

V. The Greco-Roman Background

A. Roots of European and Russian Culture

1. Everything we have learned about the history of the modern interconnected history of Europe and Russia is rooted in a background story that precedes it, without which neither of these cultures would have become what it is today.
2. That background story consists of three main components: ancient Greece—whose culture produced philosophy, democracy, history, natural science, literature, and visual art to a degree never before seen, ancient Rome—who built a “republican” form of government and adopted many Greek values after conquering Greece, and Christianity—a religion that originated and grew within the Roman empire and was later passed on to the European barbarians.
3. This ancient story begins c.776 BC with the first Greek Olympic Games, which was an athletic and religious festival that celebrated the common culture of Greece, even though its participants represented their own “city-states” and considered themselves citizens of a city, first and foremost. In that regard, Greece never became a nation in ancient times, and it is to various city-states, especially Athens and Sparta, that most of our attention goes.

B. Athens: Monarchy and Aristocracy

1. Athenian society emerged according to a simple model common to all ancient cultures. It had what is usually called a “monarchy,” i.e. the “rule of one.”
2. At the top was a king, who ruled for life, but he belonged to the most powerful family that had founded the city, which was allied to a large group of other families that referred to themselves as the “aristos” (the best), and without which neither the main family nor the king could maintain themselves in power.
3. This arrangement highlights an important point that holds true through all of history: there really is no such thing as monarchy. All monarchies are, in fact, forms of aristocracy, with a large ruling group surrounding a single figure, who may have a lot of power (depending on how charismatic he is) or may rely almost entirely on those around him (especially in a hereditary, and/or bureaucratic monarchy).
4. In Athens, for instance, the aristocracy are known to have made the monarchy *elective*—meaning that they actually *chose* the king, who would rule sometimes only for ten or fewer years. (At some point, it even seems to have been an *annual* office.)

C. Athens on the Archaic Plateau: The Problem of Debt Slavery

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 and a certain way of life based on subsistence agriculture.

3. On 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 deny the rights of another. *Without the identification of individual rights, politics is always about "faction."*)
4. The "aristos" were the accepted rulers in all such societies, but the harsh realities of life sometimes led the commoners to rebel against their rule.
5. In times of drought, Athens's commoners could easily succumb to starvation. If they wanted to survive they had to turn to the aristocratic land-owners for help. To obtain loans of food or supplies, the commoners had to agree that if they could not repay their debt they would lose their property and become slaves.
6. When this way of organizing society became intolerable to too many commoners, they rebelled.
7. In one such episode, the aristocracy triumphed in a civil war and appointed an "archon" to prevent civil unrest. His name was Draco, and his especially harsh laws became notorious through the ages. The modern English word "draconian" is derived from his name and is used to denote rules that are very severe.

D. The First Advance: Solon

1. In 594, with another round of civil conflict at its peak, the two sides agreed to submit their dispute to another respected archon named Solon.
2. Solon was given absolute power to create new laws, and the people further agreed to follow his laws for ten years thereafter.
3. Solon attempted to force the Athenians to change their way of thinking to better balance the desperate needs of the commoners and the power and property of the aristocrats.
 - a) First, Solon *emancipated* the debt slaves, and returned their property to them.
 - b) Second, he *abolished* the institution of debt slavery. From that point on, it would be illegal to make any contract that would result in slavery.
 - c) However, Solon refused to *redistribute* property from the aristocrats to the commoners, which would relieve their plight in times of drought.
4. As positive as these measures were, they could not solve the recurring problem of famines under conditions of subsistence agriculture. Further violence was almost certainly inevitable.

E. The Rule of a "Tyrannos"

1. Solon's laws were temporarily accepted by the Athenians. However, the commoners were not satisfied because Solon has not given them more land. This meant they would eventually have to turn to the lords for help again. The commoners did not want to be dependent in this way.
2. For their part, the lords resented the loss of slaves and property.

3. The commoners chose a respected military hero and nobleman named Peisistratus to champion their cause. His willingness to support the commoners earned him both the admiration of the commoners and the hatred of his fellow aristocrats.
4. With the help of the commoners, Peisistratus became the “tyrannos” of Athens after another round of violence. (The difference between a “tyrannos” and an “archon” was simply that an archon was viewed as a legitimate ruler by the aristocracy. A tyrannos is what in modern parlance is called a “populist”—someone who rises to power by appealing to the common people. (It may help you to think of Donald Trump as a modern American tyrannos, rejected by the American aristocracy of New York and California, and elected by the common laborers of the Midwest.)
5. By taking land from the aristocrats and giving it to the commoners, Peisistratus made himself very popular.
6. Predictably, the aristocracy was angry with these developments and itself rebelled, even recruiting help from the aristocracies of neighboring city-states.

F. The Second Advance: Cleisthenes and the Birth of Democracy (**c.508 BC**)

1. Once the aristocracy had regained control of Athens, there was a contest for leadership. If Athens continued to be racked by political violence, it would eventually disintegrate completely and be conquered by some other city-state.
2. **C.508 BC**, an aristocrat named Cleisthenes was thus able to convince the aristocracy to accept a program of reforms to share power with the commoners.
 - a) To break up the power of the aristocratic families, Cleisthenes allowed all commoners to participate in a new, larger assembly that was made responsible for all the laws of Athens.
 - b) To encourage the aristocrats and commoners to work together, Cleisthenes gave the commoners and equal right to participate in the government, by attending the governing assembly of the city-state.
 - c) Also, the aristocrats no longer had any special privileges. All important officials were chosen by elections, and all matters were decided by a majority vote in the assembly.
 - d) Since the aristocrats no longer ruled over the commoners, this new form of government was a step up from the archaic plateau. Now every citizen could participate in the government, and the majority would rule. (This system, the rule of the people, gets its name from the Greek words “demos”—people, and “kratia”—the rule of.)