Ancient Greece Essay, Research Paper

Ancient Greece

Greece

The Greek peninsula has been culturally linked with the Aegean Islands,

and the west coast of Asia Minor since the Neolithic Age. The numerous natural

harbors and close-lying islands lead to a unified, maritime civilization.

However cultural unity did not produce political unity. Mountain ranges and

deep valleys separated the peninsula into small economic and political units.

Constant feuding between cities and surrounding empires for political power made

Greece the sight of many battles.

Prehistoric Period

Archeological evidence shows that a primitive Mediterranean people,

closely related to races of northern Africa, lived in the southern Aegean area

as far back as the Neolithic Age. A cultural progression from the Stone Age to

the Bronze Age started about 3000 BC. This civilization, during the Bronze Age

was divided into two main cultures. One on these, called Cretan or Minoan was

centered on the island of Crete. The other culture, Helladic (who became

Mycenaean) populated mainland Greece. The Minoan culture dominated trade until

1500 BC when the Mycenaeans took control.

During the third millennium BC a series of invasions from the north

began. The most prominent of the early invaders, who were called the Achaeans,

had, in all probability, been forced to migrate by other invaders. They overran

southern Greece and established themselves on the Peloponnesus. Many other,

vaguely defined tribes, were assimilated in the Helladic culture.

Ancient Greece

Gradually, in the last period of Bronze Age Greece, the Minoan

civilization fused with the mainland. By 1400 BC the Achaeans were in

possession of the island itself, and soon afterward gained control of the

mainland. The Trojan War, described by Homer in the Iliad, began about 1200 BC

and was probably one of a series of wars waged during the 12th and 13th

centuries BC. It may have been connected with the last and most important of

the invasions which happened at about the same time and brought the Iron Age to

Greece. The Dorians left the mountains of Epirus and pushed their way down to

Peloponnesus and Crete, using iron weapons to conquer the people of those

regions. The Invading Dorians overthrew Achaean kings and settled in the

southern and eastern part of the peninsula.

The Hellenic Period

After the great migrations in the Aegean, the Greek developed a proud

racial consciousness. They Called themselves Hellenes. The term Greeks, used

by foreign peoples, was derived from Graecia, the Latin for a small Hellenic

tribe of Epirus, the first Hellenes that the Romans had dealings with. Out of

the mythology that became the basis of an intricate religion, the Hellenes

developed a genealogy that traced their ancestry to semidivine heroes.

Age of Tyrants

The age of Greek tyrants was notable for advances made in Hellenic

civilization. The title of tyrant was used on people who had gained political

power illegally. Generally the tyrants were wise and popular. Trade and

industry flourished. In the wake of political and economic strength came a

flowering of Hellenic culture, especially in Ionia, where Greek philosophy began

with the speculations of Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenies. The development

of cultural pursuits common to all the Hellenic cities was one of the factors

that united ancient Greece. Another Factor was the Greek language, the many

dialects of which were readily understandable in any part of the country. The

third factor was Greek religion, which held the Hellenes together, and the

sanctuary of Delphi, with its oracle, became the greatest national shrine. In

addition to their religion, the Greeks held four national festivals, called

games?the Olympian, Isthmian, Pythian, and Nemean.

Monarchy to Democracy

Some unification of the city-states took place. Between the 8th and 6th

centuries BC, Athens and Sparta became the two dominant cities of Greece. Each

of these great states united its weaker neighbors into a league or confederacy

under its control. Sparta, a completely militarized and aristocratic state,

established its leadership mainly by conquest, and kept its subject states under

strict rule. The unification of Attica was, however, carried on by mutual and

peaceful agreement under the leadership of Athens, and the inhabitants of

smaller cities were given Athenian citizenship. The hereditary kingship of

Athens was abolished in 683 BC by the nobles, or Eupatridae, who ruled Athens

until the mid 6th century BC. The Eupatridae kept complete authority by their

supreme power to dispense justice. In 621 BC statesman Draco codified and

published the Athenian law, their by limiting the judiciary power of the nobles.

A second major blow to the hereditary power of the Eupatride was the code of the

Athenian statesman and legislator Solon in 594 BC, which reformed the Draconian

code and gave citizenship to the lower classes. During the rule of the tyrant

Pisistratus, the forms of government began to take on the elements of democracy.

Hippias and Hipparchus, sons of Pisistratus, inherited their fathers power, but

they were considerably more despicable. Hippias, who survived Hipparchus, was

expelled by a popular uprising in 510 BC. In the resulting political strife,

the supporters of democracy, under the statesman Cleisthenes, won a complete

victory, and a new constitution, based on democratic principles, took effect

about 502 BC. The beginning of democratic rule was the dawn of the greatest

period of Athenian history and, to me personally this signifies the end of

Ancient Greece.

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