

CHAPTER 4

Classical Civilization in the Mediterranean: Greece and Rome

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The civilizations of Greece and Rome rivaled those of India and China in cultural richness and their effect on world history. Their institutions and values reverberated in the later histories of the Middle East and Europe and Europe's colonies around the world. The study of classical Mediterranean civilization is complicated because it includes Greek and then Roman political, social, and economic institutions, which were sometimes shared but often unique.

The Persian Tradition. Greeks and Romans had contacts with and were influenced to some degree by the large Persian Empire and its descendants. The Persians absorbed many of the attributes of earlier Mesopotamian societies. Zoroastrianism, an early monotheistic religion, came from within the empire. After being toppled by the Greek leader Alexander the Great, another empire arose—the Sassanid—during Rome's imperial era.

Patterns of Greek and Roman History. The rise of the dynamic city-states of classical Greece began around 800 B.C.E., reaching a high point in the 5th century B.C.E. with the leadership of the Athenian Pericles. The next major era came under the expansionist Alexander, who briefly united Greece and the Persian Empire. The legacy of the combination of the two civilizations was called Hellenism. Rome's development as a republic began as Hellenism waned. As Rome gained more territory by challenging regional powers and lesser developed cultures, it grew into an empire.

Greece. The Greeks were an Indo-European people who took over the Greek peninsula by 1700 B.C.E. From 800 to 600 B.C.E. Greek civilization rose to prominence rapidly with the creation of strong city-states. Each city-state had its own government, typically either a tyranny of one ruler or an aristocratic council. Sparta and Athens came to be the two leading city-states. Sparta represented a strong military aristocracy, while Athens was a more diverse commercial state that was proud of its artistic and intellectual leadership. During the 5th century Pericles dominated Athenian politics, creating a democratic political structure where each citizen could participate in government. Political decline soon set in for the city-states as Athens and Sparta vied for control of Greece during the Peloponnesian Wars. Afterwards the city-states were conquered by Philip II of Macedon and then his son Alexander the Great, who extended the Macedonian Empire throughout the Middle East and Egypt. Although this empire did not last long beyond Alexander's death, the Hellenistic period, as it is called, saw the merging of Greek art and culture with other Middle Eastern forms and had influence well beyond the end of the empire.

Rome. The Roman state began as a local monarchy in central Italy around 800 B.C.E. Roman aristocrats succeeded in driving out the monarchy in 509 B.C.E. The new Roman republic gradually extended its influence over the rest of the Italian peninsula. Roman influence widened during the three Punic Wars, from 264 to 146 B.C.E., during which Rome fought and defeated the armies of the Phoenician city of Carthage. The politics of the Roman republic grew unstable as victorious generals sought even greater power while the poor of the city rebelled. In 45 B.C.E. Julius Caesar ended the traditional institutions of the Roman state. Caesar's grandnephew, Augustus Caesar, seized power in 27 B.C.E. and established the basic structures of

the Roman Empire. For 200 years the empire maintained great vigor, bringing peace and prosperity to the entire Mediterranean world. Then the empire suffered a slow fall that lasted about 250 years until invading peoples from the north finally overturned the government in Rome in 476 C.E.

Greek and Roman Political Institutions. Greece and Rome featured an important variety of political forms. Both tended to emphasize aristocratic rule but there were significant examples of democratic elements as well. Politics was very important in the classical Mediterranean civilizations and offered similarities to Confucian values, yet the variety of political forms reminds the historian of India. There was no single Greek political style, but democracy is the most famous. Classical Mediterranean political theory involved ethics, duties of citizens, and skills, such as oratory. Governments supported an official religion, but tolerance of other faiths was the norm. The exception, Christianity under the Roman Empire, occurred because Christians refused to place state first in their devotion. The greatest political legacies of the Mediterranean cultures were an intense loyalty to the state, a preference for aristocratic rule, and the development of a uniform set of legal principles.

In Depth: The Classical Mediterranean Civilization in Comparative Perspective. The three great classical civilizations of China, India, and the Mediterranean lead historians to espouse a variety of comparisons. Similarities include that each developed into an empire; each relied primarily on an agricultural economy; and each supported the development of science, but for different reasons. All three civilizations emphasized clear social strata with the elites considerably distanced from the masses. Differences included social mobility, with India's the most restrictive and Rome's the most fluid, comparatively. In addition, each civilization developed a different cultural "glue" that held society together, with the Mediterraneans' emphasis on devotion to the state for the good of the whole ("civic duty"), while India promised reward for good behavior through reincarnation, and Chinese Confucianism promoted obedience and self-restraint as a good unto itself, with the result being peace and prosperity. Over time, Indian and Chinese social structures survived better than those in the Mediterranean because of the introduction of Christianity into the latter's culture.

