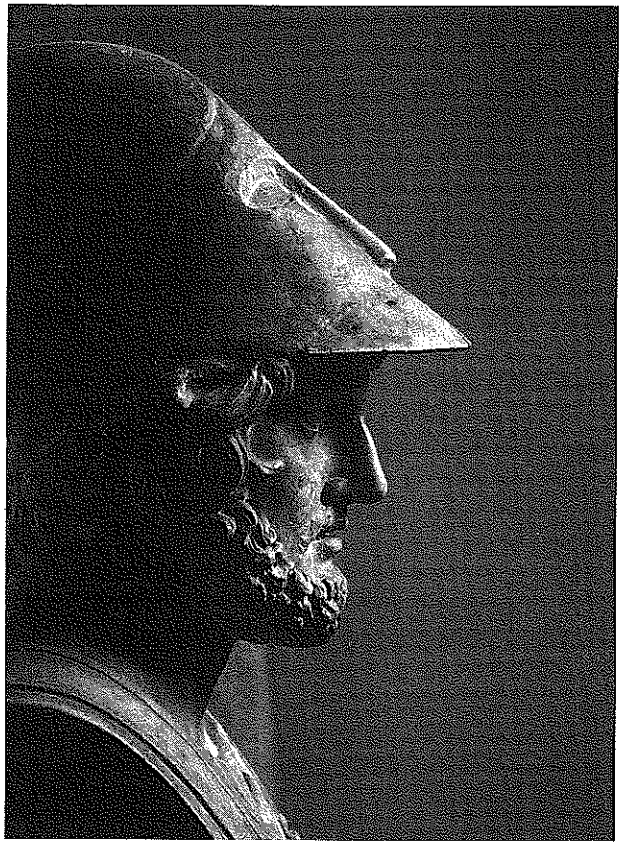

3

Themistocles: Defender of Greek Civilization

Themistocles, the leader of democratic Athens during the Persian Wars, saved Greek civilization by thwarting the Persian invasion of Greece. It was Themistocles who convinced the Athenians to use the silver produced by the mines of Laurium to construct the Athenian fleet that defeated the Persians at the crucial Battle of Salamis. It was also Themistocles who organized the city-states in defense of Greece. Finally, it was Themistocles' cunning ploy that forced the Greeks to stand and fight at Salamis, where the narrowness of the strait helped produce a Greek victory. The Persian Wars decided the fate of Western civilization. Had the Persians been able to incorporate the Greek poleis into their vast empire, they might have crushed the spirit of the Greeks. The achievements of classical Greece would not have survived to form the basis of Western culture. Furthermore, the Greeks' miraculous victory over the Persians filled them with a supreme confidence that further unleashed their genius.

BACKGROUND: SPARTA AND ATHENS

Sparta

During the Archaic period, Sparta and Athens developed the distinct political and social institutions that made them the two superpowers of Greece. Sparta was situated in Laconia (or Lacedaemon), the southeastern portion of the Peloponnesus, the peninsula of southern Greece. Watered by the Eurotas River, Laconia consists of some of the most fertile land in Europe—in sharp contrast to the poor soil of most of the rest of Greece.

It appears (though this remains shadowy) that some time in the tenth or ninth century B.C. the Spartans conquered a neighboring polis called Helos and enslaved its population. Though the Spartans did allow some of the conquered peoples, whom they called *perioikoi* (those dwelling around), local self-government and freedom from forced labor, they reduced the majority, called *helots,* to serfdom. The perioikoi produced war materials and other items for the Spartans and sometimes even served as reserves in the Spartan army. The Spartans paid for the supplies and allowed the perioikoi to sell surplus goods to other poleis. In a sense, the perioikoi lived more comfortably than Spartan citizens, who were not allowed to trade with other poleis. By contrast, the helots, though allowed to keep half of their crops, were owned by the state; some worked directly for the state but most were assigned to the land of an individual Spartan and could not depart from it. Even those allotted to individual Spartans could be conscripted by the state at any time and could be freed only by the state.

In the late eighth century B.C., when the Spartans faced overpopulation like the rest of Greece, they decided to solve the problem by conquering fertile Messenia to the west, rather than by colonizing distant shores of the Black and Mediterranean Seas, as many other city-states were doing. (The Spartans established only one colony, at Taras, on the southern tip of Italy.) The Spartans invaded Messenia, annexed its territory, and added its citizens to the helot population. The annexation of all of one polis's territory by another was rare in Greece, not only because the Greeks valued the smallness of their poleis, but also because such a policy would require a standing army. Indeed, the significance of the Spartans' military expansionism is that it left them a small minority in their own country, rulers over a vast population of oppressed helots. Thus, Sparta could not hope to develop along the same lines as the other Greek poleis. The constant need to suppress the helot population necessitated the development of rigid social discipline and a military state.

The implications of the Spartan policy of conquest became apparent only after the Messenian revolt of the mid-seventh century B.C. In this bloody rebellion, the Messenians, with the aid of Arcadia, almost gained their independence and nearly annihilated the Spartans in the process. It was during this period that the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus wrote these stirring lines:

> For a good man to die falling beside the front-line fighters, in defense of his country, is a noble thing. . . . Since a wanderer receives no recognition, neither honor nor respect nor mercy, let us fight with all our might for this land, and die for our children. . . . Flee not, leaving behind, fallen on the ground, the elders whose knees are no longer nimble. For it is a disgrace when an older man, his hair already white and gray of beard, falls in the front line and lies before a younger man. . . . So let every man bite his lip and, with both feet firmly on the ground, take his place for battle.

