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Spartan soldier



Ancient Greece



Marathon runner



Spartan women racing



Greek gods

Rosie McCormick

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Ancient Greece



Rosie McCormick



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ISBN: 978-1-68380-453-6

Ancient Greece

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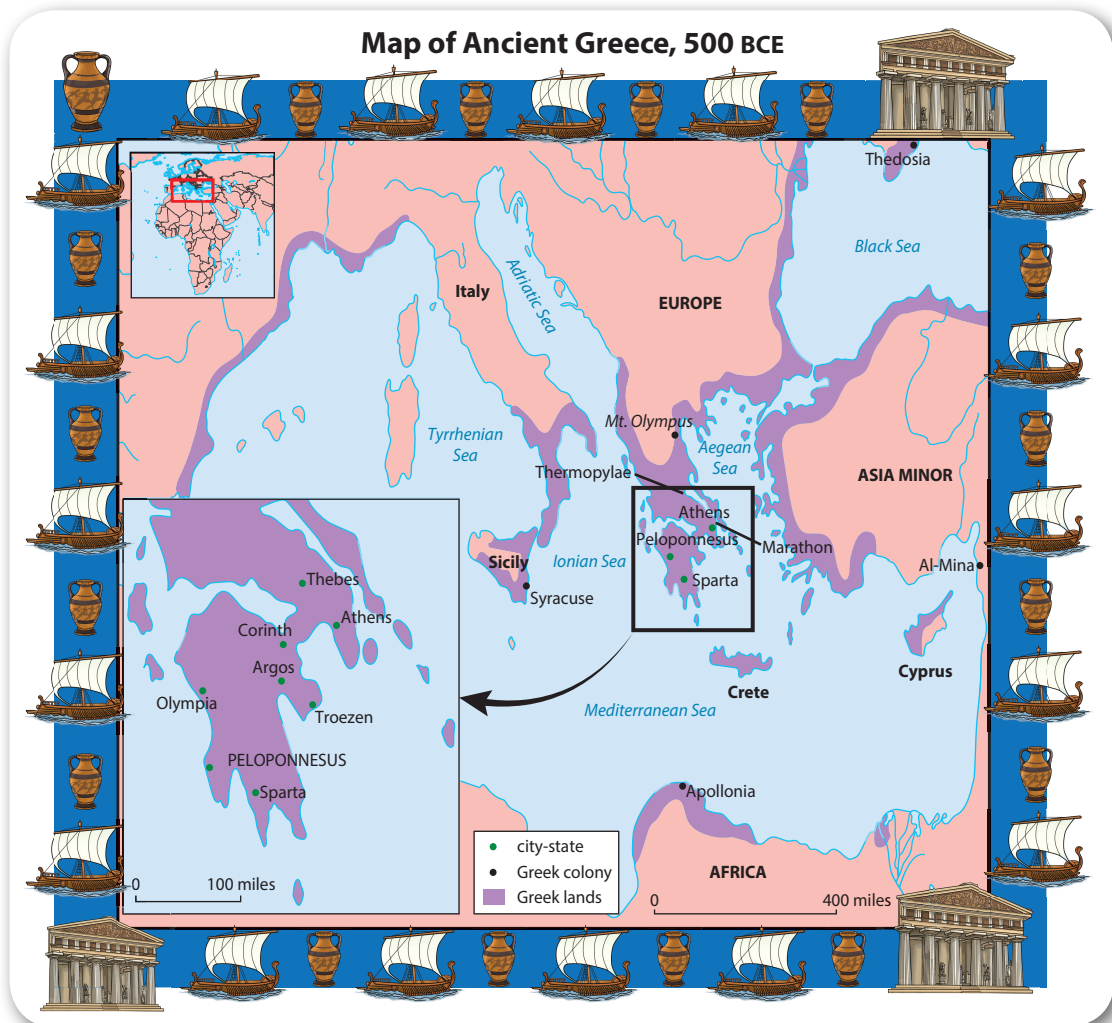
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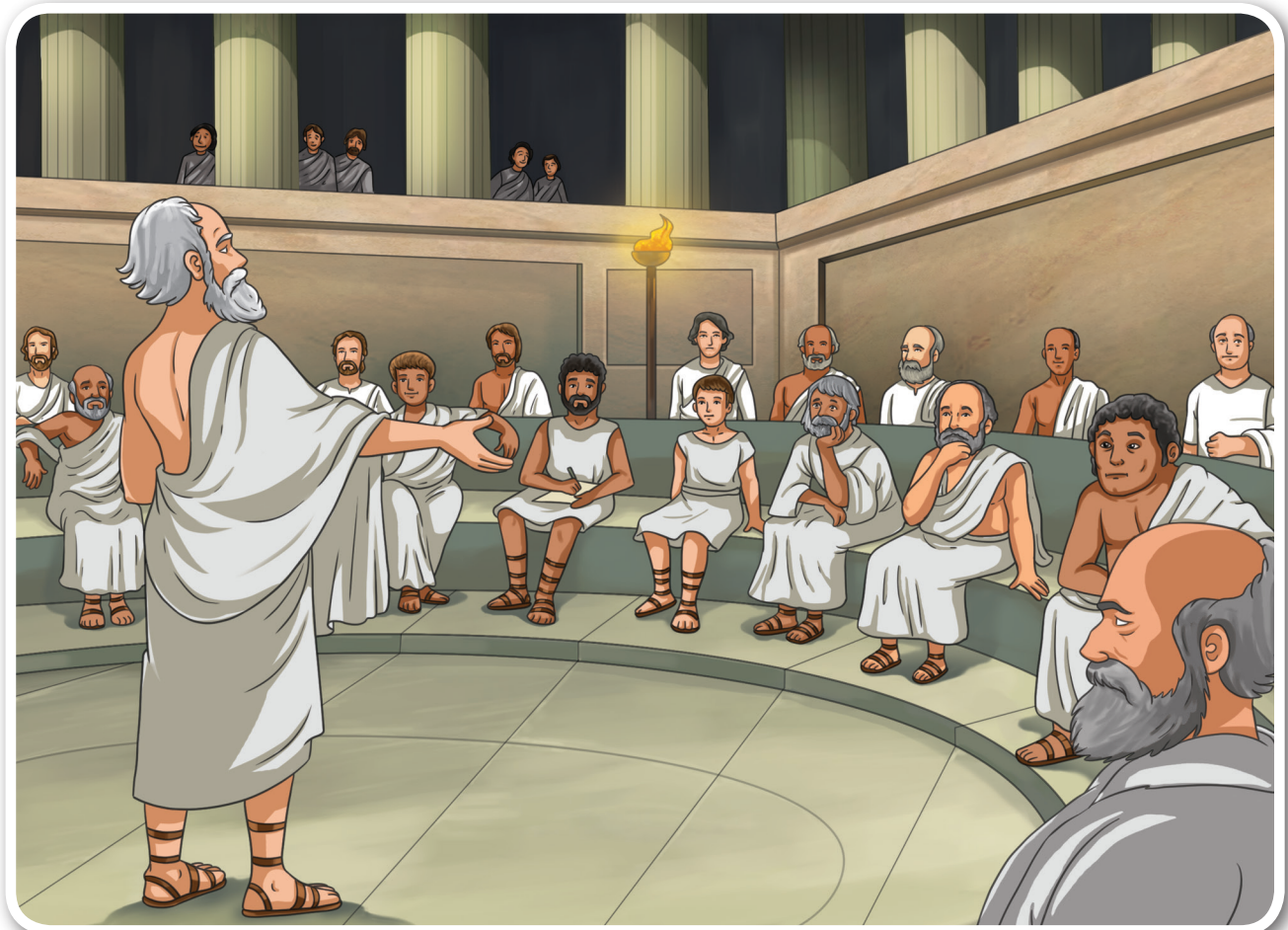
Introducing Ancient Greece

The modern country of Greece is in southeastern Europe. Much of Greece sticks out into the Mediterranean Sea. Greece also includes many islands.

