

The Golden Age of Greece:  
Imperial Democracy  
500–400 B.C.

A Unit of Study for Grades 6–12

by

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Rhoda Himmell  
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National Center for History in the Schools  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Introduction

Approach and Rationale . . . . .	1
Content and Organization . . . . .	1

### Teacher Background Materials

Unit Overview . . . . .	3
Unit Context . . . . .	3
Correlation to National Standards for History . . . . .	3
Unit Objectives . . . . .	4
Introduction to <i>The Golden Age of Greece: Imperial Democracy</i> 500–400 B.C. . . . .	4
Lesson Plans . . . . .	7

### Timeline

Greece, “The Golden Age,” ca. 750–400 B.C. . . . .	8
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<b>Dramatic Moment . . . . .</b>	<b>10</b>
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### Lessons

Lesson One: The Persian Wars . . . . .	11
Lesson Two: Athenian Democracy At Work . . . . .	25
Lesson Three: The Story Of Aristeides The Just . . . . .	33
Lesson Four: Daily Life on Greek Pottery . . . . .	45
Lesson Five: Greek Drama: Antigone . . . . .	56
Lesson Six: The Rebuilding Of The Acropolis . . . . .	93
Lesson Seven: Pericles’ Funeral Oration . . . . .	106
Lesson Eight: The Melian Dialogue . . . . .	112
Lesson Nine: The Last Days Of Socrates . . . . .	123

<b>Bibliography . . . . .</b>	<b>150</b>
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## TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

### I. Unit Overview

This unit explores Greece's most glorious century, the high point of Athenian culture. Rarely has so much genius been concentrated in one small region over such a short period of time. Students will discover in studying Greece's Classical Age many aspects of their own heritage. Present-day ideas of government, philosophy, literature, science and aesthetics can be linked directly back to Ancient Greece. Without an awareness of this remarkable heritage and an appreciation for the creativity of the period, along with an appreciation of other ancient civilizations, students cannot begin to understand enduring values and the creative power of humankind.

While studying the "Glory that was Greece," students will also become aware of the conflicts in human values which are an enduring and unavoidable part of human society. For example, within the brilliant tradition of Greek theatre students discover the moral and religious conflicts which divided Antigone and King Creon. While learning about the rebuilding of the Acropolis, students discover the imperial nature of the project. When reading the beautiful "Funeral Oration" of Pericles and the "Melian Dialogue" of Thucydides, students see both sides of war: glorious defense of the sacred homeland, and naked imperial aggression. And, last but not least, students study the heroism of Socrates as an individual confronting the might of the state. In the Golden Age, as in all ages, creative inspiration coexisted with tension and conflict often erupting into violence.

### II. Unit Context

This unit follows chronologically the origins of Greek civilization during the Bronze Age in Crete and Troy, the Homeric legends describing that heroic period, and the rise of the Polis during the seventh century B.C. The unit precedes chronologically a study of the Hellenistic period of Greek history in which Alexander the Great spread Hellenic culture throughout his empire. The unit focuses on political, aesthetic and cultural aspects of the Golden Age, but it should be presented in the context of the scientific and philosophical innovations of that period as well.

### III. Correlation to National History Standards

*The Golden Age of Greece: Imperial Democracy, 500–400 B.C.* provides teaching materials that address *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 3** "Classical Traditions, Major Religions and Giant Empires." Lessons within this unit specifically address **Standard A**, "The achievements and limitations of the democratic institutions that developed in Athens city-states," and **Standard 2B**, "The major cultural achievements of Greek civilization."

This unit likewise integrates a number of specific Historical Thinking Standards including: reconstruct patterns of historical succession and duration in which historical

developments have unfolded (**Standard 1** “Chronological Thinking”); draw upon visual and literary sources (**Standard 2** “Historical Comprehension”); examine the influence of ideas (**Standard 3** “Historical Analysis and Interpretation”); formulate historical questions and obtain historical data from a variety of sources (**Standard 4**, “Historical Research”); and marshal evidence of antecedent circumstances (**Standard 5**, “Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision Making”).

