



OCTOBER 21, 2024

ADVENTURES IN DEMOCRATIC  
DECISION MAKING

# DEMOCRACY IN ANCIENT ATHENS

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# ANCIENT GREECE

~500 BCE



# ATHENS IN THE CLASSICAL PERIOD

Athens is one of many city-states (*poleis*).

Sometimes they are allies, sometimes rivals.

Each has its own political system.

For about 180 years, Athens experiments with democracy...



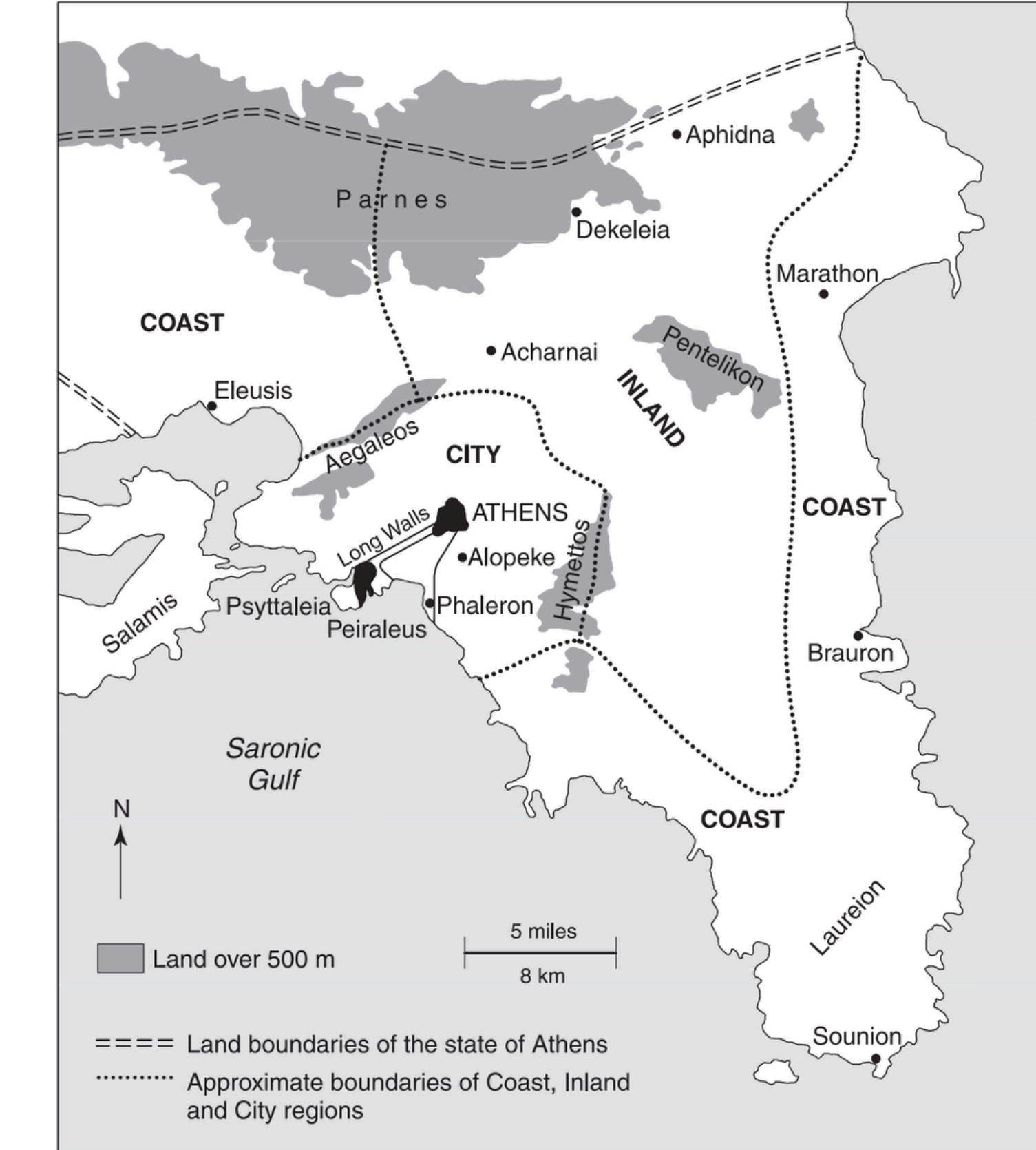
# A TIMELINE, ALL BCE

## 621-620 DRAKON'S LAWS

Harsh laws, everyone is unhappy.

## 594 SOLON'S LAWS

Proto-democratic reforms, but still no one is happy.



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New tribes, tyrants are overthrown. Democracy is on!

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Land victory against Persians.

