Athenian Society 500–400 BCE

The population of fifth-century BCE Athens was divided into citizens and noncitizens. Citizens were sons of men from Attica, the territory of Athens; only they had legal and political rights. They could participate in the democratic public assembly and hold public office. They regarded citizenship as a duty and defended the city-state during war. Their social class was based on wealth and ancestry; movement between classes was unusual. Women and slaves were noncitizens. Married women derived social position from their husbands, but slaves were an underclass, considered unworthy of social, legal, or political status.

CITIZENS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Upper Class
Families from the wealthy, land-owning aristocracy who had ruled Athens prior to the establishment of democracy. Men were well educated and influential in public debate (a). The wealthiest sponsored theatrical performances and public buildings, or paid for the building of a warship that they would command. Women had many slaves to run their households and spent their plentiful leisure time socializing at home, playing music, or even writing poetry. Male children were educated by the best tutors; some girls were taught to read and write.

Middle Class
Shop owners (b), skilled craftsmen, and successful farmers or traders. They owned several slaves, some land, and were usually literate. Those who could afford the weapons fought as hoplitai; others fought on warships. They made up the bulk of the public assembly. Women stayed at home and organized the household with the help of their slaves. Male children were educated to the best standard affordable; girls were rarely educated.

Poor
Peasant farmers, market traders (c), and laborers. Usually they lived in the countryside some miles from Athens. A lack of education, little free time, and distance from the city limited their participation in the public assembly. They served as lightly armed auxiliary troops when needed. Women from the poorest households may have had a job; otherwise they ran the home without the help of slaves. Most children were uneducated, particularly those who lived away from the city.

NONCITIZENS

Resident Foreigners (metoikoi)
Usually traders or craftsmen who had come to live in Athens because of its active economy. They had no political rights and could only rent land. All had to pay a residency tax.

Slaves
Often captives of war, they had no rights and could be bought, sold, or even put to death as their owners wished. Many worked at hard manual jobs, but some were educated and held respected jobs in the civil service. The children of slaves were also slaves. A slave might be freed but could not become a citizen.