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Athens: The Spirit of Learning

Greece had hundreds of city-states, but two became stronger and greater than the others. They were Athens and Sparta. These city-states had very different ways of life. Athens became a great democracy, ruled by its free men. Sparta became a soldier-state, ruled by a small group of men. The wealth of Athens came from its trade and colonies. Sparta's wealth came from land worked by slaves. In this chapter and the next we shall learn more about life in these two places.

The year: about 450 B.C.

The place: a busy street in Athens.

The action: two citizens, Ariston (AH-ruh-ston) and Cleros (KLAIR-ohz), are walking to the marketplace.

ARISTON: It looks like another fine sunny

day, Cleros. There's not a cloud in the sky. And the sea breeze is as cool as ever.

CLEROS: What did you expect, Ariston? Who but the Greeks are blessed with such a climate? It keeps us outdoors and makes us healthy too.

(Suddenly a boy throws a pail of garbage into the street, shouting, "Out of the way.")

ARISTON: That fool slave boy! Why doesn't he watch where he throws the garbage? He almost hit me!

CLEROS: He's just a slave. Don't expect him to have any sense.

ARISTON: Say, it's getting crowded. The marketplace will be busier than ever today. If only people wouldn't push and shove!

CLEROS: If you want to enjoy city life, Ariston, you have to put up with such things.

(The two men enter the marketplace. It is a large, open square filled with wooden booths. From these booths, merchants shout, "Fresh bread for sale!" "Buy fish!" "Olive oil today! Get it today! Get it cheap!" Around the square are long, covered walks and temples to the gods and goddesses.)

ARISTON: Cleros, do you see what I see? Isn't that the wife of Paros (PAH-roz) buying flowers?

CLEROS: Shocking! No decent woman should be seen in public! And here, among the rabble of the marketplace! She must have sneaked out of her house. Wait until Paros hears about this!

(A group of men are talking about the news of the day. Ariston stops to listen to them for a while. Then he rejoins Cleros.)

The artwork on this Greek urn shows women gathering apples in an orchard.



CLEROS: What are they saying?

ARISTON: Good news! Our fleet has won a great victory over the Persians at Cyprus (SY-press)! Perhaps now the king of Persia will leave our colonies in Asia alone. When will he learn that Persians can never defeat free Greeks?

