

# The emergence of autocracy in ancient greece and rome

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The warfare that occurred during the Peloponnesian and Roman-Punic wars affected both Greek and Roman society. While wartime would naturally have an impact on any society, these particular wars also affected the way that these societies were governed. Although many believe that these civilizations became republics, and then remained republics for their duration, in actuality wars both the Greek and Roman civilizations adapted to and embraced autocratic rule. The Greek Athenian government evolved due to non-militaristic issues several times until it became the democracy it was famed for.

Originally from 8th to 7th century B. C., Athenian government started out as a monarchy that ruled by heredity and over time an aristocracy ruled this unique city-state and they established an oligarchy (Ancient Greece), a government that was run by the few (Hanson 16). Although the aristocrats were believed to be the Athenian rulers, nine archons that assisted these wealthy landowners made the decisions that affected the affairs of Athens. The constant lack of unequal representation of the Athenian people led to reformers who, over time, were able to make the necessary changes to assuage the lack of equality.

In 560 B. C., a ruler by the name of Pisistratus dabbled in a diminutive form of autocracy when he took land from the nobles and gave it to the poor but despite their increase in property the peasants still had no political power. This issue was lessened in 510 BC when Cleisthenes established the Council of Nobles, which allowed Athenians to propose laws and discuss foreign issues and taxes (Ancient Greece). Although this political group consisted mostly of the wealthy, the political gap between the rich and the poor was <https://assignbuster.com/the-emergence-of-autocracy-in-ancient-greece-and-rome/>

decreasing while the people's involvement in government was increasing. Similarly, before the Punic Wars, there had been several clashes between social groups in Rome that significantly impacted its political affairs.

The patricians, who were the wealthy Roman landowners, had the ability to own property, vote, and hold for public office. On the other hand Rome's lower class, the plebeians, served in the army but had limited rights because they could not hold government positions or marry people beyond their social group (McGill). The latter felt the same feeling of inequality the Athenians felt, that their representation in government was unjust. Therefore the plebeians made a statement declaring that they were going to leave the Roman Army which would consequently leave Rome defenseless. Clearly the patricians were forced to grant the plebeians more rights such as the ability to hold public office and while a gap between both social classes was still in effect, this created political equality in the republic nation-state, which would later evolve into an autocratic regime.

During the predecessor era of the Peloponnesian wars, life for Athenians significantly relied on the same political equality and ideology of the republic nation-state. A republic is a form of government whose control is apportioned to the people (Bagnall 191), allowed Athenians to feel significant in their society so therefore initial feelings about the Athens' capability was positive because their " navy and democracy ensured turmoil for any who chose to stand in her way" (Hanson 109). Persia became the victim of that turmoil and experienced several military and naval losses leading to a Persian defeat that made " many nation states naively [think] that Athens

would... return to its prior status as a powerful though fairly representative polis, albeit pre-eminent among equals” (Hanson 109). However, because this victory allowed Athens to become the most powerful city-state in Greece they formed a defensive alliance of all of Greece known as the Delian League, which allowed each city-state to protect one another in the event of another attack by the Persians. This new alliance altered the traditional function of the representative polis by rendering city-states dependent on each other, which would inevitably cause their imminent dependence in autocratic leadership.

Likewise the Roman government was based on representative characterizations before it faced its own alterations and preceded to autocratic rule. Prior to the reign of Julius Caesar, the Romans had a senate that consisted of 300 wealthy aristocrats who were extremely powerful in the Roman political system (McGill). Although these aristocrats were considered to be celebrities and held in the highest regards, the consuls who presided over the senate assemblies hadSupremepower in both civil and military matters. Due to their unparalleled power within Rome’s society, these consuls were considered as the true heads of the Roman government. There were also other positions in the Roman political system that were needed to maintain order such as the quaestors who were in charge of money and finances, the praetors that dealt with legal issues, and the aediles who prepared and maintained public buildings (McGill).

While they all played vital roles in the government only the consuls and aristocrats were revered, respected and commended for their contributions

to Rome's achievements. However because they weren't able to represent the opinions of the majority of the citizens, they needed a way to keep stability and prevent drastic changes in both their government and society. In order to satisfy everyone the Roman Republic also had a House of Representatives, which had popular assemblies so that the views of the average Roman person were represented. This legislative body was broken down into two groups, the Council of Plebs and the Centuriate Assembly. While the Council of Plebs created laws that eventually became binding on all citizens, the Centuriate Assembly had the responsibility of deciding on matters regarding war and peace (McGill). Reassuringly, the people were being guaranteed that their opinions were expressed in all of Rome's interests and they reveled in their political system.

