AKS 31 – THE CLASSICAL ERA – ANCIENT GREECE

AKS 31: Examine the political, philosophical, and cultural interaction of Classical Mediterranean societies from 700 BCE/BC to 400 CE/AD.

Overview of AKS 31: You will be expected to explain how the development of the Classical Age societies of the Mediterranean were the product of the interaction among societies in the Middle East, North Africa and Europe. Special attention should be placed on the religious, philosophical, technological and political developments that left a lasting legacy. Focus should be placed on the changes and continuities the region experienced in the transition from small regional states to large multi-ethnic empires.

AKS 31a: Understand and explain the origins and structure of the Greek polis (Sparta and Athens)

In the period around 700 BC, Greece was divided into several independent and often warring kingdoms that each had their own king. These Greek kingdoms were ruled as monarchies (monarchy: A government ruled by a king. Rule was hereditary and some leaders claimed that they had divine right). The king of each kingdom was supported by an army made up of part-time hoplites (hoplites: citizen soldiers in Ancient Greece) soldiers, see picture to the left for an example, who came from the class of small landowning farmers, merchants and artisans (artisans: people who made goods by hand). Over time, the hoplites were growing increasingly unhappy with the power of the kings. In many city-states, repeated clashes occurred between the kings and the common people. This lead to powerful individuals, usually nobles or other wealthy citizens, sometimes seizing control of the government by appealing to the common people for support. These rulers were called tyrants. Unlike today, tyrants generally were not considered harsh and cruel. Rather, they were looked upon as leaders who would work for the interests of the ordinary people. Once in power, for example, tyrants often set up building programs to provide jobs and housing for their supporters. These tyrants promised reforms, or changes, in exchange for the support of the hoplites. Tyrants successfully overthrew many of the kings and then attempted to establish complete and total power for themselves. In most cases this was unsuccessful and the tyrants were themselves overthrown by the hoplites ushering the period of the Greek polis.

In the period from about 600 BC to about 300 BC Greece was divided into several (again often warring) city-states, called poleis (plural of polis). A polis was a Greek city-state that included a central city and its surrounding countryside. Each polis acted as its own independent political unit which meant that they each had their own form of government. The geography of Greece (see the map to the left) made total unification very hard. Greece is made up of mountains and surrounded by seas which (again) made unification among the different poleis very difficult. Also, each polis had an agora, which was their outdoor marketplace, and an acropolis. The acropolis was a fortified hilltop, typically the highest point in each polis, where citizens gathered to discuss city government. The most well-known acropolis was in Athens, Greece.

Population growth and limited arable land led many of the Greek city-states to establish colonies around the Mediterranean. This spread Greek culture and political traditions to neighboring people, including the Romans and brought conflict with neighboring empires like the Persians.
GREEK GOVERNMENT

Greek city-states had many different forms of government (see the chart below). In some, a single person, called a king, ruled in a government called a monarchy. Others adopted an aristocracy, a government ruled by a small group of noble, landowning families. These very rich families often gained political power after serving in a king’s military cavalry (soldiers on horseback). Later, as trade expanded, a new class of wealthy merchants and artisans emerged in some cities. When these groups became unhappy with aristocratic rule, they sometimes took power or shared it with the nobility. They formed an oligarchy, a government ruled by a few powerful people.

The idea of representative government began to take root in some city-states, particularly Athens. Like other city-states, Athens went through power struggles between rich and poor. However, Athenians avoided major political upheavals by making timely reforms. Athenian reformers moved toward democracy, rule by the people. In Athens, citizens participated directly in political decision making.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of Government</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monarchy</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- State ruled by a king</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Rule is hereditary</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Some rulers claim divine right</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Practiced in Mycenae by 2000 B.C.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Aristocracy</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- State ruled by nobility</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Rule is hereditary and based on family ties, social rank, wealth</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Social status and wealth support rulers’ authority</td>
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<td>- Practiced in Athens prior to 594 B.C.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Oligarchy</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- State ruled by a small group of citizens</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Rule is based on wealth or ability</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Ruling group controls military</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Practiced in Sparta by 500 B.C.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Direct Democracy</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- State ruled by its citizens</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Rule is based on citizenship</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Majority rule decides vote</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Practiced in Athens by about 500 B.C.</td>
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ATHENS and SPARTA

Of the Greek polies, Athens and Sparta were the most powerful and influential.

ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY

The first step toward democracy came when a nobleman named Draco took power. In 621 B.C., Draco developed a legal code based on the idea that all Athenians, rich and poor, were equal under the law. Draco’s code dealt very harshly with criminals, making death the punishment for practically every crime. It also upheld such practices as debt slavery, in which debtors worked as slaves to repay their debts.

More democratic reforms were introduced by Solon (SO•luhn), who came to power in 594 B.C. Stating that no citizen should own another citizen, Solon outlawed debt slavery. He organized all Athenian citizens into four social classes according to wealth. Only members of the top three classes could hold political office. However, all citizens, regardless of class, could participate in the Athenian assembly. Solon also introduced the legal concept that any citizen could bring charges against wrongdoers.

Around 500 B.C., the Athenian leader Cleisthenes (KLYS•thuh•NEEZ) introduced further reforms. He broke up the power of the rich nobility by organizing citizens into ten groups based on where they lived rather than on their wealth. He also increased the power of the assembly by allowing all citizens to submit laws for debate and passage. The reforms of Cleisthenes allowed Athenian citizens to participate in a limited democracy. However, citizenship was restricted to a relatively small number of Athenians. Only free adult male property owners born in Athens were considered citizens. Women, slaves, and foreigners (about 30% of the population) were excluded from citizenship and had few rights. That means that only 10% to 15% of the population of Athens was ever allowed to participate in government.

A wise and able statesman named Pericles led Athens during much of its golden age. Honest and fair, Pericles held onto popular support for 32 years. He was a skillful politician, an inspiring speaker, and a respected general. He so dominated the life of Athens from 461 to 429 B.C. that this period often is called the Age of Pericles. He had three goals: (1) to strengthen Athenian democracy, (2) to hold and strengthen the empire, and (3) to glorify Athens.

To strengthen democracy, Pericles increased the number of public officials who were paid salaries. Earlier in Athens, most positions in public office were unpaid. Thus, only wealthier Athenian citizens could afford to hold public office. Now even the poorest citizen could serve if elected or chosen by lot. Consequently, Athens had more citizens engaged in self-government than any other city-state in Greece. This reform made Athens one of the most democratic governments in history.
The introduction of direct democracy, a form of government in which citizens rule directly and not through representatives, was an important legacy of Periclean Athens. Few other city-states practiced this style of government. In Athens, male citizens who served in the assembly established all the important government policies that affected the polis. In a speech honoring the Athenian war dead, Pericles expressed his great pride in Athenian democracy:

![Primary Source]

Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership in a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses. No one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty.

**PERICLES, “The Funeral Oration,” from Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War**

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**ATHENIAN EDUCATION**

For the most part, only the sons of wealthy families received formal education. Schooling began around the age of seven and largely prepared boys to be good citizens. They studied reading, grammar, poetry, history, mathematics, and music. Because citizens were expected to debate issues in the assembly, boys also received training in logic and public speaking. And since the Greeks believed that it was important to train and develop the body, part of each day was spent in athletic activities. When they got older, boys went to military school to help them prepare for another important duty of citizenship—defending Athens. Athenian girls did not attend school. Rather, they were educated at home by their mothers and other female members of the household. They learned about child-rearing, weaving cloth, preparing meals, managing the household, and other skills that helped them become good wives and mothers. Some women were able to take their education farther and learned to read and write. A few even became accomplished writers. Even so, most women had very little to do with Athenian life outside the boundaries of family and home.

**SPARTA BUILDS A MILITARY STATE**

In outlook and values, Sparta contrasted sharply with the other city-states, Athens in particular. Instead of a democracy, Sparta built a military state. Around 725 B.C., Sparta conquered the neighboring region of Messenia and took over the land. The Messenians became helots (HEHL-uhts), peasants forced to stay on the land they worked. Each year, the Spartans demanded half of the helots’ crops. In about 650 B.C., the Messenians, resentful of the Spartans’ harsh rule, revolted. The Spartans, who were outnumbered eight to one, just barely put down the revolt. Shocked at their vulnerability, they dedicated themselves to making Sparta a strong city-state.

