

FREEDOM IN SPARTA AND ATHENS

The stark contrast between ancient Sparta and Athens makes abundantly clear that cultural achievement occurs only where men are free.

by Dennis Behreandt

In 480 B.C., the Persian army under the great king Xerxes marched on Greece. According to the Greek historian Herodotus, the Persian invaders numbered more than two million fighting men, camp followers, and engineers. A measure

of the power of this army was its crossing of the Hellespont. Persian engineers anchored 674 ships within the strait, their prows facing the current, and then tied them to capstans on either shore. Drawing the tethering cables tight, the Persians then managed to pave a road across the ships in order to move their gargantuan army.

Ancient Greece: The site of the first major experiment in human liberty at Athens was also the site of the first major experiment in totalitarianism at Sparta.



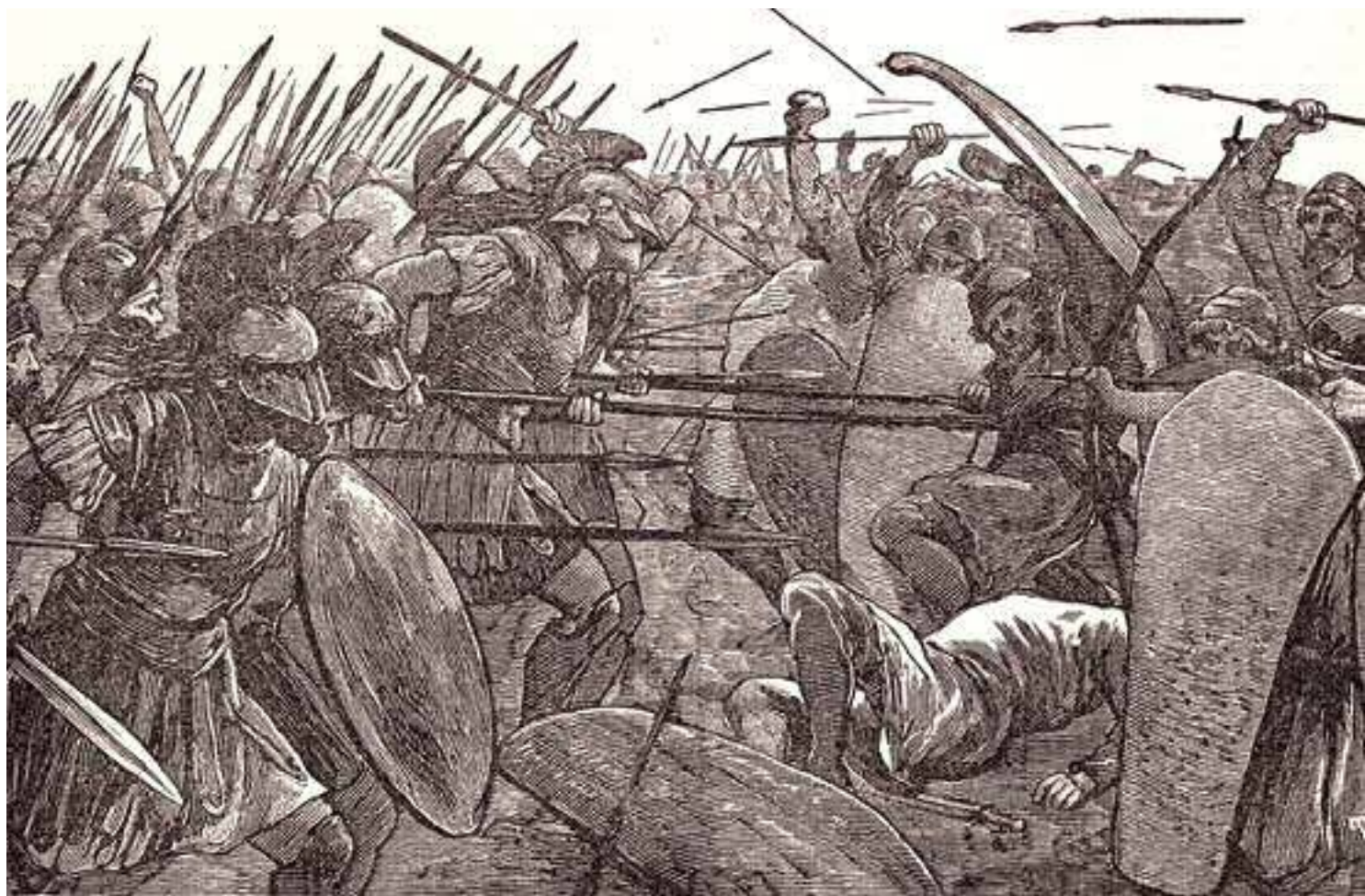
It was a feat that for centuries was considered one of the great wonders of the world. One ancient witness to the event called Xerxes a veritable Zeus and wondered why, instead of invading, this god of a king did not just destroy Greece with a thunderbolt. Imagine, therefore, the fear that the much smaller and outnumbered city states of Greece felt as this massive army bore down upon them.

