World History Name:

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Reading #7: Athens and its Democracy Block:

Source: Making of the West Peoples and Culture

**Democracy in Athens 594BC**

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*Cleisthenes*

In 594 BC, an economic crisis that pitted the rich against the poor unexpectantly promoted the development of a more democratic state. Before 594 BC Athens had been under the control of a monarchy and a series of tyrants. When the crisis of 594 BC plagued the rich and poor, Solon was appointed as mediator. He outlawed debt slavery and created a council to guide the legislative work of the assembly. The council’s four hundred members were chosen by lottery and could serve only two annual terms (not in succession), ensuring wide participation of citizens. Equally important was Solon’s decision to empower any citizen to bring charges in court on behalf of any victim and to appeal any magistrate’s judgments to the assembly. These Measures gave ordinary citizens a real share in the administration of justice.

Some elite Athenians vehemently opposed Solon’s reforms because they wanted oligarchy: the unrest they caused opened the door temporarily to tyranny at Athens, and the family of Peisistratus held power from 546 to 510 BC by championing the interest of the poor. A rival elite family, the Alcmaeonids, finally got the tyranny overthrown by denouncing it as unjust. Cleisthenes, the leading Alcmaeonoid, found that he could become a political success only by promising greater democracy to the masses. Beginning in 508 BC, he delivered on his promises and came to be known as the “father of Athenian democracy” for his reforms. His complex political reorganization achieved its goal of promoting participation in governance by as many male citizens as possible. He expanded Solon’s council to five hundred members. It would take another 50 years of controversy before Athens’s democracy reached its fullest form, but Cleisthenes’s changes paved the road for the success of this unprecedented way of life based on people persuading, not compelling each other to achieve common goals.

**Establishment of the Athenian Empire 479-460 BC**

After the Persian Wars, Sparta and Athens both built up their own alliances to strengthen their positions against each other. Relying on long standing treaties with city-states located mainly in the Peloponnese, Sparta headed forces stronger in infantry than in warships, with the notable exception of Corinth, a naval power. The Spartan allies, called the Peloponnesian League, met in a representative assembly, but no action could be taken unless the Spartan leaders approved.

By 477 BC under the leadership of the Athenian aristocrat Aristides, Athens allied with city states exposed to possible Persian retaliation—in northern Greece the islands of the Aegean Sea, and along the western coast of Anatolia (Asia Minor). Most Athenian allies had strong navies, and all solemnly swore never to desert the coalition. This alliance, called the Delian League because its treasury was originally located on the island of Delos, also had and assembly. Theoretically, every ally had an equal say in making decisions, but in practice Athens was in charge.

Special arrangements for financing the alliance’s naval operations allowed the Athenians to dominate. Each ally paid annual “dues” based on its size and prosperity. Because compulsory, these dues were actually “tribute” (tax). Larger member states supplied entire triremes (warships) complete with crews and their pay; smaller states could share the cost of the ship and crew or contribute cash instead.

Over time, more and more members paid cash. It proved beyond their capacities to build warships and to train crews (170 rowers each); the recent reconstruction of a full-sized trireme has shown how difficult it was to build one and train an effective crew. Athens, far larger than most league members, possessed the necessary shipyards, as well as many men eager to earn pay as rowers. Many oarsmen came from Athens’s poor, and they earned not only money but also political influence in Athenian democracy as naval strength became the city-state’s principal source of military power. Without them, Athens had no navy.

The decision of many Delian League allies to let Athens supply warships eventually left them without any navies of their own. Therefore, they had no power if they disagreed with Athens’s policy. The Athenian assembly could simply order its fleet to compel discontented allies to comply and continue to pay their tribute. As the Athenian historian Thucydides observed, rebellious allies “lost their independence,” and the Athenians became “no longer as popular as they used to be.” This unpopularity was the price Athenians paid for making themselves the preeminent naval power in the eastern Mediterranean. They insisted that their dominance of the Delian League was justified because it kept the alliance strong enough to protect Greece from the Persians.

By about 460BC, their fleet had expelled almost all the Persian garrisons that had held out along the northeastern Aegean coast. The alliance drove the enemy fleet from the Aegean Sea, quashing any Persian threat to Greece for the next fifty years. Athens meanwhile grew rich off the spoils captured from Persian outposts and the league’s tribute.

