

Chapter 8: The Greek Adventure: 8-4a Early Athens  
Book Title: World Civilizations  
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## 8-4a Early Athens

Athens went through all of these forms of government in the period after 750 B.C.E., when we begin to know something definite about its history. The original monarchy was gradually forced aside by the aristocrats, who ruled the polis in the seventh and early sixth centuries. The aristocrats gave way in the 500s to oligarchs, some of whom were nobly born and some of whom were rich commoners. The most important oligarch was Solon (SOH-luhn), who ruled in the early sixth century. When the polis faced a social and economic crisis generated by lack of arable land, the other oligarchs gave him supreme power to quell the discontent. Solon responded by establishing a constitution that struck an uneasy balance between the desires of the wealthy few and the demands of the impoverished and indebted masses. Neither group was satisfied, however, and the contest soon resumed.

Eventually, an aristocratic tyrant named Pisistratus (pie-sih-STRA-tuhs) succeeded in making himself the sole ruler and made certain important concessions to the common people to gain their support for his plan to start a new monarchic dynasty with his sons as his successors. But the sons were not nearly as clever as their father and were swept from power by rebellion in 510 B.C.E. The winner of the ensuing free-for-all was [Cleisthenes \(\(KLEYES-theh-nees\) A sixth-century B.C.E. Athenian tyrant who laid the foundations of polis democracy.\)](#) (KLEYES-theh-nees), an aristocrat and the true founder of the Athenian democracy. Cleisthenes believed that the people should have the last word in their own government, both because it was just and because he believed it was the best way to keep civil peace.

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