

A Very Brief Outline of Greek History (to A.D. 1453)

The Prehistoric Periods

Literally, the time before history, meaning before the written history of the Greek world. Our information comes to us by way of archaeology, and the mythology and traditions of later periods.

Paleolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic Periods:

The old, middle and new stone ages were a period of transition in the civilizations of the Aegean. At the beginning of the Neolithic period there was a big change from a nomadic "hunter-gatherer" lifestyle to one of settled village life and agriculture.

The Bronze Age : 3000 - 1100 B.C.

This term comes from the concept of the 'Ages of Mankind', originating with Stone, followed by Bronze, and Iron. (The words 'Industrial, Space, Nuclear' were not known at the time this system was created, but follow in the same spirit.) In archaeological terms the Bronze Age is divided into three periods, early, middle, and late. On the island of Crete, the MINOAN civilization came to power during the early and middle phases, only to be eclipsed by the MYCENAEAN civilization on the mainland of Greece in the Late Bronze Age.

The Early Iron Age : 1100 - 900 B.C.

Following the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization at the end of the Bronze Age, most of the palatial centers disappear, accompanied by depopulation of surrounding areas. The apparently low level of culture (for example, the art of writing is lost) and the general scarcity of information from this period makes it difficult to understand the changes occurring at this time. (This period is also sometimes called the "Dark Ages".) Greek tradition states that the "Dorians" or "Sons of Herakles" invaded southern Greece, thereby driving out the last of the Mycenaeans (the "Dorian Invasion"). Sometime later, displaced Greek-speaking peoples moved into Asia Minor (supposedly led by the descendants of Ion of Athens) and settled along the coast (the "Ionian Migration").

The Historical Periods

The Geometric Period : 900-700 B.C.

During this period the Greek *polis* (pl. = *poleis*) or "city-state" develops, including Athens, Corinth, and Sparta. Archaeologically we see a greater, more developed, artistic output in the form of painted

pottery and the rise of trade with other areas of the Mediterranean. Colonies are established in Italy and Sicily. The development of writing in the middle of the eighth century brings us out of the "Dark Ages" and into the historical period properly speaking. The epic poems of Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, are widely circulated around the Greek world.

The Archaic Period : 700-480 B.C.

Individual city-states and their colonies prosper, giving rise to centers of political, religious, philosophic and artistic development. Many of the Greek cities in the mainland, Aegean islands, and the Ionian coast are ruled by "tyrants", strong-willed men who rule, not by constitutional authority, but by popular support. Monumental sculpture, stone temple architecture, and civic building programs are among the achievements of this period. Greek cities in the eastern Aegean and Asia Minor come under the domination of the Persian Empire at the end of the sixth century. An unsuccessful revolt by the Greeks living on the Ionian coast leads to the invasion of mainland Greece by the Persians in 490 B.C. and again in 480 B.C. The Archaic period "officially" comes to an end (at least for modern historians) with the defeat of the Persian forces at the Battles of Salamis and Plataia in 480/79 B.C. In the years after the Persian defeat, Athens takes the lead in a league of Greek states (the "Delian League") sworn to pursue the war against the Persians.

The Classical Period : 480-323 B.C.

The acme of Greek civilization as viewed by many historians: literature, drama and the arts flourish throughout the Greek world. Athens enjoyed a period of wealth and power at the beginning of this period, successfully bringing the democratic form of government to the fore. Athens grows rich off its silver mines and the tribute paid by the Delian League which becomes, virtually, the Athenian Empire. This is the time of the great "Kimonian" and "Periklean" building programs in Athens, which include the Parthenon and other famous temples on the Acropolis. Conflict with other Greek cities results in the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.) and the defeat of Athens at the end of the fifth century. Subsequent decades see the rise of Macedonian power, beginning with Philip II, and culminating with the conquests (and death in 323) of Alexander the Great.

The Hellenistic Period : 323- 31 B.C.

Following the death of Alexander, his empire was divided into three parts: the Seleucids in Asia Minor; the Ptolemies in Egypt and the Macedonian (Antigonid) dynasty in Greece. The process of rule by kingship, common in the Near East, is established in the eastern area of the Greek world, including the Attalid dynasty in Pergamon. These 'Hellenistic Kingdoms' were centers of learning and artistic patronage; institutions such as the Libraries at Alexandria and Pergamon were responsible for the preservation and transmission of much of earlier scholarship and literature. Athens ceased to be an important political center, but was home to important philosophical schools.

The Roman Period in Greece: 31 B.C. - A.D. 323

The growing power of Rome eventually surpassed and engulfed the Hellenistic Kingdoms. With the defeat and subsequent deaths of Antony and Cleopatra, the last of the Ptolemaic rulers, in 31 B.C., Octavian (Augustus) incorporated much of what had been Greece into the Roman province of Achaia. Centers of learning and the arts such as Athens and Rhodes, as well as the sanctuaries of Delos and Delphi, continued to flourish in the Roman period, particularly under the patronage of such philhellenic emperors as Hadrian (A.D. 117-38). Ephesos, Pergamon, and Aphrodisias were major Roman cities in Asia Minor.

The Byzantine Period in Greece : A.D. 323 - 1453

Constantine the Great created a new capital in the eastern half of the Roman empire, renaming the ancient Greek city of Byzantium "Nova Roma", the New Rome, more commonly known as the city of Constantine, "Constantinopolis" (modern Istanbul). His religious conversion and political recognition of the Christian faith paved the way for the continuation, in Christian form, of the Roman Empire. Henceforth, the "Eastern Roman Christian Empire" known in modern times as the Byzantine Empire, carried on the traditions of Greek culture. Following the sack of Constantinople in 1204 at the hands of Latin Crusaders, much of Greece came under Frankish or Venetian ownership. The Byzantine Empire finally came to an end with the capture of Constantinopolis by the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

Recommended websites:

T.R. Martin, *An Overview of Greek History from Mycenae to Alexander* (Perseus Digital Library).

J. B. Rutter, *The Prehistoric Archaeology of the Aegean* (Dartmouth College).

The Parian Marble (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford University).

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