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404-403 **RULE OF THIRTY TYRANTS**

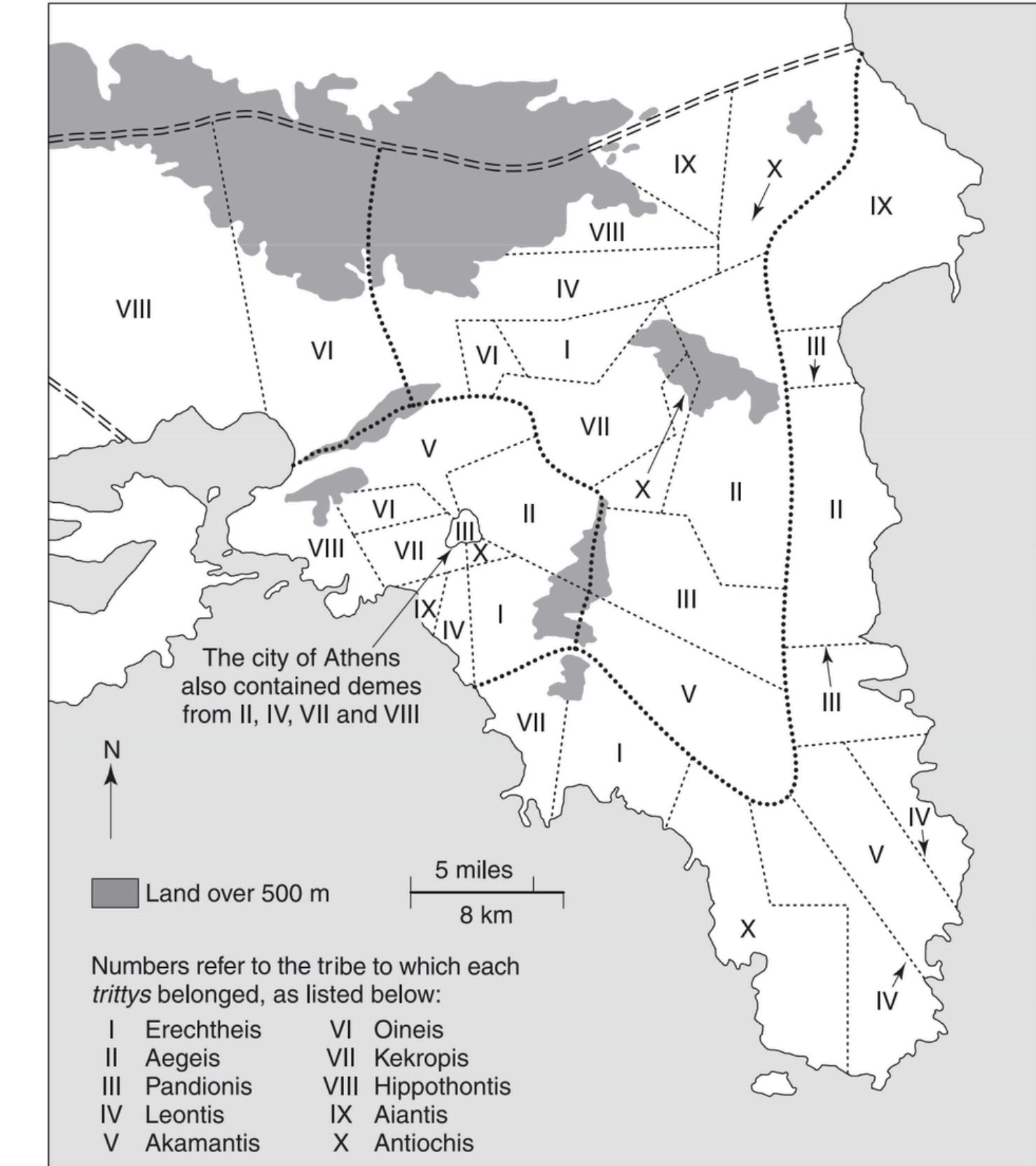
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Spoiler alert: does not end well for Socrates.

