

Analyzing Primary Sources

Songs of Sappho

- Although Sappho of Lesbos (c. 620–550 B.C.E.) was a prolific poet and skilled musician, we know very little about her life, and only a few examples of her extraordinary verse survive. Of the nine books collected in the third century B.C.E., we now have just one complete lyric and a series of fragments, some consisting of only two or three words, often preserved because they were quoted admiringly by other authors. Astonishingly, though, a papyrus scroll containing a previously unknown part of a poem was identified in 2004. Another has since been found.

Fragment 16

Some say thronging cavalry, some say
foot soldiers,
others call a fleet the most beautiful of
sights the dark earth offers, but I say it's
whatever you love best.
And it's easy to make this understood by
everyone, for she who surpassed all
human
kind in beauty, Helen, abandoning her
husband—that best of
men—went sailing off to the shores of
Troy and
never spent a thought on her child or
loving
parents: when the goddess seduced her
wits and left her to wander,
she forgot them all, she could not
remember
anything but longing, and lightly straying
aside, lost her way. But that reminds me
now: Anactória,

she's not here, and I'd rather see her lovely
step, her sparkling glance and her face
than gaze on
all the troops in Lydia in their chariots
and glittering armor.

Source: Translated by Jim Powell, *The Poetry of Sappho* (New York: 2007), pp. 6–7.

The New Fragment (2004)

Live for the gifts the fragrant-breasted
Muses
send, for the clear, the singing lyre, my
children.
Old age freezes my body, once so lithe,
rinses the darkness from my hair, now
white.
My heart's heavy, my knees no longer
keep me
up through the dance they used to
prance like fawns in.
Oh, I grumble about it, but for what?
Nothing can stop a person's growing old.

They say that Tithonus was swept away
in Dawn's passionate, rose-flushed arms
to live
forever, but he lost his looks, his youth,
failing husband of an immortal bride.

Source: Translated by Lachlan Mackinnon, *Times Literary Supplement*, July 15, 2005.

Questions for Analysis

1. How does Sappho use stories from the older tradition she has inherited to address her own concerns? How does the perspective of the female poet transform masculine ideas about heroism, beauty, warfare, and aging?
2. What are the challenges of working with such fragmentary sources as these? If these were the only pieces of evidence to survive from Archaic Greece, what conclusions could you draw about the society and its values?

castigates his faithless (female) lover and his even more faithless (male) lover with whom she has run off.

Given the male domination of Greek culture, it is paradoxical that the most famous lyric poet of this age was not a man. Rather, it was Sappho (SAF-fōh, c. 620–550 B.C.E.), who lived in the polis of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos. Revered by her contemporaries, Sappho composed songs for a wide array of occasions and a range of moods: songs of courtship and marriage, longing and desire, loss, old age, and death. Often, they are passionately dedicated to women: both the women whom Sappho loved and the historical women who occupy the margins of

masculine epic. Frequently, they take some image or incident from that inherited tradition and give it a distinctive spin. In one song, Sappho compares herself to Agamemnon, who was only able to return from Troy after he prayed to Hera, a goddess worshiped at Lesbos; Sappho now prays that her beloved will arrive safely with the goddess's help. In another, she imagines a scene not included in the *Iliad*, the joyous wedding of the Trojan Hector and his bride, Andromache. The intimacy of lyric thus reveals something that few sources from antiquity are able to convey: the feelings and desires of individuals who were often at odds with the dominant culture of their time.

“The Beautiful and the Good”

The poet known as Tyrtaeus of Sparta flourished during the middle of the sixth century B.C.E. He may originally have come from Athens, but whatever his origins he expressed ideas of honor, beauty, and virtue that were universal among the hoplite warriors of the new poleis. The key terms he uses in the following verses cannot be adequately translated into English, since these short Greek adjectives are freighted with ancient meanings: *kalos* (beautiful, honorable), and *agathos* (good, brave, manly). They stand in opposition to the term *aischros* (shameful, ugly, mean).



Kalos it is for an *agathos* warrior to die, fallen among the foremost fighters, in battle for his native land; but to leave his polis and rich fields and beg—that is most painful of all, as he wanders with his dear mother and aged father, his small children and his wedded wife. Detested he will be in the eyes of all those to whom he comes, constrained by need and hateful poverty. He shames his birth and belies his glorious appearance; dishonor and misery are his companions.