Having finally suppressed the bloody rebellion of the Messenians, the Spartans, now acutely aware that they comprised but a small minority in their own country, decided that they must change their society into a disciplined military machine or be enslaved by their own helots. At the height of Spartan power, a mere 9,000 Spartan citizens ruled nearly 100,000 helots.

Spartan legend claimed that a lawgiver named Lycurgus had introduced the unique Spartan political and social systems around 750 B.C., based on the institutions that then prevailed in Crete. Lycurgus had then made the Spartans take a solemn oath not to make any change in his constitution until he returned from a voyage to Delphi, and then purposely starved himself to death there and even had his ashes scattered in the sea, so that he could never return to Sparta in any form. The truth is that the Spartans established their distinctive institutions in the late seventh century B.C. in the wake of the Messenian revolt, and Lycurgus is almost certainly a mythical figure.

Though complex, the Spartan political system was largely a gerontocracy, an oligarchy ruled by a council of elders. The Gerousia, an assembly of Sparta's two kings and twenty-eight elders, the latter elected by the popular assembly from aristocratic families, possessed much of the city's legislative and some of its judicial and executive power. Members of the Gerousia held lifetime terms.

Sparta's dual monarchy, controlled by two families reputedly descended from the demigod Heracles, was designed to prevent dictatorial rule and to allow one king to stay at home and preside over religious rituals while the other waged war. Rivalry between the two kings generally prevented them from effectively checking the Gerousia.

The Spartans also possessed a popular assembly, the Apella, which consisted of all citizens aged thirty and over. But the Apella was the laughingstock of Greece. It decided only those few matters presented to it by the Gerousia and could not even debate these issues. Voting in the assembly was accomplished by banging on one's shield, with the louder side winning. A group of officials shut up in a nearby shed had to decide which clamor was louder.

Each year, five *ephors* (overseers) were chosen by a procedure akin to the lot. The ephors' job was to spy on the kings, each of whom was required to have an ephor at his side at all times, to initiate legislation in the Gerousia, to execute some of the laws passed by the Gerousia and Apella, to negotiate with foreign governments, to call up the army and decide who would march, to disburse government funds, to serve as moral censors, and to judge civil suits and (with the Gerousia) criminal trials. They could fine or arrest kings, pending trial. Each year the ephors issued an official declaration of war against the helots, which served as the legal basis for the execution of any troublemaker among them. Each month the kings took an oath not to exceed their authority, and the ephors took an oath not to overturn

the monarchy. But the provision that ephors could not serve again after their single year in office greatly undermined their power.

Sparta was famed more for its unique social system than for its system of government. When a Spartan child was born, the ephors inspected him for signs of illness. If the child was weak or deformed in any way, he was hurled from the top of Mount Taygetus, a crude form of genetic engineering.

At seven, Spartan girls began athletic training, scandalizing most Greeks by running about in revealing skirts. The girls' training, which included running, wrestling, and hurling the discus and javelin, was considered unusually rigorous. The Spartans hoped to make their women physically fit so that they might better endure childbirth and produce healthier babies. First and foremost, girls were trained to be the mothers of warriors. On special occasions, standing nude before dignitaries, they sang songs in praise or ridicule of specific boys (also nude), as a powerful incentive to the latter's good conduct.

So successful was the girls' indoctrination that Spartan mothers became notorious for their patriotism and martial ardor. When a Spartan woman asked about a battle and was informed that all five of her sons had been killed, she replied testily, "That isn't what I asked you, vile slave, but rather how our country was doing." Spartan mothers told their sons departing for battle: "Come back with your shield—or on it!"

At the age of seven, boys were taken from their mothers and trained at a boot camp. The "herds" of boys were taught to read (but "no more than was necessary"), count, sing patriotic songs, and recite Homer. They were not taught lyric poetry or philosophy because such subjects "softened men." The carefully selected superintendent of the camp maintained a strict discipline with the aid of brutal older boys. The young boys were taught to steal most of their food from gardens and mess halls, as training in endurance and stealth; they were beaten if caught. They walked barefooted, received only one cloak per year, bathed only a few days per year, and slept on beds of reed. They were trained in running, swimming, and dancing (for dexterity). Spartan athletic training was so rigorous the Spartans generally won the most prizes at the Olympic Games. The boys marched silently in a mass, keeping their hands in their cloaks, their eyes fixed on the ground before them. They were encouraged to play a savage game of "king of the mountain," a game in which the "king," a boy at the top of a hill, must maintain his position by fighting off all challengers and preserve his "reign" at all costs.

At twenty, Spartan males went into concealment—the *krypteia*, from the same root as "crypt," "cryptic," and "cryptography"—with nothing but a dagger. Only at night could they leave their hiding places to secure provisions and to kill any helots who were out after curfew.

