**Politics and the Ancient Greek City State**

**DIRECTONS PART I: This article is a summary explaining the nature and significance of the ancient Greek political system. Read it carefully and highlight/underline information you view as important, circle words or concepts that seem confusing and make brief notes in the space on the right.**

The basis of ancient Greek society was the *polis*, or city-state. City-states were small, independent communities which were male-dominated and bound together by family ties. Citizenship in the polis was hereditary (passed down in families) and could not be passed on to someone not part of a citizen’s family. The citizens of any given polis were an elite group of people (an “*aristocracy*”) – slaves, peasants, women and foreigners were not considered citizens.

Originally, the word polis referred to a defensible area to which citizens of a particular area could retreat in the event of an attack. The [*acropolis*](http://www.stoa.org/athens/sites/acropolis.html) in Athens is one such example. Over time, towns grew around these defensible areas. The growth of these towns was unplanned and they were not placed for commercial convenience near rivers or seas. In fact, the city-states were normally situated well inland to avoid raids by sea. An *agora* or marketplace grew within each polis. The *agora* was not only a place for trade but the heart of Greek intellectual life and culture.

The citizens in a polis were related, so loyalty were very strong. As boys, Greek citizens grew up together in schools, and as men, they served side by side during times of war. They debated one another in public assemblies – they elected one another as leaders or judges – they cast their votes as jurors for or against their fellow citizens. In such a society – the society of the polis – all citizens were intimately and directly involved in politics, justice, military service, religious ceremonies, intellectual discussion, athletics and artistic pursuits. To avoid one's responsibilities to their polis was reprehensible in the eyes of the Greek citizen. Greek citizens did not have rights, but *duties*. A citizen who did not fulfill his duties was looked down upon. For example, in the polis of *Athens,* a citizen who held no official position or who refused to participate in the affairs of the polis was called an “*idiot”* meaning one who only cared about himself.

Although there were similarities and differences between the city-states, they all made the effort to preserve their own unique identity. What we call the ancient Greek world was really hundreds of independent city-states or poleis. Those who lived within the confines of a city state considered everyone else to be inferior. Furthermore, those people who did not speak Greek were referred to as *“barbarians*”.

The two most influential Greek city-states were called *Sparta* and *Athens*. Sparta conquered all the other peoples of Laconia, one of the most fertile plains in Greece where their *polis* was located. Although the Spartans extended their territory, they did not extend their citizenship which remained limited to those native born in Sparta.

Sparta expanded because of its military culture. Beginning at the age of seven, Spartan boys were organized into troops of 10-15 who played competitive games until their 18th year, when they underwent four years of military training. From the ages of 18 to 28 Spartan men lived together in barracks. At the age of 30, they became citizens and earned the right to be called "Equals". There was also education for girls who were not allowed to engage in competitive games. Boys and girls met together to learn basic studies as well as to dance, sing and play musical instruments. Relations between the sexes was much freer than anywhere else in the Greek world. However, after marriage (usually at 30 for men, 16 for women), the husband took meals at a men's club while wives remained at home with young children.

The Spartan state arranged for a basic equality in land holding and provided citizens with laborers, called *helots* (conquered people who became slaves to Spartan citizens). In other words, the economy was based on the idea that slaves (helots) would labor to supply the Spartan citizens with food, drink and clothing. As a result, the slave population of Sparta was enormous.

Spartan law contained elements of monarchy and democracy. On one hand, a *Council of Elders* consisting of 28 men over the age of sixty held office for life. These Elders had important judicial functions and were also consulted before any law could be voted on by Spartan citizens. However, an *Assembly* consisting of all male citizens over thirty years of age voted on all laws for Sparta. In theory, it was the Assembly who was the final authority but in practice the real function of the Assembly was to ratify decisions already decided upon by the Elders.

This system developed by the Spartan state by the late 6th century B.C. was strict. With swift punishments facing both helots and citizens who broke laws and failed to fulfill their duties. Although we may find the Spartan world to be repressive, this is not the way the Spartans saw it. Male citizens had equality in education, training and opportunity and enjoyed great pride that came with their many military victories.

At the same time, the nearby city-state of Athens developed as a rival to Sparta. Athens was larger both geographically and in terms of its population than Sparta and the people Athens conquered were not reduced to servitude. So, Athens never faced the problem of trying to control a large population of angry and sometimes violent helots.

