Early Greece: From Palaces to City-States

¶ 1.1



The Origins & The Collapse: What were the first Greek-speaking civilizations, and why did they fall?

The Rise of the Polis: How did the independent city-state take shape in the aftermath?

The Great Divergence: How did Athens and Sparta evolve into radically different models?

The stage is set for classical antiquity.

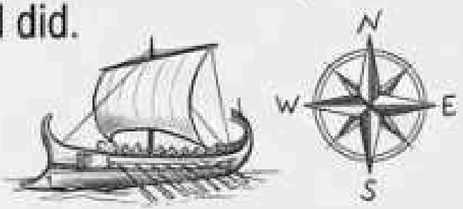
[(Mountains + Valleys) × Hundreds of Islands] ÷ Limited Farmland = Small, Independent Communities



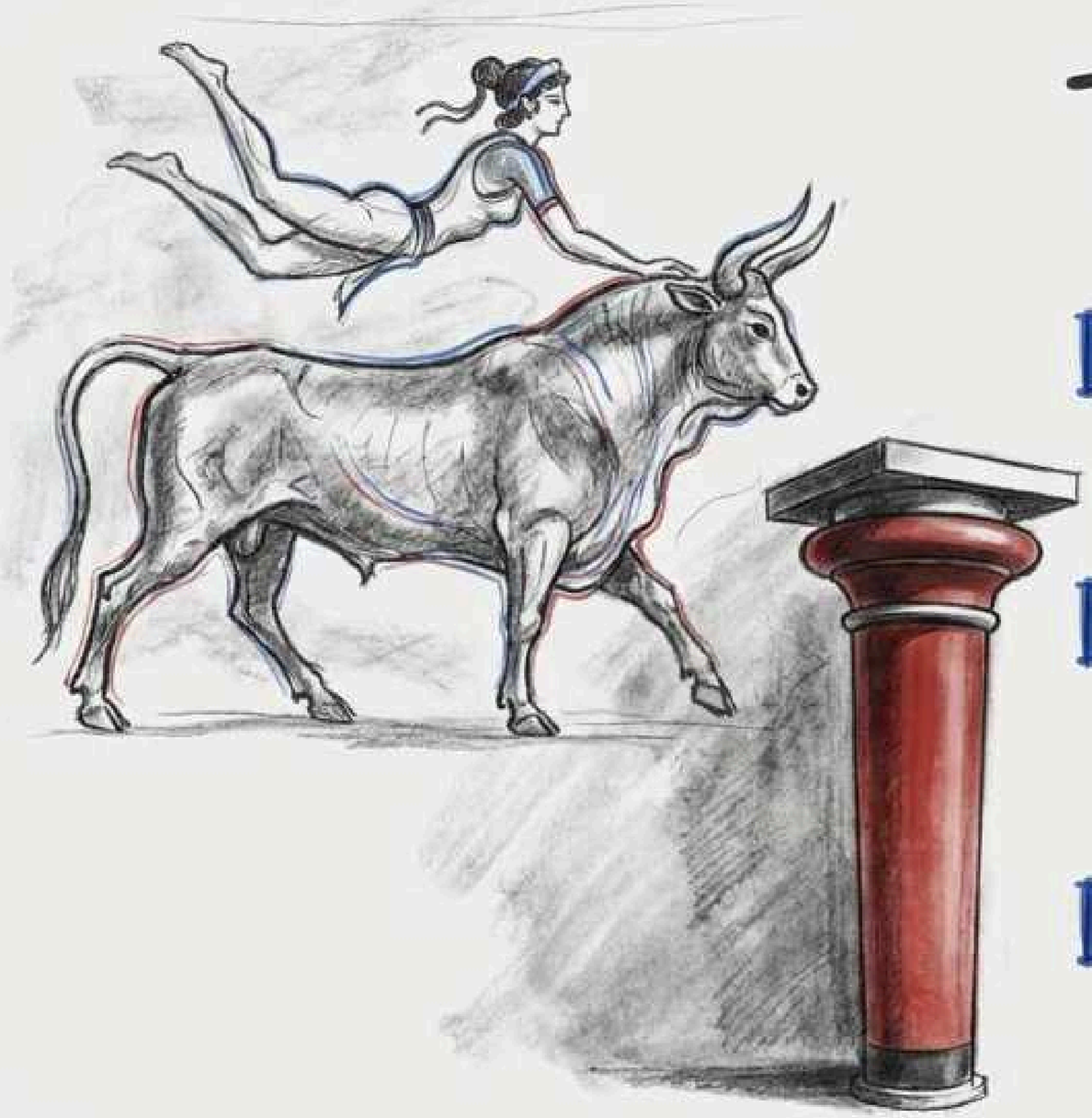
The Land: Rugged terrain isolated communities.
Main crops: Grain, olives, grapes.



