

Direct Democracy in Ancient Athens and Rome

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An outline of the lecture

- The Classical World at a Glance
- The Political System of Democratic Athens
- The Athenian Direct Democracy
- The Death of Socrates

- Constitution of the Roman Republic
- The Plebs and the Plebiscites
- *Populus Romanus* (only) in name
- A clip from Gladiator

- Direct Democracy in the Classical World

The classical world at a glance

- The historical period of Mediterranean civilization
 - Began from the Greek poetry of Homer (8-7c BC); ended with the decline of the Roman Empire (5c AD)
 - Centered on Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome
- Some notable events in the Classical World
 - The Ancient Olympic Games (776 BC~393 AD)
 - The Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC)
 - Alexander the Great dead (323 BC)
 - Julius Caesar murdered (44 BC)
 - The Colosseum built (80 AD)

The Political System of democratic Athens

- Political institutions → popular sovereignty
 - The Assembly (over 20, about 6,000 male citizens)
 - The Council of 500 (over 30, selected by lot)
 - The Court (over 30, selected by lot)
 - Administrative offices (selected by lot, with limited power: collegiate, term limit and judicial review)
 - Money and military related officials (Elected)→ State, government, and the people indistinguishable
- Citizenship in Ancient Athens → exclusion
 - Male adults who have been registered as a citizen
 - Female and slaves were excluded
 - Citizenship may be granted to foreigners

The Athenian direct democracy

- Initiation
 - Citizen may choose to speak to the Assembly, propose a law, initiate a public law suit, or advice the Council.
 - Initiators must be accountable for their initiation
- Decision-making
 - The Assembly, the Court and the Council were all open to ordinary citizens
 - The Assembly was the highest political body with the widest participation, following the rule of simple majority
- Implementation
 - Most public officials were chosen through lottery, emphasizing participation more than competence

The Athenian direct democracy

- Compensation for public services
 - Service to the public offices, the Council and the Court was paid
 - For a period of time, participation in the Assembly was also paid
- Public space for the Assembly
- An 'idiot' in Classical Athens
 - a private person, one who is not actively engaged in politics (serving public interest)



The death of Socrates

- Socrates (c. 469 BC–399 BC)
 - A classical Greek philosopher
 - The teacher of Plato
 - Sentenced to death by the people of Athens



