Greek History (<https://ensagh.wp.hum.uu.nl/>) and I thank its members for their useful discussion.

2 Rawls 1985.

3 “Fair” in the sense of “proper”, “fitting”, “equity”, is sometimes expressed in Greek by ἐπιείκεια, ἐπιεικής. Cf. Tod 1993, 58–63. LSJ *s.v.* It usually means “fair” (morally) as opposite to the strict law; Isoc. 18 (*in Callimachum*) 34; Isoc. 7 (*Areopag.*) 33; “fitting” (the social norms), Hom. *Il.* 19.146–148; or “reasonable”, Thuc. 3.9.2. It is most frequently used in legal language, e.g., Arist. *Rh.* 1.13.19.1374b: “...for the arbitrator keeps equity in view, whereas the dikast looks only to the law, and the reason why arbitrators were appointed was that equity (*to epieikes*) might prevail”.

was the hero cult granted to the founder only after his death, localized around his tomb in the *agora*.⁴ In the first generations Greek colonies largely resisted proportional hierarchies of distribution.

Why do these two meanings of fairness matter? Hans van Wees, for example, has argued that *isos* in Homer should be understood primarily in terms of proportional, one might say “Caribbean”, fairness.⁵ The social model that follows from this reading is inevitably hierarchical, structured along a clear top-down axis.

Yet an alternative picture emerges if we take seriously Homeric scenes in which a leader receives from the army only one prestige gift (*geras*), while the rest of the booty is brought “to the middle” and then distributed by lot among all participants, leaders included. In such cases, ἐπ’ ἴσῃς cannot plausibly denote an aristocratic notion of fairness grounded in status, but rather an egalitarian one, that emphasizes equality of shares.

This is not the place to enter a detailed discussion of Homeric booty, which I mention here only to illustrate how radically different interpretations of fairness generate fundamentally different models of Archaic Greek society.⁶ In what follows, I aim to show how *equality* (ἰσότης) and *likeness* (ὁμοιότης) overlap in their shared emphasis on equality rather than rank. Since complete sameness—absolute equality—is impossible among human beings, *homoios* functions as a conceptual buffer, covering those gaps where precise equivalence (*isos*) cannot be fully realized. The two appear together, with the one qualifying the other.

Why speak of both equality and “fairness”?⁷ Taken literally, *isēi kai homoiai* (ἴσῃ καὶ ὁμοίᾳ) may be translated as “on equal and like terms”. In the imaginary foundation of Plato’s Cretan city, the founder exhorts the colonists to respect *homoiotēs* (likeness-equality) and *isotēs* (equality *tout court*) by refraining from buying or selling the original land allotments, whose distribution is to be regarded as a divine act (*Laws* 5.741).

Homoios denotes a more nuanced, qualified form of equality: one person is “like” another in a particular respect. Equality and identity are not the same. To be “equal and like” is to be equal only in certain dimensions. Thus, rich and poor citizens are unequal in wealth, yet they may still be “like one another” insofar as they share equal civic rights. One might therefore advance a semantic argument that there is no real difference between equality and likeness, since equal citizens (note, for example, the Spartan *homoioi*) are in any case equal only in specific respects, as peers⁸ rather than as identical persons.

Why, then, did Greeks so often pair *isos* and *homoios*, two terms that at first glance appear redundant? In ancient Greek, the conjunction *kai* (“and”) may

4 On the cult of the founder and the role of his posterity see Malkin 1987, part II.

5 Van Wees 1992, 299–311.

6 See Malkin in Malkin, Blok 2024, 1–29.

7 Graham 1983², 229 translates “equal and fair”; I reverse the order, as will be evident below.

8 Cf. Cartledge 1996.

also carry an emphatic or explicative force, meaning “and especially”, “or rather”, or even “namely”. Thus, *isēi kai homoiai* may be understood as “on equal terms, *namely*, on like terms”.

A related example helps to clarify the distinction. In a letter concerning an attempted *synoikismos* between Lebedos and Teos, King Antigonos writes: “We thought it best that a building lot be given to each of the Lebedians among you equal (*isos*) to that which he leaves behind in Lebedos” (*Syll.*³ 344, lines 4-5). Here equality is assessed *ad hominem*: each individual receives compensation equivalent to what he owned before. This usage contrasts sharply with evidence from inscriptions (discussed below) granting citizenship or reinstating exiles, where the formula insists on *isēi kai homoiai*, stressing not equivalence to a prior condition but equality and likeness within a newly constituted civic body.

Fairness, then, is fundamentally bound up with equality—most clearly with equality of chances, as in a lottery—and it comes close to what both ancient and modern thinkers have understood as justice. John Rawls, for example, famously equates fairness with justice.⁹ In much the same spirit, a later Greek author explicitly conflates “equal and like” with “just”, describing how Timoleon invited Syracusans, and any other Sicilian Greeks who wished, to repopulate the city as free and independent citizens, “allotting the land among them on equal and just terms” (ἐπ’ ἴσοις καὶ δίκαιοις).¹⁰ In other words, it was considered “fair”—and indeed “just”—that one who was *homoios* should also be *isos*.

“They shall sail on equal and like/fair terms”. The pairing of the two feminine adjectives, *isēi kai homoiai*, forms a set formula, repeated in Greek sources across different contexts and grammatical genders (for example, ἴσοι καὶ ὅμοιοι; see below). One instance of this formula, explicitly linked to the act of sailing to found a new colony, appears in a complex fourth-century inscription from Cyrene. This inscription quotes what purports to be the original foundation decree issued by the people of Thera around 640 BCE.

