

## 11: Athens *System Action Patterns: Making Decisions*

### Investigation: Athenian Society

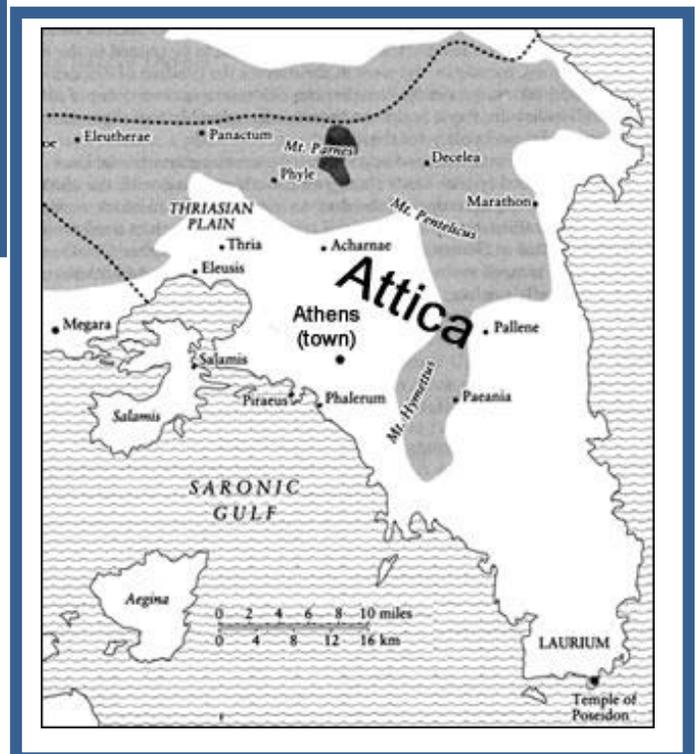
When Sparta was a city-state, another Greek city-state—Athens—was its major rival. Sometimes the two city-states were allies against a common enemy (Persia), sometimes they co-existed peacefully, sometimes they were bitter enemies. Athens was the largest city in Greece, and the one with the most historical impact.

*Use the information on this and following pages to analyze Athenian society, using the Model categories (setting, demography, patterns of action, shared ideas).*

<http://fonsetorigo.livejournal.com/40532.html>



<http://www.pbs.org/empires/thegreeks/igreeks/map.html>



Original Material copyright ©2015 by Marion Brady and Howard Brady. This material may be downloaded and printed at no cost by teachers or mentors for use with their own students only. All other rights reserved.

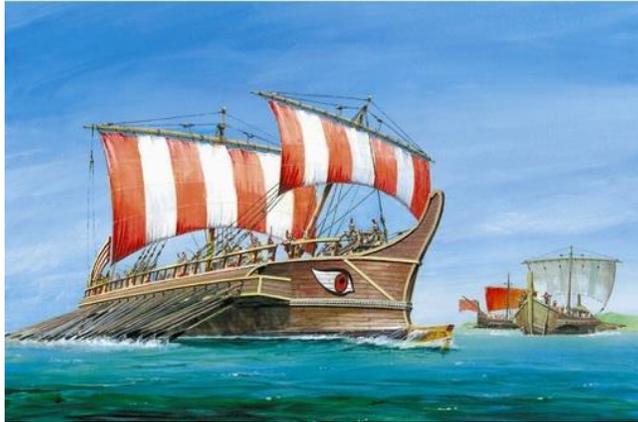
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Athens#/media/File:Akropolis\\_by\\_Leo\\_von\\_Klenze.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Athens#/media/File:Akropolis_by_Leo_von_Klenze.jpg) (Public Domain)



Painting of Athens, depicted in classical times (about 450 BCE), as visualized by 19<sup>th</sup> century German architect and artist Leo von Klenze. Painted in 1846. The architect/artist spent time in Athens doing research for the German government, and making measurements of ancient buildings and temple ruins.

