

Classical Civilization in the Mediterranean: Greece and Rome

The Persian Tradition

- Founded by **Cyrus the Great**, the Persian Empire was tolerant of local customs, developed iron technology, organized an effective government and military, developed a new religion (**Zoroastrianism**), and supported a great artistic tradition.

Patterns of Greek and Roman History

- The rise of the dynamic **city-states** of classical Greece began around 800 B.C.E., reaching a high point in the 5th century B.C.E., when **Pericles** governed **Athens**.
- Following the **Peloponnesian Wars** between Athens and **Sparta**, decline set in, but a new pattern of expansion occurred under **Alexander the Great**. Greek values spread widely in the ensuing **Hellenistic** period.
- As Hellenism declined, Rome was emerging as an expanding **republic**, defeating **Carthage** in the **Punic Wars** and later becoming the **Roman Empire** after the death of **Julius Caesar**. For roughly 200 years, the Empire enjoyed great power and prosperity.
- Despite the efforts of emperors like **Diocletian** and **Constantine**, the ensuing 250 years brought a slow but decisive fall.

Greek and Roman Political Institutions

- Greece and Rome featured an important variety of political forms. Both tended to emphasize **aristocratic rule**, but there were significant **democratic elements** as well.
- In the Greek **polis**, those who were citizens participated actively in political life. In Athens, the system of **direct democracy** allowed citizens to shape policy in general assemblies.
- In the Roman republic, the **Senate** was the main legislative body, but under the autocratic empire, the Senate's influence waned.
- Later, Rome added emphasis on law and created the institutions necessary to run a vast and decentralized empire.

Religion and Culture

- Greek and Roman culture did not directly generate a lasting major religion, though **Christianity** arose in the classical Mediterranean context. Greco-Roman religion used epic poems and mythology to explore human foibles and passions.
- An emphasis on **rationality**, especially in **philosophy**, science, and a strong artistic and architectural tradition, permeated classical Mediterranean culture.
- **Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle** are the most well-known Greek philosophers.

Economy and Society in the Mediterranean

- Greek and Roman societies mirrored many standard social features of an agricultural economy, including a large peasantry and a land-owning aristocracy, and dependence on trade and commerce.
- Differing versions of the patriarchal family structure existed in both Greek and Roman culture.
- Distinctive features included **slavery** and a slightly less oppressive attitude toward women than was true in classical China.

Toward the Fall of Rome

- **Rome began to decline** after about 180 C.E. Symptoms were gradual, including loss of territory and economic reversals.
- Ultimately, invaders periodically raided Rome until the empire finally collapsed.

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