

Ancient Greek *Poleis* Systems of Government:

Athens and Sparta



Athenian Acropolis

Introduction

The centre of Ancient Greek life was the ***Polis*** – the city state. There were eventually about 1,000 *Poleis* in Greece. These city-states varied considerably in size and importance and would have a variety of traditions and customs.

Even though they had social differences they would have all shared a common Greek culture.

However, they would often be at war with one another for one reason or another. In the Classical Greek period, they were quite often at war because of political differences.

While Ancient Greece is famous for inventing *Democracy*, these *Poleis* had a variety of political systems – some with opposing ideologies. Some were **aristocratic** or **oligarchic**, others **monarchic**, and a few – notably Athens – were **democratic**. The most unique was perhaps **Sparta**– a dual, constitutional monarchy. But perhaps the most influential city state on political history was Athenian Democracy.

In this opening section on Greek History we will examine two of these systems: Athens and Sparta.

Monarchy: rule by a King; literal Greek meaning: *one ruler*.

Aristocracy: rule by noble elite; literal Greek meaning: *rule by the best*.

Oligarchic: rule by a small group of wealthy or powerful individuals; literal Greek translation: *Rule by the few*

Democracy: rule by majority; literal translation from Greek: *Rule by the People*

Athenian Democracy

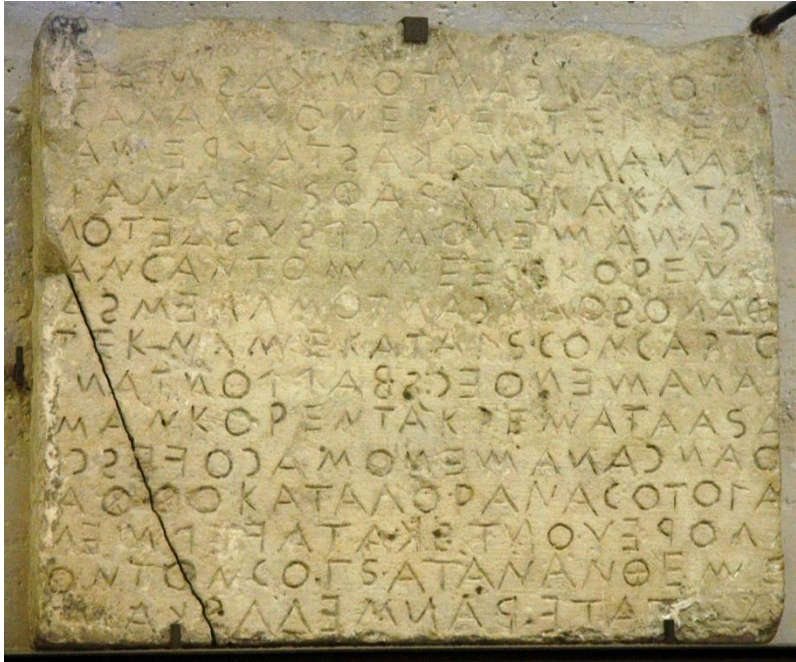


Pericles Funeral Oration

Athenian Democracy developed over time. It differs greatly from the representative democratic republics of today, which more closely resemble the system of Ancient Rome. However, in some senses the system was extremely democratic, since there was much more power in the hands of the ordinary citizens of Athens, who could directly vote on proposed laws – each having a turn in politics through allotment.

However, it must be emphasised that – as with all Ancient Greek societies – foreigners, women, and slaves still did not have and political representation beyond the male citizens of their families. It would perhaps be harsh to judge Athens for this – since no woman, slave, or foreigner had *any* political power in *any* Ancient Greek *Polis*. However, we should remember that this Greek democracy was not as egalitarian as it might seem.

Draco



Written Laws from Ancient Crete

The Athenian *Polis*, as most Ancient Greek city-states, was originally ruled by aristocrats, called **archons** who would rule from the **Areopagus**. In 683 B.C., it is stated by Aristotle that six junior archons were instituted for the recording of laws – this was to replace the prior oral code of law.