Some details in the painting are known to be wrong, but the overall character and many details are correct. The tall statue of Athena towering behind the temple at the center is exaggerated, although a 10-meter tall bronze statue of the goddess was in that location. Placed there in 456 BCE, it remained for a thousand years.

The hill covered with the temples is called the Acropolis. The large temple at the upper right is the Parthenon, also dedicated to Athena, goddess of wisdom and city protector. (The Parthenon still stands.) In the foreground is the Agora—a central social, political and commercial gathering place (although large outdoor political and government meetings were held at other nearby locations).

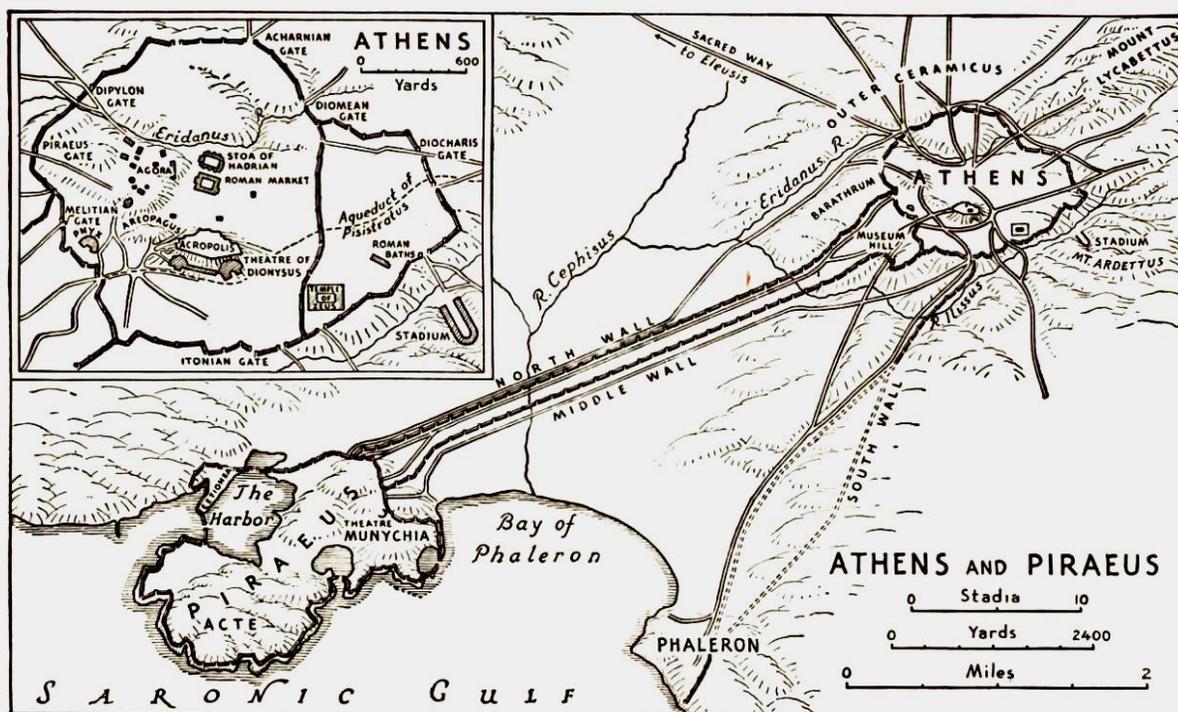


<http://platos-academy.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/trireme.jpg>

The “trireme,” with three banks of oarsmen on each side (about 170 total oarsmen), was a fast, lightweight and maneuverable warship. For many years, Athens (through its port, Piraeus) was the dominant Mediterranean sea-power, with a large number of these ships. Before battle, the sails and masts were taken down. Their usual way of fighting other ships was by ramming. Athenian triremes were not built using public funds, but sponsored by wealthy Athenians. Those operating oars were freemen, not slaves.

<http://www.goodfon.su/wallpaper/saronicheskiy-zaliv-egeyskoe.html>





<http://www.greeceathensaegeaninfo.com/h-maps/greek-mainland/map-ancient-athens-piraeus.htm>

In 478 BCE the walls erected around Athens enclosed an area of 3.5 square kilometers, including Piraeus, the harbor district. The full population of the city was over 140,000, but only 40,000 were full (male) citizens.

