

Ancient Greek Thinkers, Truth-Seekers

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"The School of Athens," detail of a mural by Raphael painted for Pope Julius III in 1509. In the center, Plato discourses with Aristotle. Image: Godong/UIG via Getty Images

The citizens of Athens were fed up with the old "wise" man.

Socrates, one of ancient Greece's most knowledgeable philosophers, found himself on trial for his teachings. The prosecutor accused Socrates of corrupting the youth of Athens. A jury of hundreds found Socrates guilty and sentenced him to death.

At the age of 70, Socrates willingly drank hemlock, a powerful poison that put an end to his controversial life. How did it happen that Athenians put to death a great philosopher such as Socrates?

Inquisitive Socrates

Throughout his entire life, Socrates questioned everything from Athenian government to Greek religion and the gods themselves. His goal was to find the truth, which he believed could be reached through reason and knowledge. Socrates was a teacher, but he did not have a classroom,

books, or even a school. Instead, Socrates lectured publicly, and anyone who was interested in what he had to say was invited to listen.

Socrates practiced a style of teaching that has since become known as the Socratic method. Essentially, Socrates taught through questioning, starting with simple questions and then progressing to more complicated, deeper questions. Through the use of reason and logic, Socrates revealed answers to many questions that led to a greater understanding of the world.

Problems arose because Socrates often questioned the very fundamentals and traditions of Greek society. His constant questioning and searching for the truth were seen as dangerous by many and ultimately led to his death.

Plato's "Republic"

Plato, a student of Socrates, also achieved greatness as a philosopher. Unlike Socrates, however, Plato chose to write down his ideas. In one of his most renowned works, "The Republic," Plato outlined his vision of the ideal state.

Surprisingly, Plato's republic was not very democratic. Plato was greatly disturbed at the way the mass of Athenians had agreed to put to death his brilliant teacher and guide, Socrates. Plato believed that uneducated people should not have right to make important decisions for everyone.

Instead, Plato envisioned a society with many classes in which each class contributed what it could. In his ideal society, farmers grew the food for the republic, soldiers defended the republic and a group of intelligent, educated philosophers ruled the republic. Not surprisingly, Plato lived at a time when democratic society in Athens was in decline.

Aristotle had much to share

One of Plato's students, Aristotle, also distinguished himself as a thinker. Aristotle wrote about and studied many subjects, including biology, physics, metaphysics, literature, ethics, logic, art and more. He emphasized the importance of observation and the gathering of information.

Although Aristotle made important discoveries in many areas, his explanation concerning the movement of heavenly bodies was wrong. Aristotle believed that the Earth was the center of the universe, and that all heavenly bodies revolved around the Earth. This makes sense from a strictly observational standpoint. Looking up at the sky, it seemed to Aristotle that everything (sun, moon, stars) circled the Earth. In this case, Aristotle's dependence on observation led him astray. In reality, the Earth revolves on its own axis, creating the false impression that it is the center of everything.

A golden age of thought

Besides the three great philosophers described above, ancient Greece produced many other important thinkers. In the realm of science, Hippocrates applied logic to the field of medicine and collected information on hundreds of patients. His work helped to advance people's understanding of the causes of disease and death.

Greek thinkers applied logic to mathematics as well. Pythagoras deduced multiplication tables as well as the Pythagorean theorem relating to right triangles. Euclid revolutionized the field of geometry, and Archimedes worked with the force of gravity and invented an early form of calculus.

In the realm of the social sciences, Herodotus is often credited with being the first modern historian. Another historian, Thucydides, tried to be as objective as possible in reporting the history he recorded.

A democracy evolving

Many of these advancements and discoveries seem obvious by today's standards. But 2,500 years ago, most humans were concerned with providing food and protection for their families and little else. Most of them were ruled by kings or pharaohs who had supreme decision-making power. The Athenian democracy encouraged countless innovative thoughts among its citizens.

To the ancient Greeks, thinking was serious business.

Quiz

- 1 Plato would be MOST likely to agree with which of the following statements?
- (A) Everyone has the right to an education so that they can help rule.
 - (B) All classes within Athenian society should be part of decision making.
 - (C) Although democracy is not perfect, it is the best form of government.
 - (D) Only educated individuals should have the right to rule the Athenian society.
- 2 Which of the following MOST influenced the abundance of new ideas in ancient Greece?
- (A) wealth
 - (B) democracy
 - (C) intelligence
 - (D) business
- 3 Why does the author include the section "A golden age of thought"?
- (A) to explain how the decline of democracy affected thinkers
 - (B) to introduce the idea that philosophers can be scientists
 - (C) to highlight the contributions of several Greek thinkers
 - (D) to give information about less important students of philosophy
- 4 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-3].
- What purpose does the introduction serve in developing the main idea of the article?
- (A) It highlights that ancient Greek philosophers had innovative ideas that sometimes challenged societal traditions.
 - (B) It introduces the reader to the risk involved with being an Athenian philosopher who used the Socratic method.
 - (C) It summarizes the advancements made by one of ancient Greece's most controversial and renowned philosophers.
 - (D) It introduces the reader to the political instability in Athens that shaped the lives of philosophers at that time.