The Sea: Acted as the primary highway; water connected Greeks far more easily than the land did.



Insight: Geography prevented a singular massive kingdom.



The Minoans (Crete)

- **Timeline**: 2000 → 1450 BCE
- **Hub of Life**: Palaces (e.g., Knossos) were not just royal homes—they were centers of storage, craft, and trade.
- **The Mystery**: Used the Linear A script → Status: Undeciphered.

The Mycenaeans (Mainland)

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Timeline: Emerged ~ 1600 BCE





Characteristics: Early Greek speakers; fortified palaces (Mycenae, Pylos, Tiryns); **elite burials** with gold.

The Script: Linear B

- **Deciphered:** 1952 by Michael Ventris.
- **Contents:** Mostly administrative lists (goods and workers).
- **Insight:** Proves a palace economy, not epic literature.

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Earthquakes



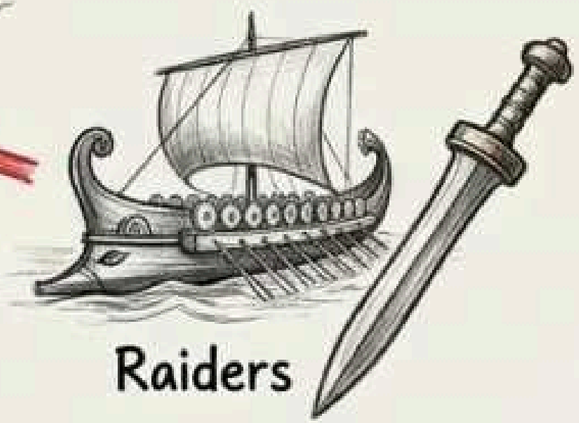
Drought

1200 BCE: The Collapse

Destruction/abandonment of Mycenaean palaces (Coincides with the fall of the Hittites and troubles in Egypt/Near East).



Breakdown of Trade



Raiders



Civil War

$\sum$ Causes = Systemic Collapse (Most historians believe several causes combined; no single theory convinces everyone).

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The "Dark Age" (1100 – 800 BCE)

Lost / Declined	Kept / Gained
- Large communities	- Farming continued 
- Robust trade networks	- Spread of ironworking 
- The use of writing	- Language and oral storytelling persisted 

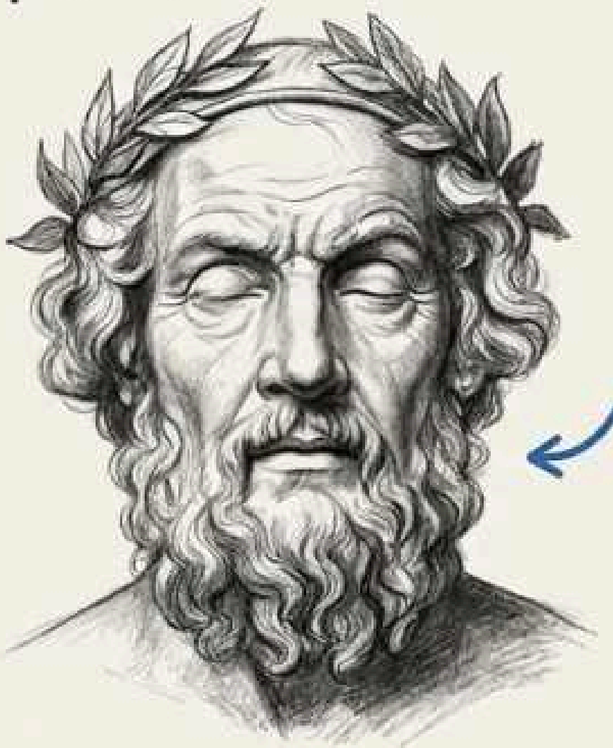
The Innovation (~ 800 BCE):

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Phoenician Alphabet + Greek Vowels = Accessible Writing

(Learnable by ordinary people)





The Epics:
The Iliad and the Odyssey (traditionally credited to Homer).

Grew out of oral storytelling → Recited long before being committed to writing → Final Written Form

Disclaimer: The Homeric poems (telling of the Trojan War) are literature, not a reliable chronicle.

