Ancient Greece: Government

Monarchy

What is a monarchy?

In a monarchy the ruling power is one person, usually a king. In Greek times they did not have queens. Between 2,000 B.C.E. and 800 C.E. most Greek city-states were monarchies.

Choosing a King

At first kings were chosen by citizens of the city-state. So, when a king died another leader would be chosen to replace him. Eventually kings were no longer chosen by the people of the city-state, they would inherit their power. When kings died their power would go to their children, usually their oldest son.

The Role of the King and Aristocrats

Kings in ancient Greece made laws and enforced them. They decided on punishments for people who disobeyed the laws or didn't pay their taxes. They ran religious ceremonies. They led the army.

That's a lot of responsibility for one person! But, they didn't have to do it alone. They had a council of aristocrats to give them advice and help them with their duties. An aristocrat is a member of the most powerful class in ancient Greek society, aside from the king of course! The word aristocrat is formed with a Greek word meaning "best". In Greek society being wealthy and inheriting land meant you were the best.

Originally, aristocrats didn't have any actual power. They were trusted advisors to the King who really needed their help with all of his tasks, especially during times of war. The aristocrats were no dummies! They soon figured out that they outnumbered the king and he needed them! The aristocrats wanted power!

Aristocrats started to make demands of their king. In some places aristocrats wanted the king to be elected instead of inheriting his power. In other places they wanted the king to have a term, or maximum number of years he could serve as king.

In most Greek city-states the aristocrats eventually overthrew the king and took power for themselves. By 800 B.C.E. most Greek city-states were not ruled by a monarch.



Oligarchy:

What is an oligarch?

Oligarchs are a small group of wealthy men. In an oligarchy a few people have the ruling power. Most oligarchs in Greece were aristocrats; they had inherited their land and wealth from their families. A smaller group of aristocrats were wealthy merchants.

Life as an Oligarch

Oligarchs led a very easy, care-free life compared with most people in Ancient Greece. A typical day for an oligarch would include hunting, chariot races, lounging on couches, and entertainment. Slaves and professional entertainers would entertain oligarchs and their guests with live music, dancing, and acrobatics.

Life for the Poor in an Oligarchy

While the oligarchs were busy enjoying themselves the poor lived a very difficult life. The poor worked all day farming in the fields. The poor knew their situation was unfair and they grew angrier and angrier with the oligarchs.

The oligarchs ignored the needs of the poor. They passed laws that made the lives of the poor more difficult. If the poor tried to resist the laws of the oligarchs they were forced into submission by the armed forces. Most of the laws the oligarchs passed were for their own benefit, increasing and protecting their wealth. There were laws that stated farmers would have to sell themselves into slavery if they could not pay their debts.

Conclusion

In an oligarchy the poor got poorer and the rich got richer. Eventually the poor joined together and searched for a leader who would promise to improve their lives. That leader was usually a member of the army. In most Greek city-states led by an oligarchy the poor overthrew the oligarchs.



Tyranny:

What is a tyrant?

It's not what you think! Tyrants were men who forced oligarchs out of power. Tyrants promised to change the government and improve the lives of the people. In a tyranny the ruling power was in the hands of one person.

Are you asking yourself how that is different than a monarchy? Good question! There are a couple of ways a tyranny differs from a monarchy. First, a tyrant can't claim that he legally has a right to rule. Second, a tyrant's son usually doesn't inherit power.

That doesn't sound so bad! So, why do we have negative view of tyrants? Well, usually tyrants kept and took control by force. But, they weren't all unpopular leaders. Most Greek tyrants were military leaders who were supported by the people when they promised change. In fact, many tyrants ruled well when they were in power. Many tyrants made changes that helped the poor. For example, some tyrants canceled the debts of the poor. Others showed their support of the poor by snubbing the aristocrats and sometimes taking away their land.

Not all tyrants were good leaders. There were some who did not use their power to help the people as promised. Some tyrants wouldn't even allow somebody to verbalize their criticisms and would punish anyone who did.



This ancient pottery shows the killing of the Greek tyrant Hipparchus.

Democracy:

What is democracy?

Democracy was first used in Athens around 500 B.C.E. Democracy is "rule by the people", the people govern themselves. The democracy used in Ancient Greece is not the same as the democracy used today. In Ancient Greece they used a direct democracy. In this type of democracy the people can vote any every issue. Most democracies today are representative democracies, like the United States. In a representative democracy the people vote and elect representatives who decide on issues in their name.

Direct Democracy

In an Ancient Greek city-state there would be an assembly. An assembly is a lawmaking group. Any free man could go to the assembly, speak on issues, and vote on laws and proposals. The day-to-day business was also run by the city-state's free men.

Democracy was formed so each person would have a right to vote on issues that were important to them. But, it didn't always work the way it was intended. Sometimes people were persuaded into voting by powerful speakers. Sometimes the assembly reversed important decisions that had just been decided. Problems like these discouraged city-states from maintaining a democratic government and most would return to earlier types of government.