Two and a half thousand years ago, ancient Greece was not a single country. It was a collection of city-states. Each city-state included a town, or small city, and nearby farmlands. There were many city-states near the Aegean Sea. But there were other city-states along the coast of Asia Minor, in southern Italy, and in north Africa.

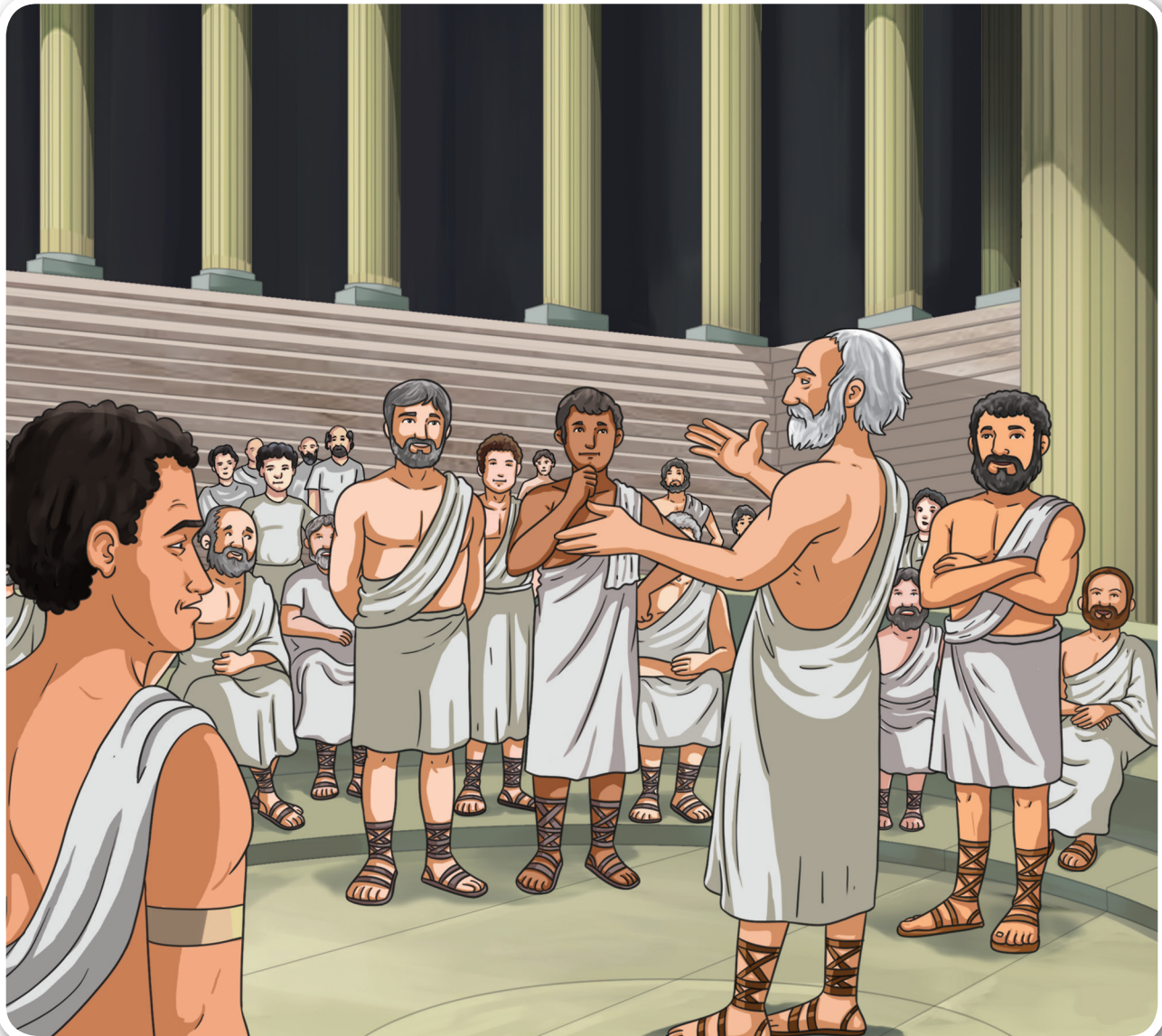


Athens was one of the largest of the Greek city-states. Today we think of Athens as the place where democracy began. We think of it this way because it had a form of government that allowed some people to help decide how things were done.



The men of Athens were the ones who had a say. All men who were over eighteen years of age and who were citizens were able to take part in what was called the Assembly. The Assembly got to make some important decisions.

The members of the Assembly decided which laws were passed and what taxes were raised, as well as other issues such as going to war—or not. Before making decisions, the members of the Assembly discussed, or debated, the issues at hand.



To reach a decision, members of the Assembly voted by holding up their hands. As well as having the Assembly, there were ten elected generals who were in charge of the army in Athens.

There were laws in Athens that said how the city-state should be run. There were also laws that said how people should behave. If someone did something that hurt the city-state, often the person would have to pay a fine or face a physical punishment. Personal disagreements were usually put before a jury, or a group of people whose job was to decide who was in the wrong.

