

ACTIVITY 8.1

Athens' Choices

Athens was located in one of the least fertile areas in ancient Greece. Its unproductive land could not grow the grain necessary to feed the growing city-state. It solved its problem by growing olives and grapes, which it used to produce olive oil and wine. Athenians traded olive oil, wine, and other goods for grain from other locales. Athens' dependence on trade led to the building of the Athenian fleet, which went everywhere in the Mediterranean, from Spain in the west to the Black Sea in the east.

Athenians built magnificent temples, such as the Parthenon, but lived in very simple homes built of sun-dried brick. Houses had no plumbing, and light was provided by olive-oil lamps. Marriage and family were important to Athenian life. Marriages were arranged by parents. Girls usually were married at about the age of 14 to an older man—sometimes twice her age. Women did not have much freedom in Athens. Although they were citizens, they could not own or inherit property. Women were to remain at home and manage the household and slaves. They could appear in public only with permission from their husbands. Men did much of the shopping at the market. Girls did not usually receive a formal education; most stayed home and learned from their mothers how to manage a household. Boys usually went to school at the age of seven, where they were taught reading, writing and grammar, music, and gymnastics. Instead of paper and pencil, students wrote on wax-covered wooden tablets. At age 18, a boy received a year of military training.

Most Athenian families of the citizen class owned at least one slave. The most common use of slaves was in farming, the main industry in Athens. Slaves also worked in the homes of Athenian citizens, and some conducted trade for their masters or accompanied them on trips. Female slaves cooked, cleaned, and made clothing. Slaves who worked in the silver mines probably endured the worst conditions.

The arts were celebrated in Athens, and great works of art, literature, and drama became the standard by which such works are judged even today. In addition, some of history's greatest thinkers and philosophers walked the streets of this city-state. Among them were the philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Various forms of Athenian government eventually evolved into direct democracy. Athens is remembered as one of the most advanced civilizations of ancient times and the birthplace of democracy.