



Western Civilization from Prehistory to 1650

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TOPIC 4.1. GREEK CIVILIZATION: THE CITY STATE

Supplement to Chambers, *The Western Experience*, Chapter 2: The Forming of Greek Civilization, pp. 37-66, or McKay, *A History of Western Society*, Chapter 3: The Legacy of Greece, pp. 53-78.

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| <p>AEGEAN CIVILIZATION: Background For Greek Culture</p> | <p>A principal source of the Western tradition, Greek civilization was preceded by an advanced civilization located on the lands surrounding the Aegean Sea from about 2000 B.C. to 1200 B.C.</p> <p>MINOAN CIVILIZATION (2000-1450 B.C.) was centered in Crete and spread to the Aegean Islands, to Troy in Asia Minor, and to Greece. Minoan prosperity was based on large-scale trade involving ships. Exports were olive oil, wine, metal ware, and pottery. Trade was the monopoly of an efficient, bureaucratic government under a powerful ruler. The palace at Knossos was furnished with running water and had a sanitation system.</p> <p>MYCENAEAN CIVILIZATION (1450-1200 B.C...) was characterized by political centralization, wide-ranging commerce, sophisticated art forms (including monumental architecture), and writing. Mycenaean centers were fortified palaces and administrative centers, not true cities. The bulk of the population lived in scattered villages where they worked communal land or land held by nobles or kings. Trade was a royal monopoly and the most important income item was olive oil.</p> |
| <p>HELLENIC CIVILIZATION Geographic Factors</p> | <p>Geographic factors played an important role in Greek history. Numerous MOUNTAIN RANGES, which crisscross the peninsula, hampered internal communications and led to the development of independent city-states. Numerous ISLANDS and the indented coastlines of the Greek peninsula and of Asia Minor stimulated a seagoing trade. The ROCKY SOIL (less than a fifth of Greece is arable) and limited natural resources encouraged the Greeks to establish colonies abroad.</p> |
| <p>Homeric Age</p> | <p>During the Greek Dark Ages (c. 1150-750 B.C.), the values that gave meaning to life were predominantly HEROIC VALUES: the strength, skill, and valor of the warrior. This was the earliest meaning of <i>arête</i> (excellence or virtue). GODS were plainly human (e.g., Zeus, the king of the gods, and Hera, his wife, plotted against each other). SOCIETY was clearly aristocratic. Only the <i>aristoi</i> (aristocrats) possessed <i>arête</i>. The common man had political rights as a member of the assembly, but it was only summoned in a crisis. The king was chief among his peers (fellow nobles) and the nobles sat in the king's council to advise him. ECONOMIC CONDITIONS were those of a simple, self-sufficient agricultural system.</p> |
| <p>Political Evolution of the City State</p> | <p>The <i>POLIS</i> (city-state) consisted of a city and its surrounding plains and valleys. The nucleus of the <i>polis</i> was the elevated, fortified site called the <i>ACROPOLIS</i> where people could take refuge from attack. With the revival of commerce, a TRADING CENTER developed below the acropolis.</p> <p>Four major TYPES OF GOVERNMENT evolved:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Monarchy limited by an aristocratic council and a popular assembly. ■ Oligarchy (rule of the few) arising when the aristocratic council ousted the king and abolished the assembly. ■ Tyranny imposed by one man who rode to power on the discontent of the lower classes. ■ Democracy (rule of the people), the outstanding political achievement of the Greeks. |
| <p>ATHENIAN</p> | <p>By the middle of the 8th century B.C., the nobles, who resented the power of the tribal king, had taken over the government, ushering in the AGE OF OLIGARCHY. Nobles ruthlessly</p> |

