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Introductory Guide to Ancient Civilizations

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Introductory Guide to Ancient Civilizations

Helmut Loeffler and Arturo H. Enamorado III
Note

This book is designed to be used along with a presentation or other supportive material. Maps, pieces of art, archaeological evidence etc. have to be presented so that the past can be recreated in context. The individual lecturer needs to fill in the missing parts he/she wants to focus on based on their expertise and interest. This guide is kept short and simple on purpose because textbooks on ancient civilizations often are too expensive and are only used periodically throughout the semester. We hope to deliver something more useful for students.
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One cannot discuss the ancient civilizations of the world without first mentioning the importance of water. Water is the key to life and to sustaining it; without water and fertile land early civilizations of the world would not have been possible. Many of the civilizations in the ancient world would develop in river valleys that provided fertile land and fresh water. But first let us discuss the beginning of human development that led to the earliest civilizations.

1. Early Human History

The earth itself as recorded by scientific evidence is around 4.5 billion years old. Considering the age of the planet it was only recently, roughly 40 million years ago, that the first monkey-like animals appeared in the tropical regions of the world. This monkey-like species would remain the dominant mammal until about 4 to 5 million years ago when the ancestor to the human species emerged. This species was still monkey-like, but it represents also the first example of pre-humans (the technical term used is *Australopithecus*). The most famous example of *Australopithecus* is “Lucy” whose bones were discovered in modern-day Ethiopia on November 24, 1974. Her remains showed that these pre-humans were bipedal (they could walk on two legs) and that their skulls contained a slightly larger brain than most mammals.

About roughly one million years ago the next leap in human evolution took place: *Homo erectus* appeared. This human ancestor was taller, had a bigger brain and started to look more human than ape. Finally around 200,000 years ago came the birth of our species, and thus begun the rise of *Homo sapiens*. One of the reasons why *Homo sapiens* succeeded was the uniquely structured larger brain (1,500 cubic centimeters) This brain enables us to have reflective thoughts, which over time proved to be an evolutionary advantage.

Paleolithic Period

The cradle of mankind was located in East Africa, in modern-day Tanzania, Kenya and Ethiopia. These regions have yielded the oldest fossil evidence for *Australopithecus* and
other species that may be direct ancestors of modern humans. The Paleolithic Period, which is ancient Greek for “Old Stone Age”, begins 4 to 5 million years ago in conjunction with the evolution of early human-like species. A main characteristic of this age is the hunting and gathering way of life. Members of early human-like species were short and around 1 meter (3 feet) tall on average. These pre-humans were covered in hair and made use of their hands. They used an early form of verbal communication. They could stand up and walk on two feet. Yet their brain size was relatively small compared to ours, measuring only 500 cubic centimeters (equivalent to 1/3 of the modern human brain). Yet with this limited brain these pre-humans were able to create simple stone tools and could travel in groups.

When *Homo erectus* evolved around one million years ago the evolutionary advantage was clear: he had a brain double the size of that of the pre-humans’ (roughly 1000 cubic centimeters) and a larger body size. *Homo erectus* and the pre-human figures lived alongside each other until *Homo erectus* became the dominant species. *Homo erectus* would discover how to tend fire. *Homo erectus* would eventually spread out and with his larger brain he developed better verbal communications than his predecessors, which made him a very effective hunter.

*Homo sapiens* evolved around 200 thousand years ago; he lived alongside *Homo erectus* and gradually became the dominant human species. With his unique brain *Homo sapiens* created better tools, weapons (for example a spear throwing device with which he could hurl spears up to 100 miles per hour) and ornamental pieces of art. *Homo sapiens* also migrated to many places around the world. This was supported by the Ice Ages. From about 65,000 to 15,000 BCE the earth experienced global cooling leading to Ice Ages, which created a lower global sea level; these lower sea levels expanded the land masses, creating the early land bridges which allowed people to move to the Western hemisphere (The Americas) and to places like Australia.

Hunting and gathering remained the source of food for *Homo sapiens*. Our early ancestors presumably had no sense of private property. Men and women were probably more equal than in later farming communities, because all members of the group were essential to the survival of the group. Our early ancestors were so effective at hunting that they killed all horses in the Americas and brought other animals to extinction. *Homo*
Homo sapiens would develop many larger and sharper stone weapons, which contributed to this extinction process. Around 110 thousand years ago Homo sapiens learned to fish in deep water. Somewhat later, our ancestors learned to craft art and jewelry. Examples include the Venus statues, which are believed to be reflections of an early form of religious rite, invoking fertility. One of the most famous and well preserved of these statues is the Venus statue found in Willendorf, Austria, dating back to 23,000 BCE. The reason many scholars believe that these statues reflect religious worship is that around this time we see early humans around the world creating similar artistic statues, which are mostly female and usually possess exaggerated sexual organs. Another form of early art is to be found in caves. Early humans mostly depicted animals on the walls of caves, presumably because hunting was an essential and dangerous part of their lives. Today we think that around 30 thousand hunters and gatherers are still living on this planet, and by studying them we try to gain insight into the way of living of hunters and gatherers.

The Neolithic Period

Agriculture became popular among early humans around 10 to 12 thousand years ago, marking the beginning of the Neolithic period (ancient Greek for New Stone Age). At this point we see our early ancestors cease to move around (as had been necessary while hunting and gathering) and to begin settling down to cultivate plants and domesticate animals. Although farming was much harder and labor intensive than hunting and gathering, agriculture became the dominant way of life because it provides a stable and secure supply of food. In fact, after the end of the Paleolithic age, around 10-12 thousand years ago, the world’s population was only 4 million, but by 500 BCE the world’s population had skyrocketed to 100 million thanks to agriculture. People would eventually move to better locations to farm, searching for fertile land, and for sources of fresh water. This in turn led to the creation of large settlements of people who banded together to farm while having a permanent home. One of the oldest permanent settlements, Jericho, dates from around 8000 BCE, and had a population of about 2000 people. The main crops that were farmed in Jericho were wheat and barley. However, the city also harvested salt, which was a source of wealth. At this time in human history money did not exist, so
goods and commodities served as the basis for trade and exchange. Wealth meant the accumulation of land and (luxury) goods. Luxury goods would be used to fund the building of the great walls of Jericho around 7000 BCE, which are mentioned in later Sacred and Secular texts.

Agriculture was so successful that many farmers could actually stop being farmers and specialize in trades for food. Crafts like pottery making would soon (around 7000 BCE) develop, which further led to the development of design and art. By marking designs into the clay before the raw pottery was baked, potters could produce nicer looking pottery and thus increase its value. Next came the craft of textile making, which involved the production of clothes and fabrics for trade. Next and highly important to the further development of mankind was the craft of metallurgy, which permitted people to create goods like jewelry and tools out of copper. Around this time period we also see the development of government and other means of providing security and order, as these were needed in the fast growing settlements. It is with the creation of early government that we can refer to these settlements as the first cities, which had also become larger in size and in population.

**Early Mesopotamia (Sumer)**

The word “Mesopotamia” goes back to ancient Greek and means “between (Meso) the rivers (Potamoi).” The two major rivers in the region are the Euphrates and Tigris. Located mostly in modern day Iraq, these two rivers provided the fresh water the people of the region needed. As early as 6000 BCE people in the region began to irrigate land on a small scale, and they gradually moved to irrigate more fields. Irrigation techniques began with simple canals but grew into the construction of large reservoirs off of the two rivers. The use of artificial irrigation increased the food supply, which resulted in an increase in population within Mesopotamia. The population booms that Mesopotamia experienced reached far into its Southern area, where we see the rise of one of the first civilizations. Around 5000 BCE the people of this area, called the Sumerians, began constructing complex irrigation systems to produce a larger harvest. By 3000 BCE, 100 thousand people lived in the land of Sumer. At this point in history, this was the largest
concentration of population in one area. Beginning around 4500 BCE the Sumerians began constructing the world’s first cities. Unlike the earlier Neolithic villages and towns, these cities were centers of political and military authority. The Sumerians developed functional aspects of the city, like market places for commerce, and organized religious activity. It is worth noting that religion in the early civilizations was polytheistic. The early Sumerian priests had two basic tasks: overseeing religious ceremonies and keeping traditions alive. The early cities of Sumer made great strides to keep peace and to ensure that food supplies could meet a fast-growing population. The governmental structures of Sumer were vital to the security of their people. They organized the building of large defensive walls to protect these early cities. In addition to defensive structures the government was also in charge of constructing useful projects for the community such as temples and irrigation systems.

Sumerian temples were by no means simple structures; these temples required an incredible amount of labor to construct. For instance, the temple to the goddess Inanna in the city of Ur, built around 3200 BCE, is believed to have required the labor of at least fifteen hundred people working 10 hours each day for about 5 years. Because Ur is so well preserved, we are able to learn much about the Sumerians from their temples. The most impressive religious structure is called the Ziggurat, a stepped pyramid in design that housed several temples and altars with stairs on the outside. The Ziggurat at Ur still exists in modern day Iraq. When these Ziggurats were built, many people would bring offerings to the gods for prosperity and good harvests. Besides commissioning the building of these massive temple complexes, the government also needed to allocate the workers necessary to build these structures, to maintain irrigation systems, and to build new ones. The Sumerian government had to ensure water was distributed equally, an important task as the other cities outside of Sumer began to grow wealthier and thus more powerful. Many of these cities began building their own defensive walls as a necessity since Mesopotamia’s geography does not provide any natural barriers. It should also be noted that the early Sumerian governments were not monarchies but assemblies of prominent wealthy men that made decisions on behalf of the community. When the city was under a threat a single man was elected to handle the crisis with full authority to fight
these wars; he was expected to return power once the crisis was resolved. Some of these temporary single rulers did not hand back power and made themselves kings.

**Akkadian Empire**

By 3000 BCE each Sumerian city was ruled by a king who possessed absolute power. This would change as one king, Sargon, began to wage a war of conquest against the other Sumerian cities. Sargon is believed to have lived from 2370 to 2315 BCE (or 2270 to 2215 BCE) and ruled over the city of Akkad. Scholars are not sure where exactly Akkad was located but most believe it was near the city of Kish. Sargon’s conquest of the Sumerian cities happened gradually; one by one each city fell under his control. He installed governors that took the place of the former kings to rule on his behalf. With each successful conquest Sargon’s army grew, becoming a very effective military machine that was virtually unbeatable in battle. His warriors became so fierce and effective in battle that the name *Akkadian* became a source of fear to their opponents. At its peak Sargon’s army consisted of about 5000 soldiers, and in order to secure his area he moved with his army from city to city. The problem he faced was finding enough supplies, food and shelter for his massive army. One solution to this problem was to demand provisions from the city that was housing Sargon’s forces, although this led to resentment, which in turn resulted in local rebellions. The second solution was to take control of the trade centers and to block trade routes to other cities, therefore allowing trade to the cities only in exchange for the payment of access fees. These supplied the army and kept the cities weak. Under Sargon the city of Akkad now became the wealthiest city in the world at that time (ca. 2300 BCE). His successors would manage to keep a secure rule over Akkad for several generations, approximately for 150 years, until Sargon’s empire collapsed in 2150 BCE, but not without influencing other rulers who modeled themselves after him.
Inspired by the conquests of Sargon, another Mesopotamian king would move to conquer and rule over Mesopotamia. He would become the most popular king of the Old Babylonian Empire. His name was King Hammurabi and he reigned from 1792 to 1750 BCE. Hammurabi created a more central administration; he did not travel around with a large-scale army like Sargon did but instead ruled from the capital city of Babylon. Hammurabi would also install deputies in the controlled areas. Unlike Sargon, Hammurabi would fund his armies not by traveling around but by creating a system of taxes to ensure regular income for his administration. We know Hammurabi mostly for another prominent innovation: the provision of a code of law. This code demanded high standards of behavior and stipulated harsh punishments for perpetrators of many crimes. The death penalty was established for crimes like murder, theft, fraud, false accusations, adultery, and incest. The core principle of the code of Hammurabi was *Lex Talionis*, which means “law of retaliation.” It basically held that the offender was to suffer a punishment equal to the crime committed. However, this principle was only applied to equals within a social class, meaning that if a nobleman injured a person of lower standing he was not punished equally, and if a nobleman was harmed by a member of the lower classes, the punishment would be death for the latter. The code of Hammurabi would influence later Persian and Hebrew laws.

Since the Babylonian empire became more and more powerful and wealthy due to their efficient tax system, it is no surprise that invaders were attracted to the prosperity of the Babylonians. Around 1595 BCE the Hittites defeated the Babylonians, conquering and sacking their capital city, and effectively plunging the region into civil unrest for several hundred years.
The Hittites

Around 1700 BCE the Hittite empire emerged in what is now Eastern Turkey. Their capital city was Hattusa. They developed a strong monarchy and expanded their empire rapidly. The Hittite military was powerful not only because of their great soldiers but also because of one of their inventions: the light, two-wheeled, horse-drawn chariot. The Hittite chariot design would soon spread to other civilizations like the Mesopotamians, the Egyptians, and the Mycenaean Greeks. It is important to note that chariots were very expensive because of the equipment and time needed to train the horses. Eventually this led to a professional elite group of soldiers because only the rich could afford a chariot. On top of the development of the light chariot, the Hittites developed the ability to make iron weapons and tools around 1300 BCE. The Hittites became engaged in battles with both the Mesopotamians and the Egyptians. Their empire dissolved after 1200 BCE. The Hittites spoke an Indo-European language, which is the language family from which many modern European languages originate. Many of the Asian languages are also of the same language family, for example Sanskrit, Persian (Farsi), Hindi, Bengali, Urdu. The reason for this widespread use of Indo-European languages is the migration of Indo-European speaking peoples out of Eastern Europe into Central and Western Europe and parts of Asia. Other language families include Semitic (Hebrew, Phoenician, Arabic) or Bantu (more than 400 languages spoken in sub-Saharan areas in Africa.)

Assyrian Empire

Between 1900 and 1800 BCE the independent state of Assyria in northern Mesopotamia was a small settlement with no threats to its borders. Assyria’s location in a valley close to the Tigris River was beneficial, since it provided the inhabitants access to important trade routes. The Assyrians were quick to establish a powerful military, with armies based on units and professional commanders. The commanders of these units were not chosen because of noble birth but rather on the basis of merit: the bravery and skill they showed
in battle. Another reason for the strength of the Assyrian military was the adoption of the chariot developed by the Hittites. After this new weapon was added to their very competent army, the Assyrians began expanding their empire to not only Mesopotamia but as far west as Egypt and Syria climaxing in size around the 8th and 7th century BCE. The cities of Assur and Nineveh became wealthy centers of power and culture. In Nineveh a massive library was constructed where many texts of the history and culture of the people of Mesopotamia were preserved, including the famous Epic of Gilgamesh.

The Assyrians drew heavily from the achievements of the Old Babylonian Empire, and even followed the code of Hammurabi as its own system of law. The Assyrian rule became more and more unpopular in other regions; many rebellions against them took place in different locations of their massive empire. By 612 BCE their empire was effectively destroyed when the city of Nineveh was conquered.

The New Babylonian Empire

After the fall of the Assyrian Empire the Babylonians returned to power. The return of the Babylonian domination of Mesopotamia is often referred to as the New Babylonian Empire or the Chaldean Empire. The most famous king of Babylonia during this period was King Nebuchadnezzar, who reigned from 605 to 562 BCE. Nebuchadnezzar spent much of his empire’s wealth on the capital city of Babylon, which among other things was protected by enormous defensive walls. It was said that a four horse-drawn chariot could turn around at full speed on top of the walls. Within the city walls were reportedly more than a thousand temples with golden statues, as well as one of the famous seven wonders of the ancient world, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. They were built as a gift for Nebuchadnezzar’s wife Queen Semiramis to bring the beautiful gardens she grew up with to Babylon. In 539 BCE the Persians conquered Babylonia under Cyrus the Great.

Mesopotamian Life

The creation of bronze vastly increased the productivity of workers in Mesopotamia. Mesopotamian craftsmen created bronze around 3300 BCE by smelting both copper and
tin together and creating a hard alloy which was first used to make more effective weapons and eventually more effective tools in agriculture and other industries. The creation of bronze marked the beginning of the Bronze Age, which lasted from around 3300 BCE to around 1400 BCE. With the innovation of iron smelting between 1300 and 1200 BCE production capabilities reached new heights and the Iron Age began. Iron was harder to make than bronze, as it required higher temperatures to smelt the iron ore. This heat was achieved through burning charcoal. Iron was vastly superior in strength and durability to bronze, and agricultural tools made out of iron increased the food supply. The large surpluses of food led to increasing populations and because of the possibility of accumulating wealth, social classes appear as in the earlier empires in Mesopotamia. Members of the religious class would still oversee religious ceremonies as had been expected of them since the time of Sumer, but the functions of temples expanded around 2400 BCE as temples became powerful economic centers. They started to possess large amounts of land and manufactories. These temples would also provide functions of a bank and help the community by taking in orphans, supplying grain in times of need, and even paying ransom if a community member was captured in battle. The religious class of the society was often made up of royalty and considered privileged along with the royal family. The less privileged members of societies in Mesopotamia were made up of three different classes. First were the free commoners who could own their own land and farm it, were expected to pay a tax, and could be drafted for building projects in the various kingdoms. The dependent clients formed the second class beneath the free commoners. Unlike the free commoners the dependent clients could not own land but were given permission to work on the land owned by the free commoners or on land owned by the state or temples. The dependent clients would share the burden of paying taxes and supplying conscripted labor for building projects. Lastly, at the bottom of the social classes of Mesopotamia were the slaves, who were made up of three different types of people. Most slaves in Mesopotamia (as well as the ancient world in general) were war captives taken from the losing faction. The second type of slaves in Mesopotamia were convicted criminals that were to serve as slaves for punishment. The last group among the slave population consisted of individuals who could not pay their debts. The consequences of being a war captive in the ancient world were dire: once you became a
slave you would usually remain a slave for the remainder of your life. In Mesopotamia slaves had no rights, in contrast to ancient Egypt, for example, where slaves were granted limited legal rights.

In Mesopotamia as well as in most of the ancient world gender equality was not common practice. Most of the empires in the region were patriarchal: men dominated women, and in Mesopotamia women were legally subordinate to men. On occasions a woman could have influence and become rather powerful through being a priestess or high priestess, which was possible only if she was of royal blood. A few women were able to become advisors to kings, but all of these were exceptions to the rule. In Mesopotamia men would gradually tighten their control over women. At some point between 2000 and 1000 BCE, for example, laws were created to ensure that women had to be virgins at marriage, and that married women were prohibited from casual social contact with men outside their family. Already in 1500 BCE, if not earlier, married women in Mesopotamia were expected to cover themselves with a veil when outside their homes. The reasoning behind these laws was presumably the desire by wealthy men to control women to ensure that their fortune was protected from illegitimate members of the family.

The Mesopotamians are also responsible for the earliest from of writing, which we call *cuneiform* or “wedge-shaped” writing. The characteristic wedge-shape was caused by scribes using a reed to imprint wedge-shaped characters into clay tablets. The earliest cuneiform writing goes back to the Sumerian period, around 3100 BCE. The initial purpose for this writing system was to keep track of goods; later it was used for legal documentation in court, for correspondence, and for literary texts. The temple scribes produced texts of mathematics and science in Mesopotamia. In particular the Mesopotamians were very advanced in the fields of astronomy and math. We have found, for example, tablets containing multiplication tables, square roots and exponents. Around 1700 BCE the Mesopotamians created a list of the stars, the sun, moon, and even planets, which they used to predict events like tidal changes. Literary texts include the famous “Epic of Gilgamesh”; the earliest parts of this epic go back to the Sumerian period. This text deals with the topics of friendship, the relationship between humans and gods, and life and death.
Neighbors of the Mesopotamians: Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews

The Hebrews were an ancient nomadic people living between Egypt and Mesopotamia from around 2000 to 1000 BCE and speaking a language called Hebrew. Israelites are people who branched off from Hebrew peoples and settled in Palestine around 1200 BCE. The proximity to the Mesopotamian advanced civilizations made sure that Hebrews, Israelites and Jews were influenced by Mesopotamia. Some of the early Hebrews migrated to prospering Mesopotamian cities, took on Mesopotamian customs and belief structures. This becomes evident when one takes a look at the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament. In both religious texts we find indications of a man named Abraham migrating from Ur, the Sumerian city around 1850 BCE. The Hebrews worshiped many of the Mesopotamian gods and adopted Mesopotamian customs and values. They were especially influenced by the Code of Hammurabi. The law code of the Mesopotamians would deeply influence the Hebrews with special focus on the principle of *Lex Talionis* or the right to retaliate. This was not the only area from which the Hebrews borrowed from their Mesopotamian neighbors; they were also influenced on the literary level. The ancient Hebrew story of Noah, whom god chooses to build an ark to save his family and the chosen animals of the world from a destructive flood, is influenced by the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh. The highly advanced Mesopotamian civilization was crucial to the development of the Hebrews, who borrowed and adapted the ideas and patterns into their own customs; this is reflected in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Old Testament, probably written after 800 BCE.

Around 1800 BCE many Hebrew people migrated to Egypt, settling among the Egyptian people. By 1300 BCE these Hebrews migrated to Palestine under the leadership of Moses to escape Egyptian oppression under Pharaoh Ramses II. These Hebrew people would organize themselves into 12 tribes after arriving in Palestine. It is after this event that we no longer call these people Hebrews but Israelites. These new migrants fought intensely against the original inhabitants of Palestine and eventually carved out land for themselves. Later the 12 tribes of the Israelites were temporarily united and ruled by monarchs. The most popular and powerful kings of the Israelites were King David (1000-
970 BCE), and King Solomon (970-930 BCE). King David built up the kingdom of Israel to become a power within Palestine, while his successor King Solomon built the capital city of Jerusalem and the famed Temple of Jerusalem. The kingdom of Israel under both King David and King Solomon traded intensively with the Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and Arabians.

In the beginning the Israelites in Palestine seemed to honor not just some deities of the Mesopotamians as mentioned above, but also some gods of the local people of Palestine as well. It is only after 800 BCE that one god named Yahweh was recognized more and more as the only “true god”. After the reign of King Solomon the Israelites were divided due to tribal tensions. The final result was the emergence of two kingdoms from the once powerful united kingdom: in the north the Kingdom of Israel and the smaller Kingdom of Judah in the south (Judea). The Kingdom of Israel fell under the domination of the expanding Assyrian Empire in the 9th century BCE, and in 722 BCE the Assyrians conquered the kingdom and deported many of the inhabitants. The Kingdom of Judah in the south remained independent, but only briefly. In 597 BCE the New Babylonian Empire conquered the Kingdom of Judah and destroyed the temple of Jerusalem and the city. Beginning in 587 BCE the New Babylonians also deported many inhabitants. This event later became known as the Babylonian Exile. Many of these deported inhabitants from the Kingdom of Judah returned later following the Persian Conquest of Babylonia by Cyrus the Great. These returning descendants of the Israelites began to be known as the Jews. These returning Jews had established a strong sense of identity, and felt distinct from the Mesopotamians and other people that they once borrowed from. The Jewish people began to attribute their survival more and more to their special relationship with the god Yahweh, stimulating the rise of monotheism, which would later have a deep impact on Christianity and Islam.

Phoenicians

Another civilization neighboring Mesopotamia was the civilization of the Phoenicians. Around 3000 BCE, their homeland was located north of Palestine in modern day Lebanon. Unlike the Israelites, who eventually formed a unified kingdom, the
Phoenicians were organized as a loose alliance of independent city-states ruled by local kings. The unique quality of the ancient Phoenicians was their focus on trade; they were not very much interested in politics and power expansion like many other civilizations. The Phoenician trade network at its peak covered the entire Mediterranean Sea between 1200 and 800 BCE. The Phoenicians’ trade network was secured by their deep maritime tradition, which eventually made the Phoenicians known for having the best ships in the region as well as having excellent sailors. Like the Hebrews and Israelites they were influenced by the highly advanced civilizations of Mesopotamia: they adopted many of the customs of their Mesopotamian neighbors but developed them in distinctive ways. This can be seen in the writing system: the Phoenicians used the cuneiform script for over 1000 years until around 1500 BCE when they developed a more simple way to write to help speed up the documentation of trade goods. This Phoenician writing system was based on an alphabetic script of 22 consonants with no vowels and was used to spell out words, making it easier to use than the hundreds of symbols for individual words in cuneiform scripts. This new writing system traveled to other people, especially to the ancients Greeks, who adopted the system in the late 9th century BCE and advanced the Phoenician alphabet by adding vowels to it. The Greek version of the alphabet would later be adopted by the Romans, who used it as the basis of their own writing system, which evolved into the modern alphabet we use today.