At twenty-one, Spartan males joined a *synousia*, an "association" or brotherhood of fifteen men in the army. Each male had to be accepted unanimously by the brotherhood. Since a rejection meant social death, this rule served as a powerful incentive for Spartan boys to display courage, reverence, and obedience daily. Few ever had to be rejected. The soldiers of the brotherhood spent all of their time together, eating in a common mess hall, and sleeping in a common barracks. Because Spartan men were professional soldiers, they were forbidden to perform manual labor of any kind. Helots furnished by the polis farmed their land, part of which was provided by the state, part by inheritance. Soldiers contributed grain from their farms to their own mess hall. To fail to do so, or to reject training, meant the loss of citizenship. Soldiers were not allowed to carry torches after dark, so that they might learn to travel fearlessly at night. Each year the 300 best warriors were chosen to fight beside the king. Anyone who was not selected could challenge one of the 300 to a fight for his position. Those who behaved cowardly in battle were deprived of citizenship and were made to wear cloaks with colored patches and to shave only one cheek as badges of their dishonor. When one Spartan soldier ran from battle, his grandmother killed him. Even the Spartans' statues of the gods depicted them armed.

At thirty, Spartan males became full citizens and joined the popular assembly. Between this time and age forty-five, they were expected to marry. They generally married women approximately eighteen years of age, in contrast to most other Greek men, who married girls soon after they reached puberty. Those males who failed to marry by forty-five were fined and ordered to walk naked through the marketplace on a certain winter day every year, singing a song about how their shame was justified since they had disobeyed the law. For their failure to provide little warriors for the state, such men were also deprived of the respect normally accorded to elders. Even Dercyllidas, one of the best Spartan generals, was denied his rightful seat at a social gathering by a young man. The young man explained, "You have not fathered a son who will offer his seat to me." Marriage was effected by forcibly carrying off the bride (more training in warrior skills). Once married, Spartan males continued to live in the barracks with their brethren and were technically forbidden to visit their wives, though, in actuality, they were expected to do so. It was understood that the husband would periodically sneak away to his wife, in the dead of night, all the while trying not to get caught (more stealth training). Some men fathered children before ever seeing their wives in the daylight. Some Spartan males shared their wives with other "virtuous" men, with the blessing of the state. A Spartan husband would not think of denying his wife to another male, nor would the wife consider refusing such a request, if the suitor were an honorable man. The point was to produce more children, but without the passionate feuds that

resulted from surreptitious sex. By institutionalizing adultery, the Spartans hoped to rob it of its power to destabilize society.

At forty-five, Spartan males could return to their wives and homes. There they lived for the rest of their lives.

At sixty, Spartan males could retire from military service if they wished. The elders of noble families became eligible for election to the Gerousia. Newly elected members of the Gerousia received the dubious privilege of a double mess of porridge when dining in public mess halls. They generally gave the extra serving to a friend or family member as a token of honor.

Sparta lost no opportunity to teach each generation its vital role in the survival of the polis. At festivals, a choir of old men sang, "We were once valiant young men," a choir of young men sang, "But we are the valiant now; put us to the test, if you wish," and a choir of boys sang, "But we shall be far mightier."

Like all other social systems, the Spartan system possessed distinct advantages and disadvantages. The deleterious effects of the system are obvious to the modern individualist. First, the Spartan fear of foreign ideas, a fear stemming from the need to preserve their unique system, hurt the Spartans intellectually and economically. Spartans were forbidden to trade and travel, lest foreigners corrupt them. Soldiers patrolled the polis's borders to discourage visitors. When a foreigner asked a Spartan how many Spartan citizens there were, he replied, "Enough, my friend, to keep out undesirables." The few invited visitors were escorted around by a guard and sometimes expelled without explanation. As a result, in sharp contrast to Athens, Sparta left posterity no art, even in the broadest sense of the term. Even Spartan history has come down to us from the Athenians, since the Spartans did not write history. When an Athenian politician criticized Sparta for its lack of education, a Spartan king replied proudly, "Your point is correct, since we are the only Greeks who have learned nothing wicked from you Athenians." While Athens possessed an intelligently controlled currency, accepted even by the primitive tribes of northern Europe, the Spartans used unwieldy iron bars for that purpose because they feared the seduction of wealth.

Second, the need to maintain discipline caused the Spartans to feed and clothe themselves miserably. The very word "spartan" has come to mean "bare" or "unadorned." After tasting the infamous black porridge of Sparta, a Sybarite who had the misfortune to be a guest at a public mess hall there, declared, "Now I understand why you Spartans do not fear death!" Spartan law decreed that the ceiling in every house be constructed using only an ax, and the doors with only a saw, the object being to encourage frugality in furniture and cutlery (who would adorn a shack with golden goblets and velvet chairs?). As a result of this practice, an astonished Spartan king who visited a lavish dining hall in Corinth asked his host if the timber there grew square. The Spartans were proud of their ability to survive on horrendous

food and shabby clothing. One of their kings, Agesilaus II, claimed that the greatest benefit of the Spartan system was the "contempt for luxury" it inspired. When Agesilaus met outdoors with a Persian satrap (provincial governor) to negotiate peace, the satrap arrived with embroidered rugs and soft cushions to keep from soiling his splendid robes, while the Spartan king plopped himself down on the grass. The Spartans' pride in their frugality could sometimes be obnoxious. Once, when the Athenian philosopher Diogenes the Cynic saw Rhodians parading about in fine clothes at the Olympics, he scoffed, "Affectation!" But when he saw the Spartans parading about in their rags soon after, he declared, "More affectation!" Aristotle noted that while the Spartans' single-minded pursuit of courage had provided them with essential security, it had deprived them of "the ability to live in a way that has real value." By sacrificing personal freedom so completely to the considerations of security, they had defeated the whole purpose of security, which was to defend that degree of freedom necessary to self-fulfillment. By the very means with which they sought to avoid enslavement at the hands of foreigners, the Spartans had enslaved themselves.

