4.4 Athens: political and social structures

Athens was the city in the centre of the state of Attica. Attica was a triangular region pointing into the Aegean Sea and was about 60 kilometres wide at its widest point.

Athens itself was situated between two rivers — the Eridanus to the west and the Ilissus to the east. It was about 2.3 kilometres wide from east to west. Three long walls, each about 6 kilometres long, joined Athens to the coast at the harbours of Piraeus and Phaleron. These walls gave Athens protected access to the sea during the frequent periods of war.

Social structure

Around 800 BCE, Attica was primarily an agricultural state but, as the population grew, grain had to be imported. This encouraged the development of goods for export, such as olive oil and fine pottery. These exports and the silver mines in the south-east corner of Attica helped make the Athenians fairly rich.

The change in the economy also led to social changes. At first Attica was ruled by a few aristocrats but under leaders such as Solon (c.640–559 BCE), Peisistratus (600–527 BCE) and Kleisthenes (570–508 BCE) it developed into a democracy. However, in reality less than half the adult population could take part in the government.

To be an Athenian citizen with the right to vote, you had to be a free adult male, born in Attica. This excluded women, metics (foreign traders working and living in Athens) and slaves.

The majority of people lived in the countryside around Athens — either on the coast, in the hills or on the plains — and worked as farmers; but whether they lived in the countryside or in the city itself, adult males were still considered Athenian citizens.

Main features of Athens

The Agora

The Agora was an open, tree-lined square surrounded by public buildings. It was both a commercial and political centre. Athenian men spent much of their day in the Agora, where a great variety of activities took place. People could buy a wide range of goods. Women looked after the affairs...
of the home and usually did not go to public places such as the Agora. Instead, they sent their slaves to do the shopping.

Shoppers could buy oil lamps and hire cooking vessels. They bought fish, olive oil, garlic and onions for cooking. There were barbers, and cobblers to make and repair shoes.

Bankers played an important role in a city whose wealth was based on trade. In one part of the Agora, slaves and horses were displayed for sale. The large-scale production of pottery took place in a special area near the western wall.

The Acropolis

The Acropolis was the highest point in Athens and buildings on it could be seen from all over the city. A long road called the Panathenian Way wound its way from the Agora up to the top of the Acropolis. This road was named after the Panathenia, a major festival held every four years in honour of the goddess Athene, the goddess of Athens.

In early times the Acropolis was a fort but, in the fifth century BCE it was the religious centre of Athens. Many temples were built here, the most famous being the Parthenon, which housed a statue of Athene.

Political and legal structures

As well as being a commercial centre, the Agora was the administrative and legal centre of Athens, where Athenian democracy was put into practice. The word democracy comes from two Greek words: demos, meaning ‘people’, and kratia, meaning ‘rule’. There were three ways in which all Athenian citizens — free adult males — could take part in the governing of Attica:

- through the Ecclesia (or assembly)
- through the Boule (or council)
- at the law courts.

The Ecclesia

The Ecclesia was the most important decision-making body in Athens, and every citizen aged over 18 years was able to participate and vote. The Ecclesia met in the south-east of Athens and gathered around the pnyx, a raised platform from which people spoke to the assembly. It met three or four times every 36 days, and decisions made here became the laws of Athens. Those who could speak loudly and clearly were the ones most likely to be able to get their views heard.
Source 3 A photograph of the Athenian Acropolis. The Parthenon is in the centre.

Source 4 A nineteenth-century portrayal of an Athenian assembly (Von Fuiz 1805–1877)

The Boule

The Boule was made up of 500 Athenian citizens who met every day except public holidays. Meetings were held in a building called the Bouleuterion on the western side of the Agora. Fifty citizens from each of the ten tribes were chosen by lot each year. The Boule’s functions were to prepare matters to be discussed at the Ecclesia and to look after the day-to-day running of the city. Citizens were paid for their attendance, so even the poorer citizens were able to take part. Every day a different one of its members would become chairman and, if the Ecclesia met on that day, that person would also chair the Ecclesia.

Source 5 The pnyx, the platform from which Athenians spoke to the Ecclesia
The law courts

The law courts were also to the south of the Agora. Every Athenian citizen had the right to be on the jury. To make it possible for even the poorest man to attend, each juror was paid about one-third of a skilled labourer’s wage for jury duty. A device called a kleroterion was used to select jurors. Names of jurors were placed in rows, and rows for jury choice were chosen at random. Juries were usually quite large in order to make it more difficult to bribe jurors. In addition, juries were always of an odd number to prevent the yes and no votes being equal. Some juries could be as large as 5001 men.

There were no judges or lawyers. The accused would make a speech in his own defence and the court would vote; a simple majority vote was all that was needed to convict. The next stage would be to decide on the penalty. Both the prosecutor and the accused would have a chance to propose a suitable punishment and the court would vote a second time on this.

For serious cases such as murder, a special court would meet on another hill called the Areopagus (see source 1 for its location).

Source 6 A famous speech said to have been made by Pericles in 431 BCE describing Athenian democracy

Let me say that our system of government does not copy the institutions of our neighbours. It is more the case of our being a model to others, than of our imitating anyone else. Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses. No-one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty. And, just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other. We do not get into a state with our next door neighbour if he enjoys himself in his own way, nor do we give him the kind of black looks which, though they do no real harm, still do hurt people’s feelings. We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. This is because it commands our deep respect…”


ACTIVITIES

CHECK KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

1 Some of the places mentioned in this description of Attica are Piraeus, the Acropolis, Parthenon, Agora, Areopagus and Eridanus. Match each of these places with the following descriptions:
   a the place where goods were bought and sold
   b the steep rocky hill in the centre of the city
   c the harbour town
   d the famous temple
   e a river bordering Athens
   f the hill where murder trials were held.