Conclusion

Starting with the rise of mankind, the development of humans towards civilization became a natural evolutionary process as we switched from hunting and gathering to farming and started to organize the growing populations made possible by agriculture. The first civilizations appear in the region between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris, known as Mesopotamia. The life giving rivers and the fertile soil first assured the survival of the people and then slowly enabled them to create empires. The Mesopotamians expanded their power through economic and military force. They influenced other kingdoms outside of Mesopotamia such as Hebrews, Israelites, Jews and Phoenicians.
2. Ancient Egypt and Nubia

Introduction

Mesopotamia was not the only place where vast empires evolved. To the west of Mesopotamia in northern Africa sprouted the most famous of the ancient civilizations, Egypt. The empire that came out of Egypt is remarkable in terms of religion, culture and politics.

Early development

When the early settlers arrived in North Africa, it was not the dry, harsh climate of today. Shortly after the last ice age ended around 10,000 BCE the Sahara Desert was more comparable to the steppes of Mongolia, with grass, small lakes and rivers. In the following millennia the people of Sudan developed a primitive form of agriculture, which included the domestication of several animals and cultivation of certain plants. By around 5000 BCE the Sudanic (Nubian) peoples organized small monarchies ruled by kings regarded as either divine or semi-divine. The people of ancient Nubia practiced the execution of the deceased monarchs’ servants so they could continue to assist and accompany the king in the afterlife. After 5000 BCE the climate of North Africa began to change; generally speaking the region became hotter and drier. This caused both plant life and water supplies to disappear. Agriculture became far too difficult and the Sahara became a vast desert. Pushed by the growing desert, the inhabitants of the formerly green Sahara were pushed to areas with fresh water like Lake Chad and the Nile River.

It is because of this migration that the early history of Africa was determined predominantly by the Egyptian civilization. Egyptian life was dominated by the vast Nile River and its delta for most of its history. The Nile provided the necessary resources to sustain highly productive agriculture, such as water and fertile soil, which in turn gave way to civilization. Yet the Nile River was an advantage not just for the early settlers of Egypt; it also provided fresh water and fertile nutrients to the soil of the regions located south of Egypt like ancient Nubia. The Nile River is the longest river in the world at 4160
miles (6695 kilometers). The source of the river is Lake Victoria. Rainfall along with melting snow caused the river to swell each spring allowing annual flooding of the land by the Nile River. When the Nile River receded in the fall it left behind fertile soil that made it possible for domesticated crops to thrive in ancient Egypt. The annual flood created an abundant amount of fertile land along the river, especially in Lower Egypt, but not as much in Nubia. This natural flooding of Egypt was interrupted only around 50 years ago (in 1968), when the Egyptian government built the Aswan Dam.

Like the Sahara desert, ancient Egypt’s territory was different from Egypt today. More of the plains in the Nile River Valley were flooded annually in ancient Egypt, allowing it to become more prosperous than Nubia to the south. The Nile also ensured that both Egypt and Nubia came in contact with Mediterranean and sub-Saharan civilizations, creating a network of trade in the region. This trade network in addition to productive farming gave Egypt and Nubia an agricultural surplus that had also occurred in Mesopotamia. This surplus allowed an increase in population after 5000 BCE. Egyptian and Nubian societies began to organize public affairs, establishing formal states and authorities after 4000 BCE. By 3300 BCE in all of ancient Egypt and Nubia there were small kingdoms ruled by local kings, all of whom practiced the custom of executing servants to provide for the kings in the afterlife. These independent kingdoms remained at peace until a period of political turmoil around 3500 BCE led to many wars and skirmishes between them. Some sources mention a man called Menes and suggest that he was responsible for the unification of Egypt around 3100 BCE. Menes extended his power from upper to lower Egypt (the Nile River flows towards the Mediterranean, that is, from the south to the north, in the direction of the Nile River’s current creating the territorial distinction of Egypt), and he built a new capital city in the middle of upper and lower Egypt called Memphis in order to support the unification process. Memphis gradually became a cultural and political center of Egypt. Menes and his successors then formed a centralized state ruled by the Pharaoh, king of Egypt.
The Pharaoh During the Archaic and Old Kingdom

Egyptian national history is usually described as a succession of Pharaohs and their dynasties. The Pharaoh embodied the unification of Egypt under one ruler, as was depicted literally on the Pharaoh’s headdress, which combined elements of Upper and Lower Egypt. Unlike rulers in many other civilizations, the Pharaohs in Egypt were seen as more than just leaders; rather they were regarded as divine incarnations, first of the hawk-god Horus, and later as the sons of the sun god Amen (-Re). The Egyptian Pharaoh was given absolute power over all of the subjects of Egypt but with one exception: he was subject to Ma-At, a cosmic balance of order and justice handed out by the gods. It applied to common people as well as the Pharaohs. This meant the Pharaohs had to be (theoretically) wise with their use of absolute power. Pharaohs in ancient Egypt enjoyed rule without limitations especially during the periods of Egyptian history known as the Archaic Period (3100-2660 BCE) and Old Kingdom (2660-2160 BCE). During the Old Kingdom of Egypt the most iconic symbols of Egypt were constructed: the massive pyramids of Giza. The original function of a pyramid in ancient Egypt was simple: to preserve and entomb the deceased Pharaohs. Most of the pyramids that remain were built between 2600 and 2500 BCE. The most famous one ever built in Egypt was the pyramid for Khufu (or Cheops), which required 2.3 million limestone blocks to finish. The Pyramid of Khufu stands at 479 feet tall and required nearly 100,000 workers to complete it over a period of decades since these laborers also had to work the fields for part of the year. The Pyramid of Khufu/Cheops is regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and it is the only one that stands today in a mostly intact state.

The pyramids were filled with treasures and goods meant to aid the Pharaohs in their journey to the afterlife, which required food, water, chariots, and even slaves. The Egyptians borrowed the practice of earlier peoples (Nubia) and executed the personal slaves of the pharaohs and buried them alongside their master. However, already in antiquity these tombs were frequently plundered by thieves. Often only the sarcophagus of the king made out of granite remained in the tomb. The word *sarcophagus* is ancient
Greek for “flesh eater”, which presumably meant the tomb was opened some time later to reveal only bones.

Another famous structure of Egypt located in Giza is the Sphinx, also created between 2600 and 2500 BCE. The Sphinx is a mythological creature with the head of a human and body of a lion (and sometimes wings of a bird). The Sphinx at Giza is believed by Egyptologists to depict the face of a pharaoh called Khafre.

The Sphinx and the Pyramids at Giza show how powerful the Egyptian pharaohs during the Archaic period and Old Kingdom were. The power of the pharaohs led to a growing fear in Nubia concerning its independence from Egypt to the north. Eventually, Egyptian pharaohs conducted several military campaigns against Nubia during the Archaic and Old Kingdom periods. Towards the end of the Old Kingdom the Nubians and Egyptians concluded a peace of some sort that involved trade deals on many levels. The reasons for the end of the Old Kingdom are unknown to Egyptologists and historians. We know for sure that there were two centuries of political chaos from 2181 to 1991 BCE. These two centuries are called the First Intermediate Period, and it is followed by the Middle Kingdom of Egypt, roughly dated from 2000 BCE to 1640 BCE. The pharaohs of this period would end up becoming weaker than their predecessors.

Middle and New Kingdom Periods of Ancient Egypt

The Middle Kingdom of Egypt can be described as the classical era of ancient Egyptian literature and culture. It was a period of weakened pharaohs and more powerful priests. The Middle Kingdom lasted until around 1640 BCE, when another period of political instability came to fruition, this time named the Second Intermediate Period. It was during the Second Intermediate period that the Egyptians were ruled for around 100 years by peoples whom they called “Hyksos”. In 1567 BCE the Hyksos were expelled from Egypt and the New Kingdom period of ancient Egypt began and would last until around 1087 BCE. During the New Kingdom Egypt expanded its power and its borders. Under Pharaoh Thutmosis III, who ruled from 1479-1425 BCE, Egypt expanded to areas far north of Egypt like Palestine and Syria. Thutmosis III would achieve this through military force. He personally led more than ten campaigns until these people were conquered.
Egyptian rulers also expanded south into Nubia. By 1400 BCE Egypt was an imperial power in the Eastern Mediterranean, Southwest Asia and along the Nile River valley. During the time of the New Kingdom the pharaohs did not construct huge pyramids or monuments like the Sphinx. Instead these new pharaohs built many large temples and palaces with large monumental statues. The most famous of the temples built during the New Kingdom was the temple of Amen (Amun) at Karnak. Amen was a local god of Karnak in previous periods. He later was worshiped together with the Sun God Re as Amen-Re.

Around 1100 BCE a long period of decline began in Egypt that resulted in the Egyptians being forced out of Nubia, Palestine and Syria by the local people, who were no longer willing to be under Egyptian rule. Egypt became so weakened that the Nubians invaded and created the so-called Kingdom of Kush in Egypt, which lasted until the Assyrians invaded and pushed out the Kushites from Egypt, and ruled it themselves until around 650 BCE.

**Egyptian Life**

During the New Kingdom of ancient Egypt there were more slaves in Egypt because of all the campaigns in the early part of this period, which led to the capture of many prisoners of war. Earlier in the Old and Middle Kingdom slaves were probably rare. The Pharaoh, the temples, or private persons could own slaves. Slaves in Egypt had some legal rights: they could own property and pass it on to their heirs. Mostly the pharaohs or the temples owned Egyptian land, thus a large part of the population in Egypt worked either for the king or the priests. The kings and the temples controlled the economy in Egypt. As for the life of the common people in Egypt little is known; more information is available regarding the royal families. The king usually had several wives, but only one was special and referred to as the “Great Royal Wife”, whose children would inherit the throne. Polygamy was probably legal in Ancient Egypt. Pharaohs sometimes married their own sisters or other close relatives. Men owned or controlled most of the productive resources, but there is also evidence of the fact that women in Egypt also frequently owned property, slaves and other economic resources.
Egypt was not forced to fight many wars against foreign invaders because the desert, the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea protected it. One example of such an invasion we already mentioned: the Hyksos conquered Egypt during the Second Intermediate period. The Egyptians were using primitive stone and copper tools and weapons that were already considered old. When the Hyksos conquered Egypt they brought with them new technologies to Egypt that included bronze tools, chariots, composite bows, and the curved sword.

Egyptian Afterlife and Religion

Much of what we know about Egypt comes from the graves and tombs of the Egyptians. This is the reason why there are many artifacts and documents describing death and the afterlife. All of this evidence of what the Egyptians believed regarding life after death survives due to the plentiful tombs and graves that are so often well preserved because of the location of these burial sites in the desert. The Egyptians took great care in the burial of the dead. In the early days of Egypt, primarily during the Archaic and Old Kingdom periods, it was thought that only the kings had a fully immortal spirit that required care in order to go into the afterlife. During the Middle Kingdom this attitude changed and many Egyptians believed everyone would live an afterlife. The afterlife imagined by the Egyptians was not that much different from their everyday lives. For that reason the tombs were filled with everyday needs like clothes, food, jewelry, and other objects they thought were needed for the spirit. The Egyptians would call this spirit the “Ka”, and they thought the body was important in the afterlife along with the spirit. The evidence for this assumption is the fact that the Egyptians went to great lengths to preserve the body through the process of mummification, which was expertly done by Egyptian specialists. In the early periods mummification was only performed for the king upon his death as well as his close relatives. Later wealthy individuals and royal officials could also be mummified, and eventually the process was open to all people in Egypt. The process of proper mummification took seventy days; during this period specialists and priests treated the body of the deceased person and conducted rituals based on prayers and incantations,
which were written on papyrus and placed in the tombs to aid in a smooth passage into the afterlife.

The religion of the ancient Egyptians was based on a polytheistic pantheon of many gods. There were two main gods of Egypt which all people would pray to, Amun and Re. Amun was originally a local god of Thebes and was associated with the sun and fertility while Re was seen as the sun-god. Already during the Old Kingdom both gods were worshiped together as one entity, Amun-Re, and as principal gods of Egyptian religion. Another important god was Osiris, and the cult spawned by belief in him was very popular among the Egyptians. In ancient Egyptian mythology Osiris’ evil brother Seth killed and dismembered him. Seth then distributed the body parts of his deceased brother all over Egypt. Yet the wife of Osiris, Isis, gathered the parts and buried him properly. The gods then restored Osiris because they were impressed by Isis’ devotion to her husband. The gods did not restore Osiris to live among mortals but to rule as the god of the underworld. The Egyptians connected Osiris’ death and resurrection with the Nile and agriculture (circle of life). In addition, the Egyptians saw Osiris as the god in charge of immortality. Osiris was so important to the belief in an afterlife that Egyptians honored him in a special cult to make sure that Osiris was pleased and was willing to grant immortality to the pious worshiper. Osiris as god of the underworld was to judge over the “weighing of the hearts”, which was the final judgment of a person. Based on this ritual Osiris determined whether a person would become immortal and enter the afterlife or not. If the heart was found to be heavier than a feather by Anubis, the jackal-god of death, because it was burdened with guilt and evil, immortality was not granted.

Conclusion

Ancient Egypt was special because of the link between government and religion. Its powerful leaders, the pharaohs, were seen as part of or linked to the gods that people worshiped. Therefore opposition to a pharaoh was rare. The construction of the great monuments of Egypt (pyramids, statues, temples) was possible only through the use of thousands of laborers. The ancient Egyptians built their lives around the great river Nile
which, because of its annual flood, provided extremely fertile conditions for thriving agriculture and, as a consequence, a great civilization.
3. Early China

Introduction

As in the cases of the previous civilizations we have discussed, a source of water was important for the development of the early Chinese civilizations. The Yellow River area became the cradle of Chinese civilization. The name Yellow River is derived from the tint the river has from carrying a very fertile soil called Loess. Though the river provided the necessary means for the people of China to create a strong agricultural economy, it was also sometimes a problem: in China the Yellow River is considered “China’s Sorrow” because of the frequent floods that devastate the fields. Rainfall in the Yellow River valley was so plentiful that the construction of dikes and other means for dredging the plains were required to prevent disaster. Yet the harvests the people in early China were able to obtain along the Yellow River allowed for the development of societies in early China starting around 5000 BCE.

Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties of Early China

The earliest Neolithic society in China emerged around 5000 BCE and was called the Yangshao society; it was located in the middle region of the Yellow River (Huang He.) In 1952 a city of the Yangshao period was excavated near the modern Chinese city of Xian. This ancient Chinese city was known as Banpo, and we have archaeological evidence for the emergence of many cities like Banpo along the Yellow and the Yangtze River during that period. Between 5000 and 3000 BCE the Yangshao society flourished, and with the success of agriculture the population in the region grew exponentially. As was the case in many other civilizations, the growth of population probably resulted in the necessity for a strong authoritative order to organize public works. According to some sources there existed three ancient Chinese dynasties that helped organize China into a more successful civilization. The Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties each ruled over some territory around the Yellow and Yangtze River areas.
The first of the three dynasties to emerge in China was the Xia dynasty. It evolved around 2200 BCE. Kings ruled over the region and the throne would be passed down within the royal family, usually to the son. This form of hereditary monarchy established by the Xia dynasty became the example for future dynasties to follow. Ancient Chinese legend tells us about a sage-king named Yu, and how he initiated projects to help control the rivers and their disastrous floods. Little is really known about the Xia dynasty; currently excavations in China are slowly unearthing possible Xia dynasty sites. What is known is that the Xia dynasty was gradually replaced by the Shang dynasty, which in turn ruled from 1766 to 1122 BCE.

More is known about the Shang dynasty than about the Xia because in addition to the archaeological sites and artifacts we also have writings belonging to this period. The Shang dynasty came to dominate the earlier Xia dynasty mostly because the Shang rulers had access to bronze weaponry, which was a technology brought by Indo-European migrants from Southwest Asia to China. Other advancements like the chariot, wagons, carts, and other wheel-based transportation came to China also through this migration; we believe the Chinese words for wheels and chariots are similar to Indo-European words. The Shang dynasty made good use of the bronze weapons and chariots, which were very powerful and disastrous for the enemy forces, and which allowed the Shang to expand their control of the Yellow River valley. The new territories acquired by the Shang dynasty provided the rulers with an agricultural surplus, which was used mostly towards improvements of the military and for personal interests of the rulers. One such interest was to keep political allies pleased, a crucial part of Shang dominance as the Shang dynasty did not establish a centralized government and instead relied on allies like local rulers in towns or villages to rule on their behalf. Written evidence states that the Shang dynasty had at least 6 different capital cities during its existence; we have found archaeological evidence of two capital cities of the Shang dynasty with more excavations under way. These two cities were called Ao and Yin, each possessing unique constructions or remains. The city of Ao for example had a remarkable city wall which was at certain points 66 feet thick in diameter.

At Yin archaeologists discovered remains of royal palaces and royal tombs. Though most of the tombs had already been raided in ancient times, there remained
enough evidence in these Shang tombs to understand what went into them when they were built. The graves sometimes contained chariots, weaponry, pottery, bronze goods, dogs, horses, and even human corpses. One grave discovered had the remains of over 300 people. One tomb became famous because it remained undiscovered and untouched by grave robbers for almost 3000 years. In 1976 archaeologists discovered this ancient tomb, which belonged to Fu Hao, the wife of a Shang ruler. She died around 1250 BCE and in her tomb many precious items were found, clearly indicating that Fu Hao was the favorite wife of a powerful ruler, probably King Wu Ding. Along with six dogs, sixteen human beings had been sacrificed. It seems that these human sacrifices followed a hierarchy. Close members of the family of Fu Hao were buried close to her corpse, which was located in the lowest part of the tomb. These close relatives seem to have died without a struggle, and they were found with their bodies intact. Most of the victims were found nearer to the top of the tomb: these were mostly young males between around 15 to 35 years old, and a few children. Most of them have been decapitated, and the fact that their hands seem to have been tied together indicates that they were unwilling victims. Presumably these victims were prisoners from enemy states.

The Shang dynasty was followed by the Zhou dynasty when in 1166 BCE the last king of the Shang dynasty was killed and replaced by Zhou authorities. The Zhou rulers were in charge of Northern and Central China officially until 256 BCE. The Zhou dynasty influenced Chinese political thinking for many centuries. For example, according to the Zhou dynasty the rulers received the right to govern from heaven. This theory was called “The Mandate of Heaven.” It explains that the ruler must deserve to rule, and he is seen as a connection between earth and heaven. These Chinese rulers had to rule to a standard and if they failed to do so, chaos and imbalance of the cosmos would follow as heaven would pass the right to rule to another deserving ruler. This helped the Zhou kings to acquire legitimacy as the rightful rulers in the eyes of an ever increasing population, as their territory was larger than the Shang dynasty’s before. The territory in fact was so large that it could not be governed by a centralized government in the capital city of the Zhou dynasty, called Hao, nor from any other capital. The solution was that the Zhou kings ruled through the use of a decentralized form of government in which they gave territories to subordinates, usually relatives and sometimes allies, who governed these
regions under their supervision, while paying tribute and providing soldiers if the king wanted them for a campaign. These subordinate rulers of the Zhou kings gradually ignored the duty and obligation to pay tribute or to provide military support to the king. The spread of ironworking around 1000 BCE also gave these subordinates weapons to challenge the Zhou kings. Because iron ore was cheaper and more plentiful than copper and tin in China, and because iron was stronger than bronze, it proved to be the perfect material with which to build weapons.

In 771 BCE nomadic peoples came to China from the west. Because the subordinate rulers refused to help the Zhou kings defend their land, these nomadic invaders conquered the Zhou capital city of Hao. This loss forced the Zhou king to move eastward to Luoyang. As a consequence the Zhou dynasty lost its authority and thus control of northern and central China. By the 5th century BCE these former Zhou subordinates made themselves local leaders and began to fight against each other, each longing to create the next powerful kingdom in China. The two centuries between 403 and 221 BCE are referred to as “The Period of the Warring States” in China because these leaders fought intensively and violently against each other. In 256 BCE the last king of the Zhou dynasty had to leave the throne and pass it on to the king of one of the regional kingdoms, the kingdom of Qin. In 221 BCE the ruler of Qin unified China through conquest and officially established a central government, founding the Qin dynasty.

**Chinese Society**

Like many other civilizations in the ancient world, the success of agriculture allowed for the accumulation of wealth. Gradually, as had happened in Egypt and Mesopotamia, social classes would evolve in ancient China. During the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties we find the royal family and related or allied noble families at the top of society. The elite had bigger houses to live in, made out of pounded earth, while they consumed and accumulated the goods provided by their subjects. The distinction between the elite and commoners can also be seen in the households themselves. In the wealthy houses the elite was able to use bronze for pots, wine cups, jars, dishes, mirrors etc., while the common people used items made out of clay, since they could not afford bronze, a rare and
expensive alloy in China. Excellent artisans with incredible skill finely detailed and purposely designed impressive ornaments on the bronze utensils of the royal families.

Trade in China was limited during the early developmental period of Chinese civilization. Long distant trade routes existed during the Xia and Shang dynasties; this is impressive since desert, tall mountains, or the sea surrounded the territories these dynasties commanded. On the sea, ships were propelled with oars until around 500 BCE when sails started coming into use. During the Xia dynasty sea-trade was limited to off-shore islands; under the Shang dynasty the trade connections were extended to the Korean peninsula. It was under the Zhou that the use of ships for sailing became so common that Chinese mariners learned how to navigate by using the stars and planets. The use of sailing helped bring many goods into China. A majority of goods in China itself was produced through agriculture and thus a majority of the population was involved in farming. The peasants did not own land but were able to work on land owned by others, often the elite, in exchange for performing military service or for providing agricultural and other kinds of labor.

Throughout China the family became a very important aspect in society. Though this was the case in just about all civilizations of the ancient world, in China we see the family becoming even more important. The reason for this is the influence of the veneration of ancestors, which began in China in Neolithic times before the Xia dynasty appeared. We can see this in evidence found in excavated grave sites of early Chinese people, which exhibit a very well-maintained appearance with kept memorabilia of the deceased ancestors. The background for this practice was the belief that the ancestors passed on to another form of existence from where they could take care of their descendants if those same descendants were to treat them properly. Thus it became common for descendants to offer sacrifices of food and drink at the graves or to bury goods along with the deceased. In addition, this strong belief in the presence of ancestors led to a strong bond between all family members: the living, the dead, and future generations were seen as being responsible for the prosperity of the family.

The head of the family was the father or eldest male member of the family. His role in family and society was very important since ancient China lacked both organized religion and official religious professionals. Thus the father of the family was expected to
conduct rituals during ceremonies honoring the ancestors and other relatives. Also the early Chinese did not recognize a personal supreme god or goddess who would care for human affairs; instead they acknowledged an impersonal heavenly power called “Tian”: heaven.

Early civilizations usually became patriarchal; occasionally women played an important role in these early civilizations, but it seems only if allowed by men to do so. In early China we find evidence of some hint of female power, such as lineage being traced through the mother’s side. With the growth of the states in China due to military power, men increasingly put women into the shadows. Later this pattern automatically reinforced itself because the families would honor mainly male ancestors who performed notable and famous deeds. After the Shang dynasty, women no longer played any formal role in public life in Chinese society.

**Early Chinese Writing**

Writing was presumably first used in China during the Shang dynasty. In other civilizations traders usually invented and used writing systems first to take notice of imported and exported goods. In China, however, it seems that the leaders were the first to use writing, which appeared after 2000 BCE. Early scribes for the Shang dynasty probably wrote on bamboo or silk, and unfortunately almost all these organic materials decomposed and are gone. Fortunately for historians, early Chinese writing does survive on artifacts called oracle bones, because the Chinese believed that they could use animal bones in a specific ritual in order to predict the future. It was common in ancient civilizations for people to attempt to predict the future, whether through examination of the entrails of sacrificed animals, or the flight patterns of birds, and even the stars. Chinese rulers had questions about the future inscribed onto the shoulder blades of cattle. Interpreters then used heated metal rods to produce cracks in the bones, and helped the king to divine answers to the questions based on the shape and location of these cracks. These Chinese fortunetellers used an organized system of pictographic symbols. The symbol for the word “fish” for example would look like a fish, and so on. In order to get a meaning of something abstract they combined pictographs. For example the word
“good” is an abstract because it is not a material thing. The early Chinese combined the pictographs of “mother” and of “child”, which together meant “good.” Soon after writing appeared in China, it ceased to be an exclusive art used by the rulers and was put to other uses. During the Zhou dynasty writing was used to create books of poetry, history, philosophy, and other works.

