

SECTION 2/The Ancient Roots of Democracy

Focus Questions

- What did ancient Greece and Rome contribute to the idea of democracy? (pages 7–10)
- How did the Judeo-Christian tradition affect the moral development of Western civilization? (pages 10–12)

Terms to Know

natural law

republic

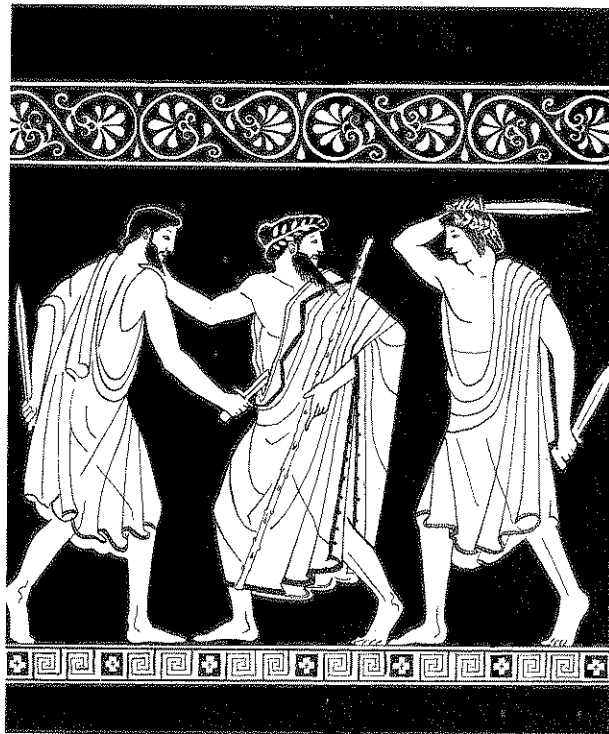
Judeo-Christian tradition

Early peoples came to require a way to organize large-scale building projects. Thus, some 5,000 years ago, the first governments were established in four great river valley civilizations: Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, and China (page 299). For 2,000 years, civilizations were ruled mainly by powerful monarchs or groups of nobles. Then, about 2,500 years ago, the first democratic government took shape in Greece. Indeed, *democracy* is a Greek word that means “rule by the people.” Although their first political institutions did not survive, the Greeks’ achievements greatly influenced later thinking about democracy. Other major influences from ancient times include Roman law and the religious traditions of Jews and Christians.

The Legacy of Greece and Rome

In ancient Greece several principles were established that became crucial to the shaping of Western civilization and its political values. These were such ideas as the worth and dignity of the individual, rational thought, citizenship, and political freedom. Rome’s great achievement was in the area of law. The Romans believed that law should be based on principles of reason and justice.

Athenian democracy. The ideals of political freedom were best expressed by the Greek



This scene from an ancient Greek vase shows the killing of a tyrant, a ruler who seized power by force. Some Greek tyrants were capable and humane, but the citizens of many Greek cities wanted self-rule.

city-state of Athens. During its “golden age” in the fifth century B.C., Athens set up a direct democracy (page 304). All adult male citizens were members of the Assembly, or legislature. Women were considered citizens but could not participate in law-making, nor could slaves and foreign residents. The male citizens of Athens met about 40 times a year to debate and decide public issues. They declared war, signed treaties, and spent tax money. The lowliest artisan—as long as he was a citizen—had as much right as the wealthiest aristocrat to vote, to hold office, and to express his opinion in the Assembly.

Athens has been described as a government of amateurs. There were no professional politicians, judges, or civil servants. There were no professional soldiers or sailors. Rather, the duties of govern-

ment were performed by ordinary citizens. Each year, public officials were chosen by lot. They held office for one year and could not hold that office again. Clearly, such a system was based on the belief that the average citizen was capable of participating intelligently in the affairs of state. Pericles, the greatest Athenian statesman, gave this glowing description of the Athenian democratic ideal:

☞ Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands of the many and not of the few. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses. No one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty. And, just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other. We do not get into a state with our next-door neighbor if he enjoys himself in his own way, nor do we give him the kind of black looks which, though they do no real harm, still do hurt people's feelings. We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs, we keep to the law. This is because it commands our deep respect. . . .

Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well: even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well informed on general politics. This is a peculiarity of ours. We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all. ☞

(1) On what basis, according to Pericles, are people chosen for positions of public responsibility? (2) What evidence does Pericles cite to support his claim that Athenians are tolerant of people who live differently from themselves? (3) Why was it important for Athenians to take an interest in politics?

The role of reason. The ideals of the democratic state could have arisen only in a society that

had an awareness of and respect for human intelligence and the power of reason. The Greeks were the first people in the world who tried to make scientific investigations of nature and systematic studies of human culture. Through their brilliant work, they made all future ages aware of the strength and potential of the human mind.

"We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all."

—Pericles, fifth century B.C.

Earlier peoples, including the Greeks of earlier ages, had interpreted the world through myths. They believed that gods and demons controlled everything that happened in the world. For example, to explain why rains finally ended a deadly drought, the ancient Babylonians said that a gigantic bird had come to their rescue. It had covered the sky with the storm clouds of its wings and devoured the Bull of Heaven, whose hot breath had scorched the crops.

The first Greek philosophers were not satisfied with such legends. They tried to understand the physical workings of nature. In the course of their investigations, they arrived at a new view of nature and a new way of studying it. They said that nature was not controlled by arbitrary and willful gods. Instead, all things in the natural world followed predictable patterns, which they called **natural law**. The rules of nature could be discovered by human beings through careful observation and reasoned inquiry.

It was the great achievement of the Greeks to question old ways of looking at the world. Over time, every aspect of Greek civilization—science, art, literature, and politics—showed a growing reliance on reason and inquiry and less dependence on supernatural or traditional explanations. With this achievement, the Greeks broke decisively with the past and established ideals that were essential to the later development of Western civilization.

Roman law. Another outstanding civilization that contributed to the development of Western values was Rome. The center of this civilization was the city of Rome, located in what is now Italy. In 509 B.C. the Romans set up a **republic**—a government without a king or queen (page 305). When the republic declined, after nearly 500 years, an emperor took control. The Roman Empire achieved something unique in history. It became a great power not only by conquering other lands but also by bringing the conquered peoples into its system.

While the Greeks had lived in small city-states, each governed by different laws, the Romans controlled an enormous amount of territory. They allowed conquered peoples to live according to their traditions in many areas, but they also tried to create a system of laws that could be used throughout the Empire. The Romans, like the Greeks, believed that law should be based on principles of reason and justice and should protect citizens and their property. This idea, applied to all peoples regardless of their nationality, had a great influence on the development of democracy throughout the Western world. Some provisions of

Roman law are readily recognizable in modern legal systems:

☞ Justice is a constant, unfailing disposition to give everyone his legal due.

No one should suffer a penalty for what he thinks.

