

Athens: Democracy in Greece

While the Spartans developed a military-based society, the people of another rising city-state were busy creating a different world for themselves.

Athens was similar to Sparta in some ways. Both city-states had large populations and extensive lands. But Athens came to be led differently. The city also became one of the most important trade centers and colonizers in the entire Mediterranean.

By the 8th century B.C., Athens was a united polis. Located north of Sparta at a distance of 100 miles, Athens controlled some of the best land in Greece—land abundant in olive trees and vineyards.

Prior to 700 B.C., Athens was ruled as an aristocracy. A representative assembly called the *ecclesia* existed, but it had little power. The aristocracy came to control so much of the economic and agricultural life of Athens that the common people began to talk about revolt.

The ruling aristocracy, in an attempt to avoid revolution and rioting, gave one merchant, who was known for his wisdom, the power to deal with the issues which were causing so much discontent.

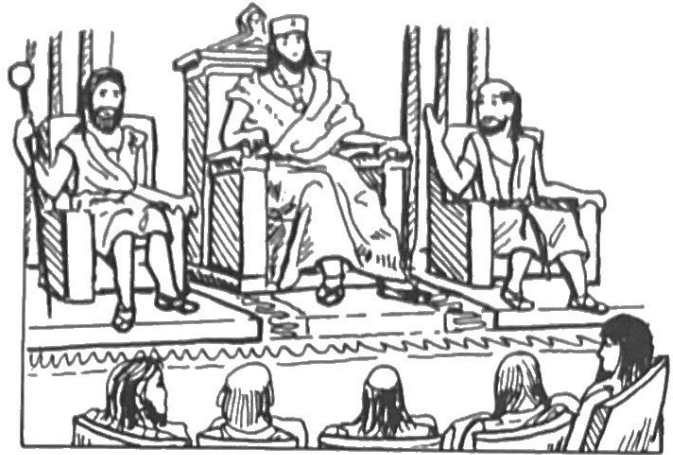
His name was Solon and he worked hard to introduce land reform and economic change to Athens. Solon also introduced some elements of democracy to government by allowing the poor to exercise veto power over the *ecclesia*.

Other rulers who followed Solon were tyrannical and his reforms did not last. However, by 507 B.C., a cunning aristocrat named Clisthenes gained power and helped bring stability to Athens. He introduced a new representative system to his city-state.

Clisthenes divided the population of Athens into 10 tribes, so that each tribe was representative of the whole population. Each tribe elected 50 citizens to represent them as members of a Council of 500. This body determined policy and made decisions for the city and its citizens.

Although Clisthenes only ruled for one year, his system lasted long after his influence. By 487 B.C., democracy in Athens was in place. Here's how it worked: Power rested in an Athenian assembly, which was made up of all the male citizens of the city-state. All important decisions, such as going to war or raising emergency taxes, were made by the

assembly. Forty thousand men qualified for membership in the assembly. (Generally, as many as 5000 men might actually meet together at any one time.)



In addition, a council was selected which had executive responsibilities in carrying out the decisions of the assembly. Special powers were also granted to a court, called the *Heliaea*, made up of several hundred men. The *Heliaea* heard court cases and lawsuits.

When seen in combination, the Athenian assembly (the *ecclesia*), the Council of 500, and the *Heliaea* constituted a democracy based on legislative, executive, and judicial branches.

However, despite these developments in creating Athenian democracy, many people were excluded from participation. Women, people from other city-states and countries, and slaves were not allowed any roles. This kept three out of four adults in Athens from participating in its newly formed democracy.

Research and Write

Athenian democracy was based on having a legislative, executive, and judicial branch. Study the government of the United States and explain what groups and individuals constitute these three important branches of our government.

Creating the Greek City-State

With the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization at the hands of the invading Dorians, city life in ancient Greece nearly evaporated. The culture on the Peloponnesus became more primitive. The arts of pottery and metallurgy reverted to simpler designs. Political systems became little more than tribal. People in the Aegean region forgot old trade connections. They even lost the ability to read and write. This is one reason the Dark Age of Greece (from 1100 to 800 B.C.) was so dark.

The villages of the Dark Age operated independently from one another. Each was ruled by a tribal leader called a *basileus*, a Greek word meaning "king."

About 800 B.C., the Greek villages began developing into larger units centered on towns. Such towns were typically built on a high place and consisted primarily of walled fortifications protecting a marketplace, where people bartered and bought goods. Such towns developed into a new type of Greek community—the *polis*, or city-state, which became the most significant contribution made by the ancient Greeks to our modern concept of government. The polis consisted of the town or city and the surrounding land. The word polis gives us our word *political*.

After 800 B.C., city-states emerged throughout the Aegean world. On the Greek mainland, the city-states of Athens, Sparta, Thebes, and Corinth emerged. On the west coast of Anatolia or Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), the Greeks established the city of Miletus. On islands in the Aegean Sea, the city-states of Naxos and Samos were created.

The city-states of the Greeks differed from one another in size and population. Greek Sparta was three times larger than Athens (3000 square miles vs. 1000 square miles), yet most city-states were smaller than 100 square miles.

Sparta and Athens were not only two of the largest city states, they were also the most populous. Each boasted a population of between 300,000 and 350,000 people.

Review and Write

The Greek city-states operated with different types of government. Define the government listed below and express your opinion about each one. Would you have liked living in any of these types of cities?

Five Types of City-State Government

	Definition	Opinion Concerning
Monarchy		
Aristocracy		
Oligarchy		
Tyranny		
Democracy		