

Greece: Philosophers of the Polis

The dualism of mystery cults and the Olympic pantheon in the early Mediterranean world indicates that there was a variety of ritual practices and beliefs held by those who inhabited the Greek mainland and the surrounding islands by the beginning of the Dark Age (ca. 1200 B.C.E.). By the end of this period (ca. 800 B.C.E.), a people known by their Greek name of Phoenicians appeared and helped to reconnect the inhabitants of Greece to the rest of the Mediterranean.

The Phoenicians

The Phoenicians were a maritime trading people who originally lived along the Lebanese coast of the eastern Mediterranean. Thriving commerce supported Phoenician city-states such as Tyre and Sidon, which were eventually overshadowed by the power of the North African port of Carthage, one of the largest cities in the world in the mid-first millennium B.C.E. Carthaginian ships plied the Mediterranean and found ports of call all around the shores of that sea.

The Development of an Alphabet

In addition to their role in maritime commerce, the Phoenicians introduced a writing system based on alphabetic characters throughout the Mediterranean. The advantages of an alphabetic script over earlier systems such as cuneiform and hieroglyphics are great: there are relatively few symbols to learn, and they are easily adaptable to different languages. The relative simplicity of an alphabetic script made literacy a possibility for more and more people.

The development of an alphabetic script for writing Greek contributed to the cultural flourishing of the Greek world over the next three centuries. Between about 800 and 500 B.C.E., both Greek society and Greek beliefs were transformed by the emergence of city-states, the expansion of the Greek world resulting from colonization and trade, and the introduction of influences from West Asia and North Africa. By the fifth century B.C.E., Greek thought and society were closely intertwined with the development of the *polis*, the city-state.

Athens

Athens, based on its hinterland, Attica, was one of the independent city-states that flourished on the Greek mainland by the fifth century B.C.E. The Olympian deity Athena, goddess of wisdom, was the focus of the public cult that gave unity and harmony to the city-state, and mystery cults continued to flourish as well. However, the fame of the Athenian city-state has less to do with its religious practices, whether the Olympian civic or mystery cults, than with two developments that grew out of changing patterns of Greek life after

the eighth century B.C.E.: democracy (power held by the people) and the emergence of rational and humanistic thought.

Democracy

The development of democracy is closely linked to the evolution of the Athenian city-state. As Athens developed in the turmoil of Greek politics, it was essential that order and balance between individual interests and those of the community be found. The Olympic cult of Athena was one means of inspiring civic unity; another was the development of democracy.

Through the seventh century, like other Greek city-states, Athens was ruled by aristocratic clans, whose power was probably rooted in petty kingships of the Dark Age era. These aristocratic clans provided the membership of the *areopagus*, the council, which they joined after being elected one of nine *archons*, or magistrates. During the seventh century, Athens began to experience social and economic conflict among aristocrats, wealthy merchants, and farmers. In 621 B.C.E., a judge named Draco was granted powers to deal with the violence that plagued Athens; his laws and punishments were so severe that the word “draconian” is now used to describe particularly harsh rules or punishments.

In 594 B.C.E., an aristocratic merchant named Solon (ca. 630–560 B.C.E.) was elected chief archon with authority to restructure the government of the city-state. He broke the aristocracy’s monopoly on power by opening up membership in the governing council to those with wealth as well as aristocratic ancestry, and by forbidding the enslavement of free citizens for the repayment of debts, he secured the basis of a free peasantry. Though his reforms helped to restore order and reduce conflict, they did not entirely resolve the problems that plagued the city-state.

A further step toward democracy took place under the leadership of Kleisthenes (fl. ca. 507 B.C.E.), whose reforms changed the basis of selection to the governing council in such a way as to further undermine aristocratic power. He reorganized the units, or “tribes,” from which council members were selected using the *deme*, or place of residence, to determine membership in a territorial unit rather than the previous criterion of ancestry. To the general assembly of citizens, the basic arena of political activity, Kleisthenes added new institutions, including popular courts. Athenian justice, like Athenian politics, became a matter of popular participation; citizens made the laws and pronounced the judgments as well. Each person appearing before the court argued his own case, and decisions were made on the basis of the will of the majority of citizens.

Periclean Athens

Athenian democracy reached its peak under the leadership of Pericles (495?-429 B.C.E.), a skilled orator and military commander. But even at this period of its fullest development, participation in the politics of the Athenian city-state was limited to a minority. Periclean Athens (including Attica, its hinterland) had a population of more than 300,000, of whom less than 14 percent qualified as legal citizens. Other Athenians – slaves, resident aliens (*metics*), and women – were denied participation in the political process. Native-born Athenian males between eighteen and fifty-nine (about 43,000 in number) alone had the right to vote and serve in public office. The chief executives of the city-state were ten generals, elected annually, who then selected their own chairman, such as Pericles.

The Persian Wars

During the Persian Wars (494-445 B.C.E.), Athens, along with Sparta, a city-state on the Peloponnesian peninsula, thwarted the designs of the Achaemenid Persian emperors Darius and Xerxes to drive the Greeks out of Anatolia and to invade the Greek homeland. The Delian League (named for the island of Delos, where the League met) had been formed by Greek city-states during the Persian Wars but came under Athenian control in 478 B.C.E. After the wars, using the Delian League as a base, Athens expanded its power throughout the Aegean and created an empire based on the strength of its fleet and its armies. The creation of the Athenian Empire, which extended political, economic, religious, and judicial control over a wide region, alarmed other Greek city-states, especially Sparta.