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| <p>DEMOCRACY Age of Oligarchy</p> | <p>acquired the best land. Many commoners were reduced to virtual serfdom. Other commoners were forced to seek a living on rocky, barren soil.</p> |
| <p>Colonization</p> | <p>In time, COLONIZATION ameliorated Greece's economic and social problems. By 600 B.C., the use of coined money had created the beginnings of a middle class. The Greek home states focused on the production of specialized wares (vases, metal goods, textiles, olive oil, wine) for export.</p> |
| <p>Tyranny</p> | <p>The continuing land hunger of the peasants contributed to a POLITICAL REVOLUTION. After 650 B.C., TYRANTS arose in many Greek city-states and, supported by the peasantry and rising merchant class, seized the reigns of government from the nobility. Tyrants redistributed land to the peasants and by promoting further colonization, trade, and industry, accelerated the rise of the mercantile class and completed the ECONOMIC REVOLUTION.</p> |
| <p>Reform: Solon</p> | <p>When Athenian nobles realized their failure to reform would result in a tyrant, they agreed to the policy of compromise advocated by the liberal aristocrat SOLON. In 594 B.C., Solon was made sole <i>archon</i> (aristocratic magistrate) with board authority to reconcile the lower classes. Inspired by the new ideals of moderation and justice, Solon instituted MODERATE REFORMS. He provided a new start for the lower classes by canceling all debts, sought full employment by stimulating trade and industry and requiring fathers to teach their sons a trade, and granted common people political rights but not equality.</p> |
| <p>Pisistratus</p> | <p>Unfortunately, Solon's moderate reforms satisfied neither party and, after a period of civil strife, PISISTRATUS, a military hero and champion of the commoners, took over as tyrant. Pisistratus solved the economic problem by banishing many nobles, whose lands he distributed among the poor, and by promoting commerce and industry. He supported public works and the patronage of the arts, starting Athens on the path to cultural leadership in Greece.</p> |
| <p>Cleisthenes</p> | <p>CLEISTHENES temporarily seized power in 508 B.C. and put through constitutional reforms that destroyed the remaining power of the nobility. He disregarded the old noble-dominated tribes and created ten new ones, each embracing citizens of all classes and districts. The popular assembly acquired the right to initiate legislation. The new and democratic COUNCIL OF FIVE HUNDRED, selected by lot from the ten tribes, advised the assembly and supervised the administrative actions of the <i>archons</i>. Cleisthenes also started the institution of OSTRACISM (an annual referendum) in which a quorum of 6,000 citizens could vote to exile for ten years any individual thought to be a threat to Athenian democracy.</p> |
| <p>Pericles</p> | <p>During the GOLDEN AGE of Greece (461-429 B.C.), the great statesman PERICLES guided Athenian policy. Power resided in a board of ten elected generals. To insure that the poor could participate in government, Athens paid jurors (a panel of 6,000 citizens chosen annually by lot) and members of the Council.</p> <p>Although democracy was an outstanding achievement, it is important to keep in mind that the majority of the inhabitants of Athens were not recognized citizens. Women, slaves, and resident aliens were denied citizenship. These groups had no standing in the law courts. (If a woman sought the protection of the law, she had to ask a citizen to plead for her in court.)</p> |
| <p>SPARTAN TOTALITARIAN STATE</p> | <p>The city-state of Sparta expanded by conquering and enslaving its neighbors. To guard against revolts by the state slaves (helots), who worked the land, Sparta transformed itself into a militaristic TOTALITARIAN STATE. For the small minority of ruling Spartans, it was a democracy. For the masses, it was an oligarchy (rule by the few).</p> |
| <p>Subordination to the State</p> | <p>The state enforced ABSOLUTE SUBORDINATION of the individual to its will. Every Spartan was first of all a soldier. Sickly infants were left to die on lonely mountaintops. Boys were taken from their families at age 7 to live under rigorous military discipline. Girls were trained to be the mothers of warrior sons. Spartan women bid the men farewell by saying: "Come back with your shield or on it."</p> |

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| <p>Backward Culturally and Economically</p> | <p>Sparta remained BACKWARD culturally and economically. Trade and travel were prohibited for fear that alien ideas would disturb the status quo. A self-imposed isolation resulted in intellectual stagnation, rigid social conformity, and military regimentation.</p> |
| <p>Spartan League</p> | <p>To insure that its helots would remain uncontaminated by democratic ideas, Sparta formed the SPARTAN LEAGUE of oligarchic states.</p> |
| <p>PERSIAN WAR</p> | <p>When the Persians conquered Lydia in 547 B.C., they also annexed Ionia. In 499 B.C., the Ionian cities revolted, established democratic regimes, and appealed to the Athenians to help. The BATTLE OF MARATHON in 490 B.C. was a decisive victory for the Athenian army, which was half the size of the Persians. (6400 Persians died as opposed to 192 Athenians.) Ten years later, in the BAY OF SALAMIS, the Greek fleet (largely Athenian) turned the tide of victory and forced the Persians to retreat.</p> |
| <p>Delian League</p> | <p>In 478 B.C., Athens invited the city-states bordering on the Aegean to form a defensive alliance called the DELIAN LEAGUE. To maintain a 200 ship navy that would police the seas, each state was assessed ships or money in proportion to its wealth.</p> <p>By 468 B.C., after the Ionian cities had been liberated and the Persian fleet destroyed, various League members thought it unnecessary to continue the confederacy. Motivated by fear of the Persians and by the need to protect free-trade, the Athenians suppressed all attempt to secede and created an informal EMPIRE. By aiding in the suppression of local aristocratic factions within its subject states, Athens emerged as the leader of a union of democratic states. However, its HUBRIS (excessive pride) proved to be its undoing.</p> |
| <p>Spartan League</p> | <p>To many Greeks, especially the oligarchic SPARTAN LEAGUE and the aristocratic factions within the Athenian empire, Athens was a tyrant city and an enslaver of Greek liberties.</p> |
| <p>PELOPONNESIAN WAR</p> | <p>In 431 B.C., the Peloponnesian War broke out between the Spartan League and the Athenian empire. COMMERCIAL RIVALRY between Athens and Sparta's ally Corinth was an important factor. Real cause: SPARTAN FEAR of Athens' growth of power.</p> <p>Sparta's army had the ability to besiege Athens and lay waste to its fields. Athens' unrivaled navy could import foodstuffs and harass its enemies' costs. But in 2nd year of war, a plague killed a third of the Athenian population, including Pericles and leadership of the Athenian government passed to demagogues.</p> |
| <p>Athenian Imperialism</p> | <p>A compromise peace was reached in 421 B.C. During the succeeding period, Athenian IMPERIALISM manifested itself in its worst form. In 416 B.C., an expedition embarked for Melos, a neutral Aegean island, to force it to join the Athenian empire. Acting on the premise that "might makes right," the Athenians put all Melians of military age to death and sold the women and children into slavery. This exhibition of HUBRIS was their downfall.</p> |
| <p>Sparta Defeats Athens</p> | <p>The war was resumed in 425 B.C. with an Athenian expedition against Syracuse that was destined to end in disaster. Two great Athenian fleets and a large army were destroyed by the Syracusans, who were advised by a Spartan general. In 404 B.C., Athens capitulated after its last fleet was destroyed by a Spartan fleet built with money received from Persia in exchange for the Greek cities in Ionia. The once great city of Athens was stripped of its possessions and demilitarized.</p> |
| <p>The Aftermath of War</p> | <p>Anarchy and depression were the political and economic legacies of the war. The Spartans replaced democracies with oligarchies -- supported by Spartan troops. The excesses of these oligarchs led to revolutions, which Sparta could not suppress. Incessant warfare filled the early 4th century B.C. as a bewildering series of shifting alliances sought to keep any state from dominating.</p> |

