## HISTORY

It is not too much to say that the Golden Age of Greece (or at least the various conceptions of it entertained by succeeding generations) has profoundly influenced and modified the whole trend of Western civilization, often imposing its way of thought, its imagery, its visions and dreams wherever it has been known. Rarely have a single time and people exerted such force upon history.

Much of this influence is due to the many kindnesses paid to the Greeks by history; they have been blessed with an abundance of ardent and well-spoken admirers throughout the ages. And from these supporters we have received our images of Greece as the "birthplace of democracy" and the source of "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur." Others have been more critical, more skeptical of the Greek achievement, but even the detractors have served to keep the legacy of the Greeks fresh by the volume of their voices raised in criticism.

The Greeks themselves were able publicists on their own behalf. Thucydides recounts for us the ideas of Pericles in his funeral oration honoring the Athenian dead of the first year of the Peloponnesian War:

> *The admiration of the present and succeeding ages will be ours, since we have not left our power without witness, but have shown it by mighty proofs; and far from needing a Homer for our panegyrist, or other of his craft whose verses might charm for the moment only for the impression which they gave to melt at the touch of fact, we have forced every sea and land to be the highway of our daring, and everywhere, whether for evil or for good, have left imperishable monuments behind us.*

To his audience, Pericles' words carried a ring of irrefutable truth; on their every side buildings and creations attested to his claim. And yet, within decades of Pericles' speech, the power and glory of Athens were lost in defeat, and the Golden Age of Greece, of which they were part, was reduced to a memory within the course of a century.

To us, this violent plunge from the heights of greatness may seem tragic; indeed, all the elements of tragedy are present--the rise of the great hero, the fatal flaw and misstep, the irrevocable and complete destruction which ensue. As tragedy, the history of Greece from 500 to 300 B.C. evokes in us feelings of admiration and sympathy, and we are forced to admit its achievements and sorrow at its decline. We may even recall the thought of the author of Ecclesiastes that:

*The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.*

Such emotions, however, must not obscure our perceptions, for extreme responses seldom if ever withstand careful and objective analysis. A balanced assessment of Greece's Golden Age need not preclude a recognition of its originality and power. The Greek city-states produced modes of inquiry and ways of doing things that represented a radical departure from those which had evolved before them in the Near East, and one must feel excitement in the presence of their philosophers and thinkers, their artists and political figures. On the other hand, we must not permit our inherited attitudes to influence our judgment. The glory of Greece may endure in people's minds, but the Golden Age did not survive its own activities; it failed to overcome its own shortcomings and limitations.

In this unit we shall examine the rise of Hellenic civilization, the Golden Age of the fifth century, and the decline of Greece to 300 B.C. In the course of our discussion, lectures, and readings, perhaps we will achieve not only a knowledge of the "how and what" of Greek history but also an understanding of the "why" as well. As Thucydides remarked:

*The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content.*

We need not agree entirely with Thucydides in order to see the profit of such an inquiry.

## THE RISE OF HELLENIC CIVILIZATION

As it emerged from the Dark Age around 800 B.C., Homeric Greece retained a certain measure of Mycenaean "things"--places, arms and weapons, chariots--but little of Mycenaean institutions or culture; the break with the past had been too sharp. Following the elimination of Mycenaean rulers and the whole power structure they headed, society had to reorganize itself with new arrangements and new values appropriate to the new material and social situations.

The world of Agamemnon and Odysseus was one of petty kings and nobles, who possessed the best lands and largest flocks. The noble household (*oikos*) was the center of activity and power, and power depended upon wealth (measured in land-holding), personal prowess, and connections of marriage and alliance. In such circumstances, power and rule extended

only to the limits of the individual noble's ability to exert and enforce his will. The king with power was judge, lawgiver, and commander, and, in the absence of bureaucratic apparatus and a formalized legal system, the equilibrium of power was delicately balanced. Because of this "rule by arbitrary will," social tension was chronic, and struggles for power were frequent.

As noted in Unit II, two phenomena which marked the Archaic Age were cultural diffusion through colonization and the emergence and development of that characteristically Greek community structure, the *polis*. While both served as "safety valves" relieving the tensions between the organs of community and the power drives of ambitious individuals, the second especially led to the creation of institutions which subjected the wills of even the most powerful men to formal rules of authority.

