

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. The most important such city-states 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), 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.

C. The Problem of Debt Slavery

1. Like other ancient cultures, one basic idea continued to guide people in the making of governments: one group must rule the others. 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.
2. In times of drought, Athens's commoners often starved. 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.

3. When this way of organizing society became intolerable to too many commoners, they rebelled.
4. 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 a 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 chosen by the aristocracy. A tyrannos is someone who is chosen by the common people.)
5. 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, and there was a new contest for leadership. If the people continued to fight, Athens 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) Now every citizen could participate in the government, and the majority would rule. (This system, *democracy*, the rule of the people, gets its name from the Greek words “demos”—people, and “kratia”—the rule of.)