Religion and Culture. The Greeks and Romans did not create a significant world religion. Their religions derived from a complex set of gods and goddesses who were seen as regulating human life. Both Mediterranean and Indian religious lore reflected the common heritage of Indo-European invaders. Greco-Roman religion tended toward an of-this-world approach with lessons that illustrated human passions and foibles but offered little in regard to modeling ethical behavior. Thus, separate models of moral philosophy were developed, by such men as Aristotle and Cicero, who like Confucius, taught the importance of moderation and balance in human behavior. Socrates taught his followers to question conventional wisdom by using rational inquiry. In the sciences, Greek work in geometry and anatomy was especially important. The greatest Roman contribution to the sciences was in engineering. In the arts and literature, the Greeks had few equals, particularly in sculpture, architecture, and plays. The Romans mimicked but rarely surpassed the Greek innovators in these fields.

Economy and Society in the Mediterranean. Most Greeks and Romans were self-sustaining farmers, but there was also a great deal of commercial agriculture, which in turn fueled their

establishment of an empire. There was also extensive trade. Slavery was an important economic and social institution in the Mediterranean civilization. The family was a tight social structure, with men in firm control; however, women were often active in business and sometimes controlled property. Overall, the status of women in the Mediterranean world was better than in China.

Toward the Fall of Rome. The fall of Rome differed from China's and India's declines. For instance, no single civilization rose to replace Rome, although several smaller governments claimed to be its inheritor. In addition, Rome's fall was fragmentary, collapsing in the western empire long before the eastern side did.

Global Connections: Greece, Rome, and the World. The Greeks set up a widespread colonial and trading network, peaking with Alexander, but it did not last. The much bigger world of the Romans was well aware of the Asian, African, and northern European world outside its realm. Chinese goods were traded in the city of Rome itself, but interest in the Middle Kingdom seems to have been strictly out of a desire for material goods, rather than because of China's technology or system of governance.

KEY TERMS

Cyrus the Great: Most famous Persian emperor, who controlled land and peoples across the northern Middle East and into northwestern India.

Pericles: One of the most famous Greek political figures, he dominated Athenian government in the 5th century B.C.E. He ruled through wise and clever means. Even he was not able to prevent war between Athens and Sparta.

Alexander the Great: Extended the Greek Empire begun by his father into the Persian Empire, all the way to India. From a political standpoint, his efforts were largely in vain, but Greek cultural contributions to the area cannot be overstated.

Hellenistic period: After Alexander's death, Greek art, education, and culture merged with those in the Middle East. Trade and important scientific centers were established, such as Alexandria, Egypt.

Punic Wars: Series of wars (264-146 B.C.E.) between the Roman republic and the Phoenician colony Carthage over dominance of the Mediterranean. Carthage's great general Hannibal was ultimately unable to stop the Romans, who conquered Greece and north Africa, including Egypt.

Julius Caesar: Dictator of the Roman republic who effectively ended the republic and, with his successor Augustus, transformed it into an empire.

Diocletian and Constantine: Strong emperors toward the end of the Roman Empire who tried with some success to reverse the tide of its ultimate fall. Constantine moved the capital away from Rome and allowed freedom of worship for Christians.

Greek city-states: "Politics" comes from the Greek word for city-state. Though united in

language and religion, the Greeks held differing forms of government, from monarchies to oligarchies to aristocratically controlled democracies.

Senate: The most important legislative body in the Roman republic, composed mainly of aristocrats.

Consuls: The two men who shared executive power in the Roman republic, but in times of crisis the Senate could choose a dictator with emergency powers.

Cicero: Roman writer and senator who expounded on the value of oratory in political discourse.

Socrates: A leading figure in the development of classical Mediterranean philosophy. He encouraged his students to question conventional wisdom. His work symbolized the Greco-Roman emphasis on the power of human thought.