Finally, the collectivized Spartan system left individual Spartans with personality deficiencies. The historian Plutarch, who admired the Spartans, compared them with bees because they were incapable of leading private lives, being "organic parts of their community, clinging together around their leader, forgetting themselves in their enthusiasm, and belonging wholly to their country." Spartans became notorious for their lack of humor. When a man asked a Spartan if he wished to hear him imitate a nightingale, the Spartan declined, saying, "I have heard the nightingale herself." The very word "laconic," derived from Laconia, became a synonym for "terse."

But the Spartan system possessed advantages as well. First, it encouraged a selflessness lacking in most individualistic societies. When an old man looking for a seat at the Olympics was jeered away by other Greeks, the Spartans rose up en masse, even the elders, to offer him a seat. The old man sighed, "All Greeks know what is right, but only the Spartans do it."

Second, the Spartans' lifelong discipline produced skilled, rugged, courageous, and patriotic soldiers. By 550 B.C., the Spartan army was the best in Greece. Combined with the Athenian navy, the Spartans later saved Greece from enslavement by the Persians. So strenuous was Spartan training that their soldiers considered war a vacation from its rigors. The Spartans were the only people who actually relaxed their discipline in wartime. Plutarch noted that Spartan troops marched to the sound of flutes in perfect order, with calm and confidence, neither fearful nor reckless, "as if some divine force had taken charge of them." When asked why Sparta had no walls, King Agesilaus II pointed to Spartan soldiers and said, "These are the Spartans' walls." King Agis remarked that Spartans did not ask how many the enemy were, only where they were located. A Spartan with a crippled leg

refused to leave the army, saying, "What's needed to fight our foes is a man who stands his ground, not one who runs away." The Spartans became famous for their patriotism. When a foreigner tried to curry favor with King Theopompus by claiming that in his own polis he was called a "friend of Sparta," Theopompus replied sternly: "Stranger, it would be more honorable for you to be called a friend of your own city."

Finally, the Spartan system produced strong, independent women. As the mothers of warriors, Spartan women possessed a much higher status in society than Athenian women. In Sparta, only women who died in childbirth and soldiers who died in battle were permitted headstones above their tombs. Since Spartan males lived in the barracks and spent all of their time preparing for war, the women had to oversee the helots. As the managers of Spartan farms, living without male supervision, Spartan women developed practical skills and an independent caste of mind.

The Spartans did not lack admirers, even in the rival city of Athens. Socrates and his disciples Plato and Xenophon greatly admired their frugality, discipline, stability, courage, and patriotism. Above all, they admired the Spartans for having rationally devised their own unique lifestyle, rather than meekly continuing a traditional way of life. Whatever one thought of the Spartan system, it was not a mindless copy of any other. Yet one contemporary made the telling observation: "Despite the universal praise for such a code of behavior, not a single city is willing to copy it."

By 500 B.C., the Spartans had established the Peloponnesian League, an alliance of Peloponnesian (and a few other) poleis sworn to mutual defense and determined to suppress democracy in the region. The Spartans feared the instability they associated with democracy above every other danger. Legend had it that when a man urged Lycurgus to create a democracy in Sparta, the lawgiver had replied, "Make your own household a democracy first." The man withdrew his request.

Athens

Attica, the territory of Athens, did not unite until approximately 700 B.C., when as many as twelve small poleis combined to form it, a development vital to Athenian greatness. Yet before the sixth century B.C., Athens was still only a minor polis.

Like most other Greeks of the Archaic period, the Athenians possessed an oligarchic system of government by the seventh century B.C. A council of nobles called the Areopagus, who possessed lifetime tenure, held the legislative and judicial power. Members of the Areopagus were former *archons* (rulers), aristocratic magistrates annually elected by the popular assembly to execute the laws of the Areopagus. The six lesser archons recorded official decisions and guarded public documents. The king archon conducted religious ceremonies, the polemarch served as the military leader, and the eponymous archon presided over the Areopagus. Like the Spartan Apella, the Athenian popular assembly, called the Ecclesia, possessed little power.

As in the rest of Greece, Athenian aristocrats abused their power. According to Athenian legend, in 621 B.C. an aristocrat named Draco, who was perhaps a mythical figure (the name means "snake"), drafted Athens's first written law code. Later dubbed "the code written in blood," Draco's laws were particularly harsh toward the lower classes, whence comes the word "draconian." The code mandated death for a wide variety of crimes, including idleness and the theft of fruit. Those unable to pay their debts could be enslaved and sold abroad or forced to sell their children. As in the rest of Greece, the aristocratic monopolization of land turned small farmers into serfs or colonists and the landless into slaves. Furthermore, the aristocratic system of government barred the rising middle class from representation in the political system. Athens was ripe for revolution.

