

Athens: A Greek Polis

If people in ancient Greece met a foreigner they may have asked him who he was, where he came from, and of which *polis** his parents were. The *polis* was one of the main characteristic features in early Greek history. Greece was divided up from an early time (c. 8th century BC) into a great number of political units, called *poleis*; each *polis* (sing.) consisted of an independent city and the surrounding countryside. How this came about is not really clear. One of the explanations is that the rugged* landscape led to the formation of small political units. The same development, however, occurred when Greeks settled down in more open areas like Italy and Northern Africa. Another theory is that the ancient Greeks were people only interested in their own affairs and region. Whatever the reasons, there was a great division of the Greek people into many larger or smaller tribes*, and into many local cults. The characteristic elements of many of these so-called city-states were some main streets, some wider open spaces, often a fortress, public buildings, (e. g. temples) and walls around the settlement. There were hundreds of these city-states, most of them extremely small and less than 250 square kilometres. The largest *polis* was Athens, whose city and countryside covered a territory roughly the size of the modern State of Luxemburg (2,500 square kilometres). By the middle of the 5th century BC the total population of the *polis* of Athens was probably about 300,000 people (Luxemburg is about 525, 000), that of Sparta, the second largest *polis*, between 190 – 270,000.

The Athenian population was divided into three groups; first the citizens, about 35 – 45,000 (110 – 170,000 with their families), then the *metics**, foreigners working and living in Athens, about 20 – 35,000 including their families. Slaves, about 80 – 115,000, formed the third group. Only adult male citizens had a say in public and political matters. Both the parents of a citizen had to be Athenians. *Metics* had to pay tax, but had no voting rights, could not own houses or land and could not speak in a law court. Slaves had no legal rights. Some were prisoners of war from other Greek states or foreigners bought from slave traders. Sometimes a slave might buy his freedom; he could not, however, become a citizen or a *metic*. Many Athenians earned their living as craftsmen or farmers.

Herakleides, a visitor to ancient Athens in the 3rd century BC, described the city as extremely dry, as it lacked a good water supply. The arrangements of the streets, Herakleides continued, were rather awkward due to the age of the city. According to him most of the houses were in a bad condition. We know that houses were usually built from sun dried mud bricks. Many houses had an upper storey; men and women lived in separate quarters. In most of the houses there was little to be seen in the small rooms around the courtyard, apart from the couches or beds and a few small, three-legged tables. People used chests* and baskets for storing clothes, documents and other things. Many objects were simply hung on pegs* on the wall. Herakleides, however, was much impressed by the public buildings in Athens. He men-

tioned the Odeion, which for him was the most beautiful theatre* in the world and he referred to the Parthenon. This building, the main temple on the Acropolis*, he pointed out, was greatly admired. In his travel account Herakleides does not refer to the Pnyx, a hill in the west of the city, and actually the most important place for the Athenian democracy*. Indeed, the Pnyx was not a very spectacular sight as it had no magnificent public buildings. The theatre-like area on a hill-side was the meeting place of the *ekklesia*, i. e. the gathering of the citizens. In the time of the classic Athenian democracy (5th century BC) there was space for about 15,000 citizens to come together in order to discuss and vote on important matters of the *polis*. From the 6th century to the end of the 5th century Athens had developed in various stages from an oligarchic system, i. e. the rule of a few noble families, into a kind of direct democracy. In the Athenian democracy the citizens did not elect representatives to decide and act for them, but attended the *ekklesia* themselves and elected and chose by lot* councillors and jurors, members of the various courts. The ordinary number of participants at the assembly, which met forty times a year, was around 5-6,000 out of 35-40,000 (432 BC) Athenian citizens. A number of them, of course, were always away on business or unable to come for other reasons. If all citizens wanted to take part in the assembly it would be more than crowded as the Pnyx covered an area 89 metres wide and 40 metres deep at the most. Moreover, living, say, in Sounion, about 70 kilometres from Athens, it would take a citizen a considerable time to reach the Pnyx, even on a donkey. In general a citizen not getting involved in public affairs was looked upon as an *ideótēs*, i. e. a ‘private’, strange person. But one could imagine that not every citizen had the nerve or the strong lungs to voice his opinion before a crowd of some thousand critical listeners. In the course of time citizens attending the assembly were entitled* to a regular pay of 1 *obolos**, later 3 *oboloi* per meeting; 3 *oboloi* were considered to be the minimum subsistence* level for an ordinary family.

The *agora*, an open space in the city, surrounded by public buildings and shops, was the place where friends often came together. A barber’s shop was said to be an ideal location to pick up the latest news and scandals. People also read the public announcements pinned* up in the Agora, which, by the way, gives us an idea about the standard of education in ancient

Athens. And here they could also watch parades, athletic events, and theatre performances, which were later transferred to the Dionysus theatre.

