Early Mediterranean Civilizations

**Minoan Civilization**
In the Aegean Sea, the island of Crete was the cradle of an early civilization that later influenced Greece on the European mainland. Archaeologists have named these people Minoans, after the legendary King Minos of Crete. Minoan civilization reached its height between 1600 B.C. and 1500 B.C. The success of the Minoans was due to the trade that existed around the Mediterranean Sea, from Crete to Egypt to Mesopotamia. The rulers of this trading empire lived in a vast palace at their capital of Knossos. The walls of the palace were covered with colorful frescoes, watercolor paintings done on wet plaster, which tell us much about their civilization. From these, historians have inferred that the sea had great importance to the Minoan people. By about 1400 B.C., Minoan civilization had vanished. This was probably due to multiple reasons, such as natural disaster and invasion.

**Mycenaean Civilization**
Mycenaean civilization dominated the Aegean world from about 1400 B.C. to 1200 B.C. They first conquered the Greek mainland, and then moved on to the island of Crete and other territory throughout the Mediterranean region. After the Minoans, the Mycenaeans dominated the sea trade. They also played a large role in the development of later Greek civilization. The Mycenaeans are best remembered for their role in the Trojan War, which they fought against the city of Troy after the Trojan prince, Paris, kidnapped Helen, the wife of a Greek king. Much of what we know about the Trojan War and life during this time period comes from two epic poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey. These poems are credited to Homer, a poet who lived around 750 B.C. The Iliad tells us the story of the Trojan War, while the Odyssey focuses on the struggles of Greek hero Odysseus as he returns home after victory at Troy. Both of these stories tell us much about the values of ancient Greeks. The characters display honor and courage as they encounter many Greek gods, goddess, and mythological creatures that played a large role in the traditions of Greek life.

**Phoenician Civilization**
The Phoenicians were one of the earliest trading empires of the Mediterranean Sea. They occupied a string of cities along the eastern Mediterranean coast, in the area that today is Lebanon and Syria. Phoenicians traded with people all around the Mediterranean Sea. To promote trade, they set up colonies from North Africa to Sicily and Spain. A colony is a territory settled and ruled by people from another land. They produced glass and a purple dye, which was exchanged for different goods. Historians have called the Phoenicians "carriers of civilization" because they spread Middle Eastern civilization around the Mediterranean. One of the most significant Phoenician contributions to culture was their alphabet, which used symbols to represent sounds. Phoenician traders developed a system of 22 symbols, which was later adopted by Greeks and transformed into the letters we use today.
Geography of Ancient Greece

Geography
While river valleys were essential to the development of civilizations in Egypt, the Middle East, India, and China, the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas were central to the development of Greek civilization. Greece is part of the Balkan Peninsula, which extends southwards into the Mediterranean Sea. In addition, hundreds of islands in the Aegean were populated by Greek speaking peoples. The seas provided a vital link to the world outside. Sailors and settlers spread out from the Greek mainland and carried goods, ideas, and culture around the Mediterranean.

City-States
About three-fourths of Greece is made up of mountains, which divided the people within the region into separate city-states, rather than a large empire. The Greek word for a city-state is polis. The polis was made up of a major city and its surrounding countryside. On the top of a hill stood the acropolis, or high city, with temples and other important institutions, and below the stood the marketplace, theater, public buildings, and homes. City-states rarely united with others and many different governments evolved in each. Many were monarchies, where a hereditary ruler exercised centralized power. Other forms of government were an aristocracy, or rule by the land-holding elite, and oligarchy, or rule by a small, wealthy elite. The two most power city-states of ancient Greece were Sparta and Athens, who often competed for power in ancient Greece.

Sparta
The Spartan government consisted of two kings and a council of elders. Spartan society was entirely based in military strength. Boys trained from the age of seven for a lifetime in the military, which required exercise, discipline, and toughness. Honor was another important Spartan virtue. According to the Greek historian Plutarch, "Come back with your shield – or on it" was a common phrase women said to men before they went off to war. Women enjoyed more freedom than in other early civilizations and were able to inherit property.

