

II. Archaic Athens

A. Athens after 776 BC: the First Century

1. Monarchy and Aristocracy

- a) At first Athens was ruled by a monarchy. A family called the Medontidae (the descendants of Medon) had all the power.
- b) Beneath the Medontidae were other families, who called themselves “sons of noble fathers” (in Greek: “Eupatrids”)
- c) C.753 BC, some kind of revolt occurred, and the other families forced the Medontidae to give up some of their power.
 - i) From then on kings could only rule for ten years. (This is known as “decennial” kingship.)
 - ii) Also, kings could be chosen from among all the Eupatrids.
- d) Later new changes were forced on the Medontidae.
 - 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.”
- e) 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 an organized unit of heavily armed soldiers.
- c) Commoners could participated in the phalanx, so they became more important to the defense of the city.
- d) Now the Eupatrids were not as obviously the “best,” and the commoners could claim the right to participate in the government.

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 unjust king, in Greece it meant the rule of a “tyrannos,” who was a popular leader, chosen by the commoners.

3. A lord named Cylon who was a famous Olympic champion raised his own private army, and declared his desire to be tyrannos.
4. The people did not support him, however, and he was forced into exile.

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

1. To try to discourage men like Cylon from trying to take power, an archon named Draco was given the job of making better laws for Athens.
2. His laws were very harsh. 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.

E. Athens on the Archaic Plateau

1. Prior to the rise of democracy, Athens remained stuck on the “archaic plateau.”
2. In Egypt and Mesopotamia this meant only monarchy, but 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.
3. 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.” (A “faction” is a group that wants to harm the rights of another.)