

The Birth of the Greek Polis

The chaos and Greece's mountainous terrain forced people to huddle under the protection of a defensible hill known as an *acropolis*. By 800 B.C.E., these fortified centers had produced more security and settled conditions that triggered two important developments vital to the emergence of Greek culture.

1. First, the more settled conditions plus the fact that Greece was by the sea and had few resources led to a revival of trade and contact with the older cultures to the East. For example, the Greeks adopted the Phoenician alphabet and added vowels to it, so literacy returned to Greece. Also, Egyptian influence can be seen in Greek architecture and sculpture. Here too we see the Greeks would add their own innovations, giving their pillars more slender and graceful lines, and creating more lifelike statues than the stiff formal Egyptian models they had to copy. These influences would lead to and be the partial basis of classical Greek civilization.
2. Also, the settled conditions along with Greece's poor soils and hilly and dry conditions led to a new type of agriculture and farmer at this time. Instead of the overly centralized agriculture of the Mycenaean period and the under-worked aristocratic estates of the earlier Dark Age, farmers started developing less desirable lands which the nobles probably did not even want. Rather than raising just grain crops or grazing livestock, they developed a mixed agriculture of grains, orchards, and vineyards that was better adapted to the varied conditions of their lands and climate. The intensive labor such farms required bred very independent farmers who would be largely responsible for the emergence of democracy in the Greek polis.

The revival of trade and development of small independent farms also combined to allow the settlements to grow into towns and cities (*poleis*) that spread out beyond the confines of their original acropolises. Later, in some cities, notably Athens, the acropolis would become a place to build temples to the gods while also serving as a reminder of earlier more turbulent times. In order to understand the Greeks, one must understand what this most distinctive of all Greek institutions, the *polis* (city-state), meant to them.

The word *polis* means city, but it was much more than that to the Greek citizen. It was the central focus of his political, cultural, religious, and social life. Much of this was because the Greek climate was ideal for people to spend most of their time outdoors. Therefore, they interacted with one another much more than we do and became more tightly knit as a community. Since poleis were so isolated from each other by mountains, they became largely self-sufficient and self-conscious communities. Greeks generally saw their poleis as complete in themselves, not needing to unite with other Greek poleis for more security or fulfillment. We can see three main qualities that were typical of major and minor poleis alike.

1. *The polis was an independent political unit* with its own foreign policy, coinage, patron deity, and even calendar. For example, the tiny island of Ceos off the coast of Attica, had four independent city-states, each claiming the right to carry on its own business and wage war as it saw fit-- all this on an island no more than ten miles in length!
2. *The polis was on a small scale*. This is obvious from the example of Ceos. But consider a major city-state such as Corinth, which controlled an area of only some 320 square miles, considerably smaller than an average county in one of our states. Athens, by far the most influential of the city-states on our own culture, controlled an area only about the size of Rhode Island. Yet it is to Athens that we look for the birth of such things as our drama, philosophy, architecture, history, and democracy.
3. *The polis was personal in nature*. This follows logically from its small size. Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato thought that a polis should be small enough for every citizen to know every other citizen. If it got any bigger, it would get too impersonal and not work for the individual citizen's benefit. Even in Athens, the most populous Greek city-state, some citizens could pay their taxes in very personal ways, such as by equipping and maintaining a warship for a year or by producing a dramatic play for the yearly festival dedicated to Dionysus. This tended to breed a healthy competition where citizens would strive to make their plays or warships the best ones possible, thus benefiting the polis as a whole.

The polis' small and personal nature bred an intense loyalty in its citizens that had both its good and bad points. On the plus side, it did inspire members of the community to work hard for the civic welfare. The incredible accomplishments of Athens in the fifth century B.C.E. are the most outstanding example of what this civic pride could accomplish.

On the negative side, the polis' narrow loyalties led to intense rivalries and chronic warfare between neighboring city-states. These wars could be long, bitter, and costly. Sparta and Argos were almost always in a state of war with each other or armed truce waiting for war. The Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens lasted 27 years, destroying Athens' empire and golden age. Sometimes city-states would be entirely destroyed in these wars, such as happened to Plataea and Sybaris. In addition, there was often civil strife within the city-state as well: between rich and poor, Dorians and non-Dorians, and citizens and non-citizens. This internal turmoil could be every bit as vicious and bloody as fighting between city-states. Ultimately, the Greeks sealed their own doom by wasting energy and resources in their own petty squabbles while other larger powers were waiting in the wings for the right moment to strike.

However, there were several factors that gave the Greeks a common identity and some degree of unity. First of all, the Greeks spoke a common language that largely gave them a common way of looking at things. The Greeks generally divided the world into those who spoke Greek and those who did not. Those who did not speak Greek were called *barbarians*, since, to the Greeks, they senselessly babbled ("bar-bar-bar").

