

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 BCE); ended with the decline of the West Roman Empire (5c CE)
 - ▶ Centered on Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome
- ▶ Some notable events in the Classical World
 - ▶ The Ancient Olympic Games (776 BCE~393 CE)
 - ▶ The Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE)
 - ▶ Alexander the Great dead (323 BCE)
 - ▶ Julius Caesar murdered (44 BCE)
 - ▶ The Colosseum built (80 CE)

The political system of Democratic Athens

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- ▶ 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 → exclusive & privileged
 - ▶ 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 lawsuit, or advise 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

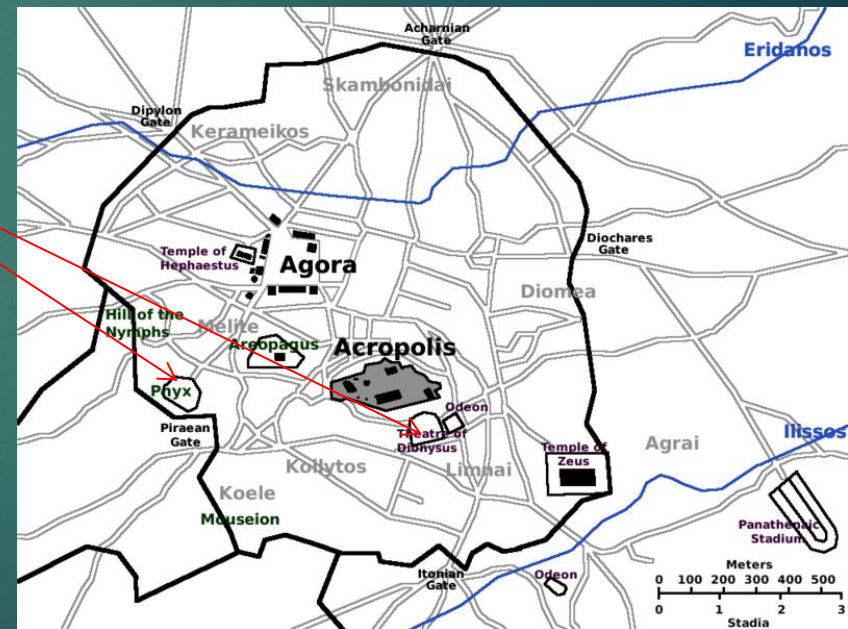
- Most public officials were chosen through lottery, emphasizing participation rather than competence

The Athenian direct democracy

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- ▶ 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 (i.e., 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

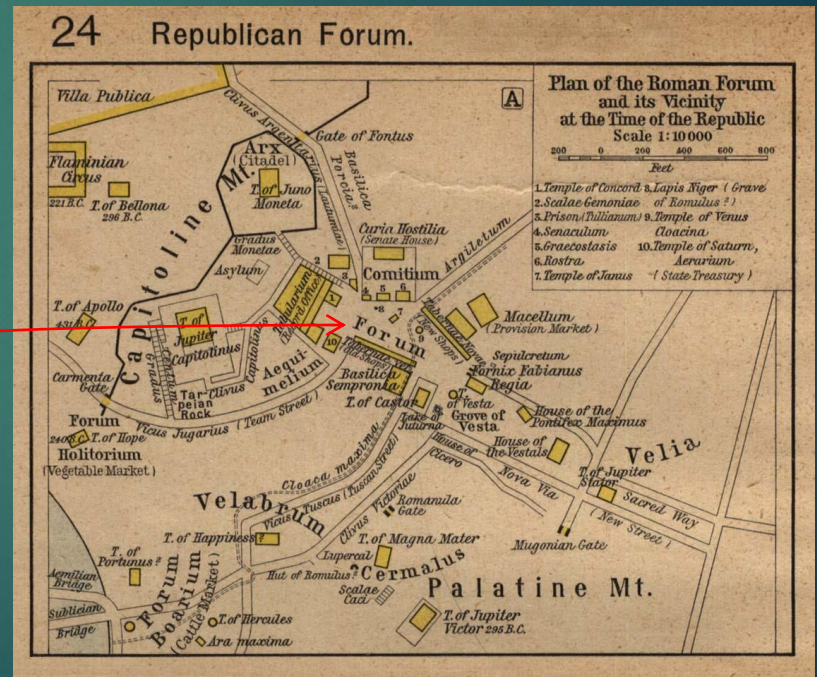
- ▶ Governing bodies
 - ▶ The Senate
 - ▶ Senators: rich (owning large lands), autocratic class, serving public office at least once
 - ▶ Very influential through *senatus consultum*
 - ▶ The People's Assemblies
 - ▶ Electing magistrates, enacting laws, declaring war and peace
 - ▶ The Magistrates
 - ▶ Office held by two people, each with veto power on the other
 - ▶ 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*: a popular vote on specific legislative proposal(s) or showing confidence in a political leader
 - ▶ A synonym for referendum, but with negative connotations

Populus Romanus only in name

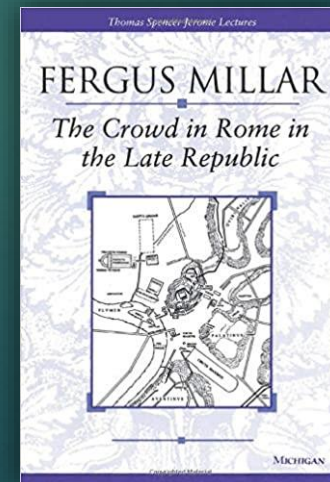
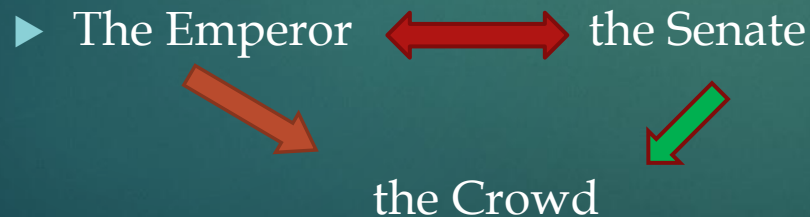
- The Roman Forum and others places for public gathering and voting were spatially limited



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

- ▶ A triangular power relations



Direct democracy in the classical world

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- ▶ ‘The power of the people’ retained very high influences
 - ▶ Who is the people?; Who stands for the people?
 - ▶ Rhetoric: Who is able to persuade the people?
- ▶ Direct democracy was more effectively implemented 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 public 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

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- ▶ 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.