



Third Edition

# ANCIENT GREEK CIVILIZATION

David Sansone

WILEY Blackwell

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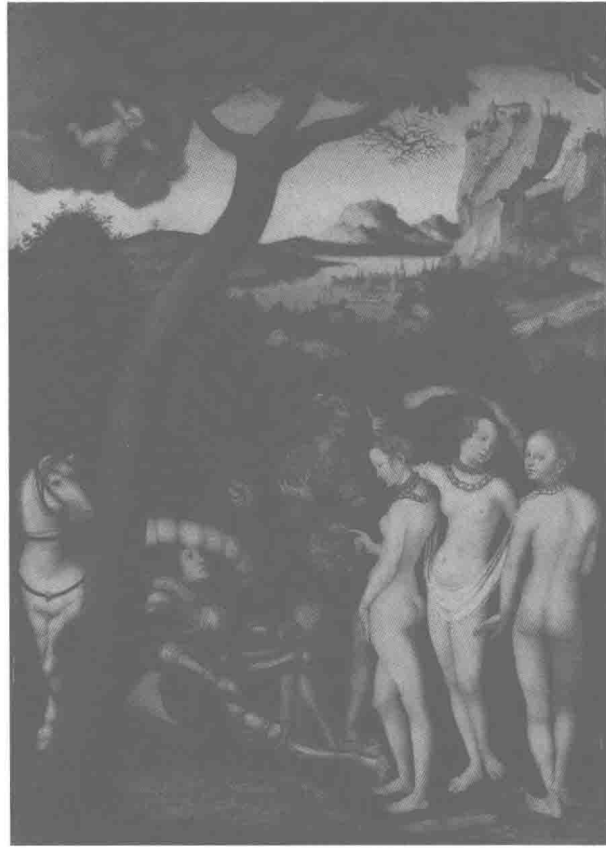
# FOREWORD LOOKING BACKWARD

In his last public speech in Mississippi City, March 1888, Jefferson Davis, former President of the Confederate States of America, proclaimed, “The past is dead,” very much hoping that what he was saying might turn out to be true. Another Southerner, the novelist William Faulkner, issued a stern corrective when, in his *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), he put into the mouth of a citizen of the fictional city of Jefferson, Mississippi, the following: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” The past, it seems, will always be with us, whether we like it or not. But it will not always be the same past. Rather, the past is in a constant process of change, as the ever-changing present increasingly imposes itself on the past. It is, perhaps, difficult to accept the notion that, for example, the civilization of the ancient Greeks, a civilization that no longer exists, is now in the process of change. We are, however, quite prepared to admit that ancient Greek civilization, while it was in existence, was constantly changing, since change is an invariable feature of living civilizations. One of the important ways civilizations, including our own, change is by constantly modifying the perception of the shared past that serves as each civilization’s foundation. As we will see, ancient Greek civilization was involved in a constant process of reinventing itself, by adapting its own past in the light of its own ever-changing present. We, too, have been reinventing ancient Greek civilization in a similar fashion. This process of reinventing ancient Greek civilization has been going on for quite some time. Indeed, there is a venerable tradition of doing so, a tradition that stretches from the time of the ancient Greeks themselves until this morning.

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## Reinventing Ancient Greek Civilization

Let us begin at a point within that tradition, somewhat closer to this morning than to the time of the ancient Greeks, so that we may have a better idea of what the nature of that tradition is. Lucas Cranach the Elder, who lived in sixteenth-century Germany, was court painter to Friedrich the Wise, Elector of Saxony, and friend of Martin Luther. Among Cranach’s works, which include paintings of biblical subjects and austere portraits of princes and Protestant reformers, are representations of stories from Greek myth, among them a *Judgment of Paris* now in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art (figure 1). The artist assumes that the viewer of the painting will be familiar with the story: The Greek goddesses Aphrodite, Athena, and Hera have been escorted by the god Hermes, who holds the prize for beauty that



**Figure 1** Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), *The Judgment of Paris*, oil on wood; 102 × 71 cm, ca. 1528. Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1928. [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org) (accessed March 29, 2016).

is to be awarded by the Trojan prince Paris (also known as Alexander) to the lucky winner. The setting of this encounter, according to the myth, is Mount Ida, in what is now northwestern Turkey. The landscape depicted in Cranach's painting, however, is conspicuously northern European and, indeed, is virtually the same as the landscape that appears in some of Cranach's portraits of his German contemporaries. Further, Paris is wearing medieval armor, rather than anything resembling what an ancient Greek would actually have worn, and the goddesses Hera and Athena are shown in the nude, as they never would have been shown in ancient Greek art (figure 2). In short, despite the fact that Cranach's painting purports to provide a pictorial representation of ancient Greek myth, the terms in which the myth is portrayed are recognizably those of sixteenth-century Germany.