Under the specter of approaching annihilation, many of the smaller Greek cities surrendered. But the two greatest city-states, Athens and Sparta, along with their allies, chose instead to resist the invader. For its part, Athens sent forth a fleet of triremes, the preferred warship of the Greeks, to counter the numerically superior Persian naval presence. The Spartans sent a smaller contingent of soldiers under King Leonidas to the pass at Thermopylae, there to counter the Persian thrust.

The Athenians met the Persian Navy at Artemisium and were frightened by what they saw. Against them was arrayed a seemingly overwhelming Persian naval force. The Greeks even initially considered withdrawing, but the gravity of the situation made retreat unpalatable and the clash inevitable. In the fray the Athenians under Themistocles fought bravely, their superior sailing skills almost making up for their inferiority in numbers. The engagement ended with the Athenian navy still afloat in large part. The Persians, despite numerical superiority, could not destroy their steadfast adversary. The two navies parted with the Greeks justifiably considering their survival against such odds an important victory.

In the end it was Athens, not Sparta, that took the lead in commerce, industry, diplomacy, the arts, and the sciences. Sparta was a leading city, but it was in Athens only that freedom found a home. As a result, it was Athens that became great, and Sparta that withered and died.

On land, the situation was much more desperate. The Spartans at Thermopylae under Leonidas numbered just 300 and were accompanied by only a few small contingents from other cities. The Spartans, though, were true warriors, picked men willing to die for their city and their honor. One of these, Dieneces, was warned that Xerxes' army was so large that a volley



Spartan valor: Under Spartan leadership, a Greek army defeated Persian invaders at the Battle of Platea in 479 B.C. The valor and skill of Spartan arms was proven time and again in the ancient world, but in Sparta, military supremacy came at the cost of freedom and cultural improvement.

Sparta after Lycurgus produced no significant philosophy, no significant art, no significant science, no significant literature, and no significant architecture. All that Sparta was was war: against those it conquered, against its own people — indeed, against all mankind.

of arrows from the Persian archers would blot out the sun. “We shall have our fight in the shade,” was Dieneces’ grim and determined response.

Against overwhelming odds, the Spartans did fight. Assault after assault fell on them at the “hot gates” of Thermopylae, but they repeatedly turned back the invaders, even repelling the Persian “special forces” — Xerxes’ feared “Immortals.” But no amount of valor could hold back the invading horde forever. Eventually, Greek traitors from another city betrayed the Spartans and showed Xerxes a way around the pass guarded by the Spartan

contingent. Through treachery, the Spartans perished. Ancient Greek sources say that 20,000 Persians fell at Thermopylae. All but two of the 300 Spartan heroes perished. Of the two survivors, one hanged himself in shame at the defeat and the other fell in battle elsewhere.