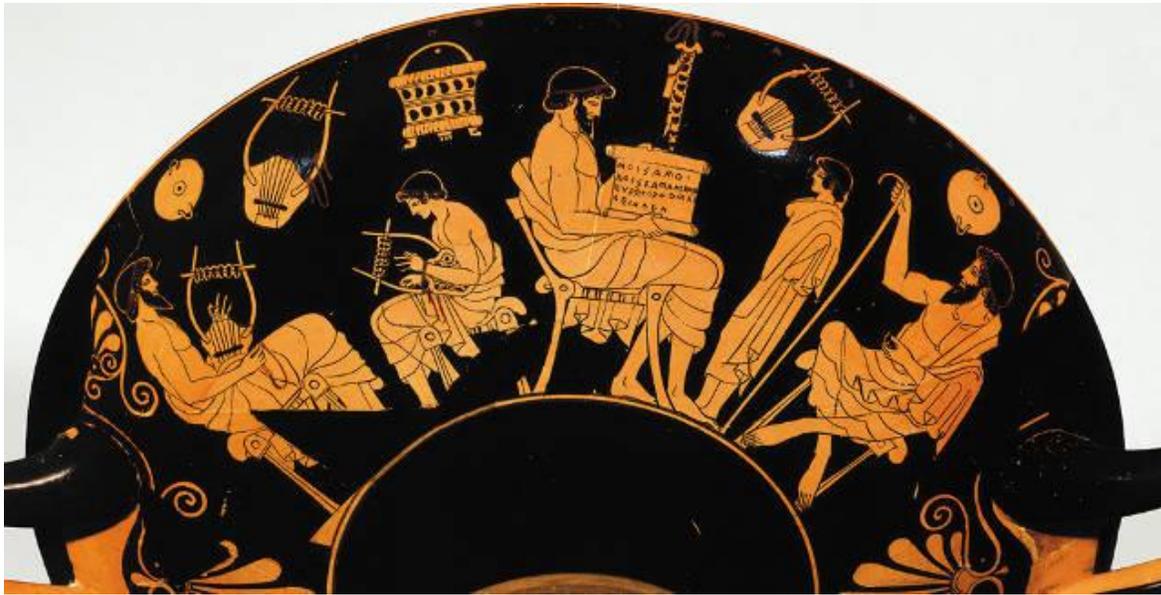
Peak population occurred in 431 BCE. Estimated population then:

<b>Male citizens, their wives and children:</b>		<b>172,000</b>
<b>Male citizens of hoplite status or better:</b>	<b>25,000</b>	
<b>Thetes—hired male laborers:</b>	<b>18,000</b>	
<b>Metics: Free non-citizens, of hoplite status:</b>		<b>28,500</b>
(Laborers, craftsmen, and soldiers or oarsmen, usually from other Greek cities)		
<b>Slaves (Lowest class, but generally well treated, some with important jobs):</b>	<b>115,000</b>	
<b>Total population:</b>		<b>315,500</b>

This is based on "The Population of Ancient Athens" - A.W.Gomme - 1933

[http://www.ancientgreekbattles.net/Pages/47932\\_Population.htm](http://www.ancientgreekbattles.net/Pages/47932_Population.htm)

**Note:** These estimated population figures include major parts of Attica outside of Athens, governed as part of the city, where many people considered citizens of Athens lived.



<http://www-en.elculture.gr/exhibitions/paideia-dimokratia-2013-547564>

Athenian craftsmen with outstanding skill made and decorated pottery used in Greece. It was also exported to many parts of the Mediterranean world.