It is easy enough to spot the inauthentic elements in Cranach's *Judgment of Paris* (or in some more recent depictions of ancient Greece, such as the films *Hercules* or *300: Rise of an Empire*). It is much more difficult to say what is genuine. But what do we mean, in this context, by "genuine" or "authentic"? The story of the judgment of Paris is just that: a story. It is concerned with gods and goddesses who never existed



**Figure 2** Attic black-figure tripod-jar showing Hermes (center) leading Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite to Paris (right) for judgment; height 14 cm, ca. 570 BC. Paris, Musée du Louvre, CA 616 C. Source: Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre) / Stéphane Maréchal.

(although they were, of course, *thought* to exist) and with human beings who may or may not have existed and who may or may not have done what the story represents them as having done. Still, stories can tell us a great deal about the people among whom the stories circulate. Surely there is an authentic (or at least a *more* authentic) version of the story of the judgment of Paris which, if we can reconstruct it, will help us recover something of ancient Greek civilization? In any case, the ancient Greeks have a *history*. Can we not discover at least some “facts” about the ancient Greeks, or at least about some of the ancient Greeks?

As we will see, the English word “history” and the English word “story” have the same origin. They both derive from the Greek word *historia*, which was used by the Greeks of the fifth and fourth centuries BC to mean “investigations” or “the account derived from one’s investigations.” (The ancient Greek word for “story,” by the way, is *mythos*, to which the English word “myth” owes its origin.) It may seem at first sight surprising that a word, like English “story,” denoting a fictional or imaginary account shares its origin with a word associated with serious scholarly investigation. But in fact stories are told and histories are written for very much the same purpose, namely in order to make sense of, or to impose structure and coherence on, events. This is why we refer to accounts of current events that we read in the newspaper or watch on television as “news stories.” Just as histories need constantly to be revised and scientific theories need to be adjusted in light of new evidence, so stories take on different forms or are adapted for different audiences.

The story of the judgment of Paris illustrates all of this particularly well. Lucas Cranach is only one of literally hundreds of artists, writers, and musicians, from antiquity until our own day, who have created versions of the story. Presumably, creative artists like Cranach or, in more recent times, Frederick Ashton, who choreographed a ballet entitled *The Judgment of Paris*, or Gore Vidal, who wrote a novel of that name, or Salvador Dalí, who made a drawing based on the myth, have been attracted to the story

“It was up to him to judge among the three goddesses, that threefold bevy. Athena’s ‘gift’ to Alexander was leadership in war and Trojan conquest of Greece. Hera promised Asia and the realms of Europe for him to rule, if Paris should judge in her favor. But Cyprian Aphrodite told of my good looks in extravagant terms and offered me to him if she were the one to take the prize for beauty.” (Euripides, *Trojan Women* 925–31, Helen speaking)

because of its mythical resonance or its archetypal status, or simply because it is a “good story” and is familiar to the artist’s audience. According to the myth, when the gods were celebrating the marriage of Peleus and Thetis, the goddess Eris, who cannot help stirring up trouble since her very name means “conflict,” provoked a beauty contest involving the goddesses Aphrodite, Athena, and Hera. At the suggestion of Zeus, the three goddesses were

led to Troy so that Paris could decide which of the three was the most beautiful. (Zeus knew enough to avoid being personally involved in the judging, so he delegated the task to a mortal, thereby showing why he deserved to be ruler of the gods.) Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual attractiveness, bribed Paris with the promise of marriage to the attractive Helen. The bribe proved irresistible and Paris accordingly awarded the prize to Aphrodite. Marriage to Helen, however, was not without its difficulties, as Helen was already the wife of Menelaus, the well-connected king of Sparta. Nevertheless, Paris sailed across the Aegean Sea to Sparta, abducted Helen, and brought her back to Troy. Understandably angry at the loss of his wife, Menelaus assembled a substantial military force and attacked the city of Troy. This was the beginning of the legendary Trojan War, a conflict that supposedly lasted for 10 years and was to provide material for poetry and song for thousands of years. Given the prominence of sex and violence, power and intrigue, moral issues and raw emotion, it is hardly surprising that this story has been told and retold through countless generations. But where does the myth originate and what does it really mean? Or is this even a meaningful question?

