GREECE

NEOLITHIC ERA

Indigenous Neolithic people and migrants from Anatolia lived in small villages, farmed and herded animals, and made fertility figurines, pottery and textiles.

MINOAN CIVILIZATION ON ISLAND OF CRETE – 2200– 1000 BC

This civilization had a large palace at Knossos where Minoan Kings lived in splendor with gardens, sparkling seas, and many attendants. There were social classes, two written languages (Linear A and B, Linear B has been deciphered), complex religious beliefs such as a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses including a snake goddess and a cult of the sacred bull, and considerable trade with exports of pottery, bronze, olive oil and timber. There has been no sign of fortifications or weapons in this civilization and women were highly regarded and very independent.

ARCHAIC PERIOD ON GREEK MAINLAND – 2,000 – 700 BC

This is a period in early Greek history when two waves of Indo-Europeans migrated to or invaded the Greek mainland. Mycenans (Achaeans) invaded/migrated 2,000-1,000 BC and Dorians and Ionians invaded/migrated 1,000-800 BC). These Indo-Europeans brought to Greece a warrior culture with bronze weapons and chariots, male gods of war, thunder and lightening, and in Homer’s words “hearts of flint, unyielding and unconquered.” They built citadels and fortified palaces with aristocrats living in citadels and the rest of the people living in villages. They adopted Linear B from Minoa because records kept by their scribes have been found. From 1600 BC on the Mycenans had adapted so well there was a lot of prosperity, cities grew, trade flourished and commercial colonies were established in Anatolia such as Troy, Mellitus, and Ephesus. Eventually some of these overseas cities such as Troy became commercial rivals to the traders on the Greek mainland and these rivalries led to the Trojan War commemorated in Homer’s epic poems the Iliad and Odyssey.

The Dorian and Ionian invasions, which occurred around 1,000 BC, may have been so devastating that they brought on the Greek Dark Ages (1100-750 BC). However, there is a lot of controversy among scholars over this point. The devastation which brought about the Greek Dark ages could also have been caused by earthquakes. Greece is located on fault lines in the earth’s tectonic plates and mantle and has often been subject to earthquakes. In any event, the Dark Ages were a time when cities were destroyed, art and writing were forgotten and lost, and there was a reversion back to living in small villages and making a living through subsistence farming. Homer and Hesiod wrote their epics during this period describing heroes with arête, the Greek concept of excellence and virtue, and stressing physical skill and strength.
Gradually cities re-emerged after the Dark Ages. These cities were the famous Greek city states each one very independent and isolated. The citizens of each city state (polis) were loyal and patriotic to their city. There was much rivalry, competition, and fighting between city states for excellence. Some city states were monarchies, some were republics and some oligarchies. And eventually, overpopulation led to Greek colonies spread out all around the Mediterranean Sea. Greeks became traders, colonists and skillful seafarers. Trade brought in wealth, valuable ideas, and information.

The first Olympic games arose in the city of Olympia in 776 BC. These games, held during the month of August under a full moon, were instituted to honor the chief God Zeus. Attracting crowds of 45,000 spectators, the games were prestigious and included wrestling, boxing, running, chariot racing, discus and javelin throwing. Proportion, balance, timing, and individual technique were considered very important. There is a story about how Olympic events came to be held in the nude. In 720 BC a runner lost his loin cloth in a race, but he went on to win the race. Then all the other runners wanted to run nude. From that time on games were held in the nude. Rewards for winning athletes were money and honor.

The creation of democracy in Athens is an incredible phenomenon of the ancient world. When most civilizations had monarchies and empires, the Greeks evolved an early form of democracy which is a legacy to us to this day. Greek democracy evolved as Greek hoplite soldiers returned from battle against the Persians and had the attitude if they could fight and die for their country they should have a say in government. Middle class merchants were also an independent, self-confident class and also wanted a say in governing. These two groups of people established direct democracy in Athens which lasted about 200 years.

