

**Transcript of “The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization”
Episode One: “The Birth of Democracy”**

**Transcript of PBS Video - The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization
Part 1 – The Birth of Democracy**

0:00 – Series Introduction: The Significance of the Greeks

The Greeks. A people glorious and arrogant, valiant and headstrong. These were the men and women who laid the very foundations of Western Civilization. Their monuments still recall perhaps the most extraordinary two centuries in history, a time that saw the birth of science and politics, philosophy, literature and drama. [A time that] saw the creation of art and architecture we still strive to equal. And the Greeks achieved all this against a backdrop of war and conflict, for they would vanquish armies, navies, and empires many times their size, and build an empire of their own which stretched across the Mediterranean. For one brief moment, the mighty warships of the Greeks ruled the seas, their prosperity unequalled. These achievements, achievements which still shape our world, were made not by figures lost to time, but by men and women whose voices we can still hear, whose lives we can follow, men such as Themistocles, one of the world’s greatest military generals; Pericles, a politician of vision and genius; and Socrates, the most famous philosopher in history. This is the story of these astonishing individuals, of the rise and fall of a civilization that changed the world.

2:35 – Episode Introduction: The Revolution

508 BC. Five centuries before the birth of Christ. In a town called Athens, a tiny city in mainland Greece, pandemonium ruled the streets. The ordinary people had turned on their rulers, demanding freedom from centuries of oppression. At this moment, one man looked on, an Athenian nobleman named Cleisthenes. Cleisthenes had been brought up from birth to be a ruler, to look down on these common people with contempt. But this one night would be a turning point in his life, in the history of Greece, and in the history of civilization. In a flash of inspiration, Cleisthenes would see that these ordinary people should have freedom, a chance to shape their own destiny, to govern themselves. And with this decision Cleisthenes would set his fellow Greeks on the path to empire.

4:37 – Cleisthenes’ Upbringing in Sixth Century Athens

Historians estimate that Cleisthenes was born around 570 BC. He was hardly the type to become a man of the people, for he had been born into one of the richest families in Greece, his home a palace by the standards of the day. Cleisthenes’ family were called the Alcmaeonids. They were a wealthy and long-established political dynasty.

Josiah Ober: “He grew up in a world of great privilege, a world in which men of an elite background would expect to have certain privileges just given to them.”

The origin of Cleisthenes’ family fortune is a tale typical of ancient Greece, a curious story lost half in myth. The first Greek historian, Herodotus, claims that Cleisthenes’ grandfather once performed a favor for a great king named Croesus, a king of immeasurable wealth. In return, he was told he could take a gift of gold dust from Croesus’ treasury. But according to Herodotus, Cleisthenes’ ancestor couldn’t restrain himself just to loading up his pockets. He stuffed every orifice of his body, his ears and his mouth, with shimmering gold dust, and then poured more

Transcript of “The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization”
Episode One: “The Birth of Democracy”

over his head and hair. And Herodotus writes that King Croesus was so amused by this bravado that he let him take all the gold he was carrying and as much again. But whatever the source of Cleisthenes’s family wealth, there was no doubt that they had used it effectively, to gain power.

From his earliest days, the young Cleisthenes was taught that he was an aristocrat, ancient Greek for a member of the ruling class. In the sixth century BC, these aristocrats controlled everything that happened in Cleisthenes’ hometown, a small settlement called Athens. Athens lay in the center of a Mediterranean peninsula, which Cleisthenes knew as Hellas, and which we now call Greece. In the days of Cleisthenes’ youth, it would have seemed impossible that this city would soon rule an empire.

Paul Cartledge: “It is certainly not what we call a city. Forget Manhattan. Athens in the center has public buildings, but otherwise, I think one should imagine more village style of accommodation and habitation.”

The town was built around the Acropolis, a steep-sided outcrop of bare rock, a stronghold from which the Athenians could fend off the attacks of their neighbors. In the narrow streets surrounding the Acropolis, huddled the simple homes of farmers and tradesmen.

Keith Hopwood: “Most of the houses were perhaps mud brick, and there was no sewage, no waste collection. We would find it very much like wandering through a third world village. You would certainly be able to smell Athens as you approached it.”

