Geography of Classical Mediterranean Civilizations

**Directions:** Describe the locations of each of the civilizations below and how it would impact the development of their civilization.

**Ancient Greece**

**Persian Empire**

**Roman Empire**
Classical Mediterranean Civilizations: Persia, Greece, and Rome

**Directions:** You will each be broken up into groups in which you will be assigned a classical Mediterranean Civilization. It is your job to take notes on your civilization and become an expert on your topic. During the second part of the activity, you will be paired with a new group in which you are the teacher for your civilization.

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Greek civilization started around 1750 BCE. Many city-states, cities and the surrounding land, developed on the peninsula and in the islands that make up Greece. The city-states were united in their language, but each was ruled separately and had different cultures. Within the city-state, the major city was built on two levels. On a hilltop stood the acropolis, or high city, with its great marble temples dedicated to different gods and goddesses. On flatter ground below lay the walled main city with its market place, theater, public buildings, and homes. Two famous city-states emerged, Athens and Sparta. They were completely different from each other. They warred with one another, until the threat of the Persian Empire united them in 486 BCE.

Athens was located in Attica, just north of Peloponnesus. Athens moved from a monarchy slowly toward a democracy, or government by the people. By modern standards, Athenian democracy was quite limited. Only male citizens could participate in government, and citizenship was severely restricted. Also, tens of thousands of Athenians were slaves without political rights or personal freedom. In fact, it was the labor of slaves that gave citizens the time to participate in the government.

In Athens, as in other Greek city-states, women had no share in public life and lived a secluded existence. Poorer women worked outside the home, tending sheep or working as spinners, weavers, or potters. Unlike girls, who received little or no formal education, boys attended school if their families could afford it. Besides learning to read and write, they studied music and memorized poetry. They studied to become skilled public speakers because, as citizens in a democracy, they would have to voice their views. Young men received military training and, to keep their bodies healthy, participated in athletic contests. Unlike Sparta, which put military training above all else, Athens encouraged young men to explore many areas of knowledge.

The Spartans were located in the Peloponnesus in the southern part of Greece. Sparta was a military state where all aspects centered around training to be strong warriors. The Spartans isolated themselves from other Greeks. They looked down on trade and wealth, forbade their own citizens to travel, and had little use for new ideas or the arts. While other Greeks admired the Spartans’ military skills, no other city-state imitated their rigorous way of life. “Spartans are willing to die for their city,” some suggested, “because they have no reason to live.” In the long run, Sparta suffered from its rigid ways and inability to change. In time, its warrior class shrank, and its power declined.
Classical Rome: From Republic to Empire

By 509 B.C.E., Rome had grown from a cluster of villages into a small city. The Romans disliked being ruled by a monarch, so they set up a new government in which officials were chosen by the people. They called it a republic, or “government of the people.” A republic, Romans thought, would keep any individual from gaining too much power. In the early republic, the most powerful governing body was the senate. Its 300 members were all patricians, members of the landholding upper class. Senators, who served for life, issued decrees and interpreted the laws.

Each year, the senators elected two consuls. Their job was to supervise the business of government and command the armies. Like senators, consuls came from the patrician class. Consuls, however, cold serve only one term. They were also expected to consult with the senate. By limiting their time in office and making them responsible to the people through the senate, Rome had a system of checks and balances on the power of government.

At first, all government officials were patricians, or people who were part of the nobility. Plebeians, the farmers, merchants, artisans, and traders who made up the bulk of the population, had little influence. In 450 B.C.E, the plebeians fought to have the laws of Rome inscribed on 12 tablets and set up in the Forum, or marketplace. Plebeians had protested that citizens could not know what the laws were, because they were not written down. The Laws of the Twelve Tables made it possible for the first time for plebeians to appeal a judgment handed down by a patrician judge.

In the event of war, the senate might chose a dictator, or ruler who has complete control over a government. Each Roman dictator was granted emergency powers to rule for six months. At the end of that time, he had to give up power. As Rome grew more powerful and gained territory, struggles between rival dictators were common occurrences. Julius Caesar was named dictator for life and was later stabbed to death in the senate because his enemies worried that he planned to make himself king of Rome. The Senate gave Caesar's grandnephew, Octavian the title of Augustus, or Exalted One. The rule of Augustus led to Roman peace and prosperity that lasted for 200 years. This was known as the Pax Romana. After the death of Augustus, several emperors ruled Rome. Transitions between emperors were peaceful. If they didn’t have a son, they chose a man worthy of succeeding. Trade and the spreading of ideas flowed freely throughout the Mediterranean, Africa, and India. There was grain from Egypt, ivory, gold, wild animals from Africa, spices, cotton, and precious stones from India. Romans made many advancements during this time period including the arch, roads, and aqueducts.
Persian Empire

In 539 B.C.E., King Cyrus formed the Persian Empire. He began by conquering Babylon. Cyrus was known for his mercy rather than his cruelty. He returned sacred items that were stolen from the Hebrews and allowed the rebuilding of their capital and the temple. Cyrus also allowed the Hebrews to continue living and worshiping as they chose. This policy of local cultural independence won for him a reputation as a fair ruler. In other words, even though Cyrus conquered many peoples, he did not force them to adopt his culture.

Meanwhile, other Persian forces moved northeast where they captured most of the trade centers on the Silk Routes that led to Inner Eurasia. Eventually, Darius (522-486 BCE), a strong military leader, took control of the Persian Empire. He soon pushed the Persian borders to the Indus River valley in the east. At that point, the Persians controlled the largest empire the world had ever seen.

As rulers of an empire that embraced more cultural communities than had any other before them, they wisely allowed their subjects much cultural freedom. The Persians practiced a religion known as Zoroastrianism which believes that the universe is constantly battling good and evil. Zoroastrians stress good thoughts, good words, and good deeds which they believe will help them achieve an afterlife in heaven. These beliefs led Persian rulers to be religiously tolerant and never force their beliefs on any of their conquered peoples. Cyrus and his successors adapted and cooperated with local rulers. They interfered as little as possible in matters that did not directly relate to their rule. They respected local traditions and even adopted some of their subjects’ religious practices for themselves.

Rather than destroy local economies for their own selfish gain, the Persians worked to increase trade throughout their kingdom. They standardized weights, developed official coinage, and implemented universal laws. They instituted taxes as well as a bureaucracy to help govern the large empire. Laws were carried out fairly and evenly among all of the various subject peoples. Roads were also built which kept the empire connected as well as helped to establish a courier, or mail, system. After the Greco-Persian Wars, the Persian Empire grew week. By 359 BCE, Phillip II of Macedonia had seen the empire’s weakness and planned an invasion. He was murdered before he could launch the plan, but his son Alexander carried it forward. In 330 BCE, Alexander earned his title “the Great” after he took over the Persian Empire.