FACTS AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

ANCIENT GREECE
The history of Attica dates back to prehistoric times when the region was made up of many independent villages. According to legend, King Theseus united the villages into one state. Its capital was Athens and its citizens, most of whom lived in the country, were known as Athenians.

The Akropolis
The settlement of Athens grew up around a great rock that loomed over the surrounding area. The Akropolis ('high city') was the main focus of the unified state. Its superb location commanded far-reaching views of the land and sea, allowing the Athenians to see any enemies and potential attacks. A fortress was built on the Akropolis, which offered protection from the enemy. The steep sides of the rock were hard to climb, and the Athenians could attack the enemy with boulders, stones, spears and arrows.

Athens in the early historical period, sixth--fifth centuries BCE

Late 590s A bitter quarrel between the rich and poor of Athens is solved. Spared a civil war, Athens has the strength to expand. Not long afterwards, Athenians capture the island of Salamis from neighbouring Megara (see map). Peisistratos commands the victorious forces.

C.546 At the third attempt, Peisistratos manages to make himself sole ruler (tyrant) of Athens. Under the tyranny, fine buildings and beautiful painted pottery are made.

C.510 The tyranny ends in blood: Hipparchus, Peisistratos's son, who killed many citizens, is thrown out.

508--507 Beginnings of a new revolutionary style of government -- democracy, the rule of the people.

Late 480s A new supply of silver is found in Athens' mines at Laurion. The Athenians decide to spend it on building a large fleet of warships. This is just in time, because...

480---479 Persia invades Greece with an enormous fleet and army (see pages 34--35). Although defeated, the Persians destroy much of Athens

479 onwards Athenians return and hurriedly build a great defensive wall around their city and fortify a new port. It will become the most famous in the Mediterranean -- Piraeus.

Socrates makes himself unpopular by asking difficult questions such as 'What is true justice?' and 'What does knowledge mean?' People could not answer and were embarrassed. Condemned to death for 'corrupting the young' and 'introducing new gods', Socrates refused to escape and died by drinking poison in 399 BCE.

The Beginning of 'People Power'
The philosopher Aristotle wrote that every Greek state contained a few rich people and a lot of poor people. Rich and poor often fought against each other, sometimes with civil war breaking out. Greeks called this conflict stasis, and many states were weakened by it. Both Athens and Sparta managed to avoid stasis, which perhaps explains how these states grew so powerful.

Rich Spartan landowners ruled with an iron hand. They scared the poor into obedience and
Attica became wealthy by producing olive oil. Silver from mines at Laureion enriched Athens and made its coins. By conquering the great islands of Salamis (early sixth century BCE) and Aligina (mid-fifth century BCE), Athens made safe its profitable seaborne trade into Phaleron and Peiraeus.

The rich tolerated this situation because they played an important role in influencing the poor to make decisions. The rich men, who had the best education and had learned the art of public speaking, would address a crowd of ordinary people to persuade them. Any topic of concern, from 'Shall we go to war?' to 'How shall we spend the city's money?' or 'What taxes should we pay?' was debated at these gatherings and then decided upon by voting. Thousands of ordinary citizens in the assembly met on a hillside near the Akropolis where they would cast their vote. Every citizen, whether rich or poor, had one vote each.

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