

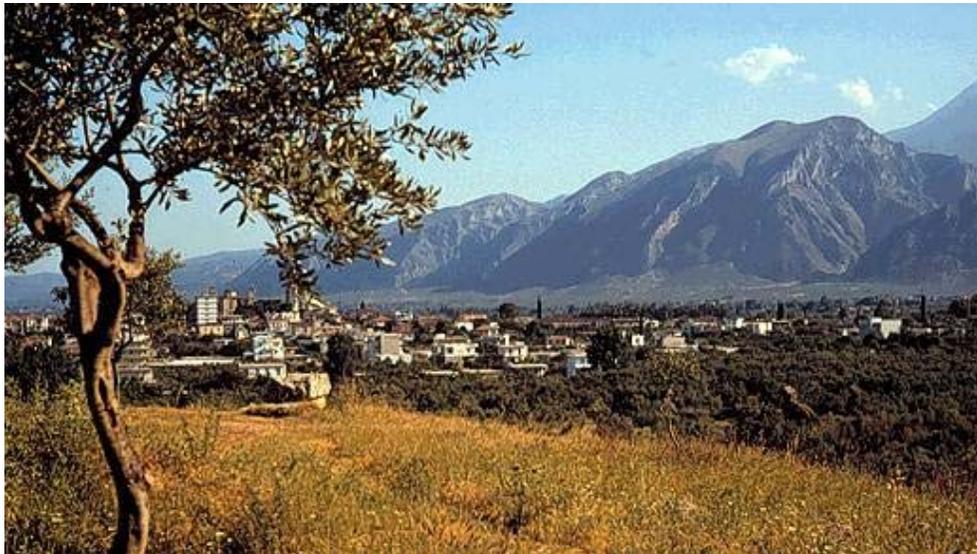
# Athens & Sparta: Democracy vs. Dictatorship

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During the archaic and classical periods (ca 800-323 BCE), Ancient Greece consisted of several hundred *poleis*<sup>1</sup> or “city states.” Each polis was its own small country. Many of these were no more than small towns or even villages which controlled sometimes very small territories. At the opposite end of this spectrum were the two largest, most powerful and ultimately most influential Greek city states, Athens and Sparta. Politically, they were polar opposites of each other.

The city of Athens and its territory of Attica was a cultural and economic powerhouse. Athens was the birthplace of many fundamental aspects of Western civilization, including ethical philosophy and the theater. The **Parthenon** and its iconic temple to the goddess Athena are the cornerstones of Western architecture. But it is in the political realm that modern civilization owes much to Athens, for it was here that democracy was born.

Athens’ democratic government and open culture stood in stark contrast to the government and society of its chief rival Sparta. Sparta was a warrior society of fierce, often unbeatable soldiers, and only warriors participated in political life. Spartan women had a reputation for being as fierce as their men, quite unlike their reclusive, segregated sisters in other Greek *poleis*. Sparta was an imperial state which subjugated many of its neighbors in the **Peloponnesus** and turned their populations into a class of virtual slaves called *helots*. This serf class outnumbered the Spartans many times over, so to keep the helots under control and suppress rebellions, the Spartans organized their entire society along military lines. The sole purpose of a Spartan man was to be a soldier and the only duty of a Spartan woman was to give birth to many more soldiers.



*The site of ancient Sparta. Few ancient remains of Sparta exist.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Poleis* is the plural form. The singular form is *polis*.

## Sparta

Ancient Sparta lay in the wide, fertile plain of Laconia in the Peloponnese peninsula of southern Greece. The Laconian plain was large and agriculturally rich, and was separated from neighboring regions by tall mountains. In the classical period, Sparta itself was never a large city like Athens. Instead, its “urban core” consisted of a clump of four villages. The Spartans were warriors, not builders, and had little use for the architectural grandeur, theaters, or high culture of Athens. Unlike most other warrior states, the Spartans were not even interested in military architecture. Instead, Spartan “walls” were said to consist solely of its young warriors.



Map of the Peloponnese peninsula in southern Greece with the locations of Sparta.

The Greek historian Thucydides said of Sparta:

*“If Sparta was to be deserted, and nothing left but the temples and ground-plan, distant ages would be very unwilling to believe that the power of the Spartans was at all equal to their fame. Their city is not built continuously, and has no splendid temples or other monuments; it rather resembles a group of villages, like the earliest towns of Greece, and would therefore make a poor show.”*

His words were prophetic, for unlike the impressive ruins of Athens or other Greek centers like Delphi and Olympia, few archaeological remains have been discovered at the ancient site of Sparta. The most impressive Spartan ruins date long after the period of Spartan greatness when in later Hellenistic and

Roman times a kind of “theme park” or “Spartan Disneyland” was built for ancient tourists to visit.

### **Sparta’s “Neighbors”**

By 750 BCE, the Spartans controlled the entire plain of Laconia. Within this territory, they were a minority, but one that dominated a larger population of non-Spartan peoples. One group of non-Spartans were the *Periokoi*, or “neighbors.” The term *Periokoi* literally means “those who are on the fringes.” The Periokoi were not Spartan citizens. They were free men, not slaves and they enjoyed a degree of local autonomy in their domestic affairs, but were distinctly inferior to Spartans. Periokoi owed military service to the Spartans, where they served in segregated auxiliary military units. Sparta’s “neighbors” primarily filled the roles of skilled craftsmen and traders, occupations that the Spartan men themselves came to reject in favor of the life of full-time career soldiers.

### **The Helots**

Despite the inferior social and political status of the Periokoi, they were much better off than another group of non-Spartans called the *Helots*. Helots were by far the largest class of people living in Spartan territory. Most of the Helots came from the lands of the once free and independent neighboring city-state of Messenia who had been defeated in battle by the Spartans. The Helots became virtual slaves, owned not by individual Spartans but collectively by the Spartan state. The Helots in Laconia and in Messenia worked as peasant serfs who farmed the land for the benefit of their Spartan overlords. Not content with their status, the Messenian Helots would rise up in a series of massive rebellion and force the Spartans to reorganize their entire society along military lines to suppress the Helot population.



### **Messenian Wars**

By around 730 BCE, Sparta had conquered the neighboring city-state of Messenia in the south-west corner of the Peloponnesus. Messenia ceased to exist as an independent *polis* for 400 years. Its population was made Helots, a class of serfs/slaves belonging to the Spartan state. The lands of Messenia were divided up among the Spartan population, and each parcel of land came with a population of Helots who now farmed it for the benefit of a Spartan man and his family. Not all Spartans received land – only veterans of Messenian wars received this gift, and this became the basis of the Spartan aristocracy. One Greek author described the sad fate of the helots:

*“bitterly oppressed with great burdens like donkeys, they (Helots) must bring to their masters out of grievous necessity, a half of all the fruits of the fields.”*

Another author reported that:

*“They (the Spartans) assign to the Helots every shameful task leading to disgrace. For they ordained that each one of them must wear a dog skin cap and wrap himself in animal skins and receive a certain number of beatings every year regardless of any wrongdoing, so that they would never forget they were slaves. Moreover, if any exceeded the vigor proper to a slave’s condition, they made death the penalty.”*

### **The Helot Dilemma**

While Helots were forced to work their own ancestral lands and give as much as half its produce to support Spartan citizens, the Messenians and other Helots in Laconia were clearly not happy with their fates. The Spartans lived in constant fear of massive Helot uprisings, and such rebellions happened on several occasions during the next 400 years of Spartan dominance. The Greek historian Thucydides reports that “Spartan policy is always mainly governed by the necessity of taking precautions against the helots.” Spartan armies rarely traveled far from home for fear of revolts among the Helots.

The Spartans had good reason to fear the Helots who outnumbered them. The defeat of a Spartan army triggered a major revolt among the Messenian Helots known as the **Second Messenian War**. The war was long and tough for Sparta, lasting from 685-668 BCE. Messenian resistance was eventually crushed, but the end result was an even larger population of subject Helots who now outnumbered the Spartans by a factor of seven to one.

### **Spartan Militarism**

The Second Messenian War frightened the Spartans so much that they reorganized their entire culture and political system along military lines. Henceforth, every Spartan male was to be a lifelong soldier to the exclusion of all other professions. Military training began at the age of seven, and Spartan men remained on active duty until they reached the age of 60—this at a time when the

average life expectancy was only 35. Spartan men could expect to be soldiers for almost their entire lives and would likely die as soldiers, whether in battle or not. Although Sparta fought many wars with other Greek city-states, the arch-enemies of every Spartan soldier were the Helots. Sparta remained permanently at war with the Helots. Each year, this “war” was formally declared anew. Spartan men stood vigilant against the slightest signs of a Helot uprising.