<http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Spring04/Tyler/PeopleG.html>

*Begin listing differences between the societies of Athens and Sparta. How might the differences in setting be related to differences in ideas and ways of acting? (There were no city walls around Sparta, for example.)*



[http://www.ancientresource.com/images/greek/greek\\_coins/athens/athens-tetradrachm-cg2170.jpg](http://www.ancientresource.com/images/greek/greek_coins/athens/athens-tetradrachm-cg2170.jpg)



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/antiquitiesproject/4847736541>

Silver and gold Athenian coins

### Some famous names from ancient Athens

#### Philosophers and Scholars:

- Socrates—c. 469-399 BCE, teacher and thinker, taught by asking questions
- Plato—c. 427-347 BCE, disciple of Socrates, founder of “Academy” school, author of documents illustrating and expanding ideas of Socrates
- Aristotle—c. 384-322 BCE, educated at Academy, founded “Lyceum” school (early university), prolific author on many subjects.

#### Playwrights: (Note that their plays are still performed. Most are written in verse.)

- Aeschylus—c. 525-456 BCE, “Father of Greek tragedy”
- Sophocles—495-406 BCE, the most famous ancient Greek playwright
- Euripides—480-406 BCE
- Aristophanes—446-388 BCE, wrote comic and satirical plays
- Names of at least 110 other ancient Athenian playwrights are known, although nearly all of their plays are lost.

#### Artists:

- Iktinos & Kallikrates: architects, designed Acropolis temples, including Parthenon
- Pheidias—c. 480-430 BCE, sculptor, statues of Athena on Acropolis, and much more
- Other famous sculptors: Polykleitos, Praxiteles, Skopas, Lysippas

*What does the list above suggest about Athenian shared ideas and patterns of action?*



The Acropolis as it appears now. Compare to the painting on Page 2.

## Investigation: Decision-Making Patterns

One of the most important sub-categories of Patterns of Action is “Making important group decisions.” This sub-category for large groups such as city-states and nations is also called “politics,” and the patterns of action for decision making—the political subsystem—is the foundation of government.

Politics is often complicated, but one of the most important questions is, “Who makes the big decisions?” Typically, three or four possible “standard” answers to this question are possible:

- One person
- A few people—an “oligarchy” (Greek *oligarkhia*)
- Many or most people—a “democracy” (Greek *demokratia*)
- Some mixture of the above.

***Data on the following pages describe historical changes in Athens. As you read the descriptions, identify (1) who is making decisions, (2) any problems that result, and (3) changes and their effects, both good and bad. Record your conclusions in your journal.***

***Where possible, use block-and-arrow diagrams to show systemic interrelationships and changes you identify.***

Aristotle, scholar and philosopher, wrote about Athens:<sup>1</sup>

There was strife for a long time between the upper classes and the rest of the people. Not only was the manner of government at this time a complete oligarchy, but the poorer classes, men, women, and children, were *serfs*, almost slaves of the rich. The poor cultivated the lands of the rich, were forced to give a portion of the crops as rent, and were allowed to keep only a fraction of what they produced.

The whole country was in the hands of a few persons. If tenants failed to pay their rent they became total slaves, and their children with them. All loans, if not repaid on time, caused the debtor to become a slave. This was the rule until the time of Solon, who was the first to appear as the champion of the people.

But the hardest and bitterest part, in the eyes of the masses, was their state of serfdom. They were discontented with every part of their lives, because they had no part nor share in anything.

As soon as he was at the head of affairs [594 BCE], Solon liberated the people once and for all by prohibiting all loans that could lead to the debtor becoming a slave. He also made laws that cancelled all debts, public and private.

There are three points in the governing rules set up by Solon which appear to be its most democratic features:

- First and most important, prohibiting loans secured by the debtor's person [*i.e. becoming a slave if the loan is not repaid on time*];
- Secondly, the right of every person to demand legally-enforced relief for anyone to whom wrong was being done;
- Thirdly, allowing people with problems or disputes to appeal to the jury courts [*where judgments were made by a large group of citizens voting on decisions*].

This third rule, people say, has given the masses their strength most of all, since, when the democracy is master of the voting-power, it is master of the government.

