

# CITIZEN ROLES IN THE ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY

## MORE INFORMATION

### MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK

Democracy in ancient Athens was not just a right, it was also an obligation. Male, adult citizens were expected to take place in a variety of activities to make democracy work. Pericles stated that, 'unlike any other nation, [Athenians regard] him who takes no part in these duties not as unambitious but as useless.'<sup>1</sup>

The roles that you could be expected to take part in included:

- attendance at the *ecclesia* (assembly) to vote on matters
- year-long service on the *boule* (council)
- jury duty
- service in the army or rowing a *trireme*
- service as a magistrate overseeing some aspect of the public sector (such as the Commissioners for Repairs of Temples, the Corn Commissioners or officials connected with the courts).

Although some modern commentators have questioned his numbers, Aristotle states that 20 000 people were serving the democracy at the height of the Athenian Empire.

#### ARISTOTLE, *THE ATHENIAN CONSTITUTION* 24

There were 6,000 jurymen, 1,600 bowmen, 1,200 Knights, 500 members of the Council, 500 guards of the dockyards, besides fifty guards in the Acropolis. There were some 700 magistrates at home, and some 700 abroad. Further, when they subsequently went to war, there were in addition 2,500 heavy-armed troops, twenty guard-ships, and other ships which collected the tributes, with crews amounting to 2,000 men, selected by lot ...

#### ← SOURCE 1

*Aristotle, The Athenian Constitution 24, trans. Sir Frederic G. Kenyon (Washington, DC: Merchant Books, 2009).*

Wealthy people were also expected to perform liturgies. These involved paying for things out of their own funds that would benefit the community as a whole, such as maintaining a warship for a year, training and buying costumes for a chorus in a play or providing items for religious festivals.

<sup>1</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.40.

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**HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS**

Using Source 1 and the information above, respond to the following:

1. Compare the duties an ancient Athenian citizen was expected to perform for the state to the duties a 21st century Australian is expected to perform.

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2. What do you think Pericles meant by saying that people who did not take part in these duties were useless?

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