*Bronze figurines of Spartan warriors.*

### **Spartan Education System**

Training for a lifelong career as a soldier began very young for Spartan males and their selection, or rejection, for a soldier's life began shortly after their birth. Newborn babies were soon inspected by a group of Spartan elders that examined them for physical fitness. At the first sign physical defects or

weakness—such as a babe that seemed ill, or “puny or deformed”— the infant was cast to its death into a ravine from the top of a nearby mountain. Both boys and girls were subject to this treatment. Males had to be strong soldiers and females had to give birth to many sons. Ultimately, it was the Spartan state that decided if a child was fit to live or die.

Boys and girls also shared a form of universal education that was unique in the Greek world, both because it was provided and controlled by the state and because females were also “educated.” Yet the Spartans cared little if their children could read. The **Agoge** was a system of *physical* education for the sole purpose of preparing boys to be soldiers and girls to be baby-factories.

For boys, the education system was known as the *Agoge* or “up-bringing system.” For the first six years of his life, a Spartan boy lived with his mother. On his seventh birthday he was taken from her and enrolled in the compulsory military education system, the *Agoge*. He was trained as a soldier until the age of 20, when he entered into active duty in the Army.



*A painting entitled “Spartan Girls Taunting Spartan Boys” by the French impressionist painter Edgar Degas.*

The *Agoge* system was notoriously harsh and brutal, designed to toughen Spartan boys up to become strong, hard men. The boys were organized in “packs.” They were given a single cloak to wear each year, even in the coldest weather. They mostly went barefoot and naked and slept outside. They were also deliberately underfed and encouraged to steal their food. But the boys were severely punished if caught – not for the act of stealing itself, but for being caught. The goal was to make them stealthy, cunning and resourceful. Besides specific military training in fighting skills, the overall point of their “education” was

to make them able to endure the hardships of a soldier's life.

Between the ages of 14 and 20, the youths began military training and service in earnest. Between 20 and 30 they were permitted, and expected, to marry. Yet they lived in the army barracks until they were 30 years old, even in peacetime. Spartan men were not considered true adults until the age of 30, even though on average, they might have only a few years of life left to them before death in battle or natural causes.

### **Spartan Women**

A Spartan women's sole duty was to have as many (preferably male) babies as possible. Girls were trained to be physically fit to survive pregnancies. They were also trained in physical fitness including almost military sorts of exercises. The "education" and other liberties of Spartan women scandalized other Greeks. Ancient Greek society was notoriously chauvinistic towards women who were seen as vastly inferior to men in every way. Most Greek women lived in the shadows of their male relatives, had no economic or social independence, and many were virtual prisoners in their own homes.



*A bronze statuette showing a Spartan woman dancing.*

In Sparta, with their sons and husbands out "playing soldier," it was left to the women to manage the economic affairs of the household. While other Greeks often praised Sparta's military culture, they were frequently outraged by the freedoms permitted to Spartan women who went about in public. Even worse, the Spartan ladies were notoriously outspoken and even insolent. Mothers and wives taunted their "weak" or "cowardly" sons and husbands. Some were even reported to have killed their own sons if they had shown fear in battle. The ancient historian Plutarch collected the sayings of Spartan women:

Some Athenian women asked some Spartan women: “Why are Spartan women the only women who boss around your men?”

Spartan Women: “Because Spartan women are the only ones who give birth to real men!”

A Spartan Woman handed her son his shield before he left for battle saying: “Son, come back either with it or on it!”

A Spartan woman upon seeing her son who had run away during a battle: “Where did you plan to escape?” She lifted up her dress and said “Do you plan to crawl back in here from where you were born!?”

A Spartan mother hearing that her son had died in battle, said only: “Bury him and let his brother take his place!”

A Spartan woman named Damatria heard that her son was cowardly in battle and she killed him when he got back saying: “He was not my child because I did not give birth to one worthy of Sparta.”



*A French painting illustrating the saying of a Spartan mother to her son as he departs for battle: “Son, come back with your shield, or on it!”*

### **Spartan Government**

The Spartan government was unlike those of most other Greek *poleis*.

Sparta had not one, but two kings at the same time, who came from separate royal families. Like most poleis, there was also an assembly of all male citizens, but its powers were relatively weak. True power was in the hands of an “elder council” of men over 60 called the **Gerousia** and five magistrates called **Ephors** who were elected annually and served for one year terms in office.

### The Kings

Sparta’s unique dual kingship came from two separate royal tribes who traced their line back to legendary founders. These two royal clans were named the Agiads and the Euryontids. These kings were not true monarchs, not only because there were two kings, but because they were often subject to the will of the Gerousia and the Ephors.

When Sparta was at war, as it often was, one of the kings led his army into battle while the other stayed home. The most famous example of this policy was king Leonidas who along with 300 Spartans fought to his death against a much larger force of Persians at the **Battle of Thermopylae** in 480 BCE.

Originally the power of a Spartan king was almost unlimited in the field and he could order any soldier put to death for cowardice or disobedience. Later, two of the Ephors were sent along with him as a check on his power. At home, the Spartan kings were less powerful.



*“King Leonidas”: an ancient statue of a Spartan warrior said to be a portrait of the famous king.*

### **The Ephors**

Originally there were three Ephors each year, later five were elected annually. Along with the two kings, they were the “executive branch” of the Spartan government. Each month the Ephors and the kings exchanged mutual oaths of loyalty. They were elected by the popular assembly and served as a balance to the power of the kings. Eventually, the Ephors came to dominate weaker kings.

Ephors could serve only a single, one-year term in office. Their duties included judicial affairs, military organization and foreign relations. Ephors convened meetings of the Gerousia and the assembly and set the legislative agenda. Becoming an Ephor was the only route to political power for non-aristocratic Spartan citizens, despite this non-aristocratic Ephors tended to defer to the Aristocratic elder council of the Gerousia, and often did their bidding. Poorer Ephors were subject to bullying or bribery by rich aristocrats and therefore rarely “rocked the boat” politically. One annual duty of the Ephors was to formally declare war on the entire Helot population so that Sparta was eternally at war with this subject class.

### **The Gerousia**

At the age of 60, Spartan aristocrats were eligible to be chosen to serve in the Gerousia, an elite elder council. They would remain members for life, but there were only 30 members at a time. Two of the Gerousia were automatically the two kings, the only members under 60 who were eligible. The Gerousia was similar to the Roman Senate or the Athenian **Areopagus**. It was an elite assembly dominated by wealthier and more conservative elements of Spartan society. No law or issue could come before the popular assembly without the approval of the Gerousia and the Ephors usually deferred to their guidance as well.

### **The Assembly**

All recognized free male citizens of Sparta were members of the popular assembly. Periokoi and of course Helots, along with slaves and freeborn Spartan males who had lost their citizenship rights for some reason were not members of the assembly. The assembly met monthly and had electoral powers to choose the annual Ephors and new members of the Gerousia when spots became available among the 30. The assembly also passed laws and made decisions for war. In practice, the assembly’s power was strictly limited by the formal or informal power of the Ephors and the Gerousia who decided what matters could come before the Assembly and who could veto its decisions. As a result, Sparta was in no way a democracy.

### **Spartan Equality?**

The Spartan system has often been admired by ancient and modern observers. Even today, organizations like the United States military often praise the discipline, courage and the supposed “equality” of Sparta. How can the military of a modern democracy admire what was in fact an ancient military

dictatorship? Part of the Spartan myth is the notion that Spartan citizens were “equal.” All Spartan male citizens were known as **Homoioi** which has often been translated as “equals.” In fact, there was genuine political and social inequality among Spartan citizens. Spartan society was dominated by an aristocratic class superior to common Spartans. Then there were the two kings. Spartan females, of course, were not citizens and had no political rights. But the Greek term *Homoioi* doesn’t mean social or political “equals” but rather “similar.” In essence, all Spartan male citizens were soldiers and equally shared the right and burden of fighting for Sparta. All were superior to non-Spartans be their Helots or Perioikoi or slaves. But among themselves, differences in class and wealth were strong. Spartan “equality” is therefore a myth, despite the wishful thinking of some of Sparta’s modern admirers.



