Chapter 5

Classical Civilization in the Eastern Mediterranean: Persia and Greece

OUTLINE

I. Introduction

The much smaller and unified Greek civilization was able to defeat the powerful Persian Empire in the 5th century B.C.E. The Persian Empire, based in modern Iran, was much larger than its Mesopotamian predecessors, showing the new possibilities of the classical era. Greece, less unified than Persia or China, spread its influence across much of western Asia and the eastern Mediterranean.

II. The Persian Empire: Parallel Power in the Middle East

Following the decline of the successive empires in the Middle East, Cyrus the Great established a Persian Empire in 550 B.C.E. that incorporated all of the Middle East as well as portions of India. Within this new empire, a new religion, Zoroastrianism, emerged to replace the more typical polytheism of the Middle East. Zoroastrianism regarded life as a struggle between forces of good and evil. Unable to conquer the Greek mainland, the Persian Empire eventually fell to Alexander the Great. While it lasted, the Persian Empire paralleled the classical development of Greece.

III. The Political Character of Classical Greece

A. Introduction

A key impetus to the development of Greek civilization after 800 B.C.E. was the general renewal of trade in the eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and the Italian peninsula. Economic growth prompted the expansion of the population and social change, which encouraged the development of new political structures. The Greek adaptation of the Phoenician alphabet facilitated cultural and economic development. The Homeric epics, the Iliad and Odyssey were recorded at this time and strongly influenced the common mythology of Greek culture. A distinctive Greek art, initially derivative from Egyptian culture, also began to emerge.

B. The City-State as a Political Unit

In the period immediately after 800 B.C.E., Greek political structures centered on the city-state, a regional government centered in a major city but including the agricultural hinterland. City-states varied in territory and population. When Greeks colonized other regions of the eastern Mediterranean, they carried the distinctive city-state form of government with them. The city-state format made political centralization in Greece virtually impossible, but it did encourage active participation in local government. In the early stages of city-state development, land-owning aristocrats were most powerful. Some of the early city-states had kings, most recognized free farmers as citizens, and the governments often contained councils. After 700 B.C.E., the
dominance of the aristocracies was challenged. Particularly in areas with strong commercial activity, merchants and urban artisans sought to break the political monopoly of the landowners. Increasingly wealthy landowners also began to squeeze out small farmers. By the 6th century B.C.E., urban groups and small farmers saw themselves as politically disadvantaged. In some city-states, these groups supported tyrants against aristocratic clans. Because tyranny contradicted the accepted concept of self-government, reformers arose who attempted to ameliorate the social and political inequities through legal innovation while still maintaining public participation in government. The growing need for strong military forces also produced incentive to increase the number of citizens within the city-states. Participation in public life, either politically or militarily, became the norm within the Greek city-state. Identification with individual gods also produced a sense of public loyalty.

C. The Rise of Democracy in Athens

Although city-state constitutions varied, democracy tended to become more common by the 5th century. Athens was the chief example of democratic government. Athens had passed from aristocratic dominance through civil dispute to tyranny under Pisistratus. After the tyrant’s death, the reformer Cleisthenes reestablished a council, elected by all citizens, that prepared an agenda for an assembly of all citizens of the city-state. All decisions of the state emanated from the public assembly, although a small group of leading politicians often dominated the group. Citizens were expected to serve in the army, serve as jurors for trials, and were eligible for the many councils that comprised the city-state administration. Despite the active participation of many adult males in the Athenian democracy, many people were excluded. Women, slaves, and foreigners were excluded from civic life. Aristocratic politicians, such as Pericles, controlled much of the government, even when they did not hold public office. Athenian democracy provided for the exile (ostracism) of politicians considered likely to establish tyrannies.

D. A Comparison of Greek and Chinese Political Styles

The Greek system, which emphasized political virtue and responsibility and which maintained a hierarchic social system, in some ways mirrored the Confucian concept of social and political harmony. But the decentralized nature of the Greek city-state was conceptually different than the Chinese insistence on a single, centralized government. The Greeks also placed more weight on individual participation in government than on a formal bureaucracy.

E. Greek Diplomacy and the Tensions of United Effort

During the four centuries of Greek political evolution, individual city-states established colonies throughout the eastern Mediterranean. These colonies exported Greek culture and political ideas. There were some things in which Greek city-states participated as a group. Most city-states participated in the annual Olympic games and recognized the religious significance of the oracle priests at Delphi. A coalition of city-states led by Athens and Sparta defeated two Persian invasions of the Greek mainland at the beginning of the 5th century B.C.E. In the decades after the Persian Wars, Athens came to dominate a confederation of city-states initially formed to control the Aegean Sea. Athens was able to covert the Delian League into an empire. The empire complicated the internal politics of Athens and produced division and strife.

