

Democracy and Justice in Athens

The Greek system of government changed and evolved over the centuries. Initially (circa 800 – 650BC) Greece was an **oligarchy** (rule by the few) ruled by aristocrats (groups of wealthy landowners). As Greece prospered and merchants, bankers and craftsmen grew richer, tensions could arise between them and the ruling Aristocrats. In some states one man was allowed to take absolute control in order to restore peace. These men were known as **tyrants**. Mostly they only ruled for short periods to secure stability but some remained in power for many years. Although the word tyrant has bad connotations today, some tyrants were popular and had long peaceful reigns e.g. Peisistratus of Athens (circa 546-527BC). He was succeeded by his son Hippias, whose reign was not so successful, he was overthrown in 510bc, and two years of civil war followed.

It was following this civil war that Athens adopted **democracy** as their system of government. The name comes from the Greek words *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule). Today, the term democracy is used to describe a system in which everybody has a vote. However, in Ancient Greece only citizens had this right. All other social groups, such as women, foreign residents and slaves, were excluded.

The Assembly

Every citizen had the right to speak and to vote at the Assembly, which met about once every ten days on a hill called the Pnyx. At least 6000 citizens had to be present for a meeting to take place. If too few people attended, special police were sent out to round up more citizens. The Assembly debated proposals which were put to it by the Council It could approve, change or reject the Council's suggestions.

The Council

The Council drew up new laws and policies, which were then debated in the Assembly. The Council was made up of 500 citizens, 50 from each of the ten Athenian tribes. Councillors were chosen annually by lot. Each tribal group took it in turn to lead the Council, taking responsibility for the day-to-day running of the state.

Ostracism

Ostracism was used to remove unpopular politicians at a vote held each year in the Assembly. Each citizen present could write the name of any politician they wished to banish on a piece of broken pottery called an ostrakon. If any politician received more than 6000 votes they had to leave Athens for 10 years.

The legal system

One of a citizen's duties was to participate in the running of the legal system. All citizens over 30 were expected to volunteer for jury service. From 461BC jurors were paid to compensate them for any loss of earnings. There were no professional judges, lawyers or legal officials. The Athenians tried to make their courts fair and unbiased. Each court had a jury of over 200 men, to ensure that jurors could not be bribed or intimidated. As there were no lawyers, citizens had to conduct their own cases. Some people employed professional speech writers to prepare their cases for them. Only citizens could speak in court. If a *metic* (foreign resident) was accused, he had to persuade a citizen to speak on his behalf.

Any citizen who wanted to serve as a juror simply went to the court. Often more people volunteered than were needed. A machine, called a *kleroteria*, was used to select the names of the jurors for that day.

Each juror was issued with two circular bronze tokens which were used for voting. The tokens were slightly different to each other to denote innocent or guilty and could be concealed in the hand for secrecy. At the end of the trial, jurors handed in one of them to show whether they thought the accused person was innocent or guilty.



Certain jurors, chosen by lot, were given special tasks. One took charge as the judge, four counted the votes and one operated a water clock to limit the time allowed to each speaker. Water clocks were used in pairs as shown here. When a speaker began the water was poured into the top receptacle which had a small spout at the bottom allowing the water to trickle out into the urn below (no spout). When the water had all dripped into the lower pot, the speaker's time was up. The upper pot would be refilled from the lower when the next speaker began, and so on.

Hampshire History Centre's two Greek artefact collections both contain replica voting ballots and a water clock as well as many other items. To arrange a loan of either collection contact the Centre on 023 9237 7546.