Foundation decrees of this kind are well known to scholars,¹¹ yet none physically securely predates the mid-fifth century. The Cyrene inscription therefore poses a long-standing problem. Because it preserves, in fourth-century stone, a text that allegedly dates to the mid-seventh century, scholars have asked whether we are dealing with an authentic archaic document or with a later fabrication—constructed *ad hoc* in the fourth century to justify the admission of Therean citizens into Cyrenaic citizenship. Indeed, this purpose is explicitly stated as the reason for reproducing the original “Agreement of the Founders”. The argument for forgery has rested in part on the identification of supposed

9 Rawls 1985.

10 Plut. *Tim.* 23.2-3.

11 Graham 1983², Appendix.

anachronisms.¹² Here, however, I will confine myself to this aspect that bears directly on the question of equality and fairness.

The clause requiring the colonists to sail on “equal and fair terms” has been cited by skeptics as evidence of anachronism in the Cyrene Foundation Decree.¹³ According to this view, such notions could not plausibly belong to the supposedly elitist society of the seventh century BCE, since they are thought to be attested only in much later periods—a claim that is, in fact, mistaken (see below). This line of criticism rests primarily on literary and text-based reasoning and constitutes an *a priori* argument: it infers non-existence from presumed improbability.

Yet *a priori* arguments collapse in the face of even a single piece of contrary evidence. Beyond epigraphy, we can observe the practical implementation of the principle “equal and like” on the ground a full century *before* the date traditionally assigned to the Cyrene foundation decree. Excavations at Sicilian Megara Hyblaia—a colony founded in 728 BCE—have revealed striking evidence of early planning, systematic allotment, and a strict equality of land portions, with closely comparable cases elsewhere in the Greek world.¹⁴

How early, then, does the collocation *isēi kai homoiai* appear? And what did it refer to? The formula is attested in both inscriptions and literary texts from at least the mid-fifth century BCE. It is, in fact, a strikingly peculiar formula: it typically appears without an explicit subject—*equal and like* in what respect? Yet from its earliest attestations the expression already seems fully formed and widely intelligible, transcending regional boundaries. Greeks clearly knew what was meant by it.

The unresolved question is therefore: “equal and like” in what? Since the two adjectives often stand alone, we must supply the missing subject. The English rendering “equal and like (or fair) terms” is necessarily interpretive, for the Greek formula contains no equivalent of “terms”. I use this formulation deliberately instead of the more specific *δίκη* or, *δίκαι*, which in some contexts do appear explicitly as the governing noun.¹⁵ In many cases, however, the intended scope is broader, sometimes encompassing the entire spectrum of a citizen’s rights and status.

This more abstract and inclusive sense of “terms” is already implicit in our earliest inscriptions. A clear example comes from Gortyn, where individuals are integrated into the civic body *isai kai homoiai* (ἴσται καὶ ὁμοῖαι). Here the phrase can only mean something like “on equal and like civic terms”—that is, with equal citizen status and rights. Read in this way, the formula fits seamlessly

12 Graham 1960 arguing for authenticity; see ML 5 (<https://igcyr.unibo.it/igcyr011000>).

13 Dušanić 1978.

14 Gras *et al.* 2004, 465-466; 523-524; cf. Tréziny 2016.

15 *E.g.*, IG I³ 41, ll. 52-54.

not only local civic contexts but also colonial foundations, where the same language articulates the conditions of collective belonging (see below).¹⁶

Let us look more closely at some specific contexts. The collocation occurs with ἐπὶ governing a noun in the dative case ten times, and only in two cases is the governing noun explicitly stated. In Thucydides (1.145.1), the noun is *dikeē*, while in a fragment of Aristotle's *Athēnaion Politeia* the noun is *moira*[i] (μοίρα).¹⁷

In several other instances the formula appears in the feminine without any expressed noun. Thucydides, for example, reports the Corinthian proclamation announcing the foundation of the colony at Epidamnus, in which the colonists were promised “equal and like” status (ἐκλήρυσσον ἐπὶ τῇ ἴσῃ καὶ ὁμοίᾳ).¹⁸ Similarly, Herodotus uses the formula to denote equality of status with allies (ἐπ’ ἴσῃ τε καὶ ὁμοίᾳ).¹⁹

In five further cases, the construction with *epi* and the dative governs masculine nouns, a fact that supports a more general rendering such as “on equal and like terms”. A particularly revealing example is the proclamation of the Spartan general Brasidas, who declared that “whoever, Amphipolitan or Athenian, wished to remain there might continue to dwell in the city and enjoy what was his own, on equal and like [terms]”—with no noun specified, but where the sense can only be that of equal civic rights.²⁰

Beyond civic “terms” or rights, the formula also appears with *epi* in the context of international treaties. Thucydides preserves the wording of an agreement between Sparta and Argos: “that each side shall grant the other equal and like trials of judgment, according to the procedures used in their respective cities” (ἐπὶ τοῖς ἴσοις καὶ ὁμοίοις δίκας διδόντας κατὰ πάτρια).²¹

In addition, there are four further occurrences in a strictly legal sense without *epi*, where the governing noun *dikeē* is explicitly stated. Three appear in Thucydides: δίκας ἴσας καὶ ὁμοίας δίδωσι;²² δίκας δοῦναι καὶ δέξασθαι ἴσας καὶ ὁμοίας;²³ and δίκας διδόντες τὰς ἴσας καὶ ὁμοίας. A fourth occurs in Plato (οὐκ ἴσης οὐδ’ ὁμοίας δίκης δεόμενα; see below).²⁴

16 IC IV 78.

17 Aristotle, fr. 611.1 Rose: ἐπ’ ἴσῃ καὶ ὁμοίᾳ μοίρα; cf. also fr. 384. There are three instances with μέρη (plural neuter), all in the same passage of Aristotle's *De plantis* and in a technical sense; see below.

