

Notes on Quiz #5

Civilizations of the Ancient World • Spring 2023

1. Who were the helots? Why were they so important to the Spartan system? What risks did they pose?

The helots were state-owned serfs. In origin they were the conquered peoples of Laconia and neighboring Messenia, subdued early in Sparta's history and permanent "prisoners of war." Each helot family farm provided a fixed amount of food year-round for a Spartan warrior, freeing the Spartans from the distractions of managing land, laborers, and produce. The helot families retained for their own use anything beyond what was levied, which is why they are at least nominally considered serfs and not slaves.

The Spartan system was heavily dependent on the helots. Because they greatly outnumbered the Spartan citizenry, which was restricted to the warrior elite (the *homoioi*), the Spartans were constantly alert to the dangers of uprising among the helots and feared marching their armies too far from home. To reinforce their status as prisoners of war, young Spartans were required to literally hunt helots as part of their training. Helots were also paraded before the young warriors drunk and humiliated to train them to think of helots as an inferior class.

2. Describe Solon's contributions to the Athenian system.

Solon had the trust of both aristocrats and the commoners and so was able to enact reforms that benefitted Athens as a whole. He weakened the power of local and family influence by making participation in Athenian politics dependent on wealth, not blood, creating new classes that cut across local and family loyalties in order to strengthen Athenian unity and the prosperity that would come from a stronger and more vibrant unified economy. He strengthened Athenian agricultural production and relieved the debt slavery crisis that was crippling the poor peasantry. He fought not for the poor against the rich (as with the tyrants), or vice versa, but for a stronger Athens.

3. Regarding the first parts of *Clouds*: (a) Why does Strepsiades go to the Thinkery? (b) How does "Socrates" first enter (appear on stage)? Why do you think the playwright introduces him like this?

Strepsiades goes to the Thinkery to learn false speech in order to free himself of the debt foisted on him by his son. "Socrates" appears descending from above in a basket, much like gods at the end of a tragedy descending to dispense wisdom and justice ("deus ex machina"), only "Socrates" talks not about the wisdom of the gods but the "natural functions" and physical processes of the temporal heavens. His scruffy appearance presents him as a false god. He also starts out with his head literally in the clouds.

EC1. Powerful groups in Athens included all of the following EXCEPT:

- (c) The two kings and their royal families (*basilei*) [*Athens had no kings*]

EC2. What are some potential disadvantages of radical democracy, as practiced in Athens?

One problem noted by those who favored the aristocracy is that the poorer classes were not educated (education was only available to the wealthy in the ancient world). — More generally, dangers faced by pure democracy include demagoguery (unscrupulous people gaining votes by telling people what they want to hear); division into faction, making consensus difficult to achieve; and tyranny of the majority, where interests of smaller groups of voters are locked out by the needs and wants of the majority.