Religion also gave the Greeks a common identity. Athletic contests in honor of the gods especially emphasized the Greeks' unity as a people. The most famous of these were the Olympic Games held every four years in honor of Zeus. During these games a truce was called between all Greek city-states, allowing Greeks to travel in peace to the games, even through the territory of hostile states. The modern Olympic Games, even though they are no more successful than the ancient games in putting an end to war, still serve as a symbol of peace in a less than peaceful world.

Finally, several city-states might combine into leagues. These leagues might be purely for the purpose of celebrating religious rites or kinship common to their cities. A good example was the Delphic Amphictyony, a league of twelve cities formed to promote and protect the Oracle of Delphi. Some leagues were for political and defensive purposes. The Peloponnesian League under Sparta and the Delian League under Athens were for such a purpose and together claimed the loyalties of most of the city-states in Greece and Ionia. This was good for preventing war between individual city-states. But it backfired when Sparta and Athens went to war in 431 B.C.E. and dragged most of the Greek world into the most tragic and destructive struggle in ancient Greek history.

By 750 B.C.E., the Greek world had largely taken shape as a collection of city-states, often at war with one another, but also feeling certain common ties of language, religion, and customs. At this point, there was nothing remarkable about the Greeks, but forces were at work that would transform Greece into the home of democracy and the birthplace of Western Civilization.

ATHENS VS. SPARTA

Conclusions

ADAPTED FROM: <http://www.pbs.org/empires/thegreeks/educational/lesson1.html>

	ATHENS	SPARTA	
Population	Approximately 140,000; Approximately 40,000 men were citizens; and slaves (about 40,000). By 432 BC, Athens had become the most populous city-state in Hellas. In Athens and Attica, there were at least 150,000 Athenians, around 50,000 aliens, and more than 100,000 slaves.	Approximately 8,000 Spartiates (adult male citizens) ruled over a population of 100,000 enslaved and semi-enslaved people.	
Origins	Ionians (pre-Dorians) who inhabited the region of Attica (centered on what would become Athens) was a main pocket of resistance to Dorian conquest.	To usher in the "Dark Ages" of Ancient Greece, the Dorians came down from the north and established themselves as a ruling class in what would become Sparta. Inter-marriage with non-Dorians was forbidden and non-Dorians were virtually enslaved to work on farms.	
Government & Political organizations	<p>Government origins Athens started as Monarchy and turned into a limited democracy because of continual threats of middle class/peasant farmer unrest. Democracy in Athens was reformed at several points as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draco (621 BCE -) – legal code – equality before the law, but harsh or "Draconian." • Solon (594 BCE -) – Athenian Assembly opened to all of 4 social classes – top 3 classes able to hold political office • Cleisthenes (500 BCE -) – Weakened the power of the nobility, increased the power of the Assembly – Council of Five Hundred <p>Athenian Government Usually classified as both a "limited democracy" and "direct democracy" ("limited" because only a minority were actually citizens and "direct" because everyone, not just politicians attended the Assembly), Athens claims to be the "birthplace of democracy".</p> <p>Elected officials including 10 generals (strategos), magistrates (archons), and others.</p> <p>Council of 500 was charged with administering decisions made by the Assembly.</p> <p>The Assembly open to all citizens (all citizens were eligible to attend such meetings and speak up). They passed laws and made policy decisions. The Assembly met on the Hill of the Pnyx at the foot of the Acropolis.</p> <p>During time of Pericles citizens were paid for jury service so not only the wealthy could participate. Women did not participate in the political life of Athens.</p>	<p>Government Origins An oppressive military state was established to quash slave revolts.</p> <p>Spartan Government: Usually classified as an "oligarchy" (rule by a few), but it had elements of monarchy (rule by kings), democracy (through the election of council/senators), and aristocracy (rule by the upper class or land owning class).</p> <p>Two kings who were generals in command of the armies and with some religious duties.</p> <p>Five overseers (ephors) elected annually ran the day-to-day operations of Sparta. They could veto rulings made by the council or assembly.</p> <p>Council or Senate (apella) of 28 councilmen (men over 60 and elected for life by the citizens) and the 2 kings. They acted as judges and proposed laws to the citizens' assembly.</p> <p>The Assembly of all Spartan males aged 30 or over could support or veto the council's recommendations by shouting out their votes.</p> <p>Women did not participate in the political life of Sparta.</p>	
Social Structure	<p>Freemen were all male citizens: divided into numerous classes: at the top were aristocrats who had large estates and made up the cavalry or captained triremes; middle ranks were small farmers; lowest class was the thetes (urban craftsmen and trireme rowers). Metics - those who came from outside the city; they were not allowed to own land, but could run industries and businesses. Slaves were lowest class, but less harshly treated than in most other Greek cities. Slaves had no rights, and an owner could kill a slave. Slaves varied in status: some were given important roles in Athens, like policemen. Women were rarely seen outside the home and had no rights in the Athenian democracy.</p>	<p>Three classes: Spartiates (military professionals who lived mostly in barracks and whose land was farmed by serfs; they served in the army and could vote). Perioeci or "neighbors/outside" who were freemen; they included artisans, craftsmen, merchants; they could not vote or serve in the army; foreigners could be in this class. Helots (serfs descended from those peoples who had resisted subjugation by Sparta and who were constantly rebelling. They were treated like slaves and gave 1/2 of their produce to the Spartiate citizens who owned the land. Women had few rights, but were more independent in Sparta than elsewhere in Greece.</p>	

