1. **Monarchy: One Person Inherits Power**

   From about 200 to 800 B.C.E., a monarchy, or king, ruled most of Greek city-states. In a **monarchy**, the governing power is in the hands of one individual, usually a king. Greek settlements did not allow queens to govern.

   Initially, the people of a Greek city-state chose the kings. When a king dies, another leader was selected to replace him. In time, however, kings demanded that, after their death, their power be passed to their children, typically the oldest son. Consequently, Greek monarchs rose to power through inheritance.

   The kings of ancient Greece possessed many powers. They had the authority to create laws and act as judges. They also conducted religious ceremonies and led their armies during wars. Additionally, they could use force to punish people who disobeyed the laws or didn’t pay their taxes.

   Kings has councils of **aristocrats**, to advise them. The word aristocrat is derived from a Greek word that means “best.” The aristocrats were wealthy men who had inherited large pieces of land.

   At first councils of aristocrats had little actual power. However, during wartime, kings depended on their support since only the rich aristocrats could afford to supply soldiers with horses and armor. The aristocrats soon realized that as a group, they were stronger than their king and wanted a share of his power.

   In some city-states, aristocrats insisted that their king obtain the crown through an election rather than inheritance. Then they limited a king’s rule to a certain number of years. Eventually, aristocrats in many cities overthrew a monarchy and took the power for themselves. By 800 B.C.E., very few Greek city-states were ruled by kings.

2. **Oligarchy: A Few People Share Power**

   Between about 800 and 650 B.C.E., most Greek city-states were ruled by a small group of wealthy men. These men were called oligarchs, from a Greek word meaning “few.” In an **oligarchy**, the ruling power lies in the hand of a few people.

   Most Greek oligarchs were aristocrats, rich men who had inherited land from their families. A few oligarchs were wealthy merchants.

   Oligarchs had very comfortable lives and often spent their days either hunting or participating in chariot races. In the evenings, they might host or attend parties, during which slaves or hired performers entertained guests with music, dance, and acrobatics.

   Unlike the aristocrats, the poor were required to work long hours in the fields. They noticed the unfair differences between their difficult lives and the easy lives of the wealthy aristocrats.

   To make matters worse, the oligarchs ignored the majority of the people’s needs. By passing laws that favored the rich, the oligarchs protected and increased their own wealth. Using the army, they forced others to obey these unjust laws. In some city-states, such laws forced farmers who were unable to pay their debts to sell themselves into slavery.

   Under the rule of the oligarchs, the rich became richer and the poor became poorer. Because their hate for the oligarchs increased, the poor eventually turned to other leaders who promised to improve their lives. Typically, these leaders were in the army. Backed by the people’s support, they used their soldiers to remove the oligarchs from power.
3. Tyranny: One Person Takes Power by Force

During the mid-600s B.C.E., people in many Greek city-states relied on the men who had promised to change the government. These men who forced the oligarchs to from power were called tyrants. In a tyranny, the ruling power belongs solely to one individual who is not a lawful king. A tyranny is sometimes called a dictatorship, and a tyrant is another name for a dictator. This form of government in ancient Greece lasted until about 500 B.C.E.

A tyranny differs from a monarchy in several ways. First, tyrants cannot claim that the laws of the land give them the right to rule. Also, there are no legal limits on tyrants’ powers. Additionally, the children of tyrants do not typically inherit their father’s powers.

Although tyrants in ancient Greece were likely to take and maintain control by force, they were often popular. Most Greek tyrants were military leaders who gained the support if the people by guaranteeing them more rights. Once they were in power, many Greek tyrants implemented changes that improved the lives of the poor. Some even canceled the debts of struggling farmers, while others were hostile to aristocrats and confiscated their land.

Some tyrants, though, did not use their power to help the people. Hippias (HIP-ee-uhs), the last tyrant to rule the city-state of Athens, is one example. Along with his brother, Hipparchus (hih-PAHR-kuhs), Hippias ruled well, at first. But then, two enemies of the brothers murdered Hipparchus. From then on, Hipparchus ruled more harshly. He paid spies to report anyone who criticized him. His rule continued to become increasingly cruel. Finally, the people drove him from power. Soon after, Athens would try another form of government, one that divided power among all the people.

4. Democracy: All Citizens Share Power

Around 500 B.C.E., the people of Athens were the first in Greece to attempt to govern themselves. They developed a form of government called democracy, or “rule by the people.” In a democracy, all citizens share in the ruling power.

Ancient Greek democracy differed from democracies today. The government of Athens was a direct democracy, in which every citizen is allowed to vote on every issue. Unlike Athens, the United States is a representative government, people may vote for representatives who then decide issues on behalf of the people.

How did direct democracy function in Athens? The city had an assembly, or lawmaking group. With the assembly, any free man could speak and vote on a possible new law or a proposal to declare war. Free men also controlled the city’s daily business.

However, not all Greeks believed that a democracy was a beneficial type of government. Powerful speakers sometimes persuaded ordinary citizens to vote unwisely. Frequently, an assembly reversed important decisions after merely a few weeks. Conflicts like these led most city-states to return to earlier forms of government, such as dictatorship and oligarchies.

Regardless, the idea that people can and should rule themselves would survive. In time the ideal of democracy would become one of the great gifts from ancient Greece to the modern world.