If no account is taken of a warrior who is a wanderer, if there is no respect for him or his family in the future, then let us fight with all our hearts for this land and die for our children, no longer hesitating to risk our lives. Young men, stand firm beside each other and fight.

Do not begin shameful flight or fear. Rather, create a mighty, valorous spirit in your breasts, and show no love for your lives when you are fighting. Do not flee, abandoning the older men, whose knees are no longer nimble.

For *aischros* it is for an older warrior to fall among the foremost fighters and lie out ahead of the young men—a man whose hair is already white and his beard grey—as he breathes out his valorous spirit in the dust, holding his bloody guts in his own hands, his body laid bare. *Aischros* is this to the eyes, and a cause of resentment to look upon.

But to the young men all is seemly, while the glorious flower of lovely youth is theirs. To men the young man is admirable to look upon, and to women lovable while he lives and *kalos* when he lies among the foremost fighters. So let a

man take a firm stance and stand fast, with both feet planted upon the ground, biting his lip with his teeth.

Source: Excerpted and modified from *The Greek Polis*, eds. W. H. Adkins and Peter White (Chicago: 1986), pp. 23–24.

Questions for Analysis

1. How does Tyrtaeus characterize defeat? How does this poem exemplify the values and tactics of hoplite warfare?
2. Why is so much emphasis placed on physical beauty and youth? What other qualities are associated with the word *kalos*? Why is old age potentially *aischros*?
3. How does this ideal of male beauty compare with that made visible in the kouros of Anavysos (page 64)?

PORTRAITS OF THREE POLEIS

The poleis of the Archaic Period developed in very different ways. To illustrate this diversity, we will examine three particularly well-documented examples: Athens, Sparta, and the Ionian city of Miletus. None of these, however, can be considered typical. There were approximately one thousand poleis in Greece, and about most of them we know almost nothing. But at least we can survey some of the features that, with variations, made each polis unique—and yet comparable, in some ways, to its neighbors.

Athens

The Athenians liked to boast that their city had been a great metropolis since the Bronze Age. But although Attica had long been a populous and prosperous region, Athens itself was of no great significance during the Mycenaean Era. When Athenians first came together to form a polis, theirs was a distinctly agricultural economy. Whatever profits aristocrats acquired through trade, they reinvested in land. Indeed, Athenian elites came to regard commerce as a disreputable means of earning a living, a mentality that persisted even when the city's excellent harbors made Athens famous as a mercantile polis.



THE ATHENIAN PNYX, WITH A VIEW OF THE ACROPOLIS. The Athenian assembly, the *ekklesia*, met on the sloping hill of the Pnyx. A speaker standing on the *bema* ("stepping stone," to the right) would have to make himself heard by all the citizens gathered in front of this platform, and all proceedings would have been plainly visible to noncitizens and foreigners in the *agora* (central marketplace) at the foot of the hill (off to the left). Overlooking it all was the temple of the city's patron goddess, Athena, on the crest of the Acropolis. ■ **How is the relative openness and accessibility of Athenian democracy symbolized by this chosen site?**

In the Archaic Period, aristocratic dominance over this polis rested on the monopolization of elected offices and control of the city's council, the Areopagus (*ah-ree-OH-pah-gus*). By the early seventh century B.C.E., an even smaller group of aristocratic officials wielded executive authority in Athens: the *archons*, or "first men." Ultimately, nine archons presided over the entire governance of the polis. Although each served for only one year, all became lifetime members of the Areopagus. And because the Areopagus appointed the archons, it could therefore control its own future membership.

As power was consolidated by this small group, deep economic and social divisions developed. A significant proportion of the population fell into slavery through debt, while struggles among aristocratic families destabilized the government and fomented cycles of revenge killings. Finally, this situation inspired Athens' first attempt to promulgate a set of written laws. In 621 B.C.E., an aristocrat named Dracon sought to control civic violence through harsh punishments: hence our use of the term "draconian" to describe any severe penalty or regime. This attempt failed, but ultimately led both aristocrats and hoplites to an agreement. In 594 B.C.E., they elected one man, the poet Solon, as the sole archon for one year, and they gave him sweeping powers. Solon was an aristocrat, but he had made his fortune as a merchant and did not hold that vocation in

contempt; this meant that he was not allied with any single interest.