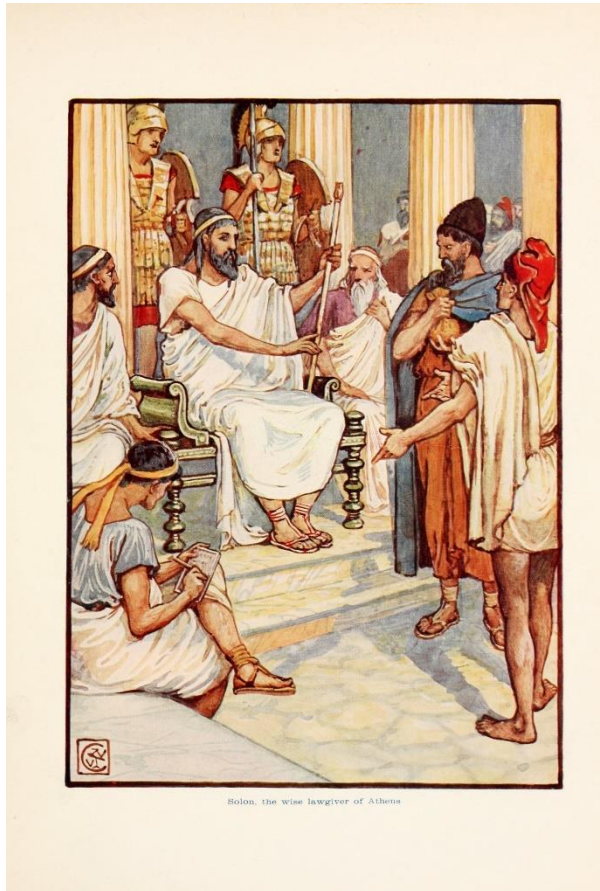
Archon:
literally
means ruler;
the noble
leaders of
pre-
democratic
Athens

In 621 B.C. Draco established the first constitution of Athens – at the request of the Athenian citizens. He is perhaps the first democratic lawgiver in Ancient Greece – in the sense that he tried to bring *some* political protection to the ordinary citizens of Athens. These codes of law were written on wooden tablets, *axones*, which are said to have survived for over 200 years. **The primary innovation these laws gave was an agreed upon and visible code of law that all literate citizens could read.** Before this, only the noble elite – the archons – could interpret the law. By introducing a codified constitution Draco allowed for legal debate in society. **These also saw the first distinction between murder and involuntary manslaughter** – an important distinction in law to this day. This homicide law was the only law which was retained by the Athens after the rest of the laws were replaced.

Areopagus:
originally the
meeting
place for
archons;
later, during
4th century,
the location
for homicide
trials.

However, Draco's laws were particularly harsh and inequitable. Debtors of a poorer class could be enslaved should they fail to pay their debts, while if a person owed money to someone of lower class there were less harsh penalties. **The death penalty was used for even minor offences for example, stealing a cabbage.** These were particularly harsh and unpopular and would later be replaced. The adjective *draconian* is now used to describe anything that is particularly harsh.

Solon



Solon, the wise lawgiver of Athens

Solon was born in Athens, 630 B.C. In the late 7th century and early 6th century B.C., many Greek *Poleis* saw their political institutions being overrun by **tyrants** – opportunistic aristocrats who would then establish themselves as sole rulers or kings. **According to ancient sources, in 594/3 B.C. Solon was given the role as archon in Athens with full autocratic powers in order to solve any disagreements between the different Athenian classes peacefully.**

Tyrannos: originally this word was simple another Greek word for king; later however it came to have negative connotations for an unjust king – usually a populist leader.

The disagreements were based on (i) Class and Ideological divisions, (ii) Regional divisions, and (iii) Clan divisions.

- i. **Class and Ideological divisions:** the poorer farmers could be enslaved for the inability to pay a debt or rent – as the government in Athens was oligarchic (controlled by a noble and wealthy minority); poorer people had little protection. This class divisions caused ideological differences in how the government and society ought to be run.
- ii. **Regional divisions:** Athens had a relatively large land area; because of this, there were divisions between those residing in the country and those living in the city and those living on the coast. These locals would then often be united by powerful landowners in the region; who would then use this influence to enhance their political powers.