*Spartan men hunting: a painting inside an ancient drinking cup from Sparta.*

### **Military Barracks & Dining System: *Syssitia***

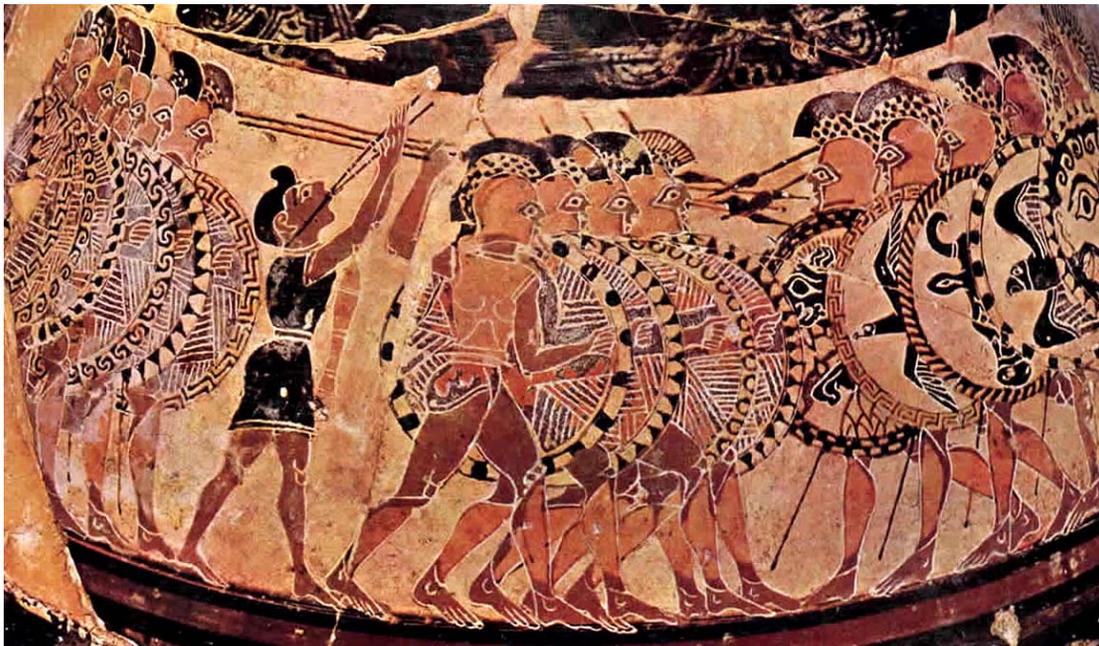
The class differences among Spartan citizens is clear from the system of military/social dining called the ***Syssitia*** or “common meals.” This was a form of military “mess halls,” but it was also had a firm social and political “pecking order.”

At the age of 20, all Spartan men were eligible to join an exclusive dining group called a *Syssitia*. These were small groups of 15 men each who would then eat all their meals exclusively with each other and no others. New men were essentially “elected” to a group in a competitive process. A “no vote” by any current member excluded the candidate. Some of these mess groups were more

exclusive or desirable & new men competed fiercely to get into a prestigious group. Aristocrats favored aristocratic candidates. The most exclusive of all was the group that included both the living kings. Failure to join a group would result in exclusion from citizen body, including loss of all political rights. This was a degrading form of social ostracism.

Men in *syssitia* were required to dine with their group once or twice every day. The only excuse for missing meal was for a specific religious observance or if the man was out hunting. Each man was required to supply food to his mess group from his allotment of income from *helots* who worked for his benefit. He would also contribute a share of wild game from his hunting. Failure to provide sufficient food to his *Syssitia* group could result in loss of citizenship status.

The main meal occurred at night with no lights, part of the Spartan interest in promoting stealthy movement. The staple of the diet was a black stew consisting of salted pork in blood. Other Greeks found this diet to be disgusting, although one Athenian resident in Sparta, the aristocrat Alcibiades was one of the few “foreigners” accepted by Spartans in part because of his willingness to eat this diet.



*Two opposing Greek armies of hoplite soldiers arranged in phalanx formations.*

### **Sparta's Military Invincibility**

The entire purpose of the Spartan social and military culture was to make its citizen soldiers the best warriors in Greece. In this it was wildly successful. Although the main enemy was its own *Helot* subjects, Sparta also excelled in warfare against other independent Greek city-states. With its full-time, life-long soldiers, the Spartan army was practically invincible and was rarely defeated in battle over a period of 300 years.

The key to its success lay in the emphasis on constant military training which was vital to the system of formal warfare based on set-piece battles

between armies of **hoplite soldiers** arranged in the military formation known as a phalanx. Success in battle with a **phalanx** formation depended on the training, discipline and loyalty among the soldiers who fought in unison closely alongside each other under the stress of battle. Any break in the line could result in rapid defeat.

The life-long close relationships and constant training of the Spartan military society made its soldiers the best hoplite warriors in Greece. Spartan armies were famous for their discipline and organization and the mere appearance of a Spartan phalanx often caused opposing forces to concede defeat before battle was joined. In a fight, lesser trained armies quickly broke and even fled from the Spartans. Spartans rarely lost and almost never surrendered, even when the odds were entirely against them as at the battle of Thermopylae when King Leonidas and his 300 Spartans were slaughtered almost to a man.

A famous ancient Greek poetic epigram reports the supposed final message of King Leonidas. It epitomizes the myth of every noble lost cause and act patriotic self-sacrifice:

*“Go tell the Spartans, O stranger passing by  
That here, obedient to its laws, in death do we lie.”*

### **The *Krypteia*: Sparta’s Secret Police**

Sparta’s domination of the Helots was not based solely on military discipline among soldiers ready to make the ultimate sacrifice even in the face of overwhelming odds. It was also based on a “secret service” that employed methods that may fairly be described in today’s terms as a form of state-sponsored terrorism.

The best of young warriors among the Spartan youths were inducted into an organization called the ***Krypteia***, literally the Spartan “Secret Service.” They were sent out on secret missions with only a dagger and some supplies with orders to scatter across the countryside to keep hidden during the day. At night, they prowled the highways and villages of the Helots where they killed them at random, although they did seek out any Helots who seemed especially strong or that might be potential trouble makers. The *Krypteia*’s purpose was to terrorize the Helots into submission performing much the same role as the notorious secret police of more modern dictatorships including the Nazi Gestapo in Germany during the 1930s and 40s or the Soviet KGB. This comparison is apt because they used secrecy and state-sponsored murder to achieve the end of suppressing opposition to the Spartan regime among a broad segment of the general population. The *Krypteia* was also a form of initiation for elite warriors.

### **Sex & Marriage in Sparta**

Sex, romantic love and marriage in Sparta were all influenced by its military, male-dominated culture. Males remained in their barracks from childhood until they had reached their 30s or even later. As a result, same-sex activity was common and widely accepted, even encouraged. Greek culture as a whole was heavily chauvinistic and sexist. Women were seen as weak and

inferior. Although physical attraction to the opposite sex was considered natural and necessary for procreation— as was marriage— emotional relations between men, including friendship and romantic ties, were seen as superior to any kind of male-female relationship. This widespread viewpoint among Greeks was intensified by the social-military system of Sparta. Emotional ties, including romance and sex between Spartan men, were encouraged to strengthen bonds between military comrades. The ideal same-sex relationship was between younger and older youths, with the older adolescent or young adult serving as a mentor and teacher to his younger partner.

Marriage in Sparta was primarily seen as necessary for procreation. As we have seen, the ideal Spartan woman was the mother of many sons. While men frequently married at the age of 30, women were usually married at around 18 years old. This was actually older than many other Greek girls who were married soon after puberty at 14 or even 12 years of age. Heterosexual marriage in Ancient Greece and in many ancient societies often amounted to a form of “intergenerational sex” between much older males and much younger females, with ages differences often approaching or exceeding 15 years and beginning for girls at an age that is illegal in modern Western nations (although not in some other modern societies).

#### **Marriage customs:**

According to the ancient historian Plutarch, marriage in ancient Sparta often took place by a kind of ritualized abduction of the bride:

*“The custom was to capture a woman for marriage...the so-called “bridesmaid” took charge of the captured girl. She first shaved her head to the scalp, then dressed her in a man’s cloak and sandals, and laid her down alone on a mattress in the dark. The bridegroom— who was not drunk and thus not impotent, but was always sober— first had dinner in the mess hall, then he would slip in, undo her belt, lift her and carry her to the bed.”*

After this strange initiation, the new husband secretly visited his wife for some time before the marriage was publicly announced.

### The Spartan Myth

Other ancient Greeks both feared & admired Sparta. Among its fiercest admirers were aristocratic Athenians in the period when Athens was a democracy, and the aristocrats themselves were often resentful and out of power. Sparta was lionized by aristocrats and oligarchs who envied the Spartan rejection of democracy as well as its “noble” military society in which the best people ruled by virtue of their strength and virility. The philosopher Plato, the historian Plutarch and other Greek authors frequently idealized Sparta. They accepted or ignored many Spartan customs that modern viewers would consider problematic, or even repulsive such as infanticide.