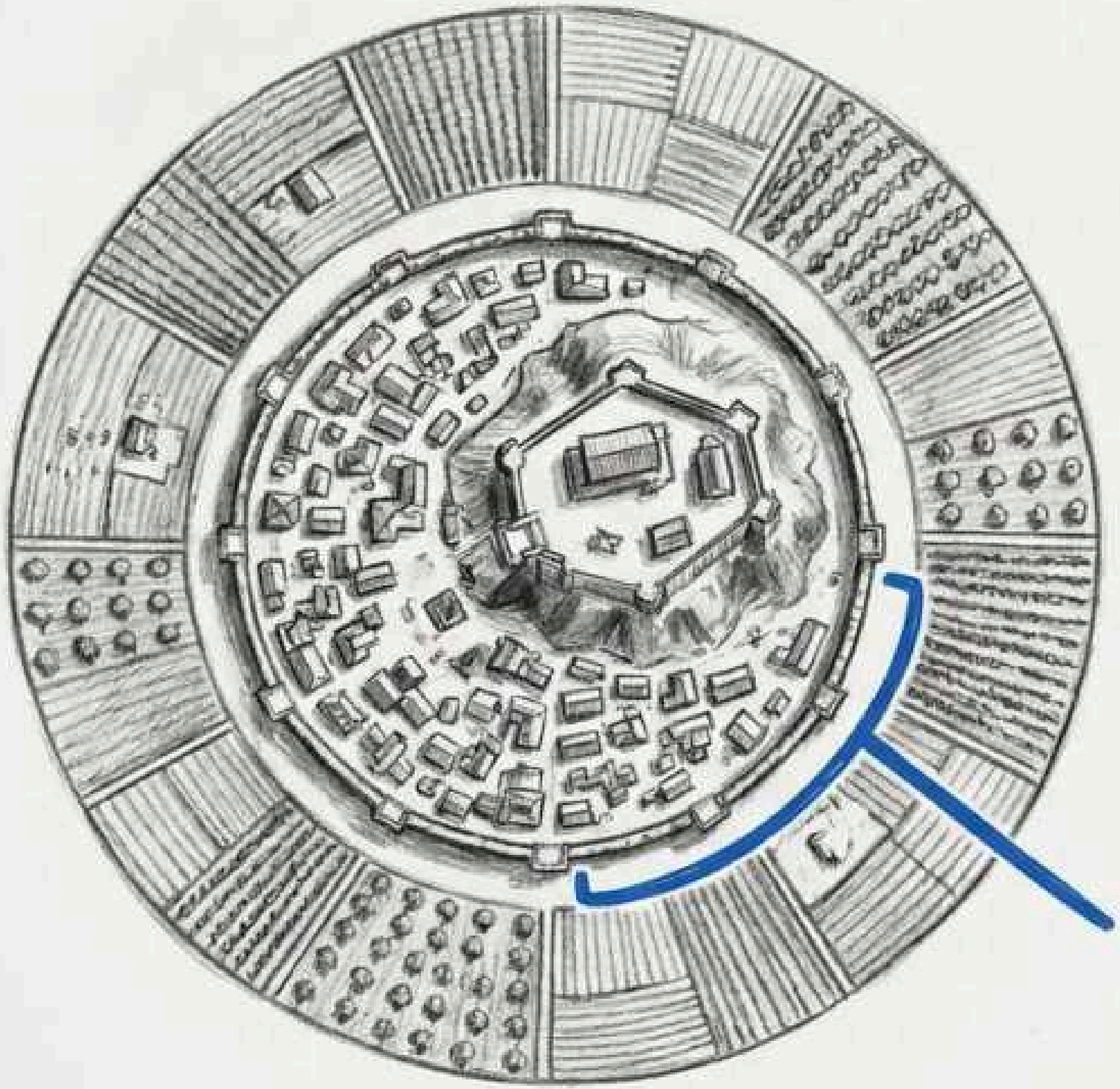
The Real Value:

A window into societal values.



Emergence of the Polis (~ 750 BCE)