United in battle to save all Hellas from the oriental invader, Sparta and Athens in

other respects could not have been more different. Only the threat of mutual annihilation convinced the two rival city-states to work together. Both were great cities, alternatively respected and feared by other Greek cities. And yet, in the end it was Athens, not Sparta, that took the lead in commerce, industry, diplomacy, the arts, and the sciences. It was Athens that was the epicenter of the Hellenistic age — that flowing of Greek culture and learning across the Mediterranean basin and deep into Asia, reaching, under Alexander the Great, as far as Afghanistan and the shores of the Indus River. Sparta, it is true, was a

great and leading city, but it was in Athens only that freedom found a home. As a result, it was Athens that became great, and Sparta that withered and died.

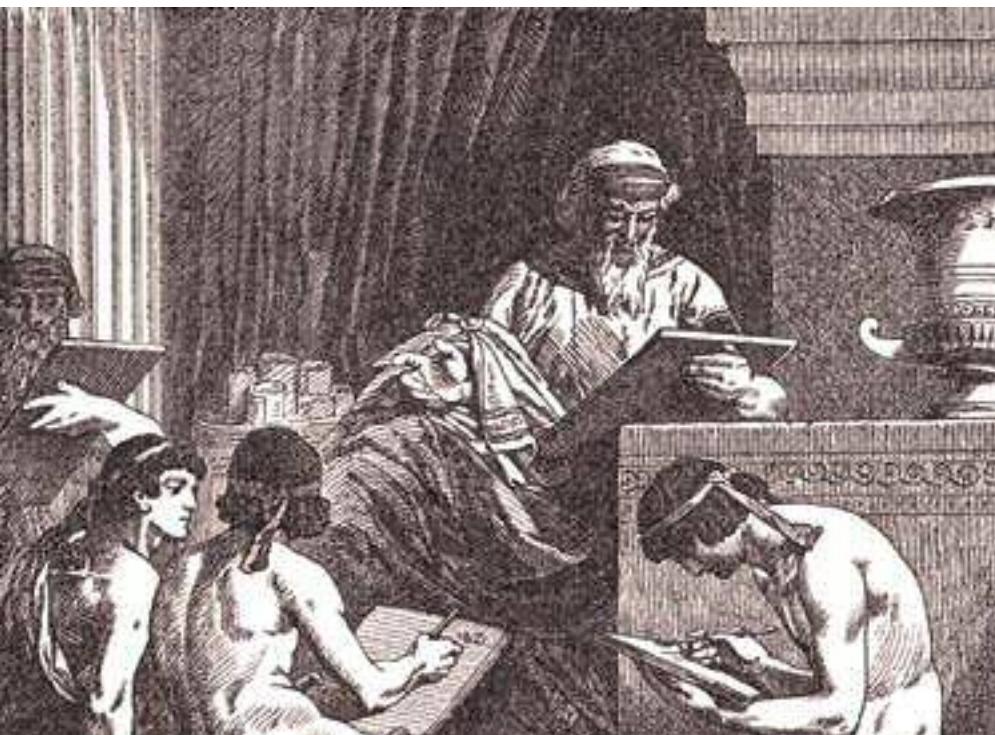
A Spartan Golden Age

Ancient Sparta was located on the plain of the Eurotas River, where the modern town of the same name is located today. The site is rugged. Surrounded by mountains, the ancient city did not need, and therefore did not build, defensive walls or other fortifications. The rugged landscape was fortification enough. Perhaps this explains the subjugation of the native population, for the Spartans themselves were not native. They were, in fact, Dorian invaders from the north, and upon arriving on the Eurotas plain they conquered and enslaved an indigenous population, the Achaeans, that, perhaps, felt that the jutting peaks of the Taygetus Mountains would deter invaders.

These conquering Spartans claimed descent from none other than Heracles, just one of the myths or legends associated with Sparta. The fabulously beautiful Helen, over whom the Trojan War was fought, was the wife of the Spartan king Menelaus. But this more properly belongs to the Mycenaean pre-history of the area, rather than to the Spartans proper. Nevertheless, the later Spartans, in about the 8th century B.C., built a shrine to Helen at the site where, in myth, the goddess Aphrodite appeared to the girl Helen and foretold of her future beauty.

