

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.