

Archaic Greece (ca. 700–480 BC)

After the renaissance of the eighth century, Greece began its classical period, the earliest phase of which is known as the Archaic period. The Archaic period saw the development of Greek civilization and culture, the development of Greek arts and philosophy, and the centrality of the basic ancient Greek political unit: the city-state.

The Development of the Polis

By the middle of the eighth century, Greece was experiencing major population growth that brought with it significant social changes. As villages grew in size, they gradually turned into city-states, known as *poleis* (the plural of *polis*). The *polis* would be the basic political unit in Greece throughout the classical period. The *poleis* came into being through a process known as *synoecism*, derived from the Greek word for “together in the same house (*oikos*).” The process saw villages band together to form larger city-states. While this sometimes took place as a result of military conquest by one village over others, it was usually the product of mutual agreement, and often the village identities continued to have some role in the governance of the city-states. Some of the most important such city-states were Athens, Sparta, Corinth, and Thebes.

The city-states tended to develop from the hilltop sites that had sprung up in the Dark Ages (though Sparta and Athens had been important Mycenaean locations). The summit of the hilltop, known as the *acropolis*, would be the location of important public buildings such as temples and government structures. The marketplace, or *agora*, was another important place in a Greek city-state. It was where citizens congregated, not only to trade and make deals, but also to spread news and conduct politics.

At the beginning of the Archaic period, most city-states still had a hereditary king (*basileus*). Over time, however, the new organization of the city-states led to conflict between the king and the aristocracy. The aristocracy grew powerful in this period as they gradually bought up the already limited farmland, and typically brought in slaves to work the land. This resulted in the impoverishment of many of the former small farmers, but created a wealthy, elite class that came to dominate the city-states. The result was *oligarchy*, a system of government ruled by a small group of elites.

Thus, many Greek city-states were oligarchies. The ruling aristocrats held various offices, usually for a term of one year, but the highest authority was invested in the *boulē*, a council comprised of the elite citizens. Every city-state was organized differently, however. Not every oligarchy got rid of the king. In Sparta, for example, the office of king endured, but there were always two kings with reduced and well-defined powers, and they ruled in conjunction with the oligarchs.

The domination of the oligarchs led to power struggles with the poor. Demagogues, who appealed to the poor and promised to bring them better conditions, often were able to gain power thanks to the support and numbers of the poor. They would rule as *tyrants*, similar to a king or *basileus*, except that their power was unconstitutional and was typically not passed down from father to son. Tyrants often built infrastructure such as public water and drainage that benefitted the poor, and at

times would even confiscate the property of the aristocracy and give it to the poor. As a result, it is little wonder that they tended to clash with the aristocracy.

Athens: A City-State in Action

The political history of Athens provides an example of the development of a polis and an introduction to a new sort of government that developed in this period: democracy. The polis of Athens was created by the process of *synoecism*, in which the settlements in the region of Attica came together to form a large city-state. The central settlement of Athens politically dominated the others. Athens quickly became the largest and richest of the Greek city-states, and it was ruled by a council of oligarchs called *archons*, who met at the Hill of Ares, and the council derived its name from this place: the Areopagus. The process of synoecism saw a few aristocrats become very rich and powerful, buying up the land and putting small farmers out of work. As a result, Athens was rife with upheaval, mostly caused by a large number of poor citizens with no power in the oligarchic government. So in the seventh century BC, a legislator named Draco wrote Athens's first constitution and written laws, which were made public for all to see and meant to put down the unrest. The laws of Draco were harsh, and proscribed death for most offenses. The word *draconian* derives from the harshness of the laws.