The Athenian assembly decided how to spend this revenue. Rich and poor alike had a stake in keeping the fleet active and the league members paying for it. The poor men who rowed the ships came to depend on the pay they earned on league expeditions. Members of the social elite enhanced their social status by commanding campaigns and spending their portion of the booty on public festivals and buildings. Wealthy Athenians were expected to make financial contributions to the common good to win popular support. They did not form political parties but gathered in formal circles of friends and followers to support their agendas. Arguments about policy tended to revolve around how Athens should exercise its growing power internationally, not whether it was right to treat allies as subjects.

**Radical Democracy and Pericles’ Leadership 461-445**

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*Pericles*

As the Delian League grew, the poorer men who powered the Athenian fleet came to recognize that they provided a cornerstone of Athenian security and prosperity. They felt the time had come to increase their political power by making the judicial system of Athens just as democratic as the process of passing laws in the assembly, which was open to all male citizens other eighteen years of age. The leaders of the initiative were members of the elite, who competed for popular support to win elective office. One of Athens’s most socially prominent citizens, Pericles became the leading Golden Age politician by supporting the masses desire for the greater democracy.

Golden Age Athenian democracy gradually became so sweeping, compared with most ancient governments, that today it is called “radical”. Its principles were clear; direct widespread participation by male citizens in the assembly to make laws and policy by majority rule; random selection and rotation for members of the Council of 500, most magistrates and jurors; elaborate precautions to prevent corruption; and equal protection under the law for citizens regardless of wealth. At the same time excellence was recognized by making the top public offices—the board of ten “generals” who managed the city-state’s military and financial affairs---elective annually without limits on how many terms a man could serve.

Majority rule was the operative principle for enforcing accountability in Athenian radical democracy. Any citizen could call for a trial to judge an official’s conduct in office, but the most striking example of this principle was the procedure called ostracism. Once a year, all male citizens could scratch on a ballot the name of one man they thought should be ostracized (exiled for 10 years). If at least six thousand ballots were cast, the man who received the most “votes” was expelled from Athenian territory. He suffered no other penalty, his family and property remained behind undisturbed. Ostracism was not a criminal penalty, and ostracized men recovered their citizen rights after their exile.

This process was meant to protect radical democracy, so a man could be ostracized if the majority perceived this prominence as a threat to their interests. An anecdote about the politician Aristides illustrates his possibility. He was nicknamed “the Just” because he had proved himself so fair minded in setting the dues for Delian League members. On the day of the balloting, an illiterate farmer handed Aristides a pottery fragment and asked him to scratch the name of the man’s choice for ostracism on it.

 *“Certainly,” said Aristides. “which name shall I write?”*

 *“Aristides,” replied to countryman.*

 *“Very well,” remarked Aristides as he proceeded to inscribe his own name.*

 *“But tell me, why do you want to ostracize Aristides? What has he done to you?”*

 *“Oh, nothing. I don’t even know him,” sputtered the man. “I just can’t stand hearing everybody refer to him as “the Just.”*

True or not, this tale demonstrates that Athenians assumed that the right way to protect democracy was always to trust the majority vote of freeborn, adult male citizens, without any restriction on a man’s ability to decided what he thought was best for democracy. It also shows that men seeking political success in Athenian democracy had to be ready to pay the price that envy or scapegoating could exact.

Like his distant relative Cleisthenes before him, Pericles became the most influential Athenian politician of his era by devising innovations to strengthen the egalitarian tendencies of Athenian democracy. The Golden Age’s most spellbinding public speaker, Pericles repeatedly persuaded the assembly to pass laws increasing its political power. In return, he gained such popularity that he was regularly elected as a general.

Pericles’s most important democratic innovation was pay for service in public offices filled by lottery. This allowed poorer men to leave their regular work to serve in government. Early in the 450’s BC he convinced the assembly to use state revenues to pay a daily stipend to men who served in the Council of 500, on juries, and in numerous other posts. The amount was approximately what and unskilled worker could earn in a day. The generals received no pay because the prestige of their position was considered its own reward.