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
IV. Ancient Greece

other side, cliffs and the sea. Before the battle, Xerxes sent a message to the Spartan commander, Leonidas, telling the Spartans to lay down their weapons. As noted earlier, the Spartans were famous for sending short, “laconic” answers. Leonidas’s reply was “come and take them.”

The early stages of the battle were described by the Greek historian Herodotus in his work *The Persian Wars*:

The pass's defenders [the Greeks] are deployed around the rocks and as the Persians attempt to move through the pass, they are speared. Many of the wounded fall into the sea.

After some fighting Xerxes learned from a Greek traitor that there was a back way that would enable him to outflank the Greeks. Xerxes ordered his soldiers to take the mountain path and attack the Greeks from the rear. On the third and final day of the battle, the pass was defended by 300 Spartans and 400 Thebans, soldiers from the city-state of Thebes, all commanded by Leonidas, the king of Sparta. These brave men faced thousands of Persian soldiers. They knew that they would almost certainly die, but they were willing to sacrifice their lives in order to slow down the Persian advance and allow the remainder of the Greek army to retreat to safety. In the end, all of them were killed defending the pass.

The Spartans’ refusal to surrender and willingness to die for their city-state has come to symbolize heroic resistance. The last stand at Thermopylae has been immortalized in a short epitaph:

Go and tell the Spartans, stranger passing by,
That here, obedient to their laws, we lie.

After mowing down the brave Spartans and Thebans, the triumphant Persians headed for Athens. The people of the city had been evacuated, and the Persians entered an empty city. They burned Athens and would probably have achieved complete victory, had it not been for the cunning of the Athenian commander, Themistocles. Themistocles tricked the Persians into bringing their entire fleet into a narrow channel along the Bay of Salamis, from which Greek fighting ships called triremes emerged to ram and attack. The Persians lost over 200 ships and this naval victory proved to be the turning point of the war. In 479 BCE, the Greeks took the war to Persian territory and defeated them.

The cultural significance of the Persian Wars was enormous. The great Battles of Marathon, Thermopylae, and Salamis acquired almost mythic status and were retold in drama, poetry, sculpture, and wall paintings for years to come. These battles were indicators of the greatness of Greece and the bravery of the Greek people.

Olympic Games

The earliest recorded Olympic Game occurred in 776 BCE. It was a footrace held to honor Zeus, the supreme god of Greek mythology. The original location for the games was Olympia Valley in the shadow of Mount Olympus.

The games were held every four years and were one of the few times that the Greek city-states came together—but still as competitors. During the games, a truce was declared and there was no fighting allowed between the city-states. The games included such sports as boxing, wrestling, footraces, chariot racing, discus throwing, and the broad jump.