Conclusion

The emergence of the early Chinese societies in the latter half of the Neolithic period created a unique civilization. No organized religion appeared in this region of the ancient world. The veneration of the ancestors became a concept original to Chinese civilization, which allowed for the growth of closely-bonded families. The use of writing also had a unique history as the early Chinese used writing for more complex purposes than simple record keeping. The graves of these early Chinese show a gap between the rich elite and common people.

The influence of the early Chinese people made its way south towards the Yangtze River. The Yangtze unlike the Yellow River brought no disastrous floods and allowed for increased agricultural output. In the southern climate of China a moister subtropical environment allowed for rice to be the plant of choice, which helped the expansion of the Chinese civilization. In the valley of the Yangtze River, agricultural surplus led to an increase in population and the development of cities, states, and complex societies.

The China that would emerge after the devastating period of chaos called “The Period of the Warring States” would become the sole power in East Asia for centuries to come.
4. Early India

Introduction

The sub-continent of India has a unique history of civilizations that built powerful empires. In the process, they also laid the foundations of future religions and philosophies in the region that are still recognized in modern times. Through foreign encounters the people of these ancient Indian civilizations would continually adapt and grow. Many of their advances in the sciences, languages and social understanding had an enormous impact on later civilizations.

Harappan Society

Like the early civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt, the early Indian civilization could not have existed without a source of fresh water. The Indian sub-continent had a great source of water and fertile land in the area known as the Indus River Valley, where the early Indian civilizations originated. One of the first civilizations to evolve around 3000 BCE along the fertile land of the Indus River was the Harappan society, named after one of the main cities of their society called Harappa. The Indus River provided fresh water for irrigation of fields in the area, permitting the inhabitants to develop agriculture and create a surplus of food, thus allowing for growth and establishment of cities. Very little is known about the Harappan society due to two factors: firstly, many of the Harappan sites are now under the running Indus River; secondly, the script of this society has yet to be deciphered, which means that any surviving writing we possess cannot be read. Thus the only data we possess on the Harappan society are from material evidence like pottery and tools. Like the Nile River in Egypt, the Indus River was at the center of life of these Harappan people. Every year, the melting of the snow in the mountains of the Hindu-Kush and the Himalayas caused the Indus River to flood, carrying with it rich soil from the mountains. Thus the river made productive agriculture in northern India possible; it supported a surplus of agricultural products and thus an increase in population, and the subsequent construction of cities marked the birth of civilization in the region around
3000 BCE. Another major city during the Harappan society period after 3000 BCE was Mohenjodaro.

The Harappan society was located over much of what is now Pakistan and Northern India. The Harappan cities like Mohenjodaro had market places, temples and broad streets. Much of the aspect of daily life for the people of the Harappan society was standardized; for example the size of bricks is the same throughout the cities. The people of the Harappan society also engaged in trade with foreigners as far as Mesopotamia, which resulted in the Harappan Society becoming wealthy, as did the Mesopotamians and Egyptians. During the climax of their culture, around 2500-2000 BCE, around 40,000 people populated the city of Mohenjodaro, an enormous number for that time period. Specialized labor existed as well: gold smithing, pottery making, weaving, and masonry were practiced in the cities’ many shops. The result of these trades led to more wealth for the people of the Harappan society and thus the division into social classes. The evidence for the existence of social classes in Harappan society is to be found in the size of the houses: many people lived in one room apartments in barrack-like constructions which were obviously for the poor; in contrast the wealthiest lived in very large houses with dozens of rooms, while the majority had modest houses with one or two stories. Unfortunately, since the script of this society has yet to be deciphered, we still await more information about their way of life beyond what we already know. One unique piece of art from the Harappan society, found during the excavation of Mohenjodaro, is the “dancing girl.” Although the name of the statuette is the “dancing girl,” we are not sure if she really is dancing. It is evident that she is naked; thus the statue probably served a fertility and/or religious function, much like the many other “Venus statues” we have found in many places around the globe.

The end of the Harappan society appears to be mysterious; it did not end abruptly but rather experienced a slow decline beginning around 1900 BCE. Evidence points to many people abandoning their cities for reasons that we can only speculate upon. Climate change leading to problems in agriculture seems to be one likely cause as to why people would abandon their cities. The Harappan society also contributed itself to its own end: the people destroyed many of their forests (deforestation) which turned the lush Indus river valley into practically a desert, with lingering effects on modern day agriculture in
the region, which can only exist through artificial irrigation. On top of climate change the Harappan society also experienced natural catastrophes like floods and earthquakes, which might have contributed to the fact that the Harappan people left their cities rather quickly around 1700 BCE. During the excavation of Mohenjodaro archaeologists found unburied remains of people who probably could not escape, an observation which only further provides evidence for a natural disaster as the cause of this civilization’s collapse. Few believe that a military campaign by foreigners took place; there is no material evidence that would indicate a battle of any kind. After the Harappan society abandoned its cities it did not disappear, as many of its aspects were absorbed by other Indian societies.

The Arrival of the Indo-Europeans (Aryans)

During the decline of the Harappan society after 1900 BCE foreign people began to migrate from Eastern Europe to the Indian subcontinent. The most prominent of these foreign people were called the Aryans, which translated means “noble people.” The Aryans spoke an Indo-European language. Around 1500 BCE we can find evidence of their settlements around the Hindu-Kush and Northern Indian regions. The Aryans did not arrive in India by invading the region in one massive push, but rather slowly over centuries. There is no evidence that the Aryans destroyed the Harappan society. After 1500 BCE the Indo-European immigrants (including the Aryans) and the local people of the Indus River Valley interacted on all levels. The Aryans were different from the local population in respect to their daily life: the Aryans were still nomadic people, relying mostly on cattle and horses while the locals practiced agriculture. The Aryans consumed dairy products and beef since at this time cattle were not yet considered sacred and protected animals. The early Aryans composed religious and literary works, but they did not write them down; they memorized these works and transmitted them orally from generation to generation in their sacred language, Sanskrit. The early Aryans had an everyday language as well called Prakrit, which would later evolve into Hindi, Bengali, Urdu and other languages spoken in the northern Indian subcontinent. The earliest of the orally transmitted works of the Aryans are called the Vedas, songs of prayers and hymns.
to honor their gods. We know about the Vedas because later religious professionals wrote them down, around 600 BCE. The Vedas are important in order to understand early Indian society and the history of India. Usually scholars call the period between 1500 and 500 BCE “the Vedic Age”, showing the importance of these texts. From the Vedas we learn that the early Aryans sometimes clashed with the local people called the Dravidians; normally however the Aryans and the Indo-Europeans in general had peaceful relations with their neighbors. The Aryans also fought each other constantly as they were not a unified people with a unified state; rather, they had a tribal organization consisting of many independent chiefdoms. The Aryans first settled in the Punjab located around the Indus River valley in northern India around 1500 BCE and slowly spread on to the east and south. After 1000 BCE the Aryans began to settle between the Himalayas and the Ganges River. With the beginning of the Iron Age in India, around 1200-1100 BCE, the Aryans began to make iron tools; this new technology allowed for their population to increase. The Aryans would push into India until 500 BCE when they reached the Deccan plateau. The chiefdoms of the early Aryans would develop into small kingdoms governed by local kings, and only after 400 BCE do we find an Indian state which reached the size of the Harappan society.

**Aryan Social Order**

Despite the fact that the Aryans did not establish a large unified state, they were able to achieve social order. Since there was no central authority or even a unified state another instrument was needed to create stability. A sharp social distinction existed in the Aryan society that was based on heritage; individuals or groups belonged to a certain social class according to their birth, occupation and roles in society. This Aryan social system became the foundation of the caste system in India. The term “caste” goes back to the Portuguese word “casta”, which is a term describing a social class established by birth. The Portuguese merchants who came in contact with India during the 16th century CE used their words to describe what they saw: the sharp distinction between social classes. Obviously this social class system was developed over time and was not suddenly imposed by the Aryans. It seems likely that after the migration to the Indus river valley,
the frequent conflicts with the Dravidians urged the Aryans to make clear social distinctions in order to create a line between them and the local population. We believe this because the Aryans used a specific term to describe social class: “Varna”- the Sanskrit word meaning “color.” We conclude that the Aryans based their social distinctions on the color of peoples’ skin, especially since the Aryans referred to themselves as the “wheat-colored” in contrast to the darker-skinned Dravidians. Gradually the Aryans and the Dravidians mixed, and distinctions between the two could no longer be made easily after the Aryans settled in the Indian sub-continent. After 1000 BCE, in the late Vedic age, the Aryans had mainly four main social classes, or Varnas. They consisted of:

- **Brahmins** - The religious officials or priests
- **Kshatriyas** - The aristocrats and warriors
- **Vaishas** - They included cultivators, artisans and merchants
- **Shudras** - The landless peasants, serfs.

After a couple hundred of years a fifth class of the so-called “Untouchables” was added to indicate the people who had to perform what were then considered to be dirty and unpleasant tasks. The work these Untouchables had to perform was regarded as being so dirty that the mere touch of one of the members of this class was believed to defile persons of higher status.

After 600 BCE the Aryans needed a more sophisticated system to describe their societies. The result was the development of sub-castes called *Jati*. Later, thousands of these sub-castes existed; they determined the life of the individual Indian for many years since these Jati demanded, for example, marriage within individual Jati. The system of these sub-castes was not unchangeable and social mobility was possible, which explains why this system was not gradually abolished.

Along with clear social distinction the Aryans had a strict gender distinction, as they belonged to a strong patriarchal society. Thus, as in Mesopotamia, Egypt and other early civilizations, we find a male authoritative presence in India. One custom during the Vedic age in India was called “Sati”; a widow was expected to follow her deceased husband.
onto the funeral pyre, thus showing her total dependence on her husband. This ritual, however, would never become a widely practiced custom in India.

Aryan Religion

The religion of the Aryans and their successors was polytheistic. Among the Aryan gods Indra was the most powerful of them all. He is foremost a god of war who likes violence and strong drink. What is unusual is despite the prominence accorded to violence and rough behavior, the Aryans also had a god overlooking ethics among people. The god Varuna was seen as responsible for punishing evildoers and rewarding virtuous people, by throwing evil people into a dark subterranean place called the “House of Clay” and by letting the virtuous into a realm called the “World of the Fathers”, the Aryan version of heaven. The religious activity of the Aryans was based on an elaborate system of rituals. During some of these rituals sometimes hundreds of animals had to be sacrificed. These sacrifices were intended to please the gods who in return were believed to support the Aryans on military campaigns.

The constant pleasing of the gods was time-consuming and expensive. The Brahmins sometimes had to perform five sacrifices per day for an individual household. After centuries the sacrifices and rituals became somewhat mechanical, and many people were not satisfied anymore with these religious practices. Around 800 BCE individuals began to leave their homes and live as hermits along the Ganges River. There they reflected on the relationship between humans and gods. Soon they would gather students around them who were interested in finding the truth through spirituality. This new generation of religious men adapted beliefs of the local Dravidian people, who worshipped nature spirits and who believed that the human soul returned to the world in a new physical form after death, whether in plants, animals, or other humans. This idea of transmigration and reincarnation of the soul was very influential since it stimulated even more thinking about religion and about the things that relate to our souls. The evidence of this is found in texts called “Upanishads”, composed between around 800 to 400 BCE, in the late Vedic age. Upanishad literally translates as “sitting in front of” which refers to the sitting of students in front of a wise man or sage with whom they would discuss
religious issues. The Upanishads taught that human beings are not separate beings but are instead part of a universal soul called Brahman. The Brahman is believed to exist forever and to never change, whereas our world, the physical world, will always change. All things in the physical world come from the Brahman and it is the goal of the human soul to return to the Brahman.

The idea of transmigration and reincarnation of the soul is explained in different ways, as one way of teaching is different from the other. For example one way to explain the migration of the soul is called Karma. Karma explains why certain souls are reincarnated as certain beings. According to this explanation, virtuous people would be reborn into a purer and better existence or higher caste. Others who were not so virtuous would be “downgraded” into a more difficult existence or lower caste. In general, being part of this cycle of birth, death, and rebirth was seen as painful according to the Upanishads; humans needed to escape this circle. The way to escape the cycle of reincarnation while still alive was through achieving a state of mind called Moksha, which is described as a deep dreamless sleep while being awake. To reach Moksha all connections to the physical world needed to be cut. Asceticism and meditation were necessary, meaning one had to live an absolute simple life without any comfort, and one had to practice yoga, which is an intense disciplined meditation through motion. People thought that the human soul could get out of the circle of reincarnation and be united with the Brahman through this very hard and difficult way of living.

An interesting theory claims that this explanation of the reincarnation of the soul was designed by the ruling elite to keep everyone under their rule. Nobody would fight against the elite if everyone, especially members of the lower castes, believed that they were in that caste because of wrongdoings in their past life, not because of bad government. Yet evidence supporting this theory is limited. The Upanishads, however, were very influential, not only in India and its later major religions like Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism, but also on Greek philosophers and Muslim thinkers. The claim that the soul would be reincarnated demanded respect for all living things, animals as well as humans. Necessarily, a vegetarian diet was common for all those who followed an ascetic lifestyle as described by these teachings.
Conclusion

Our knowledge of the early Indian civilizations is mostly based on material evidence since we lack written sources. Thus our understanding of early Indian civilizations is limited. There is still much we have to learn about the migration of the Indo-Europeans, including the Aryans, to India. They have been abused in modern history as an example of an elite race although they were among many foreign peoples who migrated to India and helped to build the foundation of many customs in India, the Punjab, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The Indo-European language gave way to modern languages of the region as well. The accomplishments of these civilizations were not physical monuments, like those in Egypt, or empires like those of Mesopotamia. Instead, the early Indian civilizations are especially noteworthy because of their accomplishments in thought and social order, all of which functioned without a centralized government, which was essential in other areas of the world for civilizations to grow.
5. Early Americas

Introduction

When exactly the first people arrived in the Americas is uncertain. It happened before 15,000 BCE, probably many thousands of years earlier. At the end of the last Ice Age people coming from Siberia had probably already crossed the Bering Strait into modern day Alaska. These early people were hunters and gatherers and moved along with the game they hunted. Around 8000 BCE these hunters and gatherers became so efficient at hunting that large animals became scarce. For example, by 7500 BCE some animals like the American horse were hunted to extinction. These people needed to find new ways to feed themselves, and they gradually began to fish and farm. Later, productive agriculture led to the evolution of complex societies in the Americas.

The area between modern day Mexico to Honduras and El Salvador is called Mesoamerica. Within Mesoamerica, agricultural crops like beans, chili peppers, avocados, etc. were first cultivated by the region’s inhabitants between 8000 and 7000 BCE. Around 4000 BCE Maize (corn) became the dominant crop grown in Mesoamerica, along with tomatoes somewhat later. By 2000 BCE agriculture had spread to all parts of Mesoamerica. No large animals, however, were domesticated in Mesoamerica. The reason why no wheeled vehicles were used in Mesoamerica is to be found here: there were no domesticated animals capable of pulling them.

Between 1200 and 1000 BCE large ceremonial centers emerged in these agricultural societies of Mesoamerica. These centers contained structures like pyramids, temples and palaces. They did not replace the agricultural villages, both existed next to one another. Within these ceremonial centers lived some permanent residents such as priests, rulers and some artisans or craftsmen. Occasionally on festive days the people living in the nearby villages would gather in these centers of ceremony, but would return to their homes after the festivals ended. The earliest of these ceremonial centers that we know of is found near the modern city of Veracruz near the Gulf of Mexico, where around 1200 BCE San Lorenzo became the earliest ceremonial center of the first civilization we will discuss in Mesoamerica.
The Olmec Civilization

The Olmec civilization formed around 1200 BCE. San Lorenzo was its capital until 800 BCE. Then the capital was moved to La Venta, which remained the capital for another 400 years (800-400 BCE) until a third capital was established at Tres Zapotes (400-100 BCE). The name Olmec in translation means “rubber-people” because of the abundance of rubber trees found in the region. Historians gave these people the name Olmecs; it is not the term that they actually used themselves. The heartland of the Olmec civilization received an adequate amount of rainfall so that no artificial irrigation systems were needed for agriculture. Rather the opposite was the case: the problem was not bringing water to the crops but removing excess water. The Olmecs required vast drainage systems to remove unneeded water to prevent the flooding of the crops. In fact, the drainage systems of the Olmec became so effective that some are still in use to this day.

The drainage systems of the Olmecs, like many of the complex structures of the centers, were all built by the common subjects living in the villages surrounding the ceremonial centers. These were mostly farmers who usually had to provide agricultural products to the elite living in the centers. In these Olmec centers we often find temples, pyramids, altars and tombs, all built by these subjects as well as skilled artisans who created ornaments. The most famous of Olmec artifacts are the monumental Olmec stone heads, carved out of basalt rock. These stone heads stood roughly 10 feet tall (or 3 meters) and weighed around 20 tons, all made by hand with simple stone tools and moved on rafts by the hands of thousands of subjects to the desired destination. With no wheeled vehicles or big animals to pull these heads or other stone works, the Olmecs relied upon the combined work force of the community of subjects.

The Olmecs expanded their influence in two ways: military power and trade. At the peak of Olmec rule their influence reached modern day Honduras and Guatemala. It should be noted that the Olmecs did not possess the technology to create alloys like bronze to use for tools. Instead they relied heavily on the volcanic rock obsidian found often in Mesoamerica.

Thanks in part to the discovery of pieces of art created by the Olmecs, we are able to learn about certain aspects of their society. For example, some statues show men with
elongated skulls. It seems that the Olmecs practiced skull deformation through artificial means; they used force on the skulls of newborns and children to achieve this desired elongated skull. The Mayas would later use this technique for artificial skull elongation only on noble children.

How the Olmec civilization ended is one of the mysteries of history. Archaeologists discovered that somewhere around 500 BCE the ceremonial centers of La Venta and San Lorenzo were destroyed and subsequently abandoned. Little of the surviving evidence shows signs of invaders, but it is possible that the people revolted and that the Olmecs deliberately destroyed their centers. By 400 BCE the dominance of the Olmecs waned and faded into the shadows of other civilizations of Mesoamerica. The Olmec civilization influenced later civilizations in Mesoamerica heavily by providing them with accomplishments that these successors adopted, such as the cultivation of corn, the ceremonial centers with pyramids, temples, and palaces, the idea of calendars, ball games, and human sacrifice. Around 100 BCE the Olmecs disappeared.

The Mayas

Around 100 BCE the population of Mesoamerica increased, and ceremonial centers appeared in regions far from the Olmec heartland. Real cities also appeared because now people permanently settled down around these centers, building off of them. The immediate successors of the Olmecs were the Mayas. Their territory consisted of regions located in modern Southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. Between 300 and 200 BCE there were Mayan villages with permanent residents in what is now Guatemala. The first ceremonial center, Kaminaljuyu, evolved where modern Guatemala City is now located. Kaminaljuyu remained an influential city until around 400 CE when it came under the dominance of Theotihuacan in central Mexico. After 400 CE the Mayans occupied territory which soon lost its fertility. The Mayas solved this problem by building terraces for farming. They placed these farm terraces along rivers, which passed through them, leaving behind fertile soil. The Mayas harvested mostly corn, but also cultivated cotton, which they used largely to make textiles. These Mayan textiles became a popular trading good throughout the rest of Mesoamerica. The Mayas
also grew cacao, the large bean which only the noble elites used for drinking and chewing because it was a very valuable commodity for the Mayas.

Between the 4th and 9th century CE the Mayan city of Tikal was the most important city, reaching its peak of wealth and population between 600 and 800 CE. At that time nearly 40,000 people lived in the city. Tikal had temples, pyramids, paved plazas, and palaces. The temple of the giant jaguar in Tikal stands 154 feet tall and is a pyramid structure. It symbolized Tikal’s dominance over the surrounding region, in which up to 500,000 people lived. Alongside Tikal there existed other cities, which formed the center of local Mayan city-kings. The local Mayan kingdoms fought constantly against each other. For the Mayas the winning city would usually be expected to destroy the conquered peoples. It was honorable for a Mayan warrior to bring back captives to his city and show them off. Sometimes high-ranking captives were kept alive for years as a kind of living trophy. In the end, however, the captives usually became slaves and were offered as sacrificial victims to the Mayan gods.

The constant fighting between cities prevented the Mayas from organizing a larger united authority and central government like other civilizations did before. However, around the 9th century CE Chichen Itza, the Mayan center on the Mexican peninsula of Yucatan, began to establish a more unified Mayan society. Captives were integrated into Chichen Itza society rather than sacrificed. Between the 9th and 11th centuries CE Chichen Itza was able to organize a loose empire, integrating other Mayan city centers in Yucatan. However, the Mayan centers outside of the Yucatan peninsula were already facing decline, which had set in around 800 CE. Within a little more than one century all these Mayan centers vanished. The reasons for this decline are not exactly known, but possibilities include invasion by foreigners, internal civil strife, ecological problems due to deforestation, earthquakes etc., many of which may have operated together. Whatever the reasons were, the Mayas outside of Yucatan left their cities, and trading between these centers ended. Slowly the jungle consumed what remained of these Mayan city centers.
Mayan Beliefs

Rituals played an important part in Mayan religion and society. The Mayas, like other civilizations, created a myth explaining how everything came to be on earth, a so-called creation myth, which the Mayas called Popol Vuh. Here the Mayas expressed their belief that the gods had created humans out of maize (corn) and water, which became flesh and blood. Mayan priests thought that the gods had to be pleased so that they would continue to sustain the agricultural cycle and keep life going. The way the Mayas sought to please the gods was through the sacrifice of human beings. Blood was essential to the sacrifice; the Mayas thought that shedding blood would make the gods pour rain for the all-important corn. Thus for the Mayas it was necessary to get as much blood from the victim as possible. They would, for example, cut off fingertips before decapitating their human sacrificial victims. Most of these victims were war captives. The Mayas also inflicted wounds on themselves in order to shed ritual blood. This informs us that the Mayan rituals were a necessity according to their beliefs and were not simply acts of cruelty towards captives.

Other important features and achievements of Mayan society were the ball games and the calendar. The Mayan priests created the most elaborate calendar of the ancient Americas. This calendar is based on two cycles: the solar year, which consists of 365 days, and a year of 260 days based on Mayan rituals. After 52 years both cycles would return to their starting point simultaneously. The interpretation of the calendar was an important task of the priests, who had to figure out the possibilities and dangers each day would bring. It is thought that the Mayas patterned their calendar after the calendar of the Olmecs.

The Mayas inherited from the Olmecs a ball game, which grew in popularity under the Mayan civilization. Almost every ceremonial center had a ball court paved with stones where players could play. The sport itself was played sometimes by two men competing against each other, and sometimes by teams of two or four. Players had to put a ball through a ring onto a marker without using hands. The ball was around 20 centimeters in circumference (8 inches) and was made out of solid, baked rubber. As such
the ball was very heavy and hard, and should not be compared with modern day soccer- or footballs. The sport was played for several reasons: for competitive sport between individuals, sometimes for the sake of bets placed by the spectators or players, sometimes to celebrate a political agreement or treaty. Sometimes war captives of higher rank had to play for their lives in public: the losers were sacrificed immediately after the match. Alongside some of these courts archaeologists found racks of skulls, most likely the heads of the losers.

**Teotihuacan Civilization**

The Mayas were not the only heirs of the Olmecs in Mesoamerica. As mentioned earlier, the Mayas flourished in Guatemala and in the lower parts of central Mexico, including the Yucatan peninsula. Further north, in Mexico’s higher regions, the Teotihuacan civilization developed. This area was for many centuries shaped by several lakes. However this valley in central Mexico has since lost these lakes because of changes in the environment and drainage of the waters. During ancient times, however, this region had a fresh supply of fish and water in abundance, and naturally people came there to settle in the area.

