

Athens: A Greek City-State

I. The Rise of City-States –

Mountains and the sea cut off Greek centers of population from one another. As a result, separate “city-states” developed. Each city-state or “polis” had its own form of government and system of laws. However, Greeks also shared a common culture, based on their language, religious beliefs, traditions, and economic ties. For example, Greeks from all the city-states participated every four years in Olympic games in honor of Zeus and other Greek gods. Two of the most important city-states were Athens and Sparta.

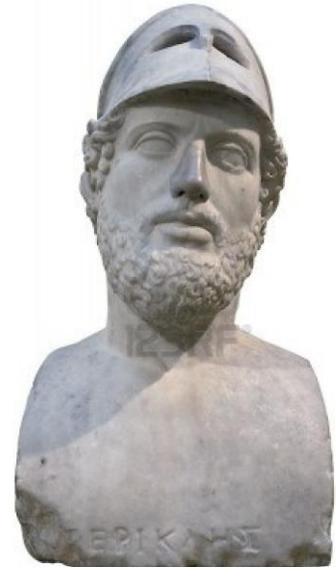
II. Athens: A Greek City-State

Athens was a great city-state in ancient Greece. The political structure evolved from a monarchy → aristocracy → tyranny → democracy. “**Monarchy**” is rule by one person, the king, who inherited power by family succession. “**Aristocracy**” is rule by a small group of nobles who wrested power from the king. “**Tyranny**” is rule by one person, the tyrant, who seized power and generally favored the people. “**Democracy**” is rule by the people.

Athens was a “direct democracy”, since every citizen could directly participate in government by voting on the issues to be decided by the city-state. However, only a minority of Athenians were citizens. Women, foreigners, and slaves were not considered citizens and could not participate in government. Athenians believed that women were inferior to men and needed male guidance. Slaves had neither political rights nor any personal freedom. Even so, Athens gave a greater number of people a voice in government than did any other culture of its time. All adult male citizens voted for or against suggested laws in the assembly.

The Athenians had a high regard for learning, the arts, and literature, and writing. The Athenians also stressed physical fitness for men. Their goal was “a sound mind in a healthy body”. Girls did not attend school. They were trained at home in domestic skills. Women were not permitted to hold government office, compete in sports, or take part in public events.

Athens reflected the values of its society: free, individualistic, changing, experimental, and diverse. The greatest leader in Athens was Pericles. His leadership marked the height of Athenian democracy and was called the “Age of Pericles”. Athens prospered during this time and became the cultural center of Greece. The arts and sciences thrived, manufacturing and trade prospered, and the city was beautiful as never before. Great buildings were built and many thinkers, writers, and artists came to Athens.



Questions to Answer

1. Why did “city-states” develop in ancient Greece?
2. How did the political structure of Athens evolve?
3. Why was Athens considered to be a “direct democracy”?
4. How did the Athenians express their appreciation for learning?