

Chapter 1: A Brief History of Early Ancient Civilization

The understanding of ancient literature rests on familiarity with the basic nature and history of ancient civilization. The following section reviews the history of the Ancient Near East and Classical Greece and Rome.

I. Historical Overview of the Ancient Near East

A. Sumer

In Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) at the lower end of the eastern side of the Fertile Crescent lie the wetlands where the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers disgorge into the Persian Gulf. Here, according to most historians and archaeologists, civilization began in a land called Sumer at that time. Because it is so remote from our age, the history of the Sumerian people is hard for us to grasp. Only a dim outline of the events shaping the third millennium (3000-2000 BCE) can be discerned in the historical record, most of which comes to us on clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform ("wedge-shaped") texts.

From what little remains of their civilization, the Sumerians emerge as an industrious, intellectually curious people, remarkably optimistic about life in the face of persistent threats of invasion and natural disaster. Their cities rival in size and scope even the greatest metropolises of antiquity. Uruk, especially, was a teeming boom-town at its height. Particularly notable in these sprawling urban communities are the ziggurats, mountainous mud-brick sloping-sided temples—they were constructed at virtually the same time as the pyramids of Egypt—which towered over the urban landscapes of most Mesopotamian cities.

At the same time, however, few Sumerian personalities have survived the ravages of time, more so the further one goes back in time. In fact, given that this primordial civilization encompasses an entire millennium of history, we don't even hear very many names of individuals. One of the few exceptions to this is Gilgamesh, a ruler of Uruk whose name is preserved among the Sumerian king-lists. He would later be associated with epic deeds and tales of far-flung adventure in the first known work of Western literature, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Around 2300 BCE, a great shift in power took place. The Akkadians under the leadership of the world's first known military general and strategist, Sargon, invaded from the north and conquered Sumer. Forging an empire that endured over a century, Sargon merged Sumerian and Akkadian culture, showing a great respect for both. It's in the wake of this synthesis that schools arose for the education and acculturation of scribes capable of passing the wisdom and learning of Sumerian culture on to later ages.

B. Babylon

After the fall of Sargon's heirs, Mesopotamia descended into a brief dark age, the Isin-Larsa period named for the two principal cities in power. From this confusion arose the Babylonians whose dominion over Mesopotamia culminated with the reign of Hammurabi (1792-1750 BCE), famous for his law-code which was preserved on a nine-foot basalt stele. In that day Babylon, Hammurabi's capital city, occupied a crucial trade route where the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers come within twenty miles of each other. By using this to his economic advantage, Hammurabi was able to achieve late in life his political and military ambitions, the conquest of nearly all Mesopotamia. However, he could not consolidate his claim over his vast domain before he died, and his sons and their heirs slowly relapsed from power and his dynasty passed from the pages of history.

Nevertheless, the Babylonians managed to hang on long enough to stamp Mesopotamian literature with their particular brand of culture, for instance, supplanting Sumerian deities with their own especially at the top of the Mesopotamian pantheon. It didn't hurt either that a long dark age—much longer than the one which came after the demise of the Akkadian Empire—followed the collapse of Babylonian hegemony. The second millennium (2000-1000 BCE) closed with Mesopotamia in a state of internal disarray, while at the same time Egypt was passing through its magnificent stage now called the New Kingdom. Even though a secondary world-power, the Mesopotamians clung fiercely to their traditions, among them the Akkadian, Babylonian and Sumerian languages and the literatures which those tongues embraced.

C. Assyria

As the new millennium dawned (ca. 1000 BCE), a new power arose, the Assyrians who lived in the northern part of the Fertile Crescent. Becoming one of the most brutal conqueror-states the world has ever known, the Assyrians unleashed a highly skilled army which attacked with unprecedented fury and horrific consequences—they favored, in particular, flaying, decapitation and impalement—such that the mere threat of the Assyrian army's approach aborted most nascent insurrections. Moreover, countless depictions of the torture and destruction of peoples all across the known world greeted travelers in almost every Assyrian governmental building. The chilling atrocities and their mechanical publication are simply unmatched anywhere in history, even Nazi Germany. The Assyrians' pitiless rage is at heart inexplicable.