**SPARTAN SOCIETY**

The Spartan social order consisted of several groups. The first were citizens descended from the original inhabitants of the region. This group included the ruling families who owned the land. A second group, noncitizens who were free, worked in commerce and industry. The helots, at the bottom of Spartan society, were little better than slaves. They worked in the fields or as house servants.

**SPARTAN DAILY LIFE**

From around 600 until 371 B.C., Sparta had the most powerful army in Greece. However, the Spartan people paid a high price for their military supremacy. All forms of individual expression were discouraged. As a result, Spartans did not value the arts, literature, or other artistic and intellectual pursuits. Spartans valued duty, strength, and discipline over freedom, individuality, beauty, and learning. Since men were expected to serve in the army until the age of 60, their daily life centered on military training. Boys left home when they were 7 and moved into army barracks, where they stayed until they reached the age of 30. They spent their days marching, exercising, and fighting. They undertook these activities in all weathers, wearing only light tunics and no shoes. At night, they slept without blankets on hard benches. Their daily diet consisted of little more than a bowl of coarse black porridge. Those who were not satisfied were encouraged to steal food. Such training produced tough, resourceful soldiers.

Spartan girls also led hardy lives. They received some military training, and they also ran, wrestled, and played sports. Like boys, girls were taught to put service to Sparta above everything—even love of family. A legend says that Spartan women told husbands and sons going to war to “come back with your shield or on it.” As adults, Spartan women had considerable freedom, especially in running the family estates when their husbands were on active military service. Such freedom surprised men from other Greek city-states. This was particularly true of Athens, where women were expected to remain out of sight and quietly raise children.
AKS 31b: Identify the ideas and impact of important individuals, including: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle & Alexander the Great.

PHILOSOPHERS

The Greeks endured years and years of war with the Persian Empire. It was during this time of uncertainty that several great thinkers appeared in Athens. They were determined to seek the truth, no matter where the search led them. The Greeks called such thinkers philosophers, meaning “lovers of wisdom.” These Greek thinkers based their philosophy on the following two assumptions: 1. The universe (land, sky, and sea) is put together in an orderly way, and subject to absolute and unchanging laws. 2. People can understand these laws through the use of logic and reason.

SOCRATES

Socrates was an Athenian philosopher (a lover of wisdom) and teacher who lived from 470 to 399 BCE. He believed that absolute standards did exist for truth and justice and encouraged Greeks to question their own beliefs, moral character and the world around them. To accomplish this he developed a teaching method in which he would ask students a series of leading questions, now called the Socratic Method. In doing this, he challenged students to think for themselves rather than accept traditional understandings of the world. Historians believe that it was Socrates who once said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Socrates was admired by many who understood his ideas. However, others were puzzled by this man’s viewpoints.

In 399 B.C., when Socrates was about 70 years old, he was brought to trial for “corrupting the youth of Athens” and “neglecting the city’s gods.” In his own defense, Socrates said that his teachings were good for Athens because they forced people to think about their values and actions. The jury disagreed and condemned him to death. He died by drinking hemlock, a slow-acting poison. To this day, Socrates is best known for his devotion to gaining self-knowledge. He once said “There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance.”

PLATO

Born into a wealthy Athenian family, Plato had careers as a wrestler and a poet before he became a philosopher. A student of Socrates, Plato (PLAY-toh), was in his late 20s when his teacher died. Later, Plato wrote down the conversations of Socrates “as a means of philosophical investigation.” Sometime in the 370s B.C., Plato wrote his most famous work, The Republic. Plato continued and expanded the philosophical work of Socrates by continuing to encourage rational thought. This is perhaps best exemplified by the cave allegory (metaphor) found in his most famous work, published in 370 BCE. In this brief passage, Plato compares the traditions and superstitions that most people rely upon to understand the world as shadows of the real truth. He also wrote his idea of a perfect government that would be run by a philosopher-king.

Plato’s writings dominated philosophic thought in Europe for nearly 1,500 years. He eventually returned to Athens and founded a school called the Academy in 387 B.C. The school lasted for approximately 900 years. It was Plato who once stated, “Philosophy begins in wonder.” His only rivals in importance were his teacher, Socrates, and his own pupil, Aristotle (AR-ih-STAHT-uhl).

