

The Civilization of Greece, 1000–400 B.C.E.

In the fifth century B.C.E., a Greek-speaking subject of the Persian Empire began to write a book. He had been to Egypt and along the African coast, to the Greek colonies of Italy, the cities of Persia, the wilds of Thrace and Macedonia, and all over the Aegean. He had collected stories about peoples and places even farther afield: Ethiopia, India, the Black Sea. We have already met this intrepid traveler, Herodotus (c. 484–c. 425 B.C.E.), who marveled at the pyramids of Giza (Chapter 1) and who told how the king of Lydia lost his power to the Persians (Chapter 2). His reason for compiling this information was timely: he wanted to write a history of recent events. As he put it, “Herodotus of Halicarnassus here sets forth the results of his research, with the aim of preserving the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful deeds of both Greeks and barbarians from losing their glory; and in particular to examine the causes that made them fight one another.”

Herodotus’s fascination with the Persians, Phoenicians, and Egyptians underscores the extent to which all Greek-speakers regarded themselves as different from other peoples. In fact, they had responded very differently to the Bronze Age collapse.



THE ACROPOLIS OF ATHENS AND THE PARTHENON. Many Greek cities were built upon mountain strongholds, but the most famous of these is the Acropolis of Athens. First settled in the Neolithic Period, during the Bronze Age it became a fortified palace—allegedly that of the hero Theseus—and then a precinct sacred to the goddess Athena, for whom the city was named. The Parthenon, its most important surviving structure, was built on the site of an older temple after the Athenian victory over the Persians at Marathon in 490 B.C.E., and then rebuilt after the Persians sacked Athens ten years later. Most of the damage it sustained thereafter occurred during modern wars. ■ *Why was this site the focal point of so much activity? ■ What do these successive events tell us about the relationship between place and identity?*

While they struggled to cooperate politically, they were able to unite around a common language and culture, and their shared values were distinct from those of the people they called *barbarians*: peoples whose speech, to Greek ears, sounded like gibberish (“bar-bar-bar”). They cherished individual liberty, participatory government, artistic innovation, scientific investigation, and the creative powers of the human mind. Although the practical implementation of these ideals would prove problematic—and continues to be so—our own civilization would be unimaginable without the political experiments and cultural achievements of ancient Greece.

FROM CHAOS TO POLIS

By the end of the twelfth century B.C.E., Mycenaean civilization had vanished. Except at Athens, the great citadels that had crowned the heights of mainland kingdoms were destroyed. Settlements shrank in size and moved inland, away from vulnerable coastlines, thus cutting themselves

off from trade and communication. The use of writing declined to such an extent that knowledge of Linear B disappeared. Archaeological evidence suggests a world in stasis, isolated from the centers of civilization that were reemerging in the Near East.

The material realities of life in this era profoundly shaped the civilization that emerged from it. This civilization would emphasize political equality and modest display, principles that formed the basis of early democracies. At the same time, the hardships of daily life, which contrasted sharply with stories of a heroic and opulent past, made the Greeks suspicious of their gods. They came to rely far more on the power of individual human beings than on divine intervention in human affairs. They also developed an awareness that excessive pride in one’s own accomplishments could be dangerous. While the gods favored those who showed initiative and daring, they would punish the *hubris* of those who failed to acknowledge their own limitations.

Homer and the Heroic Tradition

Around the year 1000 B.C.E., the chaotic conditions that had contributed to the isolation of Greece were alleviated by a period of relative peace. The standard of living improved, artisans developed their crafts, and increased contact among individual settlements fostered trade. Greek pottery, in particular, became a sophisticated and sought-after commodity, which Greek merchants could exchange for luxury goods from abroad.

As trade became an increasingly important feature of the new economy, the personal fortunes of those who engaged in trade increased accordingly, leading to a new kind of social stratification based on wealth. The men who controlled that wealth were aware that their status was not founded on warfare or noble birth, as had been the case in the past. Instead, they began to justify their preeminence as a reflection of their own superior qualities as “best men” (*aristoi*). Wealth was one sign of this superiority, but it was not sufficient in itself as a claim to aristocracy, which literally means “the rule of the best.” Those who aspired to this status were therefore expected to emulate, as far as possible, the heroes of old, whose

stories lived on in the prodigious memories and agile voices of the singers of tales.