In 594 B.C., Athenian aristocrats took bold action to prevent such a revolution. They appointed a man named Solon sole archon for a year and charged him with the duty of revising the laws. Solon had become famous for his poems, which had opposed the greed and injustice of the aristocrats. He immediately repealed the Draconian laws, canceled all debts, forbade the practice of enslavement for debt, freed those already enslaved for debt, and repurchased those sold abroad. Perhaps Solon's greatest long-term reform was to persuade nobles to produce olives instead of grain. Athenian soil was poorly suited to grain production but perfect for olive cultivation. The deep roots of olive vines could find moisture in the soil during the summer. Instead of attempting self-sufficiency and failing, as Athens had in the past, Athenians now turned to trade for their sustenance. The Athenians exported olive oil and pottery and imported grain. Trade increased Athens's wealth and stimulated creativity by bringing Athenians into contact with foreign cultures. In addition, olive production created more jobs for the poor. Solon also encouraged foreign craftsmen to settle in Athens by offering them citizenship. The offer of citizenship to foreigners on a large scale was unprecedented in the ancient world. Furthermore, Solon constructed state-owned pottery factories in order to diversify Athens's exports and to prevent the poor from becoming entirely dependent on the aristocratic olive producers. Formed from excellent clay, Athens's pottery was soon sought after by the whole of the Mediterranean world. Solon declared that each citizen must teach his son a trade and to write. Solon established the right of any citizen to initiate legal proceedings (even on behalf of another) and forced families to rely on the law when family members were murdered, rather than engaging in blood feuds. Solon turned the Areopagus into a mere judicial body, transferring

its legislative functions to the new Council of 400, in which the rising middle class was represented. At the same time, the archonship was opened to the low-born wealthy. These reforms, which doubled the number of those able to hold office, had the important psychological effect of basing status on wealth rather than birth. Athens was still not a democracy, but Solon had taken the first steps in that direction.

Few were happy with Solon's reforms. Many nobles were angered by Solon's cancellation of debts, and many of the poor by his refusal to redistribute land. Solon compared himself to "a wolf beset by hounds."

At the end of his year as archon, Solon wisely departed Athens for ten years on the pretext of pursuing his commercial interests. When asked if he had provided the best laws for the Athenians, he replied, "The best that they would accept." He went to Egypt, where a priest told him of the fabled island of Atlantis. Solon also journeyed to Lydia, a kingdom in Asia Minor ruled by Croesus. Croesus sought to impress Solon. After showing Solon his vast treasure, Croesus asked: "Who is the most fortunate of men?" Croesus expected that Solon would answer, "Croesus." Instead, Solon nominated a rich old Athenian who had lived to see his grandson and who had died an honorable death, defending his polis in battle. Still hopeful, Croesus asked who was the second most fortunate of men. But Solon replied that the second most fortunate were two brothers from Argos. These simple shepherds were former Olympic victors who had died in their sleep, after putting themselves to the yoke and carrying their elderly mother, a priestess of Hera, five miles to a temple for worship on an important festival day. Solon claimed that since no one could foresee the future no one could be considered fortunate until he had died an honorable death. This amounted to a prophecy, since the Persians conquered Croesus's kingdom soon after. Legend has it that, while lying on the pile of wood his Persian executioners were about to set ablaze, Croesus shouted, "Solon, Solon, Solon!" Perplexed, the Persian king Cyrus halted the execution and questioned Croesus about the identity of "Solon," imagining he must be a god. When Croesus told him the story of Solon's visit, Cyrus, moved by a realization of the vicissitudes of fortune, felt sympathy for Croesus and released him, treating him as an honored guest and advisor for the rest of his life. Throughout Western history, the name "Solon" has been used as a synonym for a statesman possessing wisdom and virtue.

Unfortunately, Solon's reforms did not extinguish class tensions in Athens. These tensions proved so great that in 590–589 B.C., and again in 586–584 B.C., popular unrest prevented the appointment of archons. By taking advantage of the strife and chaos, an aristocrat named Pisistratus, a second cousin of Solon's, was able to seize dictatorial power three times. In 561 B.C., Pisistratus used a dispute between the plains and coastal people of Athens to assume power. Pisistratus formed a party of disgruntled poor.

Then he came into the city one day, bearing wounds that he claimed the coastal people had inflicted. (His critics believed they were self-inflicted.) Due to his status as a war hero, Pisistratus was able to secure permission to maintain a force of bodyguards, fifty men armed with clubs. He then used this force to seize power. When the plains and coastal people settled their differences, they drove Pisistratus out of Athens. On the second occasion, Pisistratus sent heralds ahead to announce that he was coming with Athena, the patron goddess of Athens. He then arrived with a five-foot, ten-inch woman, clad in shining armor and riding in a chariot. Her real name was Phye. While it is doubtful that many Athenians were actually taken in by this prank, most regarded it as a good joke and accepted Pisistratus as their dictator again. Pisistratus cemented his power by marrying the daughter of Megacles, an important leader. But Pisistratus soon quarreled with Megacles, who was infuriated by the discovery that Pisistratus was having "unnatural sex" with Megacles' daughter. Pisistratus was again driven from Athens and spent ten years (556–546 B.C.) mining gold in Thrace. Pisistratus returned and seized power in Athens yet again, with the aid of Thracian and Macedonian mercenaries. This time Pisistratus was able to maintain dictatorial power from 546 to 527 B.C., forcing many aristocrats to flee the polis and holding their sons as hostages on several different islands.

