Democracy

The ancient Greeks devised a form of government they called *demokratia*, from which comes our word ‘democracy’. Meaning ‘the rule of the people’, democracy arose in Athens in the 400s BCE. It was a system of government in which ordinary adult male citizens (not women, foreigners or slaves) became involved in the day-to-day administration and politics of Athens.

Assembly
Male citizens of Athens, aged twenty and over, met forty times a year. These were meetings of the people’s Assembly, or *ekklesia*. Citizens listened to speeches which described plans the city Council had for Athens. When the speakers had finished, the citizens voted for or against the Council by raising their hands. The decision of the Assembly was final – the people had spoken. This was democracy in action.

Meeting Place
In Athens, meetings of the Assembly were usually held on the Pnyx hill, but they could also be held in the city’s *agora* (marketplace). At least 6,000 citizens had to attend, or an Assembly could not go ahead. At the Pnyx, speakers made their speeches from a stone rostrum, or platform, cut into the hill.
Democracy in Athens was a two-part system. One part was the Council, or boule. It was a group of 500 male citizens aged thirty and over. They held daily meetings in the council hall (bouleuterion). Each man could only be a city councillor for one year at a time, after which another man took his place.

The council hall was a debating chamber. It was a square building with sides 23 metres long, inside which were tiers of stone benches on three sides. Councillors sat on the benches while a speaker addressed them from the floor of the chamber. When he had finished, another man took his turn at speaking. Questions were called out, and the speaker answered them as best, and as persuasively, as he could.

One of the Council's main functions was to debate issues that affected Athens. These included proposals for new laws, or changes to existing ones, money matters, the construction of public buildings, dealings with other cities in Greece, and threats posed by enemies.

At the end of a Council meeting an agenda was drawn up for the Assembly – the second part of the democratic process in Athens. At an Assembly meeting the plans of the Council were announced to ordinary male citizens. The Assembly then held its own debate, at the end of which they voted to accept or reject the proposals the Council had put to them.

**How do we know?**

Our knowledge of Greek democracy, particularly the way it was practised in Athens, comes from a variety of sources. The works of Greek writers, such as the great statesman Demosthenes (384-322BC), are particularly valuable, as their books and speeches contain a wealth of information about the workings of democracy. Excavations in the heart of Athens have uncovered thousands of ostraka, on which we can read the names of men who were banished from the city by public vote, and the meeting place of the Assembly, on the Pnyx hill, survives almost intact.
Greece

John Malam