Herodotus describes battles in which the Athenians won major victories over allies of Sparta, then says:<sup>2</sup>

It is clear, from this and many other examples, that freedom is an excellent thing. When the Athenians were ruled by tyrants, they were no braver or more valiant than fighters from any of the surrounding city-states. As soon as they got rid of those rulers, they became the best warriors of all. While they were oppressed they let themselves be beaten, because they worked for a master. As soon as they got their freedom, each man was eager to do the best he could for himself.

---

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, excerpts from parts 2, 6, 9 (adapted)

<sup>2</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, Part V.78 (adapted)

Aristotle:<sup>1</sup>

The people had confidence in Cleisthenes, and he became the popular leader [508/7 BCE]. His first step was to organize the whole population of the Athenian region into ten tribes, in place of the existing four. His objective was to mix together the members of the original tribal families [*to prevent disputes between them that had caused previous problems*], and to increase the number of people that could vote and take part in government.

Next he changed the Council to have five hundred members instead of four hundred. Each new tribe now contributed fifty members, (Each old tribe had sent a hundred.)

Then he divided the country into *demes* [*villages or precincts*], and organized these demes into thirty groups called *trittyes* [*thirds*]; ten from districts in and around the city, ten from the coast, and ten from the interior. He assigned three trittyes by lottery to each tribe, so each tribe had a group of demes in each of these three localities.

All who lived in any given deme he declared fellow demes-men, so new citizens would have allegiance to their own demes, and not to one of the old families. Men were officially described by the names of their demes, and this became the accepted way that Athenians spoke of one another. He also instituted *Demarchs* [*precinct leaders*]. He gave names to the demes, some from the localities to which they belonged, some from the persons who founded them, since some of the areas no longer corresponded to localities possessing names. On the other hand, he allowed everyone to retain his family and clan and religious rites according to ancestral custom.

By these reforms the constitution became much more democratic than that of Solon.

Aristotle, in a later section:<sup>2</sup>

Pericles came forward as popular leader [*about 465 BCE*]. Under his leadership the constitution became still more democratic. He took away some of the privileges of the Areopagus [*the traditional council of aristocrats*], and, above all, he turned the policy of the state in the direction of sea power, which caused the masses to acquire self-confidence. As a result, they took more and more control of public affairs into their own hands.

When the Peloponnesian war broke out, during which the people of the region of Athens were shut up behind city walls for their protection, they became used to making a living by military service. So, partly voluntarily and partly involuntarily, they set out to take over the administration of the state itself.

**Note:** When Aristotle uses the word “constitution,” he’s not referring to a single written document, but to the accepted general rules followed by the city-state for governing.

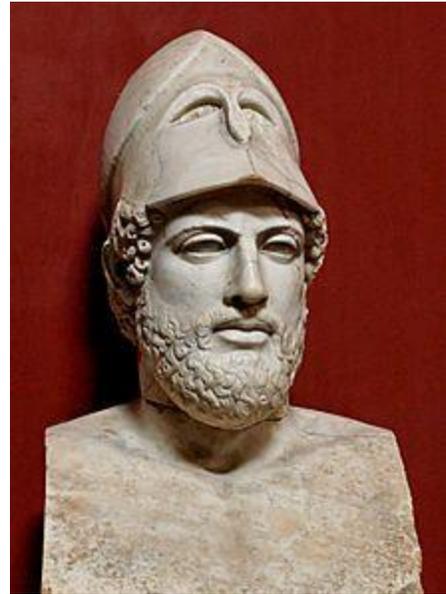
---

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, part 21/22a (adapted)

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, part 27 (adapted)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pericles\\_with\\_the\\_Corinthian\\_helmet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pericles_with_the_Corinthian_helmet)

Pericles led Athens from about 465 to 429 BCE. Under his leadership, the Parthenon and other monuments and temples on the Acropolis were built, city facilities and fortifications expanded, and the arts, literature and scholarship flourished. Athens became the cultural and educational center of the Mediterranean world. Ships in its harbor at Piraeus brought in grain from Egypt, food, goods and materials from other distant ports, and shipped out fine pottery, olive oil and much more.