The city of Teotihuacan was located 30 miles northeast of modern Mexico City. By around 500 BCE Teotihuacan was a small agricultural village of a couple of hundred inhabitants, where people had settled permanently and diverted water from the lakes through channels onto their fields. Within 500 years the population would explode to 50,000 inhabitants. Two major buildings dominated the city of Teotihuacan in 100 CE: the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon. It should be noted that these names were given to the pyramids by the Aztecs who visited the place centuries after it had been deserted. We are not sure what the people of Teotihuacan called these pyramids; yet it is the Pyramid of the Sun that is the largest single building in Mesoamerica. The population of Teotihuacan grew even more so that between 400 and 600 CE the city had around 200,000 inhabitants, making it a metropolis in ancient times, with temples, palaces, and small apartment complexes for the masses. We know little about the Teotihuacan society since all written books were lost. What we do know we owe to their famous artifacts in
pottery and obsidian. Trade was extensive between the Teotihuacan people and other Mesoamerican societies. Most of the inhabitants worked on the fields surrounding Teotihuacan. Priests played an important role in the everyday lives of the people. Like the Mayas the people of Teotihuacan adopted both the Olmec calendar and ball games. Around 500 CE a period of war with other people started, and by 650 CE the Teotihuacan civilization had entered a period of decline. Shortly afterwards the city was sacked and burned to the ground, causing the loss of all written evidence.

South American Civilizations

Mesoamerica was not the only region in the Western hemisphere to host the emergence of civilizations. Hunters and gatherers came to the area south of Central America, towards the Andes Mountains, around 12,000 BCE. These hunters and gatherers were most likely following the migration of large animals, like the llamas and alpacas that they hunted. The climate within the Andes was perfect for the natural harvesting of crops like wild potatoes. Around 8000 BCE the climate became harsher and drier, making the natural harvesting of crops difficult and forcing these hunters and gatherers to begin to settle down and start farming. The population in the region grew as agriculture in the region flourished, and by 1000 BCE the civilization in the central Andes was comparable to the Mesoamerican civilizations.

What is interesting to note is that the Mesoamerican and the Andes civilizations evolved at the same time, but mostly independently of each other. The reason for this separate evolution was the lack of vehicles and draft animals capable of connecting these civilizations. However the cultivation of maize would eventually make its way to the Andes region, just as Andean techniques of gold, silver, and copper metallurgy would make their way up north to Mesoamerica. Between 2500 and 2000 BCE permanent settlements began emerging in the heartland of the Andes societies, which was located in modern-day Bolivia and Peru. The Andean civilizations began cultivating crops like beans, peanuts, and potatoes along with maize (corn) in the Andean dry highland using irrigation systems. After 2000 BCE the early Andes people also began to build temples, pyramids, and pottery. After 1000 BCE a new organized religion appeared in the region
called Chavin Cult, named after the city of Chavin de Huantar. As suddenly as this religion appeared it disappeared, roughly around 300 BCE. Little is known about this cult, not even its proper name. What is known is that the city was a place that functioned as a ceremonial center for the people to gather and worship but was not a place of permanent residence like Teotihuacan.

The first real large cities, with populations of around 10,000 inhabitants appeared in the central Andes region around 200 BCE. These large populations needed organization. This led to the rise of regional states, which remained largely independent from each other. These early states appeared on the western side of the Andes Mountains, where each regional state contained economic zones producing goods which, when combined, contributed to the economy of the whole region. The area by the ocean provided a sustainable source of seafood using nets weaved out of cotton; the valleys of the region cultivated the agricultural crops; and the Andes highland provided meat and wool from llamas and alpacas.

The success of these economic zones created wealthy regions; this is significant because this is the only place in the world where this style of economic system was developed on purpose. Unfortunately we do not have any writings from this civilization. Most of our knowledge is based on material remains like the ruins of their cities, centers of worship and pieces of art. One regional state in particular produced many artifacts of beauty and incredible detail. The state of Mochica existed around 300 to 700 CE in modern day Peru and was named after the river which flows in the valley its people inhabited. The Moche state (also known as Mochica) was one of the most powerful states in the area. The art and ceramic works of these people depict heads of their civilization and scenes from everyday life with amazing detail.

There were quite a few regional states in Southern America, but no regional state was able to dominate the others because of the geography of the area, which featured tall mountains separating the valleys.
Conclusion

The separation and distances between cities made contact and unity very difficult in Mesoamerica and the Andes region. The achievements of the region that stand out are the calendars, the ball games and the religious beliefs. We still await more information because little is known, especially concerning the reasons why some civilizations abandoned their cities. The arrival of European colonists in the 15th century permanently changed the western hemisphere thereafter.
6. Classical Civilizations: Persia

After the preceding survey of early civilizations and the first complex societies around the world, we now turn to a period during which the so-called “Classical Societies” were founded. This period is usually thought to have lasted 1000 years, from 500 BCE to 500 CE. We once again move around the world and discuss the classical societies we find in Persia, China, India and Greece, as well as in neighboring regions.

Persian Empire

Of the empires that existed in the ancient world, few can be named great. The Persian Empire is one of the greatest empires ever created. Persian history, however, is mired in a problematic lack of information. Little is known about the ancient past of the Persians except from the written works of foreigners, often the enemies of the Persian kings.

The homeland of the Persians was in modern-day Iran. The ancient Persians were semi-nomadic peoples that migrated to Iran around 1000 BCE, along with another group called the Medes; both peoples spoke an Indo-European language. These Persians were neither powerful nor stable enough to contend with the neighboring powers, the Mesopotamian empires; in fact the Persians were dominated by the Mesopotamians and were forced to pay tribute to them. The Mesopotamians also influenced the Persians on many levels. The Persians had a society organized on tribal lines with an emphasis on archery and horseback riding. By the time the Mesopotamian empires began losing power the Persians started gaining control and power within their heartland region.

Early Persian history is dominated by four dynasties. These carved out massive empires that eventually stretched from India in the east all the way to Egypt in the southwest and to Macedonia in the northwest.
Achaemenid Dynasty

Cyrus the Great founded the Achaemenid dynasty. Little is actually known about how the Persians managed to transition from a tribal leadership to a dynastic system of rule. What we know about early Persian history comes from second hand sources, for example Jewish scriptures and the Old Testament of the Christian bible, and the work of the Greek historiographer Herodotus. In 559 BCE Cyrus was chosen to be the ruler of the Persians by the other tribal leaders; however the Medes who lived in the Iranian heartland with the Persians at that point dominated them and sought to limit their power. Cyrus and his Persian people rebelled against the Medes in 553 BCE and by 548 the Persians controlled the entire heartland of Iran.

The Persians with Cyrus as their king now expanded further. To the west in Asia Minor (now modern day Turkey) was the Kingdom of Lydia. The kingdom of Lydia is very likely home to the invention of coinage around 640 BCE. Before coins were used people simply traded goods based upon their needs. With coins, trading became easier over long distances. Sometime after 546 BCE Cyrus and his Persian armies conquered the kingdom of Lydia and brought the idea of coins to the Persian economic structure. For Cyrus the greatest accomplishment was the conquest of Babylonia in 539 BCE. Not only did Cyrus conquer the city of Babylon, but he also created a domino effect with the surrounding small kingdoms in the region, taking them all under control after the fall of Babylon. Cyrus the Great conquered many regions and expanded the Persian kingdom, and he usually allowed the different customs of the conquered peoples to remain intact. In fact Cyrus was considered tolerant as he incorporated many of the customs of the conquered. One such example was the liberation of the Hebrew people from Babylon, who had been taken as slaves by king Nebuchadnezzar earlier in the century. Cyrus allowed these Hebrews to resettle in their ancient homeland of Judea, and they gave thanks to Cyrus, calling him Messiah. After leading many successful military campaigns and after enjoying success in other projects, Cyrus was killed in 530 BCE while fighting nomads.
After the death of Cyrus the Great, the Persian Empire went to Cyrus’ son Cambyses, who ruled from 530-522 BCE. Cambyses is mostly remembered for the conquest of the Egyptian people. In 525, after years securing his power in his father’s empire, Cambyses led an expansion southward to Egypt where the Persians defeated the weakened Egyptians. According to foreign sources Cambyses went insane, even stabbing a god-bull. The bull in Egyptian religion was a sacred animal, which was believed to be the reincarnation of an Egyptian god.

According to foreign sources, Cambyses became filled with paranoia towards the end of his life, which according to some questionable sources eventually led to the murder of his own brother, whom he killed back in Persia because he feared a rebellion. Cambyses may have been suffering from malaria, which he presumably contracted while hunting in the region (Egypt). In 522 BCE Cambyses died with no son and no brother to take the throne, leaving a small legacy following the success of his father. Political instability in the young Persian Empire was quick to follow Cambyses’ death. In the following year the throne went to Darius.

Darius the Great came to the Persian throne in 521 BCE and had a long reign lasting until 486 BCE. Under Darius the Persian Empire expanded to the Indus River valley to the East and into Europe to the West, securing Persian influence through Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) and reaching Greece. To put the Persian Empire at this time in perspective we have to note that there were over 70 million subjects living under Darius, belonging to 35 different ethnic groups. Darius not only expanded the Persian Empire but also consolidated power through public works; he also issued new Persian coins which united the economy through the empire. Darius did not rule without careful organizing; for instance Darius shared power with governors (satraps), appointed to rule small provinces, but kept them in line by using a secret police called “the secret eyes and ears of the king”; thus he would keep a close eye on these governors to prevent rebellion.

In 520 BCE Darius founded a new capital city for the empire called Persepolis. He also had a massive road network built that united the empire from East to West. For this road network Darius created a communication system using stations that always had fresh horses and offered the messengers a place to eat or sleep; these stations were placed periodically along the main empire road (every 25-30 miles or so) to be used to deliver
messages from the far reaches of the kingdom to another in about two weeks. Darius’ communication network was so advanced for its time that in a matter of weeks, armies or governors could be informed and if necessary, alerted. The network was so effective the Romans would later copy it.

In Asia Minor the province of Ionia (located in western Turkey) was ruled by the Persians. The Ionians were Greek by heritage and began to rebel against the tyrants placed in power or supported by the Persians. One thing to note is during this time period the word tyrant did not mean a cruel dictator; rather it only meant that the leader took over through unconstitutional means. The Ionians, displeased especially with high taxes, started the rebellion in 500-499 BCE, yet they were not strong enough and sought help from their Greek countrymen, especially the Athenians. Athens, a rather small city state at the time, had no intention to become involved with a matter that would drag them into the sights of the Persian war machine. The Athenians, however, decided to provide aid to the Ionians, and participated alongside the Ionians in the burning down of the city of Sardis, the Persian administrative capital in the west. The Ionians were not able to defeat the Persians and the rebellion was put down. The Persians out of revenge burned the Ionian city of Miletus, which was considered a city of philosophy and intellectuals, and they enslaved every citizen. So the Ionian rebellion was unsuccessful, but it had tremendous consequences. Legend has it that Darius had a servant remind him every day to never forget about the Athenians. In 492 BCE the Persians sent a military force consisting of land troops and a navy to invade Greece and burn Athens in punishment for their participation in the Ionian Revolt. In this invasion, the Persians took several northern lands in Greece that had rich deposits of silver; yet due to a storm that heavily damaged the Persian navy they left Athens unpunished, and launched a second invasion in 490 BCE.

The Persians arrived in 490 BCE in Greece near Athens at a small village called Marathon with a force that outnumbered the Athenians and their Plataean allies by at least a 2:1 ratio. However, the Greek forces, led by Athenian generals, charged an unprepared Persian force at their landing site in a surprise ambush. The Athenian surprise attack, together with successful battlefield tactics, caused the Persians to retreat back to their ships; there they regrouped and sailed towards Athens. The Athenian soldiers, tired from
battle, were forced to run in heavy full armor 26 miles back to Athens. When the Persian navy arrived in view of Athens, these soldiers were there in time to fight. The Persians decided not to engage but to retreat altogether and end their Greek invasion as Athens stood victorious after the battle of Marathon. In Greek myth it is said that a single messenger was sent from Marathon to Athens after the Greek victory and that he ran the 26 miles yelling Nike upon his arrival in Athens, which is Greek for “victory”; he collapsed dead thereafter. Yet this defeat was not a substantial loss for the Persians as other conquests paid for the invasion and Darius remained confident of a future Persian victory. He began preparing another invasion but he died in 486 BCE before he could actually lead the Persians against the Greeks again.

The death of Darius spared Greece a third invasion for the time being, as the new king of Persia, Xerxes, son of Darius, was not interested in destroying Greece. Xerxes inherited the throne in 486 BCE and a Babylonian rebellion kept him busy. It is said (by Herodotus, the great Greek historiographer writing around 450 BCE) that Xerxes had several dreams encouraging the third invasion of Greece. Not sure whether to believe them, Xerxes asked his uncle to sleep in his bed and wear his nightgowns for a night to see what happened. The next night, to the surprise of Xerxes, his uncle experienced the same dream as Xerxes, thus confirming that the gods were encouraging Xerxes to destroy Greece and finish his father’s work. In 484 BCE, Xerxes began to prepare the largest expeditionary force in the world at this time to intimidate the Greeks into submission without a fight. Some cities did in fact submit to Persian rule when they realized what was soon going to happen.

In 480 BCE the largest expedition of Persian forces ever assembled reached Greece. Xerxes joined the Persian troops himself. The Persians arrived at a place called Thermopylae, which was ancient Greek for “Hot Gates”. There a coalition force of 300 Spartans and many more Greek soldiers from neighboring city-states fought against the much larger Persian army in order to gain time for other Greek military preparations. However the Greeks were surrounded and the Spartan king sent most of other Greeks back home. The Persians crushed the Spartan force and beheaded the Spartan king Leonidas as punishment for the death of two of Xerxes’ brothers during those few days of
fighting. The strategic reason for fighting on the side of the Greeks was successful: to buy time for other military preparations.

After fighting the Greeks at Thermopylae, where they lost only a small fraction of their enormous army, the Persians headed for Athens. Soon Athens was burned by Xerxes, who thus accomplished Darius’ plans. However, the Greek resistance was not destroyed, as many of the Athenian citizens had evacuated the city, going to the neighboring island of Salamis. The Greek general with the most influence regarding the defense of Athens was a man named Themistocles, who had fought in the battle at Marathon 10 years earlier. Seeing that the other generals were considering further retreat, Themistocles decided to write a letter to the Persian King Xerxes detailing his submission to Xerxes and encouraging the Persians to attack the Greeks immediately and destroy them while they were in disarray. Themistocles, however, had a strategic ploy in mind. The island of Salamis was separated from the Greek mainland by a narrow straight in which the much larger Persian navy could not use their ships to their full advantage because they could not maneuver well. Instead many of the Persian ships fell afoul of one another. The underwater rams of the Athenian ships that had been made sturdier also proved to be crucial since they inflicted severe damage to the Persian ships. As a consequence the Persian navy was defeated. The Persian admiral Artemisia, from the Greek city of Halicarnassus, was one of Xerxes’ best commanders; although she was a woman, Xerxes treated her as an equal and spared her, unlike other commanders, whom Xerxes executed because he believed them to be cowards.

After the Persian defeat at Salamis Xerxes decided that he would personally withdraw from Greece but leave his army to fight on. The Persians later burned Athens for the second time. In 479 BCE the Greeks, after the battle at Plataea, pushed the Persians out of Greece and thus ended the last large expedition by the Persians to Greece. However, the Persians and various Greek powers would continue be at war with one another, fighting small battles every so often until 331 BCE, when Alexander the Great conquered Persia.
Life in the Persian Empire during the Achaemenid Dynasty

The upper class of the Persian Empire consisted of the Persian king and his family as well as the former tribal leaders who represented a kind of an aristocratic class. The religious members of the Persian Empire were different from most ancient empires as they had minimal power but several privileges like being exempt from taxes. The common people consisted of artisans, traders and farmers who could own land but had no privileges in the eyes of the law and were to pay a tribute to the kings of Persia. At the bottom of the Persian class system were slaves gained from wars. The economic structure in Persia was based on agricultural dependence. Through advanced irrigation techniques the Persians became masters of the desert by getting water from deep wells, as well as developing beautiful gardens (Persian word for garden: Paradeisos) like those found in Persepolis. As the Persians expanded into the Mesopotamian valley and Indus river valley, they gained access to rich fertile soil not found in the heartland of Persia, Iran, itself. With expansion to Egypt’s Nile River region the Persians gained a massive agricultural surplus, leading to wealth and the ability both to feed everyone in the empire and gain prosperity.

Religion in the Persian Empire

It is believed that the early religion of the Persians had a connection with that of their Indo-European relatives. Most likely they shared certain gods and rituals. What is certain, for example, is that the Persians and the Aryans shared the use of a drug for religious rituals. Later the Persians developed their own unique religion based on the works of a prophet named Zoroaster or Zarathustra. Zarathustra lived sometime between around 1200 BCE-600 BCE. He left his family at age 20 and traveled around for 10 years seeking wisdom. Zarathustra later had several visions which convinced him that there was one supreme god in existence called Ahura Mazda who was the most beneficial god to man and who wanted Zarathustra to be his prophet. Zarathustra later taught that there was an evil god named Angra Mainyu and that both, Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu,
will fight for 12,000 years; after this fight good will win against evil and destroy it forever. Thereafter, according to Zarathustra, all mankind would be judged and the virtuous would be given rewards and those who were evil would suffer for eternity. This new Persian religion would be named after Zarathustra/Zoroaster and be called Zoroastrianism. Following this religion demanded among other things that two important rules were never to be broken. These two rules of Zoroaster were living with moderation and to always tell the truth. It is believed that both Cyrus the Great and Cambyses followed Zoroaster; it is certain that Darius the Great was a believer in this religion. The Persian upper class celebrated Zoroaster but the Persian kings remained tolerant and allowed other people to worship other religions within the empire.

The Persian Achaemenid dynasty ended with the death of Darius III in 330 BCE. This represents the end of one of the most powerful dynastic rules of the ancient world. The Persian Empire under the Achaemenid dynasty left behind an empire built on conquests that tied together East and West. Despite the Persian defeat in the Greco-Persian Wars of the 5th century BCE, the Persians managed to rule one of the largest empires in antiquity until the Macedonian king Alexander conquered them. Alexander, who once admired the Persians for their greatness in battle and humble leadership, declared himself the successor of the Achaemenid dynasty and King of Persia.

It would take Alexander nearly three years of fighting throughout the Persian Empire to finally pacify the entirety of the ancient Persian kingdom and force it to submit to Macedonian rule. It was during the pacifying of the Persian kingdom that Alexander arrived at the Persian capital of Persepolis; here Greek author Diodorus of Sicily describes the events in the sections 17.20-22 in his works.

*As for Persepolis, the capital of the Persian kingdom, Alexander described it to the Macedonians as their worst enemy among the cities of Asia, and he gave it over to the soldiers to plunder, with the exception of the royal palace. It was the wealthiest city under the sun and the private houses had been filled for a long time with riches of every kind. The Macedonians rushed into it, killing all the men and plundering the houses, which were numerous and full of furniture and precious objects of every kind. Here much silver was carried off and no little gold,*
and many expensive dresses, embroidered with purple or with gold, fell as prizes to the victors.

But the great royal palace, famed throughout the inhabited world, had been condemned to the indignity of total destruction. The Macedonians spent the whole day in pillage but still could not satisfy their inexhaustible greed. [...] As for the women, they dragged them away forcibly with their jewels, treating as slaves the whole group of captives. As Persepolis had surpassed all other cities in prosperity, so she now exceeded them in misfortune.

Many historians believed this act was revenge for the burning of Athens years earlier; however, regardless of the reasoning, even Alexander claimed to be regretful when he returned to the ruins of Persepolis years later on his way back to Babylon. On June 10th, 323 BCE Alexander the Great died from a fever caused by malaria in Babylon, leaving no heir. Soon Alexander’s generals fought for control amongst themselves upon the death of their king. These generals later became the successors of Alexander and carved kingdoms for themselves. Alexander’s general Ptolemy for example became king of Egypt while another general called Seleucus claimed as his kingdom the former Persian Achaemenid Empire.

The Seleucid Dynasty

Seleucus I inherited the lands contained in the former Persian Empire under the Achaemenid dynasty with the exception of Egypt and northern Greece. It would take Seleucus until 305 BCE to control the entire kingdom. Seleucus I kept the political and social systems of the Achaemenid dynasty in place. The dynasty Seleucus created would be named after him, as would the empire he created; we refer to these as the Seleucid Dynasty and the Seleucid Empire, respectively. The Seleucid dynasty created new cities in the Greek style and invited people to live in them by offering free land. However, even with all the attempts to preserve Persian styles of government, the Persian natives disliked the Seleucids because they were a foreign power dominating them. Revolts and several attempts to remove the Seleucids occurred, but none of them worked; over time,
however, these revolts began to weaken the Seleucid dynasty’s hold over the region. The Seleucid Empire lasted until 83 BCE when the Romans took the remaining part of the small Seleucid Empire, which had already been weakened by another successor kingdom claiming to restore the Persian Empire of the Achaemenids.

Parthian Empire

Following both the conquest of the Persian people by the Macedonian Greeks and the death of Alexander the Great, tensions started to grow almost immediately in the satrapies of the former Persian Empire. Many of the regional peoples banded together to push out the Greeks and restore the golden age of the Achaemenid dynasty. One such group were the Parthians, who in 238 BCE began to carve a kingdom out of the crumbling Seleucid Empire. This small Persian kingdom developed a parasitic relationship in which the Parthians grew stronger while the Seleucids grew weaker. The most powerful king of the Parthian Empire was a man named Mithridates (c. 171 BCE). The war between the Parthians and Rome eventually culminated in the death of the Roman general Marcus Crassus in battle against the Parthians in southern Asia Minor in 53 BCE. The Parthians considered themselves the true successors to the Achaemenid dynasty; they also followed Zoroastrianism and cultivated it further.

Sassanid Empire

The last Persian Empire was the Sassanid Empire, which arose after the fall of the Parthians in 224 CE. Like the Parthians, the Sassanids considered themselves the true successors of the Achaemenid dynasty. The Sassanids, however, successfully kept the Romans at a distance; they created a system of puppet states between them and the Romans, which continued even as the Roman Empire split, further strengthening the Sassanids in the region. The Sassanid Empire started to decline when the Arab Muslims arrived. Those warriors quickly took hold of Sassanid Syria and eventually absorbed the weak Sassanid Empire by conquering its capital Ctesiphon in 651 CE. The Arab invasion not only ended the Persian Empire but also brought a new religion to the region, Islam,
which slowly took over and pushed Zoroastrianism further East into India, where it survives in some form to this day.

**Impact of the Persian Empire**

The impact the Persian Empire had on the world was religious tolerance (with exceptions), along with cultural expansion, both of which influenced many other regional states. This applies also to the Arab invaders who brought Islam to the Persians, adopted Persian customs and administration. With the end of the Sassanid Empire in 651 CE we see the end of the Persian Empire. Though we know little about the mighty Persian Empire because of the lack of Old Persian sources, we still hear much about them in Greek literature and other foreign (often enemy) sources.
7. Classical China

Introduction

The Chinese civilization that emerged in the Yellow River and Yangtze River valleys struggled to find an effective way to organize government. In the 5th century BCE China was generally in a state of political chaos. The early dynasties of China experimented with how to govern large territories, sometimes using subordinates to rule on their behalf in exchange for tribute and military aid. These subordinates, however, frequently chose not to abide by the will of their king; they began to establish their own kingdoms. These kingdoms would fight so bitterly that a period of around two hundred years (403-221 BCE) became known as “The Period of the Warring States”. However, this period of political chaos gave rise to many remarkable cultural achievements. Three Chinese schools of thought emerged during this period in an attempt to end the rivalry among the smaller kingdoms and create a unified China. These three schools of thoughts in China were Confucianism, Daoism and Legalism, all of which had a deep impact on Chinese history.

Confucianism

Many people recognize the idea of Confucianism but know little about the man or his teachings. He is known to the Chinese as Kong Fuzi (meaning “master philosopher Kong”) whereas in the West he is called Confucius. He lived from 551-479 BCE and belonged to an aristocratic family from the state of Lu in Northern China. Confucius was a man with strong principles, which he would not give up for anything, not even for a political career. He travelled throughout northern China for ten years working as a teacher and a political advisor, attracting many students who wanted to pursue a political career. Some students of Confucius wrote down his teachings in a book called “Analects.” This book became very influential in Chinese politics and culture. Confucius had practical ideas and did not ask abstract philosophical questions; he concentrated on creating an educated class of superior individuals called “Junzi.” Confucius believed that these Junzi,
being well educated, would best serve the state. His students had to learn works of poetry and history that were created during the Zhou Dynasty. For more than 2000 years, until the 20th century CE, his writings were the basis of learning for future Chinese officials. According to Confucius, education alone was not sufficient to become a government official; rather, he considered moral integrity and fair judgment equally important. For Confucius it was necessary to have high standards of behavior in order to make fair and just judgements.