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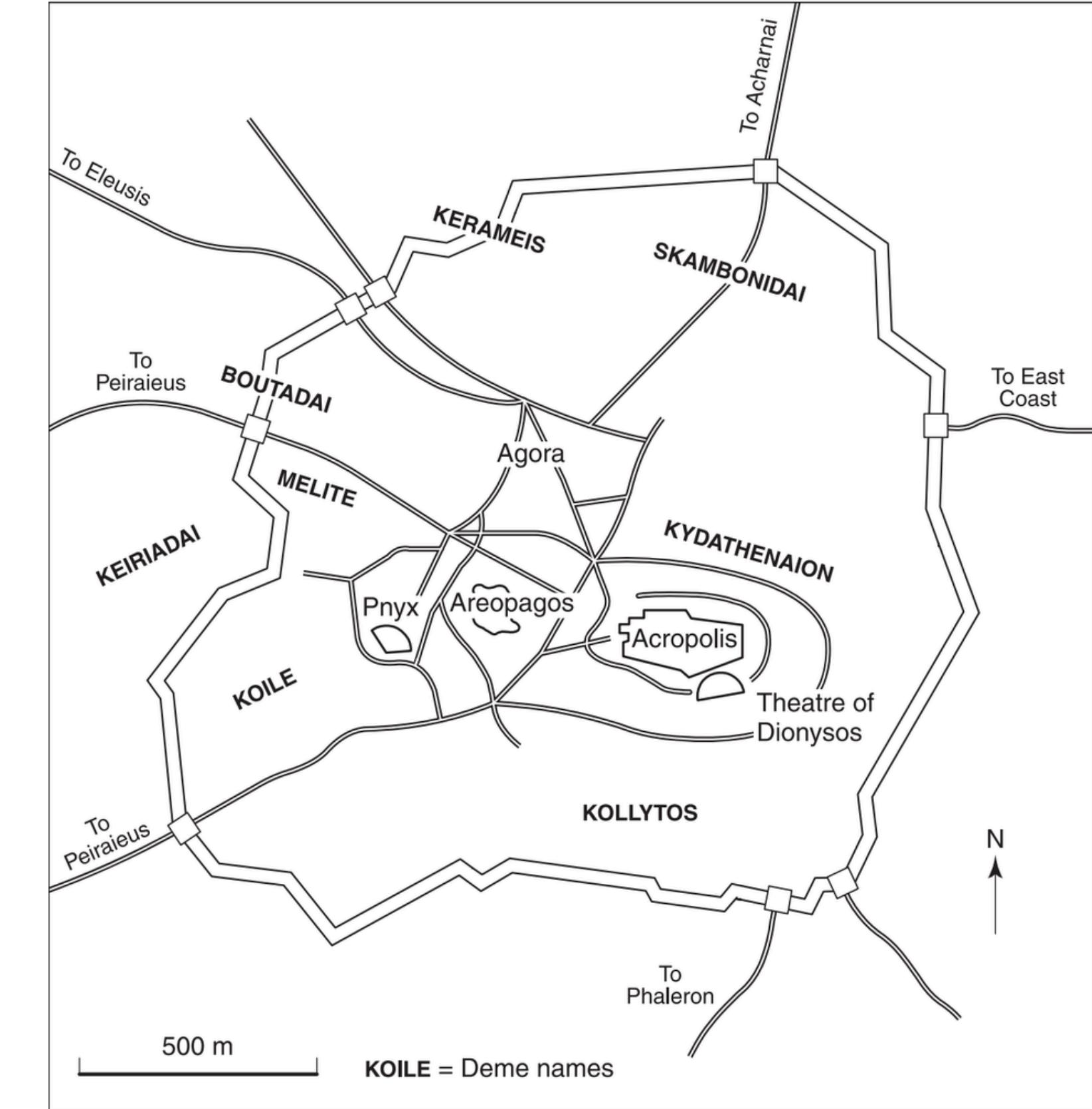
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What are the core bodies?

# THE COUNCIL (BOULE)

## WHAT

Sets the agenda for the citizens in the Assembly to vote on.

Runs the state, carrying out policies of the Assembly.

## WHO

500 male citizens of age 30+, 50 from each of the ten tribes, of every property class except the poorest.

Members selected by lot and cannot serve more than one year, no more than two times in one's lifetime, and not in consecutive years.

## WHERE

The Bouleuterion, next to the Agora.

