ANCIENT GREECE
The Birth of Democracy

In this painting, the great Athenian statesman Pericles (also pictured top left) argues a case before his fellow citizens. At rear is the Acropolis, or hill, of Athens, and the Parthenon, one of Pericles’s greatest civic works.
Ancient Athenians wrote the book on government by the people

...today, when we do something as simple as vote, we are taking part in one of history's great experiments in government—democracy. But our freedoms might not have been possible without the world's first democratic experiment, in ancient Athens.

Greek civilization began to develop about 2000 B.C. on the Balkan Peninsula and the western edge of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). By the 6th century B.C., the governments of most Greek city-states were oligarchies. Power was held by a small group of aristocrats, or members of important families.

But something else was stirring in Athens. Made wealthy through trade and powerful by its navy, Athens had become one of the leading city-states. Now Athenians began to want more: laws to make them secure and a direct role in the governing of their city.

The First Founders
Like the United States, Greece has its own democratic Founding Fathers. One of the first was an Athenian official named Solon. In 594 B.C., Solon formed a new code of laws for the city. The code defined citizens by class, spelling out the rights and duties of each.

Solon also established a citizen's group called the Council of 400. In so doing, he sought to check the power of the Areopagus (air-ee-AH-pa-gus), a ruling group of aristocrats. With this, the government of Athens looked something like the two houses of a modern legislature.

Still, only aristocrats could be citizens. The next gradual step toward democracy had to wait nearly a century and outlast a civil war. It wasn't until 508 B.C. that another Athenian statesman, Cleisthenes (KLIES-then-es), introduced a constitution with revolutionary reforms.

Before Cleisthenes, Athenians identified themselves with one of four tribes, or family lines. Cleisthenes instead divided Athens into 10 geographical tribes. From then on, Athenians would participate in government based on their demes, or township, not their family line. Most important, Cleisthenes opened citizenship to all free men.

This new concept of government comes to us today in our very language. From the Greek demos, or "the people," and kratia, or "rule," we get demokratia—"rule of the people"—or democracy.

Words to Know
- city-state: an independent city and its surrounding area.
- oligarchy: government by a few powerful individuals.
"Our city is the school of Greece." — Pericles

The Golden Age

But nothing went smoothly for long in ancient Greece. Soon, Athens was embroiled in a war with the invading Persian Empire. The Greek city-states, which usually fought one another, united to drive off the Persians, finally succeeding in 479 B.C.

Athens emerged from the Persian wars with great confidence. A sudden flowering of the arts and philosophy produced some of the greatest minds of Western culture, among them the playwright Sophocles (Oedipus the King), the philosopher Socrates, and the historian Herodotus. This high moment of civilization would later be called the Golden Age of Greece.

The city also made its greatest strides in democracy during this time, thanks to a man named Pericles. Pericles was a strategos, or general, a military and political leader elected annually by each deme. Beginning in about 467 B.C., Pericles was elected strategos for nearly 30 years. He became the dominant politician in Athens, pushing through a series of reforms that would give his city the most democratic government to that point in time.

Ancient Greece Time Line

5000 B.C.
People begin to settle around a limestone hill on the plains of Attica, near the Aegean Sea. The hill will become the Acropolis of the city of Athens.

620 B.C.
Draco devises a set of laws for Athens.

Solon reforms the laws, which many see as too harsh, in 594. In 508, Cleisthenes drafts a constitution.

490 B.C.
King Darius of Persia invades the mainland of Greece. Athenians defeat the Persians at Marathon. Greeks unite and finally defeat Persia in 479.

Today—and many things would be unfamiliar. First, only free men of two Athenian parents could be citizens. This excluded women, slaves, and immigrants. By one estimate, only about 43,000 of Athens' population of 315,000 qualified.

The government was made up of two main houses. The Assembly was the most important lawmaking body. It usually met four times a month, and was open to any and all citizens who could make it into Athens. As many as 6,000 of them regularly did!

Each session began with the sacrifice of a pig to the god Zeus. The Assembly voted on bills by a
show of hands, and its decision was final.

The power of the Assembly was partially balanced by the Council (now the Council of 500). The Council reviewed all bills before they were voted on by the Assembly, oversaw the city's finances, and conducted Athens' foreign affairs. Council members were elected for one-year terms. No member could be re-elected until all eligible citizens in his demes had served.

There were no political parties as we think of them. People usually allied themselves with either the men of the old aristocratic families or the new middle class of small businessmen and wage earners. One historian identifies a few of the second group: “Cleon the tanner, Lysicles the sheep dealer, Eucrates the tow [yarn] seller, Cleophon the harp manufacturer.”

For years, Pericles dominated the Assembly, and the government of Athens. His power as a public speaker was legendary—like a “dread thunderbolt,” said one writer. The historian Thucydides (thoo-SIH-ih-deez) wrote that Athens was “in name a democracy, but in fact a government by the greatest citizen.”

But Pericles’s commitment to democracy was complete. In fact, he looked down on any citizen who did not play his part. “We do not say that the man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business,” he wrote. “We say that he has no business at all.”

The End of an Era

But the Golden Age was to be a brief one. In 431 B.C., a group of city-states led by Sparta declared war on Athens. This conflict, known as the Peloponnesian War, soon lay waste to the districts surrounding Athens. A year later, a plague broke out, killing one third of the city, including Pericles.

Nonetheless, Athens survived the Peloponnesian War. It would finally be conquered by Philip of Macedon, Alexander the Great’s father, in 338 B.C. But the city had made its indelible mark on history. As Pericles once wrote: “Mighty indeed are the marks and monuments of our empire which we have left. Future ages will wonder at us, as the present age wonders at us now.” JS

**Your Turn**

**Word Match**

1. democracy  A. government by a few
2. aristocrat  B. rule of the people
3. oligarchy  C. independent city
4. city-state  D. member of an important family

**Think About It**

1. How was the government of ancient Greece similar to the government of the United States?
2. What did Pericles mean when he wrote, “We do not say that the man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business. We say that he has no business at all”? 

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>480 B.C.</th>
<th>431-404 B.C.</th>
<th>338 B.C.</th>
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<td>The Golden Age of Greece begins around this time. It is dominated by great minds like Socrates, the father of philosophy, and the dramatists Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides.</td>
<td>The Peloponnesian War with Sparta is the beginning of the end of Athens’ Golden Age. Pericles’s death in 429 B.C. leaves the city without an effective leader.</td>
<td>King Philip II of Macedon conquers Athens. His son, Alexander the Great, will go on to spread Greek civilization through the world.</td>
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