- iii. **Clan divisions:** the final division seemed to be caused by rival aristocratic factions. Different landowners and noble families would have rivalries with others causing strife between their supporters.

Some of Solon's Reforms:

- Solon established that 9 archons would be elected/appointed annually by the Areopagus – these archons would swear to abide by the laws upon assuming office.
- Solon established the **Ekklesia** and, according to Aristotle, Solon petitioned for all Athenian citizens to be admitted, even those of the *Thetes* or lowest class; however more recent scholars are sceptical and believe the *Thetes* did not enter the assembly until the reforms of Cleisthenes. In Solon's time, the proceedings of the Ekklesia would have been controlled by *Pentakosiomedimnoi* or noblemen.
- Ancient sources credit Solon with the creation of the **Council of 400** who would steer the proceedings of the Ekklesia.
- Solon reduced the social and economic requirements for people to enter political office.
- Solon divided citizens into 4 social classes based on the wealth: *Pentakosiomedimnoi* (wealthiest; only class eligible for public office), *Hippeis*, *Zeugitai*, *Thetes* (poorest).
- Solon's most important law is perhaps the introduction of a release of Athenian citizens who had been enslaved from debt and the prohibition of a persons' body/freedom being used as security for loan; this meant that a person could not be enslaved due to an unpaid debt. It gave political and legal protection to poorer citizens from being extorted by the wealthier.
- Solon also brought in a law entitling any citizen to take legal action on behalf of another, which greatly enhanced the ability of citizens to have legal protection.

Ekklesia: this would become the principal assembly of the Athenian citizens.

Council of 400: this Council was a early form of what would become the *Boule* as established by Cleisthenes.

The impact of these reforms was short-lived. According to Herodotus, Solon had contracted Athens to adopt them for 10 years; however, within 4 years of Solon's departure from Athens old rivalries returned and persisted. Although, there is no doubt that some of the institutions such as the Council of 400 and the Ekklesia remained functioning to some degree. And most significantly, Solon's reforms were an inspiration for more democratic reform by Cleisthenes a century later.

Peisistratos



Peisistratos entering Athens on a Golden Chariot accompanied by a tall woman dressed as Athena – a political stunt to legitimise his rule.

Peisistratos, son of Hippocrates, was a tyrant who ruled in Athens between 561 and 527 B.C. He was a distant relation of Solon. **Because Solon's reforms had proved unsuccessful in solving many of the problems in Athens, political rivalry and instability returned.**

Peisistratos championed the lower classes, the *Men of the Hills* or the *Hyperakrioi* who had previously not had political representation. His rise to power could be seen as an early form of **populism** – there is no doubt that many of his reforms did challenge the elite and led to more rights for the poor. Though populism as a concept in modern politics did not exist in Ancient Greece, they did understand the dangers of opportunistic democrats.

Populism: a political approach that appeals to the poorer or ordinary citizens and opposing the elite – usually for political gain.

Peisistratos gained notoriety for the successful capture of Nisaea in neighbouring Megara in 565 B.C. **This victory was important because it led to the end of an unofficial trade-blockade against Athens at this time, which had been causing massive food shortages – this would particularly affect the poor.**

In Athens at the time the main conflict was between three factions. One was the *Pedeis* led by Lycurgus; these were the wealthy landowners. Another the *Paraloi* led by Megacles of the Alcmaeonidae clan; these were the population living along the coast of Attica and were less wealthy and powerful than the *Pedeis* but did have control of the sea. Finally, there was the poorest faction the ***Hyperakrioi***, men who resided in the hills of Athens and had little resources; **Peisistratos took up their cause and used their numbers to his advantage.**

Upon returning victorious from the Megara incident, Peisistratos apparently injured himself as an excuse to request a bodyguard from the Athenian assembly, which they provided. **With this bodyguard and the support of the *Hyperakrioi* he seized the acropolis in Athens and the political power. Peisistratos held power from 561 to 527 B.C.** being ousted twice – when the *Pedeis* and *Paraloi* for brief periods lay aside their differences and united to overthrow him. Once such a time around 555 B.C., returning some 3 to 6 years later in a golden chariot with a tall woman dressed as Athena at his side – this was clearly a political ploy to give the impression that he had the support of the goddess herself. Most Athenians would have recognised this. The second was for some 10 years either 1 or 6 years after his first exile. He returned having gained resources from the Attic silver mines and support from local cities. He continued to rule until 527 B.C. to be succeeded by his two sons Hipparchus and Hippias.

