

EARLY CITY-STATES

800 TO 500 B.C.

RISE OF SPARTA TO REFORMS OF CLEISTHENES

ERA SUMMARY – EARLY CITY-STATES

In contrast to the Persian Empire, which had a centralized and despotic government, the Greek cities were largely independent and self-governing, likely due to the mountainous terrain of the Greek mainland. The government of most cities was oligarchic, that is, controlled by several powerful families. In some cases, there were local tyrants but the city-states themselves were generally independent of each other and there was no Greek overlord to which all cities paid tribute. Instead of a common government, the Greek towns were held together by a common language, religion, and culture.

The two most important cities in Ancient Greece were Sparta, a military powerhouse, and Athens, which rose to predominance in the fifth Century BC as a center of culture and commerce. Not only were these cities



YOUNG SPARTANS LEARNING A LESSON FROM DRUNKEN HELOTS

different in character from those under the sway of Eastern tyrants, they were radically different from each other.

Sparta was possessed of a *stoic*, severe, military temper, and Athens exhibited an *epicurean* or artistic temperament. They were both, however, vigorous examples of the Greek dedication to self-government and love of freedom.

The city of Sparta, located in the center of the Peloponnesian Peninsula, rose to distinction among Greece cities after it underwent a transformation in culture, under the leadership of [Lycurgus](#) in about 750 BC. After a devastating series of wars with neighboring Messina, he convinced the Spartan nobility to give up their riches and their land, and to allow for the equal division of wealth among all Spartan citizens. He further prohibited most displays of wealth, and occupations that would tend towards accumulation of wealth. Sparta was henceforth to be a military aristocracy, and all its citizens were engaged full time in developing the military virtues of strength, courage, and dedication to country. Pedestrian matters such as tending fields, craftsmanship, and commerce, were left to slaves (called helots), and neighboring townsmen (called peroci). Sparta had two kings who acted as generals in battle, but the state itself was led by a council of city elders. Sparta recognized her heroes, but didn't grant them political power until relatively late in life.

The city of Sparta did not cultivate the arts, and so relative to Athens, there are few relics of Ancient Sparta, but its cultural influence on the rest of Greece was enormous—"greatly admired but hated", probably sums up the situation well. There is no question that the impulse to military excellence that infused all of Greece was centered in Sparta, but it embodied as well, many of the other great stoic virtues. One of the many striking things about the city of Sparta was its enormous stability—its government was among the least changeable in human history. During an age of constant political upheavals and conquests, in which cities were often besieged and overthrown, and their inhabitants killed or sold into slavery, Sparta, an un-walled city, was an unperturbed fortress. From the time of the [Messenian War](#), in about 750 BC to the [Battle of Leuctra](#) in 371 BC, no enemy ever marched on Sparta's soil. In later days, even Macedonia and Rome, who held sway over all of Greece long after Sparta's glory days, were content to isolate, rather than conquer the famous city.

The early government of Athens was more typical of other Greek towns. Athens was the greatest city of the Ionian Greeks, who were scattered throughout the islands of the Aegean Sea and the West Coast of Asia Minor. In ancient times they had a king, but by about 600 BC they were governed as an oligarchy. [Draco](#) and [Solon](#) were two of their early law-givers. They wrote laws that prevented some oppression of the lower classes by the richer, but the democratic reforms that made Athens famous in later years, came about slowly over times. [Pisistratus](#), ruled as a tyrant for many years, but was nevertheless, responsible for laying much of the foundation for democracy in Athens. He also worked to make Athens a cultural center, while later reformers, such as [Cleisthenes](#), reorganized the Athenian government to more fairly represent all classes.

Other important Greek cities in the era before the Persian War included Thebes and Delphi, to the northwest of Athens, and Corinth, Argos and Olympia, on the Peloponnesian Peninsula. In addition to the mainland cities, some important Islands were Euboea, Samos, Lesbos, and Delos. There were also many Greek cities on the coast of Asia Minor, such as Miletus and Halicarnassus but most of these fell under the sway of the Persian Empire. The Greeks that settled in the islands and coasts near Asia Minor were called the Ionian Greeks, and along with Athens, produced most of the well-known philosophers, scientists, and writers of early Greek. Some well-known Ionian Greeks who lived before the Persian war include [Pythagoras](#) and [Polycrates](#) of Samos, and [Thales](#) of Miletus.

CHARACTERS – EARLY CITY-STATES

- Homer** ~ 1000 BC Blind poet who "wrote" the Iliad and Odyssey, before the age of writing.
Aesop ~ 550 BC Famous Greek fabulist, allegedly lived at the court of Croesus in Lydia.

