

GREEK CITY-STATES
ROMAN EMPIRE
INCA EMPIRE
MISSISSIPPIAN CULTURE
OTTOMAN EMPIRE
MING DYNASTY
IROQUOIS CONFEDERACY
BRITISH EMPIRE



Classical Beacons

THE ANCIENT GREEKS WERE THE CRADLE
AND FOUNDRY OF WESTERN CULTURE

ANCIENT GREECE, WHOSE BASIC POLITICAL AND SOCIAL unit was the city-state, was home to a variety of political empires, leagues and shifting alliances as its rival main cities vied to control events. But Greece achieved greatness not as an empire of politics, conquest or trade but as an imperium of the spirit. The roots of Western civilization tap deeply into the soil and soul of ancient Greece, a society defined by its lofty aspirations, its celebration of the individual's free will, its cultivation of science and inquiry, its insistence on education and the free exchange of ideas, and its creation of brilliant arts and culture.

This peninsula of the southern Balkans that dangles its fingers into the eastern Mediterranean is smaller in area than Yemen or Florida. Yet its ideals, spread by Alexander the Great and adopted by the Romans, gave birth to both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment; inspired the Founding Fathers of the U.S.; and continue to influence human affairs, from Tiananmen Square to Ukraine. When we debate the concepts of democracy, individual rights and personal freedoms, we might as well be speaking Greek. The curriculums taught in our academies—all of which descend from the original Academy, founded by Plato near Athens in 387 B.C.—are identical to those employed in his time: mathematics, philosophy, physics, rhetoric, metaphysics, biology and more. The Olympic Games continue to inspire athletes and spectators alike, commanding a global audience, while the masks of Comedy and Tragedy still flank our stages.

If there is a single spring from which all of Greek culture flows, it is the insistence on the value of the individual person as the prime mover of his or her own destiny. At a time when monarchs ruled the vast majority of men, the Greeks demanded that each person be treated with respect. They believed that the informed citizen, not the central state or monarchy, was the essential pillar of society.

HEIR APPARENT *The Odeon of Herodes Atticus, an amphitheater on the slopes of the Acropolis in Athens, was built around A.D. 170 by a Greek aristocrat who became a Roman senator, a typical life trajectory in the Hellenistic Age*



SACRED CIRCLE At the holy city of Delphi, home of a famous oracle, each of Greece's major city-states erected temples to its gods. Above is the Tholos, the temple dedicated to Athena, goddess of wisdom, created by the citizens of Athens in the 4th century B.C.

We know this because Thucydides, the historian who chronicled the Peloponnesian War, the long 5th-century B.C. struggle between the city-states of Athens and Sparta, recorded the great "Funeral Oration" delivered in 431 by Pericles, the democratically elected leader of Athens, in which he sets forth his city's founding principles.

"Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighboring states," he reminded his fellow citizens. "Its administration favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences; if [one has] no social standing, advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit. Nor again does poverty bar the way: if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition. The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. There, far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes."

Pericles continues to exalt the rule of law and to note that Athenians "throw open our city to the world, and

never by alien acts exclude foreigners from any opportunity of learning or observing, although the eyes of an enemy may occasionally profit by our liberality." The contrast with the antlike societies of other nations of this era, in which a small upper caste of nobles ruled over the poverty-stricken masses, is striking. In the polis, or city-state—the root word for our terms *politics* and *policy*—Athenian Greeks spoke for themselves in the public assemblies in which laws and procedures were formulated.

Of course, Greek democracy was far from completely egalitarian. Women were regarded as unequal to men: confined to the home and child-raising, they were barred from public service and the vote. Slavery was an accepted practice across Greece. Moreover, each polis maintained

"Our ordinary citizens, though occupied with the pursuits of industry, are still fair judges of public matters."

