HUM101: Handouts-T12, T13 &T14

Greek Polis: 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.

http://www.ancientgreece.co.uk/staff/resources/background/bg10/home.html

Athenian Democracy

In the year 507 B.C., the Athenian leader Cleisthenes introduced a system of political reforms that he called demokratia, or "rule by the people." This system was comprised of three separate institutions: the ekklesia, a sovereign governing body that wrote laws and dictated foreign policy; the boule, a council of representatives from the ten Athenian tribes; and the dikasteria, the popular courts in which citizens argued cases before a group of lottery-selected jurors. Although this Athenian democracy would survive for only two centuries, Cleisthenes' invention was one of ancient Greece's most enduring contributions to the modern world.

Demokratia and the Demos

"In a democracy," the Greek historian Herodotus wrote, "there is, first, that most splendid of virtues, equality before the law." It was true that Cleisthenes' demokratia abolished the political distinctions between the Athenian aristocrats who had long monopolized the political decision-making process and the middle- and working-class people who made up the army and the navy (and whose incipient discontent was the reason Cleisthenes introduced his reforms in the first place). However, the "equality" Herodotus described was limited to a small segment of the Athenian population. For example, in Athens in the middle of the 4th century there were about 100,000 citizens (Athenian citizenship was limited to men and women whose parents had also been Athenian citizens), about 10,000 metoikoi, or "resident foreigners" and 150,000 slaves. Out of all those people, only male citizens who were older

than 18 were a part of the demos, meaning only about 40,000 people could participate in the democratic process.

The Ekklesia

Athenian democracy was made up of three important institutions. The first was the ekklesia, or Assembly, the sovereign governing body of Athens. Any member of the demos–any one of those 40,000 adult male citizens–was welcome to attend the meetings of the ekklesia, which were held 40 times per year in a hillside auditorium west of the Acropolis called the Pnyx. (Only about 5,000 men attended each session of the Assembly; the rest were serving in the army or navy or working to support their families.) At the meetings, the ekklesia made decisions about war and foreign policy, wrote and revised laws and approved or condemned the conduct of public officials. (Ostracism, in which a citizen could be expelled from the Athenian city-state for 10 years, was among the powers of the ekklesia.) The group made decisions by simple majority vote.

The Boule

The second important institution was the boule, or Council of Five Hundred. The boule was a group of 500 men, 50 from each of ten Athenian tribes, who served on the Council for one year. Unlike the ekklesia, the boule met every day and did most of the hands-on work of governance. It supervised government workers and was in charge of things like navy ships (triremes) and army horses. It dealt with ambassadors and representatives from other city-states. Its main function was to decide what matters would come before the ekklesia. In this way, the 500 members of the boule dictated how the entire democracy would work.

Positions on the boule were chosen by lot and not by election. This was because, in theory, a random lottery was more democratic than an election: pure chance, after all, could not be influenced by things like money or popularity. The lottery system also prevented the establishment of a permanent class of civil servants who might be tempted to use the government to advance or enrich themselves. However, historians argue that selection to the boule was not always just a matter of chance. They note that wealthy and influential people–and their relatives–served on the Council much more frequently than would be likely in a truly random lottery.

The Dikasteria

The third important institution was the popular courts, or dikasteria. Every day, more than 500 jurors were chosen by lot from a pool of male citizens older than 30. Of all the democratic institutions, Aristotle argued that the dikasteria "contributed most to the strength of democracy" because the jury had almost unlimited power. There were no police in Athens, so it was the demos themselves who brought court cases, argued for the prosecution and the defense, and delivered verdicts and sentences by majority rule. (There were also no rules about what kinds of cases could be prosecuted or what could and could not be said at trial, and so Athenian citizens frequently used the dikasteria to punish or embarrass their enemies.)

Jurors were paid a wage for their work, so that the job could be accessible to everyone and not just the wealthy (but, since the wage was less than what the average worker earned in a day, the typical juror was an elderly retiree). Since Athenians did not pay taxes, the money for these payments came from customs duties, contributions from allies and taxes levied on

the metoikoi. The one exception to this rule was the leitourgia, or liturgy, which was a kind of tax that wealthy people volunteered to pay to sponsor major civic undertakings such as the maintenance of a navy ship or the production of a play or choral performance at the city's annual festival.

Hellenism (a term derived from the Greeks' name for themselves, *Helle–nes*) was a new phenomenon. It involved the process by which the individual cultures of the Greek city-states gave way to a uniform culture stressing the common identity of all who embraced Greek ways. This culture had common features of language, art, architecture, drama, politics, philosophy, and much more, to which anyone anywhere in the Afro-Eurasian world could have access. By diffusing well beyond its homeland, it brought worlds together: its influence spread from Greece to all shores of the Mediterranean, into parts of sub-Saharan Africa, across Southwest Asia, and through the Iranian plateau into central and South Asia. It even had echoes in China (Tignor, p. 204).

Alexander not only conquered but also laid the foundations for state systems and introduced institutional stability for (and protection and patronage of) trading systems. Instead of plundering, governments under his rule promoted trade. With their fear of attack reduced, cities could thrive. Increasingly, states encouraged the use of money and a common language for contracts—innovations that aided commercial transactions. In effect, major commercial arteries replaced the early passageways that had carried small bands of traders. Political expansion facilitated all kinds of exchanges within the Afro-Eurasian world. One consequence was the emergence of the **Silk Road**, an artery that for nearly a thousand years was the primary commercial network linking East Asia and the Mediterranean world. This trade route extended over 5,000 miles and took its name from the huge quantities of precious silk that passed along it. We cannot make sense of Alexander and the Hellenistic cultural movement or the spread of Buddhism without acknowledging the important ways in which distinct parts of the Afro-Eurasian world were already in contact. Indeed, political expansion driven by military conquest followed a period of extensive migration, trade, and technological diffusion. Alexander's conquests did not take arbitrary pathways, because earlier long-distance trade and cross-cultural exchanges had laid the trails for them. Similarly, Buddhism spread along preexisting trade routes. Slowly a new idea took hold: common cultures and shared commodities could integrate the Afro-Eurasian world. These changes created grand opportunities for expanded trade, migration, and religious conversion. Regular trade routes now supported commercial centers that crisscrossed the landmass from China to the Mediterranean. Merchants joined with monks and administrators in connecting widespread parts of Afro-Eurasia, enabling busy sea-lanes and the Silk Road to flourish. Merely a few centuries after the conquests of Alexander and Mauryan kings, the world looked very different from the realms his armies had traversed (pp. 204-205).