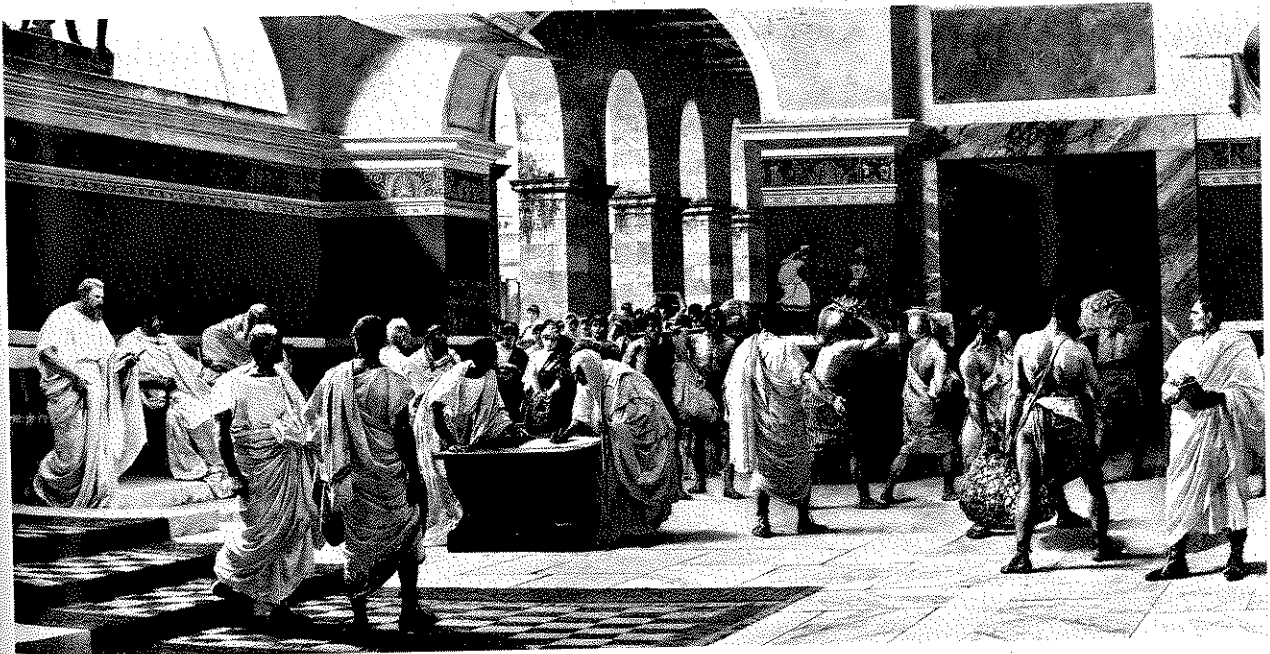
In the case of major offenses it makes a difference whether something is committed purposely or accidentally.

The guilt or punishment of a father can impose no stigma [lasting disgrace] upon the son; for every individual is subjected to treatment in accordance with his own action, and no one is made the inheritor of the guilt of another.

In inflicting penalties, the age . . . of the guilty party must be taken into account.☞

- (1) Which of these principles of Roman law might be cited by an attorney defending a fifteen-year-old burglary suspect?
- (2) Which of the principles might be cited as a forerunner of modern guarantees of rights to freedom of worship and freedom of speech?

This painting shows Roman citizens paying their taxes. Payments were often made in goods, such as those being carried away at right. Taxation paid for the many benefits of Roman rule, including roads, maintaining peace and order, and help for the poor.



Civic Values

Citizenship—Ancient and Modern

In the most distant provinces of the ancient Roman Empire, a person was proud to be able to say, "*Civis Romanus sum*—I am a Roman citizen!" Roman citizenship was a kind of invisible shield of respect. It meant that the citizen was protected by the laws of the great Roman Empire.

Since the days of the Republic, Rome had extended citizenship to conquered people. Finding that it was a good way to win people's allegiance, Roman emperors had continued the practice. By about A.D. 212, most free men and women throughout the empire were citizens. Only male citizens, however, could hold office; they were also expected to fight for Rome.

The idea of "citizenship," like many of our basic ideas about government, began

with the ancient Greek city-states and the Roman Republic. Before this, people were simply considered "subjects" of a monarch or ruler. When they began to have both rights and responsibilities in their community, people became "citizens." As modern states developed, the term *citizen* became common again. During the French Revolution, people who welcomed a republican government addressed each other as "Citizen" and "Citizensness."

All modern nations—not just democracies—have citizens, though their rights and responsibilities vary. In general, citizens are expected to be loyal to the nation, obey its laws, pay taxes, and perhaps give military service. The state in turn is supposed to protect its citizens.

