

Part 3: Ancient Greece

I. Archaic Greece

We already know that Greece is the birthplace of democracy. That accomplishment of “classical” Athens is the most famous part of our modern-day Greek heritage. When the Greeks rise up out of pre-history, however, we see that they were a primitive, early peoples like everyone else. *Archaic* Greece, however, has features not found in any other archaic civilization. We will see the seeds of later progress in this early time.

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

1. In the time when Egypt and Mesopotamia were first being unified, Greece's most advanced people were the Minoans. The Minoans started to trade with Egypt and Mesopotamia c.2000 BC.
2. By c.1500 BC, the Minoans had created a rich civilization, with a capital city at Cnossus, on the island of Crete.
3. The people of the Peloponnese, known as the Mycenaeans because their capital was Mycenae, conquered Cnossus.
4. The Mycenaeans learned to write from the Minoans. The Minoans wrote in a script called Linear A, and the Mycenaeans wrote in a later version called Linear B.
5. Unfortunately, writing was used only for limited record-keeping in the government, so there are few Linear B records from which historians can piece together the story of the Mycenaeans.
6. The Mycenaeans were themselves conquered and their cities destroyed during a time known as the Dorian Invasion. After this period, there was a Dark Age for over 300 years, and the story of Mycenae was almost completely lost.
7. The stories of Homer (such as the Iliad and Odyssey) and those of other Greek poets reveal aspects of Mycenaean life, but they are not reliable historical sources because they were told mainly for inspiration and passed down from generation to generation through an oral tradition, i.e. they were not written down.
8. 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.
9. The end of Mycenaean times came with the “Dorian Invasion,” which resulted in the destruction of the Mycenaean cities by c.1100 BC. 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.
3. One of the reasons the Greeks held Olympic games was that they believed in the same gods. Among the other important Greek gods was Apollo, to whom the Greeks turned for advice through the Oracle at Delphi. The oracle, a priestess, spoke in a strange way that was believed to be messages from the gods. The Greeks always sought advice from the Oracle before important endeavors such as construction projects, colonization efforts, and wars.

C. Greek Geography and the City-States

1. Greece is a mountainous and rugged land. It does not have a great river valley that provides a wonderful environment like Egypt or Mesopotamia. Every Greek community was divided from the others by mountains, so it was natural for the Greeks to form into small, separate countries, rather than one unified country.
2. The Greeks all spoke the same language and followed the same religion, but belonging to a city was the most important thing to them. A citizen of Athens thought of himself first as an Athenian, then a Greek; a citizen of Sparta thought of himself as a Spartan first, and then a Greek.
3. 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.")
4. Each polis had people from different tribes, most notably the Dorians (dominant at Sparta) and the Ionians (at Athens).