The earliest evidence we have for the story of the judgment of Paris is in works of Greek art that were created in the seventh century BC; that is, some time between 700 and 600 BC. The artists of these works are representing the story that appeared in verbal form in the epic poem called the *Cypria*, which perhaps dates from some time around 700 BC. Unfortunately, the poem itself has not survived, but a synopsis exists, and it is from this synopsis that the account given above has been drawn. (It is not at all unusual for our evidence for ancient Greek civilization to come to us in a form that requires amplification, supplementation, and reconstruction, not to mention outright invention.) There is no way of knowing for certain whether the poet of the *Cypria* invented the story of the judgment or was recounting a traditional story that had been told and retold through many centuries before 700 BC. Regardless of when the story originated, we can be confident that, even in its original form, it told of events that had occurred long before the time of the storyteller. For stories that introduce gods and mortals interacting on a familiar basis are naturally looking back to a remote time when, supposedly, it was common for gods to take a direct personal interest in human affairs. In other words, the Greeks of the seventh century BC were doing more or less what Lucas Cranach was doing over 2,000 years later, conveying a story about the remote past in terms intelligible to an audience of contemporaries.





**Figure 3** Print of *The Judgment of Paris*, a book stamp for Fritz Waerndorfer designed by Koloman Moser, Austria, 1903; 30.5 × 25.4 cm. London, Victoria and Albert Museum, E.1209–1965, given by Mr. Peter G. Wentworth-Shields. Source: Reproduced with permission of Victoria and Albert Museum.

It is interesting to consider why artists and writers have often been fond of setting their work in remote times and places. One reason, surely, is that it enables them to explore issues that could not be so easily addressed, or could not be addressed at all, in poems or paintings that depict the creator's own time and place. For Lucas Cranach, painting a scene from Greek myth offered the only opportunity to a serious artist of his strait-laced day of representing a female figure in the nude.

In similar fashion, we find ancient Greek artists and poets themselves making use of the distant past to include in their works elements that their contemporaries would not accept if they had been set in their own day. In the fifth century BC, for example, the Athenian dramatist Euripides wrote a tragedy entitled *The Trojan Women*, which takes place immediately after the capture of Troy by Menelaus and the Greek forces. Both the Greek soldiers and the captive Trojan women are in agreement that Helen should be put to death for having caused so destructive a war. But they are willing to allow Helen to defend herself in a public debate, something that would have been unthinkable for

“I don’t for a minute believe that Hera and the virgin goddess Athena were so far deranged that the one would offer to deal the city of Argos to the barbarians and Pallas Athena would ever sell Athens into slavery to the Trojans, or that they went to Mount Ida because of frivolous pretensions over their good looks. Why in the world would the divine Hera have conceived such a desire for a beauty prize? So that she could snare a husband more worthy than Zeus? Was Athena on the prowl for marriage with one of the gods?” (Euripides, *Trojan Women* 971–9, Hecuba speaking)

a woman in fifth-century Athens but that could be imagined as a possibility in the legendary past. Helen takes advantage of this opportunity to defend herself by placing the blame for causing the war on everyone but herself: the goddesses who bribed Paris to judge them most beautiful, Paris' parents who ignored a dream that foretold the doom that Paris would bring upon Troy, Menelaus for failing to prevent her abduction by Paris. In response to Helen's speech, Paris' mother Hecuba, the queen of Troy, argues that the whole story of the judgment of Paris is a pack of lies and that Helen is merely using it as a means of exculpating herself. What Euripides is doing, then, is to exploit the mythical past as a setting for a debate that could not have occurred in his own time, an intellectually sophisticated debate between two formidable women. But at the same time he is, through that debate, working out various ways in which that mythical past can be manipulated, constructed, even dismantled. And the participants in the debate use up-to-date rhetorical techniques and forms of argumentation that first came into existence centuries after the supposed date of the Trojan War. Thus there is a sense in which ancient Greek civilization was no more easily recoverable for the ancient Greeks themselves than it was for Lucas Cranach in the sixteenth century, or is for us today.