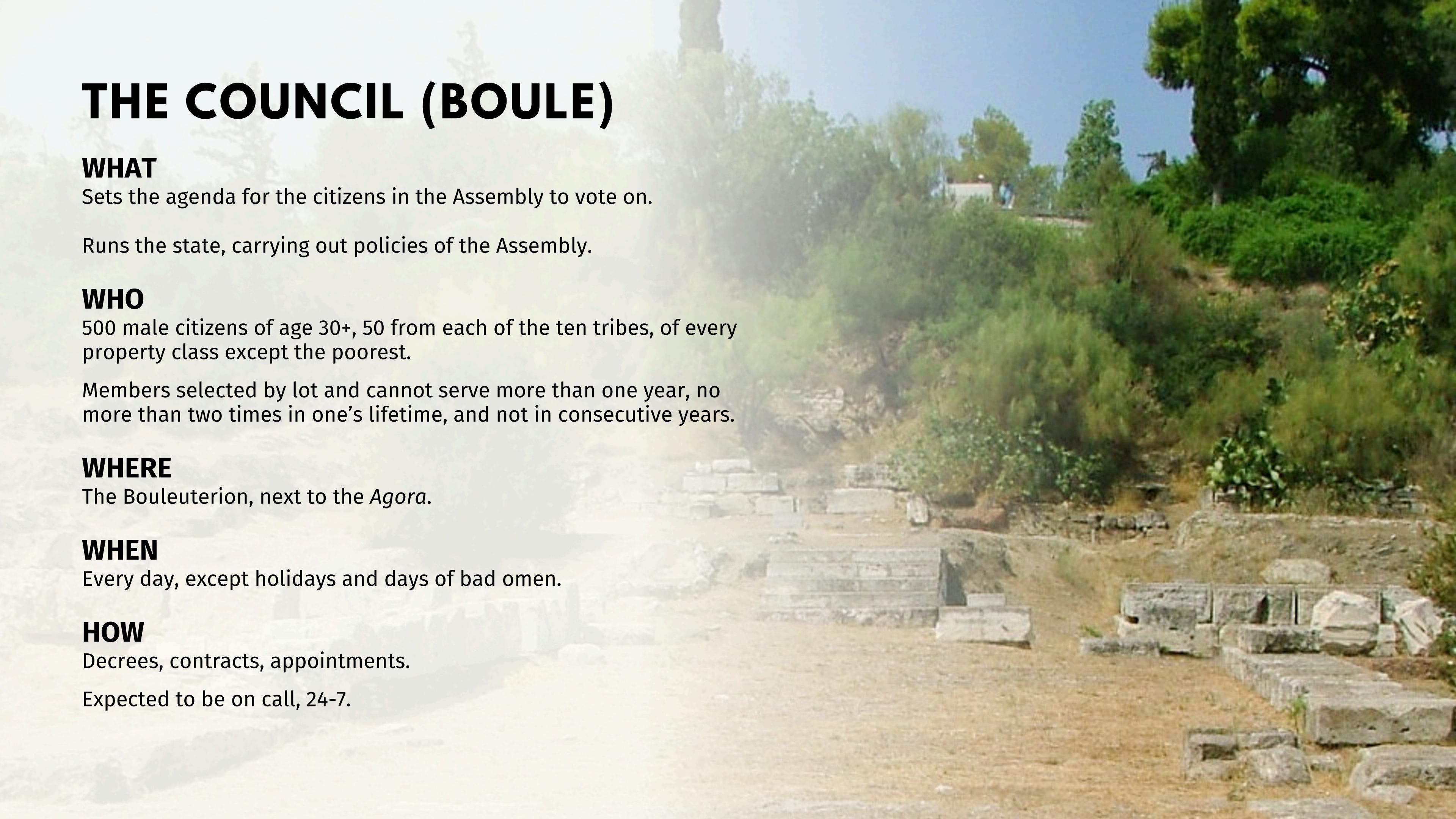
## WHEN

Every day, except holidays and days of bad omen.

## HOW

Decrees, contracts, appointments.

Expected to be on call, 24-7.



# HOW TO USE LEFTOVER MONEY?

You were at that time on the point of sending your entire force to Euboea and Olynthus, and Apollodorus [...] brought forward in the Council a motion [...] to the Assembly, proposing that the people should decide *whether the funds remaining over from the state's expenditure should be used for military purposes or for public spectacles.*

[...]

For when the division took place there was not a man whose vote opposed the use of these funds for military purposes.

Demosthenes 59.4-5



# THE ASSEMBLY (ECCLESIA)

## WHAT

Policy-making body, responsible for decisions about: war, foreign policy, finances, legislation, religious matters, electing magistrates, ostracizing obnoxious people.

## WHO

Everyone! That is, male citizens, of age 20+, no women, no slaves, no foreign residents (*metics*).

About 30k entitled to take part, though only ~6000 max in practice.

## WHERE

The Pnyx, whose ruins are on the right.

