

HISTORY TEACHING MATERIALS: THESEUS AND THE MINOTAUR

Main topic

Greek politics

Many important aspects of political life in ancient Greece are still fundamental issues in the study and practice of contemporary politics: different forms of government, participation by various groups in society, freedom and control, individual and community, the rights and responsibilities of a citizen. Scholars have argued that these aspects first arose in the ancient Greek world because of the emergence of small city-states in which kingship was weak and groups of people claimed rights as citizens in the control of their city. The ideas of the Greek philosophers who discussed such political issues are still argued over today.

Key ideas

Forms of government

Different forms of government involve potential benefits and potential dangers to the people who live under them. All forms of government aspire to bring about a well-ordered society in which people can feel secure, but the example of Sparta raises issues about the degree to which an ordered community requires uniformity and conformity.

Democracy

Nowadays, there is a common assumption, certainly in western cultures, that democracy is the best form of government. However, the freedom, equality, rights and responsibilities associated with democracy do not emerge automatically across all societies. Democracy was invented in ancient Athens in the late sixth century BC, one particular society in one particular period, and did not become more widely adopted until more than two thousand years later.

Making the link

A possible link between the story and the main topic is through King Aigeus and his role as ruler of the city of Athens.

Ruling Athens

In order to make the link to the main topic, you might consider two aspects of Aigeus' kingship, and that of his son and heir, Theseus.

1. Aigeus as a particular type of ruler, in this case, a king.

The children should not have a problem with this idea as they will probably have come across other examples of monarchs, but it might be worth bringing out specific features such as:

- kings and queens as sole rulers
- monarchs not being required to consult with their people when making decisions
- succession based on family
- social hierarchy based on family with the royal family at the top and other families below depending on their connection by blood: an aristocracy and nobility

Some details in the story might help you bring these features out. Notice that Minos is also a king; the Minotaur is his son and is referred to as 'of royal blood' — ask what the children think this means. You

could discuss Aigeus' reaction to Minos' selection of Theseus as a victim and bring out that it is not just that he is his son, but that Theseus is supposed to become the next king. You might consider the other young men chosen by Minos, who are 'of noble bearing' and that this does not mean simply that they are well-behaved, but that they seem to belong to the 'better' families of Athens.

While these features are fresh in children's minds, you could have a discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of a monarchy, perhaps using the Greek politics sheet below. You might find it best to steer clear of the complications of a modern constitutional monarchy such as that of Britain.

2. Aigeus as ruler of the city of Athens

At this point, you may want to remind the children that Athens is an example of a city-state. The Greek world was made up of hundreds of these city-states, each consisting of a main city with an area of territory on which the city depended for food, agricultural produce and raw materials, for direct use and for export.

It might be worthwhile showing the children the *map of the region of the Aegean Sea*. You could ask them to find Athens and Crete.

Map of the region of the Aegean Sea

<http://classics.oxfordre.com/fileasset/Map%201%20FINAL%20aegean.jpg>

The map shows the region in the Greek Bronze Age (about 3000-1150 BC). While it includes Athens, it shows very few of the other cities and sites mentioned in this unit of work which were not significant in this period.

According to Athenian legends, there were kings of Athens in the distant past. There was probably a Bronze Age palace on top of the Athenian acropolis — the hill at the centre of the city.

Teaching the topic

The mythical past of Athens, with Aigeus as king, offers a bridge to a comparison of the social and political systems in Athens and Sparta in the classical period of the 5th century BC.

Greek politics

The issues that are listed in the *Main topic* and *Key ideas* tabs will come up as the children learn about Athens and Sparta: different forms of government, participation by various groups in society, freedom and control, individual and community. You could integrate the politics into the children's encounters with aspects of Athens and Sparta, taking the opportunities as they arise to bring out the more general 'philosophical' aspects. Examples of such opportunities might include the groups entitled to participate in Athenian democracy and the enforced removal of Spartan boys from their families.

At suitable moments or as synthesis at the end, the *Greek politics sheet* could be used to prompt more general discussion of political issues. You might remind the children about the philosophers Plato and Aristotle whom they met in Week 4. Their ideas about the right way to live and to govern are still influential today.

Greek politics information sheet

An information sheet for children giving a brief summary of the main forms of government found in the Greek world at different times, and some comments and examples about politics from ancient Greek writers. The terms 'tyranny' and 'tyrant' did not acquire their negative meanings until the fourth century BC, but it is this meaning that has survived to today.

Athens and democracy

Athens was at its most powerful around the middle of the 400s BC. You could begin by explaining that the story of Theseus belongs to a mythic, very ancient time and that you are now focusing on an actual historical period, using the [Rise of Athens sheet](#) to introduce the reasons behind Athens' status at this time. If you want to explore the silver coin in more detail, a weblink is given below which provides a view of the other side showing the goddess Athena. The video of a trireme — the name given to the warship used by the Athenians — is a little old, but shows the positions of the rowers and gives quite a vivid sense of its speed and impressive appearance.

Greatness of Athens information sheet

An information sheet for children focusing on selected aspects of the power and wealth of Athens.

An Athenian silver coin

<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/283744/unknown-maker-silver-coin-tetradrachm-of-athens-greek-475-465-bc/>

The silver for Athenian coins was mined at Laurion, about 50 miles from Athens. The thousands of miners were slaves and worked under terrible conditions.

A trireme at sea

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7da52cJLwW8>

In the 1980s, the first full-size replica of an Athenian trireme, Olympias, was built and trialled in Greece. The ancient Athenian navy consisted of more than 200 such triremes.

