Sparta was a closed society. Spartans could not travel outside Spartan territory, except in case of war; nor could foreigners travel within Spartan territory. This was because the Spartan leaders believed their way of life was best and did not want this way of life corrupted by foreign ideas.

Athens: The Beginnings of Democracy

Athens was the other well-known ancient Greek city-state, and it was about as different from Sparta as it could be. While Sparta was ruled by a few, Athens was the birthplace of democracy. While Sparta kept its people at home, Athenians traveled and traded all around the world. While Sparta emphasized military training at the expense of all other forms of education, Athens aimed to develop well-rounded citizens. While Spartan children were taught to speak only a few words, Athenian writers and philosophers wrote plays, poems, and philosophical works that are still read today.

Athens is located on the eastern side of the Greek mainland toward the center of the peninsula. The government of Athens slowly evolved over time from one ruled by a king to one governed by its citizens. The first people settled in this area before 3000 BCE.

Originally, the Athenian government seems to have consisted of a king and nobles who owned much of the land. The nobles eventually displaced the king and dominated the government, choosing the three archons, or officials, who oversaw the government. Although there was a general assembly made up of all adult male citizens, the only power was in the hands of the landowning nobles.

Poor harvests created hard economic times that increased the feelings of powerlessness among ordinary people. Independent farmers lost their lands and became tenant farmers on estates of the wealthy nobles. Some farmers even sold themselves into slavery to pay off their debts. The economic problems added to the political discontent. Merchants clamored for their rights, and foreign craft-workers—those from other Greek city-states—resented their lack of citizenship.

In 594 BCE, Solon was appointed as the chief officer. A wise and thoughtful leader, he made many reforms that not only eased problems in Athens, but also began its evolution to democracy. Solon outlawed debt slavery and freed those who were already enslaved for debt. The status of citizen was granted to some foreign craftworkers—those from other Greek city-states—resented their lack of citizenship.

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After Solon, leaders with varying degrees of interest in maintaining and expanding the rights of Athenian citizens came to power. Some attempted to restrict those rights, and others like Cleisthenes furthered democracy. Under Cleisthenes, the people of Athens were divided into 10 tribes, which were based on location of residence, replacing the four tribes based on aristocratic descent. The Athenian assembly became the legislative, or lawmaking, branch of the government. All citizens, whether property owners or not, were eligible to attend and debate. A council of 500 proposed laws for the general assembly. Any citizen over 30 was eligible to serve on the council, whose members were drawn by lottery.
The council of 500 proved to be too large and unwieldy to function effectively as an administrative branch, so it was divided into 10 committees of 50 men each, which were further divided into smaller units representing towns. The Athenians referred to each of the latter as a deme, from the Greek word for “people.” This is the root of the English word democracy. The word democracy is a Greek word meaning “rule by the demos, or people.”

Unlike the representative democracy of the United States, in which citizens elect representatives to speak for them in government, Athenian democracy was direct democracy. Citizens discussed, debated, and voted on laws themselves. In order to decide on issues, at least 6,000 citizens had to be present in the assembly, which met several times a month.

Although Athens pioneered democratic government, their institutions differed in some key ways from modern American democracy. Citizenship did not extend to women, slaves, and most non-native residents. This was true even during the greatest age of Athenian democracy, which occurred under the rule of Pericles from 461 BCE to 429 BCE. Pericles extended the ability of poor men to serve in public office by paying a small salary to public officeholders. He also saw to it that jurors were paid for the time they spent in jury duty.

Besides democracy, Athens was also famous for its culture. It was the birthplace of both comedy and tragedy in theatre, and was also the home of the great philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

The Persian Wars: Marathon and Thermopylae

While Greek city-states warred with one another, the threat of war from outside the peninsula could unite them. In 499 BCE, Athens had aided fellow Greek city-states in Ionia, the Greek area of Asia Minor, when they rebelled against rule by the Persians and their king, Darius. Persia is the historical name given to the high plateau area of what is today Iran.

Marathon

In 490 BCE, Darius launched an attack against Athens in retaliation for its earlier support of the Ionian Greeks. Few of the other Greek city-states answered Athens’s call for help. As a result, the Athenian force of 11,000 soldiers was greatly outnumbered as it faced 15,000 Persian invaders on the battlefield at Marathon. Through fierce hand-to-hand combat, the Athenian soldiers ousted the Persians.

The battle at Marathon is known as much, however, for the story of Pheidippides as it is for the Athenian victory. The leader of the Athenian forces, Miltiades, sent the runner Pheidippides to Athens to announce the victory. Pheidippides ran so fast and so hard over the 26 miles that, after he gave his message, he collapsed and died on the spot. The Olympic marathon, roughly 26 miles long, honors Pheidippides’s feat.

Thermopylae

When Darius’s son Xerxes attacked Greece in 480 BCE, Sparta and other city-states joined Athens to fight the Persians. The Persian army landed above a narrow pass called Thermopylae, which at the time controlled the only road between northern and central Greece. On one side of the pass are mountains and on the other...