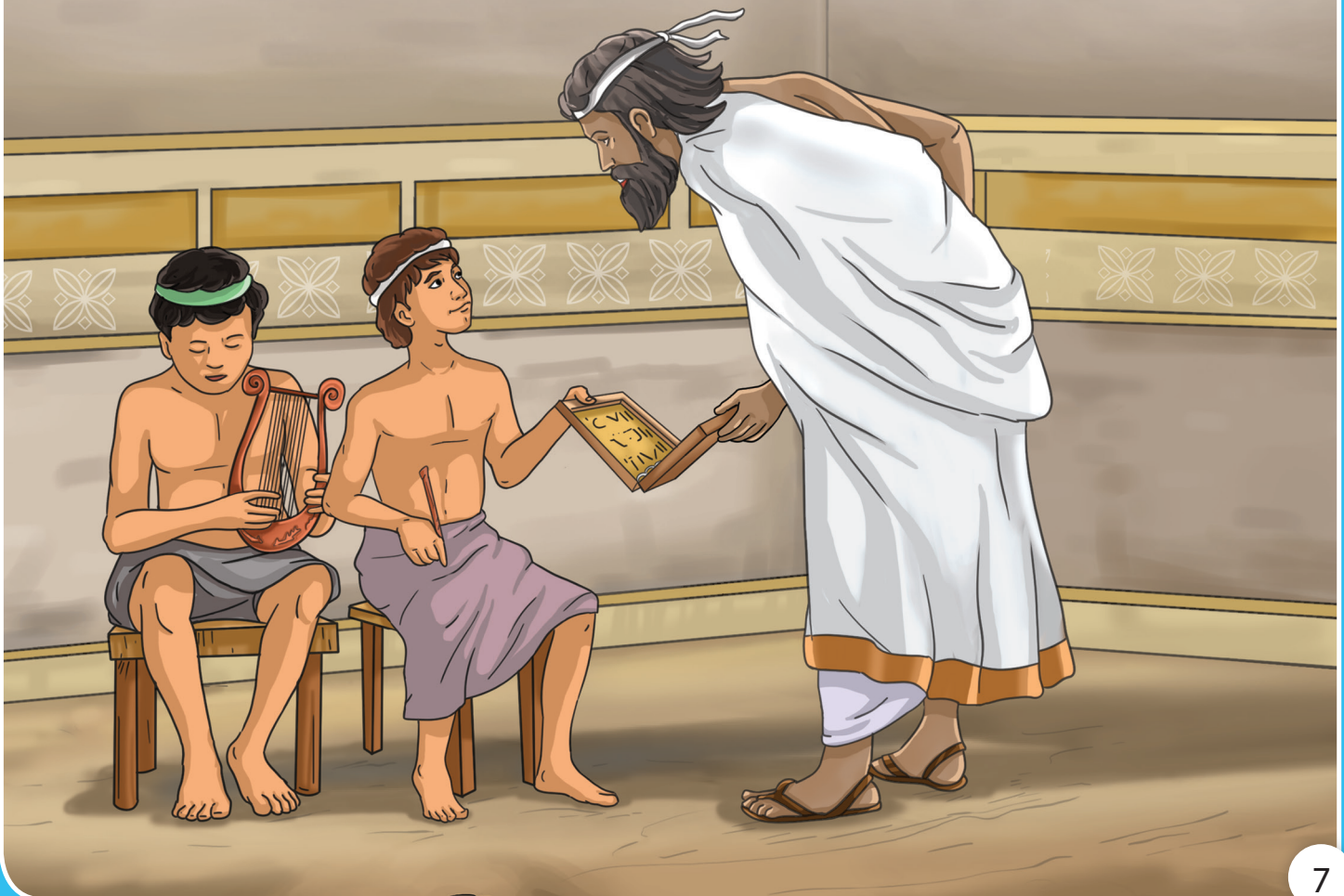


Life in Ancient Athens

Athens was a busy trading city. Thousands of people lived in Athens, and many foreigners visited to trade and work. Often the skilled craftsmen and artisans who worked in the city were foreigners. There were enslaved people in Athens too. Rich families used enslaved workers to run their households and farms.



Because the Athenians believed that male citizens should be involved in the government of the city-state, they wanted young men to have a good education. Boys were taught reading, writing, and math, as well as how to play a stringed instrument called a lyre. They learned poetry by heart. They also did a lot of physical exercise and had to do two years of army training.



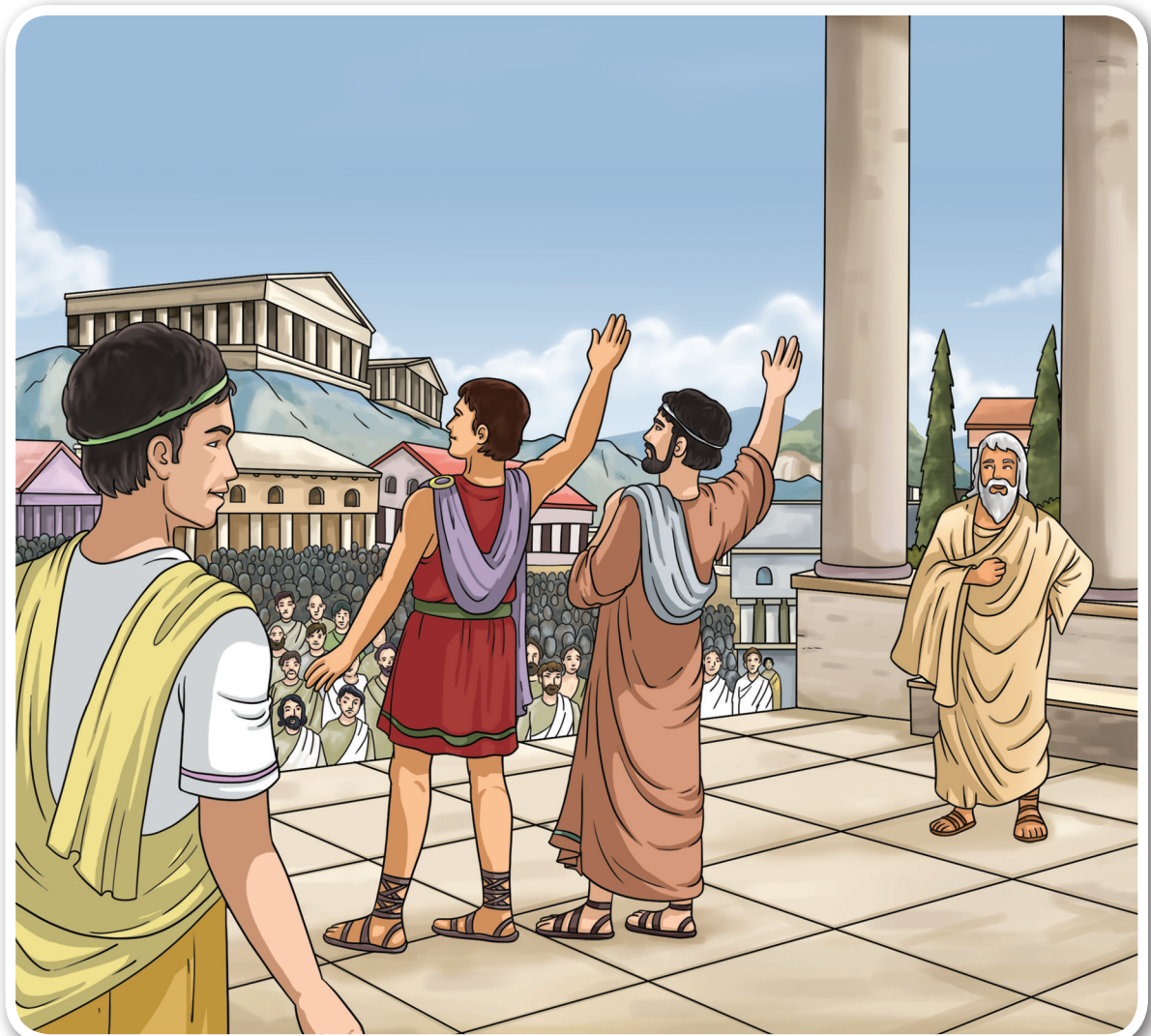
Women and girls in ancient Athens did not have many rights. Women could not own property, and they could not attend certain public events. They could not take part in sports either. But women had a role in religious ceremonies, and they were, of course, a very important part of family life. Girls learned the many skills needed to run a home. They also learned to spin thread, weave cloth, and sew.