The disappearance of kings from the scene was undramatic and unmemorable. Without them, the nobles were compelled to formalize the previously informal advisory bodies. Councils with defined prerogatives and responsibilities and a machinery for selection and rotation began to emerge. This process of formalization and rationalization took place, however, only within the closed circle of the aristocratic ranks. As a result, political instruments for the monopolization of power were created, and social crises remained firmly rooted in Greek society.

Gradually all power and control came to reside in the local aristocracy. M. I. Finley, for example, points to the stress on geneologies, with every noble family claiming a divine or Heroic ancestor, as a certain sign of this tendency toward an exclusive aristocracy of blood. Wealth, moreover, gave the aristocracy a long-lived military monopoly; iron was still scarce and expensive, and developments in weaponry put adequate arms beyond the reach of the average man. In any event, by the seventh century B.C. political control in Athens, for example, was in the hands of the council of the nobles, with the most important office held by the archon. This "power-play" was counterbalanced to some extent by the great expansion of trade and commerce, which shifted some of the power to the newly wealthy but non-aristocratic citizens, especially the merchants.

As we saw in Mesopotamia (Unit I), economics favored the wealthy and commercial interests to the detriment of the small farmer and landowner, and with increasing indebtedness came impoverishment and slavery. All of these developments increased the strain on the social fabric. What was needed was a leader who could understand and remedy the major grievances of the poor while remaining sympathetic to the aristocracy. In 594 B.C. Solon was called to the archonship and given plenipotentiary powers to put an end to social strife through a reform of the laws and political system.

Solon's stand with the poor has a striking resemblance to the moral injunctions of an Old Testament prophet:

*Unrighteous are the hearts of the rulers of the people, who*

*will one day suffer many pains for their great pride* [hubris]; *for they do not know how to restrain their excesses . . . . They grow rich through unrighteous deeds, and steal for themselves right and left, respecting neither sacred nor public property . . . .*

In our day prophets with such sentiments are seldom invited to "White House Breakfasts." Thus it is important for us to note that Solon was appointed to his office; he did not seize power. In any society such an action should command respect.

To begin with, Solon engaged in what he referred to as the "shaking off of burdens." First, those who were tied to involuntary share-cropping or who had been taken into bondage as a result of indebtedness were freed, and a law was passed against the securing of loans by the mortgaging of the persons of free men or women. Solon also encouraged exports and industry in order to promote economic welfare and initiated a series of political reforms that were designed to enlarge the numbers of participants in political life. Solon's codification of law resulted in clarity and certainty in legal matters; most importantly, it resulted in *public knowledge* of the law. In the past law had been a powerful weapon in the hands of the aristocracy, which was self-perpetuating and secretive. Because of Solon, justice was possible through a rational code, openly administered. He stopped short, however, of any confiscation and redistribution of the lands of the aristocrats. In retrospect, it seems that Solon laid the groundwork for the later development of democracy even though he himself was not a democrat, and it is to his credit that he did not use his position and popularity for personal gain.

In spite of Solon's reforms, a formal status hierarchy based on wealth remained, and the new constitutional machinery, of itself, did not lead to internal peace. The personal status of the peasantry was secure, but their economic position remained precarious, and the aristocracy continued to vie for power and wealth among themselves. Failure to be thoroughgoing enough in reform allowed civil strife to continue. As a result, Pisistratus, the first tyrant, rose to power in Athens in 561 B.C. Although called a tyrant because he usurped power and ruled by unconstitutional means, Pisistratus gave the masses new rights and opportunities and limited the power of the aristocracy. Of course the rule of a tyrant depended upon the will of one man and was, in this sense, a retrogressive step when compared with constitutional development. On the other hand, a benevolent tyrant might serve the interests of the people in the long run even as he acted to serve his own interests in the short run; it is a paradox worth thinking about. In any case, Pisistratus, and his sons, ruled Athens with few intermissions until their final ouster in 510 B.C.

Two years of civil war ensued after the events of 510 B.C., and many of the old aristocracy sought a return to the "good old days." But thirty-five years of functioning within a constitutional framework had raised the level of political consciousness, and the attempted return to the past was thwarted. In 508 B.C. Cleisthenes, another reformer, put together the constitution by which Athens was ruled for the next two

centuries. He created ten divisions which embraced a cross-section of all classes of citizens; the Council of Four Hundred, which oversaw the assembly, was enlarged, its members selected by lot from the ten divisions; and discussion and passage of law was made the prerogative of the popular assembly.

