Classic Civilization in the Mediterranean:

Greece and Rome

For most Americans, classical Mediterranean culture constitutes “our own” past.

Designers of public buildings in the U.S. copied Greek and Roman models.

Plato and Aristotle continue to be thought of as the founders of our philosophical traditions.

Greco-Roman history is one of three major classical civilizations.

-More dynamic than the Chinese and Indian civilizations in some areas but less noticeably successful in other ways.

-Rome mastered engineering while the Greeks specialized in scientific thought.

-Greece and Rome shared political ideas, had common religion and artistic styles, and similar economic structures.

**The Persian Tradition**

While a classic civilization was developing in the Mediterranean, another civilization was growing where Mesopotamia had flourished.

They were tolerant of local customs, advanced iron technology and developed a new religion-Zoroastrianism.

**Patterns of Greek and Roman History**

*Greece*

The early river valley civilizations of the middle east and Africa had spread to some of the islands (Crete) near the Greek peninsula showing some Egyptian influence.

The rapid rise of Greek civilization was based on the creation of strong city-states. Each city-state had its own government, either tyranny or aristocratic council.

Geography separates the peninsula and the city-state works well instead of a centralized government.

Trade developed rapidly.

Pericles, an aristocrat was a famous political figure that promoted democracy.

Athens and Sparta vied for power in the Peloponnesian wars and thus caused the demise of Greece.

The cities were then conquered by Philip of Macedonia and then this empire was further extended across Persia to the east to the border of India and couth into Africa by his son Alexander.

After this, some regional kingdoms continued for a couple centuries and this time period is known as the Hellenistic-because of the Greek influence.

*Rome*

The final phase of the Mediterranean civilization.

Began in humbly and spread out across the Italian peninsula.

Began with political virtue and stability.

They became strong militarily to protect and then spread across the Mediterranean to northern Africa and east to Greece, eventually across the Middle East.

Instability ensues as generals became powerful and the poor of the city rebelled.

Julius Caesar gains power followed by his nephew Augustus Caesar.

Another great emperor named Marcus Aurelius led Rome to greatness and expanded the empire throughout North and Western Europe, North Africa and the Middle East.

Rome declined with economic failure (falling trade levels) and population (lower birthrate)loss.

Leaders became less effective with few exceptions-Diocletian and Constantine (who adopted Christianity in an attempt to unite the empire).

Most governments became more powerful at the local level (instead of their allegiance to Rome).

It fell to invaders from the north because it could no longer defend itself.

Mediterranean civilizations had built on previous cultures in the region.

They began as monarchies but evolved into more complex and developed forms of government.

They diversified their economy, moving away from grain growing.

Greek and Roman Political Institutions

Polis means city-state

Strong political ideals and interests created similarities between Greek and Roman society the Confucian values of classical China (although the idea of direct citizen involvement was strictly Mediterranean).

Neither Rome nor Greece developed the elaborate bureaucracy found in the Chinese government.

As in India, participation in local government is evident.

Strong men governed in Greece-tyranny but they were effective rulers.

Greece

Democracy means the people. Major decisions were made by general assembly’s (of aristocrats) in which all active citizens could participate.

-Only a few were actually considered active (no women, slaves or foreigners).

-Lower class citizens often encouraged reckless actions.

Aristocrats-rule of the best

Rome

All Roman citizens could gather to elect various magistrates to represent the people.

The Senate was the most important legislative body composed of aristocrats.

Much of the aristocratic idea keys on political ethics , the duties of citizens, incorruptible service by the politicians and political skill (such as oratory).

Some of this resembled Confucianism.

Local autonomy prevailed in the Roman Republic.

There was considerable tolerance for local customs and religions.

The 12 Tables was introduced in the early Roman republic.

-They were intended to restrain the upper classes and ordinary people from arbitrary actions and hold them to some common principles.

-They were fair and reasonable.

-These early laws were also intended to evolve and change with the conditions.

Roman law spread throughout the empire and it helped to regulate social life.

If citizenship was granted, property could be bought, followed by trade and thus economic unity ensued.

Most governments concentrated on the law and the military.

They did attack Christianity but only sometimes as they would not place their loyalty to the Republic first.

**In Depth**

Classical Mediterranean in Comparative Perspective

India-“other world” attention

China-centralized government

Each civilization developed an empire

Each relied on agriculture

Med and China secular culture is similar, although some religion is seen.

Each civilization emphasized a social hierarchy.

-The elite wanted to maintain their control (priests in India, bureaucrats in China and aristocrats in Greece and Rome).

-Philosophies developed to explain/defend these social divisions.

-India’s caste system and the Mediterranean civilizations allowed movement only if wealth was acquired.

-China’s social structure was rigid unless you were educated and that only occurred to a small number.

Each civilization defined the lowest orders.

-China’s ‘mean people’ (followed directly by the merchants)

-India’s ‘untouchables’

-Greco-Roman had slaves

Local authorities and military took care of managing the hierarchy in the Mediterranean cultures.

Religion and the promise of rewards through reincarnation succeeded in India.

Chinese Confucianism urged obedience and self-restraint.

Social unrest occurred and so none of the systems worked perfectly.

**Religion and Culture**

Christianity spread although it was not a product of Roman Culture but it does become influenced by it.

Greco-Roman religion (Spirits of nature)

Had gods and goddesses (Zeus/Jupiter-creator or father god).

They interacted w/mortals-‘of this world’

Stories (literature) were used to illustrate human passions/weaknesses.

Mediterranean civilizations lacked spiritual passion. Many thinkers/philosophers searched for explanations/model for ethical behavior.

Aristotle – Golden Mean (balance)-Alexander’s teacher.

Stoics – moral independence – discipline/personal bravery.

Socrates always questioning, accused of undermining loyalty (“Corrupting the youth”).

Plato – understand three forms –True, Good, Beautiful

Greeks and Romans-human ability to think is important, not human spirituality

Similar to Confucianism, but more skeptical and focused on abstract questions

Rational inquiry

Few inventions, many theories that were wrong

Some geometry (Pythagoras, Archimedes, Euclid),

anatomy (Galen).

Romans more practical – engineering – roads/aqueducts

Art and literature – far more was far more important

Religion inspired artist expression – temples, statues

Realistic depiction of human form

Drama-comedy and tragedy-focused on human flaws

Sophocles – Oedipus complex

Romans known more for athletic performances – charioteers/gladiators

Greek literature – epic tradition – Homer – Iliad/Odyssey – links mythology/history

Sculpture – heroic/realistic tradition

Architecture – columns – Doric, Ionic, Corinthian – classical architecture

Rome – dome/stadium – heavily adorned public buildings/monuments

**Economy and Society**

Tendency for large landowners to squeeze out small farmers feudalism later.

A lot of tension comes from farmers trying to stay independent and get out of debt

Difficulty in farming – geography, topography

Forced to grow olives or grapes – but these take capital and patience because it takes 5 years to get a crop.

Commercial agriculture led to need for empire.

Supervised grain trade, public works, storage facilities

Manufactured products less advanced – exported animals/skins, metals.

Merchants – better in Mediterranean than China, but ambiguous

Slavery – key component in Rome, agriculture and from military expansion.

Free farmers couldn’t compete w/ slave/tenant labor

Hurt technological innovation – behind India/China in production technology

Tight family structure – women inferior/different laws – not as bad as China, but infanticide.

Not the period of “human race was most happy or prosperous” – idealized in Western world.

Urban achievements not everything.