## WHEN

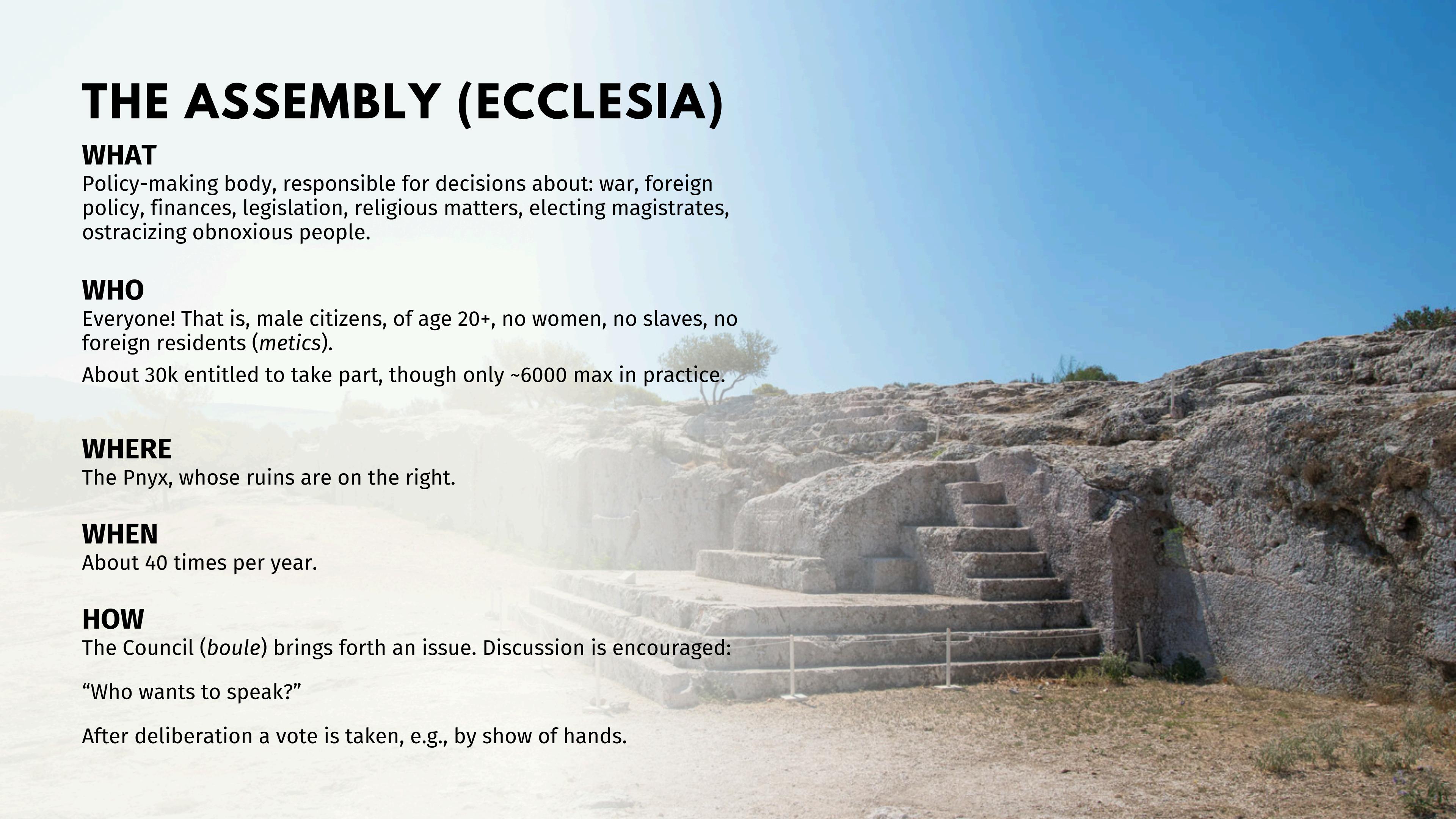
About 40 times per year.

## HOW

The Council (*boule*) brings forth an issue. Discussion is encouraged:

“Who wants to speak?”

After deliberation a vote is taken, e.g., by show of hands.



# MACEDON

## ELATEA IS CAPTURED

Evening had already fallen when a messenger arrived bringing to the presiding Councilors the news that Elatea had been taken [by Philip of Macedon].

They were sitting at supper, but they instantly rose from their meal, cleared the booths in the marketplace of their occupants, and unfolded the hurdles, while others summoned the generals and ordered the trumpeter to come.

The commotion spread through the whole city.

At daybreak on the next day the Prytanes summoned the Council to the Council House, and the citizens flocked to the place of assembly.

Before the Council could introduce the business and prepare the agenda, the whole body of citizens had taken their places on the hill.

The Council arrived, the presiding Councilors formally reported the intelligence they had received, and the courier was introduced.

As soon as he had told his tale, the marshal put the question, "Who wishes to speak?" No one came forward.

Demosthenes 18.169-170



# THE COURTS (DIKASTERIA)

## WHAT

Juries of citizens who listen to cases, vote on the guilt or innocence of fellow citizens, and vote on punishments for those found guilty.

## WHO

A pool of 6000 citizens, aged 30+, chosen by lot every year, 600 per tribe. They are paid for their service.

Juries vary in size, from 501 to 1500 people, assigned by lot at the last minute from the pool of 6000.

## WHERE

The Heliaia, whose location is sort of uncertain.