Thucydides reported Pericles' speech, 431 BCE, at a public funeral in Athens for those who died in battle in the first year of the Peloponnesian War, fought between a group of city-states headed by Athens, and another group headed by Sparta:<sup>1</sup>

“Our way of governing is not copied from other states. Instead, it is an example for them to copy. Our government is called a democracy because it is run by all our citizens instead of a small group at the top. In private disputes between people, our laws treat everyone equally, no matter their status. Our officials are chosen based on their ability, not on the class they belong to, and poverty does not keep anyone from becoming an official.

“The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. We don't keep an eye on those around us, looking for trouble. We let everyone do as they please, and don't even look at them with disapproval. But this kind of freedom doesn't mean we are lawless. Deep respect teaches us to obey the officials and the laws. We protect and give justice to those who are harmed by wrong-doers that break a law, and even those harmed by someone who violates an unwritten rule that brings disgrace on the violator.

“Our way of life gives us many ways to restore our tired spirits when our work is over. We celebrate games and make religious sacrifices all the year round, and the elegance of our surrounding gives us pleasure and relief from our worries. Our great city attracts goods produced in the whole world into our harbor. To the Athenian, the fruits of other countries are as familiar a luxury as those of his own.”

“Our military policy is better than that of our opponents. Our city is open to anyone. We don't deport foreigners or keep them from coming in and observing and learning, even though sometimes this helps an enemy. We don't rely on control or secret acts by officials to protect us. We are protected by the character of our citizens.

(Continued)

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/education/thucydides.htm> (adapted)

“In education, our rivals use painful discipline on children starting with the very young, to try to make them into brave soldiers. In Athens we live exactly as we please, and yet we are just as ready as the enemy to face danger with courage. Here is proof of this: the Lacedaemonians [*Spartans*] do not invade our country alone, but bring with them all their confederates. We Athenians advance without support of others into the territory of a neighbor. When we fight on foreign soil, we usually vanquish with ease men who are defending their homes.

‘These aren’t the only ways our city is worthy of admiration. Our love of what is beautiful does not lead to wasteful spending; our love of knowledge and learning does not make us soft. We regard wealth as something to be used properly, not something to boast about. No one needs to be ashamed of being poor. Those who aren’t trying to escape poverty are the only ones that need to be ashamed.

“Here each individual is interested in both his own affairs, and also in the affairs of the state. Even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well-informed on public issues.”

## Investigation: Decision categories

The previous investigation focused on the “who” of decision-making in Athens. This investigation looks at the “what;” the kinds of decisions that were being made by and for the Athenian people. You’ll identify some of the fundamental reasons why governments exist.

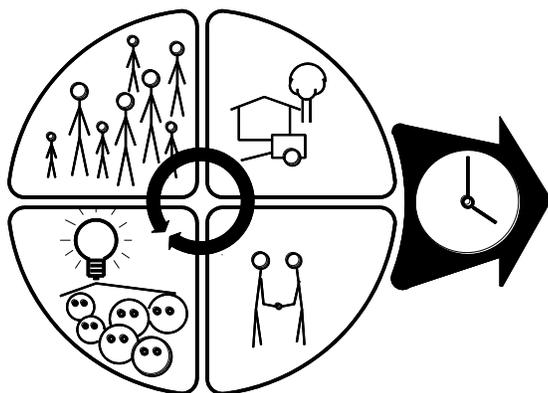
The data throughout this unit has clues to the kind of decisions being made as a part of politics. For example, the map on page 4 shows city walls built for Athenian defense. Obviously, at some point a decision was made to build them, and the government acted on that decision. Other governmental actions can be inferred, such as assigning gatekeepers to each gate in the wall.