#### **IV. Unit Objectives**

1. To appreciate the profound cultural and political flowering of the Golden Age of Greece.
2. To understand that these creative achievements were sometimes made at the expense of others, both inside and outside of Greece.
3. To recognize the continuity of our culture with the political and cultural developments of Ancient Greece.
4. To understand the complex relationships between religion, democracy, imperialism, mythology, philosophy, drama and aesthetics and how these components often relate to one another.

#### **V. Introduction to Imperial Democracy: The Golden Age (500–400 B.C.)**

**G**eography is about maps and History is about chaps, according to an old English schoolboy proverb<sup>1</sup>. Modern historians would rightly point out the omissions in this definition, particularly the lack of any mention of women, children, slaves, etc. But until the fifth century B.C. Greek history largely lacks even chaps, and for good reason. The period before 500 B.C. still belongs more to prehistory than history. Because written documents are few and relatively uninformative, the historian has to rely on archaeology for much of his or her evidence. Only the publication in the late fifth and early fourth centuries B.C. of the first histories in the western tradition, (those of Herodotus and Thucydides), allows ancient historians to construct a detailed narrative account of the history of Greece and its neighbors.

The origins of Greek historiography are complex, being rooted in Greek philosophy and literature. From philosophy it drew its concern for the rational analysis of human events and its skepticism of the value of myth as evidence for study of the past. The epics of Homer gave the first historians both guidance in their organization of a narrative account of a complex series of events and their idea of the proper historical subject, a

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Source: Frank J. Frost, *Greek Society*, 3rd ed. (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1987), p. vii.

great war and its causes. Not surprisingly, therefore, western historiography begins with accounts of the two great conflicts that define the historical framework for the Golden Age of Classical Greece, the Persian Wars that opened the fifth century and the Peloponnesian War that concluded it.

The tiny Greek city states (*poleis*) developed in an environment uniquely free of external threat thanks to the absence of a single dominant imperial power in the eastern Mediterranean for much of the first half of the first millennium B.C. That freedom ended with the sudden appearance in the mid-sixth century B.C. of the Persian empire. Its first three rulers, Cyrus I (559–530), Cambyses (530–522), and Darius I (522–486), created the greatest of all ancient Near Eastern Empires, one that stretched from the Aegean to what is now Pakistan. Attempts to extend Persian rule to mainland Greece in 490 and 480/79 B.C. failed. Athens bore the brunt of the Persian assault in both invasions: in 490 B.C., Athens faced the invaders virtually alone at Marathon. A decade later, Athens was destroyed. But together with Sparta and her allies, Athens' fleet made possible the key Greek naval victory at Salamis.

Athens emerged from the shadow of the Persian threat at the head of an alliance of island and East Greek *poleis*, the so-called Delian League, and intent on vengeance and the liberation of Persia's remaining Greek subjects. In the next half century the Delian League grew to almost two hundred members, but as the Persian threat receded the Delian League gradually changed from an association of free allies into an Athenian empire. Along with the growth of Athens' imperial power, tension increased between Athens and Sparta, her chief rival for preeminence in Greece, until war broke out in 431 B.C. The twenty-seven years of the Peloponnesian War did more than result in the defeat of Athens and the dissolution of her empire. It devastated Greece and left it again vulnerable in the next century to foreign threat, not this time from Persia in the east but from a newly unified and invigorated kingdom of Macedon in the north. During the half century of imperial glory between the Persian and the Peloponnesian Wars, however, a prosperous and confident Athens was the political and cultural center of the Greek world and her democracy a spur to revolution and reflection.