18 Thuc. 1.27.1.

19 Hdt. 9.7 (A.1).

20 Thuc. 4.105.2: Ἀμφιπολιτῶν καὶ Ἀθηναίων τῶν ἐνόντων τὸν μὲν βουλόμενον ἐπὶ τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ τῆς ἴσης καὶ ὁμοίας μετέχοντα μένειν.

21 Thuc. 5.79.1. Cf. Xen. *Hell.* 7.1.1 (δέοι ἐπὶ τοῖς ἴσοις καὶ ὁμοίοις τὴν συμμαχίαν εἶναι); Xen. *Hell.* 7.1.13 (ἐπὶ τοῖς ἴσοις καὶ ὁμοίοις ἥκοις τὴν συμμαχίαν ποιούμενος); Xen. *Hell.* 7.1.45 (τῆς πολιτείας ἐσομένης ἐπὶ τοῖς ἴσοις καὶ ὁμοίοις).

22 Thuc. 5.27.2.

23 Thuc. 5.59.5.

24 *Leg.* 908b 3.

Finally, there are three instances involving *merē* (μέρη, neuter plural), all clustered within the same passage of Aristotle's *De plantis*²⁵, where the expression is used in a technical, non-political sense.

In several inscriptions, the grammatical gender of the adjectives shifts to neuter or masculine, indicating that the implicit subject cannot always be *dikai*. A fragmentary fifth-century Athenian agreement with the Macedonian king Perdikkas, for example, refers to relations conducted ἐπὶ τοῖς ἴσοις καὶ τοῖς ὁμ[οί]οις. Here the masculine/neuter plural points to general conditions or arrangements rather than to legal procedures narrowly conceived.²⁶

A third-century agreement regulating mutual rights between Aitolians and Akarnanians goes even further: it uses the neuter form, explicitly detached from *epi*, ἴσα καὶ ὅμοια. The phrase clearly refers to general terms or conditions of interaction, rather than to specific judicial rights.²⁷

The same broad sense appears in three further Hellenistic inscriptions, one from Phokis—a *sympoliteia* agreement between Stiris and Medeon—and two from Aitolia. In these cases, the people themselves are said to be *isoī kai homoioi* (ἴσους καὶ ὁμοίους). Once again, the reference is not to *dikai* or legal acts, but to a general civic framework within which persons are constituted as equals and peers.²⁸

In a more narrowly legal sense, the collocation is used in contexts of arbitration, where it implies equal terms for both parties (ἐπὶ ἴση καὶ ὁμοίᾳ).²⁹ “Equal judgments” could also form part of international agreements, as in the treaty between the Spartans and the Argives, where the governing noun is explicitly *dike* in a formal sense (ἐπὶ τοῖς ἴσοις καὶ ὁμοίοις δίκας διδόντας).³⁰

In an even stricter legal register, Plato argues that the same “offence” should not necessarily incur the same penalty—literally, that such cases are “not in need of equal or like punishment” (οὐκ ἴσης οὐδ’ ὁμοίας δίκης δεόμενα).³¹ Men who are just in character but atheistic in belief, he maintains, should not pay the same price for their offence as atheist scoundrels.

A comparable nuance appears in Isocrates, who writes: “For it is not an equal or even a similar evil (οὐκ ἴσον κακὸν οὐδ’ ὅμοιον) that the dead should be denied burial, while the living should be stripped of their fatherland and of all their possessions besides”.³²

The point of those examples from formal and legal discourse is that they are fully consistent with the broader pattern observed above. The emphasis

25 [Arist.] *De Plantis*, 818b 36–41, esp. 39: μέρη διακεκριμένα, οὔτε ὅμοια οὔτε ἴσα.

26 *IG* I³ 89 line 34; ἐπὶ is restored.

27 *IG* IX,1² 1:3; cf. *IG* II² 204 (ἴσω καὶ ὁμοίῳ, probably in the neuter dative singular). Eleusis, dated to 352/1 BCE, line 24.

28 *IG* IX,1² 1:4; *IG* IX,1² 1:10; *IG* IX,1 32.

29 Thuc. 1.145.1; 5.59.5.

30 Cited above: Thuc. 5.27.2; 5.59.2; 5.79.1; 5.79.2.

31 Cited above: *Leg.* 908b3.

32 Isoc. 14.55; cf. 4.92.

remains firmly on equality—both equality in the strict sense (*isos*) and equality “as far as possible”, approximated through likeness (*homoios*).

Aside from historical contexts, the distinction between the two terms as expressing values of equality and fairness can at times be readily observed. In technical or concrete Greek usage, the difference between *isos* and *homoios* is clear: identity of shape is *homoios*, while identity of size or measure is *isos*. Thus, in a discussion of manufacture and pricing we find the remark: “And how do you show their proportions when you ask a higher price—by weight or by measure? For I suppose you do not make them all of the same weight or the same size, if indeed you make them to fit” (οὐ γὰρ δὴ ἴσους γε πάντας οὐδὲ ὁμοίους οἰμαί σε ποιεῖν, εἴ γε ἀρμόττοντας ποιεῖς).³³ Here *isos* refers to exact sameness of measure, *homoios* to similarity of form.