For men, life was passed working in the fields, or in basic crafts. Women spent their days cloistered in the home, cooking, spinning, and weaving. For these Athenians, reading and writing was a rare skill. There was nothing we might call science or medicine. Life expectancy at birth was less than fifteen years.

Paul Cartledge: “I think the idea that ancient Greek life was nasty, brutish and short would be entirely accurate. Certainly life was extremely tough.”

This was no society of equals. The common Athenians lived under the yoke of the aristocrats, men such as Cleisthenes’ father.

Josiah Ober: “The traditional political milieu from which Cleisthenes arose was one in which all effective political power was being dominated by a relative handful of people. The possibility that the ordinary people of Athens would actually matter was the furthest thing from the mind of the traditional Greek elites.”

For the Greek writer Aristotle, this was a world riven by injustice: *“The whole country was in the hands of a few people. The hardest and bitterest thing for the masses was their state of serfdom, not that they weren’t discontented with anything else, for to speak generally, they had no part, no share in anything.”*

Josiah Ober: “Athens was in a sense turned against itself. You had one part of the population, the aristocratic elite, holding power at the expense of the rest of the citizen population.”

**Transcript of “The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization”
Episode One: “The Birth of Democracy”**

11:30 – Greece in the Sixth Century BC and the Pre-Eminence of Sparta

Dominated by aristocrats interested only in preserving their own power, Athens hardly seemed a state on the verge of building a great empire. But then Greece also seemed an unlikely land to give rise to greatness.

Josiah Ober: “If you look at the physical world of Greece, it’s not the kind of place you’d immediately expect to produce a great civilization. Simply too many mountains. Greece does not have the obvious kind of physical unity that typically seems to be associated with the really great imperial civilizations of the ancient world.”

The great civilizations of Cleisthenes’ day had grown up around rivers and the fertile plains stretching from their banks. To the south of Greece lay Egypt, where the regular flooding of the Nile sustained a civilization already two thousand years old. And to the east lay the Persians. At the heart of their empire lay the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. This was the very birthplace of civilization, the home of the world’s first cities. But mainland Greece had no open plains. This was a landscape riven by mountain ranges. Off her coast lay countless tiny islands. It seemed impossible for a single ruler to dominate this fragmented world.

Instead, Greece was divided into countless tiny nations, called city-states, each fiercely independent, each with its own culture and history. In Cleisthenes’ time, there were over a thousand of these city-states, jostling with each other for land and power.

Josiah Ober: “They never were politically unified, or at least in the Classical period, never politically unified. And indeed, each individual Greek city-state, each polis, sought to maintain its own independence, sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully.”

In the early sixth century, Athens was not nearly the most powerful or important of these tiny nations. Argos had stood for over a thousand years. Her citizens were able to trace their history back to the mythical days of the Trojan War. The Corinthians dominated Greek trade. Their ships plied the Mediterranean, ferrying goods back and forth from Egypt, Assyria, and Italy. But there was one city-state that had military power, which appeared might come to dominate all of Cleisthenes’ Greece. In the south of Greece, around the reed beds of the river Eurotas, lay the city-state of Sparta. The Spartans were brought up from birth to be soldiers, raised in the field, separated from their families, their lives structured around discipline and war.

Paul Cartledge: “The center of an average Spartan man’s life was his barracks, and he was brought up to be a military man.”

The Spartans lived a life stripped of comforts, with few possessions, and their cloaks, dyed red to conceal their or their victim’s blood.

Paul Cartledge: “Spartans were brought up to put up with anything, and all sorts of stories, the best being of a visiting sybarite, visiting Sparta, eating the local food, and saying, now he

Transcript of “The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization” Episode One: “The Birth of Democracy”

understood why the Spartans were so willing to die, because death was as nothing to eating their food.”

The Spartans were ruthless expansionists. By Cleisthenes’ time, they had conquered all of the surrounding regions, more than four thousand square miles, and they had reduced these conquered populations to a slave labor class, known as the helots. The helots were forced to work in the fields for their Spartan overlords, and they were ruled by an iron fist.

Paul Cartledge: “The Spartans every year declared war on the helots, and the point of this, of course, was partly to reinforce their sense of identity as a warrior community, but also, rather calculatingly, to make it legitimate to kill a helot. And helot culling, as opposed to killing, was a regular practice.”