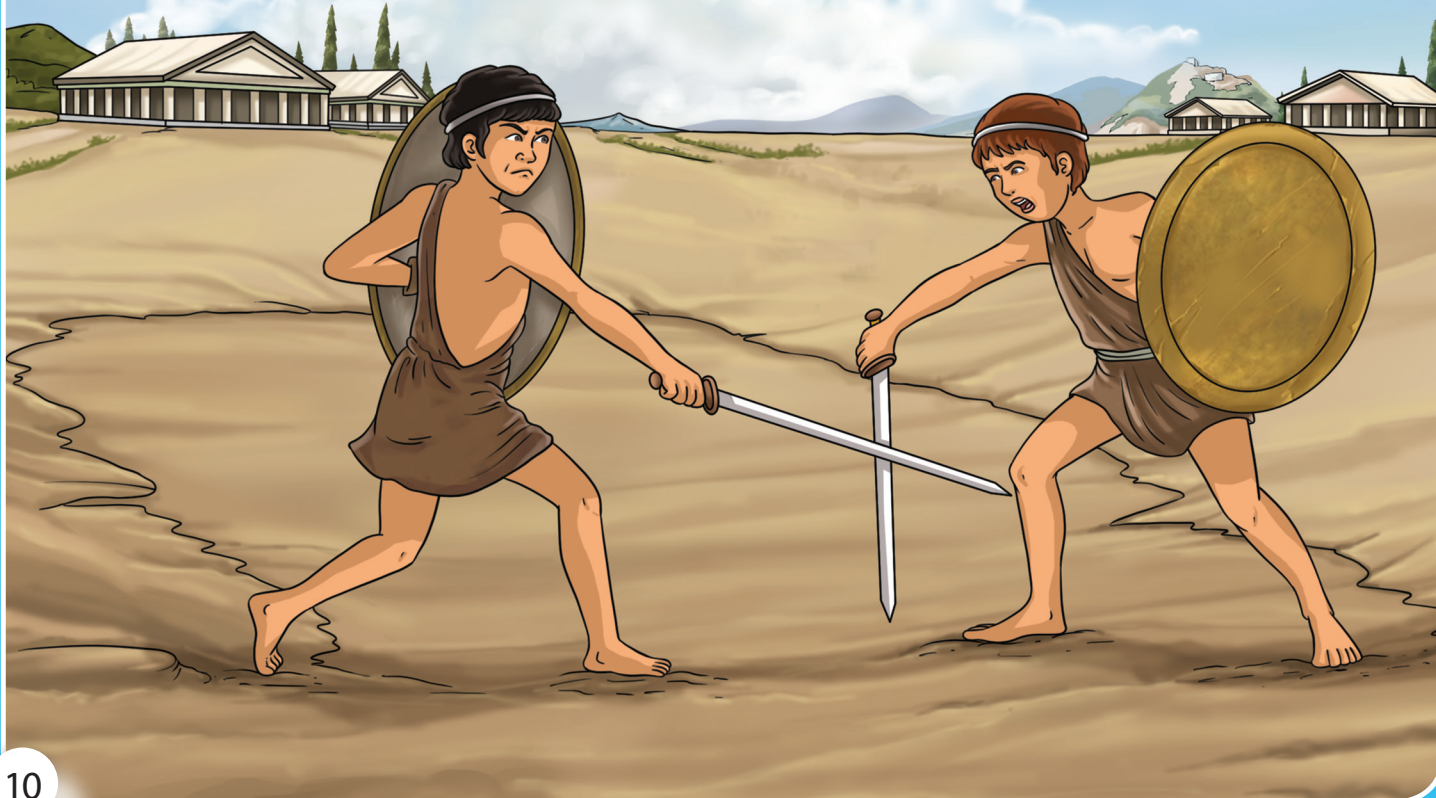
Life in Ancient Sparta

Sparta was a city-state about one hundred miles southwest of Athens. Unlike Athens, it was not near the sea. Sparta and Athens were, at times, enemies.

The government of Sparta included two kings, a council of elders, and an Assembly. The kings were in charge of the army. The Spartan Assembly could not discuss problems; its members could only vote yes or no.



The Spartans had a very different idea of what was important. They wanted their children to be tough. When they were seven years old, boys were sent away from home to train to become soldiers. Spartan boys were not allowed to wear shoes, and they were taught to accept pain. The training included becoming part of a group of soldiers called a phalanx. The soldiers in a phalanx were very loyal to one another.



Spartans raised their young men to be soldiers, so there was little time for writing and poetry. When Spartan boys became teenagers, they were given half as much food to eat. This meant they had to learn to find their own food. Spartan men had to do twenty-three years of army training.



Spartan women had more rights than Athenian women. They could own land, and some could read and write. Spartan women learned to ride and play a musical instrument. They also did lots of sports, such as running and gymnastics. Once they became mothers, Spartan women were expected to raise their sons to be brave warriors. Like the people of Athens, the Spartans also had slaves.



The Persian Wars

About 2,500 years ago, the king of Persia and his army invaded Greece and tried to conquer it. The Persians were from what is modern-day Iran. The Persians came in boats across the Aegean Sea. They had many more soldiers than the Greeks.

Two of the most important battles were the Battle of Marathon and the Battle of Thermopylae. At the Battle of Marathon, the Greek army was much smaller, but they fought bravely and cleverly. The Greeks defeated the Persians, who escaped to their boats and sailed away.



According to the legend, after the Battle of Marathon, a messenger ran all the way from Marathon to Athens to bring news of the victory. The messenger fell down and died after he had delivered his message. The distance between Marathon and Athens is twenty-six miles. This is the distance runners now cover in marathon races.



The Persians did not stay away forever. They came back with a mighty army to try once more to defeat the Greeks. To beat the Persians, Athens and Sparta agreed to join together. They also had a plan.

To get to southern Greece, the Persian army had to go through a narrow pass along the coast at a place called Thermopylae. Only a few Persians could go through the pass at one time. The Greeks knew that if they could block the pass at Thermopylae, they could slow the Persians down. And this is what they did.



