

City States: 2

Athens



Athens has a unique place in human history.

As the people who pioneer the arts of history, philosophy and theatre, who attempt the first radical version of democracy, and who achieve a degree of perfection in architecture, sculpture and pottery, the Athenians have rightly acquired an almost legendary status.

They surface relatively late in the story of Greece. No character from Athens plays a significant role in Homer. It is not until the late 7th century that Athens is firmly within the realm of recorded history. According to mythology, the first city was founded by the Phoenician Cecrops.

According to history, the Acropolis was first inhabited in the Neolithic period. The rock of the Acropolis was first used as a military fortress as its position offers a view towards the land and the sea.

By 1400 BCE, the Acropolis became a Mycenaean city and also became, for the first time, a religious centre for the worship of the goddess Athena.

Athens was born when the gods of Olympus decided that the city should be named after the God who could give the most useful gift to the mortals and who would then become its patron deity.

A contest took place between Athena (goddess of wisdom) and Poseidon (god of the sea). Athena won the contest by offering an olive tree, symbol of peace and prosperity while Poseidon struck a rock and a horse sprang forth symbolising strength.

In 560 BCE a popular general, Peisistratos, seized power in Athens. He lost and regained control more than once, but from 546 BCE he was securely established.

He ruled as a benevolent dictator, reserving the office of archon for himself and his immediate clan. Athens enjoyed an unprecedented period of prosperity. Attica was united, trade developed in a period of prolonged peace. Impressive public buildings were constructed, including the first Parthenon on the acropolis.

On his death, in 527BCE, Peisistratos was succeeded peacefully by his son, Hippias. But Hippias was toppled in 510BCE when the nobles of Attica, eager to get power back into their own hands, enlisted the help of Sparta.

The intervention of the Spartans only served to hasten the progress of Athens towards democracy. In 508BCE power was won with popular support by an aristocrat, Cleisthenes, who undermined the power of his own class by a major reorganization of the political structure.

He allowed all citizens, regardless of wealth, a voice at local level where the *demos* (effectively the town or village) becomes the heart of political life.

Thus “*democracy*” was born

In 490bc Athens was threatened by a Persian fleet & army determined to punish Athens for their support of Ionian Greek cities during the Ionian revolt, and the Athenian Army marched to Marathon to meet the Persians and asked other Greeks, notably Sparta for military assistance.

Due to the complicated political system & rivalries in Athens at the time, which saw Athenian political exiles (Hippias amongst them) within the Persian Army, the Athenians were compelled to start the battle one day before the Spartans arrived but, even so, they won a great victory.

Ten years later the Persians returned and the Athenian fleet played a great part in the Persian defeat winning a naval battle at Salamis in 480BCE. However, the city of Athens was burnt to the ground.

With the Persian threat over Athens was rebuilt and the Parthenon was one of its amazing new buildings.

Athenian power grew through the effectiveness of her fleet and Athens began to force her will on other, weaker, Greek cities. This culminated with the Peloponnesian War between Athens & Sparta and their respective allies.

Athens was soundly beaten and her power suffered for many years afterwards.

Athens resisted Macedonian rule in the 4th Century BCE but was beaten. In the 3rdC BCE Athens supported an emerging power “Rome” in their successful war with Macedonia, receiving many favours from Rome thereafter until 86BCE when Athens rebelled against Rome. This led to Athens being besieged and looted by a Roman army led by Sulla.

The fatal blow to Athens distinction was struck by the Western Roman emperor Justinian. In AD 529 he decrees that no pagan philosophy shall be taught in the famous schools of Athens, which dated back to Plato. The centre of classical Greek civilization was reduced to the status of just one Christian city among many within the Byzantine empire.

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