This democracy worked as follows: Out of a total population of about 200,000 there were 30,000 adult males eligible to vote. Women, foreigners, and slaves couldn’t vote. Adult males would assemble 40 times a year at meetings where issues were discussed-everything from questions concerning religion, the size of a military force, the location of a temple- all opinions were heard, and a full open debate was held. Finally a vote would be taken. There was also a Council of 500, chosen by lot, to prepare legislation to be voted on by the whole assembly. This democracy also consisted of 10 Chief Executives who were the Executive branch (Pericles was selected chairman by the other 9) and a judicial system where criminals went before a jury. So, in this Athenian democracy management of public life was in the hands of ordinary citizens.

The Peloponnesian Wars occurred during the Greek Classical period in the aftermath of the Persian invasions. While Greeks from all over the country banded together to fight the Persians, after the Persians were defeated, the Athenians were in a dominant position with a large fleet and many soldiers and allies in other city states. The Athenians actually had
an alliance called the Delian League and were said to have an Athenian Empire. The Spartans, who valued military strength and were quite competitive, challenged Athenian dominance and this challenge set off the 30-year long series of battles called the Peloponnesian Wars. These wars left Greece vulnerable to invasion by an aggressive, ambitious northern neighbor, the Macedonian Philip II and his son Alexander.

HELLENISTIC AGE – 300-100 BC

The Hellenistic Age refers to the time when Alexander the Great conquered Greece, Egypt, all of the Persian Empire and even parts of India. He wanted to spread Greek culture to these areas and divided his empire into regions each ruled by a Macedonian or a Greek and established many trade routes throughout the Middle East.

GREEK CONTRIBUTIONS TO HUMANKIND

Greeks stood for a spirit of free inquiry and open-mindedness which encouraged the use of reason to try to understand the world. They loved truth for its own sake and followed inductive and deductive processes to discover truth. Greek philosophers, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, explored provisional definitions until they could test their definitions and discern universally recognized truths. Mathematicians such as Euclid started with an axiom or assumption, such as “A straight line is the shortest distance between two points” or “The base angles of an isosceles triangle are equal” and would then try to determine if these axioms would always work in all contexts. Pythagoras contributed the Pythagorean Theorem $a^2 = b^2 + c^2$. The Greeks were consistent, comprehensive and highly experimental in their effort to seek the truth. They loved abstraction and reasoned on the basis of abstract theories. While Mesopotamians and Egyptians thought disease was the wrath of the Gods, Greeks tried to observe and diagnose diseases.

Greeks made contributions in art, architecture, sculpture, poetry, literature and drama.

SITUATION FOR WOMEN

Most Greek women were oppressed and subordinated. They had no political rights and could not vote or serve on juries. Wives were under the strict control of their husbands. Men were so dominant they even made decisions regarding infanticide. Women were banned from the Olympics and the professions. Upper-class women remained secluded at home and lower class women worked in menial jobs. Even a well-respected philosopher such as Aristotle had disparaging views on women: “Women are by nature dependent on men and inferior to men. This is natural, inevitable and god-given. The female is a deformed male. In conception the male provides the life seed and the form and the woman provides the soil for the seed. Strong men produce sons and weak men produce daughters. Men are active, aggressive and warm and women are passive, dark and cold. Silence is a woman’s glory. The courage of a man is shown in commanding and the courage of a woman is shown in obeying.”
Laws in Greece sought to insure chastity, virginity and obedience among wives and wives were to remain under the control of father and husband. There were 3 other categories of women, prostitutes, companions and courtesans, and slaves. These women served men, but were seen as outside social norms and were therefore stigmatized. Demosthenes, the orator, said, “We have mistresses for our enjoyment, prostitutes to serve our person, and wives to bear our legitimate offspring.”

Greek patriarchy was so extreme some scholars have claimed it went beyond the subordination of women to hatred of women or misogyny.

Since Greek philosophy and culture marked the beginning of Europe’s cultural heritage, many of the most powerful and legitimate traditions in western culture have been those which subordinate and disparage women.