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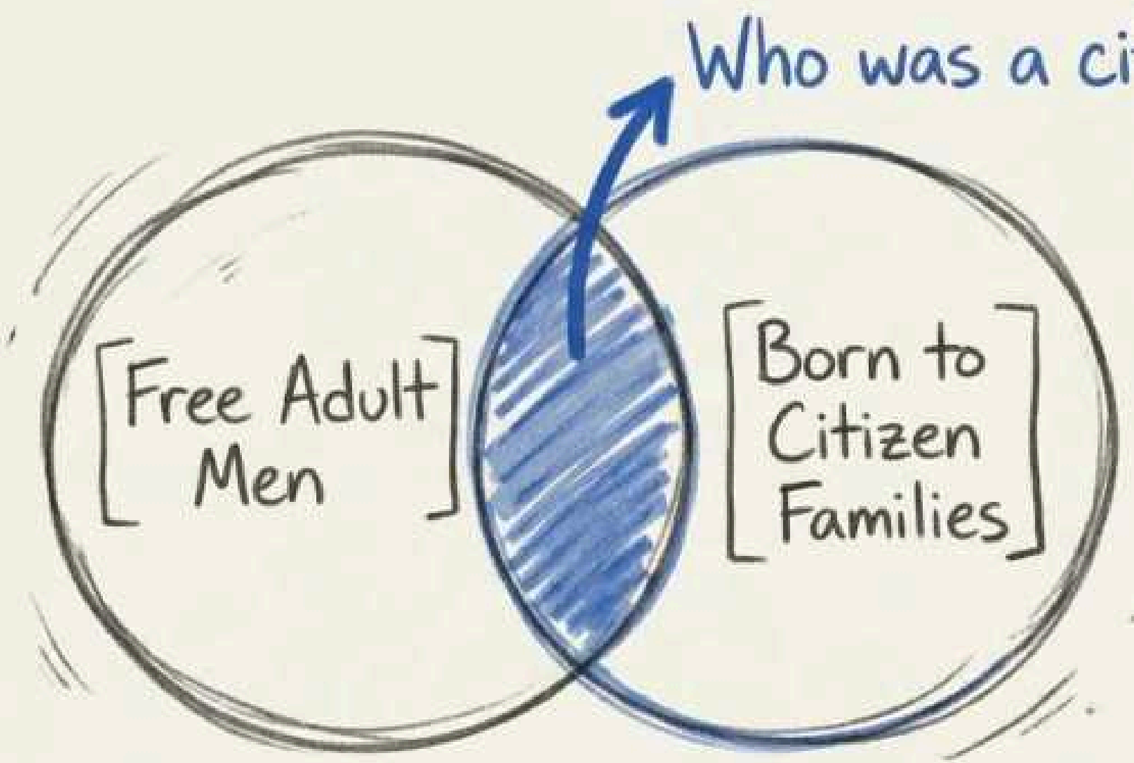
The Shared Glue (Panhellenism):

- Language
- Gods & Festivals
- Olympic Games (Traditionally 776 BCE)
- Oracle of Apollo at Delphi

Definition: Town + Surrounding Farmland = The City-State (ruled by its own citizens).

Scale: Hundreds existed, most with only a few thousand people.

¶ 1.10



Excluded:
Women, Foreigners, Enslaved People (often war captives or purchased; common in households, farms, mines).

Evolution of Rule:

1. Kings
2. Councils of Nobles
3. Narrow Oligarchies
4. Democracies



The Soldier:
Heavy infantryman in a phalanx formation (shoulder-to-shoulder).

The Political Formula

Self-Funded Armor
(Farmers of moderate means)

+

Fighting for the Polis

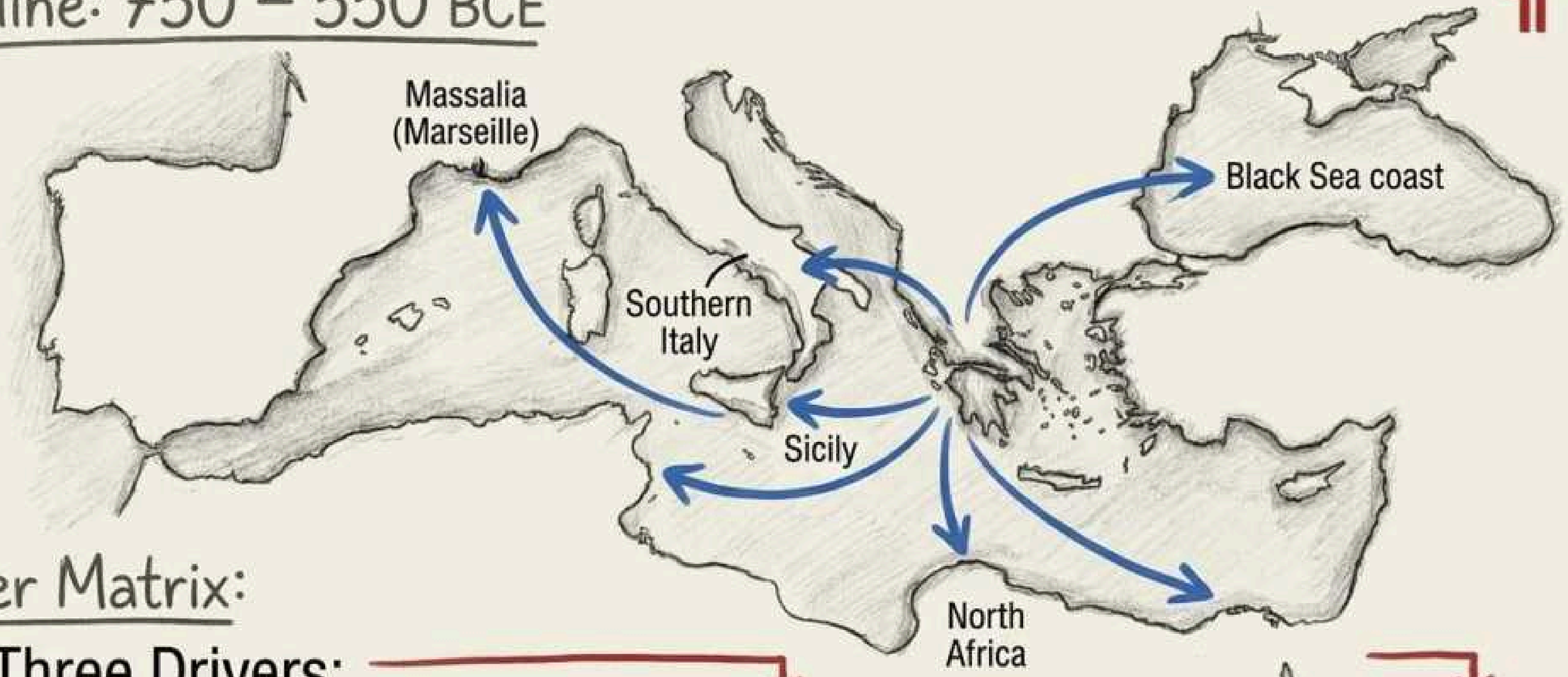
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Demand for Political Power

