

ANCIENT GREECE

Background Information 10:

Forms of Government - Democracy, Oligarchy and Tyranny

Democracy: rule by the people

- **Where?** Developed in Athens by Kleisthenes and others.
- **What?** Based on principle that all citizens of the city-state of Athens had right to attend and speak at assembly (women, slaves & metics were not citizens).

Most government officials chosen by lottery, did job for 1 year.

From 390 BC, citizens paid for attending assembly.

Most important political posts were the 10 generals: elected by the assembly each year.

Between 30,000 – 40,000 male citizens but possibly only about 5000 attended assembly.

Voting was by a show of hands.

Ostracism (banishment from Athens) involved writing a person's name on an ostraca; person with most votes over 6000 had to leave Athens for 10 years, which destroyed their career.
- **Other democracies**

In fourth century BC, heyday of Greek democracy.

Cities like Chios and Thebes (previously oligarchies) adopted a version of democratic government.

Oligarchy: rule by the few

- **Where?** Common throughout ancient Greece
Sparta championed oligarchies.
Athens had an oligarchy during and after the Peloponnesian War.
Existed in Corinth and Thebes.
- **What?** A minority of men from rich families controlled the state: most citizens couldn't take part in government.

Tyranny: rule by one powerful dictator, a tyrant.

(Tyrant: a ruler who has seized power without legal right).

- **Where?** Many states, particularly in the 6th century BC, were ruled by a tyrant.
- **What?** Took power by force.
Usually of noble birth but often had support of the poor.
Unlike a monarchy, power not inherited
Unlike modern meaning of tyranny, was not always a brutal and oppressive rule e.g. Pisistratus' rule in Athens.
- **Details** First appeared in Argos or Corinth, then Sicyon, Megara, Mytilene and Miletus.
Sparta avoided tyranny, probably because of the need for unity amongst citizens against helots.
In Athens, Pisistratus became tyrant 3 times, starting c.560 BC.
In Corinth under the Kypselidai tyranny, the city became dominant in pottery production and export, art and trade.

Historical Developments

- In Homer we have evidence for monarchy, but probably lasted no later than the 8th century.
- By c.700 BC, aristocracies, not monarchies, ruling the earliest poleis.
- Commoners challenged this position and power shifted from aristocrats to wider group of landlords.
- Oligarchies then replaced aristocracies.
-
- In 6th century particularly, tyrannies appear, including Pisistratus in Athens.

- In 508/7, Kleisthenes reforms brought about democracy in Athens: citizenship was based on membership of a deme (village/ward).
- In late 460s, Ephialtes and Pericles were behind a reform package passed by assembly that led to the removal of the remaining political powers of the Areopagus, the aristocratic council that had been the supreme court in Athens.
- In 411 and 405/4, oligarchies overthrew Athenian democracy: the latter was extreme and brutal and was set up by Sparta.
- Under Macedonian rule of Greece, tyrannies by pro-Macedonians were imposed on Athen's allies against Macedon.
- After Alexander's death, democracy was overthrown in Athens, but continued in city of Rhodes.
- Hellenistic kings and Rome promoted oligarchy and monarchy in Greece.