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## 3. Athens: Greek Civilization


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## 3. Athens: Greek Civilization

### Abstract

The importance of the Greeks lies in the fact that they sketched out many, although of course not all, of the broad foundations upon which Western Civilization rests. This may seem a bit strange in view of the fact that each city-state was independent and often jealous of the others, but the Greeks were bound together by a common language, by common gods, by belief in their descent from a common ancestor and in their superiority to non-Greeks, and by many common customs. Although the name of Athens has been chosen in the title of this chapter to represent the vigorous cultural life of the Golden Age, it must be remembered that other city-states made important contributions as well. [*excerpt*]

### Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Greek history, Greek civilization, city-states, western government, Ancient Greece, Athens, Golden Age

### Disciplines

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

### 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

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### 3. Greek Civilization

The importance of the Greeks lies in the fact that they sketched out many, although of course not all, of the broad foundations upon which Western Civilization rests. This may seem a bit strange in view of the fact that each city-state was independent and often jealous of the others, but the Greeks were bound together by a common language, by common gods, by belief in their descent from a common ancestor and in their superiority to non-Greeks, and by many common customs. Although the name of Athens has been chosen in the title of this chapter to represent the vigorous cultural life of the Golden Age, it must be remembered that other city-states made important contributions as well.

The word "classic" has been used over and over again to describe accomplishments of the Greeks. A classic is something of the highest order; it is the best. This is the meaning of the word as it is used here. They developed an architecture characterized by simplicity, symmetry, and modesty in size, which has been imitated widely in the Western World from time to time. The line of descent from the Parthenon to the Lincoln Memorial is obvious. Greek sculpture in marble and bronze and Greek painting, little of which survives, attained a uniquely successful balance between the way life is (the realistic) and the way they thought life should be (the idealized). The Greeks created and then skilfully used many of the literary forms -- the epic, tragedy, comedy, and others -- through which Western man has since expressed his deepest feelings of joy and sadness, pity and fear, achievement and frustration, understanding and bewilderment, idealism and cynicism. The Iliad, the tragedies of Sophocles (496-406 B. C.), and the comedies of Aristophanes (c. 444-380 B. C.) are read and studied today in part because of the light they shed on the life of the Greeks, but even more because of the belief that they also shed light on the great experiences confronting men in every age and on the responses men make to them. [Historical writing, except for the Hebrews, can scarcely be said to have existed before the Greeks. Whereas the Hebrews saw the hand of God everywhere in the record of their past, Herodotus (484-425 B. C.), called by Cicero the father of history, and more particularly Thucydides (c. 471-c. 400 B. C.) assumed that the hand of man is responsible for the events of history and that it is the task of the historian to study diligently man's handiwork.]

What was perhaps most important for future generations was the fact that the Greeks had the desire and that they developed the capacity to strive for an understanding of the nature of the universe and of man, an understanding which could be expressed in terms within the competence of human reason. Certainly, men before the Greeks had advanced in this direction, but in general the learned men of previous civilizations had been content to seek explanations of natural and human phenomena in purely

religious terms: as the activities of the gods. The Greeks were a religious people, but they never had a dominant priestly class to monopolize learning. Consequently, Greek thinkers were considerably freer than men had ever been before to roam intellectually -- to use their powers of reasoning to search for non-mythological answers to the great questions arising about the universe and man. Moreover, they were notably willing to follow their thinking as it led them along untried paths to new conclusions: that the thunderstorm was not a manifestation of the displeasure of the gods or that, as Hippocrates concluded concerning epilepsy, every disease has its natural cause, without which nothing happens. The results of these and other factors (the Greeks, after all, had a larger cultural accomplishment than their predecessors to draw upon and their own was growing rapidly) are far reaching. The Greeks had come to grips with a multitude of major issues which have since challenged many inquiring men. They had brought to bear upon these issues an attitude or outlook essentially of their own fashioning, one which has been called the naturalistic. Naturalism may be defined as an attitude which considers the whole universe as embodied in nature and in man, which believes the goal of human life to be earthly happiness and fulfillment, and which employs human reason as its only means of understanding. This attitude, which is in contrast to that which we shall find typical of the Hebrews, constitutes one of the major Greek contributions to Western thought.

