

Chapter 26

The Rise of Democracy

How did democracy develop in ancient Greece?

26.1 Introduction

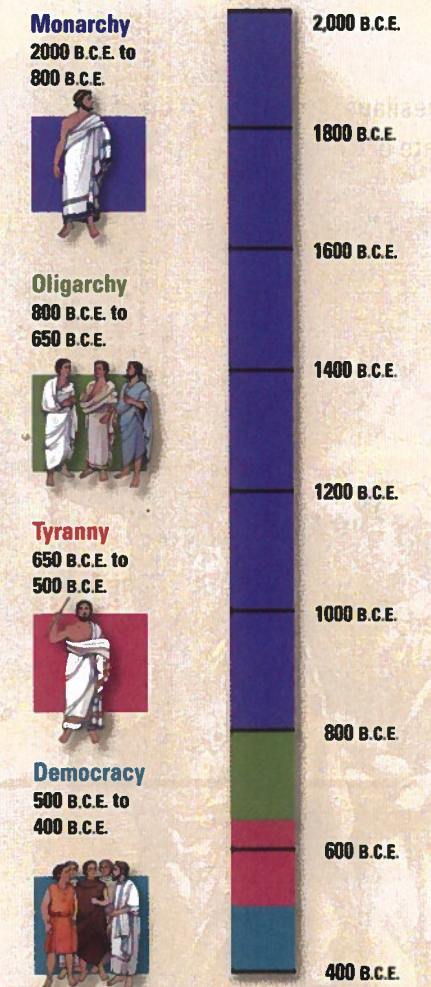
Geography affected how settlements developed in ancient Greece. Isolated communities, separated from each other by steep mountains, grew in diverse ways. For example, differences arose in how people governed themselves. In this chapter, you will learn about the various forms of government in these ancient Greek communities.

The ancient Greeks had many things in common. For example, they spoke the same language. But the Greek people did not view Greece as one country. Rather, they identified with a hometown that they called their “city.” Each of these cities included both a settlement and its surrounding farmland.

Most Greeks were fiercely proud of their cities. Each city had its own laws, its own army, and its own form of money. For these reasons, ancient Greek cities are called city-states. The ancient Sumerians in Mesopotamia were the first people to form city-states. Like the Sumerian city-states, individual Greek city-states had their own form of government.

In this chapter, you will explore the four forms of government that developed in the Greek city-states: monarchy, oligarchy, tyranny, and democracy. You will also trace how one form of rule led to another, until the Greeks eventually developed democracy.

Ancient Greek Governments



Over time, the ancient Greeks had four forms of government.

◀ Olympia, at left, was an ancient Greek city-state.

monarchy a government in which the ruling power is in the hands of one person

aristocrat a member of the most powerful class in ancient Greek society

Agesilaus II was king of the city-state of Sparta.



26.2 Monarchy: One Person Inherits Power

From about 2000 to 800 B.C.E., most Greek city-states were ruled by a monarch, or king. In a **monarchy**, the governing power is in the hands of one person, usually a king. Greek settlements did not allow queens to govern.

At first, Greek kings were chosen by the people of a city-state. When a king died, another leader was selected to take his place. In time, however, kings demanded that, after their death, their power be passed to their children, usually to the oldest son. Consequently, Greek monarchs rose to power through inheritance.

The kings of ancient Greece had many powers. They had the authority to make laws and act as judges. They also conducted religious ceremonies. They led their armies during wars. They could use force to punish people who disobeyed the laws or didn't pay their taxes.

Kings had councils of **aristocrats** to advise them. The word *aristocrat* is formed from a Greek word that means "best." The

aristocrats were wealthy men who had inherited large pieces of land.

At first, councils of aristocrats had little actual power. But during wartime, kings depended on their support, as only the rich aristocrats could afford to supply soldiers with horses and armor. The aristocrats soon realized that, as a group, they were stronger than their king. They wanted a share of the king's power.

In some city-states, aristocrats **insisted** that their king obtain the crown through an election rather than an inheritance. Then they limited a king's rule to a certain number of years. Eventually, aristocrats in many city-states overthrew the monarchy and took the power for themselves. By 800 B.C.E., most of the Greek city-states were no longer ruled by kings.

26.3 Oligarchy: A Few People Share Power

Between about 800 and 650 B.C.E., most Greek city-states were ruled by a small group of wealthy men. These men were called oligarchs, from a Greek word that means "few." In an **oligarchy**, the ruling power is in the hands of a few people.

Most Greek oligarchs were aristocrats, rich men who had inherited land from their families. A few oligarchs were wealthy merchants.

Compared with the poor, oligarchs had very comfortable lives. They often spent their days either hunting or taking part in chariot races. In the evenings, they might host or attend parties, during which slaves and hired performers entertained guests with music, dance, and acrobatics.