After establishing supremacy in the region, the new masters of Lacedaemon (Sparta) lived in relative peace with the native population. Historian Jacob Burckhardt in his book *History of Greek Culture* noted that the Spartans “appear to have dealt moderately with the Achaeans whom they subjugated and with other racial remnants ... whom they found there.” These earliest years of Sparta, difficult to date but probably beginning around the 9th century B.C., were Sparta’s best years, culturally speaking. Like other Greek city-states, Sparta was at this time largely anarchic. The political system swayed like a pendulum from very popular rule to rule by strongmen. But overall, the age was one like no other in Spartan history because freedom prevailed as it never would again.

According to historian Will Durant,



The lawgivers: In both Sparta and Athens, leaders came forward to help their city-states create lasting governing institutions. In Athens, Solon (above) drafted a set of laws aimed at restoring lost freedoms. In Sparta, the nearly mythical lawgiver Lycurgus is given credit for creating a system of laws that enslaved the people of an entire region.



Ancient Athens, at times under siege by its neighbors and at other times attacked by the Persians, became the envy of the ancient world as a result of its commercial empire and cultural magnificence.

writing in his book *The Life of Greece*, Sparta was then “a Greek city like the rest, and blossomed out in song and art.... Music above all was popular there.” In this early age the arts began to flourish in Sparta as in other areas in the Greek world because political domination was incomplete and individuals were able, to some degree, to pursue their own best interests. This brief golden age, though, was not to last.

The changes that took place in Spartan life have been attributed to the nearly mythical lawgiver Lycurgus. He is variously dated anywhere from the 9th century B.C. to the 6th. Whatever the case, the changes attributed to Lycurgus marked the imposition of a thorough and dangerous despotism on all the inhabitants of Lacedaemon.

The Coming of Lycurgus

The age of Lycurgus was already a matter of substantial antiquity when Plutarch described his life in about A.D. 75. According to this later Greek historian, Lycurgus ruled Sparta as regent for his nephew, the child-king Charilaus. The mother of the child and her family, however, became suspicious of the respect the Spartans had for Lycurgus, perhaps even accusing him of plotting the child's death, whereupon Lyc-

urgus would then rule in name as well as in fact. “Troubled at this,” Plutarch writes, “and not knowing what it might come to, he [Lycurgus] thought it his wisest course to avoid their envy by a voluntary exile, and to travel from place to place until his nephew came to marriageable years, and, by having a son, had secured the succession.”

According to Plutarch's account, later embellished by others, Lycurgus stopped first in Crete, where he studied the government of that island. He later traveled widely around the Mediterranean world, even spending time in Egypt, the ancient land of the Pharaohs. During his absence the domestic situation in Sparta continued in turmoil and the erstwhile exile was summoned home. On his return, Plutarch says, “he applied himself, without loss of time, to a thorough reformation, and resolved to change the whole face of the commonwealth.”

Lycurgus may or may not have existed. The ancient sources say he did and we doubt them usually at our peril. But whether he existed or not, the “reforms” attributed to him created a thoroughgoing despotism unmatched in sophistication and scope until the rise of communist and Nazi tyrannies in the 20th century. Like these, in Sparta the state was supreme.

In many respects, the Spartan reforms were more like the policies advocated in Nazi Germany than those in Communist Russia. Like Nazi Germany, the Spartans were unabashedly racist. The Spartans proper, meaning the Dorian invaders who controlled the region, were the only true citizens of the Spartan fatherland.

Two other classes labored under Spartan hegemony. The first, the *Perioeci*, were those who literally lived around the region. These were nominally freemen, but, according to Durant, were subject to taxation and military service but had no right to marry into the master Doric race. The other class was the Helots, slaves with no rights whatsoever, not even the right to life. These lived a sad and uncertain existence of hard labor, tilling the fields of land owned by the ruling class. They were liable to be beaten or worse at the whim of their masters. According to Burkhardt, “The dishonorable state of the helot was driven home to him not by distinctive dress but by a regular yearly flogging, administered without reason, and by ridicule after he had been made drunk. If, however, a helot attempted to rise above his slave-like status, he was put to death and his master punished for not having kept the overweening fellow in his place.”

