

## The Life of Socrates

Socrates was the first of the three great Athenian philosophers (the other two are Plato and Aristotle). Socrates was born in Athens in 469 BC, so he lived through the time of Pericles and the Athenian Empire, though he was too young to remember the battles of Marathon or Salamis. He was not from a rich family. His father was probably a stone-carver, and Socrates also worked in stone, especially as a not-very-good sculptor. Socrates' mother was a midwife. When the Peloponnesian War began, Socrates fought bravely for Athens. We do not have any surviving pictures of Socrates that were made while he was alive, or by anyone who ever saw him, but he is supposed to have been ugly.

But when Socrates was in his forties or so, he began to feel an urge to think about the world around him, and try to answer some difficult questions. He asked, "What is wisdom?" and "What is beauty?" and "What is the right thing to do?" He knew that these questions were hard to answer, and he thought it would be better to have a lot of people discuss the answers together, so that they might come up with more ideas. So he began to go around Athens asking people he met these questions, "What is wisdom?", "What is piety?", and so forth. Sometimes the people just said they were busy, but sometimes they would try to answer him. Then Socrates would try to teach them to think better by asking them more questions which showed them the problems in their logic. Often this made people angry. Sometimes they even tried to beat him up.

Socrates soon had a group of young men who listened to him and learned from him how to think. Plato was one of these young men. Socrates never charged them any money. But in 399 BC, some of the Athenians got mad at Socrates for what he was teaching the young men. They charged him in court with impiety (not respecting the gods) and corrupting the youth (teaching young men bad things). People thought he was against democracy, and he probably was - he thought the smartest people should make the decisions for everyone. The Athenians couldn't charge him with being against democracy, because they had promised not to take revenge on anyone after the Peloponnesian War. So they had to use these vague religious charges instead.

Socrates had a big trial in front of an Athenian jury. He was convicted of these charges and sentenced to death, and he died soon afterwards, when the guards gave him a cup of hemlock (a poisonous plant) to drink. Socrates never wrote down any of his ideas while he was alive. But after he died, his student, Plato, did write down some of what Socrates had said. Socrates never wrote down any of ideas. But today people who read Plato's stories about him still learn from his teachings and his method of asking questions.