
THE EXAMINED LIFE

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FOR over a thousand years, Greek civilization spread its influence over the entire Mediterranean basin. Even after the collapse of the Roman Empire, its last manifestation, Hellenistic values were eventually to re-emerge in the states of Europe which looked back to Greece as the source of their classical standards, by which to assess themselves and their achievements.

In many respects this civilization was unique. In almost two thousand years, from its origins in c.1300 BC to its final collapse in AD 558, it was to spread to all of the Mediterranean and most of Europe's lands: Greek artifacts were to turn up, for example, even in Sweden and parts of Russia. It was to show remarkable powers of evolution which were to enable it to expand beyond its original cradle, an exception among the classical civilizations. Again while other civilizations did not outlive the demise of the religions with which they were virtually coterminous, Hellenism would successfully see its dominant religion change from a native paganism to Christianity, a form of re-interpreted Judaism. This change would establish Christianity as the first world religion. It would encourage new values that were destined to last. Unlike the great valley civilizations, it would seek to colonize, not to conquer, new lands. It was a civilization that looked outwards beyond its shores, not satisfied with a limited vision under some local despot, benevolent or otherwise. Its heritage is, however, more stupendous than its existence: the world we inhabit has been, to all intents and purposes, shaped by it.

The remains, visible and invisible, still inspire awe and respect. The buildings the Greeks erected, and which we mostly know through ruins, are universally acknowledged as the finest proportioned man has ever been able to design. Their paintings gone forever, Greek sculpture is incomparably the most perfect man has produced, even though all we have left are mostly broken, defaced or eroded remnants. Homer and Pindar have left us with the finest epics and odes respectively; the handful of Greek plays still extant are second to none; and even in prose, always a late manifestation of a particular literature, only the Bible can compare with Plato. Historiography rather than the writings of annals would find an unexcelled master in Thucydides. In all these fields the Greeks set standards for all later

exponents, who would consciously analyse Greek 'products' in a search for the rules of perfection.

More remarkable still is the Greek achievement in the intellectual realm. They invented the study, and the language, of mathematics, science, and philosophy. They thought deeply about the nature of the world and man's place in the universe without any undue deference to orthodox beliefs. They were ready to question all aspects of man's existence in a search for the real and the lasting. If civilization is the control of mentality and of the environment by reason, then the greatest single Greek achievement was to lie in the liberation of man from the tyrannies of a blind, unreasoning superstition and therefore to make life a rational experience.

Yet it would be quite wrong to presume that all this arose spontaneously out of a vacuum. Egyptian and Mesopotamian roots can clearly be discerned. Greek civilization was also 'indebted' to Mycenaean culture that had immediately preceded it; to the Phoenicians whose alphabet it borrowed and transformed; and to the Greek language that unified the various people and gave them a sense of identity that went beyond the mere belonging to a circumscribed city-state.

Even its spread all over the Mediterranean basin was not fortuitous or haphazard. By 500 BC, maritime technology had made possible coast-hugging voyages that had reached an apex with the Phoenician circumnavigation of the African continent. The Mediterranean is a homogeneous geographical region sharing a fairly uniform climate, flora and fauna that makes migration within the region not a radically uprooting experience.

Movement of people between one region and another was often rendered inevitable due to the pressure exerted by a growing population. With the exception of the very fertile deltas of the Nile, the Po and the Rhone, the thin coastal strips to which man has been traditionally restricted cannot withstand intensive, agricultural cultivation, particularly with the badly-distributed pattern of rainfall.

Trade, or the desire to control or benefit from trade routes, also led to the movement of peoples. The Phoenicians, in particular, had established a number of trading centres in key sites, though they had never any real large-scale colonizing ambitions. Between 750 and 550 BC, both demographic pressure and economic considerations led the Greeks to migrate in organized fashion to the northern Aegean, the Ionian regions, southern Italy, and Sicily, where major overseas colonies were established.

Though they were later to regard 776 BC, the traditional date of the first Olympic games, as the year which marked their origin, the Greek people had actually arrived on the Mediterranean shores around 2000 BC.

By classical times, the Greeks, though, seem to have wilfully forgotten all about their primitive forebears and it was only the pioneering excavations of Henrich Schliemann that brought these people out of oblivion. It was Schliemann who first named this past 'Mycenean'.

The Myceneans were a warlike people, owing allegiance to kings and warlike aristocrats, who finally destroyed themselves in internecine wars. Perhaps these past events were to leave their imprint on the Greek mind, indeed, mutual suspicion and dislike would sour relationships between individual states and would ultimately contribute to the dismemberment of the 'Greek ideal'.

The Mycenean collapse ushered the Dark Age (1100–800 BC); still, the general unsettledness ironically helped to spread the Greek peoples to the islands of the Aegean and to Asia Minor as some survivors opted to flee the mainland in the first migratory wave.