## WHEN

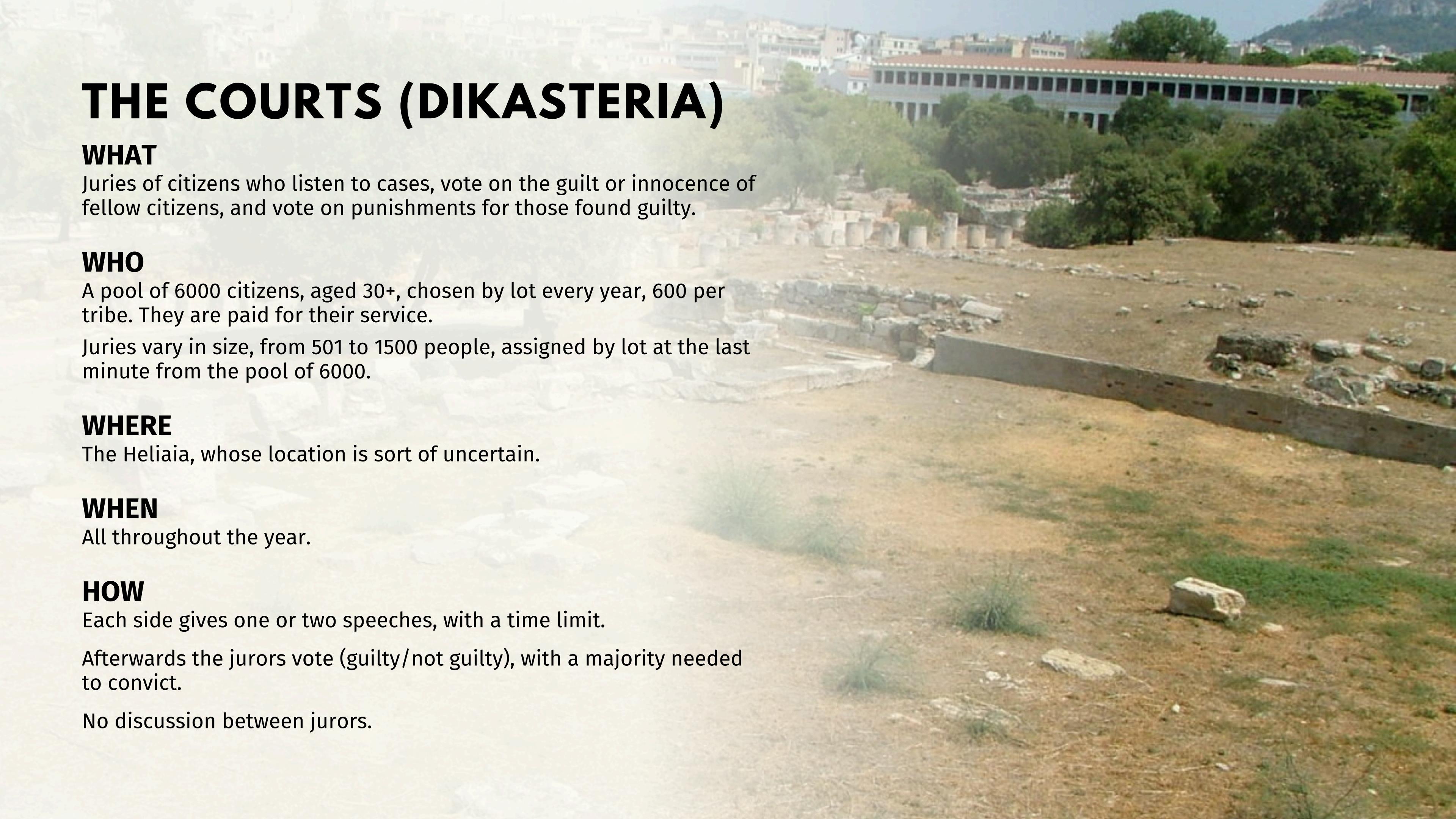
All throughout the year.

## HOW

Each side gives one or two speeches, with a time limit.

Afterwards the jurors vote (guilty/not guilty), with a majority needed to convict.

No discussion between jurors.



# SOCRATES ON TRIAL

In 399, Socrates is put on trial for charges of moral corruption and impiety.

The jury finds him guilty: according to Plato, Socrates was about 30 votes away from acquittal.

A second vote is taken, to determine the penalty.

We know how that turned out. ☠



From the drawing by

SOCRATES BEFORE HIS JUDGES.

[Edmund J. Sullivan, R.W.S., R.E.]

# THE GENERALS (STRATEGOI)

## WHAT

Military leaders, in charge of the armies and fleets.

## WHO

10 people, one from each tribe, newly appointed every year.

There is no term limit: Pericles serves fifteen consecutive years.



PERICLES

# Notable decisions?

# THE SILVER

490 **BATTLE OF MARATHON**  
Land victory against Persians.

