

Background Essay

Citizenship in Athens and Rome: Which Was the Better System?

About 500 BCE, on the Greek and Italian peninsulas of the Mediterranean Sea, a new idea began to take shape. This was the notion that people were **citizens** of a state or empire, and that being a citizen meant not only meeting certain responsibilities, but also enjoying certain rights. Before this time, in places like Egypt, Babylonia, and ancient China, individuals were generally regarded as **subjects**, not as citizens. Power was largely in the hands of a pharaoh, king, or emperor and the thousands of administrators who carried out the ruler's command. But by the sixth century BCE, a new idea was emerging: that ordinary people should play a more significant role in the life of the state, or nation.

Citizenship is a status, or standing, given by a government to some or all of its people. In the modern world, citizenship often involves a balance between individual rights, such as the right to vote, and individual responsibilities, such as the duty to serve one's country. This balance has been called the **social contract theory of citizenship**. The individual does his or her part; the nation or state does its part.

It is probably accurate to say that in the **city-state** of Athens, the emphasis was more on citizen responsibility than citizen rights. The great Athenian leader Pericles (495-429 BCE) said that Athenians who did not fully participate in voting, political debate, and holding office were "useless." The Greek **philosopher** Aristotle did him one better by declaring such

Athenians to be beasts. It seems that many Athenians agreed. Participating in government and making the city-state work was simply what good citizens should do. Citizenship was an action verb.

In Rome, the idea of a good citizen was a bit different. During the years of the Roman

Republic, from 509 BCE until roughly 27 BCE, Roman citizenship qualifications and rights fluctuated but hovered around those described in this Mini-Q (document activity). Unlike Athenians, a Roman citizen was judged more by how he behaved with his family, his neighbors, and his property. A Roman citizen who did not participate in local government would not likely have been called a beast.

It is important to note that comparing Athens and Rome is in some ways like comparing a flea and an elephant. Athens in 400 BCE had a population of about 300,000, including slaves. The Roman Empire had an estimated population in 1 CE of about 45,000,000, perhaps 15 percent of the world's population. Athens, a land-locked city-state, was about the size of Rhode Island. The **Roman Republic** (see map) was huge.

In both Athens and Rome, citizenship was something to be honored and protected. Not everyone could have it, and those who did had a special relationship to the state. The documents that follow should help deepen your understanding of how Athenians and Romans viewed the matter. Imagine life as a citizen of Athens and as a citizen of Rome. Then answer the question: **Citizenship in Athens and Rome: Which was the better system?**