The Areopagus grew unhappy with Draco's constitution, and his laws did not stop the unrest, so they appointed the statesman and lawmaker Solon to create a new constitution. Solon, in an attempt to create concord and unity, created a number of political, economic, and moral reforms aimed at giving more rights to the poor while maintaining the privileges of the aristocracy. He decreed that only wealthy nobles could hold political office, but he created a new body, the *Ecclesia*, or assembly, where all citizens could vote. The assembly would govern the city in conjunction with the noble-dominated Areopagus. At first this system did not work very well. The aristocrats dominated the government and used their power to keep the assembly from having too much sway. The lower classes, disenchanted, flocked around Peisistratus, who seized power in 541 BC and became a tyrant. He confiscated land from the aristocrats to give to the poor, and was very popular with most Athenians. He was succeeded by his two sons Hippias and Hipparchus, but when Hipparchus was assassinated, Hippias became paranoid and became a cruel ruler. He was overthrown in 510 BC, and at this point a man named Cleisthenes wrote a new constitution. Historians refer to him as "the father of Athenian democracy" because he reformed the Athenian constitution, turning Athens into the first democracy.

Under the democracy of Athens, political offices were not necessarily filled by wealthy, powerful, or even popular people. Instead, offices were filled by a random lottery of all eligible citizens. Cleisthenes replaced the four already existing Athenian tribes, which were based on social status, with ten new ones, which were instead based on geographic region. Fifty men were chosen by lot from each tribe to serve in the *boulē*, a council that ran the affairs of the city. The *Ecclesia*, or assembly, which was open to all citizens, passed laws and acted as a court of law. The oligarchic Areopagus retained the power to try murder cases and govern religious matters.

The Athenian model of a democratic city-state was quite rare, as most city-states were either oligarchies or ruled by a king or tyrant. However, over time the democratic model was adopted by other city-states. Later, as Athens grew more powerful, it would forcefully impose its democratic model on other cities.

Colonization

Another consequence of Greece's population explosion was a need to find new land. Greece's territory is mountainous and rocky, and good farmland is scarce. With more and more people, more arable land was necessary. This led many Greeks to go abroad and establish new colonies. Greek colonization began around 800 BC, but it accelerated greatly in the Archaic period. The coast of Asia Minor was completely colonized by Greeks and became known as Ionia. For a long time, the Ionian cities were some of the most prosperous and culturally important cities. Another important area for colonization was southern Italy. This region was so heavily colonized that it became known as *Magna Graecia*, "Greater Greece." Other colonies sprung up in places as far as the northern Black Sea coast and the coasts of modern-day France and Spain. Colonies were almost always on the coast, or else on rivers, as the sea was the most important means of transport between the colony and the Greek mainland. The colonies spread Greek culture, language, and thought throughout the Mediterranean world.

Greek colonies operated as independent city-states, though they maintained close links to their parent cities. They tended to share the same patron god and religious activities, and kinship ties between the residents of the mother city and the colony were maintained.

The Soldiers of the City-States

The city-states, both in Greece and the colonies, maintained armies made up of citizen soldiers. They had to supply their own arms, so the bulk of the ranks tended to be made up of farmers and craftsmen, the average citizens of the city who could afford basic weapons and armor. They went into battles very heavily armored, with breastplates, helmets, greaves (leg protectors), and a large shield called a *hoplon*. Such soldiers were known as *hoplites*. They carried long spears and a sword in case their spear became lost or broken. When they went to battle, they would line up in a formation called a *phalanx*, a straight line of soldiers several ranks deep. The opposing phalanxes would meet each other and a pushing contest between the opposing hoplites would commence. Though they used their spears to jab at one another, the goal was to push the opposing phalanx off the battlefield. At a certain point, one side would give up and flee, during which time the winners would try to kill as many of the fleeing soldiers as they could.

Hoplite warfare became standard among the Greeks by the Archaic period, and it was tied to the structure of the *polis*. Since many of the soldiers were farmers, campaigns would usually be short and last only the summer, so that the soldiers could get back home in time for the harvest. Thus, battles were meant to be decisive events,

and a single battle would often decide an entire war. Battles often took place in the same spots, because such warfare requires broad, flat planes, a rarity in Greece's hilly terrain.

