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2. Athens: The Polis

Robert L. Bloom
Gettysburg College

Basil L. Crapster
Gettysburg College

Harold A. Dunkelberger
Gettysburg College

See next page for additional authors

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2. Athens: The Polis

Abstract
Within the Greek city-states as they developed in the first millennium B. C . there were several different forms of government, ranging somewhere between the two extremes represented by Sparta and Athens. During the early period of their history the Spartans, who had conquered and reduced to serfdom the Laconians among whom they settled, chose to meet the increasing pressure of population by treating their neighbors to a similar fate, in this way becoming the largest of the city-states. After crushing a long and serious revolt, they turned themselves into a military society in order to maintain control over these subjugated peoples. [*excerpt*]

Keywords
Contemporary Civilization, Greek history, Greek civilization, city-states, Athens, Sparta, Ancient Greece

Disciplines
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Comments
This is a part of Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization. The Contemporary Civilization page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man,* as well as the Table of Contents for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors
Robert L. Bloom, Basil L. Crapster, Harold A. Dunkelberger, Charles H. Glatfelter, Richard T. Mara, Norman E. Richardson, and W. Richard Schubart

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2. The Polis

Within the Greek city-states as they developed in the first millenium B. C. there were several different forms of government, ranging somewhere between the two extremes represented by Sparta and Athens. During the early period of their history the Spartans, who had conquered and reduced to serfdom the Laconians among whom they settled, chose to meet the increasing pressure of population by treating their neighbors to a similar fate, in this way becoming the largest of the city-states. After crushing a long and serious revolt, they turned themselves into a military society in order to maintain control over these subjugated peoples.

Special obligations set apart Spartan male citizens. Representing no more than five or ten per cent of the state's population, they underwent a rigorous program of training to prepare themselves to be soldiers or rulers. They were expected to do nothing else; Sparta was the only Greek city-state with what we would call a standing army. This program really began

at birth, for infants who gave no promise of physical fitness were left to die. At the age of seven, boys entered upon a strict regimen which kept them living in barracks until they were thirty. They were taught to be unquestioning in devotion to the state; severe in everyday life; and tough, enduring, and cunning in battle. At the age of twenty they were expected to marry, but only within the citizen class. Male citizens between the ages of thirty and sixty ate in a common mess. Those over the age of sixty, having completed their military obligations, were expected when called upon to play the role of elder statesmen.

Most of the commerical activities, which the Spartans kept at a minimum, were left to a group of non-citizens called the perioikoi, who had no share whatsoever in the government. The helots, or serfs, who comprised the majority of the population, performed most of the agricultural and household labor. They were assigned by the state to work for the citizen class, but some of what they produced was their own. A close watch was kept over the helots at all times. When uprisings occurred, they were dealt with swiftly and sternly. Prospective visitors or immigrants were discouraged. Outsiders could expect to be asked to leave if they remained too long.

For several centuries Spartan efforts were directed successfully toward maintaining these internal arrangements intact, without change. To that end, political power was vested entirely in a small and select group. There was an assembly to which belonged those male citizens over thirty years of age who were fulfilling the requirements listed above, but it was overshadowed by the executive organs of government. These were three in number. First, there were two hereditary kings, who were little more than figureheads. Second, there was a council of twenty-eight men, elected for life from certain noble families. Members of this council, the gerousia, had to be more than sixty years of age. Their primary duties were to submit proposals to the Assembly and act as a court. Third, there were five ephors, who were the chief executive officials. They enforced the laws, conducted foreign policy, and were responsible for keeping the helots under control.

Many other Greeks were inclined to admire the high sense of duty which the Spartan system developed in its citizens. While not desiring that system for themselves, these other Greeks would admit that it had the consent of the Spartan citizens (and only their consent was considered necessary) and that it developed citizens according to the Spartan ideal, however narrow that ideal might be. Sparta has been compared with later totalitarian and aggressive states, but it should be remembered that the adjective "spartan" which is part of our vocabulary means simply brave, hardy, or enduring. Actually, until they regarded the Delian Confederation (of which they were not a member) a distinct threat to their security, the Spartans were not disposed to use military strength aggressively. One reason for this was the Spartan fear that foreign

involvement would disrupt their internal social arrangements, to the benefit of the helots, a fear which in time proved to be fully justified. All in all, it must be said that the militarization of Sparta stifled a thriving cultural life which had begun to develop there, and its contributions to Greek Civilization during the so-called Golden Age were limited indeed.

The contrast between Athens and Sparta is obvious at many points. The Athenian polis was the result of the early and peaceful union of the several communities which occupied the peninsula of Attica. At first like most other city-states a tribal monarchy, it later became an aristocracy dominated by a small number of noble and wealthy landowning families. As industry and commerce developed and as the Athenian economy and society became more complex, the aristocracy was opposed by the rising businessmen and also by small farmers, many of whom fared badly during the switch from a subsistence to a commerical economy. The merchants and farmers supported a series of rulers, called tyrants, who gained control of the government legally or illegally and who sponsored changes in which the old aristocracy reluctantly but peacefully concurred. The end result of these changes was Athenian democracy, which had become a reality by about 500 B. C. (just prior to the Persian Wars). It is possible to discern a roughly similar development in the polity of other city-states.