If there was any part of Cleisthenes’ Greece that looked likely to build an empire, it was Sparta. For the rest of the Greeks, they were a threat, always on the horizon.

17:40 – The Importance of Homer and the Heroic Ideal

This was the world of Cleisthenes’ childhood. Brought up a member of a self-interested elite, in a state that was only a third-rate power, it was an unlikely beginning for the man who would set Greece on the path to empire. But then Cleisthenes had always been a man fired by a dream, the uniquely Greek vision of the greatness a man could achieve.

If there was one thing that inspired Cleisthenes and his fellow Greeks, it was their stories, ancient tales and myths. The country was continually criss-crossed by hundreds of traveling bards, who recited these stories to whoever would pay. These were people who, in an age without writing, had memorized over a million lines of poetry

Edith Hall: “It’s very easy to underestimate the power of the human memory when we live in a culture like ours that has so many means of recording things. Before the Greeks got the alphabet, they seem to have been able to remember vast tracts of poetry, and pass it on over the generations, in a quite remarkable way.”

These traveling bards would have regularly visited the Athens of Cleisthenes’ childhood, and their stories would have influenced and shaped him from his earliest days. The most famous tales these singers told are still preserved, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Composed by the legendary poet Homer, these works tell of mighty battles and epic struggles, and at their heart lie the heroes, mythical figures whose strength had won them power and glory.

Paul Cartledge: “Heroes, almost by definition, were doers of great deeds. The more heads you knocked, and the more young women you deflowered, the greater your heroic status.”

Images of heroes are found all over Greek art. These warlike figures, valiant, beautiful, determined to seize victory at all costs, were the Greek ideal.

Transcript of “The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization”
Episode One: “The Birth of Democracy”

Paul Cartledge: “The heroic ideal was absolutely central, for the whole world of Greek culture. Heroes were terrific achievers, and one might hope to achieve heroic status by modeling oneself on the deeds of, for example, Achilles.”

Achilles was the archetypal Greek hero. As a child, he had been offered the choice between a long, ordinary life or a brief burst of glory on the battlefield. Achilles’ choice meant an early death, and an eternal fame. This, the vision of a hero, the ideal of the man of action, was the model that Cleisthenes was brought up to follow. To pursue a life of greatness and glory, won through strength and valor, to seize power and victory for himself, and himself alone, to become a real life hero.

23:00 – Pisistratus and the Emergence of Athens

But Cleisthenes was not the only one to take the tales of the mythical heroes to heart.

Josiah Ober: “There’s a big change in the middle of the sixth century, when one man seizes control of the government as, what the Greeks call, a tyrant.”

The story of how this tyrant, or sole ruler, came to power has been preserved by the historian Herodotus. One day, a man of dignified and noble bearing, rode into the city of Athens. Beside him stood a tall and beautiful woman, a woman he claimed was the patron goddess of Athens, Athena. This dashing figure demanded that he be given the rule of Athens, for like one of Homer’s heroes, he had the protection of a goddess. Surprisingly, he was welcomed by the Athenians as their new ruler, despite the fact that the goddess was simply a particularly tall girl from a neighboring village. The heroic figure was an ordinary man called Pisistratus, Cleisthenes’ own brother-in-law.

Keith Hopwood: “Pisistratus was, I think, an excellent politician. He was a man without doubt with an eye for the main chance.”

But as he consolidated his rule, it became clear that Pisistratus had far greater ambitions than simply gaining power.

Josiah Ober: “Pisistratus was an extremely intelligent man. He clearly understood that if he was going to maintain control of Athens, if he was going to be able to consolidate his rule and pass it on to his sons, which is clearly his ambition, he would have to find allies.”

Pisistratus took an extraordinary step. He turned to the common Athenians for support, undermining the whole hierarchy of aristocrats and commoners that had endured for centuries. Pisistratus reduced taxes and introduced free loans to allow the people to build up their farms. And by offering the Athenians the chance for prosperity, Pisistratus began to transform his city.

