Acremedes the Assemblyman

Narrators 1—10
Acremedes
Diedre, his wife
Daldes, his father
Xenos, Plutarch,
and Damian, his sons
Sophles, Chintron,
and Hector, his friends

Narrator 1: The Dark Age came to an end around 750 B.C. Cities began to grow and trade increased. Leaders stepped forward in each region to organize and govern. Over the years many changes took place before democracy reigned in Greece. Let's listen as Acremedes and his family and friends tell us how the government of Greece evolved.

Acremedes: Welcome to my humble home. My father was just telling our three sons about life in Athens, our city-state, long ago. Once the Dark Age ended and trade increased once again, over 100 self-governing regions, or city-states, were established throughout Greece. Each had its own specific characteristics. A region was called a polis. Each polis consisted of the city and its surrounding rural area. For example, the polis of Athens included the walled city plus the surrounding area in Attica.

Narrator 2: We use the word “polis” today in many forms. For example, a metropolis is a large city or center of population and culture. The word “politics” means the art of governing a state. And when someone is considered “cosmopolitan” it means that they are very worldly, or at home in any country or culture.

Diedre: Of course, not every polis was equal in terms of natural resources. The lack of farmland caused many people to move into regions away from the mainland and begin other Greek colonies. Some city-states battled each other for land control then—and still do today. Grandfather Daldes was just telling the boys how government began with the kings and queens of Greece.

Daldes: Before the Dark Age, each area was ruled by powerful kings each of whom was usually the head of the area’s richest family. Tales of these kings and their families abound in our Greek literature.

Narrator 3: This system of government was known as a monarchy, or “rule by one.” In a monarchy, the king has ultimate power and control over the people in his area. He alone controls all of the land and natural resources of the region, and he is responsible for all decisions pertaining to his people. Another feature of a monarchy was that when the king died, the power would be handed down to his eldest son, thereby keeping the power in the family.

Damian: But how could one king defend an entire area? What if the people did not like the decisions he was making?
Acremedes the Assemblyman (cont.)

Daldes: The kings would rely on other wealthy families and nobles to help, in return for favors. Naturally, these families soon wanted a share of the power as well. By the end of the Dark Age, many city-states were governed by small groups of nobles who shared equal power. This was better than giving ultimate power to one man alone but still not satisfactory for the majority of the population.

Narrator 4: When a few people govern or hold power over a larger group of people it is known as an oligarchy, or “rule by a few.” Many city-states, such as Sparta, continued to use this system, never fully evolving into a democracy. In an oligarchy there was a council made up of aristocrats, or those who were considered the “best people.” Policies were then carried out by a higher lever of magistrates within the council.

Xenos: The leaders of the oligarchies must have improved conditions in their areas. Why didn’t the oligarchies prevail?

Daldes: Different problems arose in the various city-states. Some regions grew too big and couldn’t provide food for the population. People grew unhappy and decided to overthrow the leaders. New leaders emerged who promised to make things better. They convinced others to join in their fight and seized power by force. Once they had reformed the government, they ruled single-handedly.

Narrator 5: One who assumes ultimate power by force is known as a tyrant, or “ruler who governs in a harsh way”; a dictator. Their government was known as a tyranny. Many tyrants were liked because they let the people have a say in how the government would be changed and made more fair for all of the people, not just the aristocrats. Other tyrants were harsh and greedy, however, imposing severe laws and punishments. Many times the people of a polis would throw out one tyrant and replace him with another.

Plutarch: If one man had ultimate control again, how was this any different from the monarchies?

Daldes: The monarchy was run by a family. This family was not chosen by the people. A tyrant was supported or thrown out by the will of the population. This was a great step towards democracy because it taught the people of Greece that they could make changes in the government by uniting behind a chosen leader. In fact, when the last tyrant was thrown out of Athens, the people got together and decided to share the decision-making power among themselves. Thus the first democracy was born.

Narrator 6: “Democracy” comes from two Greek words: demos, meaning “people,” and kratos, meaning “rule.” Democracy meant “rule by the people.” From about 500 B.C. and forward, Athens has been a democracy. Pericles, a famous Greek statesman, led Athens to the pinnacle of democratic government during the Golden Age of Athens.

Plutarch: I guess we always take our government for granted here in Athens, yet we must thank all of the people who came before us who made our good fortune possible. Father, can we head over to the Agora now? I believe there is to be a big trial today, and I was hoping we could go watch the debates.

Diedre: Yes, dear. Take the boys for a firsthand lesson in government. I will prepare the evening meal for your return. I will want to hear all about the happenings in the Agora today when you come home!
Acremedes the Assemblyman (cont.)