Later Europeans from the Renaissance to the 1800s also idealized the Spartan system. In modern English, “Spartan” means something that is simple, basic, and un-luxurious, but also tough and macho. This very simplicity and lack of “decadence” is praised as the chief Spartan virtue by those who claimed that modern civilization was “soft” and “weak” because of luxury.

In 1789 CE, French revolutionaries wanted to institute form of Spartan education as part of their new anti-aristocratic society. Victorian boys’ schools pretended to be modeled on “Spartan values.” Military organizations like the United States Marines also praise the Spartans as noble, supposedly “equal” warriors. But Sparta was not a democracy but a military dictatorship and one that accepted and even encouraged romantic and sexual relations between male soldiers.



*A Nazi propaganda for the “Hitler Youth” group. The Nazis openly admired the more inhumane aspects of Spartan society including the killing people they considered inferior.*

### **Dark Side of the Spartan Myth**

There is also a dark side to the Spartan myth. Among Sparta's most ardent modern admirers in 20<sup>th</sup> century was Nazi Germany. Unlike the US Marines, the Nazis saw the brutal side of Spartan culture and they approved. The Nazis openly praised and sought to copy the military idealism and the brutality of the Spartan system. Hitler's program of eugenics, the purposeful killing of human beings that were considered physically or mentally defective in some way to "purify" the human race, was partly inspired by Spartan disposal of weak or defective babies. Hitler also praised the subjugation of the majority Helot population by the Spartan minority by brutal military rule and state-sponsored terror as an ancient forerunner of the Nazi policy of enslaving and exterminating what they viewed as "racially inferior" non-German people like the Slavs or the Jews.



*The Parthenon, Athen's great temple to its patron goddess Athena. The Parthenon remains the greatest symbol of Athenian democracy and for Classical Greece and even Western Civilization itself.*

### **Classical Athenian Democracy & Society**

While ancient Sparta became a military totalitarian state that dictated the lives of its citizens and turned its neighbours in to a slave class, the polis of Athens in the Attic peninsula was developing along very different political and cultural lines. Yet even while Athens became home to the greatest philosophers, playwrights and artist of Classical Greece and the birthplace of democracy, it was

not free of the bitter social and class conflicts that divided other Greek city states. Even when political power fell into the hands of the Athenian people, aristocrats bitterly denounced the system as “mob rule.” Even philosophers like Plato who benefited from the open society were quick to denounce the very system that allowed them to flourish. Certainly, the Spartans would have had no tolerance for such questioning and challenging of their political system. Yet Athens flourished and became what its great statesman Pericles called “the school of Greece.” During this golden age, Athens also became the master of much of Greece, and the world’s first imperial democracy.



Map of the Attic peninsula.

### Origins of Athenian Democracy

During the archaic period (around 800-500 BCE), power and wealth in Athens was concentrated in the hands of the aristocratic class, a small group of wealthy landowners. The pattern was the same as in other Greek poleis: wealthy aristocrats came to monopolize the best land and political power, leaving the majority of the population at the margins of economic well-being and deprived of the most important asset, the best agricultural land in the Attic peninsula. Small farmers fell into debt to aristocrats and were forced to sell their land or even themselves and their families into slavery to pay their debts.

The poorer and especially the “middle class” of not poor but not aristocratic farmers, craftsmen and traders agitated for political and economic rights that were more favorable to them. Meanwhile, the aristocrats competed with each other for power and influence. The result of these factors was social unrest that became severe enough to shake the aristocrat dominated political system to its core leading ultimately to democracy.

As we have seen, things became bad enough that the aristocrats chose one of their own, a man named Solon, to reform the political and economic system in Athens. He ended debt slavery, bought back the freedom of many debt slaves sold abroad and made it illegal for poor farmers to offer themselves or their land as collateral for loans. Solon also divided the Athenian population by wealth and made it possible for wealthy but non-aristocratic Athenian men to have more say in the political system and even stand for public office. He also attempted to reform the economy by promoting the olive oil and pottery industries as an export market to pay for the large amounts of grain that had to be imported to Athens to feed its large population.

Solon’s reforms were important, but they did not solve the political and social problems Athens faced. Athenian society divided into three hostile groups. The “men of the plains” were wealthy, usually aristocratic farmers. The “men of the coast,” were prosperous merchants and traders as well as poorer fishermen. Finally, the “men of the Hill” were the urban poor in the city of Athens, and landless laborers and small farmers occupying marginal, low quality farmland in the rocky hill sides that aristocratic landholders did not want.

The diverging interests of these three groups stymied cooperation across a broad section of the Athenian population. The result was political and social gridlock and the retrenchment of aristocratic power and influence amid continuing social unrest. After the tyrant Peisistratus staged two successful takeovers of the political system against the interests of the aristocrats, they once again chose one of their numbers to attempt more permanent reform. His name was Cleisthenes.

### **Cleisthenes’ Reforms**

Cleisthenes was a popular aristocratic politician. He was given a broad mandate to reform the Athenian political constitution and social structure. Recognizing that the three social factions could sabotage any broad consensus among the Athenian population, he broke up the factions by devising a complex and deliberately artificial system of “tribes” into which all Athenian citizens were divided. Ten tribes were created and each tribe had members scattered across Athens and the Attic peninsula so that each one had men from each of the old factions— men of the plains, the coast and the hill. This clever policy broke up the old factions as well as the powerful influence aristocrats had over the system. The *demos* was also a word used to refer to subdivision of land. These subdivisions joined together and their populations made up the ten tribes.

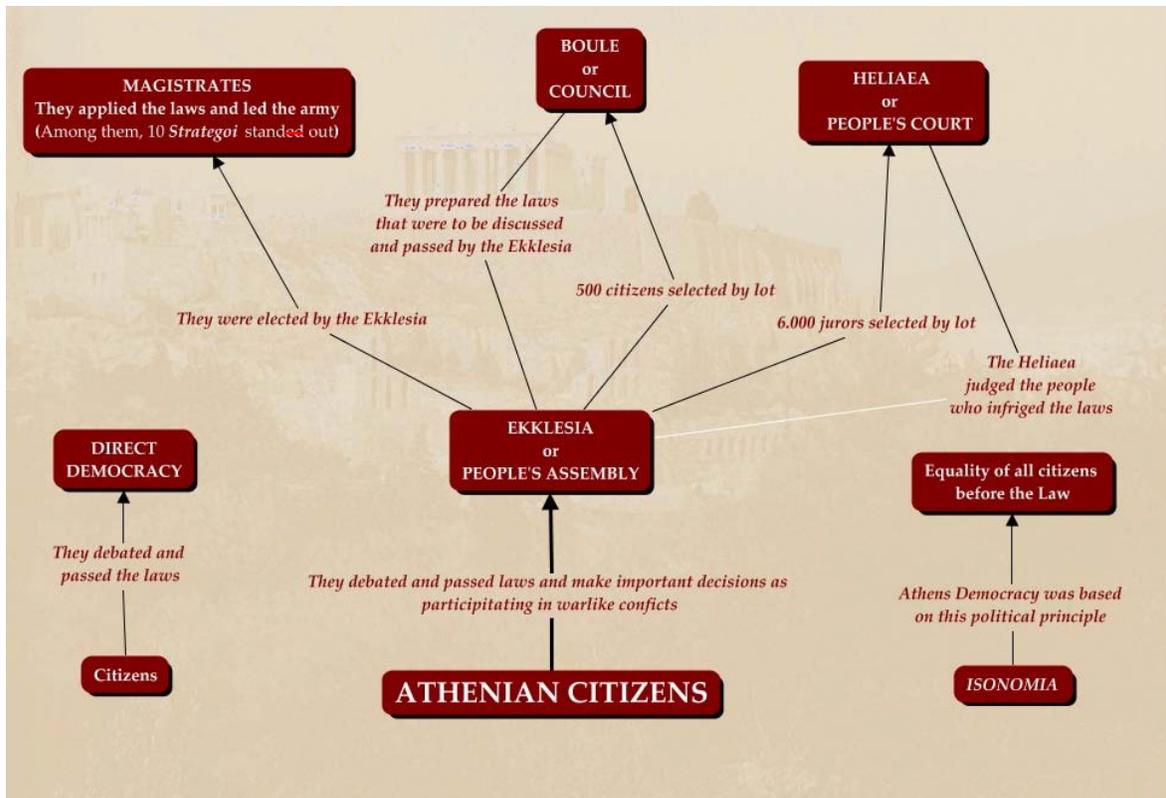


Diagram of the structure of Athenian democracy.