F. Athens Versus Sparta

The creation of the Athenian empire aroused the suspicion and opposition of Sparta. More agrarian and aristocratic than Athens, Sparta had its own confederation of allied city-states. The
two rivals began a prolonged conflict, the Peloponnesian War, in 431 B.C.E. Although both sides suffered enormous losses, the war continued until 404 B.C.E., when Sparta finally defeated Athens.

V. The Hellenistic Period

A. Introduction

The Spartan defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War did not result in political unity. Periodic wars between the city states and with Persia quickly broke out. The resultant political confusion prepared the way for the Macedonian conquest of the Greek city-states and the establishment of the Macedonian empire.

B. Macedonian Conquest

King Philip II of Macedonia (359 B.C.E. to 336 B.C.E.) strengthened the Macedonian armed forces just as the attempts at unity in the Greek mainland failed. By 338 B.C.E., Philip II was able to conquer the city-states of southern Greece and created a Macedonian hegemony. Although Greek city-states technically continued to exist, they were subjected to a Macedonian empire.

C. Alexander the Great

When Philip died, Greece and the kingdom of Macedonia fell to his son, Alexander. Alexander launched an assault on the Persian Empire that resulted in the conquest of Persia, Egypt, and the Middle East. Alexander’s armies actually penetrated as far as India before turning back. It was Alexander’s purpose to unite the centralized political tradition of the East with Greek culture. To this end, he established cities throughout the conquered region. Before his scheme could be finalized, Alexander died at the age of 33.

D. Later Hellenistic States

Alexander’s empire fragmented into three successor states: Seleucid Asia, Antigonid Macedonia and Greece, and Ptolemaic Egypt. Initially these states shared with the Greek world a renewed prosperity based on commerce and cultural exchange. Eventually the favorable position of the Hellenistic cities produced political dissatisfaction in the agricultural hinterlands. By the 2nd century B.C.E., the Hellenistic successor kingdoms weakened. The Hellenistic Middle East was characterized by the exchange of ideas between Greece, Persia, India, Egypt, and Africa. The spread of Greek culture was a significant factor in creating an intellectual framework in this part of the civilized world.

VI. Creativity in Greek and Hellenistic Culture

A. Introduction

Art and philosophy were the key cultural contributions of Greek civilization.

B. Religion, Philosophy, and Science

Greek religion featured a pantheon of anthropomorphic gods and goddesses. Individual deities patronized human activities or represented forces of nature. Greek religion did not emphasize the afterworld, as did other Indo-European religions, nor did they direct believers to more esoteric or
spiritual considerations. Greek religion failed to excite much emotion, and popular mystery religions arose that offered greater spiritual intimacy. Nor did it offer much about nature or ethics, so some thinkers turned to non-religious philosophical systems, often influenced by ideas from Persia and the Middle East, to explain these areas. The existence of mystery religions in Greek culture is somewhat similar to Daoism in China. Some thinkers, such as Socrates and Plato, were concerned with the development of ethical systems offering logical analysis of social and political action. In the Hellenistic period, Stoics taught that human independence could be achieved through strict discipline of the body and physical bravery. These ethical systems were later blended with Christian theology. Philosophers gave various answers to the question of political organization. Plato suggested a state ruled by philosopher/kings. Most Greek political theory emphasized the concept of a balanced constitution with outlets for both aristocratic and popular influence. The principle measure of political ethics was the utility of the individual constitution.

Classical Greek philosophy stressed both rationalism and skepticism. Plato suggested that man could approach knowledge of absolute truth through an understanding of ideal forms. Greek emphasis on rationalism bore some resemblance to Chinese Confucianism, and gave rise to scientific exploration, although little experimentation. Greek thinkers were interested in the elements from which the cosmos was created, which in turn led to interest in mathematics and geometry. Empirical discoveries were made in medicine and astronomy, although the astronomical observations of Ptolemy stressed the position of the earth at the center of the universe. Archimedes developed theories of physics relating to water power and mathematics.

