

Ancient History Sourcebook: Reports of The Origins of Athens, c. 430 BCE - 110 CE

- Herodotus, from [Histories](#), c. 430 BCE., I.56-59
- Thucydides: from [The History of the Peloponnesian War](#), c. 404 BCE, II.5
- Plutarch: from [The Life of Theseus](#), c. 110 CE
- Aristotle: from [The Athenian Constitution](#), c. 330 BCE

Herodotus: **from *The History*, c. 430 B.C., I.56-59**

These were the Spartans and the Athenians, the former of Doric, the latter of Ionic blood. And indeed these two nations held from earliest times the most distinguished place in Hellas, the one being a Pelasgic, the other a Hellenic people, and the one never having quitted its original seats, while the other had been excessively migratory...What the language of the Pelasgi was I cannot say with any certainty. If, however, we may form a conjecture....we must pronounce that the Pelasgi spoke a barbarous language. If this were really so, and the entire Pelasgic race spoke the same tongue, the Athenians, who were certainly Pelasgi, must have changed their language at the same time that they passed into the Hellenic body...The Hellenic race has never, since its first origin, changed its speech. This at least seems evident to me. It was a branch of the Pelasgic, which separated from the main body, and at first was scanty in numbers and of little power; but it gradually spread and increased to a multitude of nations, chiefly by the voluntary entrance into its ranks of numerous tribes of barbarians. The Pelasgi, on the other hand, were, as I think, a barbarian race which never greatly multiplied.

Thucydides: **from *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, c. 404 B.C., II.5**

In the days of Cecrops and the first kings, down to the reign of Theseos, Attica was divided into communes, having their own town halls and magistrates. Except in case of alarm, the whole people did not assemble in council under the king, but administered their own affairs, and advised together in their several townships. Some of them at times even went to war with the king, as the Eleusinians under Eumolpos with King Erectheos. But when Theseos came to the throne, he, being a powerful as well as a wise ruler, among other improvements in the administration of the country, dissolved the councils and separate governments, and united all the inhabitants of Attica in the present city, establishing one

council and town hall. They continued to live on their own lands, but he compelled them to resort to Athens as their *metropolis* [*i.e.*, "mother-city"], and henceforward they were all inscribed in the roll of her citizens. A great city thus arose which was handed down by Theseos to his descendants, and from his day to this the Athenians have regularly celebrated the national festival of the *Synoikia*, or "union of the communes," in honor of the goddess Athena.

Plutarch:
from *The Life of Theseus*, c. 110 CE

Now, after the death of his father Aigeos, forming in his mind a great and wonderful design, he gathered together all the inhabitants of Attica into one town, and made them one people of one city, whereas before they lived dispersed, and were not easy to assemble upon any affair for the common interest. Nay, differences and even wars often occurred between them, which he by his persuasions appeased, going from township to township, and from tribe to tribe. And those of a more private and mean condition readily embracing such good advice, to those of greater power he promised a commonwealth without monarchy---a democracy, or people's government---in which he should only be continued as their commander in war and the protector of their laws, all things else being equally distributed among them; and by this means brought a part of them over to his proposal.

He then dissolved all the distinct statehouses, council halls, and magistracies, and built one common state-house and council hall on the site of the present upper town, and gave the name of *Athens* to the whole state, ordaining a common feast and sacrifice, which he called *Pan-Athenaia*, or the sacrifice of all the united Athenians. He instituted also another sacrifice called *Metoikia*, or Feast of Migration, which is yet celebrated on the sixteenth day of Hecatombaion. Then, as he had promised, he laid down his regal power and proceeded to order a commonwealth, entering upon this great work not without advice from the gods....Farther yet designing to enlarge his city, he invited all strangers to come and enjoy equal privileges with the natives...Yet he did not suffer his state, by the promiscuous multitude that flowed in, to be turned into confusion and he left without any order or degree, but he was the first that divided the Athenian Commonwealth into three distinct ranks, the noblemen, the farmers, and the artisans. To the nobility he committed the care of religion, the choice of magistrates, the teaching and dispensing of the laws, and interpretation and direction in all sacred matters; the whole city being, as it were, reduced to an exact equality, the nobles excelling the rest in honor, the farmers in profit, and the artisans in number. He also coined money, and stamped it with the image of an ox, either in memory of the Marathon bull, or of the Minotaur, both of whom he vanquished; or else to put his people in mind to follow animal husbandry; and from this coin came the expression so frequent among the Hellenes, of a thing being worth ten or a hundred oxen. After this he joined Megara to Attica...

About this time, Menestheos (the son of Peteos, grandson of Orneos, and great-grandson of Erechtheos), the first man that is recorded to have affected popularity and ingratiated himself with the multitude, stirred up and exasperated the most eminent men of the city, who had long borne a secret grudge to Theseos, conceiving that he had robbed them of their several little kingdoms and lordships, and having pent them all up in one city, was using

them as his subjects and slaves. He put also the meaner people into commotion, telling them that, deluded with a mere dream of liberty, they were actually deprived of both that and of their proper homes and religious usages; and that instead of many good and gracious kings of their own, they had given themselves up to be lorded over by a newcomer and a stranger....and after Theseos death---by accident or misadventure---Menestheos ruled in Athens as king.

Aristotle:
from *The Athenian Constitution*, c. 330 BCE

Not only was the constitution at this time oligarchical in every respect, but the poorer classes---men, women, and children---were in absolute slavery to the rich. They were known as *pelatai* and also as *hectemori*, because they cultivated the lands of the rich for a sixth part of the produce. The whole country was in the hands of a few persons, and if the tenants failed to pay their rent, they were liable to be haled into debt-slavery and their children with them. Their persons were mortgaged to their creditors, a custom which prevailed until the time of Solon, who was the first to appear as a leader of the people. But the hardest and bitterest part of the condition of the masses was the fact that they had no share in the offices then existing under the constitution. At the same time they were discontented with every other feature of their lot; for, to speak generally, they had no part nor share in anything.

Source:

From:

Herodotus, *The History*, George Rawlinson, trans., (New York: Dutton & Co., 1862);

Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, (*The "Dryden Plutarch"*), (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1910);

Fred Morrow Fling, ed., *A Source Book of Greek History*, (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1907), pp. 77-79.

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