## Ancient Greece in Perspective: Time

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Already, in only a few pages, reference has been made to a number of geographical locations (Troy, Sparta, the Aegean Sea) and a wide range of dates and periods, including 700 BC and the sixteenth century after Christ. We will encounter these and many other times and places as we learn about ancient Greek civilization, and it will be useful to ensure at this point that we are properly oriented both chronologically and geographically. The ancient Greeks were by no means isolated from other civilizations, and their interactions, both friendly and hostile, resulted in influences that enriched both the culture of the Greeks and the cultures of those peoples with whom they came in contact. Therefore, it will be necessary to take a brief look here at the broader Mediterranean setting in which the ancient Greeks and their neighbors lived. Also, since the Greeks were influenced by older, more advanced civilizations, and since their own influence extended, as we have seen, even into our own day, we need to view the culture of the ancient Greeks in the proper chronological perspective.

“According to the Egyptians, the reign of King Cheops lasted fifty years. After he died he was succeeded as king by his brother Chephren, who followed his brother's example in many respects. In particular, he too built a pyramid, but it did not measure up to the earlier one – I know this from having calculated the dimensions of both pyramids myself – nor did it have underground chambers or a moat supplied, like the other one, with water flowing into it from the Nile.” (Herodotus, *The Histories* 2.127.1, on the Great Pyramid of Giza)

The most brilliant and most prominent manifestations of ancient Greek culture – the poems of Homer, the tragedies of Sophocles, the Parthenon in Athens, the philosophy of Plato, the career of Alexander the Great, the mathematical works of Archimedes – are in fact the products of a relatively brief period within the large span of Greek civilization. They all fall within the periods known as Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic (see timeline 1).

Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt (ca. 2500)

Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (ca. 2000)

Law code of Hammurabi (ca. 1760)

Mycenaean Period (1650–1200)

King Solomon builds Temple in Jerusalem (ca. 960)

Archaic Period (776–500)

Ezra and Nehemiah active in Israel (ca. 450)

Hellenistic Period (323–30)

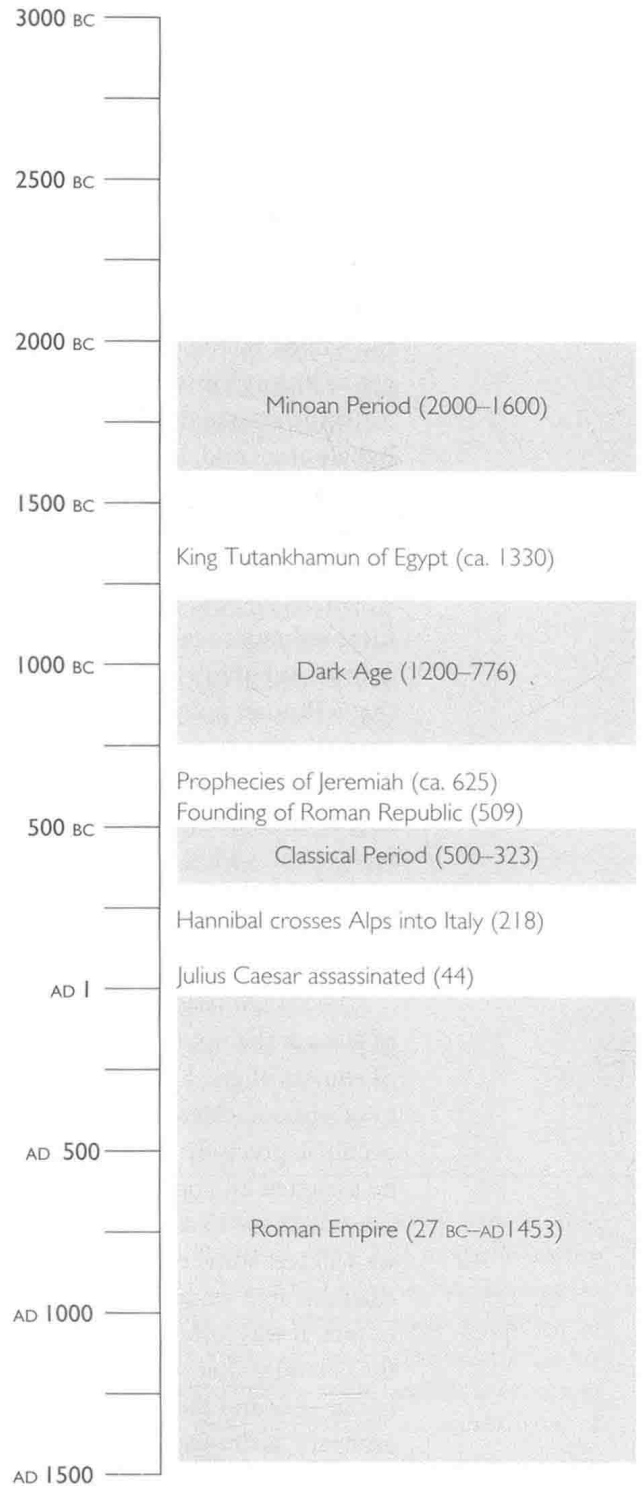
Execution of Jesus Christ (ca. 35)