***Working with others, use the data in this unit to identify as many kinds of Athenian political decisions and actions as possible. For each item, note the data source that suggested it.***

***Once your list is as complete as you can make it, group similar decisions and actions together, and classify them on a knowledge-organizing tree that indicates the important categories of political decision-making in Athens.***

## Follow-Up: Patterns of local decision making

***Choose a local government (such as that of your city or county), and identify the decision-making “who” and “what” patterns of action, in the same way as you did for Athens.***



### **For Teacher/Mentor--Overview:**

The major patterns of action in any society form subsystems with familiar names. The patterns of action for exchanging goods and services are the society's *economic system* (actually a subsystem). The patterns for teaching the young are the *educational system*. Patterns for making important group decisions (and acting on these decisions) form the *political system*, the main focus of this unit.

**Unit objective: To further enhance the learner's skills in analyzing social systems and system change, and to point up the patterns of action for decision-related elements of political subsystems and their significance.**

The major objective of this whole course of study is to enhance learner's ability to make sense of complex reality. Of course, our primary tool is systems analysis, based on the components of the Model, but the task will always be difficult.

No society is simple, not even an ancient city-state. Part of the pedagogical task is to be selective enough in designing questions and choosing primary data that important principles can be successfully investigated by the young. If there's too much complexity, confusion blocks success; too little, and the intellectual task becomes trivial and inconsequential.

Finding the "Goldilocks" combination of just-right questions and sources is sometimes difficult. We generally keep the level of difficulty fairly high, and rely on group effort (and occasional gentle intervention by teacher or mentor) to overcome conceptual roadblocks. Note that we welcome feedback by those using these materials on the effectiveness of any investigation, suggestions for making an investigation work, alternative investigations, etc. See <http://www.marionbrady.com/ContactingUs.asp>.

As with every unit in this series, *the objective is not to transfer information to learners, but to help them grasp general principles applicable to their lives, present and future.*

### **Notes on the Investigations**

#### *Investigation: Athenian society*

For learning purposes, Athens has the inherent advantage of contrasting with Sparta (investigated in unit 10) in much of its culture. Athena—goddess of wisdom, but also goddess of battle—is a good metaphor for the culture of the city bearing her name. Athens existed in a larger world of frequent conflict with rivals, so survival required an effective military, complete with hoplite infantry similar to that of Sparta. But Athens was also a center of learning and intellectual life, a commercial hub with extensive international trade by sea, and the creator of art and architecture. Thus, Athena's "wisdom" is an essential part of the spirit of Athens. The city's historical impact is obvious and well-known. The first investigation is intended to give learners an overview of Athenian society—context for the investigations that follow.

Historian Arnold Toynbee, in *A Study of History*, indicates that Sparta, Athens, and other Greek city-states were responding to the crisis situation where the agricultural production within their control was no longer adequate to supply their population. He explains:

“Some, like Corinth and Chalcis, disposed of their surplus population by seizing and colonizing agricultural territories overseas—in Sicily, Southern Italy, Thrace and elsewhere. The Greek colonies thus founded simply extended the geographical area of the Hellenic Society without altering its character. On the other hand certain states sought solutions which entailed a variation of their way of life.

“Sparta, for instance, satisfied the land-hunger of her citizens by attacking and conquering her nearest Greek neighbors. The consequence was that Sparta only obtained her additional lands at the cost of obstinate and repeated wars with neighboring peoples of her own caliber. In order to meet this situation Spartan statesmen were compelled to militarize Spartan life from top to bottom, which they did by re-invigorating and adapting certain primitive social institutions, common to a number of Greek communities, at a moment when, at Sparta as elsewhere, these institutions were on the point of disappearance.

“Athens reacted to the population problem in a different way again. She specialized her agricultural production for export, started manufactures also for export and then developed her political institutions so as to give a fair share of political power to the new classes which had been called into being by these economic innovations. In other words, Athenian statesmen averted a social revolution by successfully carrying through an economic and political revolution;..”<sup>1</sup>

Some of the best evidence for Athenian patterns of action and shared ideas is actually in Pericles’ funeral oration, part of the sources for the second investigation, so we suggest that the two investigations be overlapped, with work continuing on the first after the second has begun.