—PERICLES



HAIL TO THE VICTORS *Tourists explore the stadium on Mount Olympus, where athletic contests were held every four years, bringing together the citizens of the Greek city-states. Scholars believe 35,000 to 40,000 spectators gathered to watch the competitions*

its own customs and laws, so Athens stood apart from militant Sparta, where a suspicious spirit far removed from the liberality of Athens reigned. Some historians have described Sparta as a near-totalitarian society.

GREEK SOCIETY WAS FIRMLY FOUNDED UPON the rule of law, whose purpose was not to enforce the whims of a king but rather to improve the condition of the individual. The laws reflected the consensus of public will and applied to every citizen equally, regardless of wealth or status. They were upheld by fear of punishment, as Pericles noted in his “Funeral Oration,” yet even more strongly by each individual’s sense of responsibility and honor. Those whose conduct was dishonorable faced the disapproval of their fellow citizens, who could vote to banish undesirable individuals from the city in the process of ostracism—the ancient equivalent of being voted off the island.

The desire to be regarded as an honorable citizen ensured that the Greeks strongly believed in self-improvement throughout life. A spirit of inquiry was encouraged, as was formal education. Philosophers

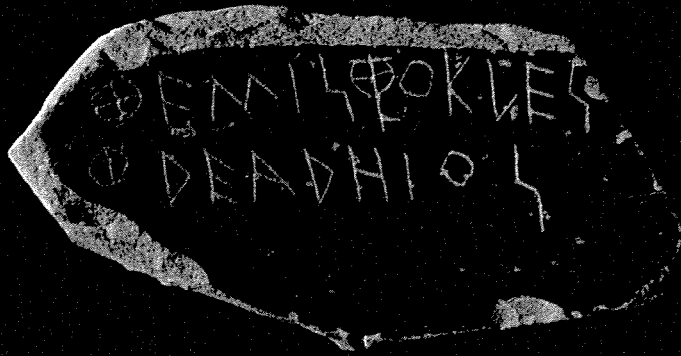
were honored—although we shouldn’t forget that the most inquisitive of Greeks, the upstart Athenian philosopher Socrates, was forced to commit suicide by drinking poisonous hemlock after he was found guilty of inciting unrest among his rebellious young followers.

Socrates’s pupil Plato established the original Academy in a sacred grove of trees in Athens, where he taught his unique brand of philosophy, grounded in formal mathematics and rising to abstract, idealized mysticism. Plato’s pupil Aristotle reversed the polarity of Plato’s top-down world of ideals. A scientist at heart, Aristotle encouraged constant inquiry into the world around us and a commonsense, experimental, bottom-up approach to the study of nature and man.

That spirit of inquiry led the Greeks to found and begin to perfect a wide range of sciences. Hippocrates wrested medicine from the hands of priests and quacks and made it a professional, experiment-based science. His oath is still given to young doctors upon their graduation. Thucydides is regarded as the founder of “scientific history,” for he insisted on evidence, rather than rumor and hearsay, in his chronicles. Euclid’s *Elements*

ELEMENTS OF CULTURE

From democracy and the ballot to architecture, engineering and the dramatic arts, ancient Greeks laid the foundations of Western civilization



At left is an ostracon, a pottery shard on which a person's name has been written, a vote to ostracize unwanted citizens. Above, graceful caryatids serve as pillars to support the roof of the Erechtheion, a temple at the Acropolis

formulated the basic laws of geometry and has been taught in schools for 23 centuries, and counting.

EVEN AS HE INSISTED ON THE IMPORTANCE OF civic engagement and individual freedom and responsibility in his "Funeral Oration," Pericles was careful to recognize the importance of the arts and entertainment in a fully rounded life. He reminds his fellow citizens, "We provide plenty of means for the mind to refresh itself from business. We celebrate games and sacrifices all the year round, and the elegance of our private establishments forms a daily source of pleasure and helps to banish the spleen."