It is important to distinguish between what we consider a tyrant today and of the time of Peisistratos; **at this time it did not mean an oppressive ruler but rather a non-hereditary king who seizes power against the traditions of the contemporary society.** Peisistratos was a champion of more egalitarian policies – similar to those of Solon:

- He redistributed lands from the wealthy to the poor.
- He offered loans to those in need.
- He encouraged the growth of olives and trade in Athens from the Black sea to Italy, from Cyprus and Ionia to Syria. Pottery from Attica in this period has been found across the Mediterranean, showing the extent of the Athenian trade.
- He also commissioned the first aqueducts for Athens, providing a clean water source, and other public building projects.
- He instituted the Panathenic games and was the first to attempt a definitive version of the Homeric texts.

When forming an opinion of Peisistratos' rule, we must consider that while he did seize power through a coup with the support of the poorest, gained through promises of reform, he did in fact act upon many of these promises and protect the poorer citizens.

However, the lack of political representation and equity among the other factions under his reign and the reign of his sons, led to the eventual establishment of democratic reforms which would be designed to counter powerful individuals or factions gaining too much power.

Cleisthenes



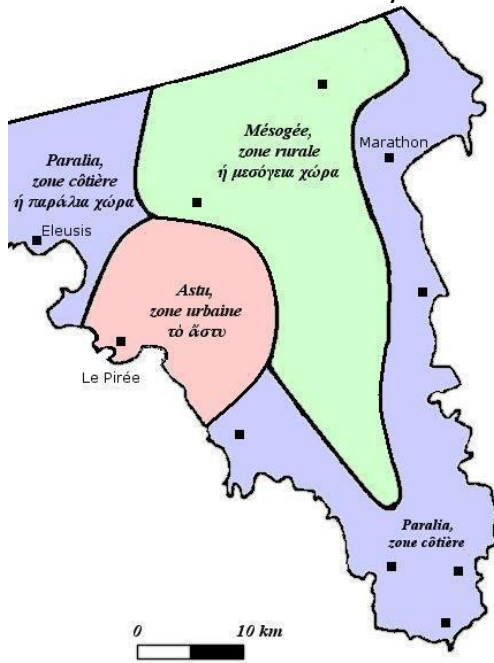
The Areopagus and Pnyx where the Athenian Ekklesia would meet and democratically vote upon the laws proposed by the Boule.

In 510 B.C. Hippias, the son of Peisistratos and the king of Athens, was overthrown by Cleomenes I of Sparta with the aid of the Alcmaeonidae clan (Cleisthenes clan). The Spartans opposed other tyrants and favoured oligarchic governments; both Cleisthenes and another man, Isagoras, were political rivals at the fall of Hippias. With the aid of the Spartans, Isagoras established an oligarchic government in Athens.

With the support of Cleomenes I and his force brought from Sparta, Isagoras exiled Cleisthenes and began disposing certain Athenian citizens from their lands. They then tried to dissemble the Athenian Council of 400 or *Boule*, established first under Solon, but then re-established by Cleisthenes while he had been in Athens. But the Athenian citizens resisted and trapped Isagoras, the Spartans, and Cleomenes on the Acropolis. **The Athenians were in favour of political reforms and the authority of the *Boule*.** Isagoras and Cleomenes were subsequently banished, and Cleisthenes was recalled from exile. **Upon his return, he instituted the democratic reforms into the Athenian constitution.**

Cleisthenes' reforms:

- He divided the landscape of Athens into three zones: the *asty* (urban), the *paralia* (Coastal), and the *mesogeia* (Inland) – representing many of the divisions as they had existed in Peisistratos' rise to power.



