

Democracy: A New Idea in Ancient Greece

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A painting of the city of Athens showing the buildings ordered built by the ruler Pericles. It was painted by Leo von Klenze in 1846 and is called "Reconstruction of the Acropolis and Areus Pagus in Athens."

In the year 507 B.C., the Athenian leader Cleisthenes introduced a system of political reforms that he called *demokratia*, or “rule by the people.” This system was made up of three separate institutions: the *ekklesia*, a governing body that wrote laws; the *boule*, a council of representatives from the ten Athenian tribes; and the *dikasteria*, the popular courts in which citizens argued cases. Although this Athenian democracy would last for only two centuries, Cleisthenes’ invention was one of ancient Greece’s most enduring contributions to the modern world.

A new system

In a democracy, the Greek historian Herodotus wrote, everyone is equal before the law. Before Cleisthenes introduced his reforms, the wealthiest Athenians had controlled the political process. The new *demokratia* opened it up to the middle- and working-class people who made up the army and navy. However, this privilege was still limited to a small part of the Athenian population. For example, in Athens in the middle of the 4th century there were about 100,000 citizens, about 10,000 “resident foreigners” and 150,000 slaves. Out of all those people, only male citizens who

were older than 18 were allowed to take part in the political process. This group of male citizens was known as the demos.

The ekklesia

Athenian democracy was made up of three important institutions. The first was the ekklesia, or Assembly, the governing body of Athens. Any member of the demos was welcome to attend the meetings of the ekklesia, which were held 40 times per year in a hillside auditorium called the Pnyx. (Only about 5,000 men attended each session of the Assembly; the rest were serving in the army or navy or working to support their families.) At the meetings, the ekklesia made decisions about war, wrote and revised laws and approved or condemned the conduct of public officials. The group made decisions by simple majority vote.

The boule

The second important institution was the boule, or Council of Five Hundred. The boule was a group of 500 men, 50 from each of 10 Athenian tribes, who served on the council for one year. Unlike the ekklesia, the boule met every day and did most of the hands-on work of governance. It supervised government workers and was in charge of things like navy ships and army horses. Its main job was to decide what matters would come before the ekklesia. In this way, the 500 members of the boule determined how the entire democracy would work.

Positions on the boule were chosen by lottery and not by election. This was because a random lottery was supposed to be more democratic than an election. Pure chance, after all, could not be influenced by money or popularity. However, historians argue that selection to the boule was not always just a matter of chance. They note that wealthy and powerful people served on the council much more frequently than would be likely in a truly random lottery.

The dikasteria

The third important institution was the dikasteria, or the popular courts. Every day, more than 500 jurors were chosen by lottery from a pool of male citizens older than 30. The jurors heard cases and made decisions about guilt and innocence. There were no police in Athens, so it was the demos themselves who brought court cases and argued for the prosecution and the defense. They decided punishments by majority rule.

Jurors were paid for their work. This was so that the job could be open to everyone and not just the wealthy. Since Athenians did not pay taxes, the money came from contributions from allies and taxes paid by "resident foreigners." The one exception to this rule was the liturgy. This was a kind of tax that wealthy people volunteered to pay to support major projects.

The end of Athenian democracy

Around 460 B.C., Athenian democracy started to change. It began to develop into an aristocracy, where a small class of powerful people rule over the state. Though democratic ideals did not last in ancient Greece, they have influenced lawmakers and governments ever since.

Quiz

1 Which of the following groups MOST influenced how Athenian democracy worked?

- (A) the ekklesia
- (B) the boule
- (C) the dikasteria
- (D) the jurors

2 Fill in the blank.

The author MAINLY explains the contributions of Athenian democracy by

- (A) explaining how the different parts worked to allow citizens to participate in government.
- (B) showing flaws in the system of democracy to point out how they led directly to its failure.
- (C) suggesting that democracy could not survive without Cleisthenes to support it.
- (D) illustrating reasons why Athenians changed their system of government.

3 How does the following sentence contribute to the development of the MAIN idea in the article?

In the year 507 B.C., the Athenian leader Cleisthenes introduced a system of political reforms that he called demokratia, or “rule by the people.”

- (A) It shows that Cleisthenes was a powerful ruler.
- (B) It explains the original purpose of democracy.
- (C) It shows that the people asked for political reforms.
- (D) It explains why the democracy is still working today.

4 The section "A new system" suggests that Athenian democracy was not an entirely fair and equal system.

Which of the following sentences from the article further develops this idea?

- (A) Any member of the demos was welcome to attend the meetings of the ekklesia, which were held 40 times per year in a hillside auditorium called the Pnyx.
- (B) At the meetings, the ekklesia made decisions about war, wrote and revised laws and approved or condemned the conduct of public officials.
- (C) They note that wealthy and powerful people served on the Council much more frequently than would be likely in a truly random lottery.
- (D) There were no police in Athens, so it was the demos themselves who brought court cases and argued for the prosecution and the defense.