The Greek achievement was summed up most ably by Durant. “Those who cherish freedom, reason, and beauty ... will hear ... the voices of Solon and Socrates, of Plato and Euripides.... They will think of Greece as the bright morning of ... Western civilization.”

In addition, the Spartans employed a terrifying secret police apparatus used to intimidate possible troublemakers and to keep the population of Helots from expanding to an unmanageable degree. Young Spartan men, organized in death squads, would be sent into the countryside in a practice called *crypteia*. The power of life and death was in their hands, for the state granted to them the power to kill Helots on sight. Even at the height of the Peloponnesian War when it would seem

that Sparta would have needed the manpower, Burkhardt notes that 2,000 Helots were killed by the state.

The tyranny of the Spartan state did not extend solely to the terrorizing of slaves and serfs. Even the privileged citizen class was thoroughly micromanaged and controlled by the state apparatus. Sparta pursued a rigorous eugenics program, encouraging husbands to give their wives

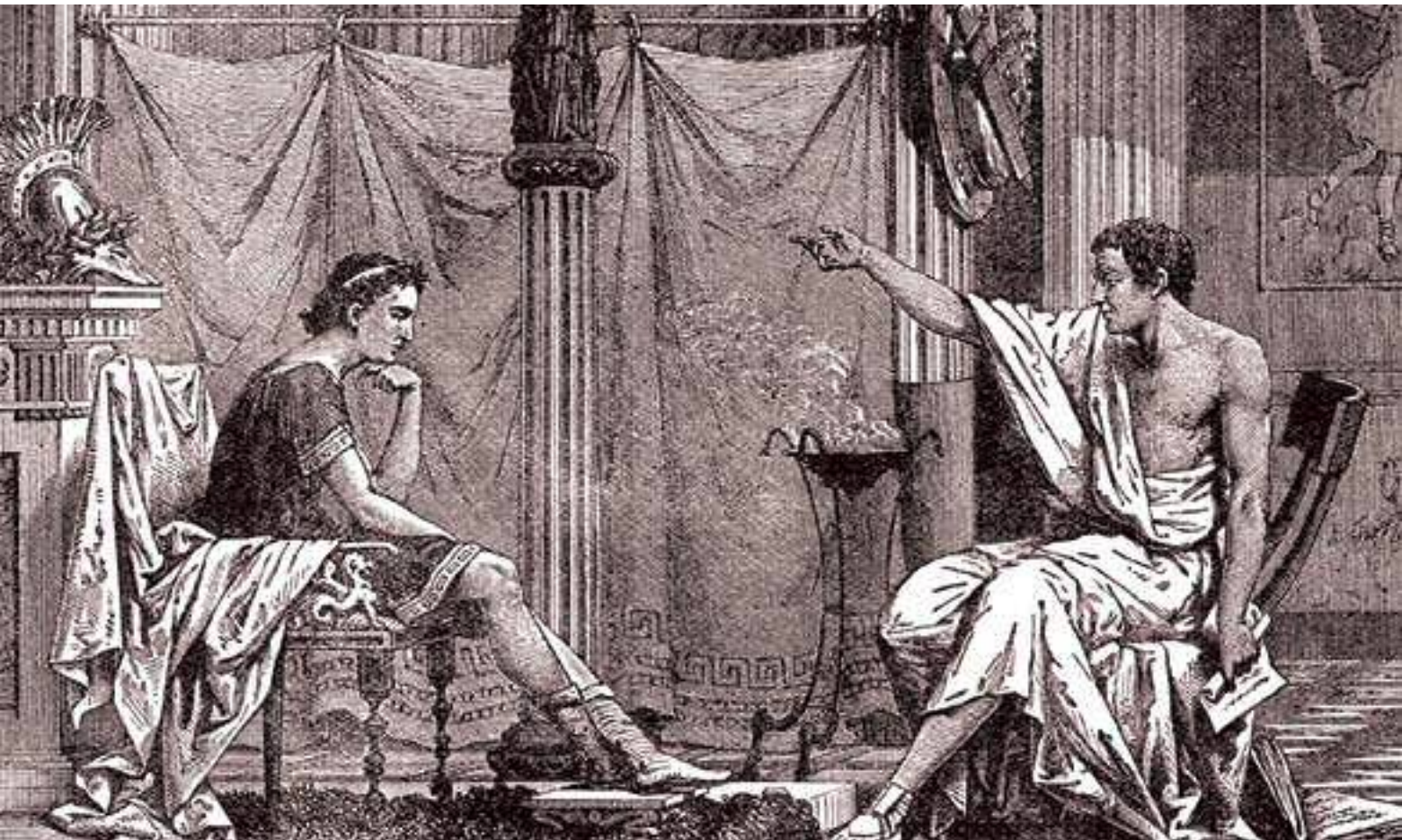
to men considered to be exceptional in order to produce exceptional children in turn. At childbirth the father had the right of infanticide, but even if the child survived this first parental judgment, life was by no means assured. Children were next brought before a council of inspectors to be appraised. Any child found unfit by this council was thrown from a cliff of Mt. Taygetus.

