Aristotle’s Athenian Constitution

About the Reading: The famous Greek thinker Aristotle wrote about many different subjects, including poetry, history, and science. Around 350 BC, he collected information about the constitutions then in use by different Greek city-states. Aristotle knew Athens well. He moved to that city-state as a teenager and was a teacher there for many years.

Part 41 – Aristotle describing Athens’ democracy.

The democracy has made itself master of everything and runs everything by its votes in the Assembly and by the law-courts, in which it holds the supreme power. Even the jurisdiction of the Council has passed into the hands of the people at large; and this appears to be a wise change, since small bodies are more open to corruption, whether by actual money or influence, than large ones. At first they refused to allow payment for attendance at the Assembly; but the result was that people did not attend. Then, after many ways to get citizens to vote failed, it was agreed to pay a certain amount to each citizen who voted.

Part 42 – Here Aristotle describes the training a boy receives in order to become a citizen of Athens.

The present state of the constitution is as follows. The franchise is open to all who are of citizen birth by both parents. They are enrolled...at the age of eighteen. On the occasion of their enrollment the demesmen give their votes on oath, first whether the candidates appear to be of the age required by law, and secondly whether the candidate is free born and of such parentage as the laws require...

Under the charge of a guardian, the youths first of all make the circuit of the temples; then they proceed to Piraeus, and some of them garrison in Munichia and some on the south shore. The Assembly also elects two trainers with subordinate instructors, who teach them to fight in heavy armour, to use the bow and javelin, and to discharge a catapult. These guardians receive from the state a drachma apiece their keep, and the youths four obols apiece...In this way they spend the first year.

The next year, after giving a public display of their military training...they receive a shield and spear from the state; after which they patrol the country and spend their time in the forts. For these two years they are on garrison duty, and wear the military cloak, and during this time they are exempt from all taxes...When the two years have elapsed they then take their position among the other citizens. Such is the manner of enrollment of the citizens and the training of youths.
Directions: Answer the following questions using POQ Sentences

1. How did the government in Athens get people to come and vote on issues?

2. What two things do the demesmen have to approve for each boy trying to become a citizen?

3. Describe what a citizen must do in their first year of training.

4. What must citizens do in their second year of training?

5. What are some changes you could make to the Athenian Constitution to make it better?

6. Aristotle believed that a larger group of citizens would not be as “open to corruption” as a small group. Do you agree? Explain why or why not.