

# Boule (ancient Greece)

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In cities of ancient Greece, the **Boule** (Greek: βουλή, *boulē*; plural βουλαί, *boulai*) was a council of over 500 citizens (βουλευταί, *bouleutai*) appointed to run daily affairs of the city. Originally a council of nobles advising a king, *boulai* evolved according to the constitution of the city: In oligarchies boule positions might have been hereditary, while in democracies members were typically chosen by lot (→ Sortition), and served for one year. Little is known about the workings of many *boulai*, except in the case of Athens, for which extensive material has survived.

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## Athenian boule

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The original council of Athens was the Areopagus. It consisted of ex-archons and was aristocratic in character.

### Solonian boule

The Athenian boule under Solon heard appeals from the most important decisions of the courts. Those in the poorest class could not serve on the boule of 400. The higher governmental posts, archons (magistrates), were reserved for citizens of the top two income groups.<sup>[1]</sup>

### Reforms of Cleisthenes

Under the reforms of Cleisthenes enacted in 508/507 BC, the boule was expanded to 500 men, made up of 50 men from each of the ten new tribes also created by Cleisthenes. The 500 men were chosen by lot at the deme level, each *deme* having been allotted a certain number of places proportional to population. Membership was restricted at this time to the top three of the original four property classes (the Pentacosiomedimni, Hippeis and Zeugitae, but not the Thetes) and to citizens over the age of thirty. The former restriction, though never officially changed, fell out of practice by the middle of the 5th century BC. Members of the boule served for one year and no man could serve more than twice in his life, nor

more than once a decade. The leaders of the boule (the *prytany*) consisted of 50 men chosen from among the 500, and a new 'prytany' was chosen every month. The man in charge of *prytany* was replaced every day from among the 50 members. The boule met every day except for festival days and ill-omened days. According to Aristotle, Cleisthenes introduced the Bouleutic Oath.<sup>[2]</sup>

## The boule in the democracy of the late 5th-century BC

After the reforms of Ephialtes and Pericles in the mid-5th century BC, the boule took on many of the administrative and judicial functions of the Areopagus, which retained its traditional right to try homicide cases. It supervised the state's finances, navy, cavalry, sacred matters, building and shipping matters and care for invalids and orphans. Its own members staffed many boards that oversaw the finer points of these many administrative duties. It undertook the examination of public officials both before and after leaving office (most offices lasting one year) to ensure honest accounting and loyalty to the state. It heard some cases of impeachment of public officials for high crimes and mismanagement or serious dereliction of duties.<sup>[3]</sup> At some point in the late 5th century, pay was instituted for those serving in the boule; this may have been a way to encourage poorer citizens to volunteer, who would otherwise be reluctant to serve. The boule was considered the cornerstone of the democratic constitution, providing a locus for day-to-day activities and holding together the many disparate administrative functions of the government. Because of the rotation of members, it was assumed that the boule was free from the domination of factions of any kind, although there is some evidence that richer citizens served out of proportion to poorer citizens. This may be due to the heavy investment of time required, time that poorer citizens would not have had to spare.<sup>[4]</sup>

## ***Boulai* in other Greek states**

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### Kingdom of Macedonia

In the Macedonian Kingdom, and later the Macedonian Empire, the body that assisted the king with running the kingdom was called the *synedrion*, literally translated as "The Congress". This tradition continued to be in use in the years of Alexander the Great and its members were hereditary. Although not democratic, the members of the Synedrion, including the king were considered equal to one another and had the right of the freedom of speech.

### Epirus

The Epirus, which became a federal republic in 231 BC, was ruled by the "Synedrion", or "The Congress". The Synedrion was dissolved when the Epirote federation fell apart due to internal upheaval during the Third Macedonian War.

### Corinth

The League of Corinth was a federation of Greek states created by king Philip II of Macedon during the winter of 338/337 BC to facilitate his use of unified Greek military forces in his war against Achaemenid Persia. The league guaranteed, among other things, that member states' constitutions in force at the time of joining were guaranteed and that a Synedrion, or congress of representatives, was to meet at Corinth.

## References

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