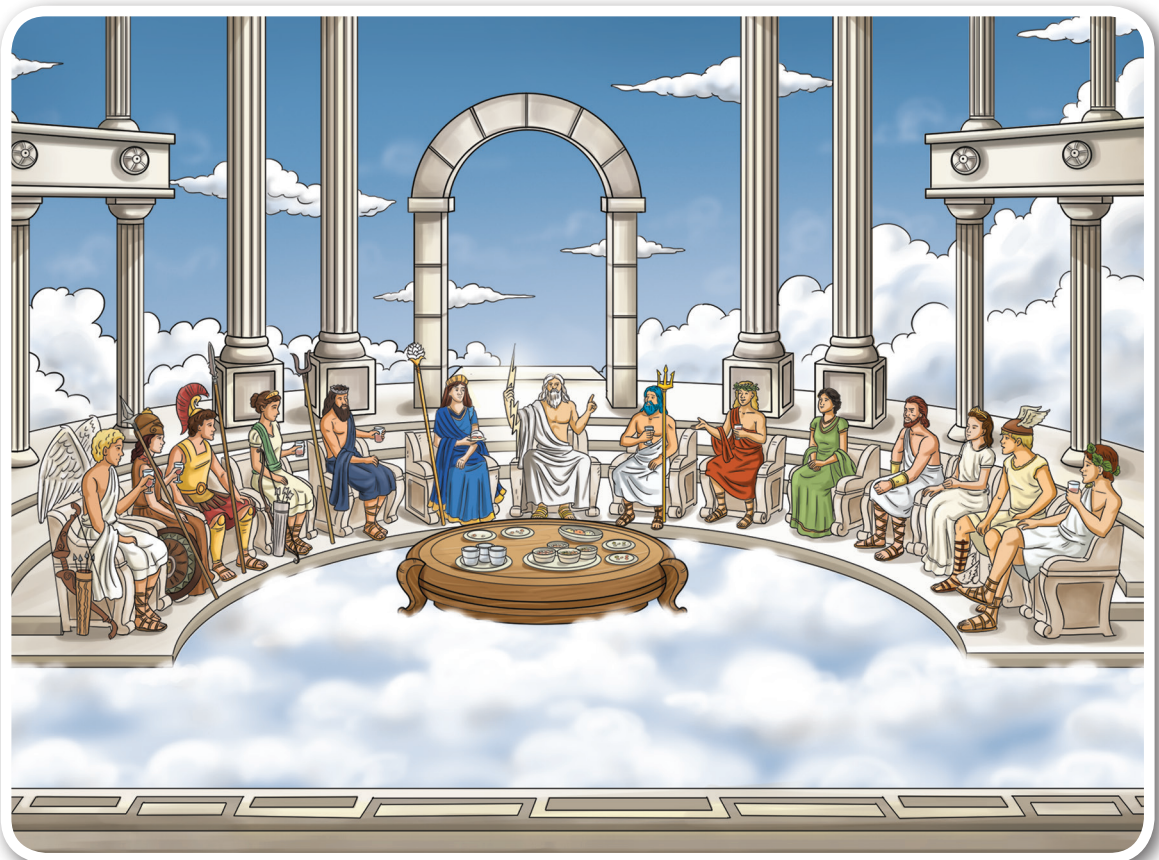
Over three days, the Greeks killed thousands of Persians. But then the Persians found another path through. The Greek leader at Thermopylae was Leonidas, one of the two kings of Sparta. When he saw it was hopeless, Leonidas told most of the Greeks to retreat. But the soldiers from Sparta and some others stayed with him. They fought bravely, but there were too many Persians. All of the Greek soldiers were killed. This is not the end of the story though. Eventually, the Greeks defeated the Persians, who were driven out of Greece forever.



Gods and Goddesses

The ancient Greeks worshipped many gods and goddesses. They believed that these gods and goddesses controlled the world and that it was important to honor them. Mount Olympus is the highest mountain in Greece. The ancient Greeks believed that their gods and goddesses lived at the top of Mount Olympus, or in the air above it. They also believed that the gods lived there happily drinking a delicious drink called nectar and eating a food called ambrosia.

Let's meet some of the most important Greek gods and goddesses.



Zeus was the king of the gods and the strongest of them all. He controlled the weather. Zeus had a terrible temper. He carried a thunderbolt around with him, and a bucketful of thunderbolts sat next to his throne on Olympus. When he was angry, he would throw thunderbolts at Earth or at people who made him mad.

Hera was the queen of the gods. Ancient Greeks believed she ruled over the heavens. Hera was also the goddess of marriage and birth. Hera was worshipped in all parts of Greece, and temples were built in her honor. Hera could be jealous, though, and often became angry with Zeus.



Poseidon was Zeus's brother. When Zeus became king of the gods, Poseidon became the ruler of the sea. Poseidon had blue eyes and long hair the color of the sea. He carried a tall, three-pointed spear called a trident. Poseidon was important to the Greeks because he controlled the sea and could either let them have safe journeys or cause shipwrecks.