The city-state of Sparta, in contrast to nearly all the others, maintained an army composed of professional soldiers. Every citizen of the city was required to train for hoplite warfare from infancy to old age, and they were forbidden by law to farm or engage in other trades. Instead, each had a plot of land (*kleros*)—worked by slaves called *helots*—that supplied the needs of the household. The citizen himself would devote his time to military exercises. Thus, Sparta was widely regarded as having the best military of all the Greek city-states. Sparta had to deal with constant uprisings of the helots, however. These uprisings were put down by Sparta's well-trained soldiers, but the revolts were a source of instability.

New Styles of Art

The Archaic period ushered in new styles of Greek art, and the beginnings of what is traditionally seen as ancient Greek sculpture and painting. After the Orientalizing period of Greek decoration, heavily influenced by art from the East, the Greeks began to develop their own artistic techniques. Black-figure pottery became very common, especially in Corinth (and later also in Athens). The scenes depicted on such pottery often included mythological scenes—scenes from epics such as the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad*—or scenes of daily life. Some of the earliest artists known by name were painters of such pottery, who became renowned for their painting skills. Black-figure pottery was produced by painting images with a glossy clay “slip” onto unfired pottery. Once the pottery was fired, the vessel turned a red color while the area covered in the slip turned black. This allowed scenes to be baked onto the pottery. The problem with the black-figure technique is that no details could be added on top of the black figures to accentuate them. Artists had to either scrape the clay or add red and white paint to create details such as facial features, armor, and so on.

Around 530 BC, a new technique for vase painting was introduced: red-figure painting. It soon outstripped the popularity of black-figure painting and became the most common form of Greek vase painting. Red-figure painting was the inverse of black-figure painting: the slip was painted as a background, with the figures left as a negative. Once the vessel was fired, the whole pot would turn black except for the figures, which turned red. The advantage of red-figure painting is that now black details could be added with the slip on the red-figures. This allowed for more refined details, and more lifelike images. Red-figure vase painting was invented in Athens, which remained the center of red-figure pottery, and thus it became the central hub of Greek pottery production, far out-stripping Corinth or any other city.

Greek sculpture emerged in the Archaic period as another art form. Such sculptures were often life-sized or larger, and usually depicted either a nude young man (*kouros*), or a clothed young woman (*korē*). Initially these sculptures looked very Egyptian, having been influenced by Egyptian works. Over time, however, a distinctive Greek style developed. Archaic Greek statuary is distinguished by the stiff, angular

posture of its subjects (a legacy of the Egyptian influence), who have helmet-like hair, the left foot advancing forward, and a characteristic “Archaic” smile.

Greek Literature

Greek poetry, originally intended to be oral and performed to the accompaniment of musical instruments, was written down and circulated in the Archaic period. Some of this poetry celebrated traditional themes like honor, bravery in battle, or the affairs of the gods. But some poets pushed against social norms and conventions with their poetry. Some wrote about love and sex. Sappho of Lesbos, writing in the late seventh century and the only female poet of the period, composed poems about erotic love between women. Archilochus of Paros wrote, in the middle of the seventh century, not just about sex and drinking, but spurned the conventions of honor of the day and wrote about fleeing battle to save his own skin. Theognis of Megara, from the middle of the sixth century, wrote about politics, and as an aristocrat despaired of the diminishing power of his class.

The Archaic period also saw the development of a new literary form—Greek drama. It started out in Athens as part of a festival to the god Dionysius. Hymns sung to honor Dionysius evolved into early forms of plays around 532 BC, and Thespis was supposedly the first actor. Throughout the Archaic period, there was only a single actor in a play. Such plays were originally only tragedies, plays detailing cathartic stories of suffering. Eventually comedies were performed also.