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| <p><u>Presentation (Optional)</u></p> <p>The Macedonian Unification of Greece</p> | <p>Political disintegration contributed to economic and social ills during the 4th century B.C. Commerce and industry languished. The unemployed supported demagogues and radical schemes for the redistribution of wealth. The wealthy became increasingly reactionary and uncompromising. Even most intellectuals – including Plato and Aristotle – lost faith in democracy.</p> <p>An optional PowerPoint presentation and handout, which give additional details about life in ANCIENT GREECE, are also available in “Course Documents.”</p> <p>Macedonia, to the north of Greece, became a centralized, powerful state under Philip II (359-336 B.C.) Philip forced the Greeks into a federal league in which each state, while retaining self-government, swore to make war upon anyone who violated the general peace and to furnish men and supplies for a campaign against Persia. On the eve of setting out for Asia Minor, Philip was assassinated by a noble with a personal grudge, leaving the war against Persia to his brilliant son Alexander, who conquered the Persian Empire.</p> <p>Incapable of finding a solution to anarchy, the Greeks ended as political failures but retained their cultural leadership.</p> <p>Adapted from The Western Heritage by Donald Kagan et al.</p> |
| <p>ONLINE RESOURCES</p> | <p>For more information on Greek Civilization, explore one or more of the following online resources:</p> <p>Ancient Greek Civilizations: Good treatment of Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations as well as contrasts between Athens and Sparta. Be sure to check out The Women of Athens (includes “Typical Day of a Greek Housewife”) and The Women of Sparta (compares the life of a Spartan woman to that of an Athenian woman).</p> <p>The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization: Excellent introduction to ancient Greek history, culture, politics, art and warfare, timeline from 1400 BC. There are Flash-enhanced (multimedia) and HTML versions of the site.</p> <p>How Democratic Was Athens? An interesting analysis of democracy in Athens.</p> <p>Daily Life in Ancient Greece: Covers many aspects of Greek life, including school, housing, clothing, marriage, family life, etc. Intended for children, but very informative.</p> <p>The Ancient City of Athens: A photographic archive of the archaeological and architectural remains of ancient Athens.</p> <p>The Ancient Greek World: Summary of topics relating to Ancient Greece, including history, daily life, religion and death.</p> |
| <p>DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:</p> | <p>Drawing on the resources you have had an opportunity to explore (textbook, course documents, online resources, library resources), answer one or more of the following questions:</p> <p>Contrast the economic and political institutions of ancient Egypt and ancient Greece. In what ways did regional geography influence the development of these civilizations?</p> <p>How do you explain the development of such an extraordinary civilization by the Greeks? Do you think much of the credit belongs to some sort of Greek "spirit," or were geographic factors more important?</p> <p>Compare the fundamental political, social, and economic institutions of Athens and Sparta before the Peloponnesian War. Why did Sparta develop its unique form of government? How do you account for Athens’ superiority in art, literature, and</p> |

philosophy?

Explain why many ancient Greek philosophers and writers admired the Spartan way of government more than Athenian democracy.

Two Greek words *ARÊTE* (excellence) and *HUBRIS* (excessive pride) had special meanings to the ancient Greeks and are used today to describe Athens's cultural achievements and its downfall. Give examples of *arête* and *hubris* in the modern world.

"It is a mistake to be so admiring of the ancient Greeks. We think highly of their civilization only because it resembles our own in some ways, and we overlook the fact that it was based upon slave labor, the subjection of women, and almost perpetual warfare." Do you agree or disagree? Why?

What special insights have you gained from your study of Greek Civilization?