Hades

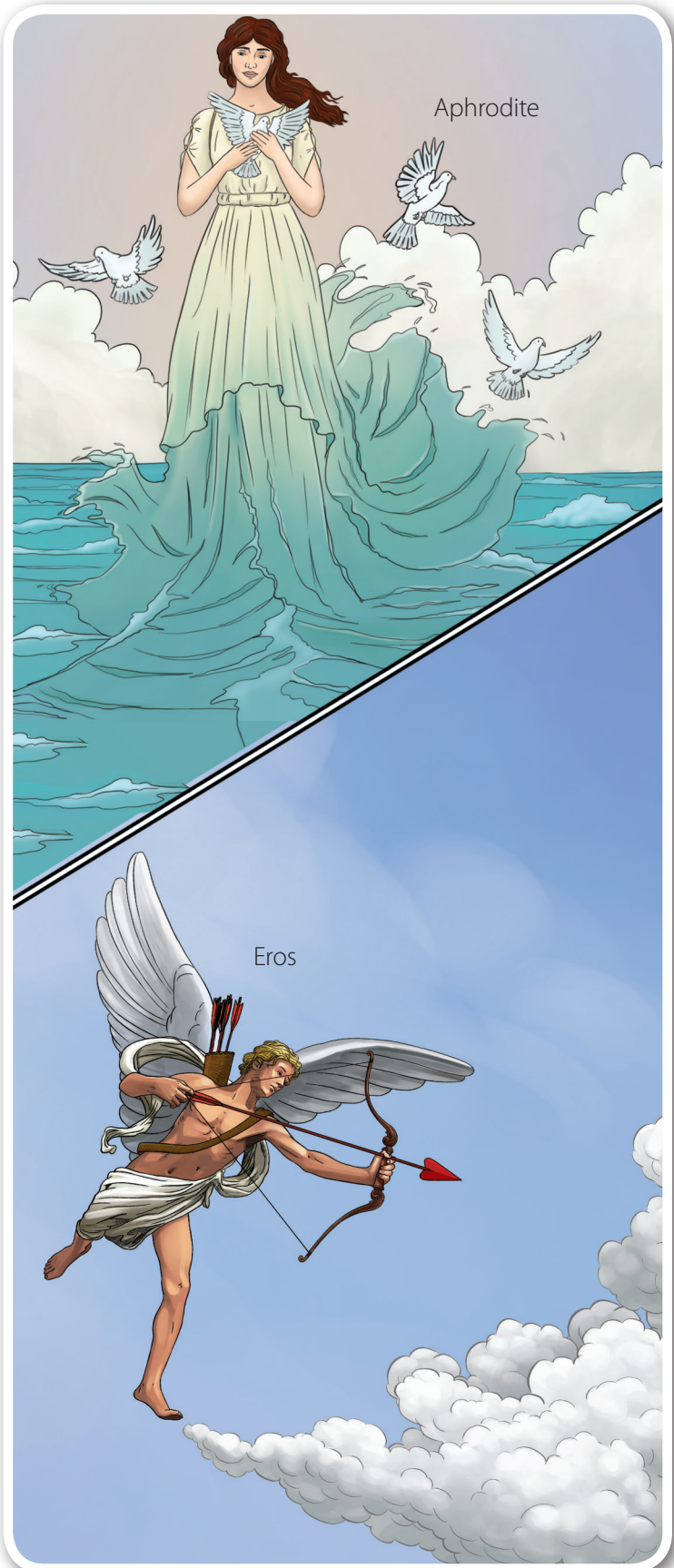


Apollo

Hades was another one of Zeus's brothers. He was the king of the underworld, where the Greeks believed all people went after they died. He was also the god of wealth, because precious metals and gems come from deep inside the earth. Hades had a special hat that made him invisible whenever he put it on.

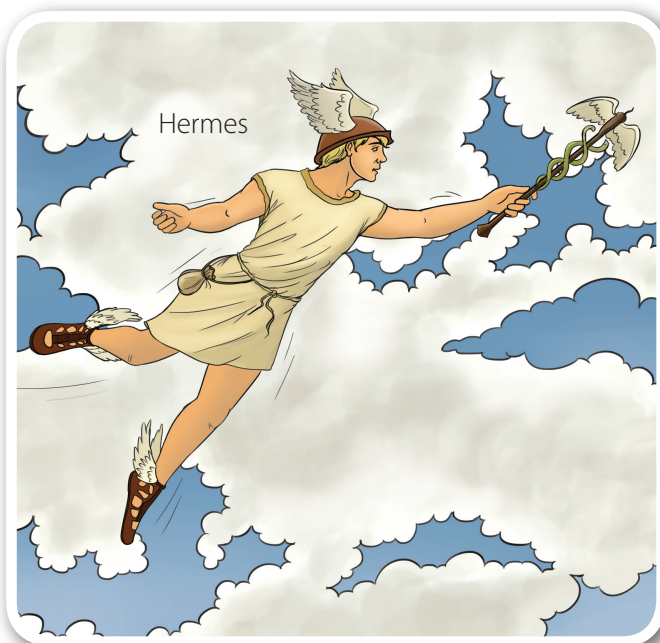
Apollo was one of the sons of Zeus. He was the god of medicine and poetry. The other gods loved to listen to him make beautiful music by singing and plucking the strings of his golden lyre. The Greeks admired Apollo and visited temples built in his honor to ask for his advice.

The goddess Aphrodite was born from the foam of the sea. She was the goddess of love and beauty, and of course she was very beautiful. Aphrodite had a son named Eros. Eros helped his mother spread the power of love by making people fall in love with each other.



Eros had a bow and arrows, and when he shot one of his arrows into someone's heart, that person would fall in love with the first person he or she saw. Later on, in ancient Rome, Eros was known as Cupid.

Athena was another goddess who was born in a very unusual way. One day she jumped right out of the head of Zeus! Athena wore armor and a golden helmet. She carried a special shield. Anyone who looked at the shield was turned to stone. Athena was the goddess of Greek cities, war, cleverness, and wisdom. The city of Athens was named for her, and the Parthenon temple in Athens was built to honor her.



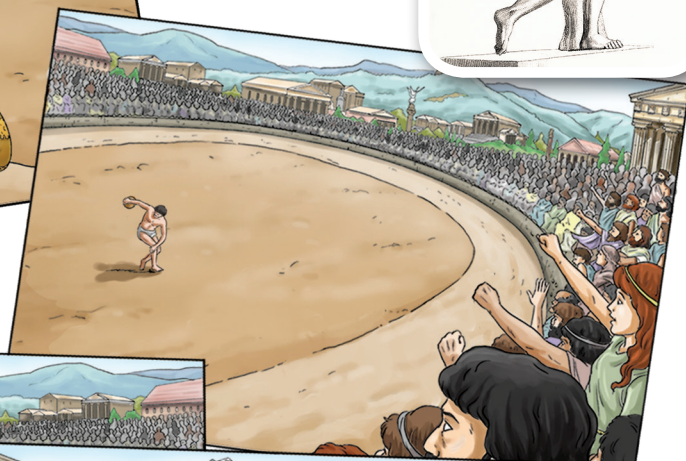
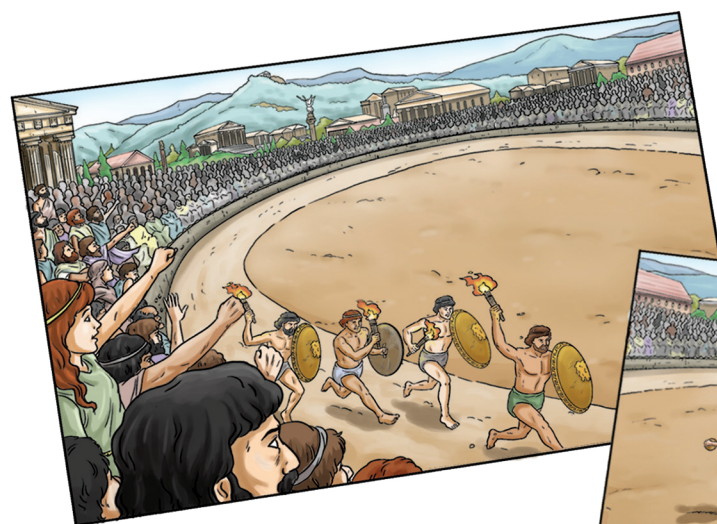
Hermes was one of Zeus's sons. He was the messenger of Zeus and could run and fly very quickly. Both his hat and sandals had wings on them, and he carried a magic wand. Hermes was the god of shepherds, travelers, merchants, and thieves. He was the cleverest of all the gods.