Unlike the aristocrats, the poor had to work long hours in the fields. They saw the unfair differences between their difficult lives and the easy lives of the wealthy aristocrats.

To make matters worse, the oligarchs **ignored** the needs of the majority of the people. By passing laws that favored the rich, the oligarchs protected and increased their own wealth. They used the army to force others to obey these unjust laws. In some city-states, such laws forced farmers who were unable to pay their debts to sell themselves into slavery.

Under the rule of the oligarchs, the rich became richer and the poor became poorer. Hate for the oligarchs grew. Eventually, the poor turned to other leaders who promised to improve their lives. Typically, these leaders were in the army. Backed by the people, they used their soldiers to throw the oligarchs out of power.

26.4 Tyranny: One Person Takes Power by Force

During the mid-600s B.C.E., people in many Greek city-states turned to the men who had promised to change the government. These men who forced the oligarchs from power were called tyrants. In a **tyranny**, the ruling power is in the hands of one person who is not a lawful king. A tyranny is sometimes called a dictatorship. A tyrant is another name for a dictator. This form of government in ancient Greece lasted until about 500 B.C.E.

oligarchy a government in which the ruling power is in the hands of a few people

tyranny a government in which absolute ruling power is held by a person who is not a lawful king



This ancient Greek bowl shows a woman playing a flute. Oligarchs in ancient Greece enjoyed musical performances at parties.



Most tyrants were forced out of power by the people. The artwork on this vase shows the killing of the Greek tyrant Hipparchus.

democracy a government in which power is held by the people, who exercise power directly or through elected representatives

citizen a person who has certain rights and duties in a city-state or nation

assembly a group of citizens, in an ancient Greek democracy, with the power to pass laws

A tyranny is different from a monarchy in several ways. A tyrant cannot claim that the laws of the land give him the right to rule. There are no legal limits on his powers. Also, a tyrant's son does not usually inherit his father's power.

Although tyrants in ancient Greece were likely to take and keep control by force, they were often popular. Most Greek tyrants were military leaders who gained the support of the people by promising them more rights. Once they were in power, many Greek tyrants were good rulers. They made changes that improved the lives of the poor. Some canceled the debts of struggling farmers. Others were **hostile** to aristocrats and took away their land.

Some tyrants, though, did not use their power to help the people. Hippias (HIP-ee-uhs), the last tyrant to rule the

city-state of Athens, is one example. Along with his brother, Hipparchus (hih-PAHR-kuhs), Hippias ruled well, at first. But then, two enemies of the brothers murdered Hipparchus. After that, Hippias ruled more harshly. He paid spies to report anyone who criticized him. His rule became more and more cruel. The people finally drove him from power. Soon after, Athens would try another form of government, one that shared power among all the people.

26.5 Democracy: All Citizens Share Power

Around 500 B.C.E., the people of Athens were the first in Greece to try governing themselves. They developed a form of government called **democracy**, or "rule by the people." In a democracy, all **citizens** share in the ruling power.

Ancient Greek democracy was different from democracies today. The government of Athens was a direct democracy. In that type of government, every citizen is allowed to vote on every issue. Unlike Athens, the United States is a representative democracy. In this type of government, people may vote for representatives who then decide issues on behalf of the people.

How did direct democracy work in Athens? The city had an **assembly**, or lawmaking group. Any free man could speak in this assembly and vote on a possible new law or a proposal to go to war. Free men also ran the city's day-to-day business.

Not all Greeks believed that democracy was a good type of government. Powerful speakers sometimes persuaded ordinary citizens to vote unwisely. Often, an assembly **reversed** important decisions after just a few weeks. Problems like these led most city-states to return to earlier forms of government, such as dictatorships and oligarchies.

But the idea that people can and should rule themselves would survive. In time, the ideal of democracy would become one of the great gifts from ancient Greece to the modern world.



The painting on this piece of pottery shows Greek citizens casting votes in an election.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you read about four forms of government used by ancient Greek city-states.

Monarchy: One Person Inherits Power Most Greek city-states were monarchies until about 800 B.C.E. In a monarchy, one person, usually a king, holds the power. Ancient Greek kings had councils of aristocrats to help them rule.

Oligarchy: A Few People Share Power Between about 800 and 650 B.C.E., most Greek city-states were ruled by oligarchies, in which power is held by a few people. Most oligarchs were wealthy aristocrats who ignored the needs of poor people. The poor eventually turned to leaders who promised to improve their lives.

Tyranny: One Person Takes Power by Force From the mid-600s to about 500 B.C.E., many Greek city-states were ruled by tyrants. Tyranny is a form of government in which a person who is not a lawful king holds the power.

Democracy: All Citizens Share Power The people of Athens were the first Greeks to develop a form of democracy, known as a direct democracy, in which every citizen was allowed to vote on every issue.