CHAPTER 2 - THE RISE OF GREEK CIVILIZATION

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The chapter begins by stressing the importance of the ancient Greeks to the history of Western Civilization. Although Greek civilization was centered in the lands surrounding the Aegean Sea, the Greeks spread their culture throughout the Mediterranean area and even into the Black Sea region, coming into contact with the older civilizations of the Near East.

For Greek civilization, the Bronze Age (2900-1150 B.C.E.) was centered in two regions: on the island of Crete and on the mainland of Greece itself. The people of Crete were not Greek, but had a great influence on early Greece. Our knowledge of civilization on Crete (labeled Minoan by its primary excavator Sir Arthur Evans) depends primarily on archaeological evidence obtained at Cnossus and a few other sites in central and eastern Crete. The palace complex at Cnossus is an intricate structure, labyrinthine in nature, but without defensive walls. The evidence reveals a secure, optimistic society whose gaily painted pottery was widely admired and exported.

Three distinct kinds of writing, preserved on clay tablets, have added to our knowledge of Minoan civilization. Most important are Linear A which is still undeciphered, and Linear B which was shown to be an early form of Greek. The tablets reveal a civilization ruled by a king with an extensive bureaucracy. Moreover, the use of the Greek language shows that in its last years, ca. 1400-1200 B.C.E., Crete was ruled by invaders from the mainland.

The civilization on the mainland which flourished from ca. 1400-1200 was centered in the city of Mycenae and is called Mycenaean. The Mycenaeans, in contrast to the Minoans, were more warlike and constructed strong defensive walls. This was a wealthy society which traded with Crete and the eastern Mediterranean; the Mycenaean Greeks probably plundered Troy about 1250 B.C.E., a war which Homer immortalized in his poems. For an analysis of the artistic style of the period, see the section entitled Art & the West: The Dipylon Vase.

Between 1200 and 1100 B.C.E., the Mycenaean world was shaken and destroyed by a catastrophe, traditionally attributed to an invasion by a northern people, the Dorians. Greece then entered into a period of decline called the "Greek Middle Ages" (1100-800 B.C.E.). The epic poems of Homer, although written about 750 B.C.E., depict the world of the ninth and tenth centuries, as well as of the earlier Mycenaean world.

The isolation and relative calm of the "middle ages" allowed the development of a unique Greek institution. The polis began to emerge between 800 and 750 B.C.E. Usually translated as "city-state," it was both more and less. Generally, it was a small independent political unit and was thought of by its citizens as a community of relatives, rather than an impersonal state. By about 750 B.C.E., the Greek poleis responded to population pressure by sending out colonies throughout the Mediterranean. These poleis retained only nominal ties with the mother, but such colonization encouraged trade and industry. The colonies adopted various forms of government, but several eventually fell to tyranny. A tyrant was not necessarily bad for a polis; he simply
assumed a dominant position in the polis extra legally. By the end of the sixth century, however, tyrants had been driven from all the cities of Greece and the most talented and active citizens were generally encouraged to take a full part in the life of the polis.

The chapter goes on to discuss the social structure of the period 750-500 B.C.E. Special attention is given to Hesiod (Works and Days) and his depiction of peasant life, as well as the aristocratic values as represented by the symposion and athletic contests.

At first, Sparta was not strikingly different from other Greek poleis, but about 725 B.C.E., the Spartans remedied population pressure, not by colonizing, but rather by invading neighboring Messenia and enslaving its inhabitants. These slaves, who outnumbered the Spartans perhaps ten to one, were called Helots. Their existence coupled with war against Argos about 650 B.C.E., changed forever the nature of the Spartan polis. The Spartans chose to introduce fundamental reforms, attributed to the legendary Lycurgus, which turned their city into a military academy and camp.

The chapter goes on to explain in detail the strict Spartan codes of discipline, ethics and education. The Spartan government was an unusual mixture of monarchy, oligarchy and democracy. The state was headed by two kings who commanded the armies, a council of elders, a steering committee of five ephors, who were elected annually, and an assembly of citizens (over thirty years of age) who ratified or rejected decisions of the ephors. The Spartan government was admired for its checks, balances and stability. Eventually, Sparta became head of a Peloponnesian League, which by 500 B.C.E., included every Peloponnesian state but Argos. Such an alliance gave Sparta security from extreme attack. But the constant threat of a Helot rebellion necessitated a conservative foreign policy. Sparta generally preferred not to get involved with the affairs of other Greek and foreign states.

The city-state of Athens developed quite differently from Sparta. In the seventh century, Athens was a typical aristocratic polis whose nobles served first as magistrates (archons) and then on the governing council (Areopagus). Towards the end of the century, quarrels within the nobility resulted in bloodshed. Draco's law code of 621 strengthened the hand of the state against the local power of the nobles.

A more serious problem was Athens' agrarian crisis. By planting wheat as a staple crop every year, Athenian farmers exhausted their land and were forced to borrow from wealthy neighbors, pledging first their land, then themselves and their families as collateral. As a result of many defaults, several formerly free farmers were enslaved and some were sold abroad. The poor demanded the abolition of debt and the redistribution of land.

