Chapter Four: The School of Hellas

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The Birth of the Greek Gods
   Myths and Mythmakers
   Worshipping the Gods

Discovering Humanity
   Homer and Hesiod
   Lyric Poets: Personal and Civic Lives
   Tragedy and Comedy: The Myth Transformed
   The Perfect Body

To Know and to Love to Know
   Presocratic Knowers and Seekers
   History, Sophistry, and Oratory
   Philosophers--Lovers of Wisdom

CHAPTER SUMMARY

One of the most important aspects of Greek society was the development of myths, designed to explain things that were not explainable. In these myths, or stories, humans often encountered gods, supernatural phenomena, and a variety of things which could not be explained otherwise. The gods that existed in these myths shared many human characteristics: they were jealous, got married, fell in love, and were generally quite humanlike. However, they were also immortal, and they were fearsome beings who required sacrifice and dedication from the humans who believed in them. Part of this worship involved the use of the temple, which became the major building in the Greek poleis.

The first person to write extensively about the gods was Homer, whose great epics described the gods as fierce and beautiful. Homer wrote of the great heroes of the Trojan War, and their trials and tribulations while fighting the war. Homer's young contemporary, Hesiod, also wrote of heroes and gods. Other poets, such as Sappho, wrote about love, although none of her male contemporaries could match her eloquence. Poetry remained the primary expression of Greek culture, although other art forms, including tragedy and comedy, began to emerge. Playwrights such as Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles wrote tragedies which explored the depths of human emotion and the complex issues which resulted from human relationships.

Plays and poetry celebrated more than emotions. The desire for perfection went far beyond government or poetry. Perfection was sought in the human body as well, and it became vitally important to strive for physical beauty. Gymnastics, running, and all manner of exercise were embraced as part of the curriculum for male children. Beauty was important for women, but men were embraced as the physical ideal. This perfection also extended to training in war, and to lose at war was to lose more than just the battle: it was to lose honor and to embarrass one's family and polis.

Another aspect of Greek society was the desire for knowledge. By the sixth century, a series of thinkers began to emerge who discussed all aspects of life. The first group of thinkers, the presocratics, sought knowledge and understanding, and challenged human understanding of virtually all issues. Some thinkers, like Xenophanes, rejected the Olympic deities and challenged polytheism. Other thinkers began to question those uncertainties which had previously been attributed to the gods. Scientific thought, such as that of Pythagoras, also dominated the Greek fields of philosophy. Other areas of study, such as history, sophistry, and oratory, also began to emerge. Historians described the events that had occurred in the past; sophists developed arguments and manipulations designed for debate; and orators expanded on public speaking and debate as a whole.

Perhaps the most significant of the thinkers to emerge was Socrates, who asked questions to which he could not provide answers. His method was designed to force those who considered themselves experts to admit that they did not know as much as they claimed they
did. Socrates was succeeded by his pupil Plato, who in turn trained and was succeeded by Aristotle. Plato and Socrates both founded schools in which they trained young men to think critically. Philosophy became a central part of life in the Greek polis, although it was generally limited to those who were wealthy: those who worked for a living did not have time to stand around the agora and philosophize.

**KEY POINTS**

**The Birth of the Greek Gods:** Before the formation of the polis, Greeks describe the loves, the sorrows, and the strivings of their gods and goddesses in tales called myths, which are retold in works of stone and song.

**Discovering Humanity:** The Greeks turn their sights from the immortals to mortals—themselves—and seek to understand the human condition in epic, lyric, and dramatic poetry.

**To Know and to Love to Know:** Greek thinkers strive to understand everything that is; they create science, social science, history, rhetoric, education, and philosophy, culminating in the work of Plato and Aristotle—the foundations of subsequent Western thought.

**SUGGESTED FILMS**

*Death of Socrates.* Time-Life, 45 minutes

*Aristotle's Ethics: The Theory of Happiness.* Encyclopaedia Britannica, 30 minutes

*Age of Sophocles.* Encyclopaedia Britannica, 30 minutes

*Plato's Drinking Party.* Time-Life, 40 minutes

*Plato's Apology: The Life and Teachings of Socrates.* Encyclopaedia Britannica, 30 minutes

*In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great.* PBS, 4 hours

*Pandora's Box: Roles of Women in Ancient Greece.* Institute of Med. Studies, 48 minutes

*The Powerful Gods of Mt. Olympus.* A&E, 50 minutes