Text 3: Democracy Evolves in Athens

Topic 5: Ancient Greece
Lesson 2: The Greek City-States
Athens Government

Located in Attica, just north of the Peloponnesus

Government evolved from a monarchy into an aristocracy

By 700 B.C. E. noble landowners held power and chose the chief officials

Nobles judged major court cases and dominated the assembly
Under the aristocracy wealth and power grew

Discontent spread among ordinary people

Merchants and soldiers resented the power of the nobles

Argued that their service to Athens entitled them to more rights
Foreign artisans, produced many of the goods that Athens traded abroad, resented laws barring them from becoming citizens.

Farmers demanded change because during hard times, many were forced to sell their land to nobles.

Some sold themselves and their families into slavery to pay their debts.
As discontent spread, Athens moved slowly toward democracy, or government by the people.

The term had a different meaning for the ancient Greeks than it has for us today.
Solon Makes Reforms

Solon, a wise and trusted leader, was appointed archon, chief official, in 594 B.C.E.

Athenians gave Solon a free hand to make needed reforms

He outlawed debt slavery

Freed those who had already been sold into slavery for debt

Opened high offices to more citizens

Granted citizenship to some foreigners

Gave the Athenian assembly more say in important decisions
Economic reforms as well

Encouraged the export of wine and olive oil

This policy helped merchants and farmers by increasing demand for their products
Citizenship remained limited, and many positions were open only to the wealthy landowners.

Continued and widespread unrest led to the rise of tyrants, or people who gained power by force.
Tyrants often won support from the merchant class and the poor by imposing reforms to help these groups.

Although Greek tyrants often governed well, the word tyrant has come to mean a vicious and brutal ruler.
Citizens Share Power and Wealth

The tyrant Pisistratus seized power in 546 B.C.E.

He helped farmers by giving them loans and land taken from nobles.

New building projects gave jobs to the poor.

Giving poor citizens a voice, he weakened the aristocracy.
In 507 B.C.E another reformer, Cleisthenes, broadened the role of ordinary citizens in government.

He set up the Council of 500, whose members were chosen by lot from among all citizens over the age of 30.

The council prepared laws considered by the assembly and supervised the day-to-day work of government.
Cleisthenes made the assembly a genuine legislature, or lawmaking body, that debated laws before deciding to approve or reject them.

All male citizens were members of the assembly and were expected to participate.

Cleisthenes's reforms advanced some of the basic principles of Athenian democracy.

He supported the idea of equal participation, which had only been for the aristocracy.

Cleisthenes expanded it to include all citizens who met certain qualifications.

Equal participation was very different from the idea of democracy we hold today, but it was the beginning of a new system for Athens.
Democracy Within Limits

Athenian democracy

Only citizens could participate in government, voting to choose officials, pass laws or holding offices.

Citizenship was restricted to landowning men over 30 years of age.

Citizenship meant a responsibility to serve in government and fight for their polis as soldiers when needed.
Women were excluded from political activities as were merchants and people whose parents were not citizens.

Tens of thousands of Athenians were slaves without political rights or personal freedom.

Yet Athens gave more people a say in decision making than any other ancient civilization.
Athenian Women

The respected Athenian thinker Aristotle reflected the general view that women were imperfect beings who lacked the ability to reason as well as men.

He wrote: “The man is by nature fitter for command than the female just as an older person is superior to a younger, more immature person.”
Most Greeks accepted the view that women must be guided by men. In court, fathers or guardians represented women, as they did for children. In well-to-do Athenian homes, women lived a secluded existence, shut off and “protected” from the outside world.
Women played their most significant public role in religion.

Participation in sacred processions and ceremonies was considered essential for the city’s well-being.

In well-to-do Athenian homes, women managed the entire household.
They spun and wove, cared for their children, and prepared food, but lived a secluded existence and were rarely seen in public.

Their slaves or children were sent to buy food and to fetch water from the public well.

Only poor women went shopping alone in Athens.
They worked outside the home, often beside their husbands

They obtained water, did the family wash in a stream, and tended sheep or worked as spinners, weavers, or potters
Unlike girls, who received little or no formal education, boys attended school if their families could afford it. Besides learning to read and write, they studied music, and memorized poetry. Equally important, they learned the skill of public speaking because, as citizens in a democracy, they would have to voice their views.
Young men received military training and, to keep their bodies healthy, participated in athletic contests.

Unlike Sparta, which put military training above all else, Athens encouraged young men to explore many areas of knowledge.