CHAPTER 3 - GREEK AND HELLENISTIC 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. This chapter also surveys the political and cultural history of the Greek poleis in the period of their greatest power, 479-338 B.C.E., and continues the story to the eve of the Roman conquest, about 150 B.C.E.

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.

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 9th and 10th 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 extralegally. 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.

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.

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. After the Persian retreat from Greece, Athens emerged as the leader of a coalition of Greek states of the Aegean islands and the coast of Asia Minor (Delian League). Athens collected tribute from these states to finance a war to free those Greeks still under Persian rule, to protect all against a Persian return, and to collect booty. Cimon led the allies to victory and became the most influential statesman in Athens for nearly two decades.

In the late 460's, however, in the wake of foreign reverses, Cimon was ostracized. Ephialtes and Pericles attacked and overturned his policies of conservatism at home and friendly relations with Sparta abroad. For about fifteen years (461-445 B.C.E.), Athens, in alliance with Argos, pursued an intermittent war with Sparta for control of the Greek mainland (First Peloponnesian War). Initially Athens was victorious, but she was soon forced to make peace with Persia (449 B.C.E.) and then with Sparta (445). A lasting result of the war was that Athens exercised stricter control over her allies: the Delian League
became the Athenian Empire. Led by Pericles, Athens after 445 pursued a conservative foreign policy of maintaining her empire and remaining at peace with Sparta.
Even as the Athenians were tightening control over their allies, at home they developed the freest government the world had ever seen. Under the leadership of Pericles, the powers of the aristocratic council, the Areopagus, were curtailed and every decision of the state had to be approved by the popular assembly. As well, jury pay was introduced and the actions of government officials were scrutinized carefully at the end of their terms. Pericles voiced the pride which the Athenians felt for their democracy in his famous Funeral Oration. The Thirty Years Peace of 445 B.C.E. lasted for only a decade. In 435, a dispute involving the island of Corcyra forced the Athenians to side against an important ally of Sparta, Corinth. The deep-seated distrust between Sparta and Athens, coupled with the aggressive arguments of Corinth resulted in a Spartan declaration of war in 432. The chapter continues with a more detailed narration of the Great Peloponnesian War which was fought, with a short period of unstable peace, for the next 27 years (431-404 B.C.E.). This long and disastrous war eventually led to the defeat of Athens and shook the foundations of Greek civilization.

The collapse of the Athenian empire created a vacuum of power in the Aegean and opened the way for Spartan leadership or hegemony (404-371 B.C.E.). Unable to maintain control of the various Greek coalitions, Spartan leadership soon passed to Thebes which was headed by the great general, Epaminondas. The Theban hegemony (371-362) ended with the death of Epaminondas. Although Athens had rebuilt her Aegean empire, her subjects succeeded in revolting in 355 B.C.E. The Greeks were more disorganized than ever.

In the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E., the Greek civilization flourished and produced cultural achievements which justify the designation of Classical Period. The chapter recounts the contributions of the Attic tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, who dealt with powerful, cosmic themes and great confrontations of conflicting principles, as well as the psychology and behavior of human beings under stress. This century also produced the first prose literature in the form of history. Herodotus, the "father of history" wrote an account of the Persian Wars, while Thucydides contributed his masterpiece on the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides has been called a "scientific historian" for his devotion to accuracy and truth.

Athenian architecture and sculpture also flourished, reaching their acme in the temples of the Acropolis, above all the Parthenon. The brilliance of these buildings gave confirmation to Pericles' statement that Athens was "the school of Hellas." At the beginning of the fourth century, Macedon, the land to the north of Thessaly, was a backward, semi-barbaric kingdom, beset by civil strife, loose organization and a lack of money. In spite of these problems, Philip II rose to unify the Macedonians and lead them to victory over the Greek city-states to the south.

Beginning in the 350's B.C.E., Philip removed his internal enemies and used the knowledge gained while a hostage in Thebes under Epaminondas to reorganize the Macedonian army and elevate the
cavalry to the decisive role in battle. The Greek city-states to the south were weakened militarily and were mired in political chaos and indecision about whether to accept or reject Philip as hegemon. The famous debates between Isocrates and Demosthenes testify to the impotence of the Greek states to commit themselves to unified action for or against Philip. At Chaeronea in 338, Philip defeated the Greek army and became ruler of Greece.

The chapter then proceeds to give a more detailed account of Macedonian government in Greece, the assassination of Philip and the succession of Alexander the Great. His exploits against the Persian empire are next recounted as are his death and the struggle for succession to his position and empire.

Alexander's conquest marked the end of the central role of the polis in Greek life and thought. Cities prospered, but without political freedom, they had only a shadow of the vitality of the true polis. In this new environment, most Greeks turned away from political solutions to their problems, and sought instead personal salvation in religion, philosophy and magic. The confident humanism of the fifth century B.C.E. gave way to a kind of resignation of man's fate to chance.

The new attitude was reflected in philosophy. Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum continued to be important, but changed somewhat in their emphases. Two new schools which offered ways of dealing with the insecurities of the times, however, flourished. Epicureanism sought not knowledge, but happiness, which the followers expected to find in a life based on reason. The Epicureans, in order to free men from the fear of death and all non-material powers, emphasized sense perception. They believed that true happiness depended on the avoidance of pain and advocated withdrawal from public life.