Herodotus makes the distinction equally explicit when comparing the dedications of Croesus at Branchidai and at Delphi: “The offerings of Croesus at Branchidai of the Milesians, as I learn by inquiry, were equal in weight and like those at Delphi” (ἴσα τε σταθμὸν καὶ ὅμοια τοῖσι ἐν Δελφοῖσι).³⁴ Here again, *isos* specifies measurable equivalence, while *homoios* signals resemblance in appearance or type.

A more revealing—and conceptually richer—example comes from the Spartan tradition concerning the twin founders of the royal houses, Eurysthenes and Prokles. When the Spartans sought to determine which of the indistinguishable twins was the elder, they were at a loss, because “the children were identical in all respects” (ὁμοίων καὶ ἴσων ἔόντων), and thus could not decide whom to choose.³⁵ A literal translation is impossible here; “identical in all respects” rightly captures both how the infants looked (*homoioi*) and how similar they presumably were in size and weight (*isoī*).

The collocation therefore points to an overlap of similarity that emphatically underscores equality rather than proportional difference. Indeed, the problem faced by the Spartans in this story is precisely their initial inability to apply the principle of primogeniture—where seniority confers privilege—in a context that, for most Greeks, would have unfolded differently: through equitable, partible inheritance by lot, without any special claim based on birth order.³⁶

The two terms are sometimes used together precisely to reinforce the notion of equality, especially in cases of total similarity in both size and form; for example, in expressions such as “equal and similar parts” (see below).³⁷ So far, our survey of eighty-four occurrences of these terms in Classical texts, from the fifth century down to and including Aristotle, confirms a consistent semantic

33 Xen. *Mem.* 3.10.10.

34 Hdt. 1.92.2.

35 Hdt. 6.52.3.

36 Berman 2007 ch. 5 sums up the evidence. Cf. Asheri 1963; Lane Fox 1985.

37 Pl. *Tim.* 55a.

pattern: *isos* denotes equality in quantity, number, or measurable extent, whereas *homoios*, in the sense of “like”, refers to equality of form, appearance, or qualitative character.

What matters most, however, is not the distinction in isolation but the collocation itself. In most cases, *homoios* follows *isos*, functioning as a qualifier rather than an alternative. The sequence does not weaken the claim to equality; on the contrary, it specifies how equality is to be understood and realized—exact where possible, approximate where necessary. The formula thus articulates an ideal of equality that is both principled and practicable, grounding abstract sameness in lived social reality.

In mathematics, we still retain the ancient Greek sense of *isos* as “exactly equal”, inherited directly from Greek geometry—for example, in the term “isosceles triangle”, which denotes a triangle with two sides of equal length.³⁸ Once again, when the terms are paired, the distinction between measure and form becomes clear. A sphere, for instance, may be divided into parts that are “equal” in measure (*isos*) and “similar” in shape (*homoios*).³⁹

Even at the metaphorical level, the collocation continues to emphasize equality or equality of position. Plato contrasts reciprocal friendship and love, grounded in equality of standing, with relationships marked by asymmetry—such as that between the needy and the wealthy. As he puts it: “Friendship is the name we give to the affection of like for like in respect of virtue, and of equal for equal” (Φίλον μὲν που καλοῦμεν ὅμοιον ὁμοίῳ κατ’ ἀρετὴν καὶ ἴσον ἴσῳ), whereas the bond of the needy for the rich is of an altogether different kind.⁴⁰

Here, too, the pairing of *isos* and *homoios* does not dilute the idea of equality but sharpens it: likeness in quality and exactness in status converge to define a relationship among peers, distinct from ties structured by dependence or inequality.

The adjective *homoios* is particularly associated with Sparta, where full Spartiates were designated as *homoioi*, each “like” the other. Herodotus, for example, remarks that Sparta was a *polis* of some eight thousand men, “all of whom are *homoioi*” to those Spartans who fought at Thermopylae; the remaining Lacedaemonians—the *perioikoi*—were not *homoioi* to them, though they were *agathoi*.⁴¹ The contrast is telling: *homoios* here does not mean “equal” in a mathematical or distributive sense, but “of the same standing”, members of the same peer group. The *homoioi*, therefore, were not simply “The Equals”. As Paul Cartledge has suggested, the term is better understood as “peers”.⁴² It marks sameness of civic status and way of life rather than strict equality of wealth or

38 Cf. Euclides 6.19.

39 Pl. *Tim.* 55a.

40 Pl. *Leg.* 8.837a; cf. Isoc. 14.55.

41 Hdt. 7.234.2.

42 Cartledge 1996.

resources. It may be significant, then, that the other term of the formula, *isos*, appears in explicitly Spartan political contexts mainly in later sources, where it refers to equality of property holdings rather than to social identity.

Thus Plutarch and Polybius both emphasize the ideal—if not always the reality—of equal land distribution among Spartans.⁴³ Polybius, for example, observes that all citizens were to possess an *ison* share of the *politikē chōra*: “The distinctive merit of Sparta”, he writes, “is said to lie in its land laws, by which no one owns more than another, but all citizens have an equal share in the public land”.⁴⁴

Here, once again, the two notions converge. *Homoios* defines equality of civic rank and peer status; *isos* articulates equality of measure and distribution. Together they illuminate how Spartan ideology, like Greek political thought more broadly, negotiated the tension between sameness of standing and equality of sharing in the *polis*.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the joint force of *homoioi* and the idea of a sovereign community comes not from Sparta, but from Samos. Herodotus recounts how Maiandrios, the putative successor of the tyrant Polykrates, declared before the assembly that he rejected ruling over men who were *homoioi*, “like” or equal in standing, to Polykrates himself. The sentiment is an old one, already familiar from Homer: Achilles famously complains that he is *homoios* to Agamemnon, though the latter prevails merely because he is more powerful.⁴⁵

