

Chapter 10: Mediterranean Society: The Greek Phase

Overview

Although the Greeks did not build a centralized state until the short reign of Alexander of Macedon, they did serve to link the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions through colonization, commerce, and cultural interaction. Through their unprecedented abilities as sea traders, and later through the unification provided by the Hellenistic empires, the Greeks left a rich cultural legacy of politics, philosophy, art, literature, and science that would go on to shape the European and Islamic worlds for centuries. Enduring innovations for which the classical Greek cultures are best known include the following:

- The earliest form of democracy, the best realization of which was found in Athens under the leadership of the statesman Pericles
- The establishment of hundreds of cities throughout the Mediterranean basin and southwest Asia
- Unique contributions to literature in the forms of mythology, poetry, drama, and essays
- The contributions of the rational philosophical thought of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and later the Epicureans, the Skeptics, and the Stoics

Chapter Outline

I. Early development of Greek society

A. Minoan and Mycenaean Societies

1. Minoan society arose on the island of Crete, late third millennium B.C.E.
 - a. Between 2200 and 1450 B.C.E., was the center of Mediterranean commerce
 - b. Received early influences from Phoenicia and Egypt
 - c. Untranslated form of writing, Linear A, was used
 - d. By 1100 B.C.E., Crete fell under foreign domination
2. Mycenaean society: named after important city, Mycenae
 - a. Indo-European immigrants settled in Greece, 2000 B.C.E.
 - b. Adapted Minoan Linear A into their script, Linear B
 - c. Stone fortresses in the Peloponnese (southern Greece) protected agricultural settlements
 - d. Overpowered Minoan society and expanded to Anatolia, Sicily, and Italy
3. Chaos in the eastern Mediterranean after Trojan War (1200 B.C.E.)

B. The world of the polis gradually emerged in Greece

1. Sparta began to extend control during eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E.
 - a. Reduced the neighboring peoples to the status of helots, or semi-free servants
 - b. Maintained domination by a powerful military machine
2. Spartan society
 - a. Discouraged social distinction, observed austere lifestyle
 - b. Distinction was drawn by prowess, discipline, and military talent
3. Athens gradually broadened base of political participation
 - a. Solon sought to negotiate order by democratic principles
 - b. Citizenship was open to free adult males, not to foreigners, slaves, and women
4. Athenian society
 - a. Maritime trade brought about prosperity to Attica, the region of Athens
 - b. Aristocratic landowners were primary beneficiaries
 - c. Class tension became intensified in the sixth century B.C.E.
5. Pericles (ca. 443-429 B.C.E.), most popular democratic leader of Athens

II. Greece and the larger world

A. Greek colonization

1. Greeks founded more than four hundred colonies
 - a. Facilitated trade among Mediterranean lands and people
 - b. Spread of Greek language and cultural traditions
 - c. Stimulated development of surrounding areas