Athens
Athens became a democracy over time, as people within the city-state called for more rights. A democracy is a government by the people. In Athens the government consisted of the Council of 500, whose members were chosen by lot from among all citizens over the age of 30, and an assembly made up of all male citizens. The Council worked to write laws and supervise the day-to-day work of the government, while the assembly debated the laws put before them and voted on whether to accept or reject them. However, in ancient Athens, not everyone in society had an equal say in the laws that would govern them. Only male property owners were considered citizens. Therefore, women, merchants, and people whose parents were non-citizens could not participate in government. Athenian daily life was also different from Sparta in that boys attended school if their families could afford it. Although they received military training as well, Athens encouraged young men to explore many areas of knowledge. Women received no formal education and were restricted to household duties.
**Persian & Peloponnesian Wars**

**Persian Wars**
As the Persian Empire expanded, they began to conquer territory that Greek settlers inhabited along the Aegean coast. When Athens sent ships to help their people, the Persian King Darius I grew furious and decided to punish the Greeks for their interference. Despite being greatly outnumbered, at the Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C. Athenians were able to defeat the Persian army. Legend has it that Pheidippides, an Athenian messenger, ran over twenty-five miles back to Athens to proclaim victory. The modern day marathon race was modeled after this story. In 480 B.C. Darius' son, Xerxes, sent a much larger force to conquer Greece. At the Battle of Thermopylae, a small Spartan force led by King Leonidas guarded a narrow mountain pass from the advancing Persians in order to allow the rest of the Greek armies to retreat. The Spartans held out heroically, but were defeated in the end. However, the Athenians, using their huge navy, were then able to destroy the Persian ships and end the Persian invasions.

**The Delian League**
Victory in the Persian War elevated Athens as the most powerful city-state in Greece. To continue to defend against Persian attacks, Athens organized with other Greek city-states an alliance for cooperation and mutual defense. This alliance was known as the Delian League, and Athens dominated it from the start. They controlled the treasury and used it to rebuild their city. The Delian League helped Athens expand its power and influence.

**The Age of Pericles**
The years after the Persian Wars from 460 B.C. to 429 B.C. were a golden age for Athens under the statesman Pericles. Under his rule, Athens was a direct democracy. Under this system, citizens take part directly in the day-to-day affairs of government. Pericles believed that all citizens, regardless of wealth or social class, should take part in government. They were able to serve in the Council of 500, assembly, and as judges for trials. Athens prospered during the Age of Pericles and it turned into the cultural center of Greece. They encouraged the arts through public festivals, dramatic competitions, and building programs.

**The Peloponnesian War**
The Greek success against the Persians is an example of one of the only times in which Greek city-states worked together for a common cause. Afterwards, many Greeks outside of Athens resented Athenian domination and before long, the Greek world was split into rival camps. To counter the Delian League, Sparta and other enemies of Athens formed the Peloponnesian League. In 431 B.C., warfare broke out between Athens and Sparta in a conflict which became known as the Peloponnesian War. Athens was unable to use their naval advantage, and after twenty-seven years of war, Sparta was able to defeat the Athenians in 404 B.C. The Peloponnesian War ended Athenian domination of the Greek world, but Athens still remained the cultural center of Greek civilization.
The wealth, democracy, and focus on education during the Age of Pericles spurred Greek thinkers, artists, and writers to make great achievements in their fields. Thus, the Greek golden age was centered on the city of Athens.

### Philosophy
Greek philosophers began to use observation and reason to answer questions about ethics, morality, government, and human behavior.

**Socrates**
Socrates is known as the "father of philosophy." In ancient Greece, he encouraged people to question accepted teachings and seek the truth. He believed "the unexamined life is not worth living." However, Socrates and his questioning were deemed dangerous. He was put on trial for corrupting the youths of Athens and sentenced to death.

**Plato**
Plato was Socrates most famous student, and he continued to preach the use of reason in his school called the Academy. In his book *The Republic*, Plato described his ideal state as one with three distinct social classes: workers, soldiers, and philosophers. He believed philosophers were most able to determine truth and justice, and should therefore rule. In his * Allegory of the Cave*, Plato writes of the importance of education and the search for truth.

**Aristotle**
Plato’s most famous student, Aristotle, addressed the question of how people ought to live. In his view, good conduct meant pursuing the “golden mean,” a moderate course between the extremes. He set up a school, the Lyceum, for the study of all branches of knowledge. He left writing on politics, ethics, logic, biology, literature, and many other subjects. Europe’s first universities largely based their courses on Aristotle’s works.

### Greek Literature
Greek literature began with the epic poems of Homer, who inspired later writers. The most important Greek contribution to literature was in the field of drama. Plays were performed in large outdoor theaters, where actors wore elaborate costumes and *masks* to portray different characters and emotion. The greatest Athenian playwrights were Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. All three wrote *tragedies*, plays that told of human suffering. Some Greek playwrights wrote *comedies*, humorous plays that mocked people or customs. Almost all the surviving Greek comedies were written by Aristophanes. Many of his plays both ridiculed individuals and criticized society.