EARLY SPARTA

- Aristomenes** d. 631 BC Bravely defended Messenians from Spartan conquest, for 17 years.
Tyrtaeus ~ 650 BC Wrote inspiring battle ballads for Sparta during the Messenian War. Historian of Sparta.
Lycurgus 884–820 BC Mastermind of Spartan laws and lifestyle.
Cleomenes I d. 489 BC King of Sparta before Persian Wars, removed tyrants from Athens, defeated Argos.

EARLY ATHENS

- Codrus** ~ 1000 BC Last King of Athens. Died nobly, and Athenians resolved to never have another king.
Draco ~ 621 BC First wrote the laws of Athens, but made them very harsh.
Solon 638–559 BC Rewrote the laws of Athens to better protect poor citizens from the rich.
Pisistratus 605–527 BC Tyrant of Athens. Respected Solon's laws. Established festivals, and promoted culture.
Megacles ~ 555 BC Opposed, and then allied himself with Pisistratus. Married Agriste of the Alcmaeonidae clan.
Hippias ~ 490 BC Exiled son of Pisistratus; helped lead Persian forces against Athens at Marathon.
Cleisthenes ~ 510 BC Athenian statesman who overthrew Hippias, and helped institute democratic reforms.

CORINTH, SAMOS, MILETUS

- Thales** 635–543 BC Early Greek philosopher and scientist, one of seven sages of Greece.
Cypselus d. 627 BC Legendary Tyrant of Corinth. Under the rule of his family the city became powerful.
Polycrates d. 522 BC Prosperous king of Samos who was overthrown by Oretes, his enemy from Asia Minor.
Pythagoras 570–480 BC Philosopher and mathematician; invented the Pythagorean Theorem.

TIMELINE – EARLY CITY-STATES

- 884 [Lycurgus](#) establishes the Laws of Sparta.
- 776 **First Olympiad.**
- 743-742 **First Messenian War:** Sparta conquers Messenia, enslaves Helots.
- 680 King Pheidon leads Argos to power, encourages Helots to revolt against Sparta.
- 685-668 **Second Messenian War:** Sparta reconquers Messenia.
[Aristomenes](#), Messenian hero, holds out for eleven years on Mt. Ira.
- 621 [Draco](#) writes down the Laws of Athens.
- 594 [Solon](#) **revises the laws of Athens to relieve debtors.**
- 561-510 [Pisistratus](#), and his sons rule as populist tyrants in Athens.
- 550 Pisistratus returns to power after his first exile.
Pisistratus patronizes the arts, reduces taxes, and makes Athens a center of culture.
- 528 Death of Pisistratus, power falls to his sons [Hippias](#) and Hipparchus.
- 514 Hipparchus is assassinated during Panathenaic festivities.
- 510 **Sparta helps drive [Hippias](#), tyrant of Athens, out of the city.**
- 508 [Cleisthenes](#) makes democratic reforms to laws of Athens.
- 538-522 [Polycrates](#) reigns as tyrant of Samos.
- 540 [Pythagoras](#), renowned mathematician and philosopher, teaches in Samos.

RECOMMENDED READING – EARLY CITY-STATES

CORE READING ASSIGNMENTS *

Haaren - <i>Famous Men of Greece</i>	Lycurgus to Pisistratus (3)
Guerber - The Story of the Greeks	Heroic Death of Codrus to Hippias Driven out of Athens (21)
Macgregor - The Story of Greece	The Land of Hellas to The Law of Ostracism (14)

SUPPLEMENTAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Winter - Aesop for Children	<i>entire book</i>
Tappan - Story of the Greek People	How Early Greeks Lived to The Greek Colonies (6)
Harding - Greek Gods and Heroes	Lycurgus in Sparta to What Solon Did for Athens (2)
Morris - Historical Tales - Greek	Lycurgus and Spartan Laws to The Tyrants of Corinth (6)
Church - Greek Life and Story	Statesman and Poet to The Exiles of Phocaea (3)

ALSO RECOMMENDED

Gould - Children's Plutarch - Greeks	The Hardy Men of Sparta to The Wise Man of Athens (2)
Church - Three Greek Children	The Story of Aristomenes (1)
Shaw - Stories of the Ancient Greeks	The Splendid City to Three Architectures (8)
Tappan - Old World Hero Stories	Lycurgus to Solon (2)
Kaufman - Young Folks Plutarch	Lycurgus to Solon (2)
Horne - Statesmen and Sages	Lycurgus (1)

* *Level I and II Study Questions are based on **Core** Reading Assignments.*