Famous Athenians might also be seen in the Agora, e. g. the sculptor* Phidias*, best known for his statues or Sophocles*, the writer of plays and most likely also Socrates*, famous for his philosophical ideas, but also known for his fights with his wife Xanthippe. After one of the fights, so the story goes, Socrates got completely wet; some

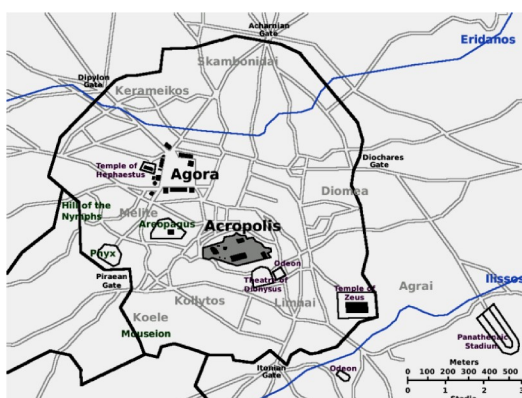


Image 1: Map of Ancient Athens c. 430 BC.
[Wikimedia Commons; date: 5 March 2008; author: singinglemon;]

people said, with the contents of a chamber pot. Socrates commented on this that after thunder you could also expect rain.

Last, but not least you could also go shopping there, as the Agora was the main market-place. One of the most important buildings in the Agora was the Bouleuterion, which among other things served as the archive. Lists of citizens, records of law suits* and the official set of weights and measures were kept there. The Bouleuterion was also the place of the *boulé*, the council that decided on the list of topics of the *ekklesia*. Out of its 500 members – chosen by lot – 50 were on duty at any one time. All male citizens were qualified, but no one could serve more than twice. Councillors were paid a daily allowance of 5, later 6 *oboloi*.

In a corner of the Agora the citizens got together every year to hold what was known as ostracism. If they thought the way an official carried out his duties was wrong or bad, they wrote his name on a piece of pottery, called *ostrakon*. If at least 6,000 citizens voted against someone, he was driven out of the polis for ten years. In Plutarch's* biography 'Life of Aristides' we read about the reason for a citizen's decision to vote against Aristides, an Athenian politician and general (died c. 467 BC). That citizen said that he did not know Aristides at all, but, he said, he disliked it very much that Aristides was everywhere referred to as 'the just', i. e. someone who is always right and fair.

Each year the people's assembly also elected ten *strategói*. 'These were military commanders, who also had an important political influence. They could carry out the policies of the council and the assembly and could be re-elected many times. So, for example Pericles*, the well-known Athenian politician and statesman, was *strategós* every year from 443–429 BC. As he was a talented speaker, he often managed to win over public opinion in the assembly.

Citizens over thirty years old did not only attend the *ekklesia* and served as councillors, but were also expected to serve in the various courts. They were chosen by lot and paid to make up for any loss of earnings. As there were no lawyers*, a citizen had to speak for himself in court.



Image 2: Dionysus theatre, seen from the Acropolis [Wikimedia Commons; date: April 2006; author: MM]

The Athenian state did not only pay citizens for their official business, it also supported poorer citizens to attend theatre performances. Performances were staged in open air theatres. In the 5th century the form of drama* had developed from the songs and dances at the spring festival of Dionysus, the god of wine and songs. The performances were organised by the state, but rich Athenians were more or less obliged to pay for the productions. On

the first day of the celebrations processions and sacrifices took place. The following three days were taken up by tragedies* – famous writers included Aeschylus*, Sophocles* and Euripides*.

On the 5th day comedies – a well-known author was Aristophanes* – were staged. As performances could last a whole day spectators had to bring their own food or would have to leave to get something to eat. Perhaps they would buy barley* porridge or barley bread, the staple* food of that time, as wheat was expensive. Other common foods were fish, eggs, vegetables and fruit. Back in the theatre they would watch the actors who wore masks with different expressions. The masks were changed according to the change of mood of the characters. Women probably did not attend performances. The roles of women were acted out by men.

Ladies also did not take part in any social activity such as a *symposium*, a private gathering of male friends. The verb *sympinein* means ‘to drink together’, and drinking (wine) played an important role on such an occasion, with the *kratér*, a wine mixing bowl, as the main item in the room. Such gatherings could involve discussions on serious topics after a good meal, but they could also develop into a kind of heavy drinking party. The guests might also be entertained by lady companions (*heterai*). These unmarried women from the lower classes or foreigners were young and beautiful. They were mostly well educated, so they could join in the conversation, or they danced and played music. Some of them became well-known and exercised a considerable influence (on men). Though they were not common prostitutes, they were usually not considered to be respectable. Sometimes, when the atmosphere at a party became less formal, it might end up in a rather wild orgy. When the guests returned home at night, they carried torches, i. e. sticks with burning material, so as not to trip over some rubbish in the dark narrow streets. After all, many people used to relieve themselves in front of the houses. Very few houses, by the way, had bathrooms.