### History
The Greeks also applied observation, reason, and logic to the study of history. Herodotus is often called the “Father of History” in the Western world because he went beyond listing names of rulers or the retelling of ancient legends. Before writing *The Persian Wars*, Herodotus visit many lands, collecting information from people who remembered the actual events he chronicled. Herodotus cast a critical eye on his sources, noting *bias* and conflicting accounts. Another historian, Thucydides, wrote about the Peloponnesian War. He had lived through the war and was able to describe the savage and corrupt nature of the time period. Both men set standards for future historians, such as the importance of research and avoiding bias.
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Greeks were able to represent realistic human form both at rest and, most significantly, in motion. In their idealized representation of the human form, Greek artists expressed their love of beauty, balance, and harmony. Over time, these ideals were reflected in all Greek art forms including architecture, ceramics, and jewelry. Today, the art and architecture of ancient Greece is considered “classic” — a standard of excellence against which other art forms are compared.

**Art**

Greek sculptors developed a new style that emphasized natural forms. While their world was lifelike, it was also idealistic. Sculptors carved gods, goddesses, athletes, and famous men in a way that shower human beings in their most perfect, graceful form.

The only Greek paintings to survive are on pottery. They provide us with most of that we know about daily life in ancient Greece. For example, women carry water from wells, warriors race into battle, and athletes compete in javelin contests. Each scene is designed to fit the shape of the pottery.

**Architecture**

Greek architects sought to convey a sense of perfect balance to reflect the harmony and order of the universe. The most famous example of Greek architecture is the Parthenon, a temple in Athens dedicated to the goddess Athena. The basic plan of the Parthenon is a simple rectangle, with tall columns supporting a gently sloping roof. The pediment, the triangular part of the front of the building, held stone statues when it was first built. Greek architecture has been widely admired for centuries. Today, many public buildings throughout the world have incorporated Greek architectural elements, such as columns, in their designs.
After Athens was defeated by Sparta and its allies in the Peloponnesian War, the Greek city-states became weak. In the Kingdom of Macedonia north of Greece, Philip II raised an army and conquered the Greek city-states in 338 B.C. Before he could continue spreading his empire, Philip II died and his son, Alexander, took control of Macedonia and began establishing one of the largest empires in history.

**Alexander the Great**

Alexander was only twenty years old when he took the throne, but he was an experienced soldier and had been taught by the Greek philosopher Aristotle. Over the next twelve years, Alexander defeated the Persian, Egyptian, and India empires and established towns throughout his new empire. Most of these towns were named Alexandria after him. After years of fighting, Alexander and his soldiers turned back at the Indus River and settled in Babylon. There, at the age of 32, Alexander died from a sudden sickness and left his empire to his generals. As a result of his success, he is known as Alexander the Great.

**Alexander’s Legacy and Hellenistic Culture**

Alexander the Great’s most lasting achievement was the spread of Greek culture. Greek soldiers, traders, and artisans settled in cities throughout the newly conquered territory, from Egypt to India. Local people assimilated Greek ideas, and in turn Greek settlers adopted local customs. This vital new culture that blended Greek, Persian, Egyptian, and Indian influences is known as Hellenistic civilization. At the center of the Hellenistic world stood the city of Alexandria, Egypt. The rulers of Alexandria built a great museum as a center of learning, which included a library of thousands of scrolls from the ancient world. The cities of the Hellenistic world included temples, palaces, and other public buildings that were much larger than those of classical Greece. This is exemplified by the lighthouse at Alexandria, which rose 440 feet into the air.

**Achievements of the Hellenistic Age**

During the Hellenistic age, scholars built on earlier Greek, Babylonian, and Egyptian knowledge. In mathematics, Pythagoras derived a formula to calculate the relationship between the sides of a right triangle. Euclid wrote *The Elements*, a textbook that became the basis for geometry. Eratosthenes showed that the Earth was round and accurately calculated its circumference.

The most famous Hellenistic scientist, Archimedes, applied principles of physics to make practical inventions, including the lever and pulley.

About 400 B.C., the Greek physician Hippocrates studied the causes of illnesses and looked for cures. The Hippocratic Oath attributed to him set ethical standards for doctors. Doctors today still take an oath to do their best to help the sick and do no harm to their patients.