Result: Hoplites claimed a share of power away from the old noble families.

Timeline: 750 – 550 BCE

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Driver Matrix:

The Three Drivers:

1. Land shortage



Not enough land for growing population, leading to pressure on resources.

2. Expansion of trade



Desire to secure resources and markets for Greek goods, fostering commerce.

3. Political exile



Political dissidents and defeated factions forced to leave and establish new settlements.

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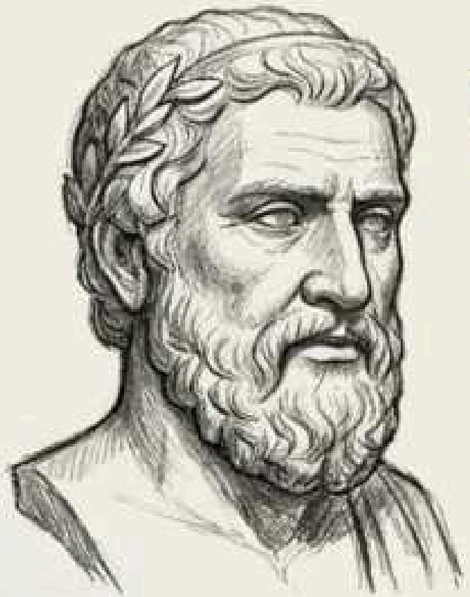
Tyrant ≠ Inherently Cruel

Historical Definition

A strongman who seized power outside normal rules.

The Reality

Many won support from the poor and built highly useful public works.



Example: Peisistratus ruled Athens in the middle of the 6th century BCE.

Location: Laconia (Southern Region)