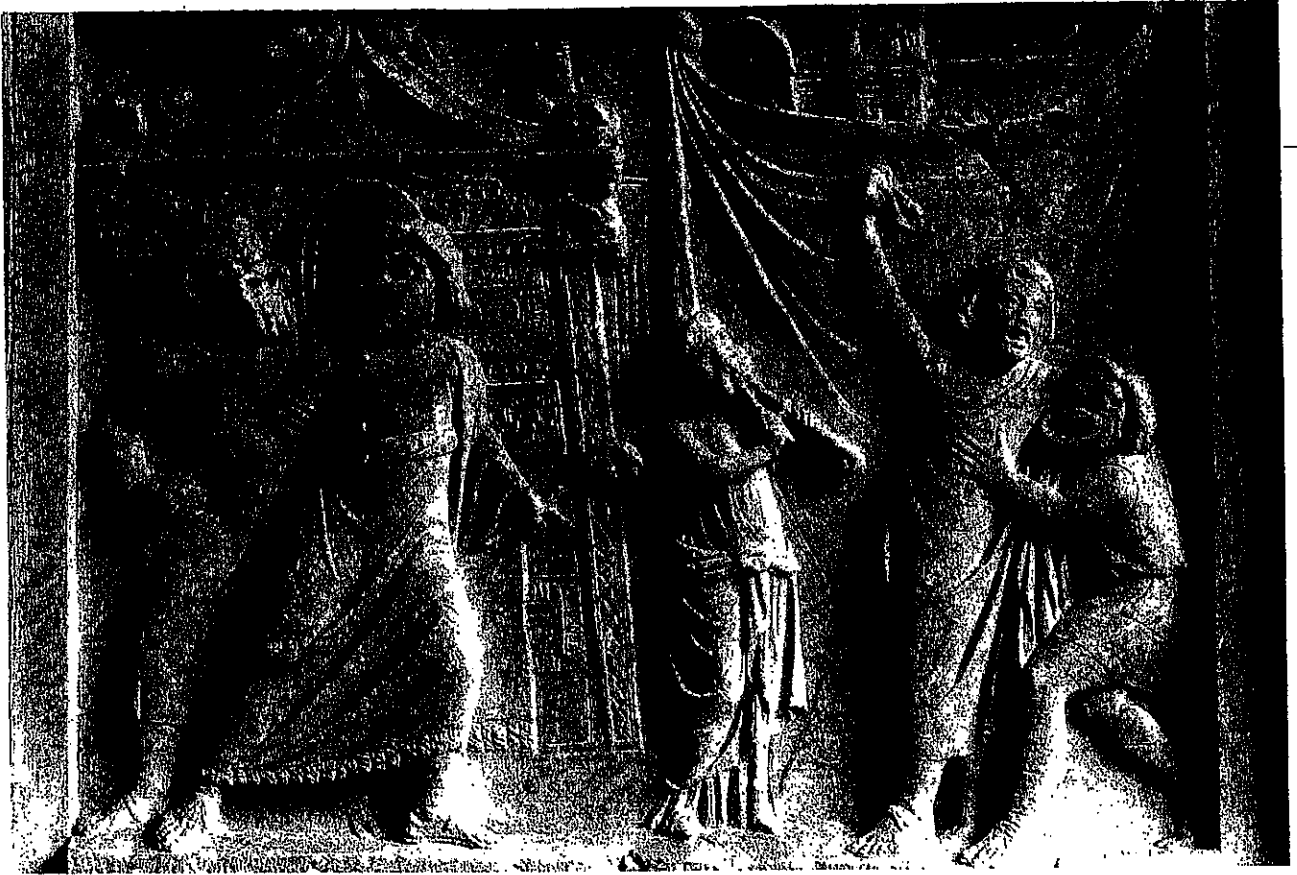
CLEROS: Persians are slow to learn, Ariston. That is why we must keep our fleet strong at all times.

ARISTON: By the way, Cleros, is it true what people are saying about our noble leader, Pericles (PEH-ruh-cleez)? Does he really want to *pay* citizens to serve on juries?

CLEROS: Why, yes, Ariston. Does that bother you?

ARISTON: Really, Cleros, you surprise me. You know as well as I do that a man's first duty is to serve his city. The highest reward that any man could want is to take part in his government. Why should anyone have to be paid for it?

CLEROS: Let's be practical, Ariston. How many men can afford to leave their jobs or farms to serve the city? We have about 30,000 citizens in Athens. Every one of them is supposed to vote on new laws. Yet how many of them actually do vote in the assembly? Usually no more than 6,000. And the reason for it is that most citizens can't afford the time to go to meetings. I think Pericles has the right idea. If we pay our citizens to take part in running the government, more will be able to serve. It will make Athens even more democratic than it is now.



*Among the ancient Greeks were the world's first playwrights.
This stone carving depicts a scene from a Greek comedy.*

ARISTON: Perhaps you are right, Cleros. I never thought of it that way. Say, what are you doing this afternoon?

CLEROS: I think I'll go to my gymnasium, Ariston. A man must have a healthy body as well as an educated mind. Besides, I hear Euripides (you-RIP-uh-deez) will be there. He's written a play, and I want to know about it.

ARISTON: I would like to meet this new writer. Do you mind if I come along with you?

CLEROS: Not at all. See you at the gym after lunch.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Period: _____

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(Questions on the reading)

1. Describe the role of women in Athens:
2. According to Ariston, what is a man's first duty?
3. Of the 30,000 citizens in Athens, how many actually vote? _____.
4. How does Cleros suggest making Athens more democratic?
5. Why do the men want to go to the gymnasium?
6. Who is Euripedes?