The three geographical zones of Athens

- He re-organised and gave more political authority to the 139 *demes*, areas of residence which had existed in Athens during the 6th century and earlier; **the *demes* would function as a local political body, led by a *demarchos* who would take care of the *demes* various civil, religious, and military affairs.**
- These *demes* were then organised into a group called a *trittyes*, (a third) **10 for each of the zones.** There were 30 of these *trittyes*.
- He then dissolved the traditional 4 tribes of Athenian aristocracy, dividing them into **10 tribes**; each of these tribes would have **3 *trittyes*, one from each of the three zones, one *asty*, one *paralia*, and one *mesogeia*.** This meant to regionalism, the favouring of political policies in favour of one geographical area was diminished. No longer would citizens of the city, coast, or inland be rivals but were compelled to work together for their common interests. The 10 tribes were given names associated with a legendary hero such as *Erechtheis* named after *Erechtheus* or *Aigeis* named for *Aegeus*, both legendary kings of Athens.
- Cleisthenes also increased the number in the **Boule to 500 – 50 from each tribe –**, previously the 400 under Solon. **The Boule would then oversee the work of certain magistrates and propose laws to the assembly, the Ekklesia, which would then be rejected, amended, or accepted.**

- The Ekklesia was made up of **6,000 citizens** out of the 30,000-40,000 male citizens of Athens from any class. **They would vote on laws to be proposed to the nomothetai** where the law would be ratified. They would also vote on all decrees and treaties proposed and vote in certain magistrates. The Ekklesia was administered by the Boule.
- Cleisthenes established a system of **sortition** for political offices to be fulfilled. **All citizens in the Ekklesia or Boule had a tenure of 1 year.** This meant that political offices would be fulfilled by volunteering citizens through random allotment rather than election. The Athenian democracy distrusted the election process, seeing it as a means for professional politicians to easily corrupt their electorate and gain political power.
- **Ostracism** was likely introduced by Cleisthenes also. This was a system by which a vote by the majority of citizens voting could exile a citizen of Athens – this citizen would be seen as a threat to the democratic system. He would be forced to leave Athens for 10 years, but his property would remain untouched. It was another means for countering corruption and the rise of powerful individuals or populists tyrants.
- The court system, the *Dikasteria*, was reformed by Cleisthenes also, and would have between **201-5001 jurors** selected each day, 500 from each tribe. They would judge civil and criminal affairs, judge the legality of decrees made by the Ekklesia, and examine the work of the magistrates at the end of their term.
- **(See graph below for full Athenian Political System)**

These reforms would form the basis of the Athenian political system for the next 200 years or so until Athens was conquered by Philip II of Macedon in 338 B.C.

During this tenure of 200 years, Athenian democracy went through many changes; sometimes these changes made it less democratic than Cleisthenes' system – such as a reduction in the size of the Boule or Ekklesia – other times strengthening the democratic system, such as the substitution of income to citizens taking up public office for the year or the paying of jurors.

Spartan Political System

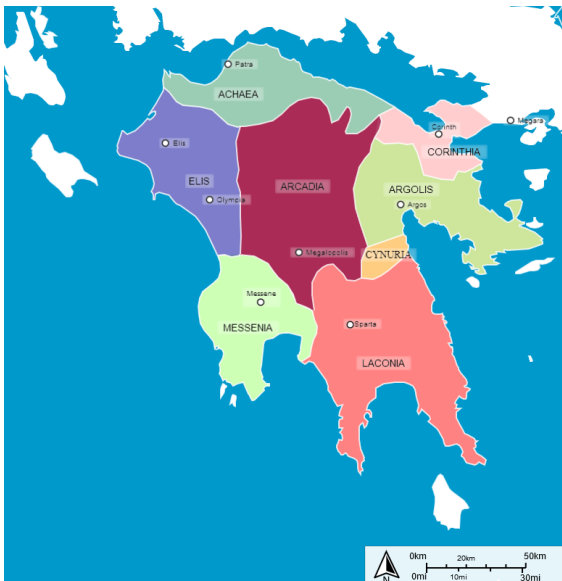


Statue of King Leonidas of Sparta

The Spartan system of government was quite different from the Athenian Democracy. It was a mixed government system – similar in divisions to a modern Republic (Monarch/President, Upper Chamber, and Lower Assembly). There was an oligarchic, democratic, and monarchic element to the political system.