Stoicism was founded in Athens about 300 B.C.E. by Zeno of Cyprus. Their school advised men to live in harmony with God and nature by living in accordance with divine reason - a philosophy almost indistinguishable from religion. The wise Stoic knew what was good, what evil and what "indifferent." Above all, he avoided passion. Withdrawal was counseled, but duty was important and political activity allowed.

In the Hellenistic world, the city flourished and the diversity and intellectual richness of Hellenistic civilization thrived in the life of one of the most important cities of the time, Alexandria in Egypt. It was here that scholars copied and preserved in the famous library the literature of the Classical Age. Wealthy royal patrons also supported art and sculpture which now emphasized sentimental and realistic modes. Perhaps the Hellenistic period's most lasting achievements were in mathematics and science, for they stood until the scientific revolution of the Renaissance. Euclid and Archimedes made great progress in geometry and physics; and the heliocentric and geocentric theories of planetary movement were both advocated and Eratosthenes offered a more detailed and accurate map of the world.
KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS

1. **The End of the Mycenaean World**: The cause of the disaster which 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. **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.

3. **Political Instability**: A key theme which runs through this period is political instability or chaos. 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 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.

4. **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, would be transliterated as "idiot," with all its pejorative connotations. Athenian democracy, therefore, is very different from modern conceptions of democracy.

5. **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.

6. **The Athenian Empire:** There is a basic contradiction of principle in Athenian democracy. How can a state which espouses the freedom of democracy for all its citizens, maintain an empire of "allied states" by force? Since the great architecture and sculpture on the Acropolis were built under the direction of Pericles through funds demanded and collected by Athenian officials, the question then becomes: what price civilization? The Athenian empire can be seen as a fountain for Western Civilization or as an ethical contradiction. Without the funds contributed to Athens, could there have been such a flowering of art and culture in Athens?

7. **The Great Peloponnesian War:** This conflict has often been viewed as one war with three phases:

1) 431-421 B.C.E.
2) 421-415 B.C.E.
3) 415-404 B.C.E.

Phases 1 and 3 were periods of "hot war". Phase 2 was one of "festering peace", as Thucydides termed it, where each side was suspicious and was moving for position before war would inevitably break out again. This is a pattern which repeats often in Western Civilization. Good examples might be the religious wars of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, as well as World War I and II which have been viewed as one war with a "festering peace" from 1919-1939.

8. **Athenian Democracy:** Although all policies of the state had to be approved by the assembly of the people before being implemented, the democracy was still ultimately dependent upon its leaders,
especially those holding renewable military posts and those whose oratorical ability warranted attention. Under a moderate leader of foresight such as Pericles, Athens flourished. But under the extremism of Cleon or Alcibiades, Athenian policy was often cruel and disjointed. That democracy was "fickle" and the people prone to quick and complete reversal of opinion was a continuing criticism of Athenian government at this time.

9. **Hellenistic World**: The term "Hellenistic" was coined in the nineteenth century and means "Greek-like." It thus refers to a world which is similar to, but still distinct from, the Hellenic world of the Greeks in the fifth and fourth centuries. The new civilization was a mixture of Greek and Oriental elements, thanks in great part to the conquests of Alexander the Great. The Hellenistic world was much larger in area than the Hellenic world and its major units were much larger than city-states, though these persisted in different forms. It was a period of great political insecurity which in turn, inspired much important intellectual activity in mathematics, science and philosophy.

10. **Greek and Hellenistic Civilization in World Perspective**: The striking thing about the emergence of Hellenic civilization is its sharp departure from the norm, rising as it did from a dark age in which a small number of poor, isolated and illiterate people developed their own kind of society. Political control was shared by a relatively large portion of the people and participation in political life was highly valued. Most states imposed no regular taxation, there was no separate caste of priests and little concern for life after death. Speculative natural philosophy based on observation and reason arose in this varied, dynamic, secular and remarkably free context. This was an era of unparalleled achievement. While the rest of the world continued to be characterized by monarchical, hierarchical command societies, Athenian democracy was carried as far as it would go before modern times. Democracy disappeared with the end of Greek autonomy late in the fourth century B.C.E. When it returned in the modern world more than two millennia later, it was broader but shallower, without the emphasis on active direct participation of every citizen in the government. In addition, many of the literary genres and forms that are ritual in the modern world arose and were developed during this time. The Greek emphasis on naturalistic art that idealized the human forms also diverged from previous and contemporary art in the rest of the world. To a great extent, these developments sprang from the independence and unique political experience of the Greeks.
SUGGESTED FILMS


The Aegean Age. Coronet. 14 min.

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

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

The Ancient World - Greece, Part II. New York University Film Library. 29 min.

The Search for Ulysses. Carousel Films. 53 min.

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

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

Ancient Persia. Coronet. 11 min.


Ancient Greece. Coronet. 11 min.


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

Age of Sophocles. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 30 min.

Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic Age. Coronet. 14 min.