

Government and Society in Athens

- During the 5th and 4th centuries BC, Greece and Athens produced a series of philosophers, poets, playwrights and scientists whose work has had a huge influence on our outlook on life.
- Most historians credit Athens with being the first democracy. Athen's environment encouraged a strong feeling of community. This sense of community was translated into a sense of personal responsibility for the running of Athens government.
- The term "democracy" comes from the Greek word meaning "rule by the people." In other times, Kings, priests, or other powerful individual individuals made all the important decisions. However, the situation in Athens was different. Citizens felt public affairs were their own, not just the responsibility of the leaders.
- All adult males who were citizens of Athens were eligible for government positions and all could speak before the council. Women, slaves and foreigners could not.
- Council was selected yearly by a lottery. At the end of one year, 500 new members were selected. Out of the council, came several committees which supervised public affairs like: tax collecting, and policing. The only committee chosen by elections and not lottery was the one in charge of military affairs.

Birthplace of Democracy

- In most ancient civilizations, people had little to say in their lives. Everyone followed rigid social rules.
- Rulers thought of ordinary people, not as a collection of individuals, but as a group. This group was useful for building monuments, growing food and paying taxes.
- As individuals, ordinary people just did not count only the very powerful enjoyed true freedom.
- However, Athenians introduced a new form of government known as “Democracy.” (rule by the people)

The Athenian democracy had two parts:

1. Assembly: All male citizens belonged to the Assembly. The Assembly made the laws of the land. Each male citizen was expected to attend regular meetings to discuss and vote on public matters.
2. Council: The council was made up of 500 citizens chosen every year by lottery. (Names were drawn from all Athenian citizens. Members served for one year. (Rich/Poor could be selected.)

The council did all the legwork, preparing laws for the Assembly to consider.

Athenian citizens were also expected to serve as jurors in court cases. A typical jury had from 200 to 400 members. There were no judges or lawyers, and citizens argued their own cases.