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1. Athens: Historical Background

Robert L. Bloom
Gettysburg College

Basil L. Crapster
Gettysburg College

Harold A. Dunkelberger
Gettysburg College

See next page for additional authors

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1. Athens: Historical Background

Abstract

We know that the civilizations of most of the world's people today are the outgrowths of previous civilizations which for some reason or another came to an end, though not without leaving a deposit of ideas and techniques for their successors to appropriate. At the moment, we are interested in examining the more immediate background from which Western Civilization grew. Many writers have summarized the cultural heritage bequeathed to the West in terms of the tale of three cities: Athens, representing the contributions of the Classical Greeks; Rome, representing those of the Romans; and Jerusalem, representing the contributions both of Judaism and of Christianity. To each of these cities in succession and to the cultural legacy which each represents we now turn. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Ancient Civilizations, Western Civilization, Athens, Greek history, Asia Minor, Aegean Sea, Rome, Jerusalem

Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Classics | Cultural History | History

Comments

This is a part of [Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

Robert L. Bloom, Basil L. Crapster, Harold A. Dunkelberger, Charles H. Glatfelter, Richard T. Mara, Norman E. Richardson, and W. Richard Schubart

I. ATHENS, ROME, AND JERUSALEM: BACKGROUND OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

ATHENS

1. Historical Background

We know that the civilizations of most of the world's people today are the outgrowths of previous civilizations which for some reason or another came to an end, though not without leaving a deposit of ideas and techniques for their successors to appropriate. At the moment, we are interested in examining the more immediate background from which Western Civilization grew. Many writers have summarized the cultural heritage bequeathed to the West in terms of the tale of three cities: Athens, representing the contributions of the Classical Greeks; Rome, representing those of the Romans; and Jerusalem, representing the contributions both of Judaism and of Christianity. To each of these cities in succession and to the cultural legacy which each represents we now turn.

There are many aspects of early Greek history which remain obscure. However, it is believed that sometime during the second millenium B. C. successive bands of related peoples began entering the Greek penisula from the north. They met and mixed with earlier inhabitants, eventually producing the Greek people of recorded history. In extending themselves to the Aegean islands and the western coast of Asia Minor, they came in contact with more culturally advanced peoples. What followed was a period (from about 1200 to 800 B. C.) similar to the more familiar Dark Ages of later times, during which the invaders appropriated some of the ideas and techniques of their new neighbors. In this way much of the culture of the Ancient Near East (a term taken here to include Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, and Crete) was made available to the early Greeks, a fact of great importance.

The geography of Greece is significant in understanding its development. The land is ruggedly mountainous. There are countless small valleys and fine harbors. The climate is that described as Mediterranean, or subtropical dry, with moderate temperatures, many sunny days throughout the year, and a limited rainfall. Even in ancient times much of the soil was not arable, and what was arable was generally not fertile. All in all, this was an area which in itself could not provide a

very high level of living for a large population. The early Greeks chose to make the best of these conditions by herding, by growing grain, or by adapting themselves enough to answer the call of the sea. Later, when an extensive trade developed, the land of Greece became famous for its exports of pottery, olive oil, and wine. Eventually, much of the food consumed, especially grain, was imported.

Geography and climate help to explain the early period of Greek expansion. The pressure of population growth within this area of limited resources was a factor in encouraging colonization. Between about 800 and 600 B. C., settlements appeared at many points from the Black Sea in the east to Spain in the west, and almost always along a shore. Byzantium (now Istanbul), Naples, and Marseilles are examples. The name Great Greece was given to the numerous settlements in southern Italy. Politically, these colonies were independent of each other and of the city from which their original settlers had come, but the cultural and economic ties with the homeland usually remained close. This colonizing movement was significant to the Greeks for several reasons: it spread the area of their influence; it introduced them to other cultures, from which they could borrow further; and by ultimately increasing trade it increased the wealth of their world.

A great challenge confronted the Greeks during the fifth century B. C. To the east, the Persians were then at the height of their power. Having already conquered the Greek parts of Asia Minor and put down subsequent revolts there, the Persians tried to add European Greece to their empire. The wars which followed spanned a quarter century (492-467 B. C.) and included four separate invasion attempts. After the last of these failed to reduce the Greeks to submission, the Persians did not renew their attacks, although they could have at any time. The jubilant and self-confident Greeks remembered only that they had withstood their mighty foes, even defeated them. At this very time they were, in fact, entering upon the period of their greatest cultural flowering -- the Golden Age or the Classical Age (c. 500 - c. 300 B. C.).

Unlike the Egyptians or the Assyrians before them, the Greeks were never politically united. The mountains made natural units of the valleys and plains, and there was no reason persistent enough, such as the need for large-scale cooperation in irrigating a Nile, to override this geographical fragmentation. Consequently, from very early times, Greece was composed of many independent city-states, each consisting of an urban settlement, originally walled for defense, with its surrounding dependent rural lands. The Greeks consciously preferred to keep this arrangement. Sparta, the largest city-state or polis, was half again as large as the state of Delaware. Athens was about half the size of Rhode Island; its total population probably never exceeded 300,000. Most of the other city-states -- there were more than 200 of them -- were much smaller in size and population.

After the Persian Wars, Athens, which had taken the lead in defending the peninsula, formed a league of city-states for mutual protection against possible future invasions. Called the Delian Confederation, this represented about the only important united political effort among the Classical Greeks. Gradually the stronger Athens came to dominate the league and transformed it into what has been called, with considerable justification, the Athenian Empire. Even though the Athenians often exercised enlightened leadership in the confederation, their control was quickly resented by the other city-states, in part because of the strength of Greek particularism and in part because some of the other cities felt the Athenians were using their position to weaken their commercial rivals. Eventually Sparta, urged on by Corinth, which was the competitor of Athens in eastern Mediterranean commerce, declared war.

During the course of the long struggle which followed -- the Peloponnesian War lasted from 431 to 404 B. C. -- Athens was defeated and Spartan hegemony supplanted the Athenian Empire. This arrangement in turn proved ephemeral and other wars followed. It is evident that the Greeks were unwilling to cease expending an important part of their limited energies on interminable political bickering. This was a luxury the indulgence in which was not obviously dangerous until Philip of Macedonia took advantage of the oft-demonstrated Greek particularism. After his victory at the epochal battle of Chaeronea (338 B. C.), Philip gained control over most of Greece. His successors completed what he had begun. Except for brief periods, Greek political independence was not regained for more than two thousand years.