The Olympic Games

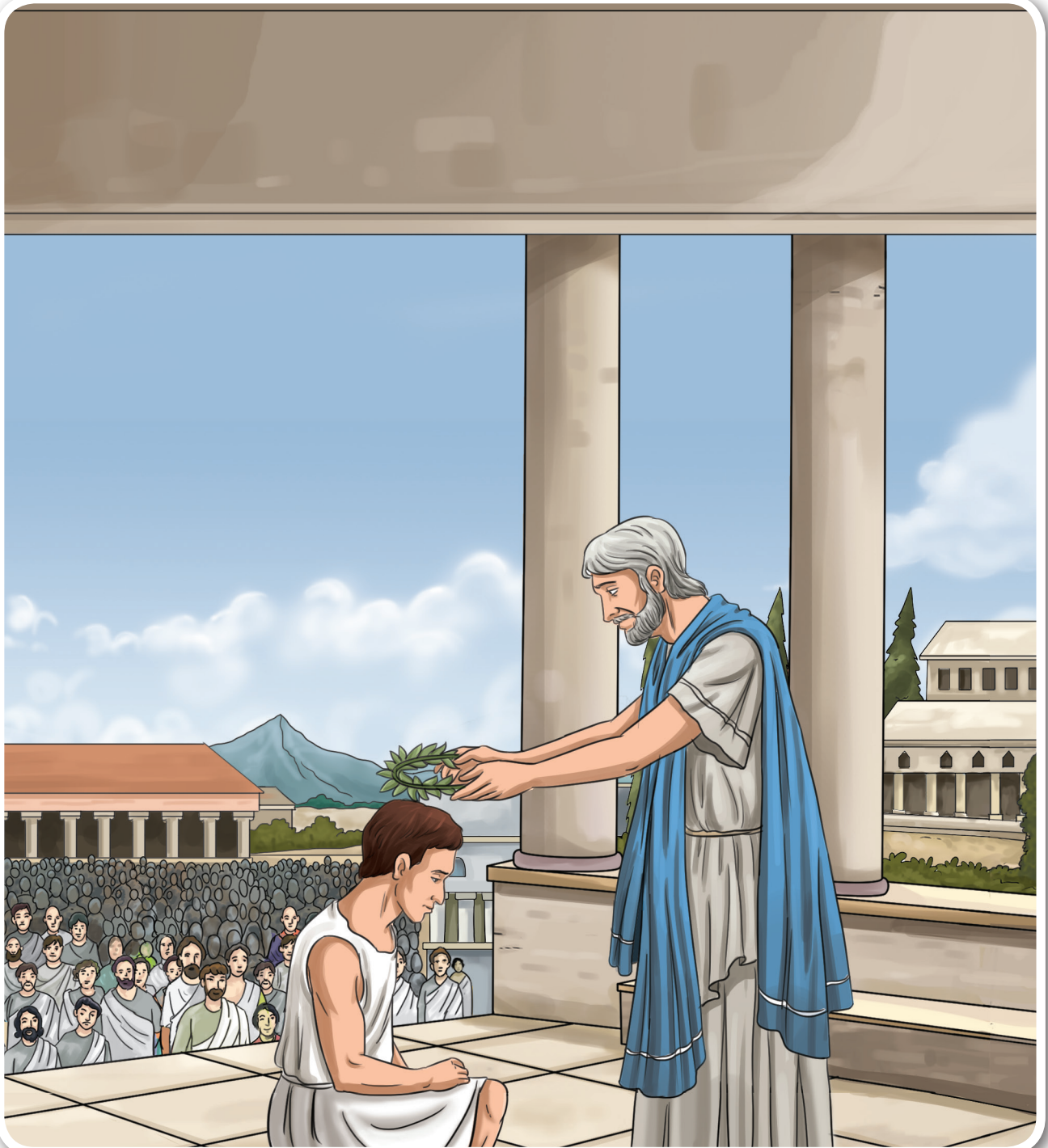
The Olympic Games were an important athletic competition in ancient Greece and were held every four years. Our modern Olympic Games are based on these ancient games, which took place in the Greek city of Olympia. The Olympic Games began as part of a religious festival honoring the god Zeus.



At first, only local athletes took part, and there was only one event—a footrace the length of the stadium. But as the games grew more popular, athletes came from farther and farther away, and more events were added. Eventually all of the Greek city-states took part in footraces, as well as in discus and javelin (a kind of spear) throwing. There were also competitions in jumping, wrestling, boxing, and horse and chariot races.



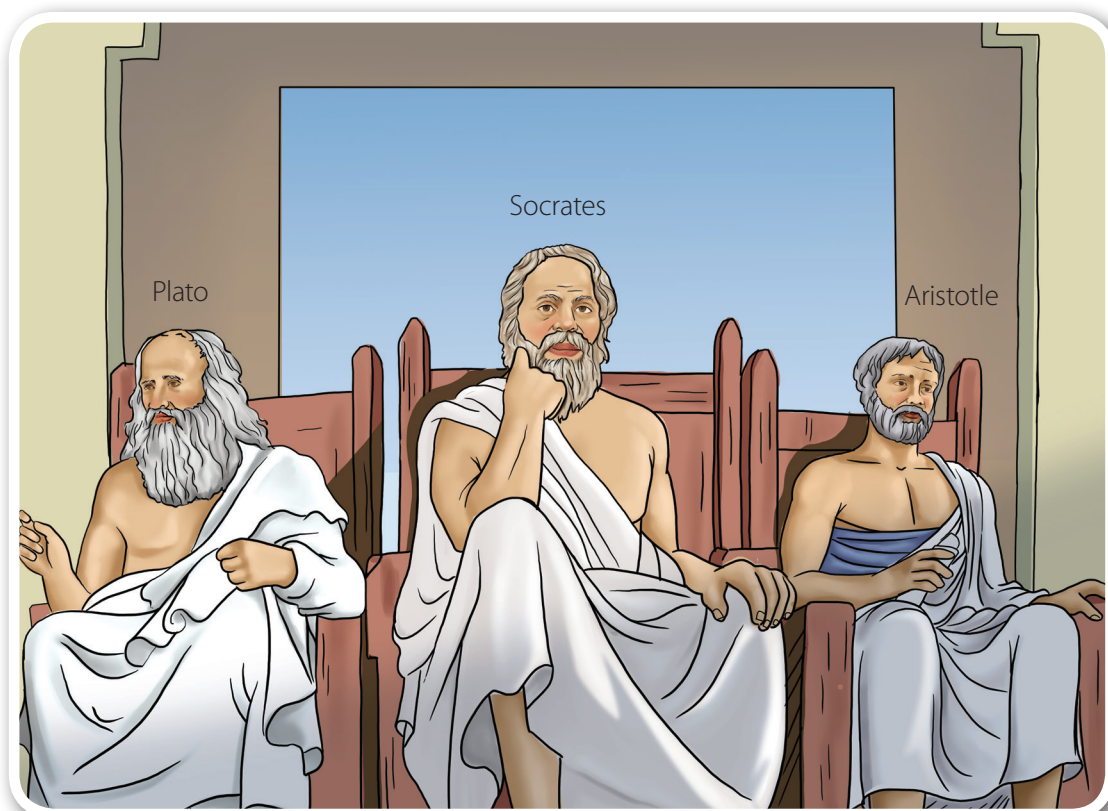
The official prize for winning an event at the Olympics was a wreath of olive leaves, which was placed on the head of the victor. But the real prize was honor. A victorious athlete would almost certainly become a hero in his native city-state.



The Great Thinkers

The ancient Greeks loved learning. Part of learning is finding new ways to look at and think about things. Some ancient Greeks spent their lives doing this. They shared their ideas with others, and those ideas are still with us today. Three of the greatest thinkers of ancient Greece were Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. They lived mostly in Athens. All three of these thinkers had students who believed in their ideas. These students spread what they learned far and wide.

Let's meet these three great thinkers whose ideas and writings are still important today.