But somewhere amidst the carnage lived within them a sense that traditional civilization should continue in the writing of cuneiform and the building of ziggurats. Indeed, the single greatest Mesopotamian library yet uncovered was found at Nineveh, the capital city of the last great Assyrian ruler. Were it not for this huge body of texts, we would not know half the story narrated above.

Ultimately, Assyrian civilization met a worthy end. In 612 BCE a coalition of their enemies, peoples who had endured their savagery for centuries, bore down on them and exterminated them root and branch. Within a decade there was no Assyrian army or royalty or city, simply no Assyrians at all. They perished in the same fire in which they had thrown so many others. Indeed, one of the reasons for the preservation of the library at Nineveh was the scope of the conflagration that engulfed the palace where the texts were housed. Destruction, it turns out, can be a form of preservation.

The Babylonians inherited Assyrian power briefly under their king Nebuchadnezzar, famous from the Bible, but his heirs lost control of their empire and its power passed to the Persians. They, in turn, expanded their domain creating the largest empire ever known at the time, stretching from Egypt to India—and in order to run it, the largest bureaucracy even known, too—all of it still managed through cuneiform writing, the last such civilization. For the times were changing and the modern age was dawning, not however across the Mesopotamians' world quite yet, but in the west on a rocky peninsula called Greece.

Terms, Places, People and Things to Know

Mesopotamia

Tigris and Euphrates Rivers

Sumer(ians)

cuneiform

Uruk

ziggurats

Gilgamesh

The Epic of Gilgamesh

Akkadians

Sargon

Babylon(ians)

Hammurabi

Assyrians

Nineveh

Nebuchadnezzar

Persians

II. Historical Overview of Ancient Greece and Rome

A. Prehistory (up to 1100 BCE)

The people who populated classical Greece were not native to the area. A millennium or so before the Classical Age, their ancestors had swept into the region in a series of invasions, pushing out the indigenous population with such success that we know almost nothing about the original inhabitants. Linguists have shown that these migrations were tied to others spreading a common language, religion and social structure from India in the east to western Europe, the so-called Indo-European invasions. While we don't know exactly who these Indo-Europeans were, we know for certain who they are. They are "us," at least most of us who come from European, Russian, Iranian or Indian descent.

The Indo-Europeans invaded Greece in waves, displacing and absorbing not only native peoples such as the Minoans on Crete, the large island south of Greece, but also earlier waves of their own people. One such incursion called the Dorians—according to Greek myth, they were the descendants of a man named Dorus—settled the Peloponnese (southern Greece) and eastern Sicily. Their principal cities were Sparta and Argos. Another wave called the Ionians—the descendants of a mythological founder named Ion—settled parts of northern Greece, the western coast of Asia Minor and western Sicily. Their principal cities were Athens in northern Greece and Miletus in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). These racial distinctions were reflected in the Ionian and Dorian dialects of the Greek language serving as constant reminders of the differences between these groups. Moreover, the bigotry which accompanied these linguistic divisions more than once affected the course of ancient history, particularly the way the Greeks formed alliances.

Our knowledge of Greek prehistory has made great strides forward through the work of archaeologists excavating sites dating to the second millennium BCE, such as Troy, Knossos, Pylos and Mycenae. We now know that the early invading Indo-Europeans who displaced the native Greek population, a people they called the Pelasgians, lived largely from agriculture, trade and piracy. They built immense citadels with high battlements attesting to a need to defend themselves from some invaders, perhaps their own neighbors. In the end, their civilization called Mycenaean after Mycenae, the first such settlement to be excavated, began to disintegrate around 1100 BCE resulting in a dark age from which all but no historical records survive. Very little is known of the next few centuries.

B. The Age of Tyrants (800-500 BCE)

Around 800 BCE the dark age began to lift as Greek civilization expanded and trade routes re-opened, establishing contact among the nations of the eastern

Mediterranean. This new Greece looked very different from what it had looked before. The Myceneans were gone, as well as the great Minoan civilization on Crete. In their place stood burgeoning city-states: Sparta in the southeastern Peloponnese, Argos in the northeastern Peloponnese (near the site of Mycenae), and Athens in Attica (northwest Greece) and Thebes in northern Greece. Most of these city-states fell under the rule of tyrants, usurpers who controlled the local populace through military power.