All Greek **poleis** were in a sense democratic in that sovereignty rested with the citizenry that elected its own officials and could meet in assembly to decide issues of concern to the community. What differentiated *poleis* was the identity of the citizens and the extent to which the assembly could take the political initiative. Reduced to its essential element, citizenship implied the ability to serve the *poleis* as a warrior. In practice this meant that in most *poleis* the assembly's powers were limited. Full citizenship and, therefore, the right to attend the assembly, was restricted to those wealthy enough to equip themselves as hoplites, heavily armed soldiers. Sparta overcame these limitations and created her unique military democracy by using her Helots to provide all Spartiates with a minimum income sufficient to allow them to serve in the hoplite line. But the

powers of even Sparta's assembly were limited to approving or rejecting questions pre-selected for it by a council dominated by the Spartan rich. Athens took a different road to democracy.

The Athenian democracy of the fifth century B.C. was the product of two distinct but convergent series of events. The first was the transformation, through a series of reforms initiated by the reformer Solon in the early sixth century B.C., of the institutional structure of Athenian political life so as to concentrate decision-making power in the Athenian political assembly. This encouraged participation by a broad spectrum of the Athenian male population in political activity at all levels. The second was the enhancement of the military value, and, therefore, the political value of even the poorest Athenians who rowed the city's triremes. This came as a result of the essential contribution made by the Athenian navy to the Greek victory over Persia in 480 B.C. and to the acquisition and maintenance of the Athenian empire in the following decades. The linkage of democracy and empire is evident in every area of fifth century B.C. Athenian life and culture. The tribute of the allies financed the great building program on the Athenian Acropolis that is one of the enduring glories of Athenian culture and subsidized the participation of the citizen body in the political life of the democracy. In a prosperous Athens luxuries of all kinds from the whole of the world known to Greeks could be found. And not only luxuries. Intellectuals such as the philosopher Democritus, the originator of both the atomic theory of matter and the social contract theory of the origin of society, and the Sophist Protagoras, the greatest Greek exponent of cultural relativism, also came to Athens. The atmosphere of vigorous and contentious debate created in Athens by their presence and that of other equally innovative thinkers can still be felt in the vivid dialogues Plato wrote about his master, Socrates and Euripides, and the biting satire of the comic playwright, Aristophanes.

In this unit students will explore various aspects of the remarkable culture of imperial Athens. They will study the origin of Athenian naval power during the Persian Wars, learn how Athenians passed laws, contemplate the brilliance of Athenian imperial culture as reflected in the Parthenon, examine its decline in the Peloponnesian War, and consider the nature of Athenian citizenship and its problems as illustrated by the institution of ostracism, Sophocles' play *Antigone*, and the trial of Socrates.

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## Lesson Two

### Athenian Democracy at Work

#### A. Objectives

- ◆ To identify the “Assembly” and the “Council of 500” as the legislative and executive institutions of Athenian democracy.
- ◆ To describe the selection, composition and functions of the Athenian Assembly and the Council of 500.
- ◆ To distinguish between the institutions of **direct** democracy in ancient Athens and the institutions of **representative** democracy in modern western societies.
- ◆ To understand the necessary preconditions for direct, participatory democracy.
- ◆ To understand the role of sortition (random selection by lot of council members and officers), and the role of rotation in office, in preventing seizure of power by any one group.
- ◆ To describe the procedures used for enacting a law or a decree in 5th-century Athens.
- ◆ To analyze the measure proposed by Themistocles (theh-MIS-to-kleez) in July 480 B.C. concerning preparations for the Battle of Salamis and evacuation of Athens during the Persian War.

#### B. Lesson Activities (Two Days)

1. Poll students to see if they think we have a direct, participatory democracy in America. Hold a discussion and draw a distinction between **direct democracy** where the citizens themselves make the laws, administer and judge them, and a **representative democracy** where citizens elect professional politicians to do these jobs for them. Discuss the feasibility of a direct democracy in large, modern societies.
2. Describe the scene of the Scythian Guards rounding up citizens at dawn in the Agora in order to make sure that they attend the day’s meeting of the Assembly.



