
Did it begin there?

“*Oh my poor kingdom, sick with civil blows!*”

Shakespeare, *Henry IV*

Greece was the very first country in the world to introduce democracy (*demokratia*, power of the people) by Kleisthenes in 508 BC. He overthrew the aristocrats at the time. Power was to be in the hands of the people who could vote at a special meeting-place in Athens: the Pnyx. This amphitheatre was hewn out of the side of a hill just by the Acropolis, capable of holding over 6,000 voters.

the Acropolis
recognised throughout the world
now as Ancient Greece

Only men who were citizens were permitted to vote, women being excluded. Votes were cast on all matters pertaining to criminal and civil offences.

today visitors
rarely recognise the site
where it all began

Classic Athens with which we are now all so familiar dates from around this time: philosophers, scientists, doctors (Hippocratic medicine), playwrights, and sculptors all flourished.

Polycleitus and
Phidias produced statues
as never before

Among the important ideas generated at the time by particular scientists for example was the remarkable concept that the earth and planets revolved around the sun – only to be believed and confirmed for the first time one thousand years later!

During this Classical Period (500-300 BC) in Greece their neighbours the Spartans, in the southern part of Greece (Peloponnese connected to central Greece by the Isthmus of Corinth), were obsessed with warfare, training their male youths in their teens to become life-long warrior soldiers (hoplites). In 431 BC, with little provocation, the Spartans went to war against the Athenians, a war described in detail by the Greek contemporary historian Thucydides. The war would not end until 404 BC with the Spartans victorious, and Greece suffering greatly, made worse by the devastating plague of 430 BC. As the war progressed some Athenians favoured peace and at this time Aristophanes wrote the comedy play *Lysistrata* in which the women of Athens deprived their men-folk of sex until they agreed to peace!

stone sarcophagi
at battle sites abandoned
weathered and forgotten

Yet later the Spartans were defeated by the Thebans, and they in their turn by the Macedonians, with the whole region ultimately coming under the power of the Roman Empire and

subsequently the Ottoman Empire in 1460 AD. Greece only became an independent country again around 1833, but was over-run and cruelly treated by the occupying German army in World War II and then tormented by communism. The country has never fully recovered since.

those of us today
who know of this history
could not support wars

Ancient Greece is most elegantly described in several poems by the Greek poet George Seferis (1900-1971) who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1963.

“And a soul
if it is to know itself
must look
into its own soul:
the stranger and enemy,
we’ve seen him in the mirror.”

Incidentally he also wrote haiku.

What do we learn from this terrible history of Greece, a country which offered so much to the Western world by its philosophers, scientists, artists and politicians?

“For what can war but endless war still breed?”

John Milton, sonnet

ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΕ ΑΥΤΟΝ (Greek) - Know Thyself

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