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Government Structure

2 Kings

Council of Elders

5 Annual Ephors

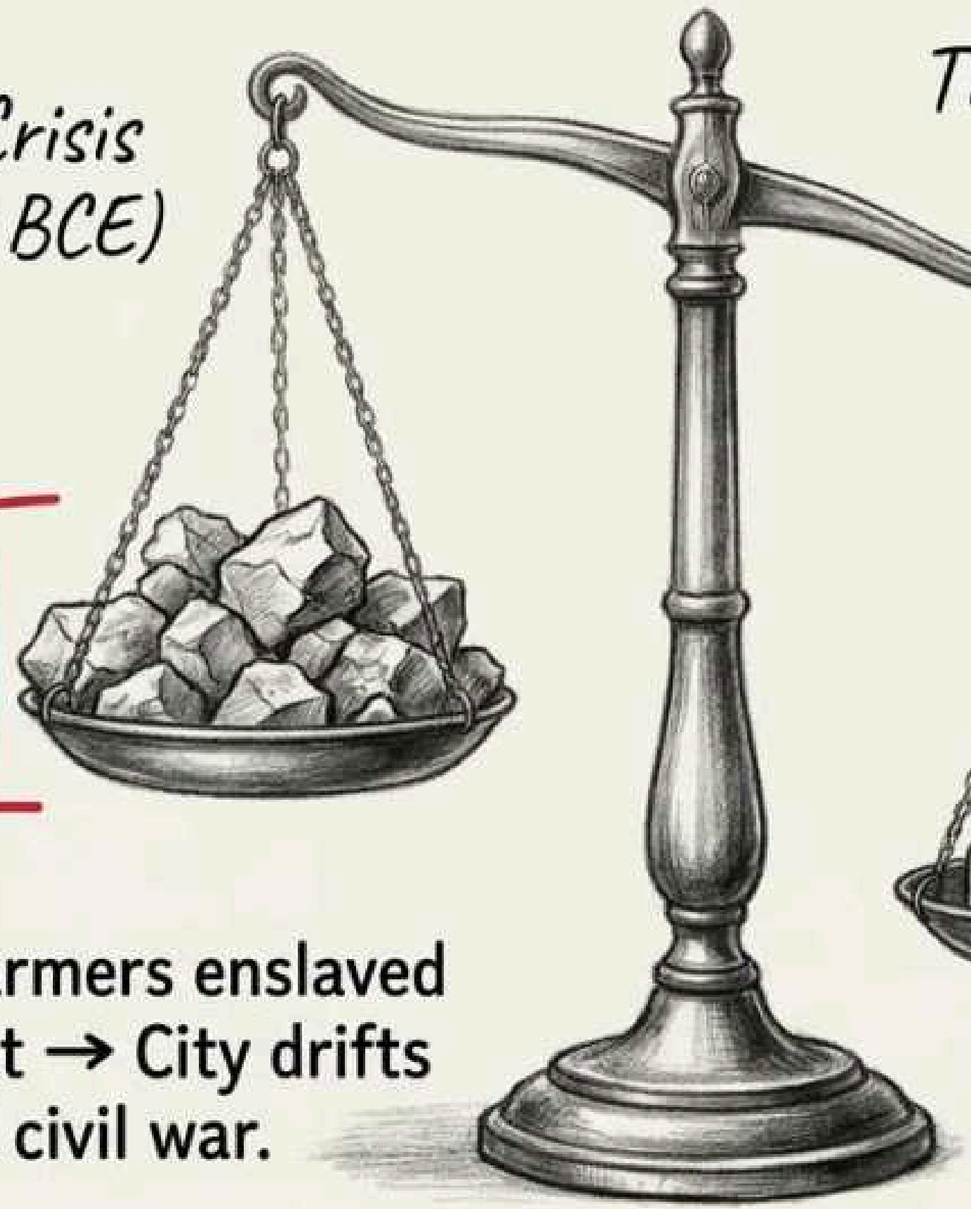
Citizens:
Men trained from boyhood in the agoge to maintain control.

Helots:
Conquered neighbors (Messenia) forced to work the land as a state-owned class.



*Note: Most historical knowledge of Sparta comes from outsiders.

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The Crisis
(~600 BCE)

Poor farmers enslaved for debt → City drifts toward civil war.

The Intervention
(~594 BCE)

Solon given power to reform.

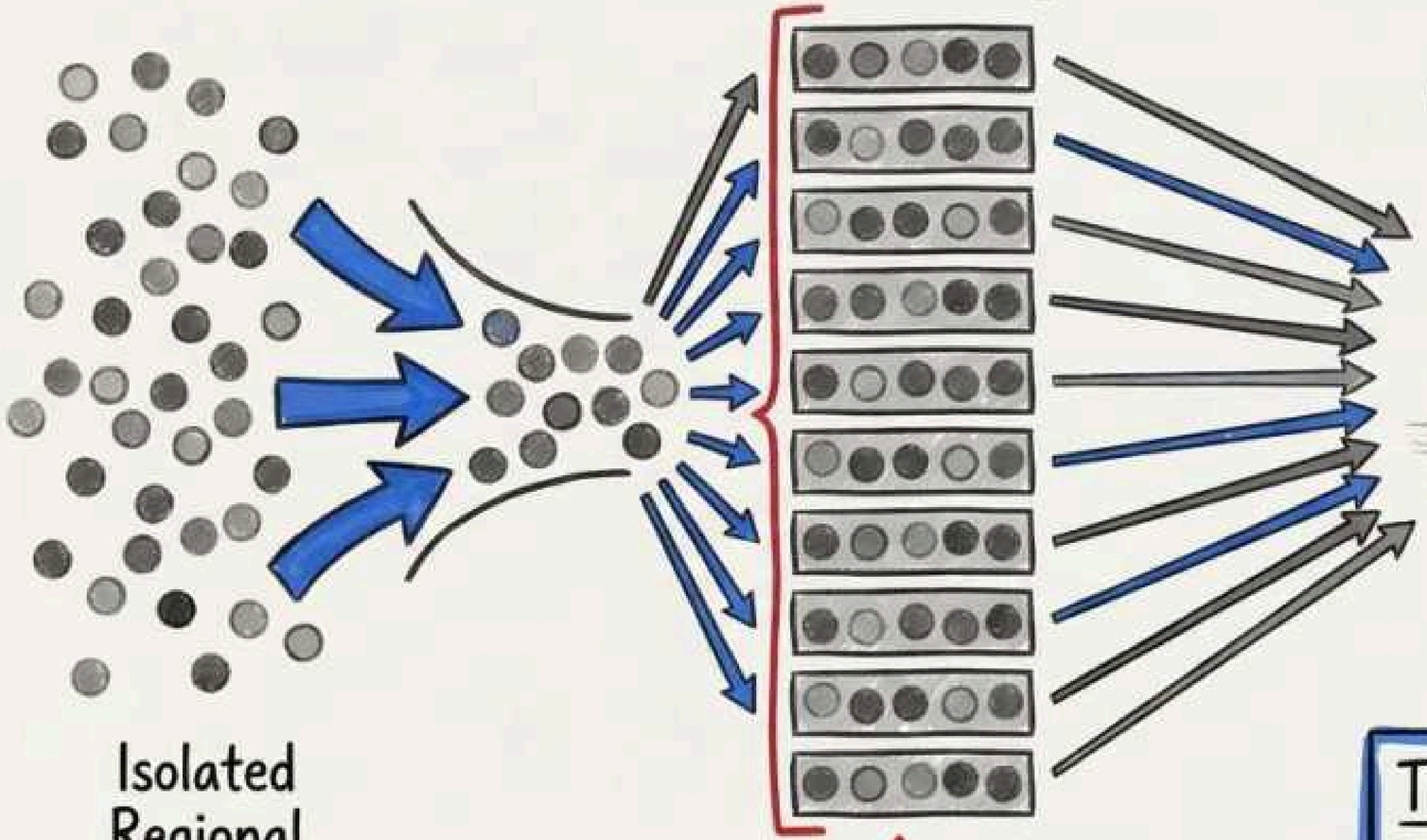
The Reforms:

- Canceled many debts.
- Ended enslavement for debt.
- Opened political offices based on wealth, not just noble birth.

Context: Solon's reforms didn't end conflict; tyranny followed, then expelled.

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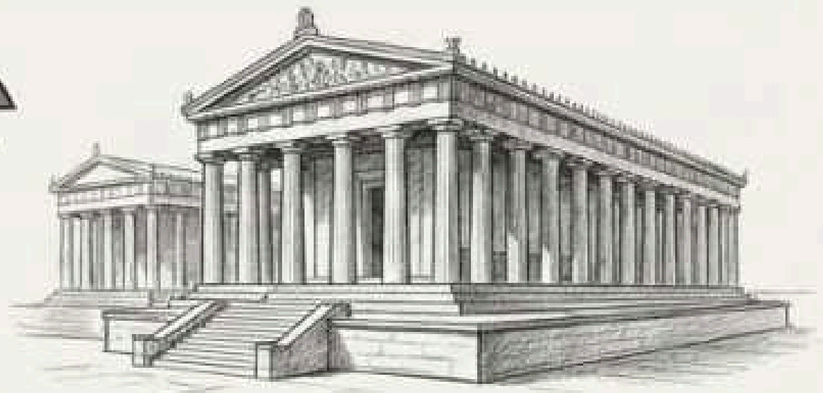
Cleisthenes' Reorganization (508/507 BCE)



Isolated Regional Districts

Mixed into 10 new tribes

Created a Council of 500

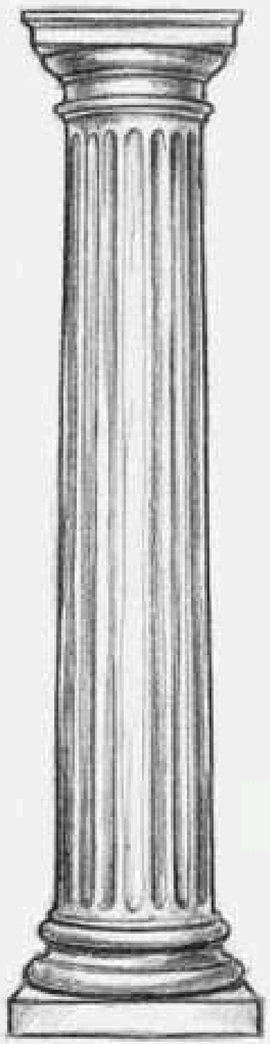


The Result: Undercut old noble loyalties = The foundation of Athenian Democracy (rule by the people).

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The Pantheon

Zeus, Athena, Apollo honored with sacrifices, processions, and festivals.





The Oracles

Delphi was consulted by both individuals and states before major moves (e.g., founding colonies, going to war)



Civic Integration

Religion was entirely embedded in state life; each polis had its own patron deity and rituals.

