

Chapter 8: The Greek Adventure: 8-4 Athens and Sparta
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Printed By: Colin Morris-Moncada (006279659@coyote.csusb.edu)
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8-4 Athens and Sparta

The two poleis that dominated Greek life and politics in the Classical Age were Athens and Sparta. They were worlds apart in their conceptions of the good life for their citizens. Athens was the center of Greek educational, artistic, and scientific activity as well as the birthplace of political democracy. Sparta was a militaristic, authoritarian society that held the arts and intellectual life in contempt and dreaded the extension of freedom to the individual or the community. Eventually, the two opposites came into conflict. Interestingly, it was the artistic, philosophical, and democratic Athenian polis that provoked the unnecessary war that ultimately ruined it.

In general, the Greeks knew four types of government:

1. A **monarchy** (Rule by a single individual, who often claims divine inspiration and protection.) is rule by a single person—a king or the equivalent (either sex)—who has the final word in law by right. Most of the poleis were monarchies at one time or another, and many of them apparently began and ended as such.
2. An **aristocracy** (A social governing class based on birth.) is rule by those who are born to the leading families and thereby are qualified to rule, whether or not they are particularly qualified in other ways. Aristocrats are born to the nobility, but not all nobles are born aristocrats.
3. An **oligarchy** (((OH-lih-gar-kee) Rule by a few.)) (OH-lih-gar-kee) is rule by a few, who are almost always the wealthiest members of society. Many poleis were ruled by an oligarchy of landlords whose land was worked by tenant farmers.
4. A **democracy** (A system of government in which the majority of voters decides issues and policy.) is rule by the people—almost always by means of majority vote on disputed issues. Voting rights in executive and legislative acts are limited to citizens; in the Greek poleis this meant freeborn adult males.

In addition, the Greek word *tyranny* originally meant rule by a dictator who had illegally seized power. That person might be a good or bad ruler, a man or a woman.

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