Solon's political and economic reforms laid the foundations for the later development of Athenian institutions. He forbade the practice of debt slavery and set up a fund to buy back Athenian slaves who had been sold abroad. He encouraged the cultivation of olives and grapes, thus spurring cash-crop farming and urban industries such as oil and wine production, as well as the manufacture of pottery storage jars and decorative drinking cups. He also broadened rights of political participation and set up courts in which citizens served as jurors and to which any Athenian might appeal. He based eligibility for political office on property qualifications, not birth, thus making it possible for someone not born into the aristocracy to gain access to power. Moreover, he convened an Athenian assembly, the *ekklesia* (*eh-KLAY-see-a*), and gave it the right to elect archons. Now all free-born Athenian men over the age of eighteen could participate in government. Even those who were not eligible for citizenship were able to see the

workings of government for themselves, since the assembled citizens met on the slopes of the Pnyx (*pNIX*), a hill visible from the central marketplace and overlooked by the sacred precincts of the Acropolis.

Yet Solon's reforms were not widely accepted. The aristocracy thought them too radical; the people of the *demos*, not radical enough. In the resulting generation of turmoil, an aristocrat named Peisistratos (*pi-SIS-trah-tohs*) succeeded in establishing himself as tyrant in 546 B.C.E. Somewhat ironically, Peisistratos then proceeded to institute Solon's reforms. But the apparent mildness of his rule was undergirded by the quiet, persistent intimidation of his fellow Athenians by foreign mercenaries and the ruthlessness with which he crushed any dissent. Still, by enforcing Solon's laws, he strengthened the political role of the *demos* and remained a popular ruler until his death. His sons, however, were less able to control the various factions that threatened their rule: one was assassinated and the other ousted with the help of the Spartans in 510 B.C.E.

But the following period of Spartan-sponsored oligarchy ("rule of the few") was brief. Two generations of increasing access to power had left the Athenian *demos* with a taste for self-government. For the first time in recorded history, a group of commoners can be credited with the overthrow of a regime. The hoplites rallied behind Cleisthenes

(CLIE-sthen-ees), an aristocrat who had championed the cause of the demos after the fall of the Peisistratids. Once voted in as archon in 508/7 B.C.E., Cleisthenes took steps to limit aristocratic power. By reorganizing the Athenian population into ten voting districts, he suppressed traditional aristocratic loyalties. He also introduced the practice of ostracism, whereby Athenians could decide each year whether they wanted to banish someone for a decade and, if so, whom. With this power, Cleisthenes hoped that the demos could prevent the return of a tyrant and quell factional strife.

By 500 B.C.E., these struggles had given Athens a far more populist government than any other Greek polis, and had strengthened its political institutions. In the meantime, Athens had become the principal exporter of olive oil, wine, and pottery in the Greek world. It was poised to assume the role it would claim for itself during the fifth century B.C.E. as the exemplar of Greek culture.

Sparta

Located in the southern inland part of the Peloponnesus, Sparta took shape when four villages (and ultimately a fifth) combined to form a single polis. Perhaps as a relic of this unification process, Sparta retained a dual monarchy throughout its history, with two royal families and two lines of succession: a situation that often led to political infighting among their respective supporters.

According to local tradition, Spartan hegemony in the surrounding region of Laconia began with the conquest of Messenia, one of the mainland's few agriculturally viable territories. Around 720 B.C.E., the Spartans subjugated and enslaved the indigenous people there, the *helots*, who were forced to work under Spartan lordship. Around 650 B.C.E., however, the helots revolted, briefly threatening Sparta with annihilation. Eventually, Sparta triumphed; but the shock of this rebellion brought about a permanent transformation.

Determined to prevent another uprising, Sparta became the most militarized polis in Greece. By 600 B.C.E. everything was oriented to the maintenance of its hoplite army, a force so superior that Spartans confidently left their city unfortified. At a time when Athenian citizens spent more time legislating than fighting, Spartan society was becoming increasingly devoted to an older aristocratic ideal of perpetual warfare.