These singers, the guardians of a rich oral history that had never been written down, were part poets in their own right and part *rhapsodes*, “weavers of songs.” The most famous is Homer, the poet credited with having woven together the mesh of stories that we know as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which crystallized around 800 B.C.E. The epics ascribed to Homer are vast encyclopedias of lore set at the end of the Bronze Age, the time his contemporary Hesiod called “the Age of Heroes” (Chapter 2): the age of Achilles and his Trojan rival, Hector; the age of Odysseus.

But these stories were not fixed in that time. Over centuries of retelling, the social and political relationships portrayed in the poems changed to reflect the assumptions and agendas of later ages. Treating these epics as historical sources, therefore, requires the historian to peel back layers of meaning. For example, Homer depicts a world in which competition and status are of paramount importance to the warrior elite, just as they were of vital concern to the aristocrats of his own day. Through the exchange of expensive gifts and hospitality, men aspiring to positions of power sought to create strong ties of guest friendship (*xenia*, *zeh-NEE-ah*) with one another, and thus to construct networks of influence that would support their economic, social, and political ambitions. This suggests that aristocrats in the Greek world conceived of themselves as having more in common with each other than they did with the local societies they dominated, something that is also reflected in the essential similarity of Trojans and Greeks in the *Iliad*.

However, the shared sense of a common culture among aristocratic households did not lessen the competition among them. Indeed, it led to competition over the epic past, as fledgling aristocratic clans vied to claim descent from one or another legendary hero. A hero cult might begin when an important family claimed an impressive Mycenaean tomb as that of their own famous ancestor, someone named in the *Iliad* and said to have come from that place. They would then develop a pious tradition of devotion that would extend to their followers and dependents; eventually, an entire community might come to identify itself with the famous local hero. The heroic ideal thus became a deeply ingrained feature of Greek society.

The Rise of the Polis

In the ninth century B.C.E., contacts between Greeks and Phoenicians intensified. Most crucially, the Greeks adopted the Phoenician alphabet, which replaced the long-disused

Linear B. The Phoenicians also pointed the way to the revival of another lost art among the Greeks: seafaring. After the devastation of the late Bronze Age, Greek vessels hugged the shoreline and traveled only short distances. By the tenth century, however, Greeks were copying Phoenician designs for merchant vessels, which allowed them to set out on trading ventures of their own. As commercial activity increased, significant numbers of Greeks began to move to the shores of the mainland, to outlying islands, and to the eastern coast of the Aegean.

These economic and cultural developments were accompanied by dramatic growth in the Greek population, which placed heavy demands on the resources of a mountainous country with limited agricultural land. Soon, some degree of economic, political, and social cooperation among the inhabitants of rival communities became necessary. But the values that had developed during centuries of isolation did not make such cooperation easy. Each local community treasured its autonomy and independence, celebrated its own rituals, and honored its own heroes. On what basis could such communities unite?

The Greek solution to this challenge was the *polis*, the root from which we derive the words *politics* and *political*. The Greeks considered the polis to be a social collectivity, first and foremost—not a place. For this reason, our sources speak of groups of people (“the Athenians,” “the Spartans”) rather than individual cities. *Poleis* (the plural of *polis*) came to be so essential to Greek identity that Aristotle (see Chapter 4) would later define man as “a political animal,” someone who participates in the life of the polis and who cannot survive outside it.

In practice, poleis combined both formal institutions and informal structures that could differ widely. Most poleis were organized around a social center known as the *agora*, where markets and important meetings were held. Surrounding the whole urban settlement, the *asty*, was the *khora*, “land.” The *khora* of a large polis might support several other towns or smaller poleis, as well as numerous villages. The Greeks described this early process of community building as the “bringing together of dwellings” (*synoikismos*, *synoecism*).

Polis formation could also come about through the conquest of one settlement by another and/or through the gradual alliance of neighboring communities. Some poleis took shape around fortified hilltops, such as the Athenian acropolis (literally, the “high city”). Other communities may have borrowed a Near Eastern (and particularly Phoenician) practice of orienting the urban center around a temple precinct. In many Greek cities, however, temple building may have been a consequence of polis formation rather than a cause, as elites competed with one another to exalt their poleis and glorify themselves.

