University of the People

HIST 1421 Greek and Roman Civilization

Unit 1 Written Assignment 1

Anonymous Student

**Introduction**

The classical Greek civilizations of Athens and Sparta during the 5th and 4th centuries BCE represented two very distinct approaches to governing and civic participation. While both were part of the Greek world, they had fundamentally different philosophies regarding citizenship, democracy, and the role of the individual in society. Analyzing the way each city-state structured its government and selected public officials highlights their core values and priorities.

**Body**

In Athens, all male citizens over the age of 20 could directly participate in the popular assembly (ecclesia) which voted on laws, elected officials, and decided on issues like war and peace (Introduction to Athenian democracy, n.d.). This radical form of direct democracy was based on the principles of equal speech and equality of law for all citizens. Most public offices, other than a few like the generals, were filled by an annual lottery from a pool of citizen volunteers (Introduction to Athenian democracy, n.d.). This random selection process helped prevent entrenched power and the establishment of a governing class.

Sparta had a very different approach, with an oligarchic system that concentrated power in the hands of a minority. As Brand (2010) describes, "In Sparta, all citizens belonged to the privileged class and were elite citizens about the rest of the population" (p. 2). However, only males from the highest two hereditary castes could serve in public office as part of the diarchy of two kings or the Gerousia council of 28 elders over 60 years old (Brand, 2010, p. 3). The selection of these offices was strictly based on hereditary bloodlines, unlike the more meritocratic Athenian system.

While both Athens and Sparta had assemblies where citizens could at least observe the political process, the degree of public participation was vastly greater in Athens thanks to its direct democracy (Introduction to Athenian democracy, n.d.; Brand, 2010). Sparta was an oligarchic warrior society that valued conformity and deference to its elite ruling class (Cartledge, 2001; Raaflaub, 2007).

**Conclusion**

Athens in the 4th and 5th centuries BCE represented a pioneering form of participatory democracy, where most citizens could vote, speak out, and even randomly be selected to hold public office through an egalitarian lottery system. By contrast, the Spartan governmental structure was hierarchical, concentrating power among a hereditary nobility through its kings and councils. While both were Greek city-states, their vastly different governing frameworks embodied starkly divergent values - one prioritizing broad civic engagement, the other enforcing strict societal control.

**References**

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