The system was apparently founded by the semi-mythical **Lycurgus** some time in the 9th century – according to Plutarch. However, it is more likely to have developed over time.

In order to understand the system, we must look at both the political structure and the societal divisions in Sparta and its surrounding lands. Sparta itself is a small city, however, it controlled a large surrounding area, called Laconia, and would conquer other territories such as Messenia which would serve as vassal states to Spartan authority.



Map of Peloponnese Regions: Sparta controlled Laconia and Messenia until liberated after the Battle of Leuctra 371 B.C.

Sparta was a highly militaristic society: elitist perhaps to the point of modern Fascism or National Socialism, highly conservative, religious and traditionalist, and highly anti-democratic and anti-tyrant. They would most often favour oligarchic systems in other Greek *Poleis*, as these could be more easily controlled and influenced. Furthermore, oligarchic government most reflected their own political structure which favoured political power in the hands of a few rather than the many but had many checks on the power of their kings.

This militaristic system was built to keep the lower classes oppressed and prevent rebellion. Therefore Sparta was often very conservative in foreign policy since their army could not be far from Sparta itself without risking rebellion from the lower classes – the Helots.

Spartan Social Classes



Spartiates from the movie 300 – the Λ on the shield was an “L” for Lacedaemonians (Spartans)

Helots

Helots were **serfs or slaves** owned by the state and made up **90% of the population** controlled by Sparta. This included part of the regions in Laconia and **Messenia** who had both been conquered by the citizens of Sparta in Archaic Period (9th - 8th century B.C.) They had little or no rights under Spartan law and were subject to the demands of the elite. They were to work the land and provide Sparta with food.

Perioiki (literally *Those who live around*)

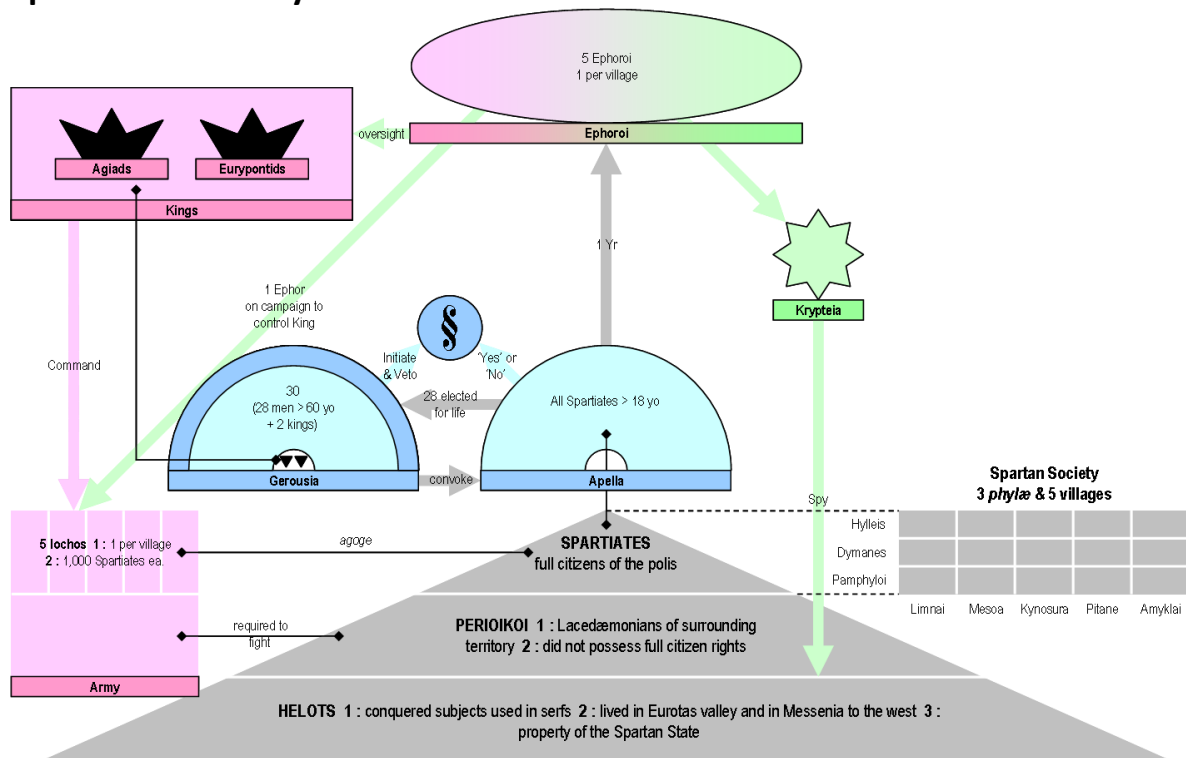
This were not political, non-professional soldiery, civilians in Spartan society. They lived in many of the urban centres surrounding Sparta. They had some rights of protection and practiced commerce or agriculture but had no political representation in the Spartan system. They would be required to fight as part of the army.