THE CULTURE OF ARCHAIC GREECE, 800–500 B.C.E.

Scholars date the Archaic Period of Greek history to the emergence of the polis and the return of writing, which the Greeks would put to a wide variety of uses. The Athenians, in particular, used writing to establish their cultural dominance over other Greek poleis, controlling the inscription of the Homeric canon, promoting the work of contemporary poets, and fostering the writing of prose histories, which allowed them to pass on to posterity a narrative of history in which they played the central role. It is therefore important to bear in mind that much of what we know about this early period derives from the work of later authors who wrote from this Athenian perspective: these include the Ionian-born Herodotus, who spent much of his later life in Athens; the historians Thucydides (c. 460–c. 395 B.C.E.) and Xenophon (430–354); and the philosophers Plato (c. 428–348) and his pupil Aristotle (384–322).

Colonization and Panhellenism

In the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E., small-scale Greek trading ventures and settlements had developed into a full-fledged colonial enterprise that followed the example of the Phoenicians. Many larger poleis competed with one another to establish colonies, with Athens and Corinth being particularly successful in such ventures.

Although each of these colonies was an independent foundation, it sustained familial and affective ties to its mother polis; so it was often called upon to support the polis and could become entangled in the political and military affairs of the mainland. At the same time, these individual Greek colonies celebrated their shared language and heritage, which was exported to far-flung reaches of the known world, creating a Panhellenic (“all-Greek”) culture that eventually stretched from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean coastlines of modern France and Spain.

Greek colonization permanently altered the cultural geography of the Mediterranean world. The western shores of Anatolia would remain a stronghold of Greek culture for the next 2,000 years. So many Greeks settled in southern Italy that later Romans called the region Magna Graecia, “Greater Greece”; Greek-speaking enclaves would survive there into the twentieth century of our era. By the fourth century B.C.E., more Greeks lived in Magna Graecia than in Greece itself.

Motives for colonization varied. Some poleis, such as Corinth, were blessed by their strategic location on the

land bridge between Attica and the Peloponnese (pel-oh-poh-NEE-suss; the large peninsula of mainland Greece), but cursed by the poverty of their land. Trade therefore became the lifeblood of this polis and of the ruling aristocracy who bankrolled the ambitious planting of colonies. Other poleis, confronted by the pressures of growing populations and political unrest, sponsored new colonies as outlets for undesirable elements or unwanted multitudes. These colonial projects parallel, in many ways, those of modern nation-states.

Colonial expansion also intensified Greek contacts with other cultures. Phoenician pottery brought new artistic motifs, while Egypt profoundly influenced early Greek sculptural representations of the human form (see *Interpreting Visual Evidence* on page 64). However, intensified contact with other cultures simultaneously sharpened Greeks’ awareness of their own identity as Hellenes (the Greeks’ name for themselves). Such self-conscious Hellenism did not lead to greater political cooperation, but it did encourage the establishment of Panhellenic festivals, such as the Olympic Games, and of holy sites.

The most important of these was the temple of Apollo at Delphi, home to the oracle of the sun god. Suppliants who sought to have their questions answered would offer gifts to the shrine and then wait while the god spoke through his priestess, whose mysterious answers would be translated into enigmatic Greek verse by an attending priest. The resulting advice was essentially a riddle that called for further interpretation on the part of the recipient—who often misconstrued it: as we noted in Chapter 2, Croesus of Lydia thought that he was following the advice of the oracle when he attacked the Persians, but the great nation he destroyed turned out to be his own.

At the Olympic Games, Greeks honored the king of the gods, Zeus, near the giant temple dedicated to him at Olympia. The Greeks took great pride in these athletic competitions, and only Hellenes were permitted to participate in them. Like colonization, these games did little to alleviate rivalry among the poleis; in fact, they often increased it. But they further strengthened the Greeks’ awareness of their common culture, an awareness that could be harnessed when they faced a common threat.