The Peloponnesian War

Sparta, unlike Athens, was a city-state based on war, and its social and political organization reflected this. Male citizens were reared and trained by the state to serve in the military. Having made important contributions to the defeat of the Persians and dominating the Peloponnesus, Sparta assumed the leading role in challenging Athens in the fifth-century B.C.E. Peloponnesian War. This conflict, begun when Pericles was still in power and Athenian democracy was at its height, lasted nearly three decades (431-404 B.C.E.) and resulted in widespread destruction and loss of life. It ended with the defeat of Athens and the end of the golden age of Athenian democracy.

Politics and Philosophy

The evolution of Athenian political democracy was accompanied by an explosion of creativity in ideas. By the time of Pericles, questions about the natural world and the origin and essence of things led some to reject both civic and cult religious beliefs to seek understanding of the world in *philosophia*, or wisdom.

A variety of thinkers sought the permanent or essential nature of things in a world of continuing change. The idea that all things consisted of four primordial, contrasting elements – wet/dry; hot/cold – emerged by the early sixth century B.C.E., but by the fifth century B.C.E. it was proposed that all things were made of fundamental particles called atoms (from the Greek word for “indivisible”). While some thinkers sought immutable truths of nature, others, like Daoist thinkers in early China, believed that change was the essence of things.

Sophists

The fundamental question that exercised Greek thinkers of the fifth and sixth centuries was: How do we know what we know? Skepticism and relativism were introduced into Athenian thought between 450 and 350 B.C.E. by a group of professional teachers of rhetoric known as Sophists. Sophists were given to arguing both sides of a given idea or thesis, an exercise that fostered a relativistic view of things.

The intellectual differences and cosmic debates among the Greeks were a reflection of the conflicts that went on within and between the Greek city-states during what may be considered their “warring states” period (fifth to fourth centuries B.C.E.), roughly concurrent with the Warring States period in China and the flourishing of various schools of thought there. During this uncertain time, the Sophists’ skepticism led them to reject the traditional religious and political guidelines for society. For them it was not the community, with its religious and political sanctions, but the rational individual that was the source of truth and knowledge.

Socrates

Socrates (469?–399 B.C.E.), one of the most influential Athenian thinkers, sought to go beyond skepticism and to establish acceptable moral and ethical codes, much as Confucius had some years earlier in China. Unlike Confucius, however, Socrates sought an intellectual rather than a traditional historical basis for his views.

According to Socrates, all ideas are preconceptions and true knowledge is to be arrived at by questioning them. Examination and reexamination are the means by which we know what can be known. As a result of his suggestion that all knowledge is relative and final truths are unattainable, Athenian judges imposed the death sentence on him, and Socrates was put to death in 399 B.C.E. His ideas were viewed as particularly dangerous because he espoused them during the collapse of Athens in the war against Sparta, a time when certain truth and final answers were wanted.

Plato

Socrates' most famous pupil, Plato (427–347 B.C.E.), undertook to create a system of thought that united the natural and the theoretical and to provide a worldview that was both ordered and beautiful. In his *Timaeus*, Plato returned to the traditions of ancient Greek beliefs and postulated a creator god who designs an orderly world that is maintained by the actions of gods. The duty of humans is to carry on with the gods' efforts through the performance of religious sacrifices, which ensures harmony and order. Plato's emphasis on religious ceremony suggests a comparison with Confucius' emphasis on ritual; but Confucius' concern was with maintaining social harmony, not harmony between gods and men as in the *Timaeus*.

The *Republic*

In his *Republic*, Plato described the ideal state as a commonwealth ruled by a philosopher-king. The world of phenomena, Plato believed, is a shadow world dimly reflecting the real world of ideas. It is this world of ideas that philosopher-kings understand and what qualifies them to govern. Beyond the world of things and experiences, apprehended by the senses, there is another, more fundamental world of eternal forms and types. In everything we experience through the senses there is an essence of this unchanging reality, independent of the material "accidents" that surround it. The "accidents" of everyday life are transcended by eternal essences and forms, which are the goals of knowledge. The philosopher-king is by education, if not by desire, able to guide the state out of the chaos and illusions of the external world of sense phenomena to eternal patterns and order.

On the basis of his observation of Athenian democracy, which had brought about the death of his mentor, Socrates, Plato believed that the people (*demos*) were an unruly lot, incapable of governing properly: "Whenever the populace crowds together at any public gathering, in the Assembly, the law-courts, the theatre, or the camp, it expresses its approval or disapproval, both alike excessive, of whatever is being said or done; booing and clapping till the rocks ring and the whole place redoubles the noise of their applause and outcries."

Following the death of his teacher and travels in Sicily and Italy, Plato returned to Athens around 387 B.C.E. and began teaching at the academy he opened there. He used the dialogue method to teach his students, working out his own ideas in discussions with his students as he had with his teacher, Socrates. Plato's most famous student was Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.), who studied at Plato's academy for nearly twenty years but ultimately rejected his teacher's idealistic view of knowledge in favor of the systematic study and investigation of nature as the source of knowledge. Aristotle also had a more successful career than his teacher; he was hired as tutor to Philip of

Macedon's young son Alexander who was to become Alexander the Great, "Conqueror of the World."

Philosophy and Political Thought in Early China and Greece

The flowering of ideas in China during the fifth century B.C.E. was paralleled by the development of philosophy in the Greek city-states at about the same time. In both the Chinese world and the Greek world, the growth of new ideas and debates among thinkers took place in an unstable political and social environment that provided fertile ground for conceiving new ways of achieving and maintaining social and political order. In China, the "Hundred Schools of Thought" flourished in an arena of competing states that rose against the background of the breakdown of the central authority of the Zhou kings; in Greece, the ferment of ideas was associated with the political form of the city-state and the practice of democracy.