Despite the sometimes unpleasant nature of tyranny, the Greek city-states thrived during this age as technology and trade improved. The arts also blossomed. Where before poets recited verse from memory or composed poetry spontaneously during performance, the adoption and adaptation of the Phoenician alphabet allowed the Greeks after 800 BCE to write and publicize their words more widely. This precipitated a revolution in literature, from lengthy, recited poems called epics to shorter lyric poetry sung to the accompaniment of the lyre. Though lyric poets still performed their songs in public, they composed and published their works in written form, a revolutionary development in this day.

C. The Fifth Century BCE (the 400's): Classical Athens

As time passed, the tyrants of pre-Classical Greece slowly began losing power and in some cities were replaced by councils, either aristocratic or elected. Athens led the way to a more democratic system of government, although its democracy should never be confused with the true representation of all people. Women, children, slaves, foreigners and the poor were disenfranchised from government even in the most liberal days of Athenian democracy. By the end of the sixth century (the 500's) BCE, a revolution spearheaded by a shadowy figure named Cleisthenes removed the last Athenian tyrant from power and put the power into the hands of "democratic" councils.

This embryonic democracy was immediately put to the test in the Persian Wars, two successive incursions of foreigners into Greece. In 490 BCE the enormous Persian Empire to the East attacked Greece with an eye on Athens in particular. Led by their king Darius, the Persians landed in Attica and, even though the Greeks were vastly outnumbered, they defeated the invading force at the famous Battle of Marathon. Forced to return home empty-handed, the aged Darius died a few years later.

His young, energetic son Xerxes inherited the throne and returned to Greece a decade after his father's humiliation (480 BCE), bringing with him a much larger and better equipped expedition. This time the Persians succeeded in capturing Athens, only to be defeated shortly thereafter in a sea battle against the combined Greek forces. Like his father, Xerxes fled back to Persia, leaving behind some of his troops who were defeated near Athens the following spring.

The Greeks were elated. Against all odds they had vanquished a powerful enemy vastly superior in number. Their confidence soared but, still wary of their mighty

foe, the states who feared that the Persians might attempt a third assault on Greek territory—mostly coastal cities and islands in the Aegean Sea—banded together in a defensive league based on Delos, the Aegean island sacred to the god Apollo. Athens headed up this so-called Delian League because it had played a large part in the victories ending the Persian Wars.

Feeling especially encouraged by their successes, the Athenians threw themselves with unprecedented vigor into their arts. It was their way of celebrating their sense of superiority over the invading barbarian. For instance, they encouraged the growth of a new form of poetry which had been introduced a generation or so before, the presentation of a story not by a narrator as in epic or a lyre-player as in lyric poetry, but by a man pretending he actually was a character in the tale being told. This new type of artist raced around, becoming for all intents and purposes the central figure or figures in the story, hence the name of the art form drama ("running"). While enacting the tale, he wore a costume and a mask that resembled the character, in fact, a series of masks and costumes since the story usually called for him to play different characters. The Athenians incorporated this innovative brand of story-telling into a new festival, the Dionysia, held in honor of the god Dionysus whom they had recently imported into Greece from the Near East. Dionysian drama became the dominant form of narrative myth-making for most of the century.

In the meantime, the Delian League proved to be not only a strong defense against the Persians who didn't try to attack Greece again but also a lucrative source of income for Athens through the tribute paid annually by the member states to the treasury which Athens as leader of the Delian League controlled. Once it became clear that Persia wasn't going to attack Greece again, several states made the not-altogether-unreasonable request to leave the Delian League. That precipitated a crisis: should states be allowed to secede from a league that protected them from a potential invader, or should they like everyone else contribute to their own defense against the possibility of an invasion, however remote?

Applying their own unique brand of logic, the Athenians decided that secession wasn't an option and forced the seceding states back into the Delian League by marshaling against them the very militias and resources those states had contributed to the alliance. Greed for tribute was, of course, a factor in that decision. Thus, the allies, as they were called, found themselves in the curious position of annually funding a league that enforced their membership with ever-increasing strength as the treasury of the Delian League grew. In simple words, the Athenians came out the Persian Wars in possession of an empire.