Hoplite Warfare

In the centuries immediately following the calamities of the late Bronze Age, the defense of surviving Greek communities rested with the few elite warriors who had the resources to invest in armor, chariots, and weaponry. This monopoly on military prowess gave the aristocracy



GREEK COLONIZATION, c. 550 B.C.E. Compare this map with that on page 45. ■ *How do you account for the differences in Greek and Phoenician patterns of colonization?* ■ *Were Greek colonies likely to compete with Phoenician colonies?* ■ *Where were such conflicts most likely to erupt?*

tremendous political and social leverage. As a result, aristocrats dominated political offices and priesthoods in the poleis, as well as economic life.

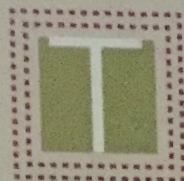
But during the Archaic Period, a revolution in military tactics brought aristocratic military dominance to an end. Increasingly, the effective defense of a polis required that it be able to call on a standing militia. Accordingly, able-bodied citizens began to equip themselves for battle and to train alongside one another. These citizen-soldiers became known as *hoplites*, from the large round shield (*hoplon*) carried by each. In battle, hoplites stood shoulder to shoulder in a close formation called a *phalanx*, several columns across and several rows deep, with each hoplite carrying his shield on the left arm to protect the unshielded right side of the man next to him. In his right hand, each hoplite carried a spear or sword, so that an approaching phalanx presented a nearly impenetrable wall of armor and weaponry to its

opponents. If a man in the front rank fell, the one behind him stepped up to take his place; as a result, the weight of the entire phalanx was literally behind the front line, with each soldier leaning with his shield into the man in front of him.

This tight formation required only one shared skill: the ability to stay together. As long as the phalanx remained intact, it was nearly unbeatable. But like the polis itself, it could fall apart if its men did not share a common goal. The hoplite revolution was therefore bound up with a parallel revolution in politics. As a polis came increasingly to draw upon the resources of more and more citizens, it was forced to offer them a larger part in the exercise of political power. By the seventh century B.C.E., these citizen-soldiers formed a hoplite class that could demand a say in decision making and thereby challenge the hegemony of old elites.

Interpreting Visual Evidence

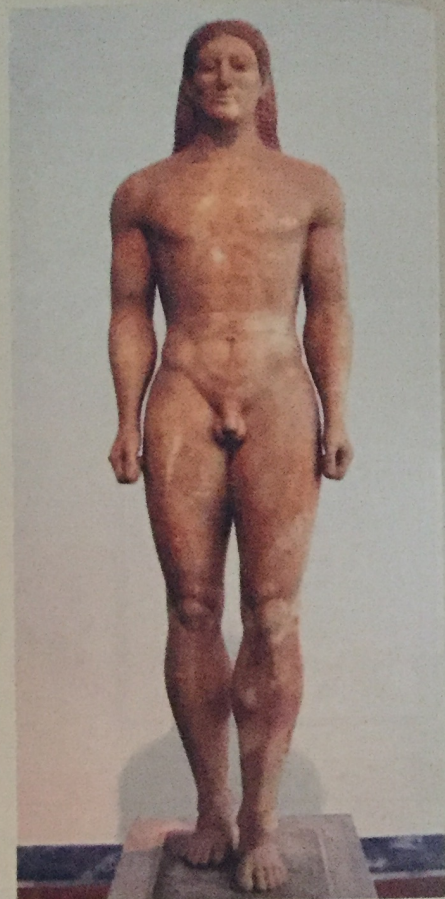
The Ideal of Male Beauty



The Greek word *kouros* ("young man" or "youth") is now applied to a whole series of life-sized statues from the Archaic Period. The one shown here comes from Anavyssos in Attica, and was made between 540 and 515 B.C.E. (it is now in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens). Although scholars used to believe that such statues were meant to represent the god Apollo, further research has shown that most were made to commemorate the dead, especially young warriors who had fallen in battle. This one appears to be walking forward, smiling, but his eyes are closed. The accompanying inscription reads: "Stop and show your pity here for Kroisos, now dead, who once fighting in the foremost ranks of battle was destroyed by raging Ares."