2 What were two things that made Athens wealthy?

3 Why were Athenian citizens paid to be on juries?

4 Copy the following table and fill in the details for each of the three organisations in Athenian democracy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Composition</th>
<th>How it functioned and contributed to democracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boule</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecclesia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DEVELOP SOURCE SKILLS

5 Source 2 is an artist’s interpretation of what life in the Agora may have been like.
   a List some of the similarities between the Athenian Agora and a modern shopping mall.
   b List all the activities you can identify in the illustration. Share your list with other students.

6 Carefully read Pericles’ speech [source 6] and write down what he considers to be the special features of democracy as it was practised in Athens.

7 Imagine that you are a boy or girl from ancient times. You have travelled from your home in the countryside to visit the great city of Athens.
   a Using all the sources and the text, make a list of places you might see and your activities there.
   b Use this list to write an account of your visit.

Use the Tour of Athens web link to take a tour of one of the most powerful and influential cities in ancient Greece.

Agora: the central marketplace in a Greek city-state
Boule: the council that looked after the day-to-day running of Athens
Citizen: in Athens, a free-born male Athenian over the age of 18
Democracy: a system of government in which political power lies with the people.
4.5 Daily life in Athens

Houses
Most of our evidence for ancient Greek housing comes from excavations in Athens. Houses were fairly simple, as people spent much of their time outdoors and the rich were expected to spend their money on religious festivals or providing ships for the navy.
Houses were made of sun-dried bricks, with wooden supports for verandahs, staircases and roofs. Both rich and poor citizens lived in similar houses, which differed mainly in size. The house of a wealthy citizen could have two storeys and a central courtyard, with rooms on each side. Women’s quarters were separated from the men’s area, and no male visitor dared to enter the women’s quarters.

Food
The main types of food eaten by the ancient Greeks were eggs, fish, vegetables, goat’s milk, cheese and fruit. In Greece’s warm climate, fruit such as mulberries, apples, figs, dates, grapes, olives and lemons were plentiful. Salads were made from a variety of vegetables such as onions, beans and cabbages. Olive oil was used for the salads and for cooking.
Although meat wasn’t a large part of the diet, an animal would be sacrificed on an altar in the courtyard on special occasions such as religious festivals or at family events such as weddings.
Breakfast would be bread and wine, and lunch would consist of bread, olives and cheese. Dinner was a hot meal of, perhaps, soup, fish, vegetables, cake and fruit. Wealthy men often ate dinner with each other, rather than with their wives and families.
Cooking was sometimes done on a raised hearth (fireplace) in the courtyard. Water was heated and soup and vegetables were cooked in large wide-mouthed jugs. Roasting was done in small clay ovens.

Festivals
Festivals played a very important role in giving a pattern to the Athenian year. The year began in
midsummer, corresponding to mid July, and hardly a month passed without one or two major festivals. Festivals could last several days. Each had its own set of procedures to be followed, and almost all had three elements:
• processions
• animal sacrifices followed by a banquet to eat the meat
• competitions involving plays or athletic events.

Athenian women

Even though Athene was a woman and the main deity worshipped in Athens, Athenian women had few rights. This was the same in other Greek states. While boys learned to read and write, slaves taught girls domestic duties such as spinning and weaving.

Apart from some religious ceremonies and festivals in which men and women both took part, most of the women’s life would be restricted to the home. Only the men were involved in the day-to-day government of the city, and any shopping that had to be done in the Agora was done by slaves. Even at night the men, rather than stay at home, would often prefer to have dinners and long discussions. The only women present were unmarried women who were there to serve and entertain them.

Marriage

A girl’s future was decided between her father and the groom’s father. This was often done while she was a young girl. The father would say, ‘I give you this girl for the ploughing of legitimate children’ and this would be a legal bond.

The girl would remain with her parents until the actual wedding celebration — the gamos — which would take place when she was aged around 15. On the evening before the wedding, the girl would dedicate her toys to the goddess Artemis. Both she and the groom would be given a ritual bath in water from a sacred spring.

On the morning of the wedding itself, the houses of the bride and groom were decorated with branches of olive and laurel. The bride’s family held a sacrifice followed by a banquet. Traditional food was served, including sesame cakes, which were believed to stimulate fertility.

In the evening, the bride would leave her parents’ house for the last time. She would be taken in a formal torchlight procession to the groom’s house. From this time on, she was considered the property of the groom and his family.

ACTIVITIES

CHECK KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING
1. What would be the main differences between the houses of a wealthy Greek and a poorer Greek?
2. Prepare a menu for a typical day’s meals in ancient Greece.
3. What were the three elements shared by most religious festivals?
4. What would a person in Australia today consider the three most unusual things about an Athenian marriage?

DEVELOP SOURCE SKILLS
5. Examine the drawing of an ancient Greek house in source 1, and answer the following questions:
   a. Which three rooms formed the women’s quarters?
   b. What does this separation show us about the role of women in Greek society?
   c. From the drawing and text, describe the building materials used for houses.
   d. Compare the ancient Greek house with your own house. Explain the similarities and differences.

6. Examine source 2 and the text. Imagine you are the bride, and describe what is happening. Write this as a diary entry for your wedding day. Include as many details as you can, such as the time, where you have been, who is with you, what they are carrying and where you are going.

Source 2: A painting from a small Greek pottery box that shows a bride being escorted to the home of her new husband, after a wedding feast at her parents’ home.