

ANCIENT GREECE – Government

Greek city states. The ancient Greek polis was itself a slow development, not easily traced even for the disparate communities of Attica, let alone for the multiple small proto-groupings that were forming throughout the Hellenic world, from the early 8th century on, and that were to go on to become the fully formed and generally contentious mini states—more than a thousand of them—of the Greek islands and coastal areas, including Asia Minor, clear through the pre-Christian centuries. The sheer number of these ‘states,’ and their gradual appearance from the sixth century on, is evidence for the importance of the communal *polis* development, whether in fully democratic form or not, as a social condition in which such enriching life forms as the arts—temple, vase, sculpture—were to find their place.

Growth of the Greek State. The social civic environment in which the early temples were constructed, the first *kouroi* sculpted, and the archaic amphoras and aryballoi produced was that of a loosely aggregated set of communities—reference here to the Attic plain and Athens its center—in which coinage, ocean going trade and commerce, a local market economy, the stirrings of a homogeneous law code as under Solon—were beginning to take shape as effective aids to group life. Shedding its roots in the clan culture of the epic age, the Greek city-state, already under Solon known as a *polis*, was trying out versions of democracy, blended with tyrannies and oligarchies, which were the staging grounds, if we go with that fifth century B.C. mythography, for the refined city state of the classical moment.

Pericles and the State. The growth of the democratic polis of Athens was driven forward by the regime of Solon, in the early sixth century; for though he was an autocrat he instituted laws, promulgated them for the city, then went away himself to let the community work with his contribution. This small tale exemplifies the kind of freeborn energy with which the nucleating residents of Athens were increasingly to show their distinctive maturity; a self-motivated involvement, with the *polis*, that for no accidental reason constituted them as makers and audience for artistic and literary work of a maturity unparalleled in world culture. The Funeral Oration of Pericles, given a century after Solon, for the first year’s fallen during the Peloponnesian War (450 B.C.), pays brilliant tribute to the kind of political participants the Athenians had to be, to achieve their distinctive greatness.

The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. There, far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes, or even to indulge in those injurious looks which cannot fail to be offensive, although they inflict no positive penalty.

The political networking of the Athenian people was so fine-tuned, their involvement with one another so earnest, that they did not even give one another dirty looks.

Non citizens. The administrative richness of the *polis*, slowly evolved and by the fifth century made demands on the citizenry which were tolerable only because the age was one of exceptional maturity. To be an Athenian citizen, one had to be male, over eighteen, own land, do military service when required, and be the child of parents who were themselves citizens. (We are about to stress the energy of commitment required *simply to be a citizen of Athens*. What are we missing? Of course we are missing the non enfranchised, women, slaves, foreign residents in Athens. And are we missing much of the population? Indeed we are. It is estimated that the population of Athens in 400 B.C. was 250,000-300,000, breaking down to roughly 30-60 thousand citizens at various different times during the fifth century B.C. Of the non citizen population, slaves and resident foreigners were almost equally populous; the average family, sometimes even the poorer Athenian family, typically owning two or three slaves, who did everything from domestic to day laborer work. Women, who had no official rights, were generally kept out of sight, in the inmost rooms of the family house.) So the glory that was participatory Athenian democracy, in the fifth century, and in which was embedded astonishing artistic creativity, was the glory of a small part of the total population of Athens.

The workings of the state. That having been said, we can feel proper awe for the energy and maturity of participatory Greek democracy. That participation did not on the whole need to be enforced because it was viewed as a supreme honor to be part of the service of the *demos*, or people. There were three main bodies in which citizens deployed their constant commitment: the *Assembly*, the *Council*, and the *Law Courts*. *The Council* consisted of 500 members, ten from each of the fifty tribes; they prepared the agenda for the Assembly. *The Law Courts*, which proved ultimately too cumbersome, involved citizen juries of hundreds, who heard both sides of cases—prosecution and defence were carried out by the plaintiff and defendant—and who voted straight up and down guilty or innocent. As the cases were argued in three-hour-at-a-time segments, and there was no judge but only a jury, one has to imagine the commitment of time and energy the citizen would be required to expend on this civic responsibility. *The Assembly*, in which there were 6000 members, was the central deliberative body of the polis, and met ten times a year to consider major threats, projects, and administrative regulations of the city. One wonders at the self-discipline required to bring order into such deliberations, and must be reminded of the member sense of real power.

The evidence for that power can be imagined from a single institution. One distinctively Athenian democratic practice that aroused the special ire of the system's critics was the practice of *ostracism*--from the Greek word for *potsherd*. In this reverse election to decide which leading politician should be exiled for ten years, voters scratched or painted the name of their preferred candidate on a piece of broken pottery. At least 6,000 citizens had to 'vote' for an ostracism to be valid, and all the biggest political fish risked being fried in this ceremonious way. For almost 100 years ostracism fulfilled its function of aborting serious civil unrest or even civil war. At the end of the fifth century it was replaced by a legal procedure administered by the jurors of the people's courts. Power to the people, all the people, especially the poor majority, remained the guiding principle of Athenian democracy.

Reading

Zimmern, Alfred, *The Greek Commonwealth* (Oxford, 1969). This will be a central reading assignment for Weeks 5,6,7.

The World of Athens: An Introduction to Classical Athenian Culture (Cambridge, 1985). This will be a central reading assignment for Weeks 5,6,7.

Discussion questions

For about a century, the fifth, the Athenians managed to maintain civic commitment, from citizens, at a level rare in human history. Can you think of other examples? How about our own industrialized Western democracies? We are more inclusive than the Greeks with our citizenship, but do we maintain a satisfactory level of participation?

Are you surprised at the level of slavery in the midst of the democracy of 5th century Athens? Do you think it surprising that slavery could coincide with participatory democracy? How do you think the system looked from the slave's viewpoint?

What do you think brought this intense participatory democracy to an end? Was it that too much was expected of the citizen? Was it that non-experts occupied too many decisive roles in the polis? Or was it that the people ultimately, after a century of high intensity participation, paid the penalty for excluding so much of their population from the vote?