Natural law. A particularly important feature of Roman law was the idea of natural law. As you have read, early Greek philosophers declared that the rules of nature could be discovered through careful observation. Natural law as the Romans understood it held that there are in nature certain rational principles and standards that apply to all people in all times. The Romans were introduced to the idea of natural law by the Stoics, a group of Greek thinkers whose philosophy, called stoicism, arose about 300 B.C.

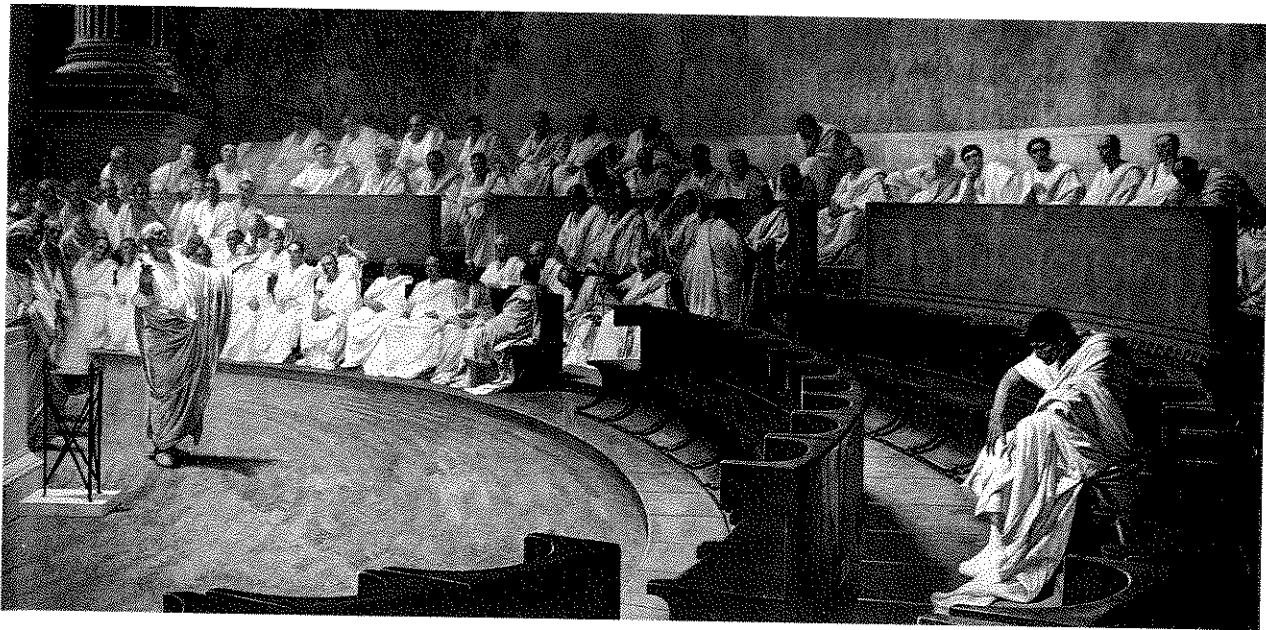
The Stoics said that every person was born with the capacity to reason. Not everyone had this capacity to the same degree, and even those who had the same inborn ability might not have the opportunity to develop it as fully as others. Still, all human beings could reason, and it was this capacity that set them apart from other creatures. Since reason was common to all people—Greek and non-Greek, slave and free, rich and poor—all people were basically equal. Cicero, a leading Roman statesman and orator from the first century B.C. summed up this idea as follows: "There is no

difference in kind between man and man; for . . . reason, which alone raises us above the level of the beasts . . . is certainly common to us all."

Since human beings are fundamentally alike, said the Stoics, they are all subject to the same moral laws and principles. The Stoics argued that human laws should agree with the natural law governing the universe. This Stoic belief—that human law should not violate the higher natural law—was central to Roman thinking about the legal system. As we shall see, it also entered into modern democratic thought through Enlightenment thinkers (page 19). It is the basic principle underlying the modern theory that people have certain natural rights that no legitimate government can deny them.