3. Read and discuss **Document A** "Athenina Democracy at Work: Background Information" describing the selection and duties of the Assembly and the Council of 500.
4. Practice or illustrate the "bean method" of selecting Council members and officers.
5. Look at Themistocles' "Measures to Meet Xerxes' Invasion" (**Document B**).
6. Review with students the historical context for this bill proposed during the Persian Wars.
7. Brainstorm as a group about how this bill would be passed.
8. Brainstorm as a group exactly what the bill is proposing. Where are the women, children and the elderly to go? How are the trierarchs selected? How are marines, archers and crews selected? Is the process democratic?

### C. Discussion Questions

1. What are the preconditions of a direct, participatory democracy? (e.g. small size of population, reasonable wealth and leisure time.)
2. Who got to participate in the direct democracy? Who did not? Who were the citizens?
3. How did a large slave population in ancient Athens make direct democracy possible?
4. Why did members of the Council rotate? What evils did this prevent? How did rotation of Council members and of officers guard against incumbency and the usurpation of power by individuals or groups? What problems did it cause? (Lack of continuity, experience, etc.)
5. How were members of the Council selected? How was the Prytany and its president selected ?
6. How does election by allotment (lot) differ from election by vote? What present-day activity is similar to this allotment process?
7. What jobs did the Assembly and the Council perform? How did this represent the legislative and executive functions of a government?
8. How did the decree by Themistocles mirror the democratic organization of society and its emphasis on being fair?
9. What were the provisions of the decree as far as men, women, children and the elderly were concerned?

10. How would an Athenian of the 5th century B.C. criticize our present-day representative democracy? What would he/she approve of in it?

**D. Vocabulary**

allotment (lot)	disenfranchised
amphitheatre	marine
archer	Pnyx
Assembly	Prytany
Boule	representative democracy
complement	sortition
Council Of 500	tribe
decree	trierarch
direct democracy	trireme