To achieve this high standard of behavior Confucius created a set of values. One of these values, for example, was Ren, a certain kindness and humanity towards others. Another value in Confucius’ philosophy was Li, the respect humans have to show towards others, especially elders and superiors. The value called Xiao demanded that children show and provide respect and care towards their parents and other family members. Ideally, according to Xiao, one was expected to take care of family members as they became older or sick while cherishing their memory once they died. Confucius believed that a person possessing moral values and who was well educated could become part of the Junzi and thus become a supreme individual capable of leading China out of “The Period of the Warring States”. Many of Confucius’ ideas were so influential because in his teachings he used general terms, not specific ones intended for one special occasion that was unlikely to happen in the real world. Thus Confucian thought became generally easier to apply at different times. Another important part of Confucian thought was that the students could easily adjust the teachings of their master to further apply his methods in other areas. One such student of Confucius’ teachings was a man named Mencius, who lived centuries later, from 372-289 BCE during “The Period of the Warring States”. Like Confucius, Mencius travelled widely throughout China and heavily supported harmony and cooperation between people, but experienced more criticism than Confucius for being too optimistic.

Another student in the Confucian tradition was Xunzi (298-238 BCE), who in contrast to Confucius and Mencius had acquired practical experience in government by working as an administrator for many years. Presumably this practical experience in politics led to the fact that he was not as optimistic regarding human nature as Mencius. He believed people act based on self-interest and are not willing to contribute to society
voluntarily. Xunzi thought that a very strict social discipline was needed to straighten out individuals with too much self-interest and change them into contributing members of society.

What Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi shared was an optimism that people can be improved and that order in society can be restored. This optimism is crucial for understanding why Confucian thought focused on education and public behavior. However, this optimism directly challenged other thinkers, who believed that this was impractical in helping to restore order in China. One such group of critics were the supporters of the second school of thought in China, Daoism.

Daoism (Taoism)

The origin of Daoism goes back to the late Zhou Dynasty in China, when the “Period of the Warring States” started to create both political and social unrest. While Confucian thought focused on education and on public behavior that required humans to actively do something to achieve change, Daoism followed a different path, one quite opposite to Confucian thought. Daoists thought that the activity of people to bring about change was a waste of time and energy. They believed that people must look inwards, reflect on themselves to gain knowledge about nature, and learn how to live in harmony with it and others. This school of thought was founded by a sage named Laozi who lived sometime between 600 and 500 BCE. Daoism itself comes from the word Dao meaning way, the way of nature and the cosmos. Thus Daoism is the way to understand nature and the world. Human beings have to self-reflect to acquire knowledge as to their place in this universe. We as humans must live in harmony with Dao, which in turn meant that humans must let go of ambition and activism in politics or the state and live a very simple (ascetic) life. Taoists called this concept of living Wuwei, which, basically translated, meant that human beings were to live simply and in harmony with nature, away from all involvement and competition in politics. Thus Taoists believed in having less government and living in small communities that relied basically on themselves. Confucian thought and Daoism were not exclusive, meaning that anyone was allowed to observe more than one school of thought; so, for example, people who followed Confucian values during
their professional time, say as government officials, could still follow the Taoist line of thought in their private lives and reflect on human nature and the place of humans in it.

**Legalism**

A third school of thought soon emerged in China as both Confucian thought and Daoism failed to produce peace and order during the Period of the Warring States. The third school of thought is called Legalism. It differed from the other two schools of thought in its emphasis on ruthless efficiency in politics and administration. People actively involved in Chinese politics developed Legalism. The most prominent person among the Legalists was Shang Hang (390-338 BCE). He worked as secretary of the leader in the regional state of Qin. Shang Hang wrote a book in which we find his ideas, called *The Book of Lord Shang*. Although he surely was a brilliant thinker to achieve such status, he was presumably rather unpopular, as he along with his family members was executed and his body mutilated by rivals in the court after the death of his patron. Another important legalist was Han Feizi, who was also killed by rival members of the political elite, who forced him to drink poison. Both Lord Shang and Han Feizi thought and believed what can be summarized as the Legalism Doctrine: a state is strong when it has strong agriculture and a strong army. The Legalists wanted people either to become farmers or to perform military service, and not work as merchants, educators, scholars, artists etc.

The term *Legalists* indicates that followers of Legalism believed in strict and clear laws, which would make people put the interest of the state over their personal interests. These strict laws made the expectations of the state clear and offered severe punishments for violations. The Legalists came up with the idea that if people were afraid to commit a small crime they would be even more afraid to commit a greater crime. A recent example of this kind of thinking can be found in modern New York City, where, under former Mayor Rudy Giuliani, a policy called “Broken Windows” or “Zero Tolerance” was implemented. However, the legalist form of punishment was far more severe than high fines or jail time; the Legalists endorsed punishments such as amputation for depositing ashes or trash in the street.
Another concept the Legalists used to keep the populace in line was the theory of collective responsibility before the law. This meant that all members of the family were expected to observe one another and report violations to the state. Should a member of the family not obey, then the entire family of the violator would be punished.

The legalist school of thought was not very popular in China and even centuries later some philosophers did not agree with the views of the Legalists. However, many scholars give the legalist doctrine credit for playing a crucial role in ending the period of the Warring States and even helping to unify China under one ruler.

**Unification of China**

During the later stages of the period of the Warring States in China, some of the regional leaders of the independent states began to adopt legalist ideas; among these states was the state of Qin (pronounced Chín) in Western China. The rule of the Qin dynasty lasted only for some years, but the succeeding Han dynasty would last centuries by following the example of the Qin dynasty. During the 4th century BCE Shang Hang advised the ruler of the state of Qin to introduce important reforms in the Qin state. In following the legalist doctrine, the ruler attracted many peasant farmers to sparsely populated areas by granting them free plots and profits. This caused an agricultural surplus, which was used by the Qin dynasty to organize a powerful army, equipped with the best iron weapons available at the time. With this army the Qin rulers conquered one state after another until they became the first rulers of a unified Chinese state in 221 BCE, when the former ruler of the regional state of Qin proclaimed himself the first emperor: Qin Shihuangdi. Ironically the accomplishments of the Qin dynasty were overshadowed by its short reign of only 14 years over a unified China, which ended officially in 207 BCE. Although the dynasty ended quickly through civil strife, the Qin dynasty was very influential on future dynasties of China, which would also pursue centralized imperial rule.

The first emperor Qin Shihuangdi ruled his empire from the city of Xianyang (near modern Xi’an). It seems that many welcomed the stability brought about by the new ruler, but others did not accept the new government. The new ruler was, for example, criticized by many followers of Confucianism and Daoism. Qin Shihuangdi reacted with
force: he executed many of those who had criticized him, and ordered books of philosophy, ethics, history and literature to be burned, with the exception of the few that he found to be useful. Shihuangdi also had 460 scholars burned alive for criticizing his regime, while he forced other critics to serve in the army in dangerous locations along the border.

However, alongside this harsh punishment, the first emperor of China introduced many reforms that further supported the unification of China. Emperor Shihuangdi would, for example, implement standardized laws as well as standardized currencies, weights, and measurements in all regions in China. He also built large road networks, which interconnected China further, reaching all far-flung areas.

Another innovation by emperor Shihuangdi was a standardized script, which he demanded that all the regional states use as a common script. In different regions people would still speak different languages and dialects as they do today, but they were forced to use the common language and script for all matters of state.

Although Qin Shihuangdi was a powerful and very ruthless leader, he is still a very important figure in Chinese history, as he must be considered a major factor responsible for Chinese unification. The emperor died not long after Chinese unification in 210 BCE and was buried in a luxurious tomb built by maybe around 700 thousand laborers. Along with the emperor, many precious grave goods were placed in the tomb; slaves, concubines and even craftsmen who designed the tomb were sacrificed. The tomb was secured with traps and crossbows that could fire at intruders who triggered them. On the ceiling of the tomb were stars and planets painted by hand, and on the floor was painted a map of the entire realm over which he had ruled, which included flowing rivers of mercury. Near the tomb, archaeologists discovered buried trenches containing an army of life-sized pottery figures (the famous terracotta army), whose job it was to protect the emperor in the afterlife. This terracotta army was excavated only recently, in 1974. However, parts of the tomb have yet to be discovered; only brief accounts of possible locations and designs have survived the centuries.

Shortly after the death of the first emperor, revolts erupted throughout China, as many thousands of laborers who were forced by the new king to work on public building projects like palaces, roads and bridges became so discontent with the obligation to leave
their families and homes that they started to rebel in 209 BCE. In 207 BCE the rebels overran the Qin court, slaughtered the government officials, and burned down the state buildings. Chaos erupted and a return to the Period of the Warring States seemed likely. Yet the end of the turmoil and chaotic situation in China came only one year later in 206 BCE. The man seemingly responsible for ending the chaos was Liu Bang; after he partially restored order in 206 BCE he became the new leader and ruler of a new dynasty which is called Han dynasty. The Han dynasty would last 400 years from 206 BCE to 220 CE thus being the longest and most influential dynasty in Chinese history. These 400 years of the Han dynasty were only interrupted once, when for 14 years (between 9 and 23 CE), a challenger took over the throne. Because of this event we talk about the Han dynasty in two parts, the early Han dynasty (206 BCE-9 CE), and the later Han Dynasty (23-220 CE). At first Liu Bang tried to follow a middle course between centralized government and a government based on more powerful regional leaders such as governors. Later on he switched to a more strict centralized government like his predecessors, which would become the model for government throughout the Han dynasty.

The most successful and influential of the Han rulers was Han Wudi, also known as the Martial Emperor. He ruled for 54 years, from 141 to 87 BCE. He expanded centralized government and authority. For this he needed well-educated people who could work as bureaucrats and administrators. However, this was a problem as there was a severe lack of educated people in China, partially because there was no formal education system in China capable of supplying Han Wudi with the necessary steady supply of educated people for these administrative jobs. Rather, most education took place in private improvised systems like those of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, who would accept students on a case by case basis. One reason for this lack of educational development was the contempt for education among certain people of the ruling class. It was said that Liu Bang emptied his bladder into a cap usually worn by Confucian scholars. However, Han Wudi had a different view, and in 124 BCE would start his education reform with the establishment of the first imperial university. The goal of this university was to produce government officials by using the teachings of Confucius as
part of its curriculum, thus ensuring that the teachings of Confucian thought survived over thousands of years.

Han Wudi was also successful in foreign policy: he expanded his rule into Vietnam and Korea, both of which came under influence of Chinese culture. For example, both countries adopted Confucian thought in their educational systems. The most important achievement in foreign policy of Han Wudi was his invasion of central Asia and his defeat of the nomadic people called Xiongnu. This ensured that the Han state could enjoy uncontested rule in East and Central Asia.

Life in Classical China

Society under the Han rulers was based on male dominance; women were seen more and more as subordinate to men, since devotion to husbands and humility were demanded of women in Confucian thought. Most of the people in China worked in agriculture, encouraged by the adopted legalist doctrine. Under the Han rulers iron was used more and more to make plows, shovels, and sickles. This added to agricultural productivity and, as was true in many other ancient civilizations, stimulated population growth. One valuable area of craftsmanship under the Han dynasty was sericulture, or the production of silk. Sericulture was much older than the Han dynasty, going back as early as 3800 BCE in the Yellow River valley. But under the Han dynasty silk production was finally expanded to other areas of China, especially modern Sichuan and Guangdong provinces. Silkworms can be found in many places through Eurasia, but the Chinese ones were especially fine producers of silk. The Chinese had refined the techniques necessary to breed silkworms and to treat them and their cocoons. Chinese silk thus became a very precious good in India, Persia, Mesopotamia, and even in Rome. The long distant trade routes used to move silk would later be known as the silk roads because of this demand. Another invention under the Han dynasty was the invention of paper around 100 CE; prior to this the Chinese wrote on bamboo, silk, or (as we have seen) bones.

As mentioned before, the growth in agriculture led to an increase in population, and by the year 9 CE, at the end of the early Han dynasty, around 60 million people lived in Han China. The problem was that the surplus wealth was rather quickly consumed,
especially by Han Wudi’s military campaigns. Han Wudi raised taxes and confiscated land to fund his projects. The distribution of wealth was unequal during those years. This could be seen especially in the distribution of land: more and more land was in the hands of fewer and fewer landowners. One reason for this was the fact that a few landlords profited from the ruin of smaller landowners who could not pay their debts, and thus were forced to sell their land or even themselves into slavery. So by the end of the first century BCE a small number of landowners possessed most of the land while more and more peasants faced difficulties just to get by. Because these peasants had no hope of improvement in the future, the situation led to social unrest, rebellions and banditry. The landowners, however, were very important for the Han emperors, since they provided the funds for their projects and courts. Thus the Han emperors were reluctant to implement reforms that dealt with the inequality problem. It was only in the year 6 CE, when a six-year-old Han ruler inherited the throne, that a Han secretary was able to start reform; the secretary took over the responsibility of governing on the new ruler’s behalf. His name was Wang Mang, and he was such a capable ruler that others urged him to usurp the throne, which he did in 9 CE. This date is regarded as the end of the early Han dynasty in Chinese history. Wang Mang started to introduce reforms which have, in modern times, earned him the nickname “Socialist Emperor.” An important part of Wang Mang’s rule was the reform of landownership: he limited the amount of land that could be possessed by one family, and he also broke up large estates and redistributed them. Unfortunately for Wang Mang, he was not very effective in implementing his policy. The landowners were understandably not very happy with his ideas, but the peasants were dissatisfied as well, because Wang Mang was very inconsistent and ill prepared to meet their expectations and to follow through on what he had promised in his reforms. Later, poor harvests and subsequent famine contributed to the dislike of the ruler, and in 23 CE a revolt ended Wang Mang’s rule as well as his life.

Two years later, in 25 CE, the Han rulers returned to power and the later Han dynasty began. The Han rulers did not take care of the problem of land-owning which had caused the end of the early Han dynasty in the first place. A few wealthy landowners still lived in luxury while many peasants struggled, living in difficulty. Desperate peasants still revolted frequently; one of these revolts became known as the Yellow
Turban Uprising due to the headgear worn by the rebels. This revolt was a serious threat to Han rulers and raged throughout China at the end of the second century and into the third century CE. Internally, the Han dynasty was also weakened by the emergence of different groups that had their own interests in mind. In the end these rivalries and fights brought down the Han dynasty in the third century CE (220 CE), leaving China once again divided into several regional states for more than 300 years.

Conclusion

The beginning of the period we refer to as classical China was shaped by political chaos. At the same time, the emerging schools of thought of Confucianism and Daoism influenced thought and society in China for thousands of years to come. Politically, Legalism helped to bring an end to the 200 year period of chaos and to unite China under one ruler, the former king of Qin. The Han dynasty maintained unity and allowed for the schools of Confucian thought and Taoism to survive.

The advance of silk production not only provided wealth for China, but also stimulated the construction of a large network of roads, which connected many civilizations and facilitated the exchange of ideas. The use of Legalism had a great impact on future Chinese culture as well as on other civilizations.
8. Classical India

Introduction

Earlier we discussed the birth of the early Indian civilizations that shaped the way India would develop. In the absence of a unified centralized government in the Indian subcontinent, it would not be long before other powerful empires would invade the region, bringing not just devastation but also new ideas and technologies. Gradually, the majority of the Indian subcontinent came under the rule of one dynasty. Eventually, inhabitants of the region made new advances in science, mathematics and medicine that had tremendous influence on later civilizations around the world.

Rise of the Mauryans

When the Indo-Europeans (including the Aryans) migrated to India, starting around 1900 BCE, they gradually founded regional kingdoms along the subcontinent. These regional kingdoms fought with each other constantly until some large regional kingdoms absorbed the smaller ones around 600 BCE. It was not long until each of the remaining larger kingdoms attempted to conquer the others, although no single kingdom was able to do so early on. As a result, India continued to be divided into kingdoms, with no single centralized government. Two events changed this state of affairs, and India’s history as well. First, around 520 BCE, Darius the Great of Persia began his conquest of Northwestern India, and made it part of the Persian Empire. He introduced a strong form of centralized government for the first time in India, along with appropriate techniques of administration. The second event occurred in 327 BCE with the arrival of another conqueror to India, Alexander the Great. When Alexander the Great and his armies arrived in India they crushed many of the regional states along their path in an attempt to expand the Macedonian Empire. The campaign to conquer India by the Macedonians was cut short when the armies of Alexander refused to go any further into the Indian subcontinent and he was forced to leave India in 325 BCE. In leaving India, Alexander inadvertently influenced Indian politics by creating a power vacuum: having destroyed
the local authorities and power systems he left no one in charge when he and his troops marched back. In the Northeastern part of India the kingdom of Magadha became the first to take advantage of the chaos and secure power in the region. Between 500 and 300 BCE Magadha dominated the area of northern India. Within the kingdom of Magadha lived an ambitious man called Chandragupta Maurya. He would slowly gain control over small remote parts of the Magadha kingdom, and he continued to do so until he gained control over all of Magadha by overthrowing its existing ruling dynasty in 321 BCE. However, Chandragupta Maurya was not satisfied with ruling just the kingdom of Magadha; he began to expand and conquer all of Northwestern India. Chandragupta Maurya’s conquest of states in the region allowed him to create an empire containing all of Northern India. Such a large empire demanded careful administration. Chandragupta Maurya had a very capable advisor named Kautalya, who wrote a political handbook with guidelines for how to use power, explaining the principles of governing. This book became known as *Arthashastra*, and some of it survived and can still be read to this very day. Apart from giving instruction on how to administer a government, Kautalya gave advice on the use of spies; for example he encourages the use of prostitutes as informants to the ruler.

Chandragupta’s son inherited the throne from his father in 297 BCE. Indian legend states that Chandragupta left the throne behind to become a monk and that he led an ascetic life, which eventually led to his death by starvation. Under Chandragupta’s son, the empire expanded to the Southern portion of India. The grandson of Chandragupta, Ashoka, came to the throne in 268 BCE, and under his rule the Mauryan Empire reached its climax. Ashoka reigned over the Mauryan Empire from 268 BCE to 232 BCE. His first campaign was to conquer a kingdom called Kalinga, which had continued to resist Mauryan dominance under his father. Ashoka’s armies defeated Kalinga in 260 BCE, which resulted in the complete control of the Indian subcontinent (except the most Southern point) under one unified empire. With his expansion of control over India complete, Ashoka moved his attention towards governing the empire effectively. He would establish Pataliputra as his capital city (close to modern day Patna), which quickly grew into a large cosmopolitan city. All around his realm Ashoka published his edicts as inscriptions on rock faces or on stone pillars he erected for this
purpose. These edicts transmitted imperial orders to his people; they also encouraged them to follow Buddhist values.

Ashoka was a very capable ruler, and as a result India would benefit from a booming economy, good government, and integration of its many different regions. But soon after Ashoka’s death in 232 BCE, the Mauryan Empire started to decline. The empire’s large administration needed a lot of money, as did its large military. Later financial difficulties forced Mauryan leaders to issue unpopular laws (for example raising taxes, confiscations of property), and by 185 BCE the Mauryan Empire had vanished.

Bactrian, Kushan, and Gupta Empires

For the next 200 years Northwestern India came under the dominance of a region called Bactria (located mostly in modern day Afghanistan), where the successors of Alexander the Great mixed with the local population and created a Bactrian Kingdom. This Bactrian Kingdom invaded Northern India in 182 BCE. Bactria was an important place because it connected China in the East to the Mediterranean world in the West. Very important trading routes went through Bactria and provided the Bactrian rulers with great revenue. Under Bactrian rule, for example, the city of Taxila in Northern India became a wealthy and flourishing place due to its function as a trading hub. Taxila was not alone in enjoying the economic boost; the whole region of Northern India called Gandhara became a cultural and commercial center under Bactrian dominance. This dominance ended when nomadic peoples from central Asia pushed into the region.

Among these conquerors were the Kushans, who possessed an empire embracing parts of Central Asia and Northern India from 1 CE until 300 CE. The most famous Kushan emperor was Kanishka, who ruled around 130 CE. Under his reign the Kushan Empire contained modern Pakistan, Afghanistan, Northern India, and the central Ganges valley. For several centuries the Kushan Empire was responsible for safe trade between East and West, having contact with Rome, Persia, and Han China.

The Kushan Empire was succeeded by the Gupta Dynasty, which evolved in the heart of the Ganges valley region in Magadha. The Gupta Empire was founded around 320 CE, and the main difference between the Gupta and Mauryan Empire was its
organization. The Mauryans relied on a centralized form of government, whereas the Gupta Empire left many responsibilities in the hands of local governments and administrations. This worked for many years until in the early 5th century, when nomadic invaders found no central force to stop them. Until then, however, from 320 CE to 400 CE, the Gupta Empire brought security and stability to India. We know this from the account of a Chinese Buddhist monk named Faxian, who travelled to India during the years of the Gupta Empire. He wrote that it was safe to travel in India and that there was prosperity and little crime.

For us the Gupta Empire is interesting because very important achievements in science and mathematics were made during its existence. Indian physicians, for example, developed techniques of plastic surgery. Indian astronomers discovered that the earth was a sphere rotating on an axis. Indian mathematicians created the basis for advanced mathematics by including the numeral zero into their mathematics. (Later in the 8th century, scholars from Arabia and Persia met Indian mathematicians and adopted what they called “Hindi numerals.” Europeans later learned these numerals from Arab Muslims, which is why the numerals in the Western world are still called Arab numerals, not Hindi or Indian numerals.) Indian mathematicians also computed Pi as 3.1416 and determined that the solar year consisted of 365.3586805 days.

The Gupta Empire ended due to conflict with an enemy against whom they could not fight back: the White Huns. The White Huns were a nomadic people from central Asia. Around 490 CE the White Huns crossed the Hindu-Kush from Bactria into Northern India and established kingdoms there. The Gupta Dynasty still existed, but only in name, not really having the power to rule effectively. Regional empires evolved once again and it would take another 1000 years for an empire like the Mauryan Empire or the Gupta Empire to appear in India.

Society in India

During the years of the Mauryan Empire, agriculture and manufacturing in India grew intensively and trading networks expanded. Extensive trade was conducted within India, especially along the Ganges River. Long distance trade between foreigners and India also
grew more and more, for example with China and the Mediterranean. Long distance trade with India was usually conducted through one of two possible routes: through the Hindu-Kush Mountains via Taxila to Persia and the Mediterranean, or via the Silk routes of central Asia to China. From India, black pepper, pearls, cotton, and gems were exported. India in return imported goods like horses and silk from China. Indian merchants also sailed to faraway regions like Indonesia as early as 500 BCE. It was necessary for these sailors to understand the rhythms of the monsoon winds in the region, as in the spring and summer the monsoon blows from the southwest while in the fall and winter months the winds come from the northeast. Once these conditions were known, the Indian merchants were able to sail from India to Indonesia and back without much issue. The exotic products the Indian merchants brought back from Indonesia often ended up in Persia or Rome. Archaeologists have found many Roman coins in India, which points to a trading connection between these two regions of the world in ancient times.

The economy was growing so quickly in India that it allowed for the population and the cities to do so as well. This growth led to issues of stability and social order among the subjects of India’s empires. The solution in India was different from that in other places: rather than focusing on law enforcement, the people in India relied on a set of morals created by Indian moralists, who promoted a strong patriarchal family, and on a society with exact definitions of what roles each member of the family had to play. In higher classes, for example, many generations lived under one house together and were “ruled” by a man who was the patriarch.

Women usually were subordinate to men in this type of family structure in India, as is depicted in the two great Indian epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, both of which describe women devoting themselves to their husbands. The patriarchal system grew even stronger in the first centuries of the Common Era. By the time of the Gupta Dynasty (320-550 CE), it reached the point where girls at age 8 or 9 were married to men in their twenties. The two would marry formally just after the girl reached puberty. This is a sign of the patriarchal system in India since these girls were put under the control of older men at a young age; obviously they were forced to devote themselves to a man and family and therefore were not able to partake in public life or society.
As we have seen earlier, society in India was based on different castes. The expanding trade, industrial activity and the growing economy brought fourth new types of workers like craftsmen, merchants, and artisans. These new workers did not fit into the old caste system or social order. Usually these workers formed guilds, which were organizations of workers within the same craft. These guilds controlled prizes, wages and cared for the well-being of their members and their families. Often these guild members lived in the same part of town and socialized with one another, which in turn led to intermarriage. These guilds began functioning as sub-castes known as the Jati. Unlike the original castes, the Jati system was built on occupation and not birth. The Jati performed services which in other lands were provided by the government. These services included organizing courts to resolve differences between members, or taking care of community affairs. Members had to abide by the rules of the Jati; if someone did not, he could be expelled from the Jati and become an outcast. As an outcast there was no protection or support from the group and it was impossible to find work in the occupation-based Jati. These outcasts were thus forced to take on occupations nobody wanted because they were considered “unclean”, like butchering, tanning leather, and undertaking. Gradually, they established another caste called the “Untouchables.”