Socrates was a stoneworker, but he was also a philosopher. The word *philosopher* comes from the Greek word *philosophia*, meaning “love of wisdom.” Unlike other teachers, Socrates did not just tell his students things—he also asked lots of questions. He wanted students to figure out answers for themselves.

If one of his students was talking about justice, Socrates would ask him what he meant by justice. The student would try to explain. Then Socrates would ask even more questions. Socrates believed that by asking questions and searching for answers, he helped people understand things more clearly.

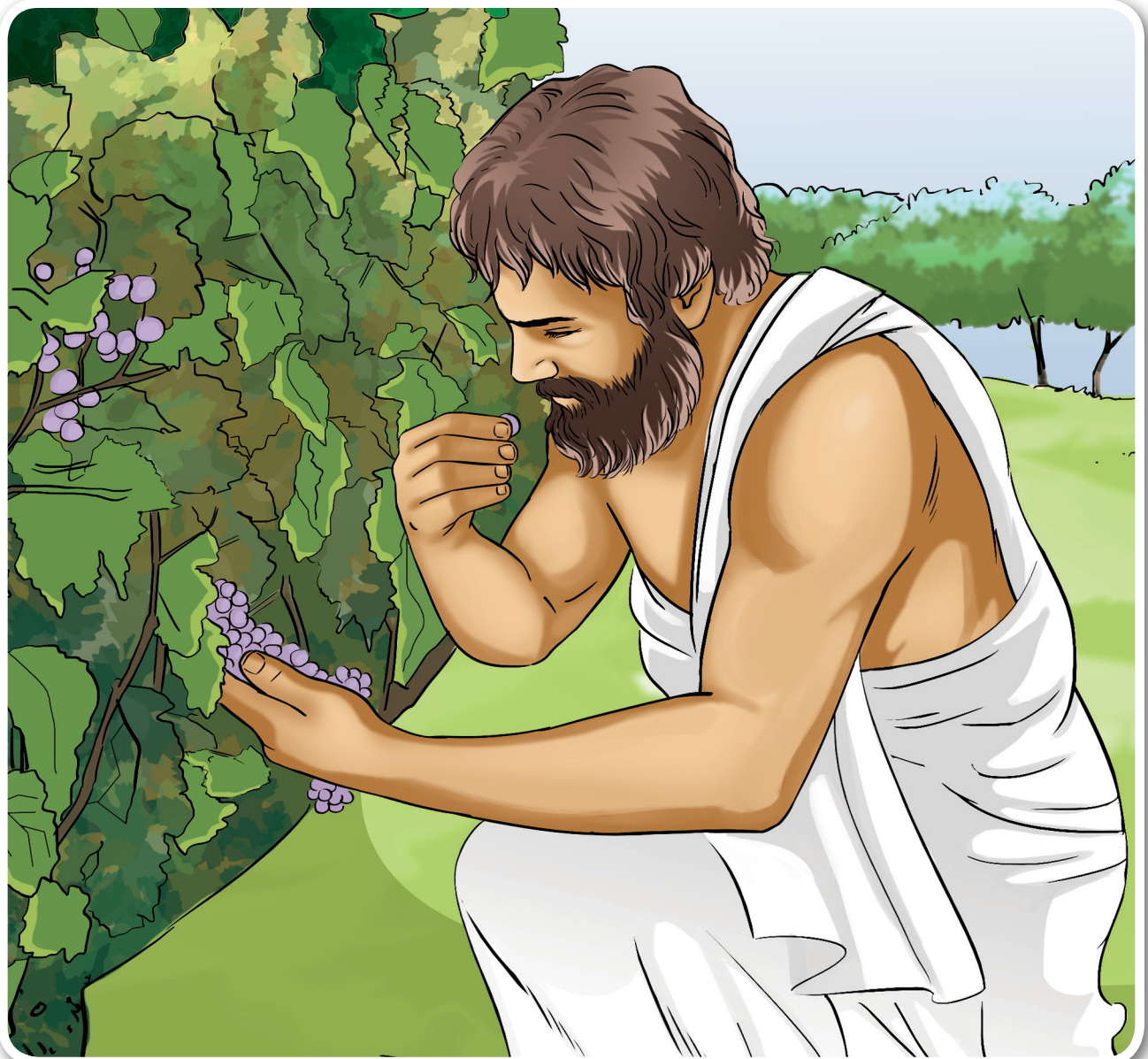


Plato was one of Socrates's students. Plato loved thinking about the questions Socrates asked. But as well as being a great thinker, Plato was a writer.

After Socrates died, Plato wrote down some of the conversations Socrates had with him and with other students. But that was not enough for Plato. Next, he tried to imagine what Socrates would say about subjects they had not talked about. Plato wrote down about thirty of these imaginary conversations, which people still read today.



Aristotle was one of Plato's students. Aristotle searched for knowledge by collecting and examining insects, animals, and plants. Aristotle believed that there is always more than one way to explain things. For example, an animal could be understood by what it looked like, what it was made of, how it moved, and what it could do. Without realizing it, Aristotle was creating the beginning of scientific research.



Alexander the Great

One of Aristotle's students became perhaps the most famous man in the world at the time. His name was Alexander. Alexander's father was Philip II, the king of Macedonia. When Alexander was about twenty years old, his father was killed, and Alexander became king.

Alexander went on to conquer more land than anyone had ever done before. He became richer than anyone else. And he ruled more people than any previous king. For these reasons, we call him Alexander the Great.



Alexander was a strong, intelligent king, and he was also a fearless fighter. One of the first things he did when he became king was to attack Greece's old enemies, the Persians. At the time, Alexander just had a small army, and he did not have a navy. Alexander faced the Persian king, Darius III, in a battle and was so fierce that the king and the Persian army fled. Alexander won a great victory. Over time, Alexander went on to conquer all of the Persian Empire, the largest and most powerful empire of its time.



Having conquered a lot of land, Alexander returned to Babylon, a major city in Mesopotamia and the center of his new empire. Alexander began to make plans for more projects, including building new cities. Sadly, Alexander caught a fever and died. He was only thirty-three years old. Alexander is among the most brilliant military leaders the world has ever known. He never lost a battle, and he never gave up.



According to a famous legend, one day Alexander and his army arrived in a city called Gordium. In the middle of the city there was a chariot tied up in such a way that the knot was very difficult to undo. People said whoever could undo the knot would rule the world.

Alexander looked at the knot but could not at first see how to undo it. Then he had an idea. He drew out his sword and split the knot apart. Alexander had proved himself worthy of ruling the world! Today, when we say someone has cut “the Gordian knot,” we mean that the person has found a clever way to solve a problem.



Another story tells of Alexander's horse, Bucephalus. As the story goes, when Alexander was a boy, a beautiful, black horse was brought to his father, the king. But no one, not even the king, could ride the horse. Alexander stepped forward and asked if he could try. It seems Alexander had noticed that Bucephalus was afraid of his shadow. Alexander turned the horse around to face the sun so that the horse could not see his shadow. Then Alexander jumped onto the horse and rode off. When Alexander grew up, he rode Bucephalus into battle.





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