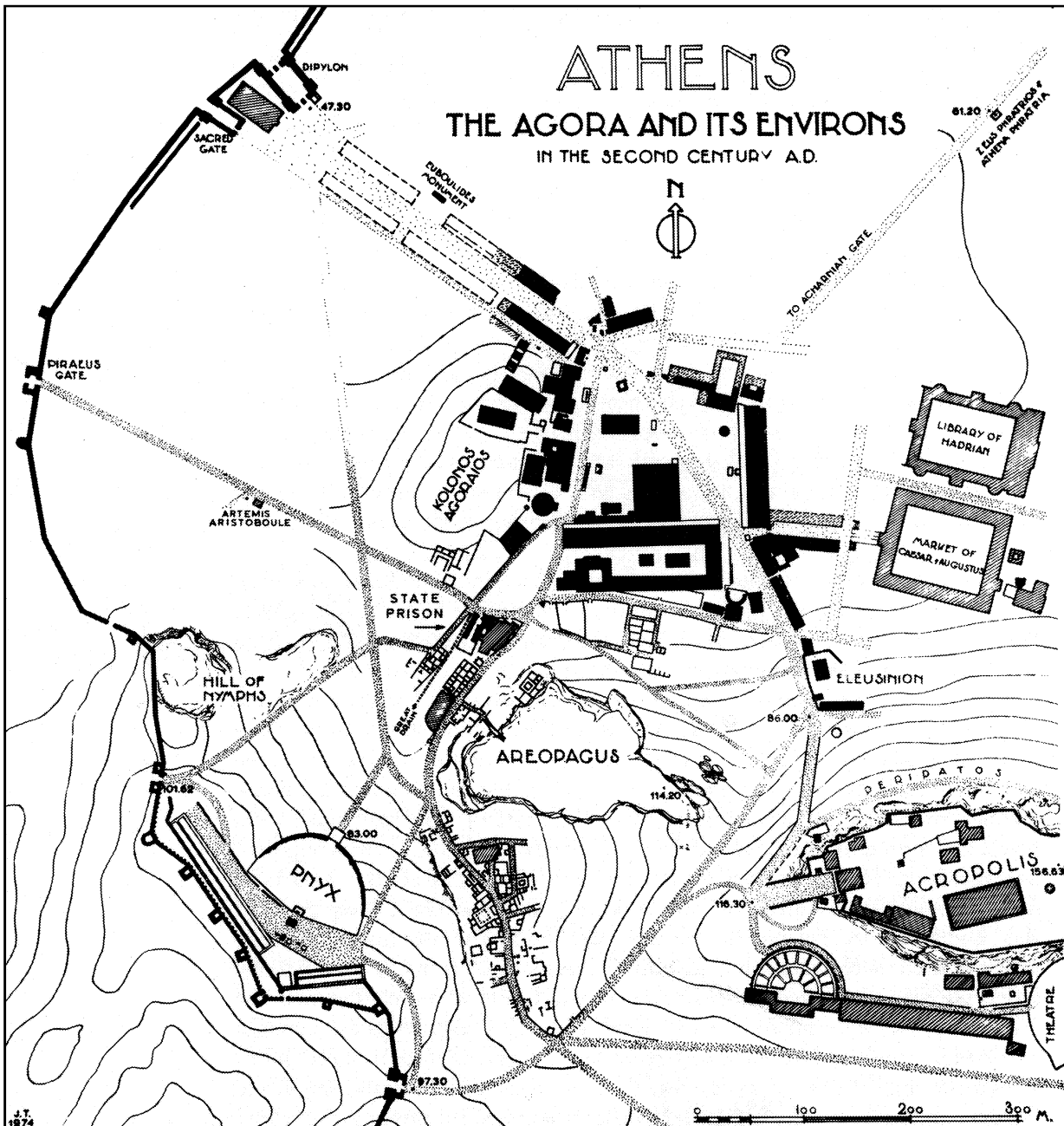
**E. Extended Activities**

1. Hold a mock council meeting and demonstrate the procedure for passing a law. Perhaps pass a law that would be useful for this class.
2. Work on a newspaper which will continue throughout the unit on the Golden Age of Greece. The newspaper can report on the battles of the Persian Wars, the decree for the Battle of Salamis, the Ostracism of Aristeides (Aristides), the “new” play Antigone, the Dionysian Festival, the foundation of the Delian League, the rebuilding of the Acropolis by Pericles, the Melian Dialogue, the Funeral Oration, and the Trial and Death of Socrates. Include a “Dear Abby” section, advertisements, sports pages, etc.
3. As an independent research project or as a class project, learn about and design an allotment machine (Kleroterion) similar to the machines used in the 3rd and 2nd century B.C.
4. A group of students might want to research the reforms of Cleisthenes which established democracy in Athens.
5. Students may want to research the court system, which is not specifically covered in this lesson.

**F. Evaluating The Lesson**

1. Informal evaluation of discussion.
2. Evaluation of student analysis of the document by Themistocles.

### Athens: The Agora and its Environs



This illustration is reprinted as published in *The Athenian Citizen*, prepared by Mabel Lang, copyright 1987, with the kind permission of the copyright owner, The American School of Classical Studies at Athens.

## Athenian Democracy at Work

### Background Information

Athenian government in the fifth century B.C. was perhaps the first true **democracy**. The government was of the people and for the people, like ours, but it was also **by** the people to a much greater degree than the large **representative** democracies of modern times. But their definition of the “people” was far narrower than ours today, excluding everyone but free adult males. In Athens, all male citizens from the age of 18 were expected by law to participate in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. We rely on elected politicians to run our government for us, but we have a far broader electoral base.

To a considerable extent, this **direct, participatory democracy** was a function of the relatively small size of the population. Athens at that time had approximately 300,000 inhabitants, about 100,000 of whom were unenfranchised slaves and 100,000 of whom were unenfranchised women. About 15,000 to 20,000 inhabitants were **metics**, or resident aliens. Out of the 100,000 or so males left, perhaps 50,000 or 60,000 were over the age of 18. This limitation of political rights makes participation much more feasible than in the mass societies of the twentieth century.