To introduce the politics of Athens, you could remind the children of the features of monarchy that you identified when making the initial link with the story — see *Making the link* above. The *Athenian democracy sheet* provides information and some points for discussion. The Athenians were concerned about any one individual or group being able to build political power; you could discuss use of the lot and ostracism in avoiding this. The children might consider why the Athenians chose to elect generals and finance officers. You could also introduce the idea of direct democracy, where people vote and participate in person, compared with representative democracy; they might think about the farmers and the size of population here.

One of the most difficult elements of Greek democracy to reconcile with modern experience is the exclusion of women and other groups in society from the political process, which you will probably want to discuss with the children. For all its limitations, the idea of political equality evident in Athenian democracy was important in later movements for political rights. It is also worth pointing out that on its own terms, this was a radical and innovative approach to political equality. It was not until 1918 that all men and some women were allowed to vote in Britain and even now, after more than 2500 years, we are still nearly a decade away from the centenary of all women being allowed to vote (in 1928).

Athenian democracy information sheet

An information sheet for children that describes the workings of Athenian democracy.

The weblinks below offer two useful resources to help fill out the children's picture of the city of Athens and the lives of its people ready for the contrast with Sparta. The children will need some familiarity with Athenian democracy to make the most of the interactives.

Athens story interactive

http://www.ancientgreece.co.uk/athens/story/sto_set.html

This resource offers children the chance to explore the daily lives of a number of different people in ancient Athens including citizens, resident foreigners (metics), a woman, a boy and a slave.

Athens explore interactive

http://www.ancientgreece.co.uk/athens/explore/exp_set.html

This resource explores different areas and buildings of the city of Athens and gives a rich picture of the life of the city, including its political functions.

Sparta

You could use the *Sparta information sheet* and compare it with what the children have learned about Athens from the resources above. The *Sparta and Athens* online activity below offers a chance to make a direct comparison.

Sparta information sheet

An information sheet for children giving details of selected aspects of Sparta including government, warriors and women.

Sparta and Athens

http://www.ancientgreece.co.uk/dailylife/story/sto_set.html

An online activity comparing the lives of men and women in Athens and Sparta.

Children's reactions to Sparta can vary — the brutality and totalitarian nature of Spartan life can be outweighed by the appeal of the relative freedom for girls, the communal spirit and a somewhat romantic idea of warrior-culture. You might encourage the children to separate out the different aspects of Spartan culture and discuss their responses. Children can often respond quite negatively to Athens, swayed by the large slave population of the city and the exclusion of women and other groups from the democracy. Again, it is worth discussing aspects separately.

It can be a good challenge to ask children to make a judgement about whether they would prefer to live in Athens or Sparta, but it is important to use effective questioning to draw out students' ideas to encourage them to give a more precise and nuanced basis for their answers.

Continuing theme: Gods and goddesses

There are no new divinities to add to the children's chart, but Ares' beauty is mentioned in the story of Theseus, and at the end of that story Dionysos rescues Ariadne from Naxos and makes her his wife.

Children often enjoy revisiting items they have seen before and it can help anchor and develop their learning. In the case of Dionysos and Ariadne, you could look again at the painting by Titian that was recommended in Week 1. If necessary, you can remind the children that Dionysos was known as Bacchus by the Romans. This time, you might pick out Ariadne and explore what her reaction seems to be to the arrival of Dionysos and his entourage. The children can also spot the constellation of the Pleiades in the sky.

Painting of Dionysos and his companions

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/be/Titian_Bacchus_and_Ariadne.jpg

As this is the last story in the unit of work, you may want to create an opportunity to review the information about gods and goddesses you have been building up. There will inevitably be gaps where the stories and pictures the children have seen have not provided details about certain deities. If you

wish to, you could take a little time and help fill in some additional information, but it is not essential that all aspects of every deity are included.

Whether or not you add extra details, you will have enough material to discuss the more important issue of the ancient Greeks' beliefs about what these gods were like and how humans should respond to them. You might steer the children's discussions towards some of the following ideas:

- various gods are involved in all aspects of nature and in every human activity
- the gods belong to a family with similar dynamics to those in human families
- gods look and behave like humans with similar emotions, strengths, weaknesses
- gods are hugely powerful
- gods can and do interact directly with humans
- humans need to be careful not to offend or disrespect gods whether deliberately or accidentally
- humans can incur the anger of the gods by failing to behave fairly and well towards each other
- humans need to keep the goodwill of the gods by carrying out rituals and making gifts to them
- the goodwill of the gods brings benefits to humans

Concluding the enquiry

By the time you reach the end of this topic, you will have covered these seven aspects of ancient Greek culture that still have relevance today:

- 1) The Greek language
- 2) Greek theatre
- 3) Athletics and the Olympic Games
- 4) Greek myths
- 5) Greek philosophy and science
- 6) Greek architecture and art
- 7) Politics and democracy

If you have been using the outcome suggested in [Teaching guidance and suggestions](#), the children are now ready to select the five most important aspects of ancient Greece they will include in their TV series and trailer. You could remind them of the seven topics and of the need to make judgements based on reasons. You might like to give them some time in small groups to reach their decisions, encouraging them to make notes of the reasons why they have selected the aspects they have. Remind them that they do not have to create the programmes, but that they should use some of the details of what they have learned to justify their selections. You could use a simple approach to presentations by the groups, or, if you have time, the children could produce presentation materials either in hard copy or digitally.

Whatever specific outcome you have chosen, if you have used an enquiry that involves selection as suggested, the children will have engaged with the following historical skills and concepts:

- enquiry
- using evidence
- making historical judgements
- historical significance
- historical argument