The Spartan system made every male citizen a professional soldier of the phalanx. At birth, every Spartiate child was examined by officials who determined whether it was healthy enough to raise; if not, the infant was abandoned in the mountains. This was a custom observed elsewhere in

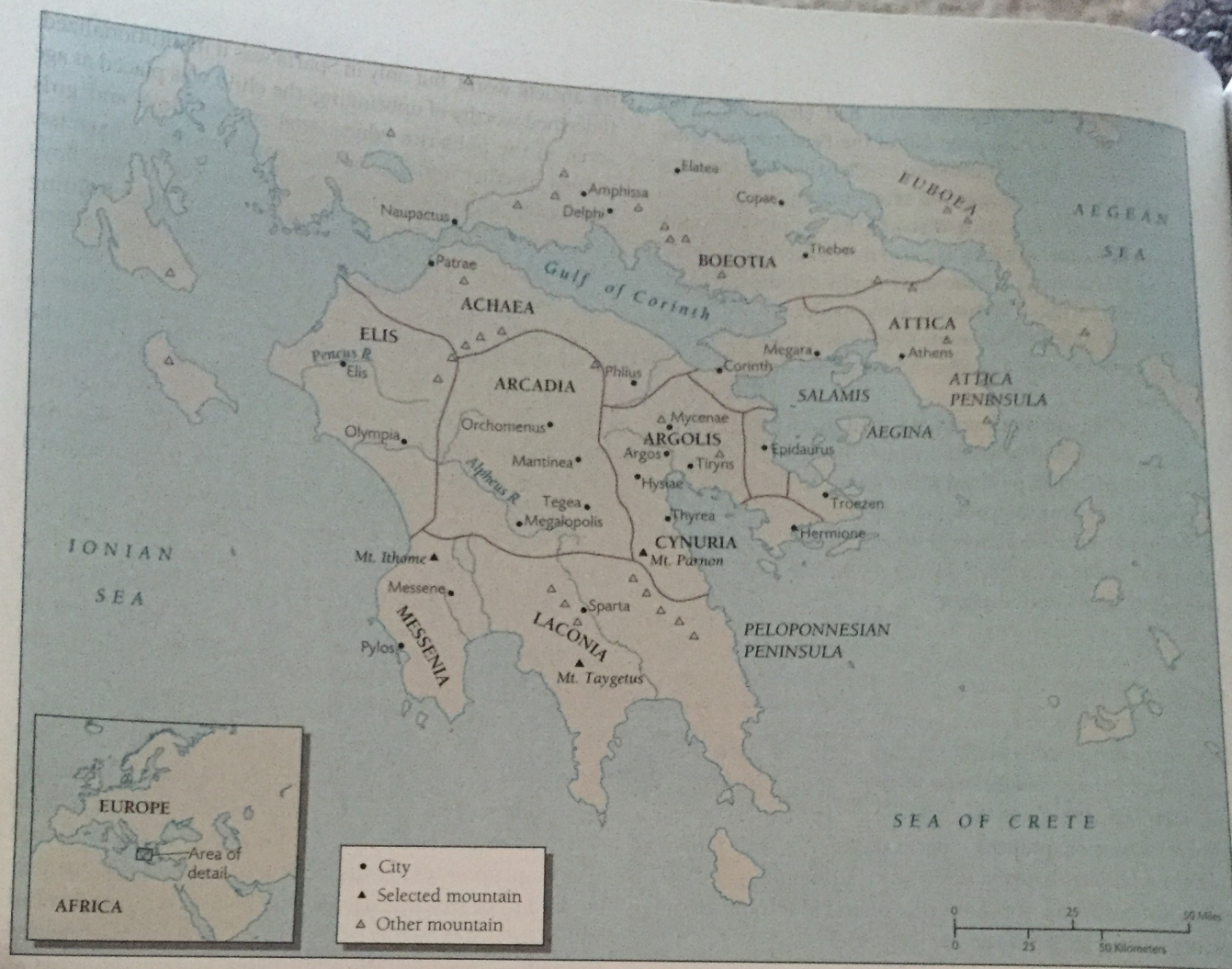
the ancient world, but only in Sparta was it institutionalized. If deemed worthy of upbringing, the child was placed at age seven in the polis-run educational system. Boys and girls trained together until age twelve, participating in exercise, gymnastics, and other physical drills and competitions. Boys then went to live in barracks, where their military training would commence in earnest. Girls continued their training until they became the mates of eligible Spartiate males.

Barracks life was designed to accustom youths to physical hardship. At age eighteen, the young man who survived this training would try for membership in a brotherhood whose sworn comrades lived and fought together. Failure to gain acceptance would mean that the young man would lose his rights as a citizen. If accepted, he remained with his brotherhood until he was thirty years of age. He was also expected to mate with a Spartiate woman, but occasions for this were few—a fact that partially accounts for the low birthrate among Spartan citizens. After age thirty, a Spartiate male could opt to live with his family, but he was still required to remain on active military duty until he was sixty.