The supreme political body was the Athenian **Assembly**. It was open to all free males over 18 whose mother and father were Athenian. All males falling into this group were citizens, regardless of income or class, and every male citizen was subject to universal political service as well as universal military training. The Assembly met about 40 times per year at the **Pnyx**, (see Illustration One), a natural **amphitheatre** on one of the hills west of the Acropolis. Their main task was to enact legislation. Attendance was normally about 2,000 or 3,000 men, for it was difficult to take four days per month off from work. Mostly craftsmen and artisans attended the assemblies, farmers being too busy and aristocrats seeing it as beneath their station in life. Usually a summons and an agenda had to be posted at least 5 days before a meeting.

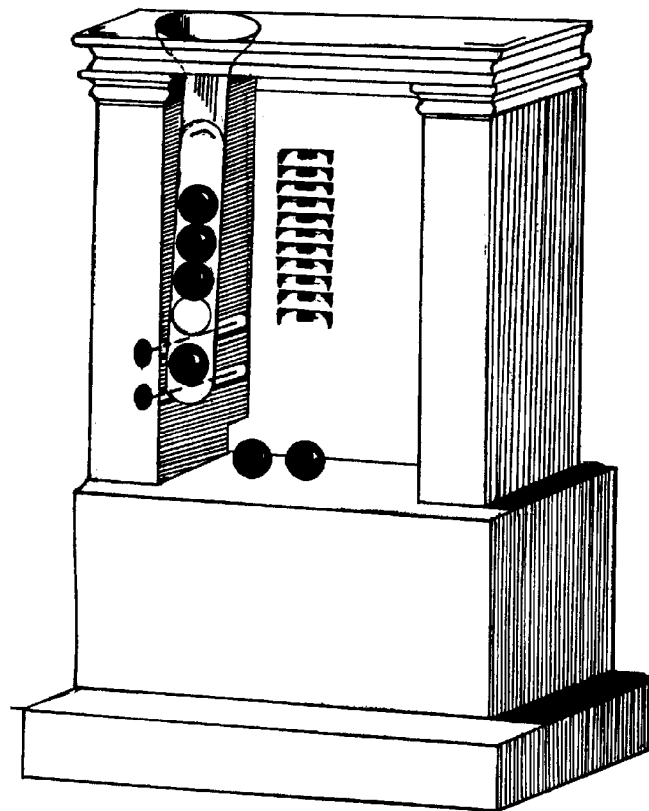
Meetings convened at dawn and the sometimes reluctant citizens were swept up from the **Agora**, (See “Athens: The Agora and its Environs” on page 28), by slaves holding the ends of a long rope wet with red paint, which would mark their clothes and thus make liable for a fine anyone who lingered or attempted to escape the call of duty. Once in the Pnyx, voting was usually taken by a show of hands. This prevented secrecy and encouraged people to follow group leaders in their choices.

In addition to votes on many specific matters, the assembly set aside 9 scheduled meetings per year in which members would approve or disapprove of how magistrates were handling their jobs. They would dismiss them for mismanagement of funds, etc. After all normal business was finished, the Assembly voted on the measures initiated by the **Council of 500**, called the **Boule**.

The Council of 500 prepared the official agenda for the meetings of the Assembly. The Council was made up of 50 men selected from each of the ten Attic tribes. These tribes corresponded to local villages or territories and were of different sizes. Council members were chosen by lot from a list of volunteers, all of them being male citizens over 30 years of age. A Council member could serve only two years in his lifetime, and only one year at a time. They were always paid for their services, which helped to compensate for lost wages on their jobs.

The way in which Council members, jurors, and office holders were chosen is called **allotment** or **sortition**. In the fifth century B.C. this was often done by placing a number of white and black beans in a box equal to the number of candidates who volunteered. The white beans would match the number of offices to be filled and the black beans would match the extra candidates. Each candidate would reach in to the receptacle and pull a bean out, white indicating that he was chosen and black that he was not. This system guaranteed absolute fairness in the selection of council members, jurors or office holders. In the fourth century B.C. much more elaborate voting machines were developed, but they followed the same random principle.