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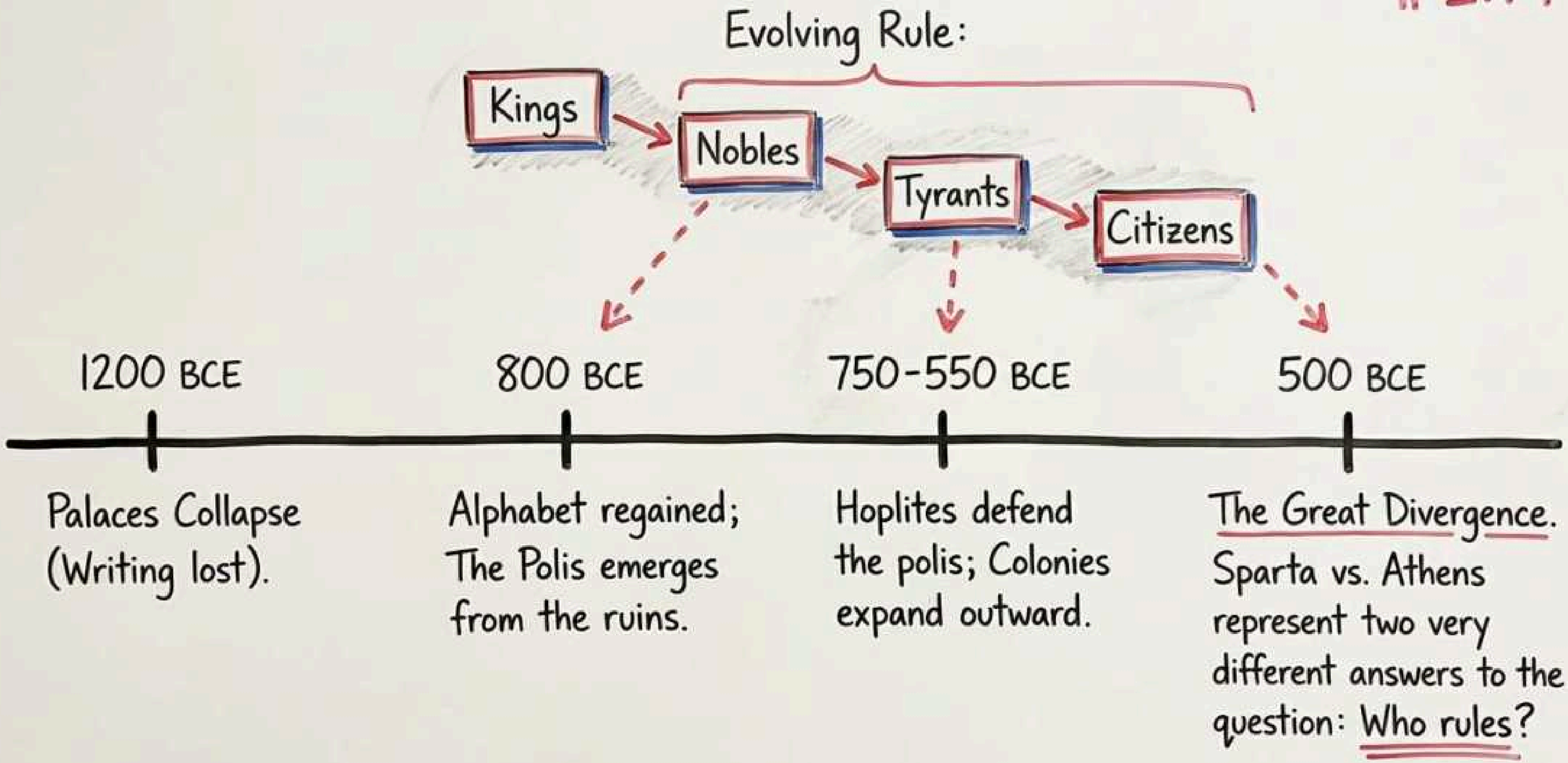
Draco's Code (~621 BCE):
Written in Athens; so severe that harsh laws are still called draconian.

Why Writing Mattered:

Visible Rules = Limits on Secret Power

- **Everyone could see the rules, preventing powerful officials from arbitrarily bending them.**

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Evolving Rule:
Kings
Nobles
Tyrants
Citizens
1200 BCE
800 BCE
750-550 BCE
500 BCE
Palaces Collapse (Writing lost).
Alphabet regained; The Polis emerges from the ruins.
Hoplites defend the polis; Colonies expand outward.
The Great Divergence.
Sparta vs. Athens represent two very different answers to the question: Who rules?

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Thought Experiment: Suppose you lived in a small polis in 700 BCE...

Q1: Who would be a citizen, and who would not?

Q2: What would your city need to defend its land?

Q3: How does the need for the hoplite affect who gets a share of political power?