If the child survived the council, a life of hard training was in store. At seven,

boys were taken from their families and raised by the state in a military regiment until the age of 30. There they were drilled by a *paidonomos* or master of boys and by the leading boys chosen to be captains. According to Burkhardt, “The goal of all education was to give the future warrior and overseer of serfs the skills he would need and to inure him to the privations he would have to undergo.” This “education” was, Burkhardt concluded, “deliberately brutalizing.”

What was the result of this Spartan despotism? The main effect was to make Sparta just what its leaders intended: an armed camp supported by slaves. The purpose behind the system was twofold. First, it was meant to keep the oppressed horde of Helots and *Perioeci* under control and, second, to provide a powerful military capability with which to increase the power and prominence of Sparta throughout Greece. It worked. But the lack of freedom and forced sequestration of all Spartans from anything resembling an intellectual

The Aristotelian Principle: Scholar Charles Murray notes that this principle “says that human beings delight in the exercise of their realized capacities.” In Athens, people were free to realize these capacities to a hitherto unprecedented degree.



life left Sparta an outsider looking in at the cultural ferment occurring elsewhere in Greece.

Sparta after Lycurgus produced no significant philosophy, no significant art, no significant science, no significant literature, and no significant architecture. All that Sparta was was war: against those it conquered, against its own people — indeed, against all mankind. “The system had to be ungracious in order to protect itself,” Will Durant concluded of Sparta, “a breath from that excluded world of freedom, luxury, letters, and arts might topple over this strange and artificial society.” Thankfully there was Athens.

The Athenian Counterpoint

In Athens, Solon, another lawgiver, created another constitution, this one more conducive to liberty, while saving his city from probable revolution and destruction. Of course, the ancient Greek understanding of freedom does not correspond completely with that which informed the American Founding Fathers. Nevertheless, where government was kept in check, in ancient times as well as modern, freedom led to innovation and prosperity.

In Athens before Solon, the indebted could be sold into slavery, even into slavery into foreign lands. In addition, an oligarchic ruling class, in control of the means of political power, used the power of the governing apparatus to enrich themselves. According to 19th-century historian George W. Cox, writing in his book *Lives of Greek Statesmen*, “From the words of Solon we learn two facts, which he states with the utmost clearness. The one is that the men who exercised power in the state were guilty of gross injustice and of violent robberies among themselves; the second is that of the poor many were in chains and had been sold away even into foreign slavery.” No less an ancient authority than Aristotle described the same phenomenon. “A few proprietors,” said the philosopher, “owned all the soil, and the cultivators with their wives and children were liable to be sold as slaves on failure to pay their rent.”