Just as our democratic ideals are derived from the Greeks, our arts and letters were shaped by their hands. In their amphitheaters, located in the open air under direct sunlight, Greeks gathered to watch the myths and legends of their culture brought to life by masked actors and a dancing, singing chorus that set the tone for the play and commented on its action. The most serious of the Greek plays, the tragedies, were derived from ancient rites to Dionysus, lord of pleasure and the giver of wine. *Tragedy* means "goat song," for goats were sacred to Dionysus. Two festivals, one concentrating on tragedy, the other on comedy, were held each year in Athens, and laurel wreaths were awarded to the playwrights whose works were deemed best by a panel of judges.

Beginning at daybreak, spectators might sit through three tragedies, a satyr play (a licentious farce with performers dressed as animals) and a comedy. Because the plays were a form of religious rite, business was suspended during the drama festivals and women were encouraged to attend. Only 45 Greek plays, among thousands, are still preserved in full, yet the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides are so compelling in their theatricality and so illuminating in their exploration of human nature that they are widely staged today.

Greek sculpture and architecture are just as pervasive. The great capitals of the world still aim to emulate the grandeur of the Acropolis, the collection of temples and structures atop a rocky hill that is the crowning glory of Athens. The Parthenon on the Acropolis, the temple dedicated to Athena, harnesses geometry to inspire awe and grandeur, even as it reflects the sophisticated expertise of its main architects, Ictinus and Callicrates. Its lofty columns bulge in the middle, taper at the top and lean slightly inward, producing a sense of optical harmony, whereas their flutings diminish in width as they rise, enhancing the temple's inspiring sense of elevation.

All was not elevated in Greek art, however. The comedies and satyr plays were lusty, ribald farces, heavy on sexual innuendo and gross-out physical humor. Drunken revelries were an accepted part of life, in good measure, for wiser Greeks urged moderation in all things.



Theatrical masks, like this terracotta mask of an angry man, allowed large crowds to see distant actors. Built-in megaphones helped amplify sound



This mask, used to portray a slave in a comedy, dates to the 2nd century B.C. Most surviving Greek comedies were written by Aristophanes (circa 446-386 B.C.)

“Instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling-block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all.”

PERICLES

They also gloried in athletic competition. The Olympic Games, held on Mount Olympus every four years, alternated with the less familiar Pythian Games at Delphi. The Games were so important that wars were suspended for them; during the Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens, the bellicose Spartans were fined for violating this sacred ban. The Olympics endured until the 4th century A.D., a span of 12 centuries. Revived in 1896, they are regarded as the pinnacle of athletics, 26 centuries after they are believed to have first been held.

ONE SIGNIFICANT ELEMENT OF GREEK SOCIETY has not survived in modern form: its pagan religion. Even so, Greek gods and goddesses endure as literary and psychological icons, if not as fearsome deities. Their shadows live on, peering out at us from the thickets of language. The wily, intoxicating Pan

gave us the word *panic*. Sigmund Freud borrowed from Sophocles when he declared that young boys experience an Oedipus complex. Strong women are Amazons; dashing men are Apollos; a narcissistic Venus in blue jeans may wear Nikes on her feet. Poor Ajax, however, is much diminished; the onetime Greek stud is now a home cleanser.

In this way, as an empire of ideas rather than geography, the Greeks live on. Yet if they were never primarily empire builders in the political sense, their neighbor to the north, King Philip II of Macedon, certainly was. The aggressor against whom the orator Demosthenes railed in his series of minatory addresses, the “Philippics,” managed to unite the often disputatious city-states in opposition to his belligerence. Philip and his son Alexander defeated an alliance of Athenians and Thebans in 338 B.C. to become masters of all Greece. Alexander then led a united force of Greeks on a long trail of conquest that led from Egypt to Persia to today’s Pakistan.

Alexander’s far-flung political empire didn’t long outlive his death, but the potent products of the Greeks’ empire of culture did. History’s greatest wannabes, the Romans, avidly embraced Greek mores as they rose to dominate the Western world. During this Hellenistic Age, Greek arts, sciences, laws and culture took root and blossomed across the Mediterranean and European worlds. And we are the inheritors of those riches.