The Judeo-Christian Tradition

Ancient Greece and Rome are one source of Western democratic ideals. A second source is called the **Judeo-Christian tradition**. The ancient Hebrews, or Jews, were the first people to believe in one God



The Roman statesman Cicero stressed the importance of reason in human affairs. Here, in the Roman Senate, he is shown denouncing a senator who had plotted to overthrow the government.

(page 301). Earlier peoples had believed in many gods, and they thought that the gods had the same weaknesses and concerns as human beings—they were often wicked, selfish, envious, or dishonest; they needed amusement, food, drink, and sleep; and they were mortal.

The Hebrews discarded these beliefs. They believed in one God, a God that is perfect, all-knowing, all-powerful, and eternal. Earlier peoples had generally thought that what the gods wanted from human beings was the performance of rituals and sacrifices in their honor. The Hebrews believed that it was God's wish for people to live moral lives.

The Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament to Christians) state that human beings are created in God's image. The Hebrews interpreted this to mean that each human being has a divine spark within, and that the existence of this spark gives each person a dignity that can never be taken away. For the Greeks and Romans, the individual had dignity because of his or her ability to reason. For the Hebrews, each person had dignity simply by being a child of God. The Hebrews believed that God had given human beings moral freedom—the capacity to choose between good and evil. Therefore, each person was responsible for the choices he or she

made. These beliefs led to a new emphasis on individual worth.

A creative expansion of Hebrew religious thought occurred with the emergence of the prophetic movement in the eighth century B.C. The prophets were spiritually inspired leaders who were believed by the Hebrews to be messengers from God. The prophets attacked war, oppression, and greed in statements such as these, expressed in the Scriptures:

☞ They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. [Isaiah 2:4]*

Shed not innocent blood. [Jeremiah 7:6]

Oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor. [Zechariah 7:10]

Let not the rich man glory in his riches. [Jeremiah 9:23] ☞

The prophets thus strengthened the social conscience of the Hebrew faith, which has become part of the Western tradition. The Hebrews be-

* References to books in the Bible include numbers that indicate chapter and verse. For example, "Isaiah 2:4" refers to Chapter 2, Verse 4 of the Book of Isaiah.

lieved that all people have the right to be treated with justice and dignity. They believed that it is the responsibility of every person to denounce injustice and oppression and that the community should assist the unfortunate. The prophets held out the hope that life on earth could be improved, that poverty and injustice need not be accepted, and that individuals are capable of living according to high moral standards.

In the first century A.D. a teacher named Jesus gained a following among Jews in Palestine (page 307). In his teachings, Jesus adopted much of the prophets' moral outlook. Like them, he believed that human beings were God's children and were judged by God according to high moral standards. Like them, he spoke out against injustice. Like them, he saw morality as the essence of the Jewish faith: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets" [Matthew 7:12]. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus went beyond traditional ideas of morality:

☞ Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. [Matthew 5:43-45] ☞

Unlike the Hebrews, the Christians were evangelists. That is, they strove to spread their beliefs

to all peoples. Christian missionaries worked throughout the Roman Empire to bring the Gospels to all peoples alike. The most famous of these missionaries, the apostle Paul, stressed the essential equality of all human beings: "For there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

Thus from the Judeo-Christian tradition there emerged several ideals that have been crucial to

the shaping of a democratic outlook: the sacred worth of the individual, the duty of the individual and of the community to combat oppression, and the equality of people before God.

Section 2 Review

1. **Define or identify:** natural law, republic, Judeo-Christian tradition.
2. Describe the direct democracy that Athens set up during its golden age.
3. How did Greek philosophers question old ways of looking at the world?
4. How did the Roman Empire influence the development of democracy in the Western world?
5. How did the Hebrew idea of God's nature lead to a new emphasis on individual worth?
6. In what ways did Jesus adopt the moral outlook of the prophets?
7. **Critical thinking:** The Stoics believed that since reason was common to all people, all people were basically equal. Who might have argued against that idea? Why?