Returning to Samos, Maiandrios’ solution was not to replace one tyranny with another, but to bring *archē*, power or rule, “to the middle” (ἐς μέσον), that is, to make it the shared possession of the community.⁴⁶ He then proclaimed *isonomia*, the term Herodotus uses for what Greeks would call “democracy”. When Kadmos acted in a comparable way, relinquishing power on Kos, he too transferred authority “to the middle”, explicitly out of a sense of *δικαιοσύνη*, justice.⁴⁷

In these narratives, *homoiotēs* and justice are effectively conflated. Quite apart from the specific political circumstances at Samos or Kos, the key concept is the “middle”, which denotes the community as a body of sharers. What the Samians gained was an equal share in power; and in contrast to the previous tyranny, this new form of sharing constituted them as *homoioi*, peers within a collective sovereign community.⁴⁸

43 Plut. *Lyk.* 8.1 [1].

44 Polyb. 6.45.3: τῆς μὲν δὴ Λακεδαιμονίων πολιτείας ἴδιον εἶναι φασι πρῶτον μὲν τὰ περὶ τὰς ἐγγαίους κτήσεις, ὧν οὐδενὶ μέτεστι πλεῖον, ἀλλὰ πάντας τοὺς πολίτας ἴσον ἔχειν δεῖ τῆς πολιτικῆς χώρας, cf. Wallace 2016, 8.

45 *Il.* 16.53.

46 On the significance of “The Middle” see Detienne 1996, pp. 91–105.

47 Hdt. 7.164 ὑπὸ δικαιοσύνης ἐς μέσον Κόφοισι καταθεῖς τὴν ἀρχήν.

48 See Asheri *et al.* 2007 *ad loc.* On the specific sense of *isonomiai* in this passage and in Herodotus generally. See Laroche 1949; Borecký 1965; Chantraine 1968, 755, for *nemō*, 742; Beekes 2010, 1023, for *nemō*, 1006. It is probable that ἰσονομία etymologically derives from

In the Cyrene foundation decree⁴⁹ and in related texts, the literal formulation is “sailing equal and like”, followed immediately by provision for a state lottery to assign the settlers. The parallel narrative in Herodotus⁵⁰ closely overlaps with these prescriptions. The decree is both prescriptive and prospective: it does not describe a foundation of a colony but regulates what is to happen *there*, in the new land. The formula must therefore refer to general conditions acceptable both to those who remain in the home community and to those who set out as colonists. This is precisely why translating *homoiai* as “fair terms” is justified—and why the fairness envisaged must be understood through the lens of equality.

Homoios here specifies the kind of fairness at stake. It does not mean “fair according to proportionate status”, but fairness grounded in an assumption of equal standing. All participants are equal *a priori*: before the lottery that selects the settlers from among the citizen households (those with more than one son), and again *a posteriori*, in what each settler is entitled to receive. Equality governs both the chances of selection and the distribution of outcomes.

From the Archaic period through the early Hellenistic age, the collocation *isei kai homoiai* recurs in contexts of new political foundations, whether through *synoikismos*, or through overseas colonization. Its integrative force—defining civic status and articulating the conditions under which citizenship is granted—is already attested in a small number of inscriptions before the Hellenistic period and becomes increasingly prominent thereafter.

What is particularly striking is the formula’s universal reach. If we allow for regional differences in epigraphic survival or epigraphic habit (there is comparatively little evidence from the western Mediterranean), *isei kai homoiai* appears across the Greek world. “Equal and fair” was thus not a local or dialect-specific expression, but one that transcended regions and political traditions, pointing to a broadly shared Greek standard of civic equality and fairness.

When employed in contexts of social and political integration within the Greek *polis*, *isos kai homoios* articulates both the terms and the values that define a citizen’s relational position, as further studied by Josine Blok. The formula never encodes hierarchy; on the contrary, it consistently emphasizes equality. This equality is itself understood as “fairness” in a legal and political sense. It leaves no room for interpreting fairness as what is “proper to one’s station”, because the relevant “station” is defined precisely in terms of equality rather than proportional rank or status.

ἴσος and νέμειν, the original sense being “equal distribution” (of booty, of rights, of offices). It seems that only later were the terms understood as “equality before the law”, as if derived from *isos* and *nomos*. On *isonomia* see Blok in Malkin and Blok 2024, 313–15.

49 SEG 9.3.

50 Hdt. 4.151–154.156.

Civic integration, whether of readmitted exiles, newly incorporated groups of settlers, or *proxenoi*, is repeatedly framed as taking place *isēi kai homoiai*. This formula is often followed by recourse to a lottery (ἐπικλήρωσις), which assigns individuals to the city's institutional frameworks. The very use of the lot embodies the principle at stake: fairness as equality of chance, and equality as the foundation of civic belonging, of sharing in the *polis*.

We have seen how any prospective colonist, “whoever wished”, was to be sent by Corinth to Epidamnos ἐπὶ τῇ ἴσῃ καὶ ὁμοίᾳ (Thucydides 1.27.1). Because Epidamnos was already in existence—unlike, for example, Cyrene, which was founded *ex novo*—the formula of equality and likeness here serves explicitly to integrate newcomers into an established civic framework. The same concern recurs in the epigraphic evidence: the expression *isēi kai homoiai* functions as a mechanism of inclusion, defining the conditions under which new members are absorbed into the community.