The Dark Age was also marked by a gradual recovery of the Greeks, socially and politically. It was during this time that the polis originated. At first clusters of habitations round a fortified hill known as acropolis, the poleis of the Dark Age were to develop in various forms. The common denominator was the removal of the individual kings and the broadening of the councils of government, but exclusive to the 'citizens' of a particular 'state'. Such an esoteric organization naturally tended to strengthen further the Greek sense of independence, or even aloofness, of one state from another. Only the threat of a foreign menace would momentarily weld the Greek states together, but such a union would invariably dissolve with the departing invader. Even so there were always some states who preferred an alliance with the invader than with their 'brother' Greeks!

All in all there were about 200 city states, though firm historical details are available only about a few. These states could vary dramatically in size and also had different systems of government. In general there was a marked development from the monarchies (*monos*, Greek for 'one'; *arkho*, 'rule') of the pre-Homeric age to aristocracies (*aristos*, Gk for 'best'; *kratos*, 'power') to tyrants (a dictatorship by an individual that does not necessarily carry the modern pejorative connotation) to oligarchies (*oligoi*, Gk for 'the few') to democracies (*demos*, Gk for 'the people') and constitutional governments. At times the whole system disintegrated and it seemed there was no rule at all, or anarchy (*an*, Gk for 'without').

Athens is the outstanding example of this development. By the beginning of the sixth century, pressure from a growing population resulted in an anti-aristocratic movement that led to Solon's reforms that added the new rich to the ruling class. The age of the tyrants that followed came to an

end in 510 BC and gave way to a period of experimentation that eventually provided Athens with the most democratic government in Greece, with inbuilt mechanisms that guarded against domination by any single faction.

On the other hand, conservative Sparta stubbornly resisted change. Lycurgus, her lawgiver, forbade the writing down of the city state's laws which youths were expected to learn by heart. Such a system would clearly work in favour of the *status quo*, an arrangement that satisfied the small ruling class which, however, remained in constant fear of the helots, the serf-like workers who greatly outnumbered the free citizens. Because of this gnawing concern, Sparta never cherished the idea of having her army far away from home for too long.

And yet these two states were to save the Greek ideal, twice within ten years. Under the leadership of Athens, the Persians were beaten at Marathon (490 BC) and at Salamis (480 BC). These victories saved the incipient western values even before they could actually bloom. A Persian victory would have meant the imposition of an autocratic form of government where lives and fortunes depended on the whims of an absolute ruler, accountable to no one. The Greek victory made possible the assertion of the ordinary individual — an individual proud of his qualities, not too afraid to ask questions in a search for the Truth that underlies all existence.

The flush of the victory over the Persians brought about 'the greatest achievement in civilization ever seen' and the removal of the eastern threat enabled the Greek values to spread from its geographic cradle.

And yet, this outstanding show of unity was doomed, as in a Greek tragedy. Within ninety years the two leading states would both end up beaten and destroyed.

Athens was the first victim. Proud of her success, she organized the Delian League which she ran more as an empire than as a confederation. The Delian funds were high-handedly appropriated for 'safekeeping', thereby raising the suspicion and the ire of the other states who found a ready ally in Sparta.

In the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC), Sparta even turned to the hated Persians for help, promising them suzerainty over the Greek states in the Asian mainland. The eventual Spartan victory, however, brought it the same unpopularity and distrust. In 371 BC, the superb Spartan army was defeated by the Thebans at Leuctra.

The net result of this fratricidal blood-letting was the sapping of Greek strength, facilitating the ultimate victory of Philip II of Macedon. In 338 BC, in the battle of Chaeronea, the Macedonians established their hegemony over the rest of the Greeks.

During the course of these bloody events, Greek civilization came to its full bloom, reaching unique heights in historiography, art and architecture, drama, and philosophy, setting standards to all future times.

Herodotus and Thucydides would originate and reach the apex of the writing of history. The former would record and celebrate what he saw as the victory of Greek simplicity over Persian wealth and luxury. Thucydides would write down and analyse the fall of the old, noble, and simple values to ambition and the blind lust for power. His *History of the Peloponnesian War* is the first history to disavow divine interference in human affairs and to see war as just a manifestation of human nature: man's fate lay solely in his hands.

The Delian funds in Athenian coffers enabled Pericles to initiate a vast programme of monumental buildings and statues to honour Athena, the city's patron, and to show the city's pre-eminence in a highly visible manner.

The Parthenon is merely the most outstanding of the sophisticated planning and great skill necessary for such achievements. In their search for permanent beauty, the artists depicted action in a balanced and restrained manner, capturing thereby the dignity and the promise of human beings.

Drama had originated as part of religious festivals. In Athens the state officials would choose the plays to be produced and the wealthy citizens were expected to provide the financial means. In spite of the official sanction, Greek playwrights could, and did, write on topical and controversial themes, often holding up public figures to ridicule in their comedies.