Plato: Socrates' greatest pupil, who suggested that humans could approach an understanding of the perfect forms of truth, good, and beauty that he thought underlay nature.

Aristotle: Student of Plato who developed logic and scientific reasoning in the Western sense. He stressed the value of moderation in all things.

Stoics: Adherents of this Greek philosophy emphasized an inner moral independence cultivated by strict discipline and personal bravery.

Sophocles: Athenian dramatist who specialized in psychological tragedies, such as *Oedipus Rex*.

Iliad: Greek epic poem attributed to Homer but possibly the work of many authors; defined gods and human nature that shaped Greek mythos.

Doric, Ionic, Corinthian: Three forms of Greek columns that represent what is still known as classical architecture.

Battle of Marathon: (490 B.C.E.) In this battle, the Persians who have invaded Greece are defeated on the Plain of Marathon by an Athenian army led by the general, Miltiades.

King Xerxes: (486 – 465 B.C.E.) Persian king who invaded Greece in retribution for earlier Persian defeats by the Greeks; his forces were defeated by the Greeks in the battles of Salamis and Plataea.

Themistocles: Athenian leader who advocated for an Athenian navy during the Persian Wars; this led to the defeat of the large Persian fleet at the Battle of Salamis by the Athenian navy.

Battle of Thermopylae: (480 B.C.E.) Battle in which Spartan king Leonidas and his army of 300 Spartans and 700 Thespians refused to surrender to the numerically superior Persian army at the pass of Thermopylae; they were annihilated to the man but allowed the other Greek armies to prepare for the Persian invasion.

Zoroastrianism: Persian religion developed by the prophet Zoroaster around 600 B.C.E. in which is taught that life is a battle between the opposing forces of good and evil, with humans having to choose between the two.

Olympic Games: Festival and athletic contests held at Olympia in honor of Zeus in which all Greek city-states sent representatives.

Peloponnesian Wars: (431 – 404 B.C.E.) War which involved Athens and its allies against Sparta and its allies; Sparta ultimately won the war but a majority of the Greek city-states are weakened considerably by the fighting.

Philip II of Macedon: (359 – 336 B.C.E.) King of Macedon who defeated a combined army of Thebes and Athens to become the ruler of the Greek city-states; father of Alexander the Great.

Alexandria: Seaport in Egypt on the Mediterranean Sea which was founded by Alexander the Great and became the center of Hellenistic culture.

Roman Republic: (510 – 47 B.C.E.) The balanced constitution of Rome; featured an aristocratic Senate, a panel of magistrates, and several popular assemblies.

Carthage: Ancient city-state in north Africa founded by the Phoenicians and destroyed by the Romans in the Punic Wars in 146 B.C.E.

Hannibal: Carthaginian general who led troops into Italy during the Second Punic War; he was defeated at the Battle of Zama in 202 B.C.E. by the Roman general Scipio.

Augustus Caesar: (63 B.C.E. – 14 C.E.) Grandnephew of Caesar who restored order to Rome after a century of political chaos; he assumed the title Augustus and instituted a monarchical government in which the emperor was dictator, chief military general, and chief priest; first emperor of Rome.

Polis: Greek word for city-state.

Tyranny: A government based on the rule of an absolute ruler.

Direct democracy: A government based on the rule of the vote of the people.

Aristocracy: A government based on the rule of the best of the society.

Twelve Tables: (c. 450 B.C.E.) Roman law code developed in response to the democratization of the Roman republic.

“Mystery” religions: Religions often imported from the Middle East which featured secret rituals and fellowship and a greater sense of contact with the divine.

Herodotus: Greek historian called the “Father of History” who wrote an account of the Persian

Wars in the *Histories*.

Pythagoras: Hellenistic mathematician who developed many basic geometric theorems which are still in use in geometry today.

Galen: Hellenistic physician and writer who wrote many medical treatises that formed the basis of modern medical practice.

Euclid: Hellenistic mathematician who produced what was long the world's most widely used compendium of geometry.

Ptolemy: Hellenistic astronomer who produced an elaborate theory of the sun's motion around the Earth.

Sappho: (born ca. 612 B.C.E.) One of the great poets of the ancient Greeks; her poetry developed the complexities of the inner workings of human beings and love.

Vergil: (70 – 19 B.C.E.) One of the greatest of the Roman poets during "Golden Age" of Latin literature; patronized by Augustus; author of the *Aeneid*.