



Lecture Two: The Classical Civilizations of Greece and Rome

1. Learning Objectives

Students should be able to:

1. Describe the major features of ancient Greek civilization.
2. Explain the development of Greek city-states.
3. Compare Athens and Sparta.
4. Discuss Greek contributions to philosophy, politics, and culture.
5. Explain the expansion and organization of the Roman Empire.
6. Identify major factors contributing to the decline of the Western Roman Empire.

2. Introduction

The civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome played a major role in the development of European and Mediterranean history. Their political institutions, philosophical ideas, legal systems, literature, architecture, and languages influenced many later societies.

Although Greece and Rome developed in different historical circumstances, they were closely connected to the wider Mediterranean world. Greek culture influenced Rome, while Roman institutions subsequently influenced European and Mediterranean societies for centuries.

3. Ancient Greece

Ancient Greece consisted of numerous independent communities rather than one unified state. These communities were known as **city-states**, or *poleis*.

Each city-state had its own government, laws, army, and political institutions. Geography contributed to this political fragmentation because mountains and seas separated different communities.

Among the most important city-states were Athens and Sparta.

4. Athens and Democracy

Athens became famous for developing an early form of democracy.

The word democracy comes from Greek words meaning approximately "rule by the people." In Athens, certain male citizens could participate directly in political decision-making.

However, Athenian democracy was limited. Women, slaves, and many foreigners were excluded from political participation.

Despite its limitations, Athenian political institutions influenced later ideas about citizenship and democratic government.

Athens was also an important cultural center. It produced influential philosophers, playwrights, historians, artists, and architects.

5. Greek Philosophy

Greek philosophers asked fundamental questions about knowledge, ethics, politics, and human existence.

Socrates emphasized questioning and critical examination.

Plato, a student of Socrates, established the Academy and wrote philosophical dialogues dealing with justice, government, education, and knowledge.

Aristotle, a student of Plato, studied philosophy, politics, biology, logic, and many other subjects. His systematic approach to knowledge had a profound influence on later intellectual traditions.

Greek philosophy encouraged the examination of ideas through reason and argument.

6. Sparta

Sparta developed a very different social and political system from Athens.

Spartan society emphasized military discipline and collective responsibility. Boys received military training from an early age, and military service was central to Spartan identity.

While Athens became associated with democracy and cultural development, Sparta became associated with military organization and discipline.

The differences between Athens and Sparta demonstrate that ancient Greek civilization was not politically or socially uniform.

7. Alexander the Great and Hellenistic Civilization

The Macedonian king **Alexander the Great** conquered a vast territory extending from Greece through Egypt and into parts of Asia.

His conquests contributed to the spread of Greek language and culture across a large geographical area.

The period following Alexander's conquests is known as the **Hellenistic period**. During this period, Greek culture interacted with Egyptian, Persian, and other cultural traditions.

Major centers of Hellenistic civilization included Alexandria in Egypt.

8. Ancient Rome

Rome began as a small settlement in the Italian Peninsula and eventually developed into one of the largest empires of the ancient world.

Roman history is commonly divided into three major periods:

1. The Roman Kingdom
2. The Roman Republic
3. The Roman Empire

The Roman Republic developed complex political institutions. Roman citizens participated in political life through various institutions, while powerful political families competed for influence.

9. Expansion of Rome

Rome gradually expanded across the Italian Peninsula and then throughout the Mediterranean.

Military organization was central to Roman expansion. The Roman army was highly disciplined and capable of operating over large distances.

As Rome conquered new territories, it incorporated different peoples into its political and economic system.

Roman roads facilitated military movement, trade, and communication.

10. Roman Law

One of Rome's most important contributions was its legal tradition.

Roman jurists developed principles concerning property, contracts, citizenship, and legal procedures. Roman law influenced later European legal systems.

The **Twelve Tables** represented an important early stage in the development of Roman written law.

11. The Roman Empire

Political instability in the late Republic eventually contributed to the emergence of imperial rule.

Augustus became the first Roman emperor and established a relatively stable political system.

During the Roman Empire, Rome controlled extensive territories around the Mediterranean.

The empire developed cities, roads, ports, administrative institutions, and commercial networks.

12. The Decline of the Western Roman Empire

The Western Roman Empire gradually weakened as a result of multiple factors, including political instability, economic difficulties, military pressures, and external invasions.

In **476 CE**, the traditional date used for the end of the Western Roman Empire, the last western emperor was removed from power.

However, Roman civilization did not simply disappear. Roman law, Christianity, language, architecture, and administrative traditions continued to influence subsequent societies.

13. Conclusion

Ancient Greece and Rome profoundly influenced world history. Greek civilization contributed important ideas in philosophy, politics, science, literature, and art. Rome developed extensive political, military, legal, and infrastructural systems.

The legacy of Greece and Rome continues to influence modern political institutions, legal systems, education, architecture, and intellectual life.

Review Questions

1. What was a Greek city-state?
2. What were the main characteristics of Athenian democracy?
3. How did Athens differ from Sparta?
4. What were the major contributions of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle?
5. What was the Hellenistic period?
6. What were the major stages of Roman history?
7. Why was Roman law important?
8. What factors contributed to the decline of the Western Roman Empire?