Victor Davis Hanson: “With the rise of Pisistratus, we start to see the success of agrarianism accelerated in Athens, and that’s going to be a kernel that’s going to grow and grow and grow in the ensuing two centuries. And one of the results of that is that we see more vines and olives. Olive trees manifest themselves in every aspect of Greek culture. Economically they allow a

**Transcript of “The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization”
Episode One: “The Birth of Democracy”**

people to have cooking oil, they allow people to eat olives, they allow people to use lubricants, soap, fuel, so it's a valuable economic commodity.”

The land around Athens produced excellent olives, the best in the Greek world. As production soared, the Athenians found a ready market for this oil. Not only in the other Greek states, but across the sea, in Egypt, and Phoenicia, Persia, and Assyria. For Athens was ideally situated to export to the entire eastern Mediterranean.

Paul Cartledge: “Greece is in the middle of an extraordinary grouping of ancient civilizations. It's bounded on the east by the great Persian Empire, on the south by the age-old civilization of Egypt, on the west, the Etruscans and the Romans. Greeks were scattered. Plato has a rather nice phrase, ‘like ants or frogs round the pond.’”

The eastern Mediterranean was the greatest marketplace of the ancient world. It seemed that everyone had something to sell. Grain from Scythia, swordfish from the Black Sea, wine from the great vineyards of the island of Chios, gold, silver, art and finery from Egypt, and everyone was willing to trade for Athenian olive oil. As goods flowed in and out of the Athenian harbor, the Athenians found their wealth and prosperity on the rise. But the most astonishing consequence of Athens' sudden expansion was to be found in the darkest streets of the city. Athens' first great artistic legacy, the vase.

Nigel Spivey: “For what I think is fascinating about the pottery is that in its own time it wasn't a big deal artistically. What was inside the pots was almost invariably worth more than the pot itself.”

Here in the area known as the Keramikos, ancient Athens' red light district, could also be found the potters' workshops. These common artisans were amongst the lowest of the low in Athenian society.

Nigel Spivey: “If you were a potter in Athenian society, I wouldn't say you were the scum of the earth, but you certainly had no especial respect. It was hard, incessant work, unenvied by the citizen population.”

Pottery had been a staple across the Mediterranean world for hundreds of years, used in the kitchen at home, and for transporting oils and food. But it had always been simple in design, using geometric patterns and basic figures, designs based on Egyptian and Assyrian art. But Athenian potters, as they decorated their work, began to develop a whole new style of painting, a freshness and a naturalism never before seen, a style that is still astonishing today.

Nigel Spivey: “It's now become almost commonplace for a Greek vase on the modern antiquities market to fetch millions of dollars or pounds. And if the makers of those vases had any idea of what we were shelling out for them, their graves would spin with either resentment or just absolute hilarity.”

These Athenian potters seem to have been motivated not by the idea of producing great art for eternity, but of outdoing each other. On one particularly fine vase, we find the proud comment,

Transcript of “The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization”
Episode One: “The Birth of Democracy”

“Euthymdes, son of Polias, drew this.” And then underneath, “And I bet Euphronios couldn’t have managed it.”

For the first time in their history, the ordinary Athenians had tasted freedom, and they had shown their capacity for extraordinary achievement.

32:00 – The Tyranny of Hippias

Cleisthenes grew to manhood under Pisistratus’ rule, and he saw how Athens changed. His home had turned from a more or less rural settlement into an international economic power.

But Pisistratus’ rule of benevolent tyranny was not to last forever. In the year 527 BC, he died and was laid to rest here, in the Athenian graveyard. His son, Hippias, took over. At first Hippias followed in his father’s footsteps, ruling Athens with a fair hand. But soon the Athenians discovered the perilous nature of tyranny. Historians tell us that, in the year 514 BC, Hippias’ brother was murdered. Aggrieved and bitter, the tyrant’s behavior completely changed. Hippias not only executed the murderers, but cruelly tortured one of their wives to death as well. Aristotle described the ruler’s slide toward madness: “After this, the tyranny became much, much harsher, for Hippias ordered numerous executions and sentences of exile in revenge for his brother, and he became embittered and suspicious of everybody.”

The freedoms the common Athenians had gained under Pisistratus were now stripped away.

Keith Hopwood: “There was now a real tyranny in the modern sense in Athens. Pisistratus had come into power for a cause. His son now had no cause other than self-preservation.”