The consequences of departing from these principles are equally revealing. A well-known counterexample is provided by the conflict at Thourioi, where the descendants of the settlers of old Sybaris were to be incorporated alongside new colonists. The Old Sybarites, however, refused integration on equal and like terms. The result was catastrophic: the Sybarites were massacred by the new settlers, who then proceeded to distribute equal portions of land—not only among themselves, but also to additional settlers admitted thereafter.⁵¹

The episode starkly illustrates the stakes involved. Where *isēi kai homoiai* governs integration, civic cohesion is possible; where equality and likeness are denied, violent conflict ensues.

In the Classical period, such situations become increasingly visible: established cities are confronted with the task of integrating individuals or entire groups, including in the special case of *klērouches* (see below on Histiaia). Athens, for example, founded Amphipolis as a mixed Greek *polis* with a pronounced Athenian presence. When the Spartan general Brasidas later captured Amphipolis, he was enthusiastically adopted as the city's new founder; after his death he even received a founder's cult, honored “as a hero”.⁵²

Brasidas' policy was one of containment rather than exclusion. He proclaimed that “whoever—Amphipolitan or Athenian... might continue to dwell there and enjoy his own, with equal and like form of government” (ἐπὶ τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ τῆς ἴσης καὶ ὁμοίας μετέχοντα μένειν). The verb *metechain*, “to have a share (in the *polis*)”, which also appears in several inscriptions alongside *isēi kai homoiai*, is itself expressive of equality. Citizens are conceived as each possessing an equal share in civic status, rights, and participation.

51 Diod. Sic. 12.11.1-4; cf. Arist. *Pol.* 1303a 31-33.

52 Thuc. 5.11.

Epigraphical examples

In several extant inscriptions, the collocation *isēi kai homoiai* appears in connection with the grant of *proxenia* (προξενία) or of citizenship, explicitly “on equal and like terms” with the existing citizen body. Such grants sometimes include recourse to a lottery (*klēros*- (κλήρος) or *lanchanō*- (λανχάνω) related terminology), by which new citizens are assigned to a civic framework (*epiklērosis*), for example to a tribe (ἔλαχε φυλὴν).

It is significant that *isēi kai homoiai* is used when the *demos*, whatever its precise composition, formally decides upon the grant. The inscriptions regularly emphasize that the equal and fair terms are to be exactly those enjoyed by all other citizens. Thus, for example, we find formulations such as ἐφ’ ἴσῃ καὶ ὁμοίαι πᾶσι τοῖς Κολοφωνίοις (second century BCE),⁵³ or πολιτείαν ἐφ’ ἴσῃ καὶ ὁμοίαι τῶν λοιπῶν πολιτῶν (third century BCE).⁵⁴

Such language can hardly be restricted to specific *dikai* or legal procedures. Rather, it must refer to the full ensemble of civic rights and obligations. This is why the more comprehensive translation “equal and like terms” is preferable. As we have seen already in Thucydides, the verbs that accompany the formula often describe what citizens *do* collectively: they “share in the city” or “participate/share in the *polis*” (μετέχειν τῆς πόλεως).⁵⁵

Finally, it is striking that the first concrete realization of this promised equality is procedural rather than symbolic. Participation in the drawing of lots ensures equal chances of assignment to one or another civic unit, placing new citizens on the same footing as the rest. Equality is thus not merely proclaimed; it is enacted through institutional practice.⁵⁶

One of the earliest inscriptions that aligns precisely with the notion of “equal and fair terms” comes from Gortyn and dates to around 500–450 BCE. The text concerns the rights of returning citizens, possibly exiles, and lays out the conditions under which they are to be reintegrated into the civic body, probably on the same terms that a former group from Lato had enjoyed.⁵⁷

Among those who have returned whoever wishes may settle himself (καταφοικίδεσθαι) and become a citizen of Gortyn on equal and like terms (ἐπὶ τᾷ ἴσῃ καὶ τῇ ὁμοίαι) and nobody may enslave him.

53 SEG 42.1065.

54 REG 112 1999.17,2 (<https://inscriptions.packhum.org/text/295244?hs=718-725>).

55 Thuc. 1.27.1. Inscriptions aside from Samos: *Itanos* 68; *Mylasa* 34; *Miletos* 20; *Teos* 40.

56 Note Wallace’s statement (2016, 8): “Although Raaflaub and I wrote in *Origins of Democracy* that in Homer, ‘equality is not yet formalized or confirmed by law or ideology’ (2007: 32), we were wrong. Equality is formalized in both custom and ideology in the distribution of common property”.

57 IC IV 78, ll. 2-3 (<https://inscriptions.packhum.org/text/200515?hs=255-262>).

The formula leaves little doubt that what is at stake is full civic integration on the same footing as existing citizens.

A comparable formulation appears in an Athenian decree, generally understood to set out the arrangements for Athens' settlement of Histiaia in Euboea,⁵⁸ which refers to settlement ἐπὶ ἴσ[ε]ι καὶ ὁμοίαι (translated by Stephen Lambert as "on a fair and equal basis"). Because this measure does not concern an overseas colony and involves Athenian citizens, the emphasis here falls more specifically on *dikai* (line 54: ἐπὶ τέσσι δίκαι[σι]), which are to be "equal and like"—a case where the literal sense of the formula is especially apt. Even so, the decree functions in effect as a kind of foundation document. In this respect, it is closely comparable to the corresponding provision in the foundation decree of Cyrene.⁵⁹

The frequent presence of the preposition *epi* before the collocation further supports the view that the implicit subject of the adjectives "equal and like" is something akin to "on such terms". Most of the literary and epigraphic evidence indeed preserves the formulation with *epi*, though not invariably so (as noted above); even where it is absent, it appears to be conceptually implied.⁶⁰

There are also a few other pre-Hellenistic decrees of the same type—for instance, a late fourth-century inscription from Kos and Kalymnos, some of which do not mention a drawing of lots,⁶¹ while others explicitly do.⁶² From the Hellenistic period onward, however, the pattern becomes increasingly standardized. Most inscriptions, especially those from Samos, combine the collocation *isei kai homoiai* with an explicit civic lottery (*epiklērosis*) that follows the grant.