End of Western Roman Empire (476)

Death of prophet Muhammad in Medina (632)

Norman conquest of England (1066)

First voyage of Christopher Columbus (1492)



**Timeline I** Overview of ancient Greek civilization.

Ancient Greek civilization itself is only a part of the great sweep of Mediterranean history that stretches back from this morning to the time of the earliest cultures for which we have reasonably detailed records. The Greeks seem to have been relative newcomers to the Mediterranean region, arriving at a time when other cultures had already established themselves. By the time the Greeks began to occupy the land that we know today as Greece, Egyptian civilization had been flourishing for several centuries; the great pyramid of Giza, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, was already a venerable monument. In western Asia, the earliest versions of the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* were coming into being and the Akkadian Empire, founded by Sargon of Akkad, was being supplanted by the Babylonians, whose King Hammurabi was responsible for creating one of history's first attempts at a written codification of law.

In the course of time, the Greeks came into contact with the Egyptians and the Babylonians and, later, with other peoples, such as the Persians and the Phoenicians, whose presence affected the cultural landscape of the Mediterranean world. Eventually, the Greeks themselves were to assert themselves, both culturally and politically, exerting a noticeable influence on their neighbors in the Mediterranean and beyond. In particular, the Roman Empire would emerge in a context in which Greek cultural influence was pervasive and in which the Greek language was the recognized instrument of international communication. It was, for example, only to be expected that a Roman political figure of the stature of Julius Caesar should be bilingual and, according to the account of the ancient biographer Suetonius, Caesar's dying words, addressed to his (Roman!) assassin Brutus, were spoken in Greek. In the following century, the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, wanting the message of their master to receive the widest possible circulation, wrote their accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus, not in their native Aramaic but in Greek, because at that time Israel belonged to a part of the Roman Empire that had long been dominated by Greek cultural influence.

The assassination of Julius Caesar occurred on March 15, 44 BC, the crucifixion of Jesus at the time of the Passover in some year around AD 35. These two events are, of course, of great historical significance, but they are also of interest to us as we try to orient ourselves chronologically in the ancient world. To begin with, one of these events is precisely dated to a particular day in a particular year; the other can only be assigned an approximate location in time. The reason for this is that our written sources chose to record the exact day and year of one event, but not of the other. As we will see, some events from antiquity can be precisely dated, but most cannot. The calendar that we use today is essentially the calendar that the ancient Romans used; in fact, it was Julius Caesar himself who was responsible for an important reform of the calendar that took effect shortly before his death. That is, the number of months in our year and the number of days in each month, all of which is, of course, entirely arbitrary, is derived from the Roman calendar (along with the names of the months; July, for example, being named for Julius Caesar). The numbering of the years, however, has to do instead with the Christian conviction that the birth of Jesus represents the beginning of a new era, so that the supposed year of Christ's birth is conventionally assigned the number 1, sometimes designated, as in this book, "AD 1"

(an abbreviation for the Latin *anno domini* or “year of the lord”), sometimes “1 CE” (for “common” or “Christian era”). This is convenient, but it has the awkward consequence of requiring us to number the years before the birth of Christ (= “BC”) in a descending order, so that a year with a larger number is *earlier* than a year with a smaller number. Similarly, the centuries are numbered in descending order, with the fifth century BC (that is, the years between 500 and 400 BC) coming before the fourth.