The pronounced pioneering inquisitiveness of the Greeks led ultimately to the gathering together of much information, a portion of which was received from previous civilizations. Not content, however, with the mere accumulation of facts and possessed with the desire to find an order, a pattern, a wholeness everywhere, they went on to formulate the basic assumptions from which many of our disciplines have sprung. Thales of Miletus went to Egypt and learned what the Egyptians already knew: that there are equal angles at the base of a triangle with equal sides. But he concluded something more, which the Egyptians apparently never realized: that the angles at the base of every triangle with equal sides are always equal, whether the triangle exists on paper or in the imagination. The mention of philosophy, political thought, mathematics, and the natural sciences suggests fields which the Greeks were among the very first to begin clearing systematically. Our use of words of Greek origin, such as arithmetic, ethics, geometry, history, music, philosophy, physics, politics, theology, and zoology, reminds us both of the catholicity and of the impact of their interests.

If by religion we mean recognition of divine power or powers, then the Greeks were religious, though they lacked the churches, scriptures, creeds, and clergy with which the Western World is familiar. The different early invaders each brought with them into the Greek peninsula their own deities and to these were added, after the fashion of polytheism, many others worshiped by the earlier inhabitants. Greek particularism made it possible for many of these local gods to continue reigning,

but in time the taste for order reduced the number, assigned them functions under the general direction of Zeus, and gave them a home on Mount Olympus, in northern Greece. This step never amounted to complete nationalization, however, and some purely local gods remained.

The many stories which were told and retold about the gods and goddesses were basically attempts to convey through them some explanation of the forces of nature over which man had little or no control. The gods were pictured in human form, as being immortal, much more powerful than men but not themselves omnipotent. Behind them was a necessity or destiny to which both gods and men were subject.

Greek polytheism was not a warm, personal religion. It lacked ethical content. By Greek standards, the gods themselves were not always moral in their behavior. The stories told about Zeus to give a serious explanation of some natural phenomenon might have him coming to earth, as the gods not infrequently did, and begetting children by a human being, despite the fact that he had a wife at home on Mount Olympus. Nor did the gods have the power to reward the Greeks with an afterlife. They believed in a state beyond the grave, but it was a dismal place beneath the earth, in stark contrast to the much more attractive existence which this world offered. But the gods did have powers over men and they expected to be worshiped. Such worship was common. In the hope of safe return, a Greek might offer a sacrifice before undertaking a long journey. Sacrifices were offered at public gatherings with much the same frequency with which Americans are accustomed to opening affairs with a prayer or with the national anthem. Indeed, there was a close connection between this religion and patriotism. The priests were public officials and the temples, in which it was thought the gods sometimes lived, were built with state funds. In the eyes of the Greeks, there could be no distinction between church and state such as the contemporary American might make.

As Greek culture developed, worship of the gods was a deeply imbedded practice, but their continued existence on Mount Olympus posed serious problems that were not easily solved. It is possible to follow these through the pages of Greek drama and to see them contributing to the crisis in the Greek polis of the later fifth century. Some Greeks began to identify the protection of morality with specific Olympian gods and the destiny of man with Father Zeus. But this would not satisfy anyone who craved a personal emotional religion or one which would promise an initiate immortality in another world. Nor was it enough to satisfy the thinker who came, perhaps reluctantly, to regard polytheism as a holdover from a primitive past, who wrestled with the issue of how it could ever be reconciled with a universe of order and of orderly change, and who concluded that such reconciliation was impossible. With these thinkers, interest began to switch from religion to philosophy.