C. Literature and the Visual Arts

Science and mathematics were less important than the arts in conveying key aspects of Greek culture. Drama, vital to religious festivals, took a central role in Greek expression. Greek dramatists produced both comedies and tragedies, with the latter receiving greater emphasis. Dramatists, both comedians and tragedians, illustrated the limits of human reason and the consequences of becoming ensnared in powerful passions. Greek drama provided the rules that governed later playwrights. The Greeks also developed history as a form of literature. Greek artists were most advanced in sculpture and architecture. Over time, the Greeks formulated three distinct architectural styles, including the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian. Greek art and literature was a product of contemporary society, and individual works were often functional. There was a tension between mass and elite culture, for while there were large audiences for drama and literature, no effort was made to popularize philosophy, unlike China.

D. Hellenistic Culture During and After Alexander

The wealth of the Hellenistic states contributed to vast amounts of monumental-scale building, although no new architectural styles were developed. Hellenistic thinkers were particularly interested in science and mathematics, and their work in these areas underlay almost all Western scientific learning for the next 2,000 years. Contributions were made in astronomy and geography, while there was also much interest in astrology and magic.

VII. Patterns of Greek and Hellenistic Society

A. Introduction

Greek society was typical of ancient agricultural economies. Distinctive features were the emphasis on slavery and a distinct ambivalence toward the status of women.
B. Economic and Social Structure

Greek civilization closely resembled other civilizations in which invading peoples settled down to agriculture. Initially society was divided into a militarized aristocracy and a larger group of free landowners. As the Greek economy became more commercialized, the society became more diverse and hierarchic. The mountainous geography of Greece produced a greater reliance on trade and colonization than in India or China. Frequent war produced a greater dependence on slavery and reduced emphasis on improved manufacturing technology. Greek society remained dominated by an aristocratic, land-owning elite. Greek politics and art was largely aristocratic in tone. Greek society depended on commerce but assigned relatively low social status to merchants. Greek merchants were regarded as socially more acceptable than their counterparts in China but perhaps enjoyed less status than merchants in India. The Greek population was predominantly rural and agricultural despite the political and cultural dominance of the cities. From the 8th century B.C.E., there was a tendency for aristocrats to force small farmers to become tenants or laborers. Aristocrats were better able to convert their operations to commercial crops such as olives and grapes, thus giving them a competitive advantage over their less wealthy neighbors. Mediterranean agriculture was particularly market-oriented, with the result that basic food supplies often had to be imported. The purpose of Greek colonization was, in part, to develop new sources of grain. Commercial forms of agriculture continued to dominate in the Hellenistic period and helped to spread Hellenistic culture.

C. Slavery and Production

Slavery was a key component of the classical Mediterranean economy. City-states used slaves for all types of labor from agriculture to mining. Manumission of slaves was relatively common. Control of slave labor systems required extensive military controls. Use of slaves discouraged investment in technological improvement. As a result, Greece lagged behind both China and India in technological development.

D. Men, Women, and Social Divisions

In Greek law and culture, women were inferior to men. Female infanticide was practiced. Despite their low social status, some Greek women were active in business and did control urban property. Greek marriages were arranged by the patriarchal household head, and husbands could divorce their wives at will. Women were restricted to certain portions of the household. Other cultural divisions were also based on social status. Peasants were more likely to engage in mystery religions. Different belief structures as well as economic disadvantages contributed to peasant rebellions, which unsettled the political life of the Hellenistic kingdoms. Conditions for women appear to have improved in the Hellenistic era.

VIII. Conclusion: A Complex Legacy

Greek civilization established certain cultural characteristics for Western civilization. Greek political ideas were more enduring than the actual political constitutions of the city-states. Perhaps the most significant contributions were in art and philosophy. Greek civilization has often been considered an integral foundation for American culture as an important example, but its influence has often been modified by time and by other cultures.

IX. Global Connections: Greece and the World

Though they considered their culture superior to all others, their trade and expansion brought
them in contact with many cultures, and some Greeks, like Herodotus, were deeply curious about the world. Alexander forged ties with the Middle East, India, and North Africa — ties that remained important after his empire collapsed.

**TIMELINE**

*Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.*

<table>
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<th>Event</th>
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<td>Reign of Philip II of Macedonia</td>
<td>359-336 B.C.E.</td>
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<td>Peloponnesian Wars</td>
<td>431-404 B.C.E.</td>
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<td>Rise of Greek city-states</td>
<td>800 B.C.E.</td>
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<td>Cyrus the Great creates Persian Empire</td>
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<td>Persian Wars</td>
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<td>Alexander the Great creates empire</td>
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**TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS**

The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.