Life for Cleisthenes had now become increasingly dangerous. For the paranoid dictator knew that it was from here, from the aristocrats, that the greatest threat to his power could come. And Hippias’ fears would be proved right.

Keith Hopwood: “With the hardening of the attitude of the tyranny, the time now seemed to be ripe.”

Cleisthenes decided to take his first great gamble. He would try to overthrow Hippias, to gain power for himself and his family.

Keith Hopwood: “Cleisthenes’ ambition to make his mark upon the scene is something that of course would have been impressed on him from a very early age, in the stories of the heroes, of their need to succeed, and to strike at the right time. For Cleisthenes himself it would be an achievement.”

Cleisthenes assembled a conspiracy to overthrow the tyrant. Hippias was trapped in his stronghold, captured, and banished from Athens forever. The year was 520 BC. Cleisthenes was now one of the most powerful figures in Athens. He had lived up to the heroic myths he’d been brought up to follow since childhood. But Greek society was changing. The heroic urge that drove Cleisthenes was no longer reserved for the elite. It was now permeating every level of Greek society.

**Transcript of “The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization”
Episode One: “The Birth of Democracy”**

37:20 – The Olympics and the Heroic Ideal

This is Olympia, in southern Greece. Here, once every four years, men from across the Greek world would gather to compete in a vast contest of athletic skill. This was the ancestor of the modern Olympic games. For the ancient travel writer Pausanias, the Olympics were the highlight of any visit to Greece. “Many are the sights to be seen in Greece, and many are the wonders to be heard, but on nothing does heaven bestow more care than the Olympic games.” The Olympic games were founded in 776 BC, two centuries before Cleisthenes had even been born. Then they had been an exclusive competition for the wealthiest of the Greeks. But by Cleisthenes’ time, the games had evolved to allow anyone to take part. A nobleman now could race against a potter, a king against a fishmonger.

Paul Cartledge: “The Olympic games were a chance for any Greeks to display the sort of heroic qualities that the heroes of Homer had displayed.”

The competitions had their roots in the skills required on the ancient battlefield. Chariot racing, running, wrestling, boxing. But here there was no real prize, just a wreath of olives, and fame throughout Greece.

Paul Cartledge: “A competitor would be surrounded by the largest gathering of Greeks in peace that he would ever experience. Perhaps as many as 40,000 Greeks would gather for the Olympic games.”

Greeks would travel hundreds of miles to attend the Olympics, and during the festival, the land surrounding the stadiums would be covered with encampments. But the games were very much a male experience. Women were prohibited from entering the competitions, or even the stadium. But for the Greek man, whatever his origin or class, to win here would be the highlight of his life.

Paul Cartledge: “You had briefly, a moment of glory, of extreme fame, which was what the competitive culture of the Greeks valued so highly.”

Here the Greeks had perhaps found a civilized way to satisfy the heroic ideal. They had built a meritocracy based on skill and ability, where anyone could win.

41:00 – Isagoras and the Exile of Cleisthenes

But a world where anyone could seize victory could only make Athens even more unstable. As soon as Cleisthenes gained power, he found that others were conspiring against him. Here heroism still meant one thing: seize power, whenever and however you can.

Keith Hopwood: “The only rule is that you get what you can, and that you fight. You have to go in there and show that you can win.”

Transcript of “The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization”
Episode One: “The Birth of Democracy”

The most ambitious of those conspiring against Cleisthenes was a man named Isagoras. Isagoras was another Athenian aristocrat. He too had been brought up to believe that power was his right. But Isagoras also knew that he could not gain power on his own. Isagoras took an unprecedented step: he turned outside Athens for support. He sent a message to the Spartans, Greece’s most feared warriors. Isagoras was an old friend of the Spartans. Rumor had it that he had shared his wife with the Spartan king. The Spartans immediately provided a force of their finest troops to back up Isagoras’s bid for power, to help him betray his city.

Josiah Ober: “Isagoras really was upping the stakes. He brought in the most powerful state in Greece. It was pretty clear he was going to turn Athens into a subject state to Sparta.”