It was Greek speculation which led to the development of philosophy. Philein means to love and sophia means wisdom. The word therefore means the love of wisdom. Philosophy is concerned with seeking wisdom about the meaning of human life and of the universe. Because of its very character, it includes the study of nature (science), the study of the various ways by which we acquire knowledge (epistemology), the study of the methods we use to make our knowledge consistent (logic), the study of the interrelatedness of all these factors leading to an evaluation of them in an effort to determine what is most fundamental, basic, or, as the Greek would put it, real (metaphysics). The great Greek thinkers, interested in obtaining a total picture, surveyed this vast field, ranging all the way from physics to metaphysics.

The Greek philosophers first worked in the area of physical nature. They began their speculations with the assumption that nature was not capricious, but that it was somehow explicable by human reason in terms of consistency and simplicity, neither of which the gods could provide. Some thought that they could go behind the obvious external multiplicity of things which they observed and derive or deduce everything from a simple, basic material reality. Thales of Miletus (c. 640 - c. 546 B. C.), who is sometimes called the father of philosophy, concluded that this reality was water; a contemporary thought that it was air. Both held that all change in the natural world was change from and to one material reality. Others, such as Pythagoras (lived about 525 B. C.), who devised the theorem which bears his name, believed that they could derive everything from what was to the Greek an equally basic reality, called form. They held that the most fundamental or real thing about a triangle was not the specific depression it made in the sand or the wood with which it was constructed, but the relation between its lines and angles. The Pythagoreans found it difficult to account for change in the natural world on the basis of their static forms. In spite of their differences, both the materialists and the formalists had arrived at the conclusion that behind the multiplicity of things there was a unity. They agreed that all change was to be understood in terms of motion away from or returning to this unity. Here there was introduced a question -- Are things basically one or basically many? -- which men have tried to answer ever since.

The rest of early Greek philosophy was primarily a series of changes on the two concepts of matter and form. The most significant of these was offered by Democritus (born about 470 B. C.), for whom the basic reality of nature was to be found in one material and invisible substance existing in many different shapes, called atoms, and in the void which existed between them. He believed that the things we see (including man and also man's mind) are made up entirely of atoms (the word means uncuttable) and that the forms of these things result from the combinations of atoms. About the time of the early Atomists Heraclitus (c. 540 - c. 475 B. C.) declared that neither the proponents of matter nor those of form had

succeeded in explaining adequately reality, change, or motion. To him the most basic factor in the universe was perpetual change, or flux. He believed the basic material reality was fire. Everything is in motion, he said in effect, and one cannot step twice into the same river. How then can one know anything of the nature of being? A contemporary, Parmenides (lived about 500 B. C.), concluded that the real world was much different from anything our senses reveal to us, that things are not really as they seem to be. These criticisms suggest the inability of the early philosophers to reach widely acceptable conclusions concerning the universe. They had reached what was to be for some time a dead end.

We may not be able to credit Thales of Miletus and the others with having answered the questions they raised to the satisfaction of later generations, but they were true pioneers in asking the questions they did: What is the basic reality? Can we relate the one and the many? Is there really change? What is color? What is the relation between numbers? Does the diameter bisect the circle? These early philosophers were true pioneers also in the rational manner in which they proceeded to formulate the answers which they gave. They were among the very first, if not the first, pure scientists the human race has produced.

One definition of science is that it is a rationally organized body of knowledge. Pure science is that for which there is no immediate application in mind and it is generally the result of labors by men who want to know simply for the sake of knowing. Applied science is that which is used to satisfy the immediate needs and desires of men. The Greeks did not neglect applied science; but, except for medicine, they never showed much interest in it. There are several possible explanations for this fact. In a society where slavery was part of the accepted order of things, there was no great clamor for labor-saving devices. It is also important to remember that, among the Greeks as among mankind generally until very recent times, the insatiable desire for more and better goods and services was virtually nonexistent.