If left to its own devices, such a system would soon convert Athens, and the entire Attic region, into another Sparta. “The dis-



The Athenian achievement: The Parthenon is the preeminent symbol of Athenian achievement, but is not the only one. Free to innovate and free to learn, the Athenians excelled in philosophy, in science, in engineering, in art, in government, and in commerce. Nearly single-handedly, the Athenians created that Greek civilization which was spread by Alexander the Great across the Near East during the Hellenistic Age. Had Athens followed the Spartan example instead, this incredible advancement in human culture never would have occurred.

parity of fortune between the rich and the poor,” Plutarch remarked, “had reached its height, so that the city seemed to be in a truly dangerous condition, and no other means for freeing it from disturbances ... seemed possible but a despotic power.” Just when Athens faced a choice between freedom and chains, Solon stepped into the fray.

In 594 B.C., Solon held the position of Archon, giving him near-dictatorial power. Others, when granted this power, used it, or attempted to use it, to institute a kind of personal despotism that even disgusted the Spartans, who, despite their own tyrannical ways, never invested dictatorial power in the hands of one man if they could help it. Solon, a patriot, resisted the charms of absolute power and sought instead to improve the health of the state by overturning the distressing and damaging practices that had seen many good Athenians forced into slavery and separated from their homes, families, and loved ones.

According to historian Cox, Solon sought “to bring the mischief summarily to an end by introducing his celebrated measure known as the *Seisachtheia*, or removal of burdens, a measure which, it is said, annulled all mortgages on lands in

Attica, restored to freedom all debtors who had been reduced to slavery, provided the means for recovering and ransoming such as had been sold to foreign masters, and rendered a fresh repetition of the old evils impossible by prohibiting all security for loans on the bodies of the borrower or his kinsfolk.”

While these seemed to be radical reforms, they stopped short of full redistribution of land as had happened in Sparta. Moreover, they relieved the pressure that all felt, at the time, would lead to violent and disruptive revolution. “Within a decade,” historian Will Durant noted, “opinion became almost unanimous that the act had saved Attica from revolution.”

Solon did not stop here. He freed those who had been imprisoned or enslaved because they were political dissidents, keeping in bondage only those who had tried to overthrow the government. He was the first to recognize the right of a property owner to bequeath his property in any fashion he may upon death. Normally property was divided among sons, but a childless man, under Solon’s reforms, could designate any beneficiaries he may choose. And these were but a few of the reforms instituted under Solon’s guidance.

Freedom's Inevitable Outcome

Prosperity and cultural achievement came as a direct result of individuals having the freedom to pursue their own interests, keep the product of their labor, and enter into associations freely with their neighbors. Historian Charles Murray, in his book *Human Achievement*, calls this the "Aristotelian principle."

According to Murray, "The Aristotelian principle says that human beings delight in the exercise of their realized capacities." The key word is *realized*. Only when people have the freedom to realize their capacities and their dreams are progress and prosperity possible. Implied in this, says Murray, "is an understanding of what it means to be human that was the basis for the Greek accomplishment — mainly Athenian accomplishment — and laid the foundation for subsequent Western thought."

So what did Athens achieve? There is scarcely a possibility of categorizing that colossal achievement here. Consider alone the work of Aristotle and Plato. These two philosophers, having the freedom to work and teach, created modes of thought that guided the development of Western culture for more than two millennia. Their works continue to inform us today.

Consider also the arts. The Parthenon in Athens never ceases to provoke awe and wonder in its clever details and subtle use of optical illusion. It is a school in architecture contained within itself. In sculpture, Praxiteles reached the pinnacle of his craft, not to be excelled until during the Renaissance when men like Michelangelo and Donatello amazed the world with their virtuosity. The Greek achievement, led by Athens, extended from these already listed marvels to stunningly innovative works in literature, science, medicine, mathematics, and technology.

We stand today in the modern world not least on the shoulders of our Athenian forefathers. The Greek achievement was summed up most ably by Durant. "Those who cherish freedom, reason, and beauty ... will hear ... the voices of Solon and Socrates, of Plato and Euripides, of Pheidias and Praxiteles, of Epicurus and Archimedes; they will be grateful for the existence of such men... They will think of Greece as the bright morning of ... Western civilization." ■