### Earliest Democracy in Athens

Cleisthenes also reorganized the **Boule** or “legislative council” which was responsible for setting the legislative agenda. 500 councilors were chosen each year, 50 from each tribe drawn from every part of Attica. The popular assembly made up of all free male Athenian citizens passed or rejected the laws the Boule-council proposed. Before 507 BCE, even this power was rigged by the aristocrats so that the poor majority could not outvote the wealthy few. After 507 BCE, the principle of one man one vote meant that a true majority decided all questions. Even then, charismatic political leaders, many of whom were aristocrats, could mould and sway public opinion. But Cleisthenes had laid the foundation for a radical change in Athenian politics and in the history of governmental systems. He called his system **isonomia** or “equality before the law.” It would soon become a true **demokratia**, or “rule of the people.”



*In 500 BC, the Persian Empire was a vast superpower.*

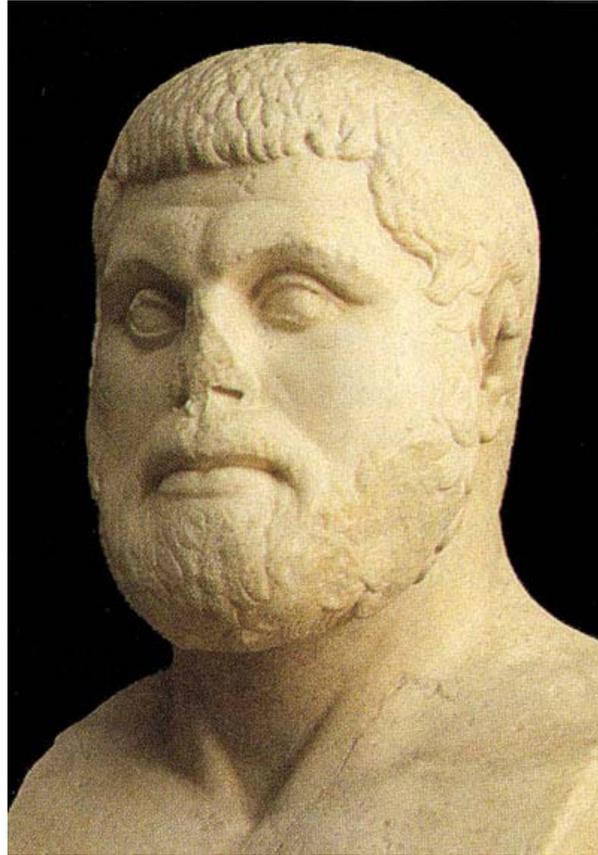
### **Persian Wars & the Triumph of Athenian Democracy**

Despite Cleisthenes' reforms, democracy in Athens might not have developed further had it not been for two great wars that Athens and the rest of the Greeks fought with an ancient superpower, the **Persian Empire**. The vast Persian Empire stretched from modern Iran in the east, to Egypt in the south-west and Anatolia (modern Turkey) in the north-west. The Persians were masters of many different peoples and civilizations. Among their far-flung subjects were the cities of Ionia on the west coast of what is now Turkey. The Ionians were culturally Greek, although divided into several different poleis which, like other Greek city states, spent as much time fighting each other as they did non-Greeks.

The surprising result of the Persian takeover of Ionia was that the city states of Ionia, the Aegean Sea and the mainland of Greece itself did something the Greeks had never done before and would rarely do again— they put aside their differences and united in common cause against an outside enemy, the Persian Empire.

In 490 BCE, when the mighty Persian Empire responded to the rebellion of the Ionian Greeks with a massive land and sea invasion aimed at crushing resistance and adding all of Greece to its Empire, it seemed likely that the Greeks would be crushed by the Persian onslaught. In a stunning upset, a small Athenian force turned back an amphibious assault by the Persian forces at the **Battle of Marathon**. The Persians halted their invasion and returned home. A Spartan army arrived too late to participate in the battle. Greece was saved;

Athenians were jubilant and justly proud of their accomplishment. They had halted a superpower dead in its tracks.



*The Athenian statesman Themistocles, father of the Athenian navy.*

### **Themistocles & the Athenian Navy**

Amid all the cheering, there was one Athenian who worried that Greece had not seen the last of the Persians. His name was Themistocles and he was a leading politician in the city. Themistocles knew that Athens and the rest of Greece had a lucky escape at Marathon. He also knew that the Persians would be back seeking revenge and that Athens had to be ready. It could not rely on its army. Even the mighty Spartans would be hard pressed to resist the massive Persian onslaught. If Athens was to be saved, it would have to be naval power that protected her.

Themistocles had built a political power base among the common people of Athens. In the Athenian assembly, he often could sway the voters to support his policies. In 483 BCE, Themistocles and Athens had quite literally a “lucky strike”. A huge vein of silver ore was found in the silver mines of Laurium in southern Attica, resulting in a huge cash windfall for the Athenian state. But what should the Athenians do with the money? Themistocles told the people to build a fleet of 200 warships called **triremes**. His main political rival, the aristocrat Aristides, opposed this calling for the money to be distributed among the population. Themistocles appealed to the public’s patriotism, not against the

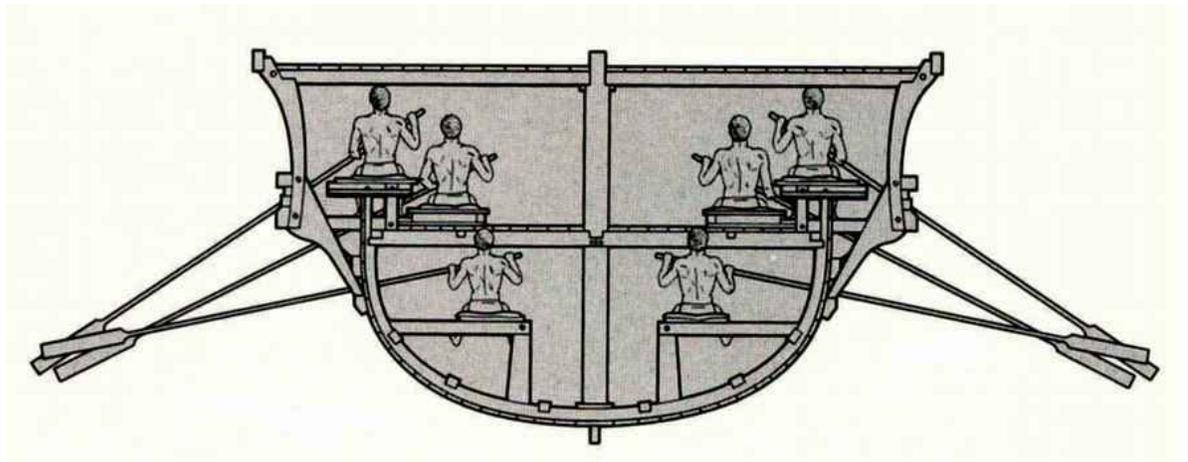
Persian threat, but against another Greek polis, called Aegina with which Athens was then at war. The assembly voted for the ships, seemingly against their own pocketbooks. In fact, the poorer majority of Athenian citizens were actually voting themselves jobs.



