

II. Archaic Athens

A. Athens after 776 BC: the First Century

1. Monarchy and Society

- a) Athens was not conquered by the Dorians during the Greek dark ages. It was ruled by the Ionians. The Ionians lords considered its rightful rulers because of their heroic defense of the city. Their descendants were known as “sons of noble fathers” (in Greek: “Eupatrids”)
- b) Beneath the Eupatrids were the commoners and slaves. The basic arrangement was like in any ancient civilization.
- c) At the top was a monarch, who ruled for life, and who belonged to the most powerful family of Athens, the Medontidae.

2. From Monarchy to Aristocracy

- a) Although the Medontidae had once been the most powerful family of Athens, the other aristocratic families within Athenian territory did not appreciate being second best.
- b) In 753, some kind of revolt occurred, and the other families forced the Medontidae to give up some of their power.
 - i) The kingship was no longer limited to the Medontidae. Other aristocrats could qualify.
 - ii) All the nobility would participate in the election of kings, which would occur every ten years. Thus kings would no longer rule for life. (This is known as “decennial” kingship.)
- c) These reforms seem to have satisfied the aristocracy for a while. Then they fought for new changes.
 - i) The kingship was reduced to one year. (It was made “annual.”)
 - ii) The powers of the king were broken up among nine officials called “archons.”
- d) At this point, the monarchy became an “aristocracy.”
 - i) The word “aristocracy” means “government by the best,” because the aristocrats thought they were better than the people they ruled.
 - ii) The basic arrangement in aristocracy is that a large group of “lords” share power, instead of just one family.

B. The Soldiers gain power.

1. Changes in Warfare

- a) In the seventh century BC, the Spartans introduced an innovation into Greek warfare known as the “phalanx.”
- b) The phalanx was a closely organized unit of heavily armed soldiers,

known as “hoplites.” With a shield and spears organized into a mutually supporting system they could defeat less organized soldiers.

2. Military Responsibility and Political Power

- a) As Athens and other Greek city-states began to adopt the phalanx in order to better defend themselves, they were forced to recruit wealthier commoners to participate in this type of formation.
- b) This, however, allowed the commoners to claim some political power for themselves. If they were necessary for the survival of the state, the reasoning went, then they should be able to participate in the making of laws also.

C. Cylon tries to become a “tyrannos” (c.632 BC)

1. Apart from monarchy and aristocracy, there was a third common form of government in ancient Greece. It was called “tyranny.”
2. Although the modern word “tyranny” means the rule of a “tyrant,” i.e. an oppressive and unjust king, in Greece it meant something else. In Greece it meant the rule of a “tyrannos,” who was a popular leader, a king chosen by the commoners, for the commoners.
3. C.632 AD, with many aristocratic families fighting over power, a lord named Cylon came to believe he could take advantage of the situation and make himself tyrannos by posing as a champion of the people.
4. Cylon was famous. He was a “celebrity,” in the sense that he was an Olympic champion, and thus highly regarded by all Athenians. He was also a member of a powerful aristocratic family and the son-in-law of the tyrannos of Megara (the neighboring city-state.)
5. Cylon thus could form his own private army of a considerable size, which he took to the acropolis of Athens (the citadel in the center of the city, with its most important religious temples) and took control of it.
6. This was intended as a declaration of his intention to rule and a symbolic statement of his power.
7. Unfortunately for Cylon, he had not counted on the fact that the soldiers of Athens would not accept a tyrannos now that they themselves were beginning to have political power. Cylon was forced into exile.

D. The Laws of Draco (c.620 BC)

1. In answer to the growing chaos between aristocratic families, and to try to prevent men like Cylon from taking power, an official named Draco was given the job of making better laws for Athens.
2. The criminal laws he created to maintain order appeared very harsh to later historians. Death was a common penalty, even for something seemingly insignificant, like the

- theft of an apple. As a result, the term “Draconian” came to be synonymous with “harsh” or “severe.”
3. Although Draco's laws were severe, they did help stop the fighting between aristocratic families. Where previously, lords had attacked each other in “blood feuds” to answer crimes, all crimes were now to be handled by courts organized by the government.
 4. Like the Code of Hammurabi, the laws of Draco were created during a difficult period and designed above all to keep order.

E. Athens on the Archaic Plateau

1. Prior to the rise of democracy, Athens remained stuck on the “archaic plateau.”
2. This level of development in places like Egypt and Mesopotamia meant a permanent acceptance of monarchy.
3. In Greece, it meant a cycle of changes between monarchy, aristocracy, and the rule of tyrannoi (plural for “tyrannos”). Tyrannoi were also kings of a sort. The only difference between a tyrannos and a king was that a tyrannos was chosen by the commoners instead of the aristocrats.
4. At this plateau, one basic idea continued to guide people in the making of governments: one group must rule the others. America’s founding fathers called this the problem of “faction.” (As James Madison explains in the famous essay “Federalist No.10,” a “faction” is a group that wants to harm the rights of another. *Without the identification of individual rights, politics is always about “faction.”*)