How, then, did the ancient Greeks and other people living before the birth of Christ, most of whom did not care and none of whom knew for a fact when the messiah was going to be born, number the years? Before we answer that question we need to understand the assumption underlying the question. We take it for granted that there is need of a consecutive numbering of years. The reason for this need, and the reason for the assumption, is that different peoples have entirely different methods of reckoning time and, when cultures come into contact with one another, it sometimes becomes necessary for them to find a means of coordinating their dates. A Roman, for example, would have referred to the year in which Julius Caesar was assassinated as “the year in which Julius Caesar and Marc Antony were consuls,” as each year was named after the two men who held the annual consulship in Rome. A Greek living in Egypt, on the other hand, might have referred to that year as “the eighth year of the reign of Queen Cleopatra,” meaning Cleopatra VII, the Greek ruler of Egypt. By the time of the assassination of Caesar, most Greeks were living under the rule either of the Roman Empire or of a local monarch. But at earlier periods in Greek history, in, say, the Classical Period, the Greeks lived in independent city-states, each with its own calendar. One city might refer to a given year as the year in which so-and-so held an annual magistracy; another might use the office of a particular priesthood as a point of reference. Given the fact that a citizen of Thebes might not know when Chrysis was priestess of Hera at Argos or how long she had served – not to mention the lack of agreement among cities regarding the day on which the “year” was thought to begin – it eventually became clear to the Greeks and others that some standardized system of reckoning was desirable. One thing that all Greeks held in common was the worship of Olympian Zeus, in whose honor the Olympic games, traditionally founded in 776 BC, were held every fourth year. This made possible a universal system of dating, and so any Greek could make sense of a reference to the assassination of Julius Caesar as having occurred “in the fourth year of the 183rd Olympiad.” Other peoples also have chosen a fixed point in reference to which all later events could be dated. The Muslim calendar begins with the Hijra, the withdrawal of Muhammad to Medina in AD 622, while the Hebrew calendar eliminates the problem of dating events that occurred

“The thirty-year truce that came into effect after the capture of Euboea lasted for fourteen years. But in the following year, at the time when Chrysis had been serving as priestess at Argos for forty-eight years, when Aenesias was ephor in Sparta, and when Pythodorus still had two months left in his term as archon of the Athenians, at the beginning of spring, six months after the battle of Potidaea, an armed band of a little over three hundred Thebans, shortly after nightfall, forced an entry into the Boeotian city of Plataea, which was then an ally of the Athenians.” (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 2.2.1, describing an event in the year 431 BC)

before “year one” by starting with the creation of the world, which is supposed to have occurred some 3717 years before the assassination of Julius Caesar.

## Ancient Greece in Perspective: Space

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Surprisingly, orienting ourselves in space is less straightforward than orienting ourselves chronologically. For, as it happens, it is easier to mark off the even flow of time into uniform segments than to draw stable boundaries on the seemingly solid surface of the earth. Today, Greece is a nation with more or less fixed borders and a secure place on the map (map 1). That has not always been the case. Indeed, the modern nation of Greece dates only from AD 1829, when the Greeks secured independence, following a lengthy insurgency, from the Ottoman Empire. At that time, however, the nation's borders were not identical with those of modern-day Greece, which are a product of the tumultuous history of the twentieth century. (To provide a sense of scale, let us note that, in area, the modern country of Greece is almost