All Spartiate males over the age of thirty were members of the citizens' assembly, the *apella*, which voted on matters proposed to it by the two kings and twenty-eight elders. This *gerousia* (gher-oo-SEE-ah, "council of elders") was the main policymaking body of the polis and also its primary court. Its members were elected for life, but had to be over the age of sixty before they could stand for office. Meanwhile, five *ephors* (overseers), elected annually, supervised the educational system and acted as guardians of Spartan tradition. In the latter role, ephors could even depose an errant king from command of the army while on campaign. The ephors also supervised the Spartan secret service, the *krypteia*. Agents spied on citizens, but their main job was to infiltrate the helot population and identify potential troublemakers.

Spartan policy hinged on the precarious relationship between the Spartiates and the helots, who outnumbered the Spartiates ten to one. Helots accompanied the Spartiates on campaign as shield bearers and baggage handlers. At home, however, the helots were a constant security concern. Every year the Spartans ritually declared war on them as a reminder that they would not tolerate dissent. Ironically, the threat of unrest meant that the polis was notoriously reluctant to send its army abroad.

Helot slavery therefore made the Spartan system possible, but Sparta's reliance on a hostile population of slaves was also a serious limitation. This system also limited Spartans' contact with the outside world in other respects. Spartiates were forbidden to engage in commerce, because wealth might distract them from the



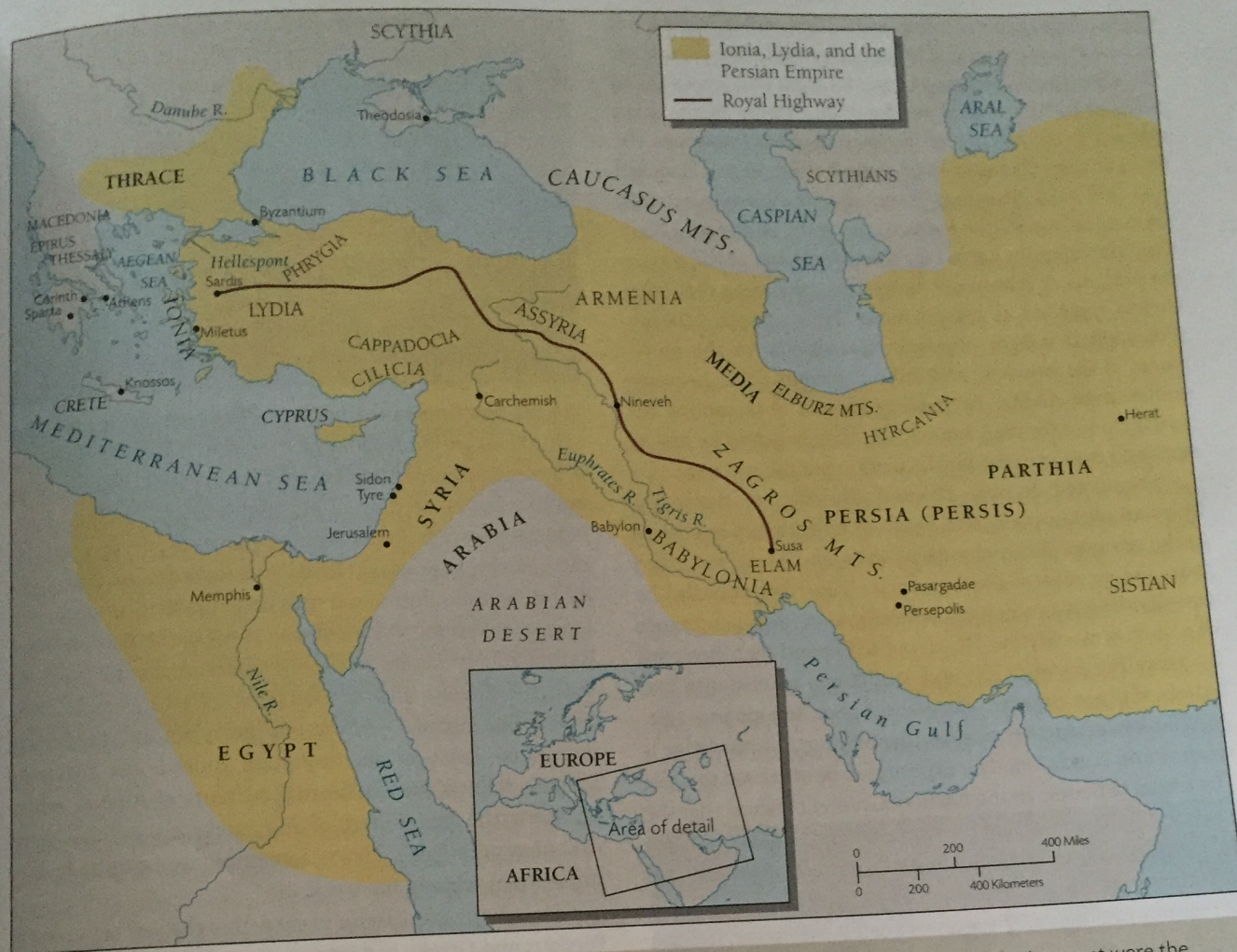
THE PELOPONNESUS. Located on the Peloponnesian peninsula, the highly militarized society of Sparta dominated the region known as Laconia. ■ *Where is Sparta located?* ■ *How might Sparta's inland situation have influenced its outlook on foreign affairs?* ■ *Did geography make conflict between Athens and Sparta inevitable?*