The Spartans took a dim view of these imperialistic designs. They were soon drawn into the escalating conflict between the Athenians and their neighbors who feared they might soon be made Athenian "allies," too. In 431 BCE the Spartans and their comrades invaded Attica and began what came to be called the Peloponnesian War, a conflict which presented an interesting challenge. The Athenians at this time

possessed a huge navy but relatively few land forces. The Spartans, on the other hand, had immense land forces but virtually no navy. It's hard to fight a war between an army and a navy—where do they meet for a battle?—thus, after the war dragged on for a decade without a clear winner or even much hope of a decisive outcome, this natural stalemate evolved into a peace treaty which both parties signed in 421 BCE.

Yet the underlying conflict was hardly resolved. A turning point came soon thereafter, when the Athenians made a disastrously bad decision. In 416 BCE they voted to send their fleet to Sicily and try to capture the rich lands there. After a few years of injudicious indecision and horrible mismanagement, the fleet was entirely destroyed in 413 BCE, a disaster that came to be known as the Sicilian Expedition. The Athenians managed somehow to equip and man another navy and later yet another, but ultimately both were destroyed. In 404 BCE Athens surrendered to Sparta. During this so-called Fall of Athens, the city's defensive walls were torn down and Spartan-controlled puppets installed. The Classical Moment, the Golden Age, the Glory of Greece, whatever it's called, passed with the turn of the century.

D. The Fourth Century BCE (the 300's): The Rise of Macedon

The worst thing that ever happened to Sparta in the Classical Age was winning the Peloponnesian War. Ruled for centuries by a provincial and conservative oligarchy (i.e., rule by aristocrats), the militaristic Spartans were as ill-equipped as can be to steer the ship of international politics. Within a mere decade Athens had squirmed out from under their thumb and was ascending again the ladder of military success.

They were the least of the Spartans' worries, for a new player had entered the arena. The Thebans who had participated only marginally in the Peloponnesian War stepped forward to challenge the Spartans' dominance. It led eventually to war and one of the most famous and decisive military confrontations in antiquity, the Battle of Leuctra in 371 BCE. There, Sparta was so seriously defeated that Leuctra came to be known as the "graveyard of the Spartan aristocracy." Virtually overnight this battle shattered both the backbone of the Spartan state and the myth of its invincibility on land. Henceforth, Sparta was a pawn in the chess game of ancient history.

But the Thebans had their own trouble brewing. The great empire in the north of Greece, the Macedonians who had for years suffered murderous infighting among the power-hungry nobility who ran the country, found at long last a great and long-lived leader, Philip II. Educated in Greece in his youth, he possessed a rare combination of deft diplomacy and brilliant military insight. After enduring many years of his duplicitous speech and betrayals, the combined forces of the Thebans, Athenians, and Spartans finally met the Macedonians under Philip in open combat at the Battle of Chaeronea near Thebes (338 BCE). When the Macedonians won, it was the end of independence for the ancient Greeks.

Philip next turned his sights on the East and Persia but, while preparing a great expedition with which he meant to attack the wealthy Persian Empire—he could think of no better excuse for this assault than to avenge the Persian invasions of a century and a half before, his real reason being greed, of course—as Philip was standing in line at a state wedding, one of his own troops leapt forward and assassinated him. His son Alexander stepped quickly into his father's throne and led the expedition out east. If Alexander wasn't the one behind this mafia-style hit—the assassin himself was killed on the spot so we'll never know who put him up to it—Alexander certainly benefitted greatly from his father's sudden demise at the height of his powers.

Still, anyone in those days would have been a fool to bet on the new Macedonian king and his motley band of stalwarts as they marched against the great empires of the East. But, if always unwise, fools are sometimes right. Wielding little more than extraordinary military genius and unparalleled personal charisma, Alexander led his army through not only Asia Minor but the rest of the Near East, Egypt, Persia and even into India before his own men said they'd had enough and refused to go any further. The virtual ruler of the civilized world, Alexander returned to Persia to consolidate his enormous empire, where—irony of ironies!—in 323 BCE he caught a cold of some sort and died in bed.