Constitution of the Roman Republic

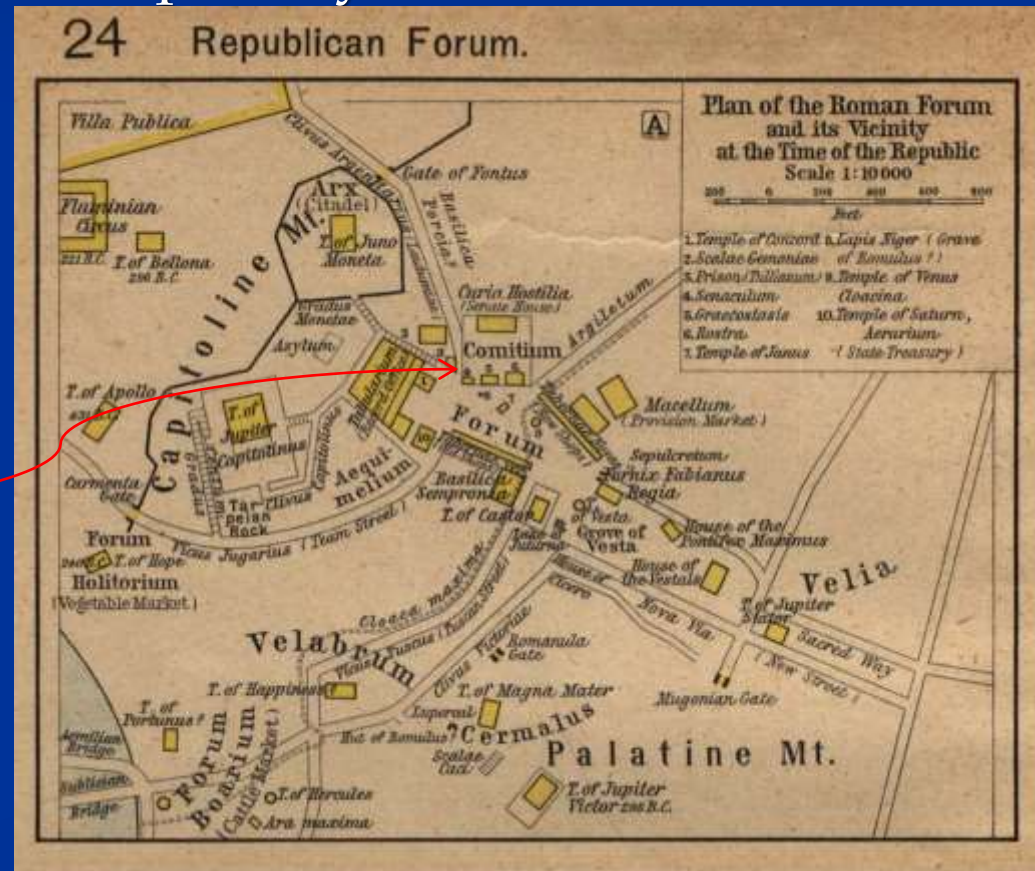
- Governing bodies
 - The Senate
 - Senators: rich (owning large lands), autocratic class, serving public office at least once
 - Very influential through *senatus consultum*
 - The People's Assemblies
 - Electing magistrates, enacting laws, declaring war and peace
 - The Magistrates
 - Office held by two people, each with veto power
 - Including Consuls, Praetors, Censors, Aediles, Quaestors, Tribunes, and (under emergency) Dictators
- In rhetoric, the Assemblies held the ultimate sovereignty of the Roman Republic

The Plebs and the plebiscites

- The Plebeians and the Patricians
 - Patricians: noble aristocrats
 - Plebeians (Plebs): the general body of Roman citizens
- In Rome, popular voting was dominated by elite division
- The *plebiscite*: popular vote on a specific legislative proposal or showing confidence in a certain political leader
 - A synonym for referendum, but with negative connotations

Populus Romanus only in name

- The Roman Forum and others places for public gathering and voting were spatially limited



A clip from 'Gladiator'

■ Some background information

- The Colosseum and gladiator-fighting became popular only in the period of Roman Empire
- The Senate remained a threat to the absolute reign of the Emperor
- Entertaining the Crowd was a political strategy to win their support against the Senate, a strategy with its own risk

■ The triangular power relations

- The Emperor ↔ the Senate
 - The Emperor → the Crowd
 - the Senate → the Crowd
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- The diagram illustrates the triangular power relations between three entities: 'The Emperor', 'the Senate', and 'the Crowd'. 'The Emperor' and 'the Senate' are positioned at the top, connected by a double-headed cyan arrow indicating mutual influence. 'The Emperor' is on the left and 'the Senate' is on the right. Below them, 'the Crowd' is positioned at the bottom. A brown arrow points from 'The Emperor' down to 'the Crowd', and a green arrow points from 'the Senate' down to 'the Crowd', indicating that both the Emperor and the Senate exert influence over the Crowd.

Direct democracy in the classical world

- ‘The power of the people’ retained very high rhetorical power
 - Who is the people?; Who stands for the people?
 - Rhetoric: Who is able to persuade the people?
- Direct democracy was more efficiently applied in Ancient Athens than in Ancient Rome
 - From an elaborated form of direct democracy in Athens to mere direct participation in public decision-making in Rome
 - Democracy in name and democracy in reality
- In the Classical World, democracy was only one form of governance co-existing with other political systems
 - In Athens, participation and equality were regarded more important than competence and wisdom
 - Many ancient philosophers were against democracy...

Reading suggestion for next week's class

- Crook, Malcolm (1996) 'Voting the Constitution: The Referenda of 1793 and 1795', in *Elections in the French Revolution: An Apprenticeship in Democracy, 1789-1799*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 102-130.