The Birth of Philosophy

The Archaic period of Greece saw the beginnings of Greek philosophy and the first of the many intellectual giants who would make Greece famous for its philosophers. The philosophers of the Archaic period are known as the pre-Socratic philosophers, that is, the philosophers before Socrates, who would later revolutionize philosophy. They were mostly interested in explaining the development and structure of the physical universe, and thus were very much like early scientists. Only fragments of the work of the pre-Socratic philosophers survive, so our knowledge of their ideas is limited.

Thales of Miletus (624–654 BC) is considered the first major Greek philosopher. He sought to understand the existence of the world and the workings of nature without recourse to mythology. Thales believed that water was the basis of all things. He was succeeded by other philosophers from Miletus, which gave rise to what became known as the Milesian School, which was interested in how nature worked. Another member of the school was Anaximenes (585–525 BC), who held that air was the basis of all things.

Another school, the Ephesian School, is represented by Heraclitus (535–475 BC), who held that fire was the nature of all things, and that change was fundamental and continual. Pythagoras of Samos (582–496 BC) created his own school of philosophy, centered on the importance of arithmetic and the harmony of numbers. While aspects of his philosophy were mystical, his devotion to numbers led him and his

followers to make many contributions to mathematics, and he is credited with the Pythagorean theorem.

Another important pre-Socratic philosopher was Xenophanes, who disagreed with the anthropomorphic concept of the gods. He mocked the idea of gods who were capable of petty rivalries and acts of immorality. Instead, he believed in an eternal, unified, and ever-present God, in no way like a human. Countless other pre-Socratic philosophers presented new and innovative ideas in the Archaic period, and Greek philosophy was exported throughout the Mediterranean world.

Political Changes

Around 540 BC, the Greek cities of Ionia on the coast of Asia Minor, long the center of early Greek philosophy and literature, fell under the sway of the Persian Empire. The Persian *satrap*, or governor, of Sardis, in Asia Minor, appointed tyrants from these cities to rule over them, making Ionian cities into semi-independent vassals of Persia. Around 500 BC, dislike of these Persian-appointed tyrants boiled. Though the tyrants were Greek, the citizens of the cities could not overthrow them since the tyrants had the backing of the Persian Empire. From Miletus, one of the most important Ionian cities, a general revolt against Persian rule took place. The Ionians were assisted by Athens, which sent troops to aid them.

The Ionian and Athenian troops marched to Sardis, captured the city, and burned it down. They were defeated, however, when a Persian army arrived. In the course of the resulting war, the Persians captured Miletus and subjugated Ionia. The result of the Ionian Revolt is that it reduced the importance of Ionia in the Greek world. While much literature and philosophy came out of Ionia in the Archaic period, afterwards Athens would be the center of such culture. It also resulted in Persian hostility toward Athens. The Persians were determined to make Athens pay for supporting the revolt. Thus, the Persians began planning a punitive expedition into Greece, which in the end would lead to the Persian Wars.

Summary

- The Archaic period saw the development of the *polis*, the Greek city-state, formed from adjacent villages. Initially the city-states were ruled by kings, but oligarchies (rule by a few powerful men) soon became the norm in most city-states.
- Greece's growing population and lack of land led to increased colonization by Greeks. Greek colonies were established along the coast of Asia Minor, in southern Italy, and a few as far off as modern-day Spain and Russia.
- The Greek city-states were defended by citizen-soldiers called *hoplites*. They were heavily armored infantrymen who fought in a formation called a *phalanx*.
- Greek art and literature developed in the Archaic period. Black-figure vase painting replaced old painting techniques, and was itself eventually surpassed by red-figure vase painting. Greek sculpture developed, as did various genres of poetry.

- The Archaic period also saw the birth of Greek philosophy. The philosophers of this period, the pre-Socratics, were interested in explaining the development and structure of the physical universe, and thus were very much like early scientists.
- The Ionian Revolt against Persia led to the defeat of the Ionian cities and the marginalization of their influence on Greek culture. The Ionian Revolt and the resulting Persian Wars mark the end of the Archaic period of Greece.