Pisistratus was an energetic dictator. He divided the lands of the fleeing aristocrats among the poor and provided for the aged and the disabled. He reduced taxes from 20 to 10 percent and gave low-interest loans to small farmers. These farmers bought better plows and oxen, thereby increasing productivity. He rebuilt Athens through ambitious works projects. He constructed beautiful temples on the Acropolis. The greatest of these structures, the Temple of Athena, later destroyed by the Persians before it could be completed, would serve as the model for the Parthenon. Pisistratus built a great aqueduct to supply Athens with water. He conquered fertile portions of Thrace, the valuable silver mines of the Hellespont (the land on either side of the Turkish Straits), and the island of Salamis. He transformed Athens from a minor polis into a cultural center through the patronage of artists, sculptors, potters, and poets, both foreign and domestic. He enlarged the festival of Dionysus, a god of nature and wine, and the Panathenaic Festival, held eight days every July to celebrate the unification of Attica. The latter festival featured dramatic contests as well as the usual athletic games, poetry competitions, and recitals of Homer. Pisistratus gave prestige to the new art form of drama and made it available to the poor. He sponsored a definitive edition of Homer's poems. He maintained the political institutions of Solon, though subordinating them to his will.

Pisistratus's son Hippias succeeded him as dictator of Athens in 527 B.C. Unfortunately for Hippias, he never learned the wisdom that Dionysius, the *tyrant* (dictator) of Syracuse, attempted to impart to his own son. Once

when Dionysius rebuked his son for being insolent to a citizen, saying, "I never behave like that," the son replied, "Ah, but you didn't have a tyrant for a father"—to which Dionysius retorted, "No, and if you behave like that, you won't have a tyrant for a son." In 514 B.C., Hippias's brother Hipparchus was assassinated at the Panathenaic Festival by a man Hipparchus was pressuring into a love affair. Considering the murder a political assassination aimed at himself, Hippias became oppressive. Combined with an economic recession, Hippias's oppression produced a popular revolt, which forced him to flee to Persia in 510 B.C.

The Spartans, who had helped the Athenians drive Hippias and his friends out of Athens, attempted to impose an oligarchy of 300 Athenian aristocrats on the city. Two years of civil war ensued.

In 508 B.C., Cleisthenes and the democratic party of Athens expelled the Spartan king Cleomenes and a small contingent of Spartan soldiers. The Athenians then defeated the armies of Sparta's allies, Chalcis and the Boeotian League, in two separate battles. Sparta was not sufficiently intent on imposing an oligarchy on Athens, which was not a Peloponnesian polis, to press the matter.

It was at this time, following the overthrow of Hippias, that "tyrant" became a pejorative term in Athens. This antidictatorial strain would later culminate in the writings of Aristotle, who portrayed tyrants as enemies of free speech and assembly, employers of spies, builders of distrust, impoverishers of the people, and initiators of war.

Like Solon before him, Cleisthenes was made sole archon for one year in order to revise the laws of Athens. Cleisthenes established the first major democracy in world history. He reduced the power of the Areopagus and made the Ecclesia, the assembly of all citizens (adult males twenty and older, except for slaves and resident foreigners) the supreme legislative body of Athens. The Ecclesia passed all laws, and its decisions could not be appealed. The Ecclesia assembled to vote on legislation every ten days; the average attendance was 5,000. The new Council of 500 prepared the assembly's agenda, executed its laws, handled public finances, and received foreign envoys. The Council of 500 was completely responsible to the Ecclesia. Since council members were chosen by lot, and citizens could not serve more than twice in a lifetime, each citizen was likely to sit on the council at least once during his lifetime. Cleisthenes abolished the four-tribe organization, based on bloodlines, through which Athenians elected their local leaders, since it gave the aristocrats too much power and divided the polis by clan and by region. He replaced the system with ten new tribes. Each tribe consisted of *demes*, subdivisions containing citizens from each part of Athens and from different clans. The new system forced Athenians of all persuasions to cooperate, thereby increasing unity. All Athenians came to see the city of Athens as their own, since the city was the logical

meeting place of the new multiregional tribes. Each tribe elected a *strategos* (general). The only elected leaders in Athens, the strategoi soon became the most influential leaders of the polis, gradually taking over the responsibilities of the archons. Cleisthenes also instituted the practice of ostracism, though it was not successfully applied until 487 B.C. Every spring, Athenian citizens voted for the banishment of the Athenian they considered "most dangerous" to the polis. Provided that at least 6,000 votes were cast, the man who received the largest number of votes would be exiled for ten years to a place more than three days' journey from the polis. Each citizen wrote his choice on an *ostrakon* (a shard of pottery). (A few citizens added expletives and caricatures.) Although ostracism was often abused by influential popular leaders called *demagogues* (leaders of the people), who had their rivals banished, it was intended as a way of neutralizing overly ambitious aristocrats, who might otherwise subvert the democracy.

The reforms of Cleisthenes completed the transformation of Athens from a backwater polis, torn by economic and political strife, into a flourishing city-state with a new sense of purpose, a new self-confidence, and the first major democracy in world history. This transformation proved vital to the defense of Greece against a massive Persian invasion.

BACKGROUND: GREEK UNITY AND DISUNITY

Although the Greeks were divided into a multitude of poleis, they coalesced well enough to defeat the most powerful army in the world. Aside from the fear of enslavement to Persia, four cultural bonds united the Greeks. First, they shared a common language, though it was divided into the Doric, Ionic, Aeolic, and other dialects. Second, they shared a love of Homer's poems.