# THE SILVER

In 483, a large seam of silver is discovered in the mines of Laureion.

Aristides proposes dividing the windfall among the people.

Themistocles, one of the generals, proposes that the money should be put towards building a new fleet.

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Plot twist: when he argues for his position, Themistocles does not even mention the Persians; instead, he appeals to Athenians' rivalry with Aegina, who currently has a larger fleet.

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# THE MYTILINEAN DEBATE

In 427, the allied (read, subordinate) city of Mytilene revolts against Athenian rule.

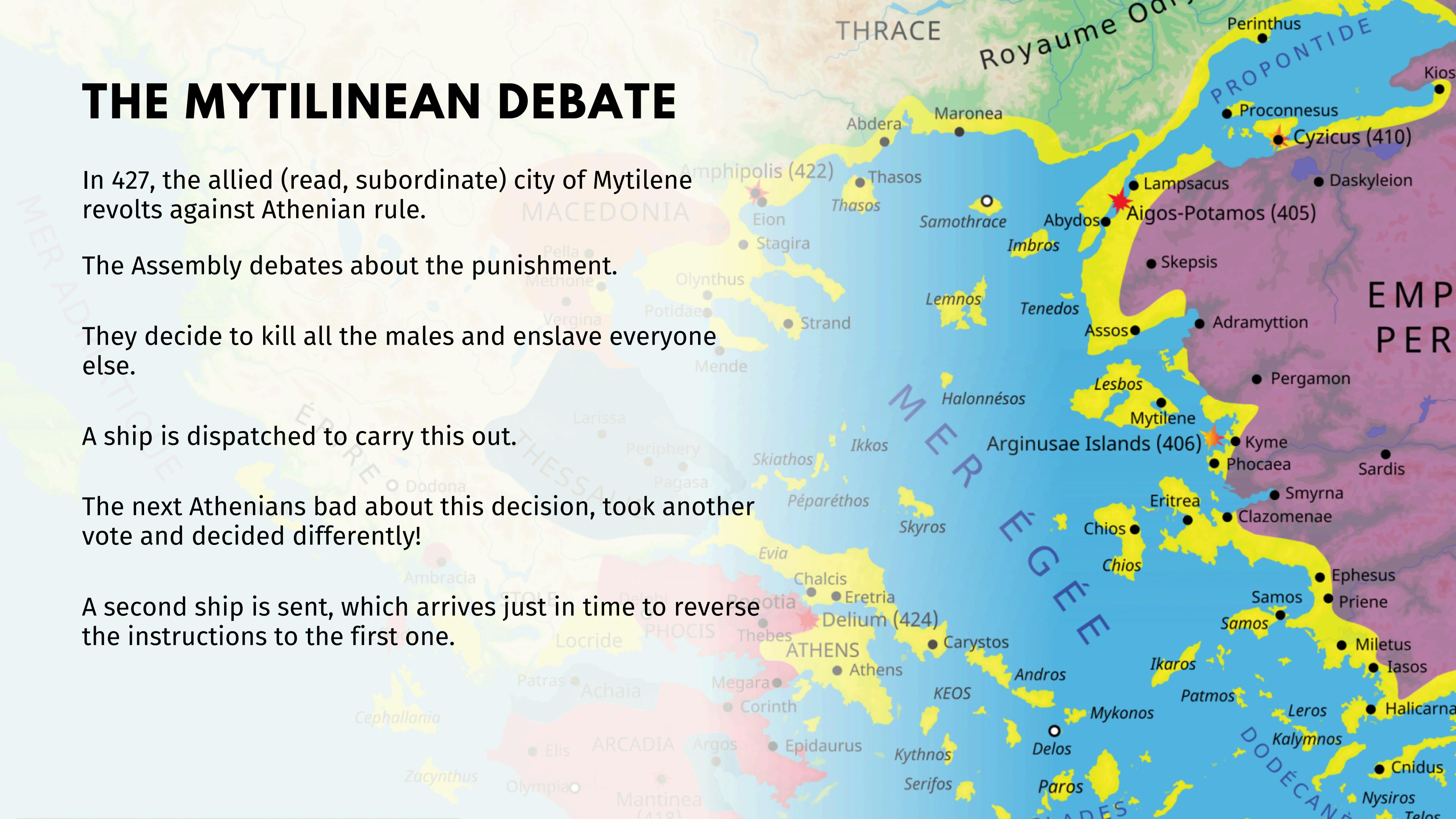
The Assembly debates about the punishment.

They decide to kill all the males and enslave everyone else.

A ship is dispatched to carry this out.

The next Athenians bad about this decision, took another vote and decided differently!

A second ship is sent, which arrives just in time to reverse the instructions to the first one.