By having the provision of all these representative bodies in their government, it was ensuring that such governmental changes such as a tyrannical ruler or an autocratic state would never occur, but the Punic Wars changed that assurance. Unfortunately, the Athenian victory over the Persians wasn't able to ensure similar changes wouldn't occur in Greece since the Athens became a strikingly autocratic city-state. Their victory changed the entire political situation in Greece when the Athenians began demanding tribute stipends from all of the other Greek city-states. This money was used to finance the construction of buildings such as the Parthenon, which embodied many Greek artistic values, including the once revered egalitarian ones (Tritle 33). Naturally, one of the major Greek city-states, Sparta, grew angry and jealous of the growing Athenian Empire and as a result, they felt that the only way to end these feelings was to go to war.

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When conflicts arose between the Athenians and Spartans, they engaged in long and tireless battles, which made the Athenians question whether a republic was equipped for the intensity of Spartan warfare. These battles were collectively known as the Peloponnesian Wars, a series of conflicts between Athens and Sparta to determine who would control Greece. The Spartans emerged victorious, making them the most important Greek city-state and giving them control over all of Athens's political and foreign affairs ("Peloponnesian War"). After the Peloponnesian Wars, the Greek city-states stopped communicating with one another due to the lack of prosperity under Spartan control and this eventually led to their conquest by King Phillip II of Macedonia (Hanson 175), which was the acquisition that initiated the branding of Greece as an autocratic state. During the Peloponnesian wars, which lasted from 431- 404 B. C.

, when the Athens' felt that their leadership amongst Greek city-states was threatened, their oppressive position was taken over by Sparta. Athenian aggression was still especially apparent in the historian Thucydides' historical document, Melian Dialogue, which presented a figurative conversation between the Athenian government and the government of the island of Melos (Kagan 247). This dialogue talks about the confrontation between Melos and Athens, who felt that if they didn't conquer the small island, they would be considered weak. Since Melos was a close ally of Sparta they constantly and confidently refused Athens's threats in order to maintain their independence (Kagan 248). The Athenians gave them one last chance either to surrender or die, and although the Melians felt they would

have a better chance of keeping their liberties by fighting, many of their islanders were slaughtered, as Athens emerged victorious.

While each major city-state applied their own unique military tactics throughout the twenty-eight year war, the Athenians utilized a defensive tactic from within the walls of their city (“Peloponnesian War”). Additionally they were able to put pressure on Sparta’s allies by using their naval forces, which were also used to transport goods to the citizens within Athens’ city walls. As a result of the cramped conditions Athenians were reduced to during the war, a plague eventually broke out killing one-third of the population including the great Athenian General, Pericles, who established direct democracy. Along with the loss of this historical figure came the unexpected defeat at the Battle of Syracuse, where Athenians arrogantly assumed they were going to win. After this battle, Athens never really regains their strength and they lose the war to the might of Sparta, who then led the Greek city-states into their demise and conquest by King Phillip II, who would rule by autocracy. The Punic Wars were a series of conflicts between Rome and Carthage that altered the course of world history because it sparked what would be become known as the Roman Empire which would result in a drastic change in government.

Carthage was an excellent military and naval power located in North Africa, Sicily, an island of the Italian peninsula, and Cordoba, a part of Spain (“Carthage”) that was founded by the Phoenicians (a group of people who were excellent ship builders and passed this skill on to the Carthaginians). Rome was a growing military power whose desire for a vast empire caused

them to invade the Carthaginian territory of Sicily confidently even with their lack of naval power. This caused the people of North Africa to become furious, gather their army and navy and fight back forcing the Romans to recognize their own need for a navy. With Rome emerging victorious, they conquered Sicily, expanded their borders and escalated tensions with Carthage who vowed to seek revenge for this humiliating defeat, which ultimately led to another feud between the two military powers (“Punic Wars”). To prevent another loss Carthage planned a surprise attack on the Romans under the theory of autocracy and under the leadership of its best general, Hannibal, who had been taught by his father, Hamilcar Barca, that the Romans were evil and must be destroyed.

The same hatred possessed by Hannibal and his family was also expressed by the Carthaginian government, which naturally led them to their additional conflicts with Rome known as the second and third Punic Wars. While the Romans were expecting Hannibal and his forces to use their navy to destroy their capital, Hannibal thought that it would be wise to cross through a large mountain range known as the Alps. The Carthaginians brought 50,000 soldiers, 9,000 horses, and 60 elephants and although they suffered huge losses in the mountains, the Carthaginians were able to surprise the Romans (Nardo 52). Then at the Battle of Cannae, Hannibal used a tactic called the Double Envelopment Maneuver, which proved to be significantly effective in battle because he was able to kill 40,000 soldiers. Faced with heavy losses the Romans were forced to retreat but fortunately because Hannibal did not choose to pursue them the Romans recuperated from Cannae.