Around the year 600 B.C., Athens faced a deepening political crisis. The farmers who supplied the city-state with food began to struggle financially. The crisis was solved in 594 B.C. when Athenian citizens gave control over to [*Solon*](http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/solon.html), a respected *aristocrat* (member of a wealthy family). Solon cancelled all agricultural debts. He also passed new laws that divided Athenian people into four classes based on their annual agricultural production rather than birth. Members of the three highest orders could hold public office, but all citizens could vote.

Solon's system did not grant citizenship to those people who did not own any productive land – women, children, slaves, foreigners, artisans and merchants. However, with the reforms of Solon, men from poorer and less-established families could more easily work their way up economically and achieve positions of political leadership. Nonetheless, Solon did not completely end the economic crisis in Greece and problems remained.

In 508 B.C., a new Athenian leader named *Cleisthenes* instituted a new political organization whereby citizens would take a more involved role in running the city-state. He called this new political system *democracy* – rule by the entire body of citizens. He created a *Council of Five Hundred* which proposed laws for Athens. All male citizens over the age of thirty could serve for a term of one year on this Council and no one could serve more than two terms in a lifetime. Such an organization was necessary, thought Cleisthenes, so that every citizen would learn from direct political experience. With such a personal interest in his democracy, Cleisthenes believed that there would be no citizens who would conspire in an attempt to abolish the system.

Cleisthenes divided all Athenians into ten tribes (replacing the original four). The composition of each tribe guaranteed that no region or class would dominate. Because the tribes had common religious activities and military units, Cleisthenes hoped the new organization would also increase devotion to the polis as a whole and diminish regional, class or family division. Cleisthenes also established the *Assembly* contained all Athenian citizens who were not serving on the Council of 500 or not serving as public officials. The Assembly had forty regular meetings per year – about once every 8 or 9 days. These meetings discussed varied topics like the food supply, the qualifications of officials, questions of defense and how to punish law breakers. Special meetings or emergency sessions could be called at any time.

Around 460 B.C., following victory in a lengthy war with the Persian Empire, a new Athenian leader named [*Pericles*](http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/pericles.html) worked to give even greater equality of justice and equality of opportunity to all in Athens. The equality of justice was secured by a new jury system, which ensured that slaves and resident aliens were on juries. The equality of opportunity did not mean that every man has the right to everything. What it did mean is that the criteria for choosing citizens for office was *merit and not wealth*. Whereas Solon had used the criteria of family status for his officials and Cleisthenes had used wealth, Pericles now used *merit*. Under Pericles, Athens became a *direct democracy* that gave more voice in government to more people than any other society in the ancient world.

The citizens of Athens met often under Pericles and often focused on local issues. But they also discussed democratic theory – that is, they constantly debated questions like what is the good life? What is the best form of government? But perhaps the most important of all were discussions and debates over the issues of war. This is important because the 5th century, the so-called “Golden Age” of Greece, was an age of near constant warfare with several wars between various city states. Between 431 and 404 B.C., war between Sparta and Athens spelled the end of Athenian dominance and the beginning of the death of Athenian direct democracy. A system of *monarchy* (rule by one person) became permanent when Athens was invaded by the Macedonian King Philip and his son Alexander the Great in 338 B.C.

**DIRECTIONS II: Now that you have read and annotated the article, come up with FOUR “Reading Questions” you could answer verbally if asked. Make sure the questions are analytical and not only factual. Write these questions below:**

**1)**

**2)**

**3)**

**4)**

***The Roman Republic and Democracy***

**DIRECTONS PART I: Read this article carefully and highlight/underline information you view as important, circle words or concepts that seem confusing and make brief notes in the space on the right.**

At around the same time when democracy was developing in Athens, a Latin speaking people who lived on the Italian peninsula called the Romans were becoming more prominent. A group of people from the northern part of Italy called the Etruscans had ruled over the Romans until 509 BC, when Rome successfully rebelled against them and established the Roman Republic. This new form of government, influenced by Athens, mixed some elements of democracy (rule by the many) with aspects of oligarchy (rule by the elite). The Romans set up their new system of government without a king and placed law making power in the hands of elected representatives. Roman citizens could vote for the representativeswho then had a voice in making laws for Rome. This form of government was called a republic (from the Latin meaning “affairs of the people”) and lasted for nearly 500 years.