Questions for Analysis

1. What aspects of the body does the *kouros* emphasize? If this is intended to be a model of Greek manhood, what values would it convey to contemporary youths?
2. Is this a representation of the young man as he was when living, or in death? How do your conclusions about the ideal of male beauty change if this is a glorification of death?
3. Compare this image to the values expressed in the verses by Tyrtaeus of Sparta on "The Beautiful and the Good" (page 67). How do these two perspectives complement one another?



Aristocracy, Tyranny, and Democracy

For the better part of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E., aristocrats continued to dominate the Greek poleis. Struggles for influence among competing families were commonplace, and these differences affected polis government at every level, not least because aristocrats were the only members of society who could afford to hold unpaid and time-consuming political offices.

The aristocrats of this period pursued not only wealth, power, and fame; they also cultivated a distinctive lifestyle. Participating in politics and holding office was part of this lifestyle. So too was the *symposium*, a "drinking party" at which elite men would enjoy wine, poetry and poetic competition, performances by trained dancers and acrobats, and the company of *hetaeras* (courtesans) who provided witty conversation, music, and physical intimacy.

Respectable women were excluded from such meetings, as they were from nearly all other aspects of public and political life (as will be discussed later). So too were non-aristocratic men. The symposium was thus an arena for the display of aristocratic masculinity.

The glorification of male sexuality was another important aspect of this homosocial aristocratic culture. Typically, a man in his late twenties to late thirties, who had just begun to make his career in political life, would take as his lover and protégé an aristocratic youth in his early to mid-teens. The two would form an intimate bond in which sexual intercourse played an important role. This benefited both partners and their families, and allowed the younger partner to learn the workings of politics while making valuable social connections. Many later philosophers, including Plato, argued that true love could exist only between such lovers, because only within such



HOPLITE INFANTRY ADVANCING INTO COMBAT. This Corinthian vase, dating from around 650 B.C.E., displays the earliest-known depiction of hoplites fighting in a phalanx formation.

a relationship could a man find a partner worthy of his affections.

A whole complex of values, ideas, practices, and assumptions thus shaped aristocratic identity. As a result, it was impossible for those outside this elite world to participate fully in the public life of the polis. By the middle of the Archaic Period, moreover, the circle of the aristocratic elite tightened even further, as smaller and smaller groups came to dominate higher offices. Many aristocrats found themselves on the outside of their own culture, looking in.

For these men, one remedy lay close at hand: an alliance with the rising class of hoplites. And occasionally, a single aristocrat with the backing of the hoplites would succeed in setting up an alternative form of government, a *tyranny*. The word *tyrannos* had been borrowed from the Lydians, and it signified someone who ruled outside the traditional framework of the polis.

A tyrant in Archaic Greece was not necessarily an abusive ruler. Indeed, tyranny often led the way to wider political enfranchisement because anyone who sought the support of the hoplite class would have to appease that class by extending further rights of political participation, while all the time striving to keep the reins of power in his own hands. But this was an inherently unstable state of affairs, because the continuance of tyranny became an obstacle to even greater power for the hoplite class. For this reason, tyrannies rarely lasted for more than two generations and could serve as a stepping-stone from aristocracy to a more broadly participatory form of government: democracy.

It is important to stress that our notion of democracy is quite different from that of the Greeks. In fact, Aristotle denegated this form of government as “mob rule,” because it gave too much power to the *demos*, a word meaning “neighborhood” or “affinity group.” He saw it as a system too easily controlled by a particular faction. Our ideal of democracy is closer to what Aristotle would have called a *polity*—governance by the polis as a whole.

The Power of Poetry

The aristocracy of the Archaic Period were deeply invested in the heroic ideal enshrined in the Homeric epics. But they also strove to express their unique culture in newer poetic forms. The most characteristic of these is the lyric, a series of rhythmic verses sung to the music of the lyre. Because these songs would have been composed orally, even improvised, relatively few survive. But those that do are valuable historical sources. Because they were the focus of entertainment at gatherings, they are often politically charged, sexually explicit, or daringly subversive. For example, the poet Archilochus of Paros (c. 680–640 B.C.E.) flouts the conventions of epic poetry by mocking his own failures on the battlefield: “Some barbarian waves my shield, since I had to abandon it / . . . but I escaped, so it scarcely matters / . . . I can get another just as good.” So much for the heroic ideal of returning either with one’s shield, or on it! In another lyric, Archilochus