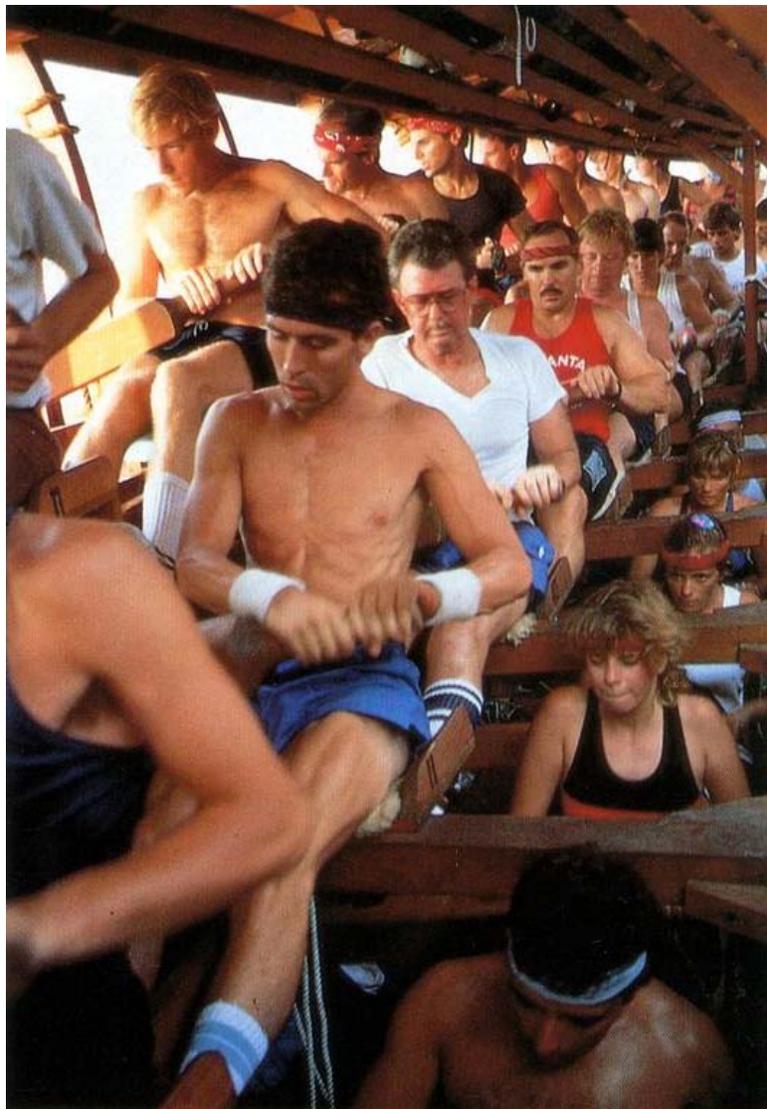
*An ancient relief sculpture showing men rowing a trireme warship.*



*The "Olympia": A full scale replica of an ancient Greek trireme.*



*Cross section diagram showing rowers in a trireme.*



*Modern volunteers rowing the replica trireme "Olympia."*

A trireme was the premier Greek warship of its day. Its name derived from the three banks of oars on each side which served as the main propulsion for the ships. A trireme had a contingent of soldiers, but the rowers far outnumbered them. Its main weapon was a bronze-tipped ram on the prow which was used to ram other ships and sink them. It was in essence a human powered and guided naval missile. Only the wealthier classes in Athens could be hoplite soldiers, but even the poorest man could row a ship. Despite the Hollywood cliché of ancient ships rowed by hundreds of slaves, the vast majority of the rowers were free men who were paid for their service. Each ship had roughly 170 rowers. Multiplied by 200 ships in addition to those Athens already possessed, the men in the assembly were voting for Athens to become the greatest naval power in Greece and voting themselves jobs in the navy to row them.



Map showing the Persian invasions of Greece during the First and Second Persian wars.

Like the non-aristocratic, “middle class” citizens who fought as hoplite soldiers in its army, once the poorer men of Athens could play a role in defending her against her enemies, they could demand, and get, a say in Athens’ politics. By 480, Athens was a powerful democracy and only just in time. Ten years after the Persian Emperor Darius I had invaded Greece, his son and successor Xerxes came back for revenge with an even larger military force on land and sea.



Map showing the locations of the battles of Thermopylae and Salamis during the Second Persian War

### The Second Persian War

The Greeks had been warned, and not just by the Persians or Themistocles, but by the god Apollo himself. By 481 the Greeks knew a massive second Persian invasion was headed their way. A great council of city-states was called, led by Athens and Sparta. Most of the Greek states swore an alliance that was to be led by Sparta because of its unrivaled status as the greatest land force among them. Athens wanted to be the leader of the naval forces, but its rivals opposed this. Themistocles cleverly proposed that a Spartan admiral would lead the combined Greek navy, but behind the scenes the Athenian statesman would be in charge.

While a small force, led by King Leonidas and his 300 Spartans, valiantly tried to delay the Persian land force at Thermopylae, Themistocles organized the naval resistance and the evacuation of the city of Athens itself. After the battle of

Marathon, the Persians were intent on destroying the city and Themistocles knew there was no way to prevent this. An oracle of the god Apollo at Delphi was consulted. This priestess was a medium who supposedly could convey Apollo's will, although her words written down by the priests were often mysterious and difficult to interpret. She told the Athenian delegation that Athens could only be saved by wooden walls!



*An ancient Greek bowl showing a man consulting the Oracle of Delphi.*

While some Athenians insisted that the population should take refuge on the Acropolis Mountain at the heart of Athens, Themistocles convinced most Athenians that the wooden walls were the ships of its navy. The population was evacuated to the nearby island of Salamis with the combined navy of the Greek forces anchored nearby. They watched helplessly as the Persians burnt their city to the ground and destroyed the temple of their goddess Athena on the Acropolis.

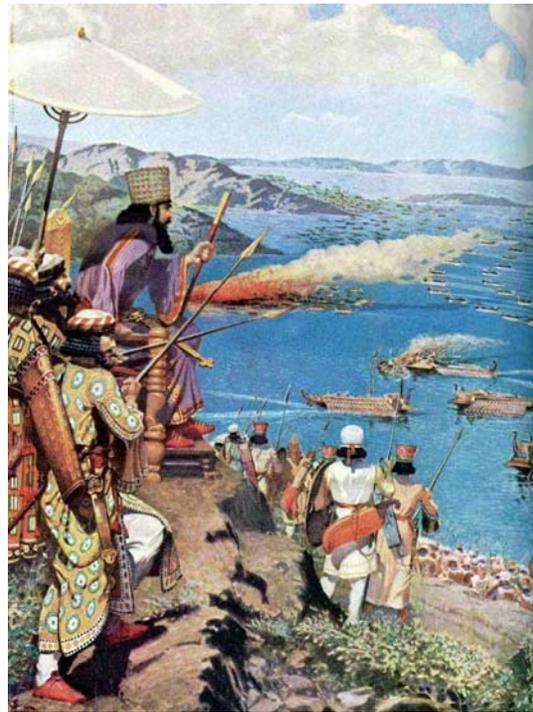
In September 480 BCE, the Persian emperor Xerxes sat on a golden throne on a hilltop overlooking the bay of Salamis and prepared to watch the great act of his revenge against the Athenians and their Greek allies as his vast fleet poised ready to attack the Greek ships apparently bottled up in the narrow bay between Attica and the island of Salamis. The result was not what he expected, for Themistocles had laid a trap for the Persians. The faster and more maneuverable Greek triremes were fighting in home waters. They quickly routed the larger Persian fleet. The victory turned the tide of the war.

The Greek counter attack culminated in the **Battle of Plataea** in June 479 BCE when a Spartan led land force defeated the Persian army. The Greek allies went on the offensive, moving into the Aegean Sea and Ionian coast, repelling the Persians and liberating their fellow Greeks. Greek navies led by the Athenians carried the war to the eastern Mediterranean in the coming years, but

the alliance of the Greek city states soon came to an end. Divisions among them would eventually lead to another series of conflicts, called the **Peloponnesian Wars**, which would destroy Classical Greece. In the years immediately after the war, however, democratic Athens was flush with victory power and pride as it entered its golden age.



*Artist's conception of the Battle of Salamis.*



*(Left) The bronze tipped ram on the prow of the Olympia. (Right): artist conception of Xerxes witnessing the Battle of Salamis.*

### **The Delian League: From Alliance to Empire**

After the second Persian invasion of Greece was repelled in 479 BCE, the Spartans and many of their allies in the Peloponnese of southern Greece lost interest in the war against Persia. Sparta, in particular, was always nervous about having armies too far from watching over the Helots.

Athens, along with the Greek city states of the Aegean islands and the Ionian coast, were keen to continue the war. The remaining Greek allies formed a new pact on the island of Delos called **the Delian League**. Members of the league were sworn to contribute ships and money to the conflict with Persia. The Greeks now waged an offensive naval war across the eastern Mediterranean Sea. A treasury was created at the sanctuary of the god Apollo on Delos, and each year the allied states would pay silver into the fund. With the largest navy and the prestige of having twice been crucial to stopping two Persian invasions of Greece in 490 BCE and 480 BCE, Athens was the leader of the Delian League.

As the years went by, however, Athens began treating other city states in the League less as allies and more as subjects. This became all too clear in 471 BCE, when the island of Naxos tried to withdraw from the league. Athens considered this an act of rebellion and defeated Naxos militarily. From now on, other “allies” were expected to contribute only silver and not ships. The League treasury was soon transferred from the island of Delos to the temple of Athena in Athens for “safe keeping.”