- **Cyrus the Great**
- **Hellenistic**
- **Solon**
- **Olympic games**
- **Cleisthenes**
- **Peloponnesian War**
- **Alexander the Great**
- **Antigonids**
- **Sophocles**
- **Ionian**
- **Zoroastrianism**
- **Iliad and Odyssey**
- **Socrates**
- **oracle of Delphi**
- **Pericles**
- **Macedonia**
- **Ptolemies**
- **Stoics**
- **Aristophanes**
- **Corinthian**
- **Hellenism**
- **city-state**
- **Pisastratus**
- **Persian Wars**
- **Delian League**
- **Philip II**
- **Seleucids**
- **Plato**
- **Doric**
- **helots**
MAP EXERCISE

The following exercise is intended to clarify the geophysical environment and the spatial relationships among the important objects and places mentioned in the chapter. Locate the following places on the map.

Sparta  Athens
Macedonia  Asia Minor
Aegean Sea  Mediterranean Sea

What geographical feature central to other Middle Eastern civilizations is missing in classical Greece? How did this affect Greek economic and political development?
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. How does Greek civilization compare and contrast to other civilizations?
2. Define a city-state. How did the Greek city-states change between 800 B.C.E. and 400 B.C.E.?
3. How did the Greek city-states work together? Why were they often separate?
4. Compare the political structure of Hellenistic Greece to that of Greece prior to 400 B.C.E.
5. What was the function of philosophy in Greek culture?
6. According to the authors, what were the principles of Greek culture?
7. Why was the Greek economy so market-oriented?
8. Discuss the role of slavery in the Greek economy and culture.
9. What was the social status and function of women in Greek society?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

The following questions test your ability to summarize the major conclusions of the chapter.

1. Compare and contrast the political organization, social structure, and philosophy of Greek civilization to that of Han China.
2. Discuss the reasons for political and social fragmentation in classical Greece.
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. Which of the following was not a feature of Persian politics?
   a. a well developed infrastructure for the whole empire, such as roads
   b. democratically elected city-state government
   c. a high degree of tolerance for local cultures and religions
   d. a strongly centralized government

2. Who founded the Persian religion based on the cosmic struggle between the divine forces of good and evil?
   a. Xerxes
   b. Zoroaster
   c. Cyrus the Great
   d. Darius

3. The development of Greek civilization was spurred in part by
   a. the revival of trade in the eastern Mediterranean
   b. the collapse of Egyptian civilization
   c. incorporation into the Persian Empire
   d. the adoption of Zoroastrianism

4. The Greek governments of the classical Greece largely consisted of
   a. regional kingdoms.
   b. a unified empire under a single ruler.
   c. city-states.
   d. feudal vassals loosely controlled by a single ruler.

5. Which of the following statements most accurately describes a difference between the classical Chinese approach to politics and the approach of classical Greece to politics?
   a. China placed less emphasis on hierarchy and obedience to authority than did the Greeks.
   b. Greek politics emphasized a single, centralized system of authority.
   c. The Greeks placed more emphasis on participation in government and less on bureaucracy.
   d. The Chinese lacked the bureaucracy that made democratic government in Greece possible.

6. The Delian League eventually became
   a. Alexander the Great’s empire.
   b. the Spartan empire.
   c. the Athenian empire.
   d. the Persian empire.
7. The war between Sparta and Athens for dominance in classical Greece was called the
   a. Persian War.
   b. Peloponnesian War.
   c. Corinthian War.
   d. Pyrrhic War.

8. Which of the following statements most accurately describes the success of regional dynasties following Alexander’s death?
   a. Internal division caused a decline in production and combined with war among the kingdoms to weaken the successor states so that they declined by the 2nd century B.C.E.
   b. The regional dynasties continued to cooperate after Alexander’s death so that they were able to survive as independent monarchies long after the creation of the Roman Empire.
   c. The successor states barely survived Alexander and disappeared within 50 years after his death.
   d. While three of the regional dynasties quickly succumbed to invasions, Seleucid Persia continued to survive until finally replaced by the Ottoman Turks.

9. Chinese Daoism can best be compared to what aspect of Greek religion?
   a. the pantheon of gods
   b. monotheism
   c. the mystery religions
   d. the struggle between man and nature

10. The unfree agricultural workers of the Spartan city-state were called
   a. metics.
   b. helots.
   c. poleis.
   d. homoioi.
## Answers to Self-Test Questions

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