

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 involves a background story, with three parts:
2. First there is ancient Greece, where the people invented philosophy, democracy, history, natural science, literature, and realistic visual art. The second is Rome, whose people built a “republican” form of government and adopted many Greek values after conquering Greece. The third is Christianity—a religion that originated and grew within the Roman empire and was later passed on to the European barbarians.
3. This background 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. The most important ones were Athens and Sparta.

B. Athens: Monarchy and Aristocracy

1. Athens started with 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).
3. No king could rule without the help of the aristos. All monarchies are, in fact, forms of aristocracy, with a large ruling group surrounding a single figure, who can only be a strong king, if he has a lot of charisma.

C. The Problem of Debt Slavery

1. The “aristos” were the accepted rulers in all ancient societies, but the harsh realities of life sometimes led the commoners to rebel against their rule.
2. In times of drought, Athens's commoners often starved. If they wanted to survive they had to obtain loans of food or supplies, and if they could not repay their debt they would lose their property and become slaves.
3. When too many commoners became slaves this way, they rebelled.
4. To stop rebellions, the aristos chose an “archon” named Draco, to make especially harsh laws. (The modern English word “draconian” comes from his name and it means rules that are very severe.)

D. The First Advance: Solon

4. After another war, an archon named Solon was given absolute power to create new laws.

5. 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.
3. Even though this was a positive step, it did not solve the problem of famines.

E. The Rule of a “Tyrannos”

1. 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. They chose an aristos named Peisistratus to champion their cause. 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 chosen by the aristocracy. A tyrannos is someone who is chosen by the common people.)
3. By taking land from the aristocrats and giving it to the commoners, Peisistratus made himself very popular.

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

1. The aristocracy regained control of Athens, but if the people continued to fight, the city would eventually be conquered by some other city-state.
2. **C.508 BC**, an aristocrat named Cleisthenes was able to convince the aristocracy to accept a new idea to share power with the commoners.
 - a) To break up the power of the aristocracy, Cleisthenes allowed all commoners to participate in a new assembly that was made responsible for all the laws of Athens.
 - b) 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.
 - c) This system is called *democracy*, the rule of the people, which comes from the Greek words “demos”—people, and “kratia”—the rule of.)