The most powerful legislative body (representatives who make laws) in the Roman Republic was called the Senate.  Its 300 members were not voted in, but drawn from the wealthiest, land-owning patrician (aristocratic) families.  Senators served for life and controlled the finances and foreign policy of the Roman state.  They were supposedly an advisory body, but in actuality the Senate was at the center of all policy decisions concerning foreign affairs, military matters, finances, public land, and state religion. However, the Roman Republic also included two other law making bodies (called the Assembly of Tribes & the Tribune) which were elected by the average citizens and included representatives from the plebeian class (the ordinary people of Rome), and had the power to approve taxes and appoint most government leaders.

The executive (authority to carry out laws) power of the Roman Republic was vested in two Consuls who were elected by the Senate for one-year terms.  The main job of the Consuls was to run the government on a day-to-day basis in consultation with the Senate.  These two Consuls had to agree on policies except in the case of an emergency like a war or famine.  In such cases, the Senate could appoint a single leader called a dictator with vast powers for a period of six months.  At the end of that time, the dictator was expected to give up power.

Gradually the ordinary Roman people (plebeians) demanded greater equality and were granted the right to vote in the lower assemblies. The patrician Senate gradually extended these rights mainly because they needed plebeians to agree to serve as soldiers in the Roman army.  Still, many plebeians felt frustrated because they really never knew exactly what the laws were and believed the patricians could too easily manipulate laws. Eventually, the plebeians insisted that the government write down all the laws. Finally in 451 BC, the patricians agreed to engrave the laws of Rome onto 12 bronze tablets displayed for all to see in the Roman central public marketplace or Forum. These 12 Tables became the basis for all future Roman law.

The Twelve Tables made it more difficult for the patricians to manipulate the law.  Plebeians could now appeal judgments against them, based on this written code.  Elected officials called Tribunes were chosen to represent the interests of the ordinary people of Rome.  They had the power to veto decisions of the Senate.  In reality, this was the power to "object to" but not actually reject Senate decisions. Over time, Plebeians won the right to marry into the Patrician class, to be appointed to the Senate, to have one consul appointed from the Plebeian class, and to hold other high political and religious offices.

While the plebeians were growing in power at home, Rome's armies expanded the republics power across Italy and later around the entire Mediterranean.  The recipe for Roman expansion was a combination of skillful diplomacy, military might, and generally good treatment of its defeated enemies.  In other words, Rome would first try to do a deal with you.  If you were stubborn, they would beat you up.  Then they would defeat you offering you full citizenship in their empire.  By this method, Rome expanded its empire, adding parts of Spain, France, North Africa, Macedonia, Greece, Asia Minor, and Egypt to its republic.  By the time of the birth of Christ, Romans boasted that the Mediterranean was indeed Mare Nostrum (“Our Sea”).

However, the eventual decline and fall of the Roman Republic has its roots in this expansion.  Ambitious generals and greedy Senators fought over the wealth and power that poured into Rome as its territory expanded.  Poor peasants whose holdings were confiscated by the Roman military poured into the cities, swelling the ranks of the urban poor.  Jobs became more scarce thanks to the widespread use of slave labor--slaves captured as a result of Rome's conquests.  Furthermore, government service to the Republic that had once been an honor and duty was becoming a matter of greedy ambition.  Turmoil rocked the Republic as selfish men seized power, often by making promises to the desperate poor in exchange for mob support.  When a reformers appeared, such as the Tribune Tiberius, they were assassinated by jealous Senators.  Tiberius’ plan for land reform (distributing land to the poor) clashed with the desire of senatorial families to accumulate vast estates. Finally, in 27 BC a military hero named Augustus seized power and declared himself emperor (Caesar) with dictatorial powers for life and the Roman Republic collapsed.

Nonetheless, Greco-Roman ideas about government continued influencing people around the world in future centuries including the creators of the first modern republic, the United States of America. The US Constitution established a republican form of government based the Roman concepts of rule of law, separation of powers, representative government and checks and balances.

1.  Define in your own words:

*Republic*

*Patricians*

*Plebeians*

*Senate*

*Assembly of Tribes*

*Consuls*

*Dictator*

*Twelve Tables*

*Mare Nostrum*

*Tiberius*

*Caesar*

2. Explain why you think the Roman Republic was able to last as long as it did.

3. How did Rome turn from a Republic into a dictatorship?

4.  What influence did the Roman have for Western Civilization even after its Republic collapsed?