In their tragedies, Aeschylus (525–456 BC), Sophocles (496–406 BC), and Euripides (c. 480–406 BC) treated themes that are still relevant: the rights of the individual, the role of the individual in society, and the nature of good and evil. Euripides, in particular, would relegate the gods to the background, making the human soul the battleground of strong passions and reason, with tragedy being the result of the hero's 'flawed character'.

On the other hand, the comedians preferred to criticize political affairs and leading politicians in coarse and bawd representations. Aristophanes (445–386 BC) is a particularly sharp and devastating critic who, to Athens' credit, was officially accepted and encouraged.

Greek art was the result of the citizens' love towards their polis. Its practical functions were to better the lives of the citizens and to improve the quality of life in the state.

The greatest Greek contribution, however, lies in philosophy. Other peoples had speculated about man and his universe through myths and epics; the Greeks were the first to treat this question in rational terms. Reason was the most important human faculty if the world were to be made under-

standable. The unexamined life, Plato would conclude, is not worth living.

The first philosophers were basically scientists who, through observation, were concerned with discovering those laws which they felt the universe had to observe. Anaximander would, through abstract thinking, arrive at an idea that resembled Darwin's Theory of the Evolution of the Species. Demosthenes would put forward the theory of a universe made up of invisible, indestructible atoms.

In the classical period the Sophists would insist that everything could be the subject of inquiry and analysis, advancing the view that nothing is absolute and that therefore everything is relative. Naturally such a view raised the suspicion of many a traditionalist citizen, a position that would directly contribute to the execution of Socrates (c. 470–399 BC). Though not strictly a Sophist, Socrates pioneered the method of investigation where a general topic could be narrowed to its essentials by continuous, linked questions.

Plato (427–347 BC), Socrates' student, actually wrote down his thoughts and theories and held that the mind enables man to perceive those eternal forms, the only 'reality', of which the matter perceived by the senses is only an imperfect copy. *The Republic* is the application of the theory of forms to politics and puts forward the idea of philosopher-rulers administering the state for the common good. In *The Laws* a more totalitarian solution as to the ideal government of a state is put forward.

Aristotle (384–322 BC), Plato's student, extended the search for truth to all aspects of human endeavour, stressing moderation in all things. He literally created whole new areas of study in his quest to learn everything about everything. The universe and humanity, he believed, could be explained by a simple synthesis of all learning.

Alexander, the son of Philip II of Macedon, known to later ages as Alexander the Great, would effectively spread Hellenic learning farther than anybody could have imagined. Alexander (336–323 BC) actually changed the political face of the known world. His eastern conquests made unlikely another Persian challenge to 'western' ideals which filtered as far east as India.

Alexander's conquests were not merely shallow military victories. He travelled in the company of philosophers, poets, scientists, and historians. The 'over 70 cities' he founded were permanent outposts of Greek values, as were the at least 250 colonies that were established in the East in the century after his death. Hellenism therefore became the common bond among the East, the Greek peninsula, and the western Mediterranean, bringing about the cross-fertilization of ideas.

The world as shaped by Alexander provided a common cultural background and a broad commercial network of no mean proportions.

The greatest contribution of Hellenism was to science. Aristarchos of Samos (c. 310–230 BC) thought out a heliocentric universe based on the observations of his naked eye, though his theories did not prove strong enough to supplant Aristotle's geocentric system that would persist for another 1800 years. Archimedes of Syracuse (c. 287–212 BC), the greatest Hellenistic thinker, made significant contributions in mathematics, mechanics, and hydrostatics. Eratosthenes of Cyrene (285–c. 204 BC) was the first to measure accurately the actual size of the earth which, he concluded, was of spherical shape. Theophrastus (c. 372–288 BC) originated the scientific study of botany.

Philosophy ceased to be the exclusive province of the leisured classes; philosophers became more numerous and new schools of thought emerged. The Cynics, of whom Diogenes (c. 412–323 BC) is the best known, preached the joys of a simple life, rejecting the lures of materialism. The Cynics inspired Epicurus (340–270 BC) for whom the principal good of human life lies in the absence of pain; for the Epicureans, knowledge could be obtained only through the senses, such knowledge being more reliable than that brought about by the fear of the gods or of death. The Stoics, the most popular of them all and the ones who were to capture the mind of Rome, stressed the importance of a virtuous life and helped to pass on to Rome the concept of a universal state governed by natural laws.

It was this essential unity – an empire of common thought – that the Romans would find a fertile soil for their expansion. Through military strength, Rome would first subject the western Mediterranean, then the Hellenistic East. By 146 BC Rome stood unchallenged with the former proud Greek states and kingdoms, mere provinces of a new order with its capital in central Italy.