Narrator 7: Although Athens claimed to be a democracy, the citizens making the decisions comprised only about 15% of the total population. This included all adult males over 18 years of age born in the area. Only men could take part in public life. Women and girls stayed at home, going out only to enjoy the arts, such as the theater. They gained their social status from their husbands and male relatives. Even though women and children comprised 48% of the population, they had no political rights and could not own land. But they were protected under the law. Women saw their role in the home as an important one, and they were respected and honored by their husbands and families. Women were encouraged to be intelligent, strong-willed, and courageous, as well as gentle, loving, and talented in the arts.

Acremedes: Come, boys, we’re off to the Agora. Who can tell me about the citizens of Athens?

Xenos: The citizens of Athens make the laws, hold trials at the assembly, and make all decisions regarding the workings of Athens. But not all men are considered citizens. Some are foreigners, or metics. Metics live and work in Athens but were born outside the city. Metics are protected by the law, but, like women, they cannot participate in government or own land.

Narrator 8: Metics paid taxes and served in the army. Life was not bad for these foreigners who comprised 12% of the population. Many of them had left their own polis in search of work and a better life. They were shopkeepers, craftsmen, and usurers. Most metics were highly respected within the community.

Damian: And don’t forget the slaves—25% of the people who live in Athens. Some slaves are purchased from slave traders and some are prisoners of war. They are not considered citizens, but like Athenians, they are protected by laws. Still, they cannot vote, choose their own jobs, or even have families without the permission of their owners.

Plutarch: This is true, but most slaves are treated well. Many have been set up in business by their masters, who claim a share of their profits. Some work on the farms and some in households. Some slaves earn wages and can save money to buy their freedom.

Acremedes: Very good, boys! I can tell you have been taking our government lessons seriously. Ah, I see my three friends on the far side as we enter the Agora now. I think they have just come from the assembly and can tell you what a trial is like.
Acremedes the Assemblyman (cont.)

Narrator 9: The Agora was a large public meeting place in the center of the town. Here all of the citizens of Athens would gather to listen to the happenings of their polis. Men would discuss politics, philosophy, and business. Groups would gather around speakers attempting to persuade voters before entering the assembly. The Agora was usually a bustle of activity.

Sophles: Greetings! I see you have brought the boys along to experience today’s follies in the Agora. I’m sure you have many questions about the workings of our politics, since one day you will each be a citizen entrusted with many duties.

Xenos: There are many people from all over Attica. The assembly of jurors and council members must consist of at least 6,000 citizens. But how does the assembly decide who will be a council member and who will be a juror for the trials?

Chintron: The region of Attica is divided into ten tribes. Each tribe sends 50 citizens to make up the council of 500. Then, each tribe takes turns running the assembly.

Hector: Thousands of jurors are summoned from all over Attica. They are paid by the government so that they can afford to take off from work. This way, rich or poor, every male citizen can take part in the government. It is very interesting to get all of these men together, for we can see that there are vast differences between those who live in the city and those who live in the country.

Plutarch: Yes, but isn’t that the point of our government? To let all points of view be heard and allow all of the people a fair say in the decisions of the polis? I think it is a marvelous system!

Damian: I agree and would like to know more details. Exactly what happens inside the assembly at a trial?

Sophles: Every trial has hundreds of jurors. Each juror is given two disks—one to show for a vote of guilty and the other for vote of innocence. People on trial speak in their own defense in front of the assembly. They may also ask other citizens to speak on their behalf to help persuade the jurors. They are timed using a water clock so that each speaker gets an equal time to present their case. Once all speakers have been heard, which often can take several days, the jurors place one vote disk into a jar. The votes are counted and revealed. Punishments are then imposed.

Narrator 10: In Athens there were no judges or lawyers. Citizens had to plead their own case in front of hundreds of onlookers. If the case involved a woman, metic, or slave, a citizen was required to speak on his or her behalf, since these groups were not allowed to directly take part in the process. The ability of a speaker to be persuasive often accounted for a vote of innocence. A good speaker could sway the juror to his side regardless of the facts. Sometimes an assembly would change a verdict after realizing that they had been persuaded to make a rash decision.

Xenos: Father, what are those slaves doing over there?

Acremedes: They carry the rope and red paint to mark anyone who seems to be trying to avoid their assembly duties. A democracy can only work if everyone does his part. It is important that you understand and accept this great responsibility, because soon you will be a vital part of it. Never forget that participating in government is also a privilege that many people do not enjoy.

Plutarch: Thank you for this valuable lesson. I can’t wait to grow up and become an assemblyman myself.