The golden age of Athens under the leadership of the Athenian statesman Pericles was largely funded by the contributions of the Delian League. The magnificent temple to Athena called the Parthenon, built entirely of marble, was just one of the fabulous public works projects the League’s silver paid for. The “alliance” was at an end. Pericles and his fellow Athenians openly talked of the Athenian Empire and of the yearly tribute payments that each former ally now paid to a kind of Athenian protection racket. There was even a monumental stone inscription, parts of which still survive, that listed how much each polis in the Empire had to pay to Athens.

Resentment against the naked power and aggression of Athens towards its former allies seethed throughout the Greek world. While the subject states of the Empire could do little, a coalition of other Greek states, led by Sparta were openly hostile to Athens. Eventually, a rival league led by Sparta would go to war against Athens. The Peloponnesian wars would eventually humble Athens and bleed all of Greece dry. Classical Greece, which had uncharacteristically united to fight off the Persian superpower, would now commit a form of collective suicide as it tore itself apart.

### **Athenian Society**

Athens was the first and perhaps the most radically pure form of democracy in history. This did not mean that a majority of its population had a say in government. In fact, only a minority of people in Athens were citizens with political rights. All of them were men, and they had to be free adult men who had

Athenian parents. Women, slaves and foreigners, who together made up the large majority of the adult population of Athens, had no say in government whatsoever.

Even with these restrictions, and other requirements for wealth to qualify for military or political service, Athenian democracy gave power to a much larger segment than the aristocratic systems of other Greek city states. Aristocratic cities like Sparta were oligarchies. **Oligarchy** means “rule of the few.” Democracy was rule of the “demos” - people but only the free, native-born, males. Athens remained a class-based society. There were aristocrats and commoners, but political rights were determined by wealth. The richest men, known as “500 bushel men” for the value of their annual income in bushels of grain, included aristocrats and non-aristocrats. They could seek the highest political offices, including the 10 annually elected Generals who were the primary military and civilian officers.

Next came the “Horse men” or “300 bushel men” who were considered wealthy enough to be able to provide horses for military service. Horses were expensive to keep, so the name for this group demonstrated their wealth. They could serve in lesser political offices and in the army.

Next was a kind of “Middle Class” called the “200 bushel men,” who were wealthy enough to equip themselves with weapons and armor so they could serve as Hoplite soldiers in the army. Politically, they could also be elected to minor political offices.

The three top income groups were only a minority of the free male citizenry called **Thetes**. At the bottom, worth 199 bushels of grain or less, were the urban and landless poor. These were free men who could vote in the assembly, but they were ineligible for service in the army as hoplites. What they could do is row the ships of Athens’ large navy. And since each ship needed almost 200 rowers, there were a lot of jobs indeed. Thetes could also serve on juries. As the largest voting block they had raw political power that was successfully guided and channeled by ambitious and talented politicians like Themistocles and Pericles.

### **Slavery & Democracy**

The “dirty little secret” of Athenian democracy was the large numbers of non-citizens, who had no political rights but whose labor and talents made Athenian democracy possible. Worst off were the slaves. Democracy was for native freeborn Athenians who saw no contradiction between slavery and democracy. Because of the labor provided by large numbers of slaves owned by private citizens and the Athenian state, even poor Athenian citizens had the leisure time to engage in daily politics in the assembly or in the courts. Only with slaves to do much of the work could such a large portion of the free citizens of Athens engage in the constant, often profitable wars Athens fought, either as elite Hoplites or poor naval rowers.

Public slaves owned by the state did a range of jobs; everything from miserable work in the silver mines to a squad of Scythian archers used as police force with powers of arrest to keep public order. Unlike Sparta where the Helot

slaves were “public property,” most slaves in Athens were “private property.” And slaves were not just for the rich. It was quite possible for citizens of the middle and even lower classes to own at least one slave.

“Chattel slavery” was the notion that slaves were like livestock. They were considered morally inferior to free men. In this way, all free Athenian citizens viewed themselves as being alike regardless of their class because they were by nature superior to slaves. Paradoxically, slavery supported the fundamental ideology of democracy in Athens, namely that all free Athenian men could participate in government!

Many slaves were actually very skilled and intelligent specialist workers. They included craftsmen such as goldsmiths, accountants, private tutors, etc. Most of their economic output was claimed by their masters, but slaves could also earn their own money and might even buy their freedom. Skilled slaves were valuable property and were cared for by their masters as a kind of investment. Unskilled slaves, especially those doing the worst kind of tasks like mining, were less valuable and more expendable.

### **Metics: Resident Aliens**

Another politically disenfranchised class of people in Athens was the **Metics**. Metics were “resident aliens.” They were free, but foreigners, i.e., non-Athenians. It did not matter if a Metic was a Greek from the city of Corinth or Thebes or a non-Greek from Egypt or Persia. All residents of Athens who did not have Athenian parents, and who therefore lacked citizenship rights, were Metics. Often they were non-Greek, but many were non-Athenian Greeks. Any slave who gained his freedom could also “move up” to Metic status.

Metics were systematically denied political rights, but wealthier ones were subject to taxation and they shared certain financial obligations to the Athenian public with wealthy natives. Like rich Athenian citizens, they were expected to make religious contributions to the cults and festivals of the city’s gods and temples. Metics were also subject to military service

Despite these disincentives, metics could often live prosperous or wealthy lifestyles as resident aliens in Athens. Democratic Athens attracted many economic and intellectual immigrants. They worked as merchants, craftsmen and in other lucrative trades such as philosophers who served as private tutors to the sons of wealthy Athenians.

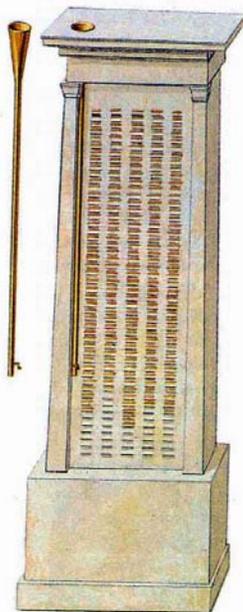
The inferiority of Metics versus citizens was not based on wealth, but on their non-Athenian status. Politically and socially, the wealthiest metic was somehow inferior to a poor Athenian citizen. Metics shared many of the burdens of citizenship, but without its privileges. There was a special tax levied only on them. They required a native Athenian “sponsor” to gain access to the courts for legal reasons, either to sue or defend themselves against lawsuits. Failure to have a “sponsor” could result in fines or loss of property, and even being sold into slavery. Metics were rarely granted citizenship, but some could obtain a form of “equal rights,” namely freedom from usual burdens placed on metics. Despite their “second class status,” the economic opportunity and intellectual freedom in Athens lured many foreigners to the city.

## Direct Democracy

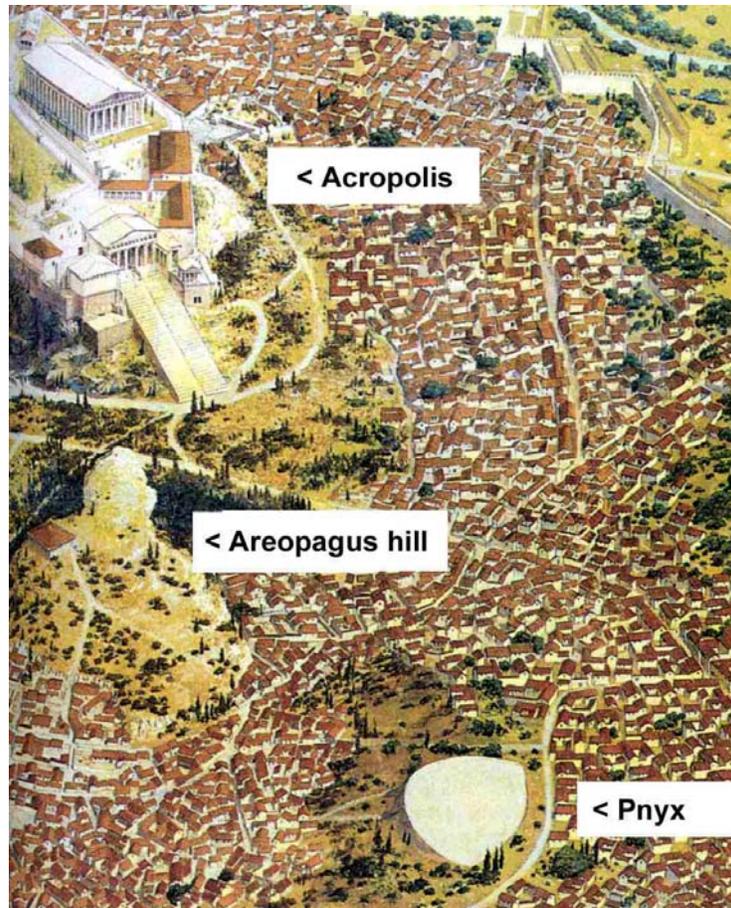
Most modern democracies including the U.S. are representative democracies. This means that citizens elect representatives like city counselors, state legislators, congressmen and senators to represent them in legislative bodies at the local, state and national level. Classical Athens was a direct democracy. This was possible because Athens was a small state and only a fraction of its male residents had citizenship rights. Women, foreigners and, of course, slaves, were excluded from the political system. The citizenry at large represented themselves in the assembly where they could vote on laws and other policies. Citizens could also serve on juries.