As was the case in Sparta, there were three groups in Athenian society. At the bottom were the slaves, most of whom were employed in domestic service and in industry and most of whom were apparently fairly well treated. Next were the metics, who carried on many of the commerical activities and who had considerably greater freedom and prestige than their Spartan counterparts. At the top were the citizens, as in Sparta a minority of the total population. For many years it was possible for a few metics to become citizens, but by far the greater number of citizens acquired that status by birth.

The government of democratic Athens was vested primarily in (1) an assembly, composed of male citizens who met frequently in the open air and voted on many important matters; (2) a Council of Five Hundred, chosen by lot by local governmental units, which, acting in groups of fifty at a time, carried on most of the routine executive business; (3) a board of ten generals, elected annually by the Assembly to command the military forces (later they began performing executive duties too); and (4) large judicial bodies (ranging in size from about 100 to about 1,000 members), chosen by lot, which acted as judge and jury in trying cases. Athenian democracy was based upon the belief that the average citizen should not entrust the duties of public office to professionals, but should carry them out himself. This conviction was reflected in the elections by lot and in the provisions for frequent rotation in office. For example, the presiding officer of the Assembly served for a term of one day. An amazing number of Athenian citizens held public office during the years when these arrangements were in force.

The foregoing is a description of Athenian democracy at its best. The continuing success of such a system depends in large part upon citizens* rather consistently putting their own interests second to the best interests of the state. It appears that this has been difficult for men to do over an extended period of time in a constantly changing world. The Athenians were no exceptions to this generalization. Particularly after the establishment of its so-called empire, in the middle fifth century, Athens developed into a bustling and cosmopolitan industrial and commercial center which fostered the growth of an individualism that could not be contained, it seemed, within the framework of the old polis. There is ample evidence that during the later fifth and the fourth centuries the level of Athenian democracy declined. Interest in active political participation flagged in favor of active pursuit of individual advantage, except when the government could be used to promote that advantage. The citizen-soldier gave way to the mercenary -- an ominous development in a state which had put such strong emphasis on the average citizen's performance of his duties.

In evaluating Greek democracy, we may point to its brevity and to the fact that only males who were citizens ever participated in it. We may long debate the question of how many citizens ever had the time or the inclination, or both, to play the active political role which history has inferred they played. Nevertheless, the achievement of Athens and similar city-states was real enough. It indicated a remarkable political development in the Ancient world, where government responsible to the people was all but unknown, as well as a remarkable political maturity on the part of the Greeks.

One feature of the city-state before its decline remains to be discussed, for the polis was much more than merely a unit of government. It encompassed the whole of a life in a way that the American has seldom, if ever, approximated, not even in the New England town meeting, and in a way that he finds it exceedingly difficult to understand. For the Greek citizen the polis was the teacher of virtue and molder of character. In it and by it the many capacities of his life were developed and then brought to focus. It was his society, his state, his church, all in one. When he participated in the everyday affairs of state, in the Olympic games, or in the public festivals; when he watched, along with thousands of others, the performance of a Greek tragedy; or when he put forth his best work as a mason, sculptor, or writer, he felt he was doing something that was an altogether necessary part of the complete and virtuous life, something that was far from being an inconvenience or a curse.

The Greek economy was never developed to the point where it produced a very high level of living for many people, even for the citizen class. Greek citizens, and not only those in Sparta, appear to have been content to dress plainly, to eat sparingly and simply, and to live in unpretentious houses, since they found the fulfillment of their lives in other

pursuits. "Man is a creature who lives in a polis," wrote Aristotle, as if to say that outside the polis he could not be a man. The Greeks in fact regarded non-Greeks as barbarians. They would not deny the cultural achievements of the Egyptians or the Persians, but they were convinced that these foreigners lacked the institution without which the good life was impossible of attainment: the polis.

Every society must mediate the claims of the individual and the claims of the group to paramount consideration. The polis provided a balance between the life of the individual and the life of the group that stimulated many of the latent capacities resident in the Greeks. It was a balance which made the individual who was neither a king nor a priest stand out in an almost unique way in the Ancient world. The individualism that it nurtured, as has been suggested, was a quality to be expressed through the city-state and not apart from it. Unbridled individualism cannot exist in any human society, and it was never encouraged in Classical Greece. Along with Greek freedom and democracy, we must remember that the community decided which infants were to be permitted to survive and which were to be left to die. In Athens it was possible to ostracize a man, to send him into permanent exile, if enough citizens voted to expel him, acting from motives that could be honorable but that also could be selfish.

