Chapter 3 – Democracy in Ancient Athens

Who Were Citizens in Ancient Athens?

1. How did people’s place of birth, age, position in society, and gender affect their citizenship and participation in government in ancient Athens?

Place of birth, age, position in society, and gender greatly affected a person’s chance to participate in their government in ancient Athens. Individuals who were foreigners (metics), women, slaves, or youth under the age of 20 were not considered citizens and, as such, were not allowed to participate in government.

2. Many societies in ancient times limited the right of citizenship to people who were born there. Why do you think this is not true in Canada today?

In Canada, we value diversity and inclusion. We have people from all over the world who live and participate in our society. We respect those with different cultures, religions, genders, sexual orientations, ages, etc. We recognize that everyone has a voice and valuable opinions and ideas to share.

What Were the Roles of Men and Women?

1. Compare the rights of men and women in ancient Athens.

While both boys and girls spent their early years doing the same thing – living at home and playing with toys - boys were much more valued than girls, even from birth. By the age of seven, they went their separate ways and learned aspects of life that were pertinent to their gender roles in ancient Athenian society. Boys got to be independent citizens once they reached the age of 20, while girls were always thought to belong to a male guardian – either her father, brother, or husband.

2. How did the education of Athenian children prepare them for their adult role in society? In what ways does education prepare children today for their future role in society?

Boys went to school and learned reading, writing math, music, literature, and poetry (epics). They also practiced athletics, such as running, boxing, wrestling, javelin, and discus throwing (these skills prepared them for service in the army). All of the learning that girls and women did was at home – they mostly learned household skills like spinning, weaving, and child care. Today, in Canadian society, there are many opportunities for individuals of any gender to pursue through school. Students are taught a variety of subjects, skills, and trades that open their
eyes to a variety of career opportunities in their adulthood. Gender roles still exist in our society, and certain jobs are still thought of as “masculine” or “feminine” (never mind the wage gap that still exists; however, we have come a long way from ancient Athens.

Was Fairness Part of Athenian Democracy?

1. Which of the ancient Athenians' ideas of representation are a part of Canadian democracy?
   a. “The most important idea was that it is fair that citizens be allowed to rule themselves. This is the basis of democracy.”
   b. “Athenians believed that majority rule was fair. This meant that decisions were made by voting and that a law supported by more than half the votes was passed.”

2. To what extent were freedom and equity part of Athenian democracy?

   Freedom and equity were not a significant part of Athenian democracy; slavery was an accepted part of Athenian society, it was perfectly normal for people own other people. Even the most poor Athenians owned slaves, and these slaves did not have a voice in the society they lived in. Similarly, women did not experience equity in the eyes of democracy – they were not considered citizens and could not participate in government or decision making. Those citizens who did participate in government felt it was their duty to do so, and worked for the common good of the people, rather than individual rights.

Using Primary Sources: Democracy Crowning Demos

1. Why do you think this work was created?

   In 338 B.C.E. Philip II of Macedon and his son Alexander defeated the Athenians and other Greek states in a battle in central Greece. In the following year, the Athenians passed a law against tyranny that reflected Athenian uncertainty concerning the future of their democracy. This law was written in the inscription on this sculpture to demonstrate the importance of democracy in Athens.

2. What does the sculpture tell us about the Athenian attitude toward democracy?

   The woman in the sculpture represents democracy and the man represents “demos”, or the people of Greece. The fact that she is sheltering him represents the importance Athenians placed on the democratic process; they believed that it protected the people and gave them a voice. This is their statement against tyranny, against anyone who wishes to forcibly take over and rule their city-state.
3. What crimes and punishments are described in the inscription?

In the inscription, it states that if anyone tries to overthrow democracy in Athens, that person and their children will have their civil rights and property taken away.

4. What does the inscription tell us about the beliefs and attitudes of the Athenians?

This tells us that Athenians really believed in the democratic process and greatly valued having a voice in their government. They were ready and willing to defend this process against anyone who wished to change it.

How Were Athenian Citizens Involved in Decision Making?

1. How did men who were citizens participate in the democratic government in Athens?

Men who were citizens either participated in the Assembly (group of at least 6000 members who met 40 times per year to make decisions on many issues in the city-state), the Council (group of 500 people who were the overseers of the government), or the Court (group of magistrates – citizens and officers of the court – that helped maintain law and punish those who didn’t follow the rules).

2. Did Athens have representative government? Explain.

Athens did not have a representative government – they had was is called a direct government, where citizens voted directly on government issues. In Canada, we have a representative government, where we elect leaders to represent our voices in governmental decision-making.

3. In Canada, a person’s vote is by secret ballot. What are the advantages of voting in secret?

By voting in secret, it allows individuals to share their true opinion without fear of judgement or conflict with other people. It ensures that peoples true feelings, beliefs, and values are expressed, and therefore heard.

Making a Difference: Pericles, Athenian Statesman

1. How did Pericles think democracy benefited people in a community?

Pericles believed that democracy allowed the power to be in the hands of the many, and not of the few. He also felt that because citizens shared power over their city-state, they would “respect the authorities and the law and therefore live peacefully together and maintain order.”
2. Why do you think democracy is an attractive form of government today?

Democracy is an attractive form of government today for many of the same reasons, primarily the fact that it theoretically allows for the voices of its citizens to be heard. Ordinary people from every walk of life can have a say and an impact on how the city, province, or country is run. It values the opinions, beliefs, and ideas of the people being governed.

How was the Council of 500 Democratic?

1. Why do you think membership in the Council was limited to citizens over 30 years old?

The Council members were essentially the overseers who organized and ran the government and assembly meetings. Perhaps membership in the Council was limited to citizens over 30 years old in order to allow all citizens a chance to participate in the Assembly first to get used to government proceedings, before they were given the opportunity to be in charge.

2. How would limiting the amount of time a citizen could serve on Council or as chairman help safeguard democracy? What problems might it create?

By constantly rotating the Council membership (once every year) and chairman / leader of the Council (once every 24 hours), Athenians ensured that nobody could become power-hungry and push forth their own personal agenda, thereby maintaining a democratic voice for all its citizens.

How Were Athenian Courts Run?

1. Why do you think Athenian jurors were chosen on the day of the trial?

Athenian jurors would have been chosen on the day of the trial to make sure that the jury was the least biased group of citizens to judge a defendant as being guilty or innocent.

2. Do you think it would be better to go to trial in ancient Athens or in Canada today? Explain your thinking.

Personal opinion: I believe that it would be better to go to trial today. Firstly, because your jury would be more diverse and comprised of more than just adult men – it is more likely to include people who look, think, and behave like you. Additionally, in today’s court, you have a trained professional who speaks and advocates for you and your case. In contrast, those living in Athens would have not had a lawyer and would have had to represent him or herself!
1. What do you think about Socrates’ criticism of the Athenian system of democracy?

   **Personal opinion:** I believe that in some ways, what Socrates said about the democratic process in Athens was true. Because all citizens have their thoughts and ideas represented in the decision making process of a direct democracy, you aren’t necessarily picking the best and most qualified people for the incredibly important job of governing a city-state. On the other hand, it is important that everyone’s voice is heard and valued.

2. What ideas about the responsibilities of citizens did Socrates express when his friends urged him to escape his punishment?

   Socrates believed that it was his duty to make it known to the governing body of Athens that the lottery system and their democratic process was “unjust”, and not to just run away to escape his punishment.

3. What similarities do you see between Socrates’ speech and Pericles’ speech on page 66?

   Both men speak with conviction and emphasize the duty of citizens in their speeches.