Part 3: Ancient Greece

I. Archaic Greece

We already know that Greece is the birthplace of democracy. That is the most famous story of “classical” Athens. When the Greeks rise up out of pre-history, however, they were still like other archaic peoples.

A. Greek Pre-history: Minoans and Mycenaeans (c.3000 BC – c.1100 BC)

1. The most ancient Greek peoples were the Minoans on the island of Crete. The Minoans traded with Egypt and Mesopotamia as early as c.2000 BC.
2. The Minoans were conquered by other Greeks called “Mycenaeans.”
3. The Mycenaeans wrote using a script we call “Linear B,” but we don’t know how to read it, so we don’t know their history.
4. The stories of the Greek poet Homer (such as the Iliad and Odyssey) tell us about Mycenaean life, but they are not reliable historical sources. They are more fiction than fact.
5. Although many mysteries remain concerning these times, historians do believe that the city of Troy (from Homer’s Iliad) did exist, and that the ruler of Mycenae (Agamemnon) may have led an expedition against that city c.1200 and destroyed it.
6. The end of Mycenaean times came with the “Dorian Invasion.” Greece entered into a kind of “dark age” until c.800 BC.

B. The Olympic Games and the new Greek World

1. In 776 BC, the first Olympic Games were held at Olympia on the Peloponnese.
2. The Olympic Games were held every four years. These celebrations were combined religious and athletic festivals where the Greeks held religious ceremonies in honor of the god Zeus and athletic contests such as foot and chariot races, and wrestling and boxing matches to honor their cities’ champions.

C. Greek Geography and the City-States

1. Greece is a mountainous and rugged land. It does not have a great river valley like Egypt. It was thus harder to unify. Greece remained many smaller countries each surrounding a main city.
2. Greek cities behaved much like separate countries do today, so historians call such cities “city-states.” In Greek, a city was known as a “polis.” (This is where we get the word “politics.”)
3. Each polis had people from different tribes, most notably the Dorians (dominant at Sparta) and the Ionians (at Athens).