



What Democracy Meant To The Greeks

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What Democracy Meant to the Greeks. PREFACE: Democracy is a Greek word. The democratic way of life was first formulated and practiced by the Greeks. In the face of Oriental tyranny they proclaimed, and fought successfully to preserve, the superior values of self-governing communities. Among them arose the civil liberties of speech and public assembly. They regarded the state as educational and ethical in its primary purpose rather than military and coercive, and recognized its duty to provide citizens with opportunities for richly varied living. Facing the difficulties of foreign relations, they created an empire controlled by a democracy and confederations of city-states. In times like these, when democratic institutions have undergone more violent criticism and attack than ever before, it may be useful to re-examine this phase of Greek life the original evolution of a democratic society, its aims and procedures, the appraisal of its successes and failures by its own critics, the causes of its decline. Since the problems which confronted the Greeks were in many respects similar to ours, it may be that we can still profit from their experience. To be sure, their leading state, Athens, was different from any of the present time. That was a smaller, less complicated, less experienced world. The immaturities are obvious, especially in economic resources and scientific technology. Conduct lacked the guide of Christian ethics. To a certain extent Athens was not a democracy at all its economy involved a slave system, although, as we shall see, the notion that it was an aristocratic society favoring the privileged few at the expense of the masses is far from correct. There was only a rudimentary system of representation, with most of the officials chosen by lot public policy was generally determined by direct vote of the citizens. Other differences between that democracy and ours will appear in the course of this study. Yet we shall also find interesting and significant similarities in the issues that were faced and the solutions that were reached with more or less success. Certainly many of the psychological and moral factors were like our own, as well as basic political and economic ones. And in specific ways we shall profit only slightly from their experience, by adopting some of their methods and avoiding their mistakes, there is real value in relating ourselves to the democratic tradition, in appreciating the intelligence and courage of the men who did these things, in feeling comradeship with those first fighters in the age long struggle to achieve democracy. It is not the purpose of this book to describe in great detail the political evolution, procedures, or theories of the Greeks. Many excellent books have been written on these subjects. They should be consulted, as well as histories of Greece and the original sources see the List of Books for Further Reading, on page 267, in order to make the picture complete. This book aims merely to study the human values that were sought and realized by Greek democracy, the chief problems that it faced, the measure of success and failure that resulted, the validity of the criticism of it by its own greatest thinkers. Many translated passages have been included, in order to let the Greeks speak for themselves. The reader can judge how effectively they spoke. The translations are my own, in some cases abridged and rather freely rendered, with occasional borrowing of apt phrases from other versions. In the preparation of this book I have received valuable help from my colleagues, Norman O. Brown, Charles F. Edson, A. D. Winspear, Selig Perlman and Carl Boegholt, and from J. P. Harland and Max Kadushin. To them I am deeply grateful...

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