pursuit of glory. Nor did Spartiates farm their own lands, as Athenians did. Economic activity fell either to the helots or to the free residents of other Peloponnesian cities, who were known as *perioikoi* (pair-ee-OY-koy), "those dwelling round about." Unlike the residents of Attica, the *perioikoi* exercised no political rights.

The Spartans also self-consciously rejected innovation, styling themselves as the protectors of the "traditional customs" of Greece. In this role, Sparta tried to prevent the establishment of tyrannies in neighboring states and tried to overthrow them when they arose: hence their willing intervention in the affairs of Athens under the Peisistratids. Indeed, Sparta's stern defense of tradition made it an object of admiration throughout the Greek

world, even though few Greeks had any desire to live as the Spartans did.

The fatal flaw in the Spartan system was demographic. There were many ways to fall from the status of Spartiate, but the only way to become one was by birth—and the Spartan birthrate simply could not keep pace with the demand for trained warriors. As a result, the number of full Spartiates declined from perhaps as many as 10,000 in the seventh century to only about 1,000 by the middle of the fourth century B.C.E. Another flaw is historical: because the Spartans placed little value on written records, almost everything we know about them (including the summary offered here) must be gleaned from archaeological investigations or the propaganda of their rivals, notably the Athenians.



IONIA, LYDIA, AND THE PERSIAN EMPIRE. During the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E., the Greek cities of the Ionian coast were the cultural and commercial leaders of Greece. But during the fifth century B.C.E., after the Persians conquered Lydia, they lost this position to Athens. ■ **Where are Ionia, Lydia, and Miletus on this map?** ■ **How does Ionia's geographical position help to explain the change in its fortunes?** ■ **How might this change have influenced Ionian attitudes toward the Persian Empire?**

Miletus and the Ionian Revolution in Thought

Across the Aegean from the Greek mainland lay the Greek cities of Ionia on the central part of the Anatolian coast. Here, Miletus was the foremost commercial and cultural power. Long a part of the Greek world (see *Analyzing Primary Sources* in Chapter 2, page 39), it had also been shaped by Mesopotamian and Egyptian influences, and Milesian intellectuals were well aware of Near Eastern literature and learning. Some even echoed the vaunting rhetoric of Persian imperial decrees ("thus speaks Darius the Great King...") to make their own, quite different observations ("thus speaks Hecataeus of Miletus: the sayings of the Greeks are many and foolish").

The relationship between the Ionians of the coast and the interior kingdom of Lydia was close but difficult. It was through the Ionians that the Lydian invention of coinage was introduced to the Greek world, where it revolutionized trade, made wealth portable for the first time, and introduced a host of new philosophical and ethical problems. The Ionians, in turn, played a crucial role in Hellenizing western Asia while at the same time insisting on their independence. The major cities of Ionia ultimately banded together to form the Ionian League, a political and religious confederation of poleis pledged to support each other. This was the first such organization in the Greek world.

The Milesians founded many colonies, especially in and around the Black Sea. They were also active in Egypt.