With his Spartan force, Isagoras staged a coup, seizing control of Athens. He and his troops would rule from the high point of the city, the stronghold atop the Acropolis. The first targets of the new tyrants were the other aristocrats, Cleisthenes most of all. Over 700 households were cast out of Athens, including Cleisthenes and his entire family. Cleisthenes would leave his city, living once again under the hand of a despotic dictator, a dictator who now ruled with the support of the most fearsome power in Greece, the Spartans. For Cleisthenes, all his childhood lessons seemed betrayed. He had been brought up to be an aristocrat and a ruler, to emulate the mythical heroes, but all this had led was conflict and feuding, death and exile, power struggles amongst an aristocratic elite. How could Athens ever escape from this pointless cycle of violence?

45:30 – Popular Uprising and Democratic Reform in Athens, 508 BC

But even as Cleisthenes agonized in exile, Athens was rocked by an extraordinary event. Like their mythical heroes, the ordinary people of Athens now took their destiny into their own hands. They rose up in revolution. Isagoras and his Spartan allies blockaded themselves atop the Acropolis, the high point of the city. But even there they could not escape the fury of the common Athenians. For two days and two nights, Isagoras held out against this extraordinary uprising, until finally on the morning of the third day, he was forced to surrender.

The year was 508 BC. This would be Athens’ first step toward empire and glory. For the first time in recorded history, the people had turned on their rulers and seized power for themselves.

Josiah Ober: “Athens at this point is in the control of the mob, the ordinary people who had risen up without organized leadership. And then the question is: what happens now?”

At this new dawn, the Athenian people now turned to one man, a figure whose life, whose experiences and disappointments had given him a unique vision. Cleisthenes was recalled from exile and asked to build a government.

Josiah Ober: “When Cleisthenes returned to Athens after the expulsion of the Spartans, he faced a really remarkable challenge. There was no possibility for just simply putting back in power a group of aristocrats. There was no possibility for him to declare himself tyrant. In a sense, what Cleisthenes had to do is design a revolutionary governmental solution for a revolutionary political situation.”

Transcript of “The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization”
Episode One: “The Birth of Democracy”

For Cleisthenes, the problem was how to give his fellow Athenians the say in their future that he knew they now must have. On an Athenian hillside, he had a great meeting place carved out from the bare rock. Here, in the shadow of the Acropolis, the citizens of Athens could now gather to discuss the future of their state. On these very steps, rich and poor alike could stand and address their fellow citizens. This is the ancestor of the British House of Commons, the American Congress, of parliaments across the world. And where government had once been decided by the strength of a sword arm, or the thrust of a sharpened spear, Cleisthenes instituted the simple vote. A white pebble for yes, a black pebble for no. And with this simple and elegant idea, Cleisthenes instituted the rule of the people, a system of government which we now know as democracy. The great Athenian assembly would gather every nine days on issues covering the entire administration of the state, from the raising of taxes to the building of roads, from the price of figs to the declaration of war.

Paul Cartledge: “Athenian democracy is a very different sort of democracy from ours. One has a sense as an Athenian citizen that you really can make a difference. There is no us and them, there is no government separate from the ordinary Athenian citizen body. They are the government. Democracy represented a sharp break, and originally an elitist, heroic culture was now turned on its head, and the idea was that even ordinary Greeks who were not aristocratic, who were not rich, could be, as it were, heroes in politics.”

It was a system of government that would transform this tiny state, and would set off one of the greatest flowerings of civilization that world has ever seen.

The Athenians would take what had been the greatest achievements of the ancient world and transform them. They would take the monumental pyramids and temples of the Egyptian pharaohs and with them build an architecture of grace and splendor. They would take the myths and tales of the traveling bards and transform them in to theater, entertainment for a whole city. And the great stone sculptures of Assyria and Egypt would be remade with an intimacy and emotion that still touches us today.

But just as Cleisthenes’ democracy was gaining strength, a new threat was gathering in the east, the mighty Persian Empire. The Persians were the greatest power of the day. They ruled an empire that stretched from India to the Mediterranean. But as Athens had grown in power and confidence, the Persians realized that this tiny state on their eastern border might soon pose a threat. They mobilized a force of 30,000 men to invade Greece immediately. Cleisthenes’ democracy, hardly born, was now to face its greatest test.

[Series Written & Directed by Cassian Harrison]