E. The Hellenistic Age and the Coming of Rome (300-31 BCE)

The lands around the Mediterranean were plunged further into political and social chaos. With traditional states and kingdoms lying in ruins, government turned into a free-for-all. Alexander's generals carved up his empire like ravenous vultures, inspiring unprecedented bloodshed across the ancient world. Greece itself was overrun by a series of invading generals, each worse than the one before, as the hallmarks that had sustained the glorious Classical Age of a century before—the independent city-state, open and ethical debate, artistic freedom—all sunk out of sight.

Paradoxically, the Greek-est place in this so-called Hellenistic Age ("Greek-like") was Egypt, the only vaguely secure place protected, as it was, by sea and desert. There, one of Alexander's generals Ptolemy had established a dynastic kingdom, one of the few which was stable for any period of time over the next few centuries. Greek poets and philosophers flocked to Alexandria in the Nile delta of Egypt, a city Alexander had founded and named after himself. Eventually Alexandria supplanted Athens as the center of Greek culture.

The result was a hybrid culture, inaugurating a new breed of Greek, a person less focused on Greece alone, more international and cosmopolitan in outlook. Amidst the ruins of classical civilization, science and technology flourished—they often do when the prevailing world view is turned upside down—as the Hellenistic Greeks absorbed and exported learning across all parts of the known world.

Later, in the second century (the 100's) BCE when the Romans from Italy swept eastward across Greece and into the Near East, the Greeks must have uttered a collective sigh of relief. Here was yet another horde of conquerors, yes, but conquerors with enough sense to let the Greeks inform them about life, truth and especially the vagaries of fortune. Rome, it's true, presented them with just another form of bondage—being a Roman "province" was a type of servitude, no question about it—but the Greeks by then had learned that not all bondages are equal. Some are far worse than others, and serving Rome was only half-bad, which in this case was half-good.

In some part, this was true because the Romans imposed a relatively fair and equitable system of administration over their provinces. In greater part, however, it stemmed from the Romans' formidable military prowess which imposed peace like shackles on all subject states within their domain. Only fools who wished to die revolted against such indomitable adversaries, and thus stability and calm tended to follow in the Romans' wake.

This had been made all too clear from recent history. The Romans' endurance in battle had of late been sorely tested during the first and second Punic Wars (265-241, 218-202 BCE) waged against their economic and military rival Carthage (modern Tunisia). The great turning point had come at the end of the third century when the Romans defeated the Carthaginians and had come to dominate the western Mediterranean lands.

Looking east with a greed that comes of such success in conquest, they spent the next century (200-100 BCE) absorbing first Greece and then Asia Minor into their ballooning empire, later adding Syria, Palestine and Egypt, and all along taking in as much culture as they bestowed. By that day no one was as good at bestowing culture as the Greeks who quickly sold the Romans on Hellenistic drama, art, and architecture with the magnanimous charm of seasoned salesmen. Early on, equations were made between native Italian gods and Greek deities, beginning a process that would forever change the nature of Roman myth, literature and religion.

Later, the Romans' greatest authors strove to emulate the Greeks, and in some cases rivaled and even in ways surpassed them. Despite a horrendous century of civil unrest spanning most of the first century BCE (100-31 BCE), by the end of the millennium the Romans attained an extremely high level of social and cultural sophistication, grounded for the most part in Greek civilization and learning. Thus was born Greco-Roman culture, the bedrock of modern Western civilization.

Terms, Places, People and Things to Know

Indo-Europeans

Crete

Dorians

Ionians
Troy
Mycenae/Mycenean(s)
Sparta
Argos
Athens
Attica
Thebes
tyrants
lyric poetry
democracy
Persian Wars
Darius

Xerxes
Delian League
drama
Peloponnesian War
Sicilian Expedition
Fall of Athens
Battle of Leuctra
Macedon(ians)
Philip II
Battle of Chaeronea
Alexander
Hellenistic Age
Alexandria
Rome/Romans
Punic Wars
Carthage