As a result of social and political development, Athens, which has been used here as a "typical" example, entered the fifth century B.C.--the Golden Age--armed with a constitution and a short tradition of increasingly democratic activity and methods. To be sure, the sources for potential civil strife remained, as did the problem of reconciling the will of the individual with the demands of the greater community, but much progress had been made by locating the resolution of the problems in legal, social, and literary forms. The days of the Homeric kind of hero were numbered.

## SPARTA

If Athens can serve as our model for one major form of social and political development in many parts of Greece, Sparta, the other superpower, can serve to illustrate another.

Sparta was located in the valley of the Eurotas River, with fields more fertile than was usual in Greece. Spartan territory, which covered the entire southeast Peloponnesus (Laconia) included many indigenous free people who lived in their own communities but had no autonomy in military and foreign affairs. In the latter roles they were obligated to fill the subordinate ranks in the Spartan army and to follow Spartan leadership. There were, in our modern terminology, subjects rather than citizens, whom the Spartans referred to as *perioeci*.

Below the class of *perioeci* existed the helot, whose position was little better than that of a farm animal. The helot was permitted to live in a family group and was, therefore, the source of a self-perpetuating slave population. Unlike the slaves in Athens or our own country of some years ago, the helot was not considered to be the property of a personal master. Rather, he was assigned to a Spartan master to whom he turned over one-half of his production. In this way the Spartans themselves were freed to attend to their primary task--military duty in the service to the state.

At the top of this rigid social hierarchy were the Spartan citizens, an elite body of citizens who alone were entitled to political voice and participation in the rigorous military training. This Spartan training was started at age seven and stressed courage and obedience, indifference to pain and other discomfort, and contempt for the civilized niceties of other Greek states. Service to the state, devotion to duty, great personal austerity, and "obedience to the laws" (*eunomia*) were the hallmarks of a good citizen of Laconia, and helped Sparta to resolve (or at least

suppress) the tension between individual desire and community goals.

The government of Sparta was headed by two kings, thought to be descended from Heracles, and sharing equal powers. They were advised by a board of five ephors, who were often the virtual ruling power of the state. A council of elders (*Gerousia*) served to give direction, and all major decisions were approved by an assembly of all Spartan male citizens.

It should be no surprise that Spartan politics and social life were of a conservative nature. Strangers were looked upon with suspicion, and large scale trade was discouraged. Spartan involvement in external affairs was rare, though usually of a decisive nature because of its superb army. Clearly, Spartan conservatism and reluctance to engage in protracted external activities were due in large part to the need for supervising and controlling a hostile subject population which was a perpetual threat.

## THE PERSIAN WARS

As discussed in Unit II, in the sixth century B.C. Persian might, directed by Cyrus, conquered practically the entire Near East, including all of the Ionian cities except Miletus. After Darius I became king of the Persians, the Milesians led the Ionian city-states in a desperate attack on the Persians. From 499 to 494 B.C. the Ionians held out against the Persians with the aid of their Athenian kinsmen. Predictably, the revolt failed, and Miletus was burned in reprisal. The Athenians were stunned, since Miletus had been the most brilliant of the Hellenic cities.

In 492 B.C. Darius sent an expedition through Thrace to punish the Athenians. But a storm partially destroyed the Persian fleet accompanying the land forces, and Darius returned home. Two years later the Persians set forth and engaged the Athenians at Marathon. Herodotus, the Greek historian, reports that the Athenians, with fewer than half the number of the Persians, charged the enemy on the run. (Perhaps the recent example of Miletus added to their exertions.) In any event, the Athenians won a tremendous victory, killing about 6,000 of the foe. In many respects the battle at Marathon was one of the most decisive in history, for it halted the westward thrust of the Asiatic advance and inspired the Greeks with a fair hope of maintaining their freedom.

Ten years later a new Persian army under Xerxes, Darius' successor, came in vast numbers. But the Athenians had built up their naval forces and were given aid by the Spartans, who distinguished themselves in a brilliant episode at the mountain pass of Thermopylae. In the ensuing action Athens was burned, but the Greek fleet destroyed the Persian forces at the Bay of Salamis. Xerxes was forced to retreat to Asia Minor, and the army left in Greece was defeated a year later in 479 B.C. at Plataea. The victory gave Athens a surge of confidence in its own righteousness and abilities, and this helps to account for much of the