The tendency to be around people of the same occupation was an important pattern of Indian society.

Challenge to the Old Social Order in Classical India

Because India possessed a healthy economy after 600 BCE, members of the lower castes began to enjoy prosperity. Vaishas and Shudras would sometimes even become wealthier than their Brahmin or Kshatriya contemporaries. This development created a direct challenge to the old order of society. The religious professionals and warriors enjoyed special status because of the services they provided. The priests performed sacrifices for the well-being of the community, whereas the warriors obviously protected the community from immediate danger. However, because of economic developments after 600 BCE, members of the wealthy classes (many of whom came from the lower castes) grew tired of the old order and did not like the Brahmins’ attitude of superiority. The
result was the rise of new religions and philosophies during the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. These new schools of thought challenged and sometimes rejected the cults of Brahmins and served the interests of the newly-enriched social classes. There is evidence, for example, of an atheistic sect called Charvaka in the area which claimed that the gods were only figments of the imagination created by the Brahmins and that there was no afterlife. Other religious traditions like Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism evolved, all of which emphasized spirituality against the Brahmins’ influence and dominance.

Jainism

One of the most influential new religions in India was Jainism, which existed in the 7th century BCE but did not grow in popularity until the 6th century. At this time a popular teacher in India turned to Jainism. His name was Vardhamana Mahavira. Mahavira (which means “great hero”) was born into the second highest class, the Kshatriya (warriors). According to legend, he left his prominent family at the age of 30 in order to seek a way out of the circle of incarnation. For 12 years Mahavira wandered along the Ganges river valley while leading an ascetic life, and finally achieved enlightenment. He got rid of all his worldly possessions and preached that humans should not be involved in worldly affairs. Mahavira’s teachings became so popular that a group of dedicated students became monks to spread his message. These students called Mahariva “Jina”, meaning “conqueror.” From the title of Jina the followers of Mahavira began referring to themselves as Jains. Jainism was heavily influenced by the religious philosophy of the Upanishads, with their idea of incarnation of the soul into human beings, animals or plants. According to Jainism, the soul was no longer limited to living entities, but could be incarnated in everything in the universe, even rocks.

Jainism taught that the only salvation from being trapped in this circle of reincarnation was to be found in saying “no” to all selfish behavior. Generally, this could be done by following a principle called Ahimsa, which meant avoidance of all violence unto other living things. For the Jain monks, this imposed an extremely difficult way of life. These monks had to sweep the ground before they walked to avoid harming insects, they had to follow a strictly vegetarian diet, and they had to avoid sudden movements and
wear masks so not to harm the souls inhabiting the air. This type of lifestyle was very difficult on its own, but for farmers, leather tanners, and workers in other occupations that somewhat harmed or involved living beings, it was impractical. Thus Jainism was rather unpopular among many people and did not become the first choice to replace the existing traditional religion of the Brahmins in India at the time. But for certain people Jainism offered something very attractive: it did not allow for social hierarchies or classes, since everything in the universe possessed a soul and played an equal part in the universe. In particular, the fact that the Jains did not recognize the different Varnas or Jati only promoted more support among the lower castes.

The Jainist concept of Ahimsa (nonviolence) greatly influenced other religious schools of thought over a long period. To this day around 2 million people in India follow Jain teachings, in particularly the concept of nonviolence. In addition, many Buddhists and Hindus see Ahimsa or nonviolence as the most important part of their faith. Influential people like Mahatma Gandhi, or Martin Luther King in the West, saw the concept of nonviolence as the most important tool for achieving reform.

Jainism remained a minority religion in India, as few people could be persuaded to follow the very strict lifestyle demanded by a devout Jainist. With Jainism failing to challenge the faith of the Brahmins, a more practical faith succeeded in becoming more popular in India: Buddhism.

**Buddhism**

The founder of Buddhism was Siddhartha Gautama, born around 563 BCE in a small tribal state in the Himalayas as the son of the local ruler. Siddhartha had a very comfortable life and was separated from all the “common” people. He was educated solely to succeed his father as ruler over the state into which he was born. Siddhartha, however, became gradually unhappy with this life. According to legend, one day Siddhartha left his palace and saw a man in the park who was weak and miserable because of his age and infirmity. When Siddhartha inquired what was plaguing the man, the man responded that all human begins must grow old and weak. Later, Siddhartha saw a corpse and a sick body, from which he learned about sickness and death. Lastly,
Siddhartha saw a monk who informed him that some people choose to seclude themselves from the world in order to lead a holy life and train their spiritual capabilities. After seeing both the suffering of the world and the monk, whom he believed to be a noble character, Siddhartha chose the lifestyle of asceticism in the hopes of understanding why human beings have to suffer. He started wandering along the Ganges River. Siddhartha sought understanding by meditating intensively and, later, by living the most simple and ascetic life possible, but neither way provided him with the knowledge he searched for. The question of “why humans beings have to suffer” would remain unanswered, until one day Siddhartha sat beneath a large tree in a place called Bodh Gaya. Siddhartha Gautama decided to sit under this fig-tree until he found the answer to this question, and so he remained under the tree for 49 days, meditating deeply and being tempted by demons that offered him pleasures or threatened him with terrors so he would abandon his quest. Siddhartha Gautama remained devoted to his meditations under the Bo-tree (a fig tree found in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and China) until he gained the knowledge he sought and thus became enlightened. Not only did Siddhartha then understand why humans suffer, he also understood how to get rid of suffering in the world. This knowledge transformed him into “The Enlightened One”, or Buddha.

Gautama explained his views to the public for the first time in 528 BCE at the Deer Park of Sarnath, quickly attracting followers along the Ganges river valley. Gautama, now known as Buddha, began to organize these followers into communities of monks. These monks possessed only yellow robes and begging bowls. They would travel barefoot and preach Buddha’s teachings. Buddha and his monks reached much of Northern India. In 483 BCE Buddha died at over 80 years of age. His final words to his companions were: “Decay is inherent in all component things! Work out your salvation with diligence.”

The teachings of Buddha were very attractive to many Indians. The most important part of his teachings were the Four Noble Truths: (1) all life brings suffering; (2) desire causes suffering; (3) one has to eliminate desire to end suffering; (4) one can eliminate desire by leading a disciplined life, following the Nobel Eightfold Path. This path demanded right belief, right resolve, right speech, right behavior, right occupation, right effort, right contemplation, and right meditation. By following these teachings
Buddhists believed that they would reduce desire, find personal salvation from the circle of incarnation, and achieve Nirvana, a state of mind indicating perfect independence in spirit. The Noble Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths are together called Dharma, which Buddhists of all sects share as the core of their beliefs. Buddhism was also more attractive than Jainism, as Buddhism did not require such an extreme ascetic life style. However, both orders shared a common belief in the non-recognition of social distinctions, which gave Buddhism the same popularity as Jainism among the lower classes.

What also helped to make Buddhism more popular than the Vedas and the traditional religion of the Brahmans was that Buddhism used the common language of the people and not Sanskrit, making it accessible to a larger audience. Lastly, another reason for Buddhism’s growing popularity was support from the Mauryan Empire under Ashoka, who converted to Buddhism around 260 BCE.

Buddhism was not easy for everyone to follow, as people were still required to make sacrifices if they hoped to live a righteous life, which could include letting go of personal property, worldly goods, and social distinction. As a result, new developments in Buddhism took place between the 3rd century BCE and 1st century CE: Buddha was increasingly considered to be divine and was thus worshipped as a god, and Buddhist monasteries began to accept gifts from wealthy individuals hoping to achieve salvation. This loose form of Buddhism eventually grew in popularity and spread around Asia in the early centuries of the Common Era. However, the strict form of Buddhism did not disappear; it remained in areas like Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka.

Hinduism

The third of the evolving faiths in India was Hinduism. It was inspired by the Vedas as well as the Upanishads. Hinduism became even more popular than Jainism and Buddhism among the people in India. The Hindu values and their development are outlined in two great epic poems called Mahabharata and Ramayana. The Mahabharata was originally composed around 1500 BCE and was not at first a religious work. It describes a civil war fought between two groups of cousins over the control of Northern
India. Later, around 100 CE, the Brahmins introduced religious aspects into it, for example by giving the god Vishnu a more important role in this civil war. Originally, the second poem, Ramayana, was nonreligious as well. It was a love story about prince Rama and his wife Sita. The last work offering insight into Hinduism is a shorter poem known as the Bhagavad Gita. It was composed by several people between 300 BCE and 300 CE. In this poem we find a dialogue between a warrior called Arjuna and his charioteer, Krishna, who is actually a human incarnation of the god Vishnu. The Bhagavad Gita describes Arjuna’s reluctance to fight when he recognizes relatives and friends among the enemies. Krishna tries to convince him to fight by using several arguments. These include the claim that killing relatives and friends does not kill their soul, since only the body dies, as well as the claim that it is Arjuna’s duty to fight as a member of the Kshatriyas, the warrior-caste. Lastly, Krishna tells Arjuna that he would find everlasting peace and happiness if he would worship Krishna completely. In short Krishna’s arguments detail the core understanding of Hinduism: understand the soul, know your duties, and worship and devote yourself completely to god. These core beliefs of Hinduism are important, as under Hinduism people are able to live non-ascetic lives and perform their duties while still leading a pious life. This new idea was different from core ideas of the other religions, which required detachment from the world to end the cycle of incarnation. Later, Hinduism began encouraging participation in worldly affairs: in addition to the principle of obedience to religion and the moral laws, Hinduism developed the principles of the pursuit of economic well-being and prosperity (called Artha), the enjoyment of various pleasures (called Kama), and the salvation of the soul (Moksha). The balance of Dharma, Artha, and Kama would make Moksha possible.

Hinduism replaced Buddhism as the most popular religion in India when the Gupta emperors started to support it. By 1000 CE Hinduism was the dominant religion in India, and a few centuries later both Hinduism and Islam forced Buddhism into the shadows.
Conclusion

The advances of Indian culture soon spread, such that all regions of India were able to share a common language, prosperity and faith. The caste system developed in India as a unique way to ensure social discipline and order. The advances and developments made in science, philosophy and religion during India’s Classical period are still in use around the globe.
9. Early Greece

Introduction

The achievements of the ancient Greeks helped to develop our modern (Western) world. However, they did not emerge on their own. The successes and achievements of the Greeks are based on advances of prior civilizations, for example those of Mesopotamia and Egypt.

The area that is modern day Greece was the heartland of Ancient Greece. It is located in a region called the Balkans, shared by other modern countries like Serbia, Romania, Croatia, Bulgaria, Albania, and Macedonia. The sea, that is the Mediterranean, was the dominant factor in the lives of the Ancient Greeks. Around 7250 BCE the first boat was built in the area, probably made of papyrus. Like modern Greece, ancient Greece was not a very rich and fertile land. Greece consists of large mountain ranges; most mountains are not very tall but, but they are steep and rugged, providing protection but also separation. The source of life for the Greeks was the sea; access to the sea was vital as this was an important source of food and the most convenient way to travel. Other civilizations that we have discussed usually had fertile river valleys capable of stimulating farming and civilization.

Cycladic Civilization

The first civilization to emerge in the area that later became ancient Greece was not itself a Greek civilization. It is called the Cycladic civilization, a name derived from a chain of around 25 islands on which these people emerged. Its origin is dated to around 3200 BCE, the period when the Neolithic age (New Stone age) turns into the Bronze Age.

The Cycladic people created a large collection of female statues over several centuries. These female statues presumably indicate the worship of a mother goddess as well as the existence of fertility rituals. These statues date back as far as 2600 – 2400 BCE and are remarkable for their elegance and the craftsmanship with which they were created. Some of these statues were life-sized, which is also remarkable because there
were few places that produced life-sized statues this early in history (Egypt is an example). Few of the statues were male.

Minoan Society

On the island of Crete in the Aegean Sea we have evidence of another early civilization. Around 2900 BCE on the island of Crete the Minoans emerged. This name does not reflect what these people called themselves, but is rather a name given to them centuries later by modern scholars. The Greek poet Homer wrote about a powerful king on the island of Crete named Minos. Whether king Minos ever existed or ever ruled over the island of Crete is doubtful. Like the Cycladic civilization, the Minoan civilization emerged in the area of ancient Greece, but is not considered a Greek civilization.

The achievements of the Minoan civilization are numerous. Among them are the great palace complexes located throughout Crete and other islands that were under Minoan dominance. Most of these palaces were built between 2000 and 1700 BCE, and the most famous of these palaces was built at Cnossos (Knossos). Parts of the great palace remain and can still be seen there to this day. Historians suggest that the size of the palaces and the numerous rooms used for storage helped inspire the tale of the labyrinth and the Minotaur.

Many of the Minoan ruins were found on the island of Crete in the 1920s by the archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans. It is important to understand that these palaces were the political, economic and cultural centers of Minoan society; they contained no defensive structures against invaders. For economic purposes the Minoans invented a script which we call Linear A, which the Minoans presumably used for keeping track of incoming and outgoing goods. Linear A has yet to be completely deciphered. In terms of religion the Minoans seem to have worshipped a mother (creator/earth) goddess, and priestesses played an important part in the performance of rituals. Also, it seems that women played an important part in Minoan society.

The location of the Minoans on the island of Crete played a key role in their development, as the island is located close to both Egypt and Phoenicia. Around 2200 BCE the Minoans learned advanced shipbuilding and sailing techniques from the
seafaring Phoenicians; accordingly between 2200 and 1450 BCE the Minoans created a large trading network. During the peak period of their civilization, the Minoans flourished because of these networks, which filled their palaces with goods. Minoan art, which emphasizes peaceful scenes, was likely influenced by Egyptian art. The Minoan graves also give us information about how they lived. The graves were communal, with no real emphasis on standing out from other graves, and often show no competitive pattern.

After 1700 BCE natural catastrophes hit the area in the form of earthquakes, tidal waves, and volcanic eruptions, one of which devastated Thera (Santorini) in 1628 BCE. After 1450 BCE the Minoan civilization, which at this point was very wealthy from trade, had become an attractive target for invaders eager to conquer the Minoans.

**Mycenaean Civilization**

The first Greek civilization evolved around 1800 BCE. It is called the Mycenaean civilization, named after the city of Mycenae, which is located in the Peloponnesian peninsula. Once again the term Mycenaean was not used by the people themselves; modern scholars introduced this term because Homer writes that the Mycenaean king Agamemnon led the largest amount of troops against Troy. The assumption is that Mycenae had to be a dominant city at that time. The German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann excavated key areas in Greece and Turkey in the 1870s and 80s, eventually discovering the great cities of Mycenae and Troy, both of which had previously been thought to be nothing more than myth.

The graves found around Mycenae demonstrate a drastic difference between the Minoans and the Mycenaeans. The Mycenaeans possessed a competitive class system, as is evident in their burial patterns. Graves were built to show social status and sometimes contained the latest technology and luxuries like chariots and silk goods. Unlike Linear A, the Mycenaean script, called Linear B, was decoded by Michael Ventris in the 1950s. In Linear B texts we have discovered, among other things, the word “slave”, which indicates that slavery was already common during the Mycenaean period. The Mycenaeans were able to take over the Minoan civilization, seemingly not militarily, but
slowly and more importantly peacefully. Mycenaean art is usually violent, depicting mostly scenes of hunting and warfare. Another difference between the Mycenaeans and the earlier Minoans can be found in religion: while the Minoans worshipped a female goddess as a major deity, the Mycenaeans turned to a male sky-god, who is the dominant god among many.

Around 1200 BCE the Mycenaean empire experienced a period of decline like many other regions around the Eastern Mediterranean. This is the beginning of the so-called “Dark Ages” of ancient Greece. Between 1200 and 800 BCE the economy of all of Greece quickly came to a standstill, and the population decreased. Little evidence points toward what exactly caused this Dark Age in Greece; no evidence exists of a foreign invader attacking Greece nor Mycenae in particular, especially as the Mycenaean palaces (unlike the Minoan ones) were protected by thick giant walls said to have been built by the Cyclopes. The agriculture and trade networks of Mycenae during this period began to wither away along with the knowledge of Linear B. The reason for the loss of an entire written script was the fact that not many people actually knew Linear B, as it was reserved only for keeping track of trade. Secondly Linear B was very hard to master, as only a few officials in the city centers knew it. Not many people knew how to read and write, and instead they passed history on in the form of oral tradition through the generations. Once trading came to a halt there was no more use for Linear B.

**Archaic Period Greece**

With the fall of the Mycenaean civilization at the start of the 12th century BCE, Greece experienced a setback in culture and development. However, by the 9th and 8th centuries BCE Greece began to recover, marking the beginning of a new period between 800 and 500 BCE, known as the Archaic Period. The economy in Greece began to recover and trade networks were slowly (re)built. The population of Greece also increased in a way that stimulated more trade and also colonization of areas of the Mediterranean Sea outside of Greece to serve as trading posts.

It was around 850 BCE that the Greek people came in contact with the Phoenicians and their system of writing. The Phoenicians, the great sea traders, had
borrowed the cuneiform system from the Mesopotamians and had noticed its inefficiency in keeping track of trade goods; the result was the development of a set of letters, the 22 consonants of the Phoenician alphabet, which could be combined to create a word. This produced a much faster and superior system of writing than cuneiform, which required the memorization of many symbols. The Greeks, seeing the use of this writing system for trade, adopted the Phoenician alphabet and added vowels, thus creating a phonetic alphabetic script.

During this early portion of the Archaic period we see the return of art and literature in Greece. The earliest known use of the Greek alphabet dates to the 8th century BCE. The drinking cup now called “The Cup of Nestor” was found in the grave of a boy in Italy. It contains a three-line epigram and reads:

“I am the cup of Nestor from which one can drink with pleasure, but whoever drinks from this cup will immediately be seized by desire for Aphrodite of the beautiful diadem.“

Not only do these lines represent the earliest known use of the Greek alphabet, they also represent one of the earliest uses of Greek poetry to have come down to us in its original form from the time of Homer’s celebrated epics. The location of the cup of Nestor indicates that trading around that time (770 BCE) was again widespread.

The Greek expansion and colonization of other parts of the Mediterranean Sea has left traces in many modern day cities that are still flourishing: Naples, Istanbul, Nice, Marseilles.

Religious festival at Olympia

During the early Archaic period, the 8th century BCE, the first monumental temples were built in Greece, starting with simple one-room structures to local gods. On the island of Samos we find one of the earliest monumental Greek temples, the 8th century BCE sanctuary to the goddess Hera. By 700 BCE there were already many of these large
temples all over the Greek world. Along with these temples came the rise of Pan-Hellenic (all Greek) festivals that attracted worshippers from all over the Greek world.

By the 8th century BCE Greece was divided into hundreds of separate and mostly independent city-states called *poleis*. All Greeks worshipped the same pantheon of gods, but each city preferred one or some to the whole community of gods. The most famous and early shrines were those of Zeus and Hera in Olympia in the Western region of the Peloponnese, Apollo and Artemis at Delos, Zeus at Dodona, and Apollo at Delphi.

In 776 BCE, athletic contests presumably became a part of the festival of Zeus at Olympia. These contests or games were held every four years at Olympia and followed an eight year cycle of Babylonian origin with the game being held at the beginning and midpoint of this cycle. The games were open to men who could afford to become outstanding athletes, meaning those who could put a lot of time into their training since they did not have to work all day. The athletes competed naked. The two main areas in which these men would compete were running and wrestling, the main event of which was a sprint of 200 yards (180m) called the *Stadion*, which described the length of the race in ancient Greek. Unlike the modern Olympic Games, the ancient games did not feature representatives of national teams, but rather individuals competing against each other. The prizes for the winners consisted of nothing but a garland made out of olive leaves. The prestige or fame of winning the competition, however, led to many material rewards, such as a lifelong free eating “ticket” for the winner in his home city.

Attendance at the Olympic festival was limited to men and unmarried women. According to one source (Pausanias), women who were not married competed in their own separate festival in honor of Hera, called the *Heraia*.

Later, professional athletes dominated the games. The most famous athlete in ancient times was Milo from Croton, in Southern Italy. He became famous because he had won the wrestling competition six times in a row beginning in 536 BCE. What separated Milo from other athletes, apart from skill, was an element of showmanship: he was known according to some sources to tie a chord around his head and to hold his breath until the veins around his head enlarged so much that they snapped the cord.

These festivals and contests were very important to the Greeks, who used them to show respect to and worship Zeus and the gods; in addition, it is important to note that
the Greeks loved competition in many areas of their lives. Usually a period of truce between warring city states would be declared to allow for secure travel on the part of the athletes to and from Olympia.

City Development

The development of the *polis*, or Greek city-state, occurred chiefly between 700 and 500 BCE. The centuries of the Dark Ages had brought a transition from the Mycenaean palaces to independent city-states. These were the basic political unit of Greek civilization during the Archaic and Classical periods. A polis is typically defined as a fortified urban center, which controlled some amount of territory, together with outlying villages. The size generally would be such that one could walk from one end to the other end of the polis in one day. The cities were independent, sovereign states. They guarded borders and minted their own coinage. All Greek cities shared several common traits: there was a fortified lower town as well as an acropolis at or near the center. The word *acropolis* literally means “high/elevated city” in ancient Greek, as typically the acropolis was built on a hill, separately fortified, and easily defended. Ideally the acropolis served as a final safe place of refuge should the lower town fall. Besides being a place of last resort, the acropolis of each polis also served as the home to the sanctuary of the principle deity of the city.

Overall the lower part of the polis or the town was divided into three different types of spaces: public, private, and religious. The most important public space was called the *agora*, a large central square often home to the markets. There the inhabitants would also hold meetings, elections, festivals, athletic contests, military processions, and theatrical performances. Next to the agora were public buildings necessary to run the city. Also, we usually find a sanctuary in the center of the polis where an altar was located for making animal sacrifices as burnt offerings to the god/goddess.

The Greek landscape for the most part is rugged and mountainous, which is a major reason why Greek civilization was characterized by the development of many isolated city states during the Archaic period. The arable land attached to the polis was rarely fertile enough to feed a large body of inhabitants. For this reason many city-states
moved towards the foundation of colonies. The job of these colonists was to help find a source of food or at least help provide for means for the polis to remain functional, even if that meant a loss in population through the often harsh long trip to faraway lands. The problem that arose for these colonists was that they were all male. Often they found wives among the local neighbors of the new Greek colony, sometimes through peaceful negotiation, other times through violently kidnapping the local girls.

During this period of colonization, the Greeks often asked the gods for approval and guidance before embarking on their dangerous trip. Most frequently they consulted the god Apollo, who was the god of light, music, archery, and prophecy. Apollo’s most important oracle was located at the sanctuary of Delphi, a place surrounded by mountains in central Greece. In the Delphic sanctuary a prophetess called the Pythia spoke the will of Apollo, responding to questions from visiting petitioners. There are several theories that try to explain what happened there. One of these theories suggests that the Pythia inhaled vapors rising from a cleft in the mountain; these vapors probably caused a prophetic frenzy; the people then believed that Apollo answered their questions. The high concentration of ethylene gas leaking out of cracks in the ground near the Delphi sanctuary today supports this theory. In addition, the fact that the temple at Delphi was closed to visitors in the winter seems to fit in with this idea, since the release of ethylene gas is minimal during the winter months. In any case, the people who received blessing from Apollo to go forth and establish a colony for their polis helped to enhance the reputation of Delphi, which lasted for centuries. Thus Delphi played a crucial role in Greek international affairs.

Sparta

The physical and political separation of Greek city-states produced not just unique customs but also unique types and forms of government. Many of our modern descriptions of government have roots in ancient Greek: democracy, monarchy, oligarchy, and theocracy. Tyranny (a word that did not originate in ancient Greek), for instance, was common in other cities and sometimes followed oligarchies. However, a tyranny early on had nothing to do with harsh and cruel leadership over people as it does now. During the
Archaic period it meant merely that a man seized power in an unconstitutional manner. It had no meaning as to how the power was wielded. Other city-states (Athens) developed democracy, meaning “rule by the people”, which differed from most democracies today in the sense that in ancient Greece only male citizens had the ability to participate in governing. In the 5th century BCE the democracy in Athens became one of the earliest and the most renowned democracy in Greece.