	ATHENS	SPARTA	Conclusions
Allies	Delian League (with Athens clearly the most powerful); Athens taxed and protected other city-states.	Peloponnesian League (with Sparta clearly the most powerful).	
Military strength	Strong navy.	Strong army, best and most feared fighters on land.	N/A
	Democratic values for citizens. They believed in participation in government as a civic responsibility. Athenians believed in their cultural superiority and in their role in an empire and benefiting from trade. (See Pericles' Funeral Oration showing these values.) "Further, we provide many ways to refresh the mind from the burdens of business. We hold contests and offer sacrifices all the year round, and the elegance of our private establishments forms a daily source of pleasure and helps to drive away sorrow. The magnitude of our city draws the produce of the world into our harbor, so that to the Athenian the fruits of other countries are as familiar a luxury as those of his own."	Militaristic values. Children of citizens were raised to be "Spartan", taught to get along with almost nothing. Spartiate citizens were not permitted to own gold or silver or luxuries. Spartan children were taught to respect elderly, women, and warriors. [The strict separation of classes and militaristic system was put into place by Lycurgus in the 7th century BC.] Spartan mothers would say to their sons, <i>"Either come back with your shield or on it"</i> (meaning return victorious or die fighting). This lifestyle was praised by Xenophon , an ancient historian c. 375 BCE.	
Education	Boys: Schools taught reading, writing and mathematics, music, poetry, sport and gymnastics. Based upon their birth and the wealth of their parents, the length of education was from the age of 5 to 14, for the wealthier 5 - 18 and sometimes into a student's mid-twenties in an academy where they would also study philosophy, ethics, and rhetoric (the skill of persuasive public speaking). Finally, the citizen boys entered a military training camp for two years, until the age of twenty. Foreign metics and slaves were not expected to attain anything but a basic education in Greece, but were not excluded from it either. Girls: Girls received little formal education (except perhaps in the aristocrats' homes through tutors); they were generally kept at home and had no political power in Athens. The education of a girl involved spinning, weaving, and other domestic art.	Boys: Boys were taken from parents at age seven and trained in the art of warfare. They were only give a cloak - no shoes or other clothes, and not enough food so they had to steal (to learn survival skills). At age 20 they were placed into higher ranks of the military. To age 30 they were dedicated to the state; then they could marry but still lived in barracks with other soldiers. They were educated in choral dance, reading and writing, but athletics and military training were emphasized. Girls: Girls were educated at age 7 in reading and writing, gymnastics, athletics and survival skills. Could participate in sports; treated more as equals.	
Role of women	Athenian women and girls were kept at home with no participation in sports or politics. Wives were considered property of their husbands. They were responsible for spinning, weaving and other domestic arts. Some women held high posts in the ritual events and religious life of Athens (where the goddess Athena was the patron). Prostitutes and courtesans were not confined to the house. Some became influential such as Aspasia (see the 'Character Stories section of this Web site).	Girls were educated in reading and writing and could participate in sports; they were treated more as equals to men. The goal was to produce women who would produce strong healthy babies. At age 18 she would be assigned a husband and return home. Citizen women were free to move around and enjoyed a great deal of freedom. Domestic arts (weaving, spinning, etc.) were usually left to the other classes. Spartan women could own and control their own property. In times of war the wife was expected to oversee her husband's property and to guard it against invaders and revolts until her husband returned.	
Cultural achievements and legacy	Art, architecture, drama and literature, philosophy, science, medicine, etc. Government (democracy, trial by jury)	Military supremacy and simple lifestyle are the major inspiration behind the philosopher Plato's book 'The Republic' - the first attempt to formulate an 'ideal' community.	
Other	Food: Athenians enjoyed luxuries and foods from all over their empire. Wealthy Athenian homes were quite nice with an inner courtyard.	Food: Spartan Broth consisted of pork, blood, salt and vinegar. Spartans were trained to dislike luxuries and fancy foods. The men lived most of their lives in military barracks .	