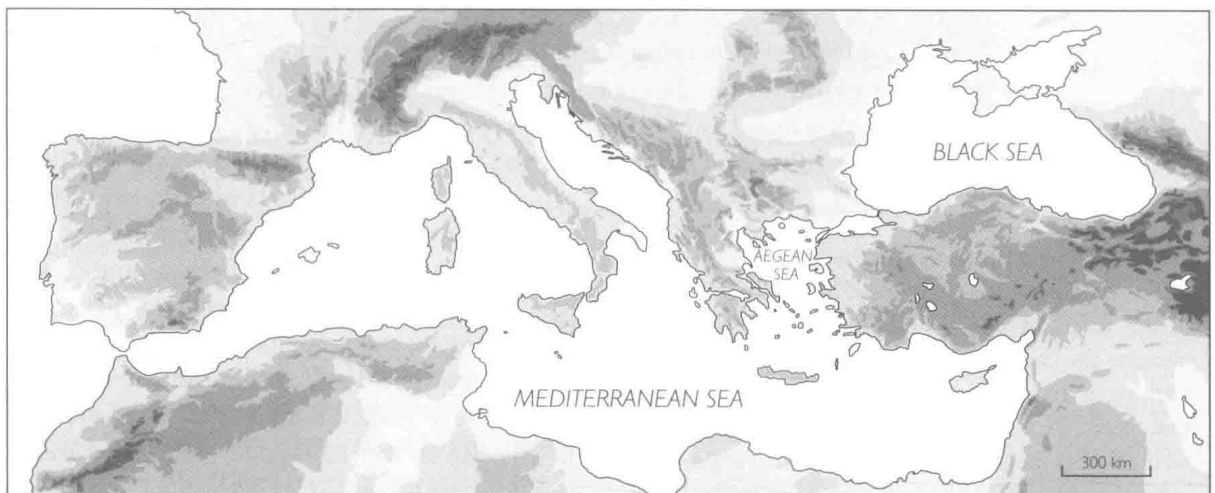


Map 1 Modern Greece and its neighbors.

exactly the same size as England in the United Kingdom or the state of New York in the United States.) When we use the term “Greece” in reference to an earlier period, we are using the word not so much in a geographical sense as a shorthand expression meaning “the area inhabited by Greek-speaking people.” For the past 4,000 years that area has included the land now occupied by the modern Greek state, but at various times it has encompassed a great deal of additional territory.

For this reason, the land shown in map 2 has no boundaries marked. That is, it is not what is called a “political map” like map 1. Rather, it is a “physical map” showing the most prominent topographical features of the lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea, with terrain at higher levels represented by correspondingly darker shades. The Aegean Sea separates two land masses, that to the east being occupied today by the country of Turkey and that to the west by the modern country of Greece. In addition, there is a large number of islands strewn over the Aegean Sea, most of which are now part of Greece, as they have been since ancient times. It is this region, consisting of the southern tip of the Balkan Peninsula and the Aegean islands, along with a narrow strip of land along the western coast of what is now Turkey, that represents what the Greeks considered to be their homeland throughout antiquity. It is important to understand the character of that homeland because the geography and climate of Greece and the Aegean represent the one constant in Greek civilization. It is also clear that the physical characteristics of the land in which the Greeks lived have to some extent influenced the way in which their civilization developed.

The most notable feature of the Greek landscape is the degree to which it is fragmented. The mainland is broken up by a series of mountain ridges that divide much of Greece into a number of relatively small pockets of habitable territory. And the islands, of which there are dozens in the Aegean Sea and a few more in the Ionian Sea to the west of mainland Greece, are merely a continuation of this series of ridges, so that, in geological terms, the only difference between the mainland and



Map 2 Physical map of the Mediterranean region.

the islands is that the lowest points of the former are not under water. In fact, the sea poses less of a barrier than many of the irregularities of the terrain. For this reason, it is the islands and the areas of the mainland nearest the coast that have been the most active in cultural, social, and economic terms throughout much of Greek history. The abundance of good harbors along the Aegean coast and among the Aegean islands meant that there were frequent contacts between the Greeks and their Mediterranean neighbors, especially those in North Africa and western Asia. As we will see, these features of topography had two important effects on the way in which Greek civilization developed. In the first place, relatively easy access to the (generally more advanced) cultures of Asia and Egypt resulted in an openness to foreign influence; in fact, the adoption and transformation of the artistic and technological advances of non-Greek peoples would become characteristic of Greek civilization. In the second place, the fragmentation of the Greek landscape encouraged the development of numerous discrete and autonomous communities, in contrast to the more centralized administrations of the Egyptians and the peoples of western Asia.