The government form of ancient Sparta was a monarchy, but this monarchy in Sparta was complex as it also was part of an oligarchic system resulting in a mixed constitution. The city of Sparta is located in a region known as Laconia or Lacedaemon, for which reason the Spartans are also often called Lacedaimonians or Laconians. This region is located in the Peloponnese, where Sparta itself occupied a valley between rugged mountains that made it easy to defend. Fresh water came to Sparta by way of the river Eurotas; the Spartans had access to the sea through a harbor called Glytheon, 25 miles south of the urban center. Right outside of this harbor, however, was dangerous sea known for high waves and strong currents, which protected the Spartans from seaborne attacks. Early on these difficulties also prevented the Spartans from developing into a naval power.

The origin of the Spartans is quite unclear. What is known is that at some point the Spartans conquered some of the local inhabitants of Laconia and turned them into *helots*, who were much like slaves. In the late 8th century BCE Sparta conquered the richer land of Messenia in the West and turned the Messenians as well into *helots*. Mountains between Laconia and Messenia made it very difficult for Sparta to exercise its power over Messenia, which encouraged the Messenians to revolt against the Spartans whenever they saw an opportunity. The consequence for the Spartans was constant danger at home from the *helots*, especially from those living in Messenia. The hostility that surrounded Sparta led to the creation and development of a harsh military lifestyle, which was admired already in antiquity. Most information we have on Sparta and its militarized lifestyle comes from the author Plutarch, who lived from about 45 CE to 120 CE. Plutarch and other sources identify several customs that they believed to be part of the life of Spartans. Officials, for example, scrutinized the Spartan infants at birth in order to determine their vitality; basically, these officials decided if the infants were to be raised
or killed. Additionally, in ancient Sparta all boys and girls, depending on their gender, received the same education. The fathers were not involved in the process of education. When the boys reached seven years of age, they were taken away from their families and began to train to be soldiers in groups called herds. As members of these herds, Spartan boys learned obedience, group solidarity, and military skills. By the end of their training, these warriors were in their thirties.

The training of the boys into warriors was considered harsh by ancient standards. The boys were forced to go everywhere barefooted all the time in order to toughen their feet, and often completely naked as well. At age 12 their hair was cut short, and everyone was allocated only one cloak annually to wear throughout the year. Magistrates called Ephors who served as overseers came every day to inspect the boys, and every ten days they came to examine them in the nude. The boys had to sleep in groups on rough mats they made themselves. They were not allowed to speak at will. In fact the word laconic, meaning “not using many words”, has its origin in the Greek word Laconian, one of the common names for the Spartans. They boys were also kept hungry, forcing them to steal food. This was intended to train young Spartan boys to use stealth, and if the boy was caught he was punished severely. In the Classical period the young boys were sent out to live in the wild in secret bands with which they had to hunt down any helots (slaves) who were thought to have rebelled against the government. If the boys and young men did not survive these conditions, they could not become equals (known as homoioi) with full citizen rights. Those Spartans that continued in training were expected to grow their hair long and to grow a beard with no mustache by age twenty. The male Spartan was expected to sleep and eat in common barracks and spend his time training for military service until he reached thirty. A Spartan male would eat his meal along with the 15 other members of his army group, helping to strengthen the bond between its members and to enhance their loyalty to one another. On the other hand, whoever could not handle this lifestyle was forced to wear colorful cloaks and was forced to shave off part of their beard, making them look ridiculous and disgraced. Spartan society stigmatized those who could not cope with the rigorous military life. The successful members of the Spartan army, however, became the premier fighters of all of Greece. All of the training and the harsh living conditions were designed to transform the young Spartan male into the
perfect soldier, who was skilled and courageous in battle, who never ran away or surrendered, who always stood his ground, and who would willingly give up his life for the city.

Spartan women, on the other hand, also felt the impact of the military lifestyle. Because a Spartan girl was raised to give birth to a tough soldier-to-be, women faced considerable pressure to help produce manpower for the Spartan army. Men were legally required to marry; those that remained bachelors too long were fined and ridiculed. The role of women in Spartan society was definitely different from that of women in other Greek states. Women were educated in Sparta by the government (in other cities the fathers or husbands were responsible). Spartan women were allowed to spend most of their time outside exercising, which was not allowed anywhere else. And unlike other Greek women, Spartan women were well nourished and were allowed to drink wine. While the men were away it was the duty of the Spartan women to manage domestic affairs, which gave Spartan women a lot of responsibility and freedom and the right to own property.

The Spartan constitution is also rather unique. We find elements of monarchy, democracy, and oligarchy mixed into one constitution to provide a system of checks and balances. Sparta was ruled by two kings, one to rule at home and the other to take charge on the battlefield. The two kings served with a group of 28 elders in an assembly called the Gerousia.

Along with this unique government the Spartans disliked the concept of private property. In Sparta there was no form of coinage with only iron spits several feet long being the valid currency for trade. This economic system actually worked very well for the Spartan state for many generations. Sparta was idealized in antiquity and in that sense served as a counterpart to Athens. In fact this idealized Spartan utopia was also the basis of Plato’s Republic. In this book Plato uses Spartan ideas such as a social system based on commonality and totalitarian control. In Plato’s state men and women of the highest class get the same education, with women also receiving physical training; sexuality is guided by eugenic considerations stipulating that only the strongest may live while the weak should die. Members of the lower classes do all the housework, while only those
belonging to the top class produce strong children, and thus according to Plato, a strong society. In this utopian world there is no form of private property and money.

**Conclusion**

The early development of Greece and the region around Greece was vital to the development of the Western world as we know it today. All the city-states of Greece worshipped the same group of gods, but specific individual gods were often selected to be the patrons of each city. The colonization stimulated by these growing cities also spread Greek ideas like their borrowed alphabet and concept of government to the rest of the western Mediterranean. Delphi became a powerful center because of its connection to the god Apollo and thus to the divine. The Spartan way of life provides us with a source for debate, as many people seem divided over whether we should praise the patriotic and brave people of Sparta, or see their society as the forerunner of totalitarian regimes like that of Nazi Germany, with its emphasis on a perfect society of strong people. Sparta’s government and society worked for many generations, playing a crucial part in later Classical Greece. In spite of the differences between individual cities, the Greek civilization during the early part of the Archaic period gradually developed a commonality that would result in Pan-Hellenic festivals such as the one at Olympia – a festival to worship Zeus that included an athletic competition in which individual athletes of city-states could earn fame and reputation, for them as well as for their city.
10. Archaic and Classical Greece

Introduction

In the previous chapter we discussed the formation of Greek civilization from the Neolithic Period to the beginning of the Archaic Period. As we will see in this chapter, the first steps of democracy as a form of government are deeply tied with the growth of Athens as a city-state. Unlike Sparta, which found a way to solve quarrels between aristocratic families and the people through total control of its citizens, Athens found a unique way to deal with these problems: by letting more people participate in politics.

Athens

During the late Bronze Age (1600-1150 BCE) Athens was already the largest and most important settlement on the Attica Peninsula. During the Greek “Dark Ages” (1150 to 750 BCE) Athens first suffered like many other places around the Eastern Mediterranean, but it experienced a significant growth in its wealth sooner than many other places in Greece through trade to overseas regions. Some graves dating back to the 9th century BCE in Athens, for example, are full of riches from areas throughout the Mediterranean. At the end of the “Dark Ages” in the 8th century BCE the population of Athens rose sharply, an indication of growing prosperity in the region. The result was the expansion of Athens into nearby parts of Attica; it is interesting to note that unlike many other city-states, Athens did not partake in any colony building overseas. Many of the settlements in Attica considered themselves Athenian and were not subject to a subordinate role, which shows that Attica was unified under Athens. However, this unification created problems, as the majority of the people under Athenian leadership lived in the countryside of Attica and not in the city of Athens. They therefore faced a lengthy journey to make it to Athens and participate in government. The fastest growing segments of the population in Attica were the free peasants living outside of Athens. As these landowners became wealthier and more powerful, they began to demand more rights in the politics of the city.
The early government of Athens was aristocratic, as was the case for most other city-states throughout Greece during the Archaic Period. The reason why Athens moved towards a democracy instead of an oligarchy like Sparta was probably the rapid growth in population among the peasants in Athens and Attica. Their demands to have a say in politics forced the governing members of Athens to recognize them because their role in providing food for Athens gave them increasing power.

A big problem in Athens and Attica during the Archaic Period was inequality in the distribution of wealth. By the beginning of the 6th century BCE, this inequality endangered social peace: in order to pay off debts, some landowners were forced to give up the rights to their land, while other people had to sell themselves into slavery. To resolve this social conflict a respected member of an important Athenian family had to mediate between the rich and poor. His name was Solon. By creating a new set of laws, he prevented further turmoil or even a civil war.

In the 6th century BCE Solon introduced reforms in Athens. His legislation took place in the 590s BCE. He was seen as a political figure, a lawmaker, and a poet. Solon's poetry is considered an autobiographical source that explains his choice of taking the middle course between the ambition of the wealthy people and the immoderate demands of the poor. His political reforms were made public in writing, making it possible for all inhabitants of Athens to read the new laws. Solon’s reforms of Athens primarily dealt with the citizen body of Athens. The reforms in general tried to link political power to income and not to birth and abolished debt slavery.

The reforms of Solon helped Athens to avoid turmoil and civil war, but they could not prevent the rivalries that often broke out between members of the noble families. These rivalries in other cities frequently resulted in the rise to power of tyrants. In Athens, in 561 BCE, a man named Peisistratus, a distant relative of Solon, seized power unconstitutionally. According to Herodotus (1.59), Peisistratus wounded himself and his mules and then appeared on the Agora demanding bodyguards for protection. The Athenians granted him the requested bodyguards, although Solon warned them not to do so. Afterwards Peisistratus seized the Acropolis (in Athens) and with it gained control over the city. For about 5 years he stayed in power, until a revolt of aristocrats drove him out of office, as well as out of Athens. A few years later, Peisistratus managed to return.
Herodotus describes how Peisistratus dressed a beautiful and extraordinarily tall woman in armor and put out the rumor that Athena herself was escorting him back to Athens to restore him to power (1.60). Thus Peisistratus returned to power, but only to be driven out again in 555 BCE. He then returned once again in 546 and remained in power until his death in 527 BCE. His family would rule Athens until 510 BCE, when the last of his sons (Hippias) was expelled. After this period of tyranny in Athens, the people began to develop a democracy. Beginning in 508, a series of political reforms gradually changed Athens into a radical democratic state.

The newly formed democratic city-state of Athens, however, would collide with the dominant monarchy in the East, the Achaemenid Dynasty of Persia. Democracy, as the word implies, entrusts a major share of power to the people, who value their freedom and responsibility. So did the Athenians. King Darius attempted to invade Greece in 492 and again in 490 BCE. In 490 BCE the Athenians and Plataeans pushed back the Persian invaders in the Battle of Marathon. This was a huge achievement considering the enormous power of Persia and the relatively small size of both Athens and Greece itself, which up to this point had consisted mostly of separate city-states sharing only a language and the worship of the same gods, among other things. Darius’ successor Xerxes once more tried to conquer Greece in 480 BCE with a far larger army. He too failed to conquer the Greeks, famously losing the naval Battle of Salamis in 480 BCE. These wars between Greece and Persia became known as the Persian Wars. Their outcome for the Greeks cannot be underestimated; for one thing, they gave the Athenians confidence that they could achieve the impossible, which further supported the development of democracy.

Athens reached its peak in the 5th century BCE under the leader Pericles, who helped influence Athenian politics from 461 to 429 BCE, the years often referred to as the “Golden Age” of Athens. Pericles was responsible for many of the improvements and achievements in Athens that transformed it into the most sophisticated of all Greek city-states. It was also a home to brilliant thinkers, philosophers, dramatists, poets, artists, and architects.
Athenian Architecture and Festivals.

The most famous building project of Greece was initiated and undertaken by Pericles. The Athenians had begun rebuilding their temples under Kimon to repair the damage inflicted by the Persians during the sacking of Athens. The most conspicuous temple on the Acropolis in Athens is known as the Parthenon for the goddess Athena Parthenos. This temple was designed by the architect Ictinus and took 15 years to complete. The Parthenon still stands on top of the Acropolis in Athens, even though it was heavily damaged by an explosion in 1687 when the Venetians fought against the Ottoman Turks in Athens. (The Turkish army used the Parthenon and the surrounding temples as a powder magazine, which was blown up by a cannon shot from a German gunner.) However what remains of the Parthenon gives us a detailed look at Athens as it emerged from of the Persian Wars. Inside the Parthenon was a massive statue of Athena created by sculptor Phidias, who also created the famed statue of Zeus in his temple at Olympia. Both statues made huge impressions on visitors to these temples. Painters also decorated other buildings with scenes of Greek victory: Polygnotus of Thasos, for instance, decorated the Stoa Poikile (a colonnaded porch where the people could discuss politics and other issues) with scenes of the Battle of Marathon.

The art of Greece changed greatly from the Archaic Period into the Classical Period of Greece, especially in bronze casting and sculpture. Most notably, the rigid postures of archaic bronze or marble statues gave way to increasingly naturalistic postures capable of expressing more movement. One of the most famed pieces of classical statuary was the discus thrower by Myron from Eleuthera in Attica. Others included the spear-bearer (Doryphoros) by Polycleitus. Vase painting reached its peak during the Archaic Period and during the time of Pericles continued to display a high level of artistic accomplishment. In a speech that he attributes to Pericles, Thucydides, the great historiographer, explains (2.34-46) that in Athens people delighted themselves every day and made attempts to get rid of melancholy. According to Pericles, the Athenian people achieved this through festivals and sacrifices. As we discussed, there had long been festivals throughout Greece, most notably the festival at Olympia, which included an athletic competition. However, there were also other types of festivals with
competitions in song and music; there were even dramatic competitions that called for the performance of tragedies and comedies. The greatest of these drama/theater competitions took place annually in March in Athens and was called the Greater Dionysia. The festival had been founded by the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus and, for the most part, occurred every year. The tragedies and comedies were all performed in honor of the god of ecstasy and wine, Dionysus. Guests from all over Greece were welcomed, and it seems that the member states of the Delian league were required to pay tribute to Athens during this festival. Each of these performances took place outside, in an open air theater. The Greater Dionysian performances took place on top of the south slope of the Acropolis of Athens, not in the theater of Dionysus in the lower level of the city.

The Greater Dionysia followed a procedure in which three poets had to compose three tragedies and one satyr play each, for a total of nine tragedies and three satyr plays. In addition, five comedies were added to the festival, which meant that there were 17 performances altogether over a four-day period. The performances were judged by a group of ten people representing each of the ruling tribes of Athens. The judges decided which poet, which protagonist, and which chorus were to receive first prize. Each day the people participating in the festival would enjoy seven to eight hours of performances, even in times of war. Over the years, three great Athenian tragic playwrights often won first place at the Greater Dionysia: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Aeschylus, the most successful of the playwrights, may have written as many as 90 tragedies, of which only a few survive to this day. The oldest of his plays that have survived is called *The Persians* and was performed in 472 BCE, only 8 years after the Battle of Salamis. Many veterans of the battle against the Persians were presumably present when the play debuted. Aeschylus died in 456 BCE, and up to that point he had dominated the Greater Dionysia. The play *The Persians* is fascinating because not a single Greek individual is named in the play. Instead, the characters of the play are all Persians, and the play as a whole conveys a sense of objectivity instead of simply praising Athenian heroism and nationality. In Aeschylus’ own characterization of the Persians, he develops the argument that the Persians lost because of the hybris of Xerxes, who offended and was then punished by the gods.
Another famous surviving work by Aeschylus is the three-part tragedy called the *Oresteia*. All three plays deal with the family of Orestes. Aeschylus also changed the technical aspects of the performance by adding a second actor along with the main protagonist and the 12-person chorus.

The second great playwright of classical Athens would come to fame after beating his rival Aeschylus in the Greater Dionysia. Sophocles, around twenty years younger than Aeschylus, became a very successful playwright. He differed greatly from his rival in the way he depicted his characters: while Aeschylus usually characterized them as superhuman on many levels, Sophocles instead created characters who were similar to real people, which allowed the audience members to identify with them more easily. Sophocles would also add another actor to the play (a third one).

The youngest of the three great Athenian playwrights was Euripides, born around 480 BCE, after the battle of Salamis. He lived until around 407-06 BCE. Between Sophocles and Euripides a generational change took place: the veterans of the Persian wars (like Aeschylus, who had fought in the battle of Marathon himself), had died. Euripides stayed far away from politics all his life, and this attitude is detectable in his drama, in which political allusions are not missing, but are not accorded as much importance as in the plays of his predecessors. We are told that Euripides wrote around 22 tragedies but only won the Greater Dionysia 4 times – a detail which may reflect the fact that many of his plays discuss unpopular or complicated matters and did not necessarily appeal to his audience. 18 of Euripides’ plays survive to this day (although *Rhesus* is wrongly attributed to him); among these, *Alcestis* is the earliest, and *The Bacchae* was the latest.

The theater performances in general can be seen as a key part of democracy, since in the comedies, for instance, the citizens could criticize their leaders or unpopular topics.

5th Century Achievements and the Peloponnesian War

The field of medicine advanced greatly during the 5th century BCE under Hippocrates of Cos, who created the Hippocratic Oath (which is still used today). Hippocrates, along with other members of his school, is regarded as the founder of the science of (western)
medicine. He was born in 460 BCE on the island of Cos, and belonged to the famous family of the Asclepiads. We possess a so-called Corpus Hippocraticum, a group of books (72 altogether) supposedly written by Hippocrates. Nowadays we think that not a single one of these writings can be attributed to Hippocrates himself. However, these books demonstrate that Hippocrates saw sickness as a malfunction of the whole body; he also developed the humoral pathology, according to which the body consisted of four humors or liquids that had to be maintained in equal balance. The four liquids were blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. According to Hippocrates, if these liquids were not in balance, the result was sickness.

The Greek language also underwent a change. Attic Greek began to rival Ionic Greek as the language of science. As these two main dialects became more widespread among the city-states of Greece, they allowed for easier communication among travelers and contributed to a feeling of Greek unity. Festivals like those in Olympia, Athens, and Delphi, which were all Pan-Hellenic, also helped to bring Greeks together in identity and culture.

Many Greek city-states shared certain common elements of education. Athletic exercise was a major part of the education system of Greece. Every city had a gymnasion, and the youth would exercise there regularly while older men watched and conversed with one another. Before attending the gymnasion, the children went to an elementary school. These children (usually only boys) learned the works of Homer, Hesiod and Solon, memorizing sentences and poems. In the gymnasion, the boys participated in physical exercise in preparation for military service. Boys practiced in the nude and followed a curriculum based on the pentathlon: running, wrestling, broad jumps, javelin and discus throwing. In addition to the pentathlon there existed a precursor to mixed martial arts (MMA) called Pankration, which combined elements of boxing, throwing, and grappling. The athletes had their hands covered in leather straps, which could cause serious injury considering the fact that almost all blows were legal. Interestingly, the sport was prohibited in Sparta.

After the invasion of Xerxes, Athens dominated Greece not only culturally, but also politically. In 478 BCE, many city-states formed an alliance designed to provide protection against future Persian attacks. The alliance was called The Delian League, and
the Athenians assumed a position of leadership within it because they possessed a superior fleet. Athens became more and more aware of its growing power and behaved more and more arrogantly when dealing with the other members of the alliance and with other Greek city-states in general. Soon this created tension among the Greek city-states, which resulted in a bitter and destructive war called the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE). The war fractured Greece between Athens and its allies on the one hand and Sparta and its own supporters and allies on the other. The historian Thucydides brilliantly described most of the Peloponnesian war in an unfinished work of eight books. At first the Athenians seemingly had the upper hand but, in the end, and with assistance from the Persians, Sparta forced Athens to accept unconditional surrender in 404 BCE. After this, Sparta dominated Greece for a short time, but then tensions based on jealousies and on the ineffectiveness of Spartan leadership led to new conflicts among the Greek city-states, and made it possible for a new power to emerge in the North and to dominate Greece.
11. Macedonian Empire

To the north of Greece was a region known as Macedonia, which was governed by an absolute monarchy. The autocratic Macedonian king's power was only partially limited by his companions, called Hetairoi – other Macedonian nobles who served as advisors and bodyguards to the king, and who served in an elite cavalry unit commanded by the king in battle. Of course, the closeness of the Hetairoi to the king and their proximity to power sometimes resulted in conspiracies.

The Persians influenced Macedonian early history. Macedonia had served as a loyal ally to Persia since the 6th century BCE, even supporting the Persian invasion of Greece in 480 BCE. The protection provided by the mighty Persians secured Macedonia’s growing power so that by the end of the 5th century BCE Macedonia was the strongest power in the region. Macedonia became important for Athens and other Greek city states since Macedonian grain and timber was a desired product. The Athenians and their allies, for example, needed the timber from Macedonia to build their fleets, thus making the Macedonian kings wealthy. The kings often used this wealth to hellenize their courts by importing Greek intellectuals, artists, and writers like Euripides, who dedicated a play to a Macedonian king. The royal court in Pella, the main city of Macedonia, became the region’s political and cultural center. However, the growth of Macedonian power caused problems for the Athenians, whose interests in the region were threatened by those of the Macedonians. This prompted Athens to make attempts to influence Macedonian politics, whether by supporting rival neighboring states, or by supporting opposition to the Macedonian kings in Macedonia itself.

Philip II was born in 383. He lived in exile in the Greek city state of Thebes from 369 to 367. While there, Philip gained insight into contemporary Greek politics and military tactics, which Phillip brought back to Macedonia. Upon his return in 364 BCE Macedonia was in a chaotic state: three different kings ruled Macedonia over the next 7 years, and the political situation remained unstable. This instability, however, became useful to Phillip, who was able to take power in 359 BCE, but the situation at that time was dire since Macedonia and Philip were threatened by foreign enemies and by rivals supported by Athens. It would take Philip only two years to put down the unrest and
secure his power in Macedonia through a combination of diplomacy and military success. Throughout the 350s Philip enjoyed ongoing success, so that in only 9 years Philip had freed Macedonia from its enemies. He was then able to strengthen his kingdom through reform. Philip's most important military reform was the introduction of a new phalanx to replace the undisciplined former militia of Macedonia. Philip would also strengthen the bond between king and soldier by fighting along with his soldiers in battles, losing an eye and suffering other wounds in the process. In 338 BCE Philip together with his son Alexander defeated an Athenian and Theban army at Chaeronea in Boeotia. After the victory at Chaeronea Phillip gained effective control over Greece and began planning an invasion of the territory of Macedonia's former ally, Persia. However Philip would not be able to carry out these plans personally, as he was assassinated in 336 BCE, possibly because of dynastic conflicts within the Macedonian court. In 338, Philip had married for the 7th time. Most of Philip’s marriages had been arranged for diplomatic purposes and served to cement his relationships with nearby rulers or states. Olympias, Philip’s fourth wife and the mother of Alexander, had been Philip's primary wife and queen for most of Philip's reign. However, Philip’s seventh wife, Cleopatra, was the daughter of a Macedonian aristocrat. Philip might have hoped to have a Macedonian heir, since Olympias was a foreigner from Epirus (a region in modern-day northern Greece), and Alexander was therefore only half Macedonian. Olympias and Alexander fell from favor and fled into exile. Cleopatra gave birth to a girl and in Macedonian tradition a girl could not succeed to the throne. Philip reconciled with Alexander, who returned to Pella, while Olympias remained in exile in Epirus. This resultant feuds between powerful Macedonian families may have contributed to Philip’s assassination in 336 BCE, and to the succession of Alexander to the throne at the age of only 20.

Immediately, Alexander faced challenges to the throne. The city of Thebes, in central Greece, revolted when its inhabitants heard news of Philip’s death. Alexander’s response to the revolt was decisive: he besieged Thebes, took it, and utterly destroyed it. The residents who were not massacred were sold into slavery. Alexander did spare one house, the home of the poet Pindar, whom Alexander admired. The destruction of Thebes also intimidated Greece to the point that all the Greek cities acknowledged Alexander as their leader out of fear of facing the same consequences.
After the uprising of Thebes was suppressed, Alexander resumed his father’s invasion of the Persian Empire. In the spring of 334 BCE Alexander and his Macedonian army crossed the Hellespont into Asia. Alexander was 21 years old. He would never return to Macedonia again. In the next 11 years of his life, Alexander brought under his personal control the largest landmass and a larger population than had ever before been ruled by one man alone.