ARISTOTLE

Aristotle, the son of a physician, was one of the brightest students at Plato’s Academy. He came there as a young man and stayed for 20 years until Plato’s death. In 335 B.C., Aristotle opened his own school in Athens called the Lyceum. The school eventually rivaled the Academy. Aristotle worked to collect and categorize all of the knowledge from a wide variety of disciplines including politics, philosophy, ethics, poetry, physics, astronomy, meteorology, zoology, and psychology. Aristotle’s work laid the foundation for the modern study of many of these disciplines.

Aristotle once argued, “He who studies how things originated . . . will achieve the clearest view of them.” He constantly questioned the nature of the world and of human belief, thought, and knowledge. Aristotle came close to summarizing all the knowledge up to his time. He invented a method for arguing according to rules of logic. He later applied his method to problems in the fields of psychology, physics, and biology. His work provides the basis of the scientific method used today. One of Aristotle’s most famous pupils was Alexander, son of King Philip II of Macedonia. Around 343 B.C., Aristotle accepted the king’s invitation to tutor the 13-year-old prince. Alexander’s status as a student abruptly ended three years later, when his father called him back to Macedonia. Alexander went on to become known as Alexander the Great.
MACEDONIA & ALEXANDER THE GREAT

The kingdom of Macedonia, located just north of Greece, had rough terrain and a cold climate. The Macedonians were a hardy people who lived in mountain villages rather than city-states. Most Macedonian nobles thought of themselves as Greeks. The Greeks, however, looked down on the Macedonians as uncivilized foreigners who had no great philosophers, sculptors, or writers. The Macedonians did have one very important resource—their shrewd and fearless kings—specifically, King Philip II and his son Alexander.

In 359 B.C., Philip II became king of Macedonia. Though only 23 years old, he quickly proved to be a brilliant general and a ruthless politician. Philip transformed the rugged peasants under his command into a well-trained professional army. He organized his troops into phalanxes, a military formation created by the Greeks (see pic to the left). Philip conquered a lot of the Greek city-states before being assassinated by a former guardsman while attending his daughter’s wedding. His son Alexander, who was only 20 years old at the time, was immediately proclaimed King of Macedonia.

Alexander was a pupil of Aristotle when he was the prince of Macedonia. In 336 BCE Alexander became the king of Macedonia and in 334 BCE announced that a unified force of Greeks and Macedonians would invade the Persian Empire presumably to extract revenge for the Persian invasion of Greece in 480 BCE. By 326 BCE Alexander’s armies had defeated the Persian Empire, taking control of the Middle East and Egypt and crossed the Indus River in northern India. In his wake, Alexander left a series of new cities inhabited by a mix of native peoples and Greek colonists. Alexander died at age 32 in 323 BCE without an heir. His generals fought over the empire, eventually dividing it among themselves. While the political unity of the empire Alexander created was short lived, the cultural legacy endured for centuries as Greek culture blended with native traditions across the Middle East and South Asia. Hellenistic culture was the blending of Macedonian, Greek, Persian, Egyptian and Indian cultures.

AKS 31d: Describe polytheism in the Greek world.

The Greeks developed a rich set of myths, or traditional stories, about their gods. Through the myths, the Greeks sought to understand the mysteries of nature and the power of human passions. Myths explained the changing of the seasons, for example. Greeks attributed human qualities, such as love, hate, and jealousy, to their gods. The gods quarreled and competed with each other constantly. However, unlike humans, the gods lived forever. Zeus, the ruler of the gods, lived on Mount Olympus with his wife, Hera. Hera was often jealous of Zeus’ relationships with other women. Athena, goddess of wisdom, was Zeus’ daughter and his favorite child. The Greeks thought of Athena as the guardian of cities, especially of Athens, which was named in her honor. Attempts to appease the gods and goddesses led to the construction of monumental architecture like the Parthenon in Athens, seen below. It was built for the goddess Athena on top of the Acropolis.

I am not afraid of an army of lions led by a sheep;
I am afraid of an army of sheep led by a lion.
- ALEXANDER THE GREAT