Spartiates

These were the citizens of Sparta. They were those who had undergone military training, the **agoge**. At the age of 7, young boys were taken into the system and instructed in military training by *paidonomos*. There were three stages in the *agoge*: the *paides* (ages 7–17), the

paidiskoi (ages 17–19), and the *hēbōntes* (ages 20–29). From the age of 20, each Spartan boy would become part of the Spartan army and continue to live in the barracks. They would also be voted into the public messes – if they failed in the vote they could return each year for 10 years. By the age of 30, each successful Spartan would be eligible to vote, for public office, and to marry.

Spartan Political System



Spartan Political System

Apella

This was the **general assembly** of all Spartan citizens, made up of the 3 *phylae* and 5 villages of the Spartan society. They would elect the 5 Ephors each year and any new members for the Gerousia, and they would vote yes or no on all laws or actions proposed by the Gerousia. **They were not permitted to discuss any of the issues put forward to them**, or to control any of the proceedings of the assembly, or to be addressed by any foreign dignitaries.

Gerousia

This was a council of elders elected for life from *apella* and would often be relations of the two royal families in Sparta. They were a council of 28 members over the age of 60 plus the two Spartan kings making 30 in all. They would propose all high-state policies and laws to be voted upon by the *apella*. They acted as a council for the actions of the Kings.

Ephors

There were 5 elected representatives – one from each village – from the *apella* for each year and could not be re-elected again. They were the closest to a democratic element in the Spartan system and would oversee the proceedings and actions of the Kings in politics and the military. They were perhaps the most powerful element in the Spartan system aside from the Kings. They also controlled the *Krypteia*, a sort of police aspect of the Spartan

system made up of the Spartan youths who were responsible for terrorising the Helots – keeping them under the authority of the state.

Two Kings

The Spartans had two Kings: the Agiad and Eurypontid families, both claiming ancestry from Heracles. **Their role in the government was mainly religious, judicial, militaristic, and ceremonial.** They were members of the Gerousia. They performed many religious functions in Spartan society which was significant as the Spartans were highly religious. **They would also lead the army into battle.** However, from the time of Cleomenes I and Demaratus, it was decided that only one of the Kings would lead the army at one time (Demaratus had changed his mind at the last moment and decided not to join his forces with Cleomenes in the interference of Athenian politics – later being exiled for this action).

Later most of the power of the Kings would be redistributed among the Ephors and Gerousia. For example, by the time of the Persian wars, the Kings lost the ability to declare war and would be accompanied into battle by an Ephor who would oversee all decisions taken by the king.

Decline of Spartan System

Once Thebes broke Spartan control of Messenia in 371 B.C., Sparta could no longer support their militaristic system without their serf/slave population, the Helots. It is also important to note that because so few persons rose to the status of citizens to begin with, and because they were so selective and insular in their political and military system, their population of citizens declined. The loss of a few hundred citizens could cripple Spartan power. This is why it was so important for Spartans to win every battle and for Spartiates not to be taken prisoner. Otherwise they would be greatly reduced in military and political strength.