Indeed, we possess several dozen inscriptions from Samos alone that contain this formula, and, with dialectal variation, parallel examples from Crete, Euboea, Teos, Ephesos, and the Troad. In a common and repeatedly attested Samian formula, the *dēmos* grants *politeia* on "equal and like terms" to an individual and his descendants, after which the act of integration is concretely realized through a lottery (*epiklērosis*) for assignment to a tribe and other civic units.

58 <https://www.atticinscriptions.com/inscription>; *IG* I³ 41. Cf. Thuc. 1.114.3 (<https://www.atticinscriptions.com/inscription>; <https://inscriptions.packhum.org/text/41?hs=1814-1820>).

59 *IG* I³ 41; *SEG* 32.3 (<https://inscriptions.packhum.org/text/41?hs=1814-1820>; <https://inscriptions.packhum.org/text/293327?hs=1274-1280>).

60 A fourth-century inscription from Delphi (*FD* III 4.378), for example, records a grant of citizenship phrased simply as πολιτείαν ἴσαν καὶ ὁμοίαν (342/1 BCE), without the preposition. The same omission occurs in a third-century inscription from Rhamnous (235–229 BCE; *SEG* 41.87, *Demos Rhamnountos* II 20), probably also in a much-restored inscription from Sardis (98 BCE), and in several texts from central Greece. In all these cases, the sense "on equal and like terms" is clearly intended, even though *epi* is not explicitly stated (<https://inscriptions.packhum.org/text/309007?hs=763-773>).

61 *IG* XII,4 I:131; *IG* IX,2 1230, Thessaly, 2nd century.

62 *IG* XII,4 I:130; *Iscr. di Cos* ED 71g (stele II) Kos (*IG* XII,4); Samian, found on Kos late IV BCE.

A representative example may serve to illustrate this pattern.⁶³

(...) δεδóσθαι δὲ πολ[ι]-
τείαν ἔφ' ἴσῃ καὶ ὁμοίαι αὐτῷ τε καὶ ἐγγόνοις καὶ
ἐπικληρώσαι αὐτὸν ἐπὶ φυλὴν καὶ χιλιαστὸν καὶ...

And that citizenship shall be granted to him and to his descendants on equal and like terms, and that he shall be enrolled by lot in a tribe and a *chiliastys*, and...

Here citizenship is granted “on equal and like terms” not only to the individual but also to his descendants, and this abstract grant is immediately translated into institutional reality through *epiklerōsis*: the recipient is allotted by lot into the basic civic subdivisions of the *polis*. The combination of equality and fairness, expressed by the procedure, seems manifest.

Very similar formulations recur at Ephesos (*Ephesos* 59) and in most of the other cases we examined from a wide range of city-states. *Epiklerōsis* is mentioned explicitly for one Agathokles and his descendants:

... it was resolved by the council and the people to grant to Agathokles of Rhodes citizenship on equal and like terms, both to him and to his descendants, and to assign him by lot to a tribe and a *chiliastys*, and to record these matters for him...

Once again, the structure is revealing. The decree begins with a formal decision of the *boulē* and *dēmos*, proceeds to the grant of *politeia* ἐπ' ἴσῃ καὶ ὁμοίαι, and culminates in a lottery that assigns the new citizen to the concrete frameworks of civic life. Equality and fairness are thus not merely proclaimed; they are operationalized through institutional mechanisms that place the recipient—and his descendants—on the same footing as all other citizens.

Conclusions

- In social and political contexts, the two adjectives *isos* and *homoios* regularly appear together as a fixed formula, most often with *homoios* following *isos*. The pairing consistently refers to the relational position of members within a group and invariably emphasizes equality rather than hierarchy.
- The frequent absence of an explicit subject suggests that the collocation had already become a conventionalized formula well before its first secure epigraphic attestations around 500–450 BCE—or as early as 640 BCE, if the authenticity of the Cyrene foundation decree is accepted.
- On this basis, one of the main arguments against the authenticity of the Cyrene foundation decree—namely, that the phrase “(they shall sail on)

63 *Samos* 17 (*Samos*, *IG* XII 6, 1, 120).