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Then under the leadership of General Scipio, the Roman Army battled against the Carthaginian Army at the Battle of Zamma, and defeated Carthage once again (Nardo 55). The concept of autocratic rule was visibly seen on the battlefield since both Carthage and Roman generals' actions would determine the welfare of their nation. The Carthaginian Empire was shrinking and it was only a matter of time until it would cease to exist. The Romans had decided in the third Punic War that Carthage should be eradicated from the map. One illustration of the Romans animosity towards the Carthaginian government is illustrated by the famed expression "Carthago delando EST" coined by the Roman Senator Cato, which from Latin language translated into "Carthage must be destroyed" (Nardo 84). After their final warfare the Romans won leaving Carthaginian families to be sold into slavery while the remainder of their lands were either burned to the ground by Roman soldiers or rendered useless by the salt they threw on the ground's soil, which prevented crops from ever growing again ("Punic Wars").

With their new control of the Mediterranean and North Africa, Rome had become virtually unstoppable and now set out to conquer new areas, thus beginning the era of the Roman Empire, and their tyrannical desire for control. The conquest of the Greek city-states by the Macedonians led to the formation of one of the greatest empires in world history. There was divided opinion over whether King Phillip II, who led the conquest, was a hero for saving the Greek city-states or merely someone with a lust for power and control. He had plans for revenge against the Persian Empire, but was ultimately assassinated before he could carry them out and as a result, his

teenage son, Alexander the Great, became the new King of Macedonia.

Alexander was considered to be a very well rounded and exceptional King due to his educational background with his mentor the great philosopher, Aristotle and his combat tactics, which allowed him to possess skills to fight anyone at any time (McGowen 8). He was also regarded as a great military leader who always showed respect to the small, but loyal Macedonian Army.

With his followers, he developed a kingdom that stretched from Macedonia to Persia known as the Hellenistic Empire, which aided Alexander the Great in preserving Ancient Greek ideas to be studied for generations. Through his empire, fifty new cities were established such as Alexandria, Egypt and other cultures such as the Persian and Egyptian cultures were mixed to form Hellenistic culture (McGowen 145). This people in this city had access to unlimited knowledge, which was located at the Great Library. Its beauty made it one of the Seven Wonders of the World, but it was destroyed thousands of years ago. Hellenistic culture was a Golden Age is society because it gave rise to new philosophies such as Epicureanism and Stoicism.

In addition, Hellenistic culture brought about new achievements in mathematics and science (McGowen 145). Such inventions as the lever and pulley developed by Archimedes proved to be a huge part of the reason for their success against the Romans. Due to their advantage of new inventions, Alexander was able to invade the Persian Empire by engaging in autocratic rule, taking over Greece's affairs and keeping his father's vision of conquest alive. Through his use of the phalanx and flanking techniques in battle, he was able to kill many of Darius III's army at the Battles of Granicus, Issus,

and most importantly Gaugamela (McGowen 47). The Hellenistic Empire was able to last for an extremely long period of time and its success influenced the Romans to copy the perfection that the Greeks had created. The Punic Wars ultimately led to the Roman Empire, which endured a successful period of peace and prosperity which lasted for 500 years.

The first Roman Emperor, Octavian, started the Pax Romana, which was regarded as the ultimate period of peace and prosperity in the history of Rome (Nardo 119). His excellent leadership led the Roman Government to change his name to Augustus, the revered one and they considered him to be a modest man who wisely spent a lot of money on building roads and new buildings. He also established the Praetorian Guard, which consisted of 9,000 men, who would follow the Emperor everywhere for protection (“Punic Wars”). Augustus created a strong, central government with an efficient bureaucracy, which allowed room for the Senate to function but gave them less power. By doing so he was able to take control of Rome’s affairs and lead them through an era of prosperity.

His successor, Marcus Aurelius was considered to be the last of the Five Good Roman Emperors. Aurelius, a Stoic philosopher who encouraged the people of Rome in an abstract way, also wrote his ideas in his book *Meditations* (Nardo 123). With the autocratic leadership of wise, humble and passionate men, the Roman Empire remained extremely successful, for the most part, but as all good things come to an end, this empire too was on the brink of a gradual collapse. Despite what most people think, government in Ancient Greece and Rome changed before and after the Peloponnesian and

Punic Wars from a republic to an autocracy. The direct democracy of Athens in the 5th century was transformed into an empire ruled by the Macedonian King, Alexander the Great. After the Punic Wars, Rome's desire for power moved them towards forming the Roman Empire.

The changes to these civilizations and the effects of wartime led to the changes in the ways they were governed. Although the idea of autocratic rule with a single dictatorial leader should be alarming, both Greek and Roman civilizations were able to benefit from the government change.