Allotment Machine



*Illustrated by  
Carole Collier Frick*

The 50 members selected from each tribe acted as a unit in the Council and held the collective presidency (called the **Prytany**) of the Council for one-tenth of the year. This reduced the amount of time men had to be away from work. The members of the Prytany met every day and in effect **administered** the government. The Prytany changed 10 times a year and its chairmanship changed daily. Thus 365 citizens each year would serve as head of state: an adult male, if he lived long enough, would have a good chance of holding the highest office. The Prytany prepared legislation, tried magistrates accused of misdeeds, and inspected cavalry and ships.

By rotating the Prytany every tenth of a year, by not allowing anyone to sit on the Council for more than one year and through the system of allotment, no man was in office long enough to entrench himself and to establish a following. However, in reality, the 10 generals representing the 10 tribes could be reelected year after year and they often were. In addition, they were voted in by ballot, not by the random drawing of beans. Thus they played a continuing role in nonmilitary affairs and they did establish a strong following.

As you can see, the Athenian system of direct democracy was not perfect. Another serious flaw was its extensive reliance on slavery. Many craftsmen, farmers and shopkeepers who participated in the Council and the Assembly had slaves to do their work while they were away running the government. This dependence on slaves allowed free men the time to participate actively in their government and to perform their naval service. Perhaps in this context we should raise the question of whether or not modern representative democracy is more just than the direct democracy of ancient Athens.

You have read about the Persian Wars and about Xerxes' planned invasion at Salamis. Please read the following bill which was passed by the Assembly putting into effect the plan of Themistocles, the Athenian general, for the defense of Athens. Keep in mind that this bill had to be proposed and approved in the manner described above. Also, take note of the attention paid to justice in the selection of **trierarchs, marines, archers and complements** for the ships. (See **Document B.**)

## The Themistocles Decree

(Primary Source)

Gods. Resolved by the Council and the People. Themistocles, the son of Neokles from Phrearrhoi, made the motion.

The city shall be committed to Athena, the guardian of the Athenians, and to all the other gods to guard against and ward off the barbarian on behalf of the land; and all the Athenians and the foreigners living at Athens shall deposit their children and women at Troezen...; and they shall deposit their elders and property on Salamis; and the treasurers and the priestesses shall remain on the Acropolis to protect the possessions of the gods.

All the other Athenians and foreigners who are of age shall embark on the two hundred ships that have been made ready and ward off the barbarian on behalf of their own freedom and that of the other Greeks together with the Spartans, Corinthians, Aiginetans and the others who are willing to share in the risk; and beginning tomorrow the generals shall appoint two hundred trierarchs, one to each ship, from those men who possess land and a house at Athens and have legitimate children and are not more than fifty years old, and they shall assign ships to them by lot; and they shall enlist marines, ten to each ship, from those between the ages of twenty and thirty years of age and four archers; and they shall assign by lot these units whenever they allot the trierarchs; and the generals shall write the names of the rest of the crews on whitened boards, the Athenians being drawn from the deme registers, and the foreigners from those registered with the polemarch; and they shall list by name those who have been assigned to two hundred crews, one hundred men per ship, and they shall note at the head of the list of each crew the name of the trireme, its trierarch and its specialists in order that each crew may know onto which trireme it should embark. When all the crews have been formed and assigned by lot to the triremes, the Council and the generals shall man all two hundred ships after making a propitiatory sacrifice to Zeus the All-Powerful, Athena, Victory, and Poseidon the Securer.

When the ships have been manned, one hundred of them shall go to Euboean Artemisium and one hundred shall take up station around Salamis and the rest of Attica and defend the land. In order that all Athenians may be of one mind in warding off the barbarian, those who had been exiled for ten years shall go away to Salamis and they shall remain there until the People decide about them and the disenfranchised. . . .

Source: Russell Meiggs and David M. Lewis, *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions to the End of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 48-49. Translation by Stanley M. Burstein.