



# LIFE IN ATHENS

Athens was a walled city near the sea. Nearby, ships came and went from a busy port. Inside the city walls, master potters and sculptors labored in workshops. Wealthy people and their slaves strolled through the marketplace. Often the city's citizens (free men) gathered to loudly debate the issues of the day.

Athens is in central Greece, only four miles from the Aegean Sea. Its location encouraged Athenians to look outward toward the world beyond the city. Athenians liked to travel. They were eager to spread their own ideas and to learn from others. They encouraged artists from other parts of Greece to come and share their knowledge of art and architecture. Athens developed strong relationships with other city-states, and it grew large and powerful through trade. A great fleet made it the leading naval power in Greece.

## **Athenian Government**

Athens became a democracy around 500 BCE. But unlike modern democracies, Athens allowed only free men to be citizens. All men over the age of 18 who were born in Athens were Athenian citizens. Women and slaves were not citizens.

Every citizen could take part in the city's government. A group called the Council of 500 met every day. Each year, the names of all citizens 30 years of age or older were collected, and 500 of those names were chosen. The council ran the day-to-day business of government and suggested new laws.

Proposed laws had to be approved by a much larger group, the Assembly. The Assembly met on a hill every 10 days. At least 6,000 citizens had to be present for a meeting to take place. If not enough people showed up, slaves would round up more citizens with ropes dipped in red paint. Men were embarrassed to appear at the meeting with their clothes stained with red marks.

The Assembly debated and voted on laws proposed by the council. Every citizen had the right to speak at Assembly meetings. Some speakers were more skilled than others. Some spoke longer than others. Sometimes a water clock was used to time the speaker. One cup of water was set above another. The first cup had a small hole drilled into the bottom. The speaker could talk only until all the water ran out of the top cup into the bottom cup.

Image from: <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/Import/acropolis.r.s.jpg>

Text from: Frey, Wendy. "Life in Two City-States: Athens and Sparta." *History Alive!: The Ancient World*. Palo Alto: Teachers' Curriculum Institute, 2004.

Final note in italics added by Ms. Guyer

Most Athenian men enjoyed taking part in the city's democracy. They liked to gather and debate issues. They were proud of their freedom as Athenian citizens.

### **Athenian Economy**

An important part of life in any community is its economy. An *economy* is the way a community or region organizes the manufacture and exchange of money, food, products, and services.

The Athenian economy was based on trade. The land around Athens did not provide enough food for all the city's people. But Athens was near the sea, and it had a good harbor. So Athenians traded with other city-states and some foreign lands to get the goods and natural resources they needed. They acquired wood from Italy and grain from Egypt. In exchange, Athenians traded honey, olive oil, silver, and beautifully painted pottery.

Athenians bought and sold goods at a huge marketplace called the agora. There, merchants sold their goods from small stands. People bought lettuce, onions, olive oil, wine, and other foods. They could also buy household items like pottery, furniture, and clay oil lamps. Most Athenians made their clothes at home, but leather sandals and jewelry were popular items at the market. In addition, Athenians bought and sold slaves at the agora.

Like most city-states, Athens developed its own coins to make trade easier. Coins were made of such metals as gold, silver, and bronze. Athenians decorated the flat sides of their coins. One of their coins had an image of the goddess Athena on one side. The other side pictured Athena's favorite bird, the owl.

### **Education in Athens**

Athenian democracy depended on having good citizens. Athenians believed that producing good citizens was the main purpose of education. Since only boys grew up to be citizens, boys and girls were educated quite differently.

Athenians believed that a good citizen had a sharp mind and a healthy body. So education meant physical training as well as book learning. Until age 6 or 7, boys were taught at home by their mothers or male slaves. From age 6 to 14, boys went to school. Teachers taught reading, writing, arithmetic, and literature. Books were rare and very expensive, so subjects were read out loud and the boys had to memorize everything. To help them learn, they used writing tablets. Coaches taught sports such as wrestling and gymnastics to strengthen students' muscles. Boys also studied music. They learned to sing and play the lyre.

At 18, Athenian men began their military training. After their service, wealthy young men might study with private teachers. These teachers charged high fees for lessons in debate and public speaking that would help young men become political leaders.

Unlike boys, most girls did not learn to read or write. Girls grew up helping their mothers around the house. They were taught to cook, clean, spin thread, and weave cloth. Some also learned ancient secret songs and dances for religious festivals. Girls usually married men chosen by their fathers. Girls from poor families often had more choice.

### **Women and Slaves in Athens**

As you have already learned, only men were considered citizens in Athens. Women and slaves were not. As a result, they had far fewer rights than free men did.

Athenian women could not inherit or own much property. They could not vote or attend Assembly. Most could not even choose their own husbands.

A few women had jobs. Some women sold goods in the market. A few very important women were priestesses. But most Athenian women had their greatest influence in the home. They spent their days managing the household and bringing up their children. An Athenian wife had separate rooms at home and never went out alone. She would spin, weave, and supervise the slaves. She educated her sons until they were 6 or 7 and ready for school. She taught her daughters until they were 15 and ready to be married.

There were many slaves in ancient Athens. Most people who weren't poor owned at least one slave. Some slaves were born into slavery. Others became slaves when they were captured in wars.

Slaves performed a wide variety of jobs in Athens, including tasks that required a great deal of skill. Some slaves ran households and tutored Athenian children. A number of slaves were trained as craftsmen. Others worked in farms or factories. Some slaves worked for the city as clerks.

The unluckiest slaves worked in the silver mines. They might work 10 hours a day in cramped tunnels 300 feet below the surface. They had little air to breathe and were often whipped if they stopped to rest.

## **Summary**

Athens was a democracy, though only free men could take part in its government. Its economy depended on trade. Boys were educated to be good citizens. Girls learned skills for managing the household. Women and slaves had far fewer rights than men had.

Athens and Sparta were bitter rivals, but did come together to defeat a common enemy with other Greek city-states to fight for their freedom and independence.

*This enemy was Persia, under the direction of Darius and later his son, Xerxes. Both tried to make Greece a part of their empire, but Greece was fiercely independent and fought bravely together during the Persian wars to keep their freedom. Spartans and Athenians united their strength of land armies and navies to defeat the Persians forever. Unfortunately, after Persia learned to leave Greece alone, this left Sparta and Athens plenty of time to fight each other in a series of wars called the Peloponnesian Wars. These would leave both so weak that another foreign invader from the north could take over all of Greece – Alexander the Great, from Macedonia.*