Third, the Greeks shared a common religion. They worshipped twelve primary gods, immortal beings who inhabited Mount Olympus, the tallest mountain in Greece. These gods included Zeus (the king of the gods), his wife and sister Hera (goddess of women), his brothers Poseidon (god of the sea) and Hades (or Pluto; god of the underworld), his sister Hestia (goddess of the hearth), and his children Athena (goddess of wisdom, who had sprouted full-grown from the head of Zeus), Apollo (god of truth, music, and archery), Hermes (god of trade and messenger for Zeus), Aphrodite (goddess of love), Hephaestus (god of crafts), Ares (god of war), and Artemis (goddess of the hunt). The Greeks often named their children in honor of the gods (e.g., Herodotus meant "given by Hera"). Despite the gods' often unethical behavior, they fascinated most ordinary Greeks, just as modern film stars fascinate ordinary Americans, in spite of, or even because of, their ethical lapses. The average Greek might live vicariously through his gods, who could behave as he generally could not.

Beneath the twelve principal gods were countless demigods, the most popular of whom were Demeter (Zeus's sister and goddess of grain), Dionysus (god of wine), and Asclepius (god of healing). According to Greek mythology, after Hades had kidnapped Demeter's daughter Persephone and had taken her to the underworld, Demeter had been too distraught to continue her essential work of making crops grow. As a result, many humans had starved. Zeus had then settled the dispute with a compromise: Persephone would stay with Hades only one-quarter of the year. This myth explained the winter months, when crops would not grow. A series of "mysteries," secret religious rites, sprouted up around Demeter and Dionysus. Some of Dionysus's female followers (the *maenads*), when possessed by the god, ascended Mount Parnassus, tore wild animals to pieces with their bare hands, and ate the raw meat. One myth alleged that the Titans, a collection of thoroughly depraved deities, had eaten Dionysus when he was a boy. After striking down the Titans with one of his thunderbolts, Zeus had repaired the demigod. According to this myth, the smoldering remains of the Titans became the human race. Hence humans were wicked but retained a trace of the divine through Dionysus, since the Titans had digested him. The festivals of both Demeter and Dionysus often featured obscene jokes, gestures, and objects, such as giant phalluses. The Greeks made pilgrimages to the many shrines of Asclepius, especially to his original shrine at Epidaurus, hoping for cures. Although Asclepius was generally thought to heal the visitors who slept in his temples by appearing in their dreams and instructing them on the proper cure, his priests at Cos and Pergamum also relied on such natural healing techniques as diet, exercise, and herbs. The Greeks also made pilgrimages to the principal Panhellenic shrines at Dodona and Delos.

The Greeks, along with some foreigners, also turned to the oracle of Delphi for advice. The Greeks considered sacred Delphi the center of the universe, partly because of its location in central Greece. There a series of virgin priestesses, who always bore the title "Pythia," sat in a dark and eery sanctuary. Engraved on the pediment above the entrance to the sanctuary were the Greek maxims "Know thyself" and "Nothing to excess." According to legend, after the visitor addressed his question to a male functionary, and the functionary presented it to Pythia, the prophetess inhaled the vapor emanating from a chasm. Intoxicated by the vapor, the oracle lapsed into a trance and uttered wild cries, which represented the voice of Apollo speaking through her. The functionary then interpreted the often incoherent shrieks and reworded them in hexameters. However suspect these colorful details—especially the chasm and the vapor, which are entirely absent from early accounts—it is clear that the oracles became wealthy and powerful through gifts and bribes and through their considerable influence on the actions of their visitors. For instance, the enemies of a particular polis might pay handsomely to know what advice Pythia had given that city-state's

emissaries, since they were likely to follow it. Others might pay the oracle to give a certain party the advice they wished them to hear. For instance, Cleisthenes and other Athenian enemies of the tyrant Hippias bribed Pythia to begin every prophecy for the Spartans, no matter what their question, with the phrase "Athens must be liberated!" (The Spartans finally did aid the Athenian dissidents in expelling the tyrant, though probably for more practical reasons than sheer exasperation with the oracle's harassment. The Spartans vainly hoped that Athens would join the Peloponnesian League.) The oracles were able to establish a respectable record of accuracy, primarily because their prophecies were often vague, but also because their steady stream of visitors from all over the Mediterranean world provided them with the large body of information necessary to make accurate predictions.

Except for the oracle of Delphi and a few other seers, most Greek priests wielded little power. Not expected to be uncommonly wise or virtuous, these caretakers of temples and shrines generally required and received no special training. There was no institutional framework to unite priests as a clergy, to teach ethics, or to formulate doctrine. Like most other religions of the day, Greek religion was concerned with outward ritual, not inner belief. Greeks never prayed without offering sacrifice, expecting help from the gods in return for their gifts. Nevertheless, they believed that the gods rejected the sacrifices of oath-breakers and other ne'er-do-wells. Bliss and punishment in the afterlife were generally believed to be reserved for a few select heroes and villains, the mass of humankind coming to an end in Hades, a shadowy place that was neither heaven nor quite hell. And even these vague conceptions were only half-believed; most Greeks remained agnostic concerning the afterlife.

Finally, the Greeks shared common athletic games. The most famous and significant of these were the Olympic Games, held for five days every fourth summer at Olympia, "for the greater glory of Zeus." As many as 50,000 Greeks attended these games, which allegedly began in 776 B.C. Olympic winners were awarded olive wreaths taken from a sacred tree. Wars were temporarily postponed for the games. The first day of the festival was devoted to sacrificing 100 oxen on the altar of Zeus, which consisted of a mound of ashes that had accumulated over previous centuries. The second day was allotted to foot races. Subsequent days were apportioned to boxing, wrestling, the pancratium (a combination of boxing and wrestling), the pentathlon, horse races, and chariot races. Initially, boxers wound straps of soft leather over their fingers as a sort of primitive boxing glove, but in later times switched to harder leather, sometimes even weighted with metal. Wrestlers, who performed nude (for better holds?), had to throw their opponents to the ground three times to win. The pancratium continued until a participant acknowledged defeat. The pentathlon consisted of sprinting, long jumping, javelin throwing, discus hurling, and wrestling. The most

popular contest was the chariot race. Around 248 B.C., a Macedonian named Belistiche became the only woman to win this contest. The closing event of the games was a race run in full armor. Boys' competitions in boxing and running and women's foot races were added in later years.