“I am aged Euphro, with no large holdings in many-furrowed land or vineyards gushing with wine. My plow etches a groove in scanty soil and my drink is a trickle from a handful of grapes. With meager means I can only give meager, though grateful, return; grant me more, divine spirit, and more will be your share.” (Apollonides, *The Greek Anthology* 6.238)

This fragmentation is not restricted to the division of Greece by physical barriers into isolated communities. Even within a narrowly defined geographical area, differences in terrain and climate can be considerable. The success of agriculture depends upon such factors as the quality and depth of the soil and the amount and timing of rainfall. Since

these determinants can vary greatly not only between neighboring communities but even within communities, we find a quite uneven distribution of wealth both between and within communities. It should be understood that this uneven distribution existed within a much narrower range than we are used to in our own society. Greece is not well endowed with natural resources, and so a king of Sparta could tell the Persian King Xerxes, according to an account by the historian Herodotus, “Greece and Poverty have always had to share the same rations.” But the more scarce the resources, the greater the competition for them. So we will see that ancient Greek civilization developed as it did in part out of a need to minimize the ruinous effects of this competition and to maximize the benefits of the limited resources. Those

“Why is it that at the festival of the Thesmophoria the women of Eretria do not roast the meat in the fire, but use the rays of the sun, and why do they not invoke Calligeneia? Is it because the captive women that Agamemnon was bringing back from Troy happened to celebrate the Thesmophoria in that place when, suddenly, conditions for navigation turned favorable, so they set sail and abandoned the sacrifice without completing it?” (Plutarch, *Greek Questions* 31)

resources include land variously suitable for the cultivation of grapevines, olives, and some grains (wheat and, more widely, barley), pasture land (for sheep, goats, swine, donkeys, mules, and, in a few locations, cattle and horses), and very widely scattered mineral deposits (iron and copper for tools and weapons, limestone and marble for building and sculpture, clay for ceramics, and



silver for display). Greece is not, however, well supplied with spacious, fertile plains or large, hardwood forests. For this reason, whenever the population of Greece expanded beyond a certain point, it became necessary either for some Greeks to migrate to other areas within the Mediterranean region or for increasing numbers of goods to be imported into Greece. In either case, the most attractive areas were the same: the region around the Black Sea, whose forests supplied timber for ship-building and whose rich agricultural lands provided grain, and the coasts of Italy, Sicily, France, Spain, and, sporadically, North Africa. All these places, because of their easy access by sea and their availability of fertile land, became destinations for Greek traders and settlers.

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### Zetemata: Questions for Discussion

The Greek word *zetema* (plural *zetemata*) means something like “question in search of an answer.” Like most people, the ancient Greeks were fond of asking and attempting to answer questions about things that puzzled them. A number of ancient authors wrote works that consist of nothing but questions and suggested answers, relating to nature or to literary matters or to cultural history. Often the questions begin “Why is it that ...?” and often the suggested answers themselves take the form of questions, sometimes a series of alternative questions, with the author giving no indication as to which of the alternatives the author considers to be correct. Sometimes the various answers are drawn from the written works of earlier authorities. The philosopher Aristotle, for example, who lived in the fourth century BC, wrote a work which no longer survives in which he raised and suggested answers to several features of the Homeric poems that Aristotle and his contemporaries found puzzling; those poems were already hundreds of years old and Greek language and society had undergone considerable change in the meantime. We know of Aristotle’s work only because some of his solutions to Homeric problems are quoted by later authors, for whom Aristotle was closer in time to Homer than they were themselves. The origin of unusual religious practices also attracted the attention of a number of Greek authors, like the Hellenistic poet Callimachus, who devoted a learned poem to the subject, and the essayist Plutarch, who lived in the time of the Roman Empire and who wrote two works that addressed the origins of various Greek and Roman religious and cultural practices.

In the spirit, then, of the ancient Greeks, we will end each chapter with questions for discussion, recognizing that often the best questions produce, not answers, but better questions.

- What kind of explanation might a modern anthropologist give for a ritual, like the one described by Plutarch (above), in which meat was prepared without the use of fire?
- What do the bribes offered to Paris by the three goddesses reveal about ancient Greek views of what a young man is likely to find most appealing?