The Athenian Popular Assembly theoretically consisted of all adult male citizens of 20 years and older. It met two or three times per month and any citizen could vote there if he showed up that day. Athenian citizens also participated in their government by serving as public officers or as jurors in court cases. Jurors were chosen by lottery and were paid for service. Eventually, citizens were even paid to attend the assembly. To serve as public officers, a citizen had to have the required level of wealth for the office and be at least 30 years old.

The top executive posts in the Athenian system, such as the ten annually elected generals, went to the wealthy few, who were often aristocrats. Men of the lower financial classes could serve as minor officials. As many as 900 men were selected on a yearly basis. This was in addition to hundreds of men who served in jury pools. Minor officials and jurors were chosen randomly by lottery. There was even a sophisticated allotment “machine” for the purpose.



*A reconstruction (left) and an actual fragment (right) of an Athenian allotment machine for randomly selecting candidates for minor government posts.*



*Artist's conception of Athens in its golden age (500-400 BCE). On the acropolis is the Parthenon temple and other monuments to the goddess Athena. The pnyx is where the democratic assembly met.*



*The Pnyx today.*



### **Pericles**

In a famous speech to the Athenian people, the great democratic leader Pericles told the Athenians that it was no shame to be a poor man in Athens. Honor came not from wealth but through service to the city state. Even the poorest citizen could participate in government and he was honor bound to do so. Theoretically, Athens had a weak executive branch and a strong legislative branch. There was no supreme elected official like a president or prime minister. Instead, there were 10 “Generals” elected every year and a number of lesser officials. But talented politicians like Pericles and Themistocles often dominated Athenian politics and persuaded the majority of citizens in the assembly to support their policies and agendas. The historian Thucydides, who was an aristocrat, did not like democracy yet he said the system worked best when there was a strong politician like Pericles behind the scenes who actually “ran the show.”

Between 461 BCE and 429 BCE, Pericles dominated Athenian politics. Pericles was a gifted speaker and although an aristocrat, he was leader of the popular faction in the assembly. In some years he served as a general, while in others he was supposedly a “private citizen” without formal political office. Yet he was one of the few who could always speak in the Assembly and he was usually able to sway opinion to vote in favor of his policies. He also used political patronage to fund lavish public works projects and jobs for the poor from rowing

in the navy to pay for attendance at the Assembly or on juries. Much of the wealth to do this came from the Athenian empire and was used to build the fabulous monuments on the acropolis like the Parthenon, Athens' great temple to its goddess Athena.

### **The Peloponnesian Wars**

Between 431 BCE and 404 BCE, Athens, Sparta and the whole of the Greek world fought a kind of civilization-wide "Greek World War." Pericles himself led Athens into the first of a series of disastrous wars against Sparta in 431 BCE. At the start of the **First Peloponnesian War**, Athens had the largest navy in Greece, and large annual revenues of silver from the tribute payments from her empire and from silver mines in Attica. The city had already built up a huge reserve of gold and silver. Athens seemed to have all the advantages, and Pericles was convinced that the war could be won in a couple of years; Sparta would quickly give up. But it did not turn out that way. The Peloponnesian Wars dragged on for almost 30 years. Two years after it began, a devastating plague hit Athens, killing thousands of people, including Pericles himself.

Our main historical source for the long and devastating Peloponnesian Wars is the historian Thucydides, an Athenian aristocrat like Pericles himself. Thucydides survived the plague and even served as a general against Sparta. After Athens lost a battle under his leadership, Thucydides was exiled from his homeland and then traveled around Greece gathering sources for his great account of the war which, he said, was the most important event of his lifetime. Thucydides lived to see the end of the second Peloponnesian war in 404 BCE, but was not able to complete his history before his death.

After thirty years of war, Athens was devastated, humbled and defeated. It had lost its empire. Thucydides' history of the war was a form of ancient "journalism" or "current affairs" page-turner. But he also saw the war as a kind of "morality play." Athens was guilty of *hubris* or "arrogance," and pride led to her fall. And who was ultimately to blame for all this? According to Thucydides it was not the wise and noble Pericles who had led the Athenians into the war—but democracy itself!

### **Demagogues and Anti-Democrats**

According to Thucydides, it was only Pericles who managed to keep the destructive power of the people at bay. Under his leadership, the mob was controlled and guided. After his death, the popular mob in the assembly was misled by **demagogues**. The term Demagogue means "leader of the people," but in this case *demos* meant mob. Demagogues were rabble rousers who brought out the worst instincts of the poor masses. They whipped up the worst prejudices of an angry mob with disastrous results. According to the aristocrats, it was these demagogues, and the stupid masses of the common people through the democratic system that brought Athens to its knees.

In the later stages of the Peloponnesian War and in the years following it, there were a series of political revolutions in which democracy was repeatedly overthrown, suppressed by Sparta and then restored on a number of occasions.

The Athenian populace suffered from horrible political violence as competing factions killed hundreds of their political enemies. Severe economic hardship and political uncertainty wrecked havoc on the war-weary population. Ultimately, democracy was restored but there was much bitterness on both sides. According to the aristocrats, including a prominent group of philosophers and intellectuals led by the aristocratic thinker Plato, democracy itself was the chief cause of Athens' problems.

Plato was also bitter over the death of his beloved mentor the philosopher Socrates. Socrates was a commoner and a loyal citizen of Athens, but his tendency to question everything and everyone in Athens as a self-appointed intellectual gadfly did not sit well with an Athenian population in a dark mood after the Peloponnesian war, the loss of its Empire, and the political upheavals of recent years. Socrates was brought up on charges for corrupting the youth of Athens and for not believing in the city's gods. A jury of citizens found him guilty and he was condemned to death by drinking poison. Plato blamed Socrates' death on the people of Athens and democracy itself.

### **The Legacy of Athenian Democracy**

Democracy in Athens lasted for less than 200 years. In 336 BCE, all of Greece came under the dominion of king Alexander the Great of Macedon. For the next 2000 years, the birthplace of democracy was ruled by a series of foreign kings and emperors: The Macedonians, Romans, Byzantines, and Ottoman Turks. As late as the 1970s CE, when Greece had achieved independence as a modern nation not ruled by foreigners, it was still not a democracy. Finally, in 1975, Greece, with Athens as its capital once again became a democracy.

Outside of Greece, democracy is also a relatively recent phenomenon. The first modern democracies did not begin to appear until the late 1700s CE. The Founding Fathers of the United States did not look to Athenian democracy but the aristocratic and oligarchic Roman Republic for inspiration. Like Thucydides and Plato, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin feared and distrusted the rule of the common people:

*"A democracy is nothing more than mob rule, where 51% of the people may take away the rights of the other 49%."* – Thomas Jefferson

*"Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There was never a democracy yet that did not commit suicide."* – John Adams

Modern democracies in the western nations like the United States, Great Britain and France evolved gradually during the 1800s and 1900s. When the United States Constitution was ratified in 1789, along with the Bill of Rights, it guaranteed legal equality and political representation only to free white men. Slavery existed until the end of the Civil War in 1865. Women only gained the universal right to vote after the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment to the

Constitution in 1920. Full legal equality for African Americans was not achieved until the 1960s.

Around the world today, democracy has only made great headway in the past twenty years. In 1972, only 40 nations on earth could be considered true democracies. Today 123 countries are democracies, and the number continues to increase. Yet dozens of nations are highly undemocratic. Some nations are also “illiberal democracies.” These partial or pseudo-democracies are not fully or truly democratic. In some countries, democracy has been on the retreat in recent years as authoritarian rulers systematically roll back political rights and freedoms. In these sham democracies, popularly elected dictators hold true power and basic constitutional rights and the rule of law are absent. This form of pseudo-democracy has been described as “one man, one vote, one time.” Despite such limitations and setbacks, modern democracy has expanded beyond the wildest dreams of the ancient Athenians.