In 594, the Athenians elected Solon as "sole archon" with extraordinary powers to remedy the problems. Solon canceled current debts and freed the debt slaves. His reforms included a division of the citizenry into four classes based on wealth, a new council to serve as a check on the Areopagus, and a popular court. He also encouraged the cultivation of a cash crop, olive oil, and fostered the growth of trade and industry.

Solon's efforts, however, were only temporarily successful. By 546, a tyrant named Pisistratus had achieved power in the state. The Pisistratids succeeded in increasing the power of the nobles. These tyrants maintained the institutions of Solon's government, were beneficial to the state, and very well-liked for the most part.
In 510, however, rival nobles succeeded (with the help of a Spartan army) in driving out the tyrants. With great popular support Clisthenes succeeded in overcoming his political opponents and established a democracy. This democracy eliminated many of the old regional rivalries and required that each citizen contribute his time and energy to the governance of the state, including fighting in the military and serving on juries. Clisthenes also created a new council of 500 and encouraged free and open debate in the assembly. Although his successes would give Athens an even more open and popular government, Clisthenes can be called the founder of Athenian democracy.

The chapter continues with an account of Greek religion and emphasizes its importance as a unifying factor among Greeks while noting its formality and lack of ethical teaching. The great changes of the Archaic Age were also reflected in the poetry. The lyric style, encouraging personal expression, predominated.

In the late sixth century, Greece not only faced foreign ideas, but also the threat of foreign conquest. The Persian empire had been created by Cyrus the Great in the mid-sixth century. His successors invaded Greece after Athenian aid to a rebellion in Ionia in 499 B.C.E. The Greeks repelled two invasions by the Persians in 490 and 480 B.C.E., and succeeded in defending their homeland and lifestyle; the stage was set for the achievements of Classical Greece.

KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS

1. The End of the Mycenaean World: The cause of the disaster that occurred about 1200 B.C.E. and sent the Greek world into decline cannot be known for certain. The Greeks spoke of an invasion by Dorians, but the lack of archaeological evidence has led some to suggest a social revolution as the cause for destruction. There is evidence, however, from the Linear B tablets that the Mycenaeans were expecting some kind of invasion from the Northwest; also, the population from Greece drained to the eastern islands and the Ionian coast. It's certain, however, that Greece was not isolated in this catastrophe. The Hittites in Anatolia were eradicated and the Egyptian records relate attacks from "Sea Peoples" and others both before and after 1200.

2. Development of the polis: The polis was an independent unit ruled by a variety of governments: monarchy, oligarchy, democracy, tyranny, etc. In Athens, where the government progressed from monarchy to oligarchy to tyranny to democracy, the polis had an ethical purpose. As Aristotle noted, only in a polis, living under law, could man curb his baser instincts and fulfill his potential.

3. The Tyrant: It is important to remember that tyranny was not necessarily a pejorative form of government. Tyrants often came to power, supported by hoplites (heavily-armed infantrymen) and discontented aristocrats. Tyrants often redistributed the land of the ruling aristocrats, encouraged trade, sponsored public works projects, introduced new festivals and patronized poets and artists. They usually promoted a policy of peace (for fear of having to arm the citizenry) with the result of prosperity for the people and popularity for the regime. By the
end of the sixth century, however, the situation was reversed and the people of most poleis demanded a greater voice in government.

4. Political Instability: A key theme which runs through this period is political instability or stasis. The Greeks had an aversion to it and much of their history is concerned with attempts to achieve political stability. Hence, the stability of the Spartan constitution was widely admired by many Greeks. Yet instability was perhaps a necessary, if unfortunate, prerequisite to progress. The Athenians especially dominate the history in this regard with the disturbance leading to the archonship of Solon, the tyranny of Pisistratus, the constitution of Clisthenes and finally, the Persian wars. Perhaps it was because of Athenian success at dealing with potential chaos (which is implied in democracy itself) that enabled her to establish the progressive society of the fifth century.

5. Athenian Democracy: It should be emphasized that Athenian democracy was truly "rule by the people" and each citizen had rights and responsibilities under law which demanded full participation in the government. Thucydides, the Athenian historian, later remarked that those people who kept to themselves and shirked their political responsibilities were worthless to the state. It is interesting that the Greek word for "private person," idiotes, can be transliterated as "idiot", with all its pejorative connotations. Athenian democracy, therefore, was very different from modern conceptions of democracy.

6. The Persian Wars: These wars were viewed by the historian, Herodotus, and others as well, as a test of strength between two distinct cultures, lifestyles, and systems of government. The defeat of the Persians meant relatively little to the internal administration of their empire; but for the Greeks, victory against such odds implied sanction of the gods and inspired confidence and creativity (for the Athenians at least). The importance of the resounding Greek victory for the subsequent achievements of the fifth century should not be underestimated.

SUGGESTED FILMS


The Aegean Age. Coronet. 14 min.

Ancient Phoenicia and Her Contributions. Atlantis Productions. 14 min.

A Prince in Crete. Ziller. 15 min.

The Search for Ulysses. Carousel Films. 53 min.
Ancient Greece. Coronet. 11 min.

The Ancient World - Greece. New York University Film Library. 66 min.

From Doric to Gothic. Macmillan Films. 20 min.

Greek Pottery (1500-400 B.C.E.). Time-Life. 19 min.

The Glory that Remains: The Sudden Empire - Persia. Time-Life. 30 min.

Ancient Persia. Coronet. 11 min.