How did Athenians feel about  
their democracy?

# PERICLES

Our government does not copy our neighbors', but is an example to them.

It is true that we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few.

But while there exists equal justice to all and alike in their private disputes, the claim of excellence is also recognized; and when a citizen is in any way distinguished, he is preferred to the public service, not as a matter of privilege, but as the reward of merit.

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.34–2.46



Did it work though?

# ASSESSING DEMOCRACY

According to some measures, democratic Athens was doing great!

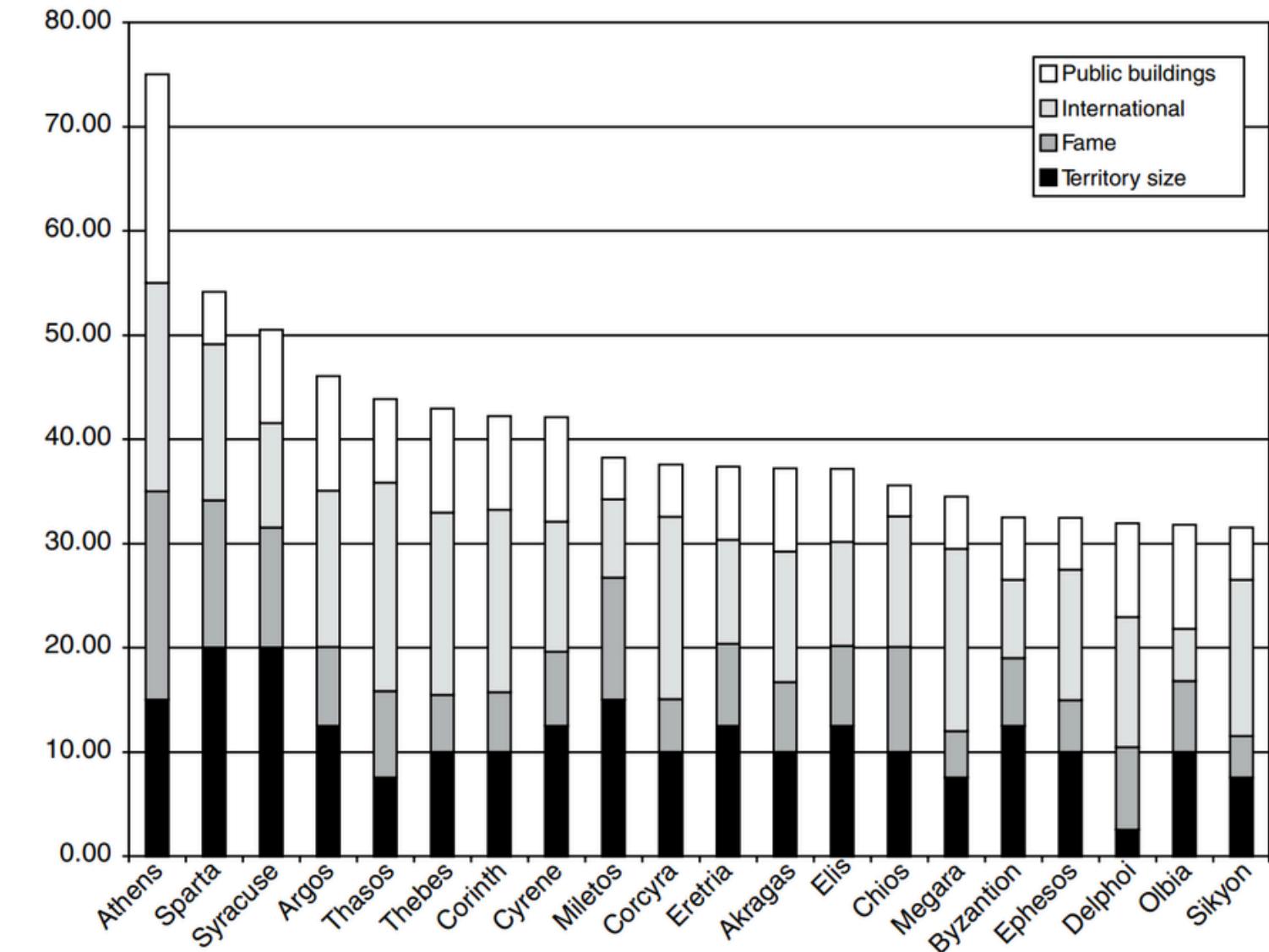


Figure 2.2. Comparisons of the twenty most prominent Greek poleis. Balanced 80-point scale based on the aggregate of territory size, fame (columns of *Inventory* text), international activity, and public buildings.

Ober, J. (2010). Democracy and knowledge: Innovation and learning in classical Athens. Princeton University Press.

Obviously, not everyone was on board...