- equal and fair terms” is anachronistic and properly belongs to the fourth century BCE—can no longer be maintained. Moreover, archaeological evidence, such as the equal *kleroi* attested in colonies founded earlier than Cyrene, demonstrates concrete expressions of “equal and fair” practices about a century before the Thera collective decision to send a colony to Cyrene and to choose as colonists one son from each household by lot.
- While the subject of the formula may at times be specific, such as *dikai*, it is often broader in scope, best captured by the rendering “equal and like terms”. The frequent use of the preposition *epi* further supports the sense “on such terms”. This comprehensive meaning is especially clear in contexts of reintegration of exiles, grants of citizenship, reciprocal rights between states, and colonization, where an inclusive vision of the civic order is at stake. In late inscriptions, this is made explicit by the repeated insistence that the beneficiaries are to become “like all the other citizens”.
 - The interpretation of *isos* as meaning not “equal” but “proper to one’s status”, proposed by Hans van Wees for Homeric Greek, cannot be sustained once the full range of evidence for the collocation *isei kai homoiai* is considered. Reading *isos* as “proper” presupposes one vision of Archaic Greek society: hierarchical, “princely”, and structured from top to bottom. By contrast, the pervasive use of *isei kai homoiai* reveals a fundamentally different, horizontal conception of society, in which individuals are ideally positioned in relation to one another as equals, on “equal and like terms”.
 - This has not been a study of equality *tout court*, nor of citizenship, but specifically of the collocation *isei kai homoiai* and its implications for the values of equality and fairness in sharing in the polis. Nevertheless, it also sheds light on the meaning of *isos* itself. The tension between proportional equality based on merit and what modern scholars call “arithmetical” equality is not confined to debates about ancient democracy; it already arises in the eighth century: Achilles famously complains that those who fight and those who stay behind receive the same shares of booty. His grievance notwithstanding, the complaint presupposes that “the same” distribution was indeed the expected norm.⁶⁴
 - Modern discussions of Greek equality tend to focus on “Greek thought”, privileging philosophical and theoretical texts, especially those on ancient music (Archytas), as well as Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates, and Plutarch, the latter four all relatively late. The evidence of *isei kai homoiai* shows, by contrast, that equality and fairness as values, their associated vocabulary

64 *Il.* 9.319-320; cf. *Arist. Pol.* 2.1267a 1-2 who cites this passage to illustrate that on the one hand, the upper classes are unhappy that the *τυμᾱί* are ἴσαι, and, on the other, the masses complain about unequal distribution.

and concrete implementation (often through mechanisms of distribution by lot) were already well established long before the emergence of democracy.⁶⁵

- In technical and arithmetical language, the distinction between *isos* and *homoios* is clear: *isos* denotes equality of measure, while *homoios* denotes likeness of form or quality. This distinction is visible both in material examples—such as the dedications at Delphi and Branchidai, and in narrative ones, such as the indistinguishable Spartan twins. When combined, the two terms reinforce rather than weaken the notion of equality.
- Most literary and epigraphic attestations of *isēi kai homoiai* are not descriptive but prescriptive: they articulate what ought to happen rather than what already exists. This distinction is crucial when apparent contradictions arise in practice. Greek colonists, for example, might receive land allotments by lot that were equal in size (*isos*), yet different in value owing to location or soil quality; in that sense the allotments were only “like” one another (*homoios*). Such differentiation did not prevent later inequalities of wealth, since there were no limits on personal movable property (χρήματα).⁶⁶ Egalitarianism, in other words, never implied sameness.⁶⁷
- Whereas *isos kai homoios* most often appears in prospective contexts—articulating a horizon of expectations, as in colonization, the Spartan *homoioi* represent an idealized case in which these principles were imagined as fully realized. Ideally, Spartans possessed equal land allotments (where *isos* is emphasized) and were politically constituted as peers (*homoioi*). Tyranny, as illustrated by the Samian case, stood in direct opposition to such a community of *homoioi*.
- Finally, Greeks understood *isēi kai homoiai* as an expression of justice, even when this is not made explicit. Greek practices of distribution, in inheritance, land allotment, booty, sacrificial portions, and political office, regularly relied on the drawing of lots as mechanisms ensuring equal chances for participants. The gods presided but did not intervene; even they had distributed their *timai* by lot. *Isos kai homoios* thus encapsulates a horizontal, relational vision of society, in which the governing ideal was that relations among citizens ought to be equal and fair.
- **Final conclusion:** This study has traced the meaning, usage, and implications of the collocation *isēi kai homoiai* across literary, epigraphic, archaeological, and institutional contexts from the Archaic period through the Hellenistic age. What emerges is not a marginal formula or a late

65 This is a major claim of Malkin, Blok 2024.

66 Plato says this explicitly: “It would indeed have been a splendid thing if each person, on entering the colony, had had all else equal as well. [...] however, [this] is impossible, and one man will arrive with more money and another with less. (trans. R.G. Bury)” *Leg.* 744b.

67 Zuchtriegel 2018, 137.

conceptual innovation, but a deeply embedded Greek idiom for articulating civic equality, social integration, and fairness as a relational value. The pairing of *isos* and *homoios* consistently expresses a *horizontal vision of society*. It defines how members of a community ought to stand in relation to one another—not according to rank, birth, or proportionate merit, but as peers sharing equal civic standing and equal chances. The formula does not deny difference; rather, it circumscribes difference by insisting that what matters politically and legally is equality of status and participation. Where exact equality (*isos*) could not be achieved, likeness (*homoios*) provided the conceptual link that allowed equality to function in real social conditions. Crucially, *isei kai homoiai* is overwhelmingly *prescriptive* and articulates a normative horizon—what a community commits itself to when founding a city, reintegrating exiles, or granting citizenship. Its frequent coupling with the drawing of lots (*klēros*, *epiklērosis*) shows that equality was not merely proclaimed but institutionalized through procedures designed to neutralize privilege and ensure equal chances. The formula thus belongs as much to political practice as to political language. By following this formula across time and space, I have tried to show that equality, fairness, and distributive justice were not products of classical democracy alone, nor confined to philosophical speculation. They were operative values in Greek *poleis* long before democratic institutions crystallized, already visible in colonization practices, land division, inheritance, cultic access, and early civic integration. The Greek city had always known the tension between honor, hierarchy, and status, on the one hand, and the equalizing or “middling” forces on the other. The *polis*, at decisive moments, appears as a *community of sharers*, constituted through equality of terms rather than hierarchy of status.