HELLENISTIC CULTURE

Just as broad uniformity in politics and war trumped the small size and diversity of the old city-state, so the individual city state cultures now gave way to a homogenized Hellenistic culture. Following the existing commercial networks, this uniform Greek culture spread rapidly through the entire Mediterranean basin and beyond. It was an alluring package and ruling elites in all regions that encountered it fell under its powerful spell. Hellenistic culture included philosophical and political thinking, secular disciplines ranging from history to biology, popular entertainment in theaters, competitive public games, and art for art's sake in

all kinds of media. No other society at the time had such a complete package of high culture; hence its widespread appeal and diffusion. Archaeologists have found a Greek-style gymnasium and theater in the town of Aï Khanoum in modern Afghanistan, and adaptations of Greek sculptures made at the order of the Vedic king Sandrakottos (better known as Chandragupta; see below). We also know of Carthaginians in North Africa who became "Greek" philosophers, and Gallic and Berber chieftains, from the far west of France and North Africa, who had fine Greek style drinking vessels buried with them.

COMMON LANGUAGE

The core element of Hellenism was a common language, known as *koine*, or Greek. It replaced the city-states' numerous dialects with an everyday form that people anywhere could understand and quickly became the international language of its day. Most peoples who came into contact with Hellenistic culture accepted the benefits that it afforded in expanding a network of communication and exchange. Peoples in Egypt, Judea, Syria, and Sicily, who all had distinct languages and cultures, could now communicate more easily with one another, and enjoy the same dramatic comedies and new forms of art and sculpture. Despite pockets of resistance, the Hellenizing movement was remarkably successful in spreading a shared Greek culture throughout the Mediterranean world and into Southwest Asia.

COSMOPOLITAN CITIES

Much as Athens had been the model city of the age of the Greek city-state, Alexandria in Egypt became exemplary in the new age. Whereas fifth century BCE Athens had zealously maintained an exclusive civic identity, Alexandria was a multiethnic city built from scratch by immigrants, who rapidly totaled half a million as they streamed in from all over the Mediterranean and Southwest Asia seeking new opportunities. Members of its dynamic population, representing dozens of Greek and non-Greek peoples, communicated in the common language that supplanted their original dialects. Soon a new urban culture emerged to meet the needs of so diverse a population. (See Primary Source: The Cosmopolitan City of Alexandria.)

The culture of the Hellenistic movement took the place of local art forms. In the previous city-state world, comic playwrights had written plays for their individual cities and local cultures, highlighting familiar languages, foibles, problems, and politicians. In contrast, entertainment in the more widely connected world had to appeal to bigger audiences and a greater variety of people. Plays were now staged in any city touched by Greek influence, and they were understood in any environment. Distinctive regional humor and local characters gave way to dramas populated by stock characters of standard sit-coms that any audience could identify with: the miser, the old crone, the jilted lover, the golden-hearted whore, the boastful soldier, the befuddled father, the cheated husband, the rebellious son. At performances throughout the Mediterranean basin, laughter would be just as loud in Syracuse on the island of Sicily as in Scythopolis in the Jordan Valley of Judea. Ways of thinking changed to match this unified world.

The new ideas reflected the fact that individuals were no longer citizens of a particular city (*polis*); instead they were the first "cosmopolitans," belonging to the whole world, or "universe" (*kosmos*). The new political style was relentlessly cosmopolitan, radiating out of cities not just into nearby hinterlands but also to distant (and often rivalrous) cities. Kingdoms and states by now had become so enormous that individuals could relate to political style only through the personality of kings or rulers and their families. Rulership was personality, and personality and style united large numbers of subjects. For example,

Demetrius Poliorcetes, the ruler of Macedonia, wore high-platform shoes and heavy makeup, and he decorated his elaborate, flowing cape with images of the sun, the stars, and the planets. In the presence of a powerful and solitary sun king like Demetrius, ordinary individuals felt small, inconsequential, and solated. In response, an obsessive cult of the self arose, as Hellenistic religion and philosophy increasingly focused on the individual and his or her place in the larger world (Tignor, pp. 110-112).

HELLENISM AND THE ELITES

Once high Greek culture coalesced (united), its appeal to elites in widely dispersed communities along the major communication routes became almost irresistible. Social elites sought to enhance their position by adopting Hellenistic culture, the only one that had standing above the level of local values. Syrian, Jewish, and Egyptian elites in the eastern Mediterranean adopted this attitude, as well as Roman, Carthaginian, and African elites in the western Mediterranean. The later Roman high culture was itself a form of Greek culture. Of the Romans' extensive borrowings from the Greeks, not the least important was a belief in the value of a written history. The Romans, too, began writing about contemporary and past events. Secular plays, philosophy, poetry, competitive games, and art followed, all based on Greek forms or local imitations. North African kings similarly decked themselves out in Greek dress, built Greek-style theaters, imported Greek philosophers, and wrote history. Now they, too, had "culture." (Tignor, p. 213).