

## SOCRATES ON TRIAL: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

At the time of his trial in 399 B.C., Socrates was 70 years old. He had lived through the Periclean age when Athens was at the height of her cultural and political power. The age of Athens, or the Classical age, began in 462 or 450 or 445 B.C. and lasted until 404 B.C. when Athens was defeated by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. Almost everything associated with Greek culture occurred during these 50 years; the great words of Greek tragedy and comedy, the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes; great architecture; the Acropolis and the rebuilding of the Agora.

The brilliant leader Pericles came into power in a popular democratic movement. Under his leadership, the Assembly became the central power of the state and served as a law court, hearing major cases. The Assembly consisted of all the free-born male citizens over the age of 18.

In 431 B.C., the war between Sparta and Athens broke out. Pericles died in the second year of the war, and by 404 B.C., Athens' defeat ended her navy, her democracy and her cultural glory. In that year, Athens surrendered to the Spartans. They then installed their own oligarchic government and the Thirty Tyrants, or simply the Thirty, as they came to be called, established a regime of terror. The leader of the Thirty, Critias, a pupil and associate of Socrates, killed and murdered Athenians from the middle class and poor. The democrats fled Athens (Socrates remained in the city), organized and retook the city the following year, reestablishing the democracy. In 403 B.C., an amnesty was declared. Crimes committed against the state before that year could not be prosecuted. Members of the Thirty were granted amnesty also, but chose to flee the city and sought refuge in a small village called Eleusis. There they organized and planned to attack Athens. The Athenians discovered the plan, executed the leaders, and extended amnesty to the rest. In 401 B.C. two years before Socrates trial, an uneasy peace finally came to Athens.

### ATHENIAN STATE RELIGION

The Greek state religion could not be separated from the proper working of society. Religion pervaded all forms of festivals, statues all over the city and each individual's worship of the gods. In this way, the individual was keeping the city under the protection of the gods. At the end of the fifth century, after the amnesty, many different cults were introduced and they all received official state recognition. The State religion was based on the belief that the good of the community was paramount.

### ATHENIAN LEGAL SYSTEM

Socrates was tried by 501 of his peers. Private individuals brought actions on behalf of the State. Socrates' prosecutor was Meletus, backed by Anytus and Lycon. Of Lycon and Meletus, little is known, but Anytus was a prominent and popular democrat, who had fought to restore the democracy and who had promoted the amnesty of 403 B.C.

### ATHENIAN EDUCATION

Up until 450 B.C., the State, one's parents and society, had been the teachers. But gradually, professional teachers, called sophists, began to take over. They taught those rich enough to pay the skills of rhetoric, music, and martial arts, among other subjects. Their teachings were thought to subvert the fabric of society. The state was under attack and the intellectuals were blamed. The common Greek belief was that anything a pupil says is attributable to the teacher.