The first decisive battle between the Persians and the Macedonians took place at the river Granicus in Northwestern Asia Minor. Alexander gained control of Asia Minor after routing the Persians in battle, defeating the Persian governors (satraps). The Persian king Darius III – who had not been present personally at the battle of the Grancicus – then mobilized his forces in the Persian homeland and met Alexander at Issus in 333 BCE. The Persian army outnumbered the Macedonian forces, possibly by as much as 3 to 1, but the geography of the battlefield, which was located in a narrow pass between the sea and the mountains, favored Alexander’s troops. Alexander was victorious, and Darius was forced to flee, leaving his family behind at his camp. Alexander pursued him but failed to overtake him. Alexander then marched southward to Egypt, conquering the coastal cities of the eastern Mediterranean on his way. When Alexander arrived in Egypt, he was welcomed as a savior. The Egyptians saw him as a liberator from the Persians who had up to this time occupied Egypt. In 331 BCE Alexander founded the new city of Alexandria, which remains a major city in Egypt today. Alexander would establish many other cities during his campaign, which he likewise named after himself. While in Egypt Alexander also consulted the oracle of the Egyptian god Ammon in the desert; nobody is certain what the oracle said to Alexander. What we do know is that Alexander was depicted on coins as the son of Zeus after this visit.

Later in the year 331 BCE Alexander continued his pursuit of Darius III. At Gaugamela in modern day Iraq the two armies met on an open plain. Alexander's brilliant tactics led to a decisive victory over the Persians, but Darius escaped yet again. Alexander pursued the Persian king until one of the Persian satraps, who did not want their leader in the hands of the enemy, killed Darius III. For the next three years Alexander reclaimed parts of his new empire. Alexander pushed deep into modern day Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, bringing the region under his control. Then he
began the push into India, leaving the Hindu-Kush Mountains and marching down into the Indus river valley. After almost a year of fighting in the Punjab region his troops did not want to go any further. Many of Alexander's men had not seen home in over 8 years. Unable to convince his men to carry on, Alexander led a brutal march back to Babylon through a harsh desert, where many of his soldiers died from dehydration and heat exhaustion. In spring of 323 BCE the Macedonian forces arrived in Babylon and Alexander immediately planned the conquest of Arabia, but before he could carry out his plan he died from what is believed to have been Malaria on June 10th 323, just short of his 33rd birthday. Alexander’s death created a crisis, as he had left no male heir capable of taking the throne, although one of his wives named Roxane was pregnant and later gave birth to a son (whom she named Alexander, and whom modern historians know as Alexander IV). Alexander’s closest associates were his generals. Soon after Alexander's death they began to fight among themselves in a bid to become Alexander’s successor to the throne. The next 150 years were thus determined by the struggles of the kingdoms of each general and their successors, each of whom hoped to gain power over the others; since no single ruler could conquer the kingdoms of all of the others, they inevitably weakened each other to the point that the rising power in Rome was able to conquer them all.

Conclusion

The rise of Athens during the classical period of Greece ushered in a new age of democracy, freedom, and art, but it also created tensions that resulted in the Peloponnesian War and ended the Athenian path towards dominance of Greece. After the Peloponnesian War the struggles of Greek city-states for power among themselves allowed the Macedonians to create their own empire and dominate the Greek city-states under one rule. Under Alexander the Great the Macedonian empire was expanded from the Balkan Peninsula to the East and thus Greek culture and civilization began to mix with other civilizations. Alexander's conquests made sure that many aspects of Greek civilization were spread to Persia and Northern India. The world after Alexander was
shaped by political chaos. The successors of Alexander made attempts to rule over a united empire but instead they weakened each other.
12. Hellenistic Period

Introduction

The period following Alexander’s death in 323 BCE is called the Hellenistic period. The events of this period were effectively determined by the numerous attempts of the rulers of the successor kingdoms of Alexander’s divided empire to become the next great leader of the known world. The name Hellenistic has a double meaning. First, it implies that the Greeks who had moved to the Near East changed the culture and society in the new area they lived to match Greek customs and culture. Second, it implies that the new culture was not as good as the culture of previous periods, especially the Classical period of ancient Greece or the Golden Age of Athens in the 5th century BCE. However, it is important to note that the Hellenistic period was not, in fact, a period of decline; in many ways this period became more inventive and interesting than the Classical period.

Partition of Alexander’s Empire

After the death of Alexander in 323 BCE, the Macedonian empire faced a dangerous power vacuum, since there was no clear heir to Alexander’s throne. Even though Alexander’s widow Roxanne gave birth to a son that same year, the Macedonian throne could not be left to someone so young. Alexander’s other possible heir was a half-brother, but he too was unable to rule, as he was mentally ill. As a result, the generals who had served under Alexander agreed, in order to prevent the division of the empire, that Perdiccas should be the so-called guardian of the kingdom until Alexander’s son could rule. However, the other generals were not satisfied with this decision; each general decided to seize his own part of the empire in an attempt to gain full control of it later. The generals who struggled over Alexander’s empire were Ptolemy, Antigonus, Lysimachus, and the so-called gang of three: Perdiccas, Craterus, and Antipater (the latter of whom ruled Macedon). Antipater soon faced a revolt in Greece, instigated by Athens. This revolt against Antipater began in September of 323 and ended in August of 322, when Athens surrendered. The revolt was as a complete disaster for Athens, which was
unable to free itself from Macedonian rule. Instead, Antipater’s soldiers executed many
democratic politicians and effectively ended Athenian democracy, which had existed
since 508 BCE with only short interruptions between 411 and 404/03 BCE. Antipater
deprived many Athenians of their citizen rights and installed a garrison, which ended
Athenian independence for good.

**Antigonus' Campaign for a Successor Kingdom**

It is important to note that nothing had changed from the perspective of the rest of the
world and that the three-year-old Alexander IV was still regarded as the designated king.
The acting guardian of the kingdom after Perdiccas’ death became Antipater. However,
the empire was already falling apart: Antipater, Lysimachus, Antigonus, and Ptolemy had
each established their own power bases. But throughout history the hunger for power has
been especially strong in some men; this was the case with Antigonus, who tried to gain
power over the whole empire by force of arms. First, Antigonus’ son, Demetrius,
besieged the island of Rhodes in the year 305 BCE. Rhodes was a major commercial
power, and it was necessary to control Rhodes in order to control the region. The siege of
Rhodes was extraordinary, and it earned Demetrius the nickname “The Besieger”. He
personally designed siege towers, which were a hundred feet tall. 34 men could occupy
the upper levels of these towers, and they could fight in all directions. Demetrius himself
wore armor of iron, which weighed around 40 pounds. However in spite of all of this
offensive equipment, Rhodes still stood its ground even after a yearlong struggle drained
both sides. In 304 BCE Rhodes became Demetrius’ ally. The Colossus of Rhodes was
erected to commemorate Rhodes’ survival of the siege; it stood 105 feet tall, was made
out of bronze, and represented the god Helios.

Antigonus and his son Demetrius the Besieger then began the conquest of
Macedonia in 302 BCE. In 301, the other successors Lysimachus, Seleucus and
Cassander (son of Antipater) joined forces to stop them. The two armies met near a small
town called Ipsos in central Anatolia, each one consisting of roughly 75,000 troops. This
battle became one of the greatest in the ancient world. Demetrius, who commanded
Antigonus’ cavalry, made a mistake in the battle when he broke through the enemy line
and pursued his fleeing enemies too far from the field, leaving his father exposed to Seleucus’ Indian war elephants. The elephants trampled down Antigonus’ guards, and Antigonus himself died when he was hit by many of the javelins thrown by men mounted on the elephants. The dreams of a unified empire died with Antigonus.

**The Egyptian Successor Kingdom**

In Egypt Ptolemy I had established his own power base. He had been present at Alexander’s death in Babylon, and saw an opportunity to secure the richest prize of Alexander's empire: Egypt. Ptolemy had spent four months in Egypt with Alexander as one of his companions. There he had seen how rich the country was and how easily it could be defended, as was proven when another former general, the very ambitious “Guardian of the Kingdom” Perdiccas, decided to attack Ptolemy I in 320 BCE. While trying to cross the Nile, thousands of his men drowned and hundreds more were victims of the crocodiles that inhabited the river. Soon afterward, Perdiccas’ officers revolted against him and murdered him. These officers then asked Ptolemy I to take Perdiccas’ place as “Guardian of the Kingdom”, but Ptolemy I declined the offer. Although the title would bring him honor it would not give him power. Ptolemy I had other plans, as he wanted the empire to dissolve so that he could remain in power in Egypt. Ptolemy I was a very cunning man: he even helped to put another one of Alexander’s generals, Seleucus, in charge of Babylon, in an attempt to neutralize his opponent Antigonus, whose own power base was in Anatolia.

Ptolemy grew up in Pella a son of a noble together with Alexander and was close friends with him, even though Ptolemy was several years older. Gradually, Ptolemy showed his skills on the battlefield, and he eventually became one of Alexander’s bodyguards, which was a high honor. Ptolemy was prudent and had character, as demonstrated not only by the fact that he successfully installed a successor to his throne and was the only one of the first round of Hellenistic kings to die in his bed of old age (at 85), but also by his extraordinary career. At Babylon, when Alexander’s generals first began to follow through with the original plan of electing Perdiccas as guardian of the kingdom, Ptolemy succeeded in having himself appointed governor of Egypt. At this
time, Egypt was governed badly by Alexander’s appointee Cleomenes, and overall Egypt was in a sad state. Although the generals at Babylon had decided that Cleomenes should be Ptolemy’s first assistant, Ptolemy thought otherwise: a trial was held and Cleomenes was sentenced to death and executed. Ptolemy would present himself as Pharaoh upon his arrival in Egypt in 323 BCE. Ptolemy and his successors ruled Egypt and controlled 7 to 10 million subjects. This made Egypt the most densely populated land on earth at the time. Ptolemy kept most of Egypt’s old administrative structure intact, but he did make some changes, such as appointing Greek immigrants to top positions. As a result, most royal documents were written in ancient Greek.

Ptolemy I’s successor was Ptolemy II (309-246 BCE), who continued the work of his father. He inherited a stable situation in Egypt. He built the Mouseion (home of the Muses), the great museum in Alexandria. This museum functioned both as a library and a university, and it was also a center for the arts. The finest intellectuals gathered there, coming from many places: native Egyptians, Jews, Greeks and Carthaginians. The museum also established Greek as the international language of learning. The librarians wanted to place every book ever written inside the museum for safekeeping. As a result, this museum helped transform Alexandria into a culturally dominant city in the Mediterranean world. While the Ptolemaic dynasty did not make any attempts to rebuild Alexander’s empire, they did have to deal with several wars overseas, and with periodic revolts on the part of the native Egyptians.

Seleucid Empire

The other dynasty in the east was that of the Seleucids, who ruled Western Asia as a result of the wars of the “Diadochi” (the successors of Alexander). As a result of these wars, Seleucus created the largest of the Hellenistic successor kingdoms. The population of his kingdom was said to be around 25 million people, and the kingdom itself encompassed most of the territory that the Persians had before. The Seleucid kings did not intervene much in local affairs but rather installed Satraps as governors, who administered their assigned provinces rather independently; what mattered most to the Seleucid kings was that taxes and revenues were collected in time and in their full
amount. Thus the territory Seleucus ruled was a combination of many local institutions with their own taxes and customs. Alexander had replaced Persian Satraps with his own men, and so did Seleucus. As a result, many Greeks migrated to Western Asia, hoping to make money. Many administrators had Greek names, which leads scholars to believe that Seleucus gave administrative jobs to Greeks; the other possibility is that the former administrators of the old elite changed their names into Greek ones. This was part of the so-called Hellenization of the east which took part during this period. Hellenization means the adoption of Greek culture by the populations of conquered territories. This happened partly because Greek immigrants moved to the Near East. The local people began learning the Greek language, and adopted Greek customs. The first two kings of the Seleucid Empire, Seleucus I and Antiochus I, made sure that thousands of young men came east to their empire as mercenary soldiers. Once these soldiers left active service, the two kings used them to control the countryside of the empire by giving them land and citizenship. Seleucus and Antiochus also founded large cities and, like Alexander, they named the greatest of them after themselves. Seleucia is located near modern-day Baghdad, and Antioch is in Syria. More than a hundred thousand people soon lived in these cities, which made them bigger than Athens or Syracuse. The Greeks and Macedonians who came to the East as settlers preferred to live in these big cities rather than the countryside. Thus, Greek was spoken from Syracuse to central Asia. In the countryside, however, it was a different story; the Greeks there did not interact much with the local population, which saw the Greeks as just the most recent of many conquerors.

Around 250, this empire entered a long period of decline as the migration of Greeks from the West slowed down. Fewer former mercenaries settled in the Eastern parts of the Seleucid Empire, which became increasingly isolated. Soon some of the governors, in Bactria in particular, started to call themselves kings and ignored the new King Antiochus II. Deprived of important revenues, the Seleucids were forced to reduce their military; the successor of Antiochus II, Seleucus II, was consequently defeated in battle, and was pushed out of his kingdom.
**Greece and Macedonia Continued**

Macedonia was the weakest of the successor kingdoms because many talented and bright thinkers migrated East. Athens underwent many constitutional changes: from oligarchy to democracy, then back to oligarchy, and then to tyranny. An Athenian revolt against the Macedonians resulted in the installation by the latter of a new dictator in 262 BCE. In 229 BCE the city was freed, but Athens was in severe decline, and by 200 BCE it became a kind of tourist attraction in the ancient world.

In Sparta the situation was different. The society of Sparta was based on a strong military, everything else was subordinate to this. Many young Spartans who had received a very good and effective military training chose to start a counterrevolution in an attempt to return to the glory days and to reinstate the laws given by the legendary Lycurgus. After some success, these counterrevolutionaries were defeated in a final battle against the Macedonians at Sellasia in 222 BCE. Many Spartans died in the battle, bringing an end to the counterrevolution and causing Sparta to decline into obscurity by 220 BCE.

The last attempt to create a unified Hellenistic kingdom in Greece was made by the king of Epirus, Pyrrhus. Pyrrhus was a strange, aggressive man who loved war for its own sake; he liked to fight with enemies in single combat. In the year 281 BCE the people of Taras asked him for help against the Romans. Because Pyrrhus liked war and because he saw this as a chance to expand his empire, he agreed to help. Pyrrhus defeated the Romans in two battles, but lost many men; while the Romans could replace their own losses easily, these victories were too costly for Pyrrhus, which led to the creation of the expression “Pyrrhic Victory”. Pyrrhus neglected the Romans and Taras for a while to concentrate on a war with Carthage. After suffering a defeat, the Carthaginians offered generous terms for peace, which Pyrrhus rejected. His arrogance alienated his allies. Soon Pyrrhus was alone, and when he renewed hostilities against the Romans he was finally defeated. The Romans had, by this time, learned how to deal with his war elephants. Yet Pyrrhus then went on to invade Macedonia, and was finally killed in battle in 272 BCE.
Cultural Achievements during the Hellenistic Period

As described above, Ptolemy II endowed the mouseion in Alexandria, the temple for the Muses. Ptolemy’s advisor while establishing the mouseion was Demetrius of Phaleron. Ptolemy assembled or tried to assemble copies of all Greek literature. Thus, he founded the world’s first great library. But besides books, he also needed capable people to preserve and copy them. Many skilled men were attracted to his court in the hope of receiving royal patronage. One of the tasks of these librarians in Alexandria was to produce an official text of Homer. When we read the works of Homer today, we need to remember that these texts go back directly to the library of Alexandria and the edition made there.

The scholars whom Ptolemy attracted were sometimes good poets themselves. Apollonius of Rhodes, for example, was the director of the mouseion from around 270-245 BC. His major work was an epic called the Argonautica. The Argonautica describes Jason and the Argonauts’ quest for the Golden Fleece. The Argonautica is the only epic from the period between Homer (around the 8th cent. BCE) and Virgil (1st cent. BCE) to survive. Apollonius used the archaic language of Homer, but also introduced new literary styles, which make his poetry sound extremely modern in some passages. Apollonius also sometimes stops the narrative to address the reader directly in order to hint at the difficulties of writing an epic. Clearly, his allusions and wordplays demanded well-educated readers.

Another poet who worked as a scholar in Alexandria during the 3rd century BCE was Callimachus. His work is different from that of Apollonius. Callimachus preferred brief poems. He was an outstanding scholar, and compiled a Catalogue of Persons Conspicuous in Every Branch of Learning and a List of their Compositions on 120 scrolls. Callimachus was most famous for his hymn to Zeus. Like Apollonius, he used an archaic poetic form and combined it with contemporary elements: among other things, he introduced verbal puzzles and many allusions into his hymn.

Theocritus was another scholar working in Alexandria. He invented a style of poetry known as “bucolic” poetry (meaning “poetry concerning cowherds”). In his bucolic poetry, he praised the simple rustic life in Sicily and southern Italy in nostalgic
imagery. Theocritus himself called his poems *Idylls* in Greek, which should be translated as “little pictures”. Written for an urban elite who had probably never seen the countryside, his poems idealized the life out of the city.

The novel too was developed as its own genre during the Hellenistic Age. Like poems, early novels were written to be read aloud in front of an audience. The earliest example of a novel we possess is a papyrus fragment containing the story of an Assyrian who woos a fourteen year old bride. All the later novels of the Hellenistic period have the same pattern. Boy and girl first fall in love. Fate separates them before or soon after marriage. The couple then has to endure many disasters, such as imprisonment, torture, rape, seduction, and sometimes even death, but there is usually a happy end when the couple is reunited and lives happily ever after.

Where drama and performance are concerned, the so called “New Comedy” stands out. New Comedy developed during the fourth and third centuries. Unfortunately, only a single example of Athenian New Comedy survives. It is called “Dyskolos” (“Grumpy old man”) and was written by Menander (342-291 BCE). As far as we can tell, New Comedy used the following patterns: humorous confusion over identity and well-known characters like greedy pimps, romantic young men, and tricky or faithful slaves. The Romans adopted New Comedy, and writers like Plautus and Terence produced examples of the genre in Latin.

Hellenistic Philosophy proved to be very influential. Athens in the 3rd century BCE still dominated Greek philosophical life. The school of Plato, the Academy, produced Scepticism, which was shaped by the conviction that nothing can be known about the world for sure. The sceptic, however, could form plausible impressions, and could act as if those impressions were true. Thus he was able to function in a world in spite of chaos around him.

Diogenes (404-323 BCE) was the founder of Cynicism. He was called doglike (*kynikos*) because he was not interested in social conventions: he had no clothes, he lived in a barrel, and he both urinated and masturbated whenever and wherever he wanted. He also refused to own private property and material things. The most famous story about Diogenes holds that Alexander the Great once travelled to Sinope in the Black Sea to offer Diogenes anything he wanted. Diogenes supposedly told Alexander to get out of his
way, because he was blocking the sun. Diogenes’ theory, as far as we can tell, claimed that the common lust for wealth, honor and status was empty of meaning. Some followers of Diogenes, the Cynics, travelled from city-state to city-state in order to mock the authorities. They used a type of oration for this purposes which was called *diatribe*. The English word comes from this kind of oration.

In total contrast to Diogenes’ damnation of the desire for material wealth and status stood Epicurus (341-270 BCE). He spent most of his life in Athens, first studying with Platonists, and later founding his own school, the garden (*kopos*). This garden was the garden of his own house, where wealthy men, women and slaves isolated themselves and followed Epicurus’ teaching. Epicurus’ thoughts are rather well known, for two reasons. First, in 79 CE, Mount Vesuvius, still an active volcano, erupted and preserved a library with many scrolls containing Epicurean philosophy. Second, in the first century BCE a Roman called Lucretius wrote a book called “On the Nature of Things”, in which he explained Epicurus’ thought.

When we look at the American constitution we see the evidence of Epicurean thought: “We hold these Truths to be self evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” For Epicurus happiness was the most important goal in life.

Epicurus accepted the atomism of Democritus: Epicurus acknowledged that the cosmos consists of an infinite number of atoms drifting through space. These atoms have size, shape and weight. They fall down like endless rain without touching each other. But sometimes they strike each other, thus creating the cosmos, the arrangement of all things.

The mind according to Epicurus also consists of atoms, albeit atoms smaller than the ones in the cosmos or the ones that create the body. Even the gods are made of atoms, but very fine ones. Epicurus believed that the gods lived in the spaces between the stars. They did not interfere and took no interest in the world of humans, living in eternal and undisturbed happiness. For Epicurus, undisturbed living (*Ataraxia*) was the essence of happiness.

According to Epicurus, humans were made exclusively out of matter and ceased to exist when they died. Epicurus claimed that humans should not fear death, because
death was simply the end of existence, after death nothing unpleasant could happen. Because of this theory, Epicurus naturally denied any form of afterlife.

Epicurus’ conception of lust was twofold. On the one hand, there was positive lust – the lust for eating, listening to music, or sex. On the other hand, there was negative lust, which was the lust for the absence of pain. According to Epicurus the negative lust was to be preferred because positive lust often caused pain (by, for instance, leading to excessive eating) and was transitory. Negative lust, or lust for the avoidance of pain, was lust itself, and thus the chief goal.

The most influential school founded in the Hellenistic Age was Stoicism. Zeno (333-262 BCE) founded this philosophical school. He studied with Cynic philosophers and with Platonists at the Academy in Athens. Near the end of the 4th century BCE he established his own school in Athens in the Stoa Poikile, the “painted stoa”. This meeting place gave the school its name.

The concept of happiness of Zeno was different from that of Epicurus. In Zeno’s philosophy, one has to follow natural law to reach happiness. By following the natural law one can be happy regardless of circumstances: pain and pleasure can be ignored. Stoicism influenced some of the Roman emperors, and one of them, Marcus Aurelius, wrote a major Stoic book.

According to the Stoics the divine logos, which should be translated as “reason, intelligence”, determined everything. Logos also caused all things to happen and gave all things properties. This produced an important question: if the logos determined everything, what about responsibility? The Stoics claimed that humans were morally responsible and remained free. According to Stoics the human relationship to moral choice was like a dog tied to a moving cart: the dog could choose to move with the cart, in which case everything would go well and he would be happy; or he could choose to run the other way (or to the side, or sit down), in which case he would be dragged along by the moving cart, which would inevitably move on. The moral for human beings is clear: if one makes choices according to the Logos, everything goes well; if one decides against it, he or she pays the price. Thus, if one allows the divine Logos to rule his life, he aligns himself with the intelligence that governs the cosmos. Only few people were thought to be able to do this: the elite. The masses were thought incapable of recognizing
this principle, and to decide without reason. Stoicism therefore supported the ruling of educated elites.

Medicine and science advanced rapidly after Alexander. The wealth accumulated in the royal centers supported this. We know very little about medicine during the Hellenistic age. We do know that the Ptolemies allowed and supported human dissections in the 3rd century BCE in Alexandria. A man called Herophilus, for example, distinguished between the sensory nerves, and the terms he used for the description of the eye are still in use today. Furthermore, he examined internal and external organs, distinguishing between veins and arteries. Detailed explanations of the functions of the body were produced later, but without a microscope there were limits to what was possible.

In mathematics the work of one man was very important: Euclid (325-250 BCE). His work, the “Elements”, is the most widely read Greek work in the modern world except the New Testament. High school geometry is virtually Euclid’s Elements with examples and applications.

Conclusion

The final years of the Hellenistic period can be described as a period of increasing loss of power among the successor kings. In Egypt, which had remained the most prosperous of all the successor kingdoms, politics became increasingly dominated by Rome, which emerged as dominant power at the end of the last Punic wars. In 30 BCE, following the suicide of Queen Cleopatra, the last of the Ptolemaic rulers, Egypt fell entirely into the hands of Rome.

In the East, the fall of the Seleucid kings allowed for the return of Persian power as the Parthians created their own empire on the remains of previous empires. The Parthians later came into conflict with the Romans, who began to expand further to the East. The Romans incorporated many aspects of the conquered Hellenistic kingdoms. From the Greeks they borrowed their pantheon of gods, advances in literature, and architecture. The Hellenistic period gave way to the greatest empire of the ancient world: Rome. For the next four centuries Rome and its emperors would create the foundations
for the modern world, including the ancestors of modern languages, ideas that they passed on from the Greeks, and borders that continue, in some cases, to exist today.