Olympic winners were treated as heroes by their home poleis, which generally gave them houses, land, or free meals for the rest of their lives. The resultant incentive to win led to occasional cheating. In a few instances, beginning in 388 B.C., athletes were caught bribing rivals. In such a case, the athlete was stripped of his award and made to pay a fine, which was used to fashion a bronze statue of Zeus featuring an inscription against cheating. Only full-blooded Greeks could participate in the Olympic Games, since the games were a Greek religious event.

Other games, begun after 600 B.C., included the Pythian Games (held every four years at Delphi in honor of Apollo; winners received laurel wreaths), the Isthmian Games (held every two years at Corinth in honor of Poseidon; winners received pine needles), and the Nemean Games (held every two years in Argolis in honor of Zeus; winners received parsley). Unlike the Olympics, these games included contests in music, drama, and poetry, as well as athletic competitions.

Yet, despite the cultural bonds that united the Greeks, it should be noted that many poleis, considering themselves unable to resist the awesome power of the Persian army, refused to help their fellow Greeks, or even joined with the Persians. Thessaly, Thebes, Argos, Crete, Corcyra, Syracuse, other Italian city-states, and various Ionian poleis either remained neutral or collaborated with the Persians. Some opposed the Greek alliance against Persia out of long-standing animosities toward other poleis. Argos was a traditional enemy of Sparta and Thebes of Athens (Athens had aided tiny Plataea in a land dispute against the more powerful Thebans). Powerful Syracuse refused to aid the Greek alliance unless given command of Greek armed forces. (Carthage soon attacked Syracuse, making Syracusan help impossible, in any case. Carthage, a powerful former colony of Phoenicia, which was now a subject nation within the Persian Empire, probably synchronized its attack on Syracuse with the Persian invasion of Greece in 480 B.C.) The number of Greeks who remained neutral or collaborated with Persia was so large that postwar Greece witnessed a level of finger-pointing and recrimination unmatched anywhere until post–World War II France.

BACKGROUND: THE PERSIANS

The Medes of western Iran had taken control of most of the Near East after 612 B.C., when they had joined with the Chaldeans to overthrow the Assyrian empire. But around 550 B.C., Cyrus the Great, the king of Persia

(central Iran), wrested control of most of the Near East from the Medes. The Persians were related to the Medes, another Indo-European people. Indeed, the Greeks often mistakenly used the word "Mede" interchangeably with "Persian."

In 546 B.C., Cyrus added the Lydian empire, located in what is now central Turkey, to his possessions. Croesus, the king of Lydia, had made the fatal blunder of attacking Persia. When Croesus had asked the oracle of Delphi, "What will happen if I attack the Persians?" she had replied, "A great empire will fall." On the assumption that the oracle meant the Persian Empire, Croesus had attacked Persia. But the oracle had really meant Croesus's own empire—or so it was assumed later, after his kingdom had been conquered. In any case, having conquered the Lydian empire, Cyrus hardly paused before swallowing the undisciplined poleis of Ionia, which had already come under the informal control of Lydia, as well as the rest of western Asia Minor. Cyrus imposed puppet dictators on the Ionians. The Persian conquest of Lydia and Ionia placed the empire's massive forces on the doorstep of Greece. The same Cyrus who had freed the Hebrew prophets from their Babylonian captivity now threatened Greek liberty.

In 529 B.C., Cyrus died fighting the Scythians, the savage nomads of southern Russia, who decapitated him. Using camel caravans to maintain his water supply, Cyrus's son Cambyses II extended Persian rule to Egypt and to the Greek colony of Cyrene in what is now eastern Libya in 525 B.C. In emulation of the Egyptian pharaohs, Cambyses then married his own sister and began acting like a god. Going completely mad after failing to conquer Nubia due to water supply problems, Cambyses committed suicide in 522 B.C.

The following year, Cambyses' distant cousin Darius I succeeded him. Darius quickly expanded the Persian Empire eastward to the doorstep of India. In 513 B.C., he conquered eastern Thrace, but failed to push north beyond the Danube. Darius constructed the famous "royal road" from Sardis to Susa, thereby converting a three-month, 1,500-mile journey into a three-day trip when using swift horses. He also increased government efficiency by reorganizing the empire and by dispatching investigators to each of the provinces. The Persians established their chief administrative centers at Susa, Ecbatana, Persepolis, and Sardis. The first three cities were located in what is now western Iran, Sardis on the western frontier in Asia Minor. At its height, the Persian Empire consisted of one million square miles containing nearly seventy million people.

The Persians were capable and relatively mild rulers, as long as subject peoples paid their tribute. The growth of a new ethical religion, built on the teachings of the Persian philosopher Zoroaster, moderated Persian rule. Since honesty was the most important requirement of the religion, Zoroastrians like Cyrus were shocked at the immorality of the Greek marketplace