- B. Conflict with Persia and its results
 - 1. The Persian War (500-479 B.C.E.)
 - a. Greek cities on Ionian coast revolted against Persia, 500 B.C.E.
 - b. Battle of Marathon, 490 B.C.E., is decisive victory for Athens
 - c. Xerxes tried again to seize Athens; his navy lost battle of Salamis (480 B.C.E.)
 - d. Persian army retreated back to Anatolia (479 B.C.E.)
 - 2. The Delian League
 - a. Military and financial alliance among Greek poleis against Persian threat
 - b. When Persian threat subsided, poleis, other than Athens, no longer wanted to make contributions
 - 3. The Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.E.)
 - a. Tensions led to two armed camps, under leadership of Athens and Sparta
 - b. Unconditional surrender of Athens, 404 B.C.E.
- C. The Macedonians and the coming of empire
 - 1. The kingdom of Macedon, a frontier state north of peninsular Greece
 - 2. Philip of Macedon (reigned 359-336 B.C.E.) brought Greece under control
 - 3. Alexander of Macedon succeeds Philip at age twenty and begins conquests
 - a. By 331 B.C.E., controlled Syria, Egypt, Mesopotamia
 - b. Invaded Persian homeland and burned Persepolis, 331 B.C.E.
 - c. Crossed Indus River by 327 B.C.E., army refused to go farther
 - d. Died in 323 B.C.E. at age of thirty-three
- D. Hellenistic Empires: Alexander's realm was divided into Antigonid, Ptolemaic, Seleucid
 - 1. Antigonid empire: Greece and Macedon
 - a. Continuous tension between the Antigonid rulers and Greek cities
 - b. Economy of Athens and Corinth flourished again through trade
 - 2. The Ptolemaic empire: Egypt--the wealthiest
 - a. The rulers did not interfere in Egyptian society
 - b. Alexandria, capital at mouth of the Nile
 - c. Cultural center: the famous Alexandria Museum and Alexandria Library
 - 3. The Seleucid empire: largest, from Bactria to Anatolia
 - a. Greek and Macedonian colonists flocked to Greek cities of the former Persia
 - b. Colonists created a Mediterranean-style urban society
 - c. Bactria withdrew from Seleucids and established independent Greek kingdom

III. The fruits of trade: Greek economy and society

- A. Trade and the integration of the Mediterranean Basin
 - 1. Trade and commerce flourished resulting in population growth and more colonies
 - a. Production of olive oil and wine, in exchange for grain and other items
 - b. Led to broader sense of Greek community
 - 2. Panhellenic festivals (like Olympic Games) became popular
- B. Family and society
 - 1. Greek society in Homer's works
 - a. Heroic warriors and outspoken wives in Homer's world
 - b. Strong-willed human beings clashed constantly
 - 2. Patriarchal society was the norm
 - a. Women could not own landed property but could operate small businesses
 - b. Priestess was the only public position for women
 - c. Spartan women enjoyed higher status than women of other poleis
 - 3. Sappho: Talented female poet wrote poems of attraction to women
 - a. Instructed young women in music and literature at home
 - b. Critics charged her with homosexual activity (not acceptable for women)
 - 4. Slavery: private chattel, property of their owners
 - a. Worked as cultivators, domestic servants
 - b. Educated or skilled slaves worked as craftsmen and business managers

IV. The cultural life of classical Greece

- A. Rational thought and philosophy

1. The formation of Greek cultural traditions: philosophy based on human reason
 2. Socrates (470-399 B.C.E.): "An unexamined life is not worth living"
 - a. Encouraged reflection on questions of ethics and morality
 - b. Was condemned to death on charge of corrupting Athenian youths
 3. Plato (430-347 B.C.E.): A zealous disciple of Socrates
 - a. The theory of Forms or Ideas--world of ideal qualities
 - b. This world is imperfect reflection of world of Forms
 - c. His Republic expressed the ideal of philosophical kings
 4. Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.): Plato's student, but distrusted theory of Forms
 - a. Devised rules of logic to construct powerful arguments
 - b. Philosophers should rely on senses to provide accurate information
 5. Legacy of Greek philosophy
 - a. Intellectual authorities for European philosophers until seventeenth century
 - b. Intellectual inspiration for Christian and Islamic theologians
- B. Popular religion and Greek drama
1. Greek deities: Zeus and scores of subordinate deities
 2. Various types of religious cults; Cult of Dionysus most popular
 3. Drama was performed at annual theatrical festivals
 - a. Great tragedians explored the possibilities and limitations of human action
 - b. Comic drama took delight in lampooning the public figures
- C. Hellenistic philosophy and religion
1. The Hellenistic philosophers: search for personal tranquility
 - a. Epicureans: identified pleasure as the greatest good
 - b. Skeptics: doubted certainty of knowledge, sought equanimity
 - c. Stoics: taught individuals duty to aid others and lead virtuous lives
 2. Religions of salvation spread through trade routes
 - a. Mystery religions promised eternal bliss for believers; like Cult of Osiris
 - b. Speculation about a single, universal god emerged