One of the most famous evaluations of the Greek polis was that put by the historian Thucydides (c. 471 - c. 400 B. C.) into the mouth of the Athenian statesman, Pericles (c. 490 - 429 B. C.). For about thirty years Pericles was the outstanding figure in Athenian politics, commanding the confidence of the Assembly and frequently holding the office of general, one of the few in which a citizen could expect long tenure. The Age of Pericles coincided with the height of Athenian power. Political democracy was extended. The energies of the polis were marshaled and many of the buildings on the Acropolis (including the Parthenon) which had been damaged or destroyed during the Persian Wars were rebuilt. In his foreign policy Pericles opposed the Spartans and in 431 B. C. war broke out between the two states. Pericles died during an outbreak of the plague two years later. The funeral oration, from which the following excerpts are taken, was delivered in 430 B. C. in honor of the soldiers who had died during the first year of the war. Later ages have often forgotten much of the varied and often contradictory Greek experience which is left to us and have chosen to remember this picture drawn by Pericles as summing up what was characteristically Greek:

> ....But before I praise the dead, I should like to point out by what principles of action we rose to power, and under what institutions and through what manner of life our empire became great. For I conceive that such thoughts are not unsuited to the occasion, and that this numerous assembly of citizens and strangers may profitably listen to them.

'Our form of government does not enter into rivalry with the institutions of others. We do not copy our neighbours, but are 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 the law secures equal justice to all alike in their private disputes, the claim of excellence is also recognised; 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. Neither is poverty a bar, but a man may benefit his country whatever be the obscurity of his condition. There is no exclusiveness in our public life, and in our private intercourse we are not suspicious of one another, nor angry with our neighbour if he does what he likes; we do not put on sour looks at him which, though harmless, are not pleasant. While we are thus unconstrained in our private intercourse, a spirit of reverence pervades our public acts; we are prevented from doing wrong by respect for the authorities and for the laws, having an especial regard to those which are ordained for the protection of the injured as well as to those unwritten laws which bring upon the transgressor of them the reprobation of the general sentiment.

'And we have not forgotten to provide for our weary spirits many relaxations from toil; we have regular games and sacrifices throughout the year; our homes are beautiful and elegant; and the delight which we daily feel in all these things helps to banish melancholy. Because of the greatness of our city the fruits of the whole earth flow in upon us; so that we enjoy the goods of other countries as freely as of our own.

'Then, again, our military training is in many respects superior to that of our adversaries. Our city is thrown open to the world, and we never expel a foreigner or prevent him from seeing or learning anything of which the secret if revealed to an enemy might profit him. We rely not upon management or trickery, but upon our own hearts and hands. And in the matter of education, whereas they from early youth are always undergoing laborious exercises which are to make them brave, we live at ease, and yet are equally ready to face the perils which they face....

Pericles

'If then we prefer to meet danger with a light heart but without laborious training, and with a courage which is gained by habit and not enforced by law, are we not greatly the gainers? Since we do not anticipate the pain, although, when the hour comes, we can be as brave as those who never allow themselves to rest; and thus too our city is equally admirable in peace and in war. For we are lovers of the beautiful, yet simple in our tastes, and we cultivate the mind without loss of manliness. Wealth we employ, not for talk and ostentation, but when there is a real use for it. To avow poverty with us is no disgrace; the true disgrace

is in doing nothing to avoid it. An Athenian citizen does not neglect the state because he takes care of his own household; and even those of us who are engaged in business have a very fair idea of politics. We alone regard a man who takes no interest in public affairs, not as a harmless, but as a useless character; and if few of us are originators, we are all sound judges of a policy. The great impediment to action is, in our opinion, not discussion, but the want of that knowledge which is gained by discussion preparatory to action. [For we have a peculiar power of thinking before we act and of acting too, whereas other men are courageous from ignorance but hesitate upon reflection.] And they are surely to be esteemed the bravest spirits who, having the clearest sense both of the pains and pleasures of life, do not on that account shrink from danger. [In doing good, again, we are unlike others; we make our friends by conferring, not by receiving favours. Now he who confers a favour is the firmer friend, because he would fain by kindness keep alive the memory of an obligation; but the recipient is colder in his feelings, because he knows that in requiting another's generosity he will not be winning gratitude but only paying a debt.] We alone do good to our neighbours not upon a calculation of interest, but in the confidence of freedom and in a frank and fearless spirit. [To sum up: I say that Athens is the school of Hellas, and that the individual Athenian in his own person seems to have the power of adapting himself to the most varied forms of action with the utmost versatility and grace.] This is no passing and idle word, but truth and fact; and the assertion is verified by the position to which these qualities have raised the state. For in the hour of trial Athens alone among her contemporaries is superior to the report of her. No enemy who comes against her is indignant at the reverses which he sustains at the hands of such a city; no subject complains that his masters are unworthy of him. And we shall assuredly not be without witnesses; there are mighty monuments of our power which will make us the wonder of this and of succeeding ages; we shall not need the praises of Homer or of any other panegyrist whose poetry may please for the moment, although his representation of the facts will not bear the light of day. For we have compelled every land and every sea to open a path for our valour, and have everywhere planted eternal memorials of our friendship and of our enmity. Such is the city for whose sake these men nobly fought and died; they could not bear the thought that she might be taken from them; and every one of us who survive should gladly toil on her behalf. *

* Thucydides Translated into English . . . trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1900), I, 127-131.