We usually don’t advocate use of videos for classroom use because they have the same problem as traditional textbooks—the information is already processed. The role of the learner is passive, and any learning that occurs tends to be shallow and short-lived. However, once learners are well along the path to processing the data for this investigation of Athens, their grasp of its nature can likely be enhanced by viewing the excellent video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0T78tNS9u8>. (55 minutes).

### *Investigation: Decision-Making Patterns*

This activity is a fundamental civics lesson focusing on the rather traditional theme of “Athenian democracy.” Of course, when it comes to political systems, the standard classification continuum “monarchy—oligarchy—democracy” is an oversimplified version of complex reality. No government falls at a single point on the continuum. There’s always a mix, and even the most democratic will have significant sharing of decision-making and administrative power with smaller groups and single individuals.

Athenian government is far too complex to depict in a course like this. The Wikipedia article on “Athenian democracy” has a mind-boggling diagram of the system. However, two conflicting principles with the same name (one a cynical joke) are at the core of this issue:

---

<sup>1</sup> Toynbee, Arnold, *A Study of History*, abridgement of volumes i-iv by D. C. Summervell, 1965, New York, Dell Publishing (Original copyright 1946 by Oxford University Press) pp. 16-17

**The Golden Rule:** Treat others as you would wish to be treated. (Democratic principle)

**The Golden Rule #2:** Whoever has the gold makes the rules. (Oligarchic principle)

Primary sources chosen for this activity show (imperfectly) the evolution of democracy in Athens. It may be necessary to point out that, at its best, “democratic” decision-making was still limited to citizens of Athens, and this group was a distinct minority—no women, no way for those that migrated to the city to become citizens, no citizenship unless one’s father was a citizen, and one’s mother, except for gender, was also qualified for citizenship. And of course, no citizenship for slaves.

An interesting point that learners may raise: Single individuals—Solon, Cleisthenes, and Pericles—made changes to the Athenian constitution that increased democracy. We suggest that you let the learners work out why this could happen, likely identifying the potential of the people to enforce new rules that improve their autonomy—the “torches and pitchforks” threat.

### *Investigation: Decision categories*

This investigation deals with the functions of government. In the case of Athens, evidence shows that the city was supplying infrastructure (roads, walls, the harbor at Piraeus, public buildings, areas for commerce) and even temples and statues of Athena. Provision of religious facilities was considered a state function. Naval warfare was privately subsidized, but the state had a necessary role in managing naval enterprises—commanding fleets and setting tactics for battle. Land warfare was, of course, managed by the state. A great many state functions may be inferred related to warfare—establishing conventions for hoplite armor and weapons, providing organization and command structure, logistic support of military operations, and the like.

Courts provided resolution of civil disputes, and likely also ruled in cases of significant criminal offense. The sources don’t indicate how minor law infractions were handled, but likely local magistrates were responsible for control of ordinary deviant behavior. The sources also don’t indicate the sources of tax revenue or the methods of collection, but such taxes were necessary to maintain the government.

Infrastructure for the economic system was also a government function, such as minting of coins, provision of areas for markets, and providing regulations such as the one preventing a defaulting debtor from becoming a slave.

One step that might be helpful to learners would be to begin the “Follow-up” application. Kids may find it fairly easy to figure out what their local government does, then ask themselves if the government of Athens was supplying the same service or facility (e.g. roads, water, sewer, police, etc.).

### *Follow-Up: Patterns of local decision making*

This activity is the logical extension of the principles investigated for Athens. It ought to be an imperative part of the unit, although doing it right will require significant class time. Learners are much more likely to accept the merit of historical study if they see it as applicable to their own lives.

One possible way to streamline the activity is to have the learners do a quick analysis of local government functions, then divide the analysis between groups; one group investigating the central decision-making group such as the council, others handling locally-supplied utilities, other infrastructure (roads, bridges, parks), police, courts, other administration such as permitting, etc. The local telephone book or the local government's website listing of offices will be a major aid in this initial step. Learners are likely to be impressed by the extent of local government services and responsibilities—a powerful civics lesson.

(HLB) August 2015

Toynbee quote added September 2015, minor changes January 2022.