Women from good families did not often leave the house except to go to family gatherings or religious celebrations. At home they supervised the servants and managed the family affairs. When going out they would usually have a slave with them. Women of the lower classes had more freedom; moreover, they did not have a slave. In general women spent much of their time with their children and with spinning and weaving. Girls were introduced by their mothers into the duties of organising a household. Thus a girl was prepared for married life. Girls were often married at the age of around 15; their husbands might be 30 or 35 years old. When a baby was born, it was presented to the father. If he refused to accept it, as he did not recognize it as his own or because it was handicapped, it was put out to die.

A boy’s education began at the age of seven. Families would often pay for a slave called *paidagōgós* meaning ‘someone who guides children’, who had to supervise their son’s schooling. As schooling had to be paid for many boys probably did not get more than a basic education – reading, writing and basic arithmetic* – which was, however, important for political activities in a democracy. Wealthy families had their sons educated in music and athletics; sports activities were practised in a *gymnásion**. In later years a *gymnásion* developed into a centre of intellectual life, too. Reading and learning by heart the works of great authors such

as Homer* was also part of the education. Boys of very rich families received an even higher form of education, rhetoric. Rhetoric means the art of giving a fine speech that could win over people's opinion, which was important for speaking in the *ekklesia* or in a court. At the age of 18 a young man had to do two years of military training.

Religion was an essential part of life in Athens. Many houses had an altar for family prayers in the open courtyard. The most important public and religious event was the 'Great Panathenaea', the feast of the goddess Athene. It was held every 4 years, with less important festivals in-between, and lasted for 6 days. Athene, the daughter of Zeus, was the goddess of wisdom, her symbol was an owl. She was also the patron* goddess of Athens. The most important part of the festival was a huge procession. It started at the city wall, led across the Agora on the Panathenaic Way up to the Acropolis. There, a specially made dress was offered to a



Acropolis at dawn; [Wikimedia Commons; date: 26 March 2007; author: Leonhard G.]

statue of Athene. Animals were also pulled along in the procession to be sacrificed in a great ceremony. There was a lot of noise, much shouting and loud music from instruments during the slaughtering ritual. We do not know if

all this created a very serious atmosphere.

The most magnificent building on the Acropolis, which was both a holy place and a fortress, protected by walls, was the Parthenon, a temple to the goddess Athene, *Athene Parthenos* (the 'virgin Athene'). A lot of buildings, especially on the Acropolis, were destroyed in the Persian Wars*. So the Athenian politician Pericles started a huge reconstruction programme.

In 438 BC the Parthenon was completed. It was built of marble, a hard stone, and the exterior decorated with friezes* and statues, and painted in bright colours. The main object was the cult statue of Athene. It was 12 metres high, made of ivory and covered with gold. It also formed part of Athens' wealth. The total cost of the Parthenon came close to several tons of silver; one column alone cost about 5,000 drachmas. The wages for an unskilled labourer were about one drachma a day. If he wanted to buy, say, a pair of shoes (sandals) he had to pay about 6 to 8 drachmas; but then he would probably prefer to go barefoot, as did most of his countrymen. The prices for a goat and a cow were about 12 to 15 drachmas and 50 drachmas respectively. Most likely he did not have enough money to buy a slave, for whom you had to pay about 170 to 180 drachmas. The building activities provided the source of income for a lot of Athenians for many years.

The enormous amount of money spent on the building programme and all the money needed for the great Athenian navy*, the allowances for the councillors, jurors, and the attendance of the *ekklesia*, came from various sources: *Metics* had to pay tax, and then there was the customs duty and the extra taxes and contributions from wealthy citizens. A person was believed to be wealthy if he possessed at least 6,000 drachmas. Trading around The Mediter-

raean and The Black Sea made many Athenian merchants rich. They exported wine, olive oil and manufactured goods (mainly pottery) and imported mainly corn and wood for use in building. The silver mines at Laurion, near Athens, were a particularly great source of income. The Athenians made their own silver coins depicting an owl, Athens' sacred bird, on one side.

5 The picture of an owl can still be seen on the present-day Greek 1 € coin. Mining was mostly done by slaves. In the 5th century 20,000 of them, it is said, were working in the mines under very hard conditions, working shifts of up to 10 hours. In some seams* workers had to move along on hands and knees and work on their backs. They were also beaten and often their feet were chained.

10 The main sources of income was the money paid by of the members of the Delian League* to Athens in return for the promise of Athenian military protection in case of Persian attacks. Pericles, as said before, spent the money on the reconstruction programme of the city, in spite of strong protests and revolts by some members of the League. With firm warnings and, if necessary, military operations (by the navy) Athens managed to keep the alliance part-
15 ners under control.

The magnificent newly erected buildings, the achievements* of Athens' philosophers, artists and writers and, last but not least, its powerful navy made Athens into the leading *polis* of Greece in the 5th century BC. In a fictitious* letter the writer Menandros* summed up why he did not accept a very attractive invitation by the Egyptian king to come to Egypt. In Egypt,
20 Menandros said, he would not see an *ekklesia* or an independent people that enjoyed such freedom. And, he added, he would not find an Agora, or a magnificent Acropolis; in general, not an Athens with its political and cultural elements that for him embodied* the whole of Hellas.

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