These colonial efforts, combined with its advantageous position for trade, brought Miletus extraordinary wealth. At the same time, it became a center for what the Greeks called *philosophia*, “the love of wisdom.” Beginning in the sixth century B.C.E., a series of intellectuals now known as the pre-Socratics (because they came before Socrates) raised new and vital questions about the relationship between the natural world (the *kosmos*), the gods, and men. Often, their explanations moved the direct influence of the gods to the margins or removed it altogether, something that other Greeks regarded as blasphemous. For example, Milesian philosophers sought physical explanations for the movements of the heavens, and did not presume that heavenly bodies were divine. By making human observations the starting point for their knowledge, they began to formulate scientific explanations for the working of the universe.

Stimulated by the cultural diversity of their city, Milesian philosophers also began to rethink humans’ place in the cosmos. When Hecataeus (*heck-ah-TAY-us*) remarked that “the sayings of the Greeks are many and foolish,” he was deriding his contemporaries’ unquestioning acceptance of a narrow worldview. He set out to expand their horizons by traveling extensively and studying the customs and beliefs of other cultures. The philosopher Xenophanes (*zee-NOFF-uh-nees*) further posited that all human knowledge is relative and conditioned by experience: he observed that the Thracians (a people living north of Greece) believed that the gods had blue eyes and red hair as the Thracians themselves did, whereas Ethiopians portrayed the gods as dark skinned and curly haired, as they themselves were. He concluded that human beings make gods in their own image, not the other way around. If oxen could pray, Xenophanes declared, they would pray to gods who looked like oxen.

Such theories would become a distinctive strand in later Greek philosophy, yet they would continue to be regarded as disturbing and dangerous—dangerous enough to warrant the execution of Socrates in Athens a hundred years later (as will be discussed later). By that time, the Persian conquest of Lydia had made Miletus and its sister cities subject to that great empire. Ultimately, those poleis’ resistance to Persian rule would trigger a momentous struggle for dominance and survival.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE PERSIAN WARS

The two major wars fought between the Greeks and the Persians were construed as defining events by those who witnessed and looked back on them. From the first, the contest

was unequal. Persia was the largest and most efficient state the world had ever seen, capable of mustering over a million armed men. The Greeks, by contrast, remained a collection of disparate communities, fiercely competitive and suspicious of one another. An exceptionally large polis, such as Athens or Sparta, might put 10,000 hoplites in the field; but the vast majority of Greek states could only provide a few hundred each. So the threat of Persian conquest loomed large on the Greek horizon.

The Ionian Revolt (499–494 B.C.E.)

For the first time in the history of Western civilizations, we can follow the unfolding of events through the narrative of a contemporary historian. Herodotus self-consciously set out to write an account of his own times in careful, unambiguous prose, rather than in the form of heroic poetry or the boastful language of victorious inscriptions. And luckily for us, Herodotus was uniquely qualified to probe the long-term and more immediate causes of the Persian Wars. Raised in the Ionian polis of Halicarnassus, he regarded both the Greeks and the Persians as great peoples. Yet, as a Greek himself—albeit one born within the Persian dominion—he was not impartial. Indeed, his surviving account reflects the intellectual currents of Athens, where he spent the better part of his career, as well as many Athenian prejudices. This is something we must bear in mind when reading his work.

Herodotus was careful to show that the war between the Persians and Greeks had ancient roots, but his narrative also shows that the catalyst was a political conflict in Miletus. In 501 B.C.E., the city was governed by Aristagoras (*ah-ris-TAG-or-us*), a tyrant who owed his power to the backing of the Persian emperor, Darius. But apparently Aristagoras came to believe that his days as the emperor’s favorite were numbered. So he turned abruptly from puppet to patriot, rousing the Milesians and the rest of Ionia to revolt against Persian rule. As a safeguard, he also sought military support from sympathetic poleis on the Greek mainland. The Spartans refused to send their army abroad, but Athens and Eretria, on the island of Euboea, agreed to send twenty-five ships and crews. This small force managed to capture the old Lydian capital of Sardis (by then a Persian administrative center) and burn it to the ground. Then the Athenians and Eretrians went home, leaving the Ionian colonies to their own devices. In 494 B.C.E., these rebellious poleis were finally overwhelmed by the vastly superior might of Persia.

Darius realized, however, that as long as his Greek subjects could cast a hopeful eye to their neighbors across the Aegean, they would forge alliances. He therefore decided