

monarch a single ruler, such as a king, queen, or emperor, who holds all the power in a country or empire

aristocrat a member of the most powerful class in ancient Greek society

Agesilaus II was king of the city-state of Sparta.



26.2 Monarchy: One Person Inherits Power

From about 2000 to 800 B.C.E., most Greek city-states were ruled by a **monarch**, or king. In a monarchy, the ruling power is in the hands of one person, usually a king. Greek settlements did not have queens.

At first, Greek kings were chosen by the people of a city-state. When the king died, another leader was selected to take his place. Eventually, though, kings demanded that their power go to their children after their death, usually their oldest son. In a monarchy, then, rulers inherit their power.

The kings of ancient Greece had many powers. They made laws and acted as judges. They conducted religious ceremonies. They even led the army during wars. They used armed soldiers to punish people who disobeyed the laws or didn't pay their taxes.

Kings had councils of **aristocrats** to advise them. The word *aristocrat* is formed from a Greek word that means "best." To the Greeks, the "best" people were wealthy men who had inherited large pieces of land.

At first, councils of aristocrats had no real power. But kings depended upon aristocrats for help during wars, since only the wealthy could afford horses and armor. The aristocrats soon realized that, as a group, they were stronger than the king. They wanted a share in the king's power.

In some city-states, aristocrats insisted that the king should be elected instead of inheriting his crown. Then they said the king could rule only for a certain number of years. Eventually, aristocrats in most city-states overthrew the monarchy and took the power for themselves. By 800 B.C.E., kings no longer ruled most Greek city-states.

26.3 Oligarchy: A Few People Share Power

By 800 B.C.E., most Greek city-states were ruled by a small group of wealthy men. These men were called **oligarchs**, from a Greek word that means “few.” In an oligarchy, the ruling power is in the hands of a few people.

Most Greek oligarchs were aristocrats, men who had inherited land from their families. A few were wealthy merchants.

Compared to the poor, oligarchs had very comfortable lives. They spent their days hunting and taking part in chariot races. In the evenings, they lay on couches and drank wine. They had parties where slaves and hired professionals entertained guests with music, dance, and acrobatics.

Meanwhile, the poor had to work all day in the fields. The hardworking poor saw the difference between their lives and the easy lives of the wealthy, and they thought it was very unfair.

To make matters worse, the oligarchs ignored the needs of most of the people. They passed laws that the poor did not like, and they used the army to force people to obey them. Many of their laws protected and increased their own wealth.

In some city-states, oligarchs passed laws forcing farmers to sell themselves into slavery if they could not pay their debts.

Under the oligarchs, the rich became richer and the poor became poorer. Many people who weren't wealthy came to hate the oligarchs. Eventually, the poor turned to leaders who promised to improve their lives. These leaders were usually in the army. Backed by the people, they used their soldiers to throw the oligarchs out of power.

oligarch one of several people who rule a country or empire together, sharing the power



This ancient Greek vase shows scenes of boar hunting and chariot racing. These activities were favorite pastimes of ancient Greek aristocrats.

26.4 Tyranny: One Person Takes Power by Force

tyrant a person who seizes power illegally

During the mid 600s B.C.E., people in many Greek city-states turned to men who promised to change the government. The men who forced the oligarchs from power were called **tyrants**. In a tyranny, the ruling power is in the hands of one person who is not a lawful king.

A tyranny is different from a monarchy in two ways. First, a tyrant cannot claim that he has a legal right to rule. Second, a tyrant's son does not usually inherit his father's power.

Tyrants usually took and kept control by force. But that doesn't mean they were always unpopular. Most Greek tyrants were military leaders who gained the support of the people by promising them more rights. And once they were in control, many Greek tyrants ruled well. They made changes that helped the poor. Some canceled the debts of poor farmers. Others were hostile to aristocrats and may have taken away their land.

Other tyrants, though, did not use their power to help the people. Hippias, the last tyrant in the city-state of Athens, is one example. Along with his brother, Hipparchus, Hippias ruled well at first. Then two enemies of the brothers murdered Hipparchus. After that, Hippias ruled more harshly.



Most tyrants were forced out of power by the people. The artwork on this vase shows the killing of the Greek tyrant Hipparchus.

He paid spies to report anyone who criticized him. As his rule became more and more unbearable, he was finally forced to leave power. Soon Athens would try another form of government, one that shared power among all citizens.

26.5 Democracy: All Citizens Share Power

Around 500 B.C.E., the people of Athens decided to try governing themselves. They developed democracy, or “rule by the people.” In a democracy, all **citizens** share in the ruling power.

Ancient Greek democracy was different from democracy today. The government of Athens was a *direct democracy*. In this type of government, every citizen can vote on every issue. Unlike Athens, the United States is a *representative democracy*. In this type of government, people vote for representatives who decide issues in their name.

How did direct democracy work in Athens? The city had an **assembly**, or lawmaking group. Any free man could speak in the Assembly and vote on a new law or a proposal to go to war. Free men also ran the city’s day-to-day business.

Not all Greeks believed that democracy was a good type of government. Powerful speakers sometimes persuaded ordinary citizens to vote unwisely. Often, the assembly reversed important decisions after just a few weeks. Because of problems like these, most city-states returned to earlier forms of government, such as dictatorships and oligarchies.

But the idea that people should rule themselves would survive. In time, the ideal of democracy would become one of the great gifts of ancient Greece to the modern world.

26.6 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you read how the city-states of ancient Greece developed four very different forms of government. Early monarchies gave way to oligarchies. In turn, many oligarchies were replaced by tyrannies. Finally, Athens developed democracy.

The next chapter compares Athens with its great rival, Sparta. Unlike Athens, Sparta remained an oligarchy. You’ll see how two different forms of government led to two very different ways of life.

citizen a member of a democracy, who has certain rights and responsibilities
assembly a group of citizens in an ancient Greek democracy with the power to pass laws



The painting on this piece of pottery shows Greek citizens casting votes in an election.