ANCIENT GREECE
Background Information 10:

Forms of Government - Democracy, Oligarchy and Tyranny

Democracy: rule by the people

- **Where?** Developed in Athens by Kleisthenes and others.
- **What?** Based on principle that all citizens of the city-state of Athens had right to attend and speak at assembly (women, slaves & metics were not citizens).

  Most government officials chosen by lottery, did job for 1 year.

  From 390 BC, citizens paid for attending assembly.

  Most important political posts were the 10 generals: elected by the assembly each year.

  Between 30,000 – 40,000 male citizens but possibly only about 5000 attended assembly.

  Voting was by a show of hands.

  Ostracism (banishment from Athens) involved writing a person’s name on an ostraca; person with most votes over 6000 had to leave Athens for 10 years, which destroyed their career.

- **Other democracies**

  In fourth century BC, heyday of Greek democracy.

  Cities like Chios and Thebes (previously oligarchies) adopted a version of democratic government.
Oligarchy: rule by the few

- **Where?** Common throughout ancient Greece
  - Sparta championed oligarchies.
  - Athens had an oligarchy during and after the Peloponnesian War.
  - Existed in Corinth and Thebes.

- **What?** A minority of men from rich families controlled the state: most citizens couldn’t take part in government.

Tyranny: rule by one powerful dictator, a tyrant.
(Tyrant: a ruler who has seized power without legal right).

- **Where?** Many states, particularly in the 6th century BC, were ruled by a tyrant.
- **What?** Took power by force.
  - Usually of noble birth but often had support of the poor.
  - Unlike a monarchy, power not inherited
  - Unlike modern meaning of tyranny, was not always a brutal and oppressive rule e.g. Pisistratus’ rule in Athens.
- **Details** First appeared in Argos or Corinth, then Sicyon, Megara, Mytilene and Miletus.
  - Sparta avoided tyranny, probably because of the need for unity amongst citizens against helots.
  - In Athens, Pisistratus became tyrant 3 times, starting c.560 BC.
  - In Corinth under the Kypselidai tyranny, the city became dominant in pottery production and export, art and trade.

Historical Developments

- In Homer we have evidence for monarchy, but probably lasted no later than the 8th century.
- By c.700 BC, aristocracies, not monarchies, ruling the earliest poleis.
- Commoners challenged this position and power shifted from aristocrats to wider group of landlords.
- Oligarchies then replaced aristocracies.
- In 6th century particularly, tyrannies appear, including Pisistratus in Athens.
• In 508/7, Kleisthenes reforms brought about democracy in Athens: citizenship was based on membership of a deme (village/ward).

• In late 460s, Ephialtes and Pericles were behind a reform package passed by assembly that led to the removal of the remaining political powers of the Areopagus, the aristocratic council that had been the supreme court in Athens.

• In 411 and 405/4, oligarchies overthrew Athenian democracy: the latter was extreme and brutal and was set up by Sparta.

• Under Macedonian rule of Greece, tyrannies by pro-Macedonians were imposed on Athens’s allies against Macedon.

• After Alexander’s death, democracy was overthrown in Athens, but continued in city of Rhodes.

• Hellenistic kings and Rome promoted oligarchy and monarchy in Greece.