Introduction to Ancient Greece Documentary narration

Over three thousand five hundred years ago, the Greek-speaking people

who lived here among the mountains, bays, and islands of the north-

eastern Mediterranean began to shape a truly remarkable culture.

The new ideas that took root in this rugged land became so important

that ancient Greece is said to be “the birthplace of western civiliza-

tion," and the influence of that civilization can be found almost every-

where we look in the world today.

Ancient Greece gave birth to the world's first democracy and the origi-

nal Olympic Games.

Ancient Greece also made long-lasting contributions to art, architec-

ture, science, and mathematics, as well as to literature, drama, and even

to the study of history itself.

And the religion of the ancient Greeks has provided us with a rich

tradition of myth and legend.

In order to better understand this tremendously important period of

history, let us now visit some of the fascinating places where this mar-

velous civilization developed in the far distant past.

Mycenae

The origins of Greek civilization can be traced back to the ruins of this

hilltop city called Mycenae that was first settled about 4500 years ago,

and that was once the center of a rich and powerful empire.

Legend says that Mycenae was founded by Perseus, who was a son of

Zeus, the King of all the Greek gods, whose magnificent statue is seen

here.

The Greek people of long ago believed that to build the walls of the

city, Perseus had ordered one-eyed giants, whose job it was to make

weapons for the gods, to carve these enormous stones and then lift

them into place.

As early as thirteen centuries before the birth of Christ, the kings of

Mycenae rode out through this gate built from these huge stones to

lead their troops into battle...and above the gate the figures of two li-

ons, carved in stone, still remind us of the great power these kings

once held.

The golden death masks of several different kings were discovered in

deep circular tombs, like this one, that were built next to the lion's gate.

Near the royal tombs and overlooking the fields where the farmers of

Mycenae once grew crops to feed their citizens are the remains of a

many-roomed house where the high priest lived; and this painting of a

young Mycenaean woman once adorned a wall of a religious building

that stood nearby.

Up above the priest's house, crowning the hill, we can still see the ram-

part walls that surrounded the royal palace where long ago decisions

were made that shaped the course of Greek history.

It was probably in the throne room of this palace that the most famous

of all the kings of Mycenae, Agamemnon, decided to sacrifice his daugh-

ter to the gods so that his ships might have good weather as they set

off to attack the city of Troy.

The hatred and violence that beset the family of Agamemnon has be-

come legendary, mostly because it is described in such detail in the

Iliad, the most famous of all the books written in ancient Greece.

For countless centuries the people living in the village near the ruins of

Mycenae believed that Agamemnon was buried here in this massive

tomb that lies outside the gates of the city. However, archeologists now

think that this tomb probably belonged to some other Mycenaean king.

The Collapse of Mycenae: Colonial Expansion

By 1100 B.C. Mycenae’s power had collapsed; and, following years of

invasions from the north, other cities grew in strength.

Starting around 800 B.C. some of these cities began to bring Greek cus-

toms and religion to far distant lands by establishing colonies.

Sparta, for example, founded the colony of Taras in southern Italy;

Greeks from Rhodes in Asia Minor founded Massilla in the south of

France where today's city of Marseilles stands; Corinth established colo-

nies in northern and western Greece, but her biggest colony was Syra-

cuse in Sicily. And by the year 600 B.C., the Greek city-states had founded over thirty

different colonies in distant regions of both the Mediterranean and the

Black Seas.

Corinth

Corinth, whose ruins are seen here, was not only a major Greek colo-

nizer of the Mediterranean, it was also one of the three most powerful

city-states in Greece for several centuries.

Corinth grew up not far from Mycenae on a narrow isthmus where

important land and sea routes came together....routes that could be

monitored by soldiers on duty in Corinth's ancient acropolis that

loomed high above the city.

Today it is hard to imagine just from looking at these ruins what a rich

and powerful place Corinth once was, but archeologists have carefully

studied these stones and they are fairly certain the city once looked

something like this.

At its center stood the great temple of Apollo, who was the god of the

sun, music, healing and prophecy. Here we can see all that remains of

that beautiful building.

Ancient Greek temples, such as this one in Athens, were never entered

for worship by ordinary people; instead, temples were considered to

be the houses of the gods, and sacrificial offerings were always made

on altars that stood outside.

Not far from the Temple of Apollo was the center of all of Corinth’s

commercial and governmental activities. This was a huge open mar-

ketplace or "agora" that was lined on two sides with shops where such

items as wine, pottery, and olives could be purchased.

Opposite the central shops on the far side of the market square was a

long covered area called a "stoa" which was attached to the main build-

ing of Corinthian government, the senate house.

By looking at this reconstructed stoa in Athens, we can get a good idea

of what the stoa in the market of Corinth once looked like. Under its

huge roof, citizens of the city-state could either sell things or simply

meet and talk, shaded from the intense sunlight and protected from

stormy weather.

Just below the marketplace in Corinth was the fountain that at one

time supplied the city's water. By passing through stone archways,

slaves were able to fill jugs with cool, fresh water which they then car-

ried back to their master’s houses.

Just within sight of the houses where the Corinthians lived, there once

stood a large theater, whose ruins are seen here, where citizens en-

joyed performances that were very often of a religious nature.

The theater may have used pillars like these in its construction that are

decorated in the “Corinthian” style–that is, carved to look like the leaves

of the acanthus plants that grew wild all around the city.

One final feature of ancient Corinth was a sacred spring that has long

since vanished but was at one time reached by climbing down a stair-

way located near the gates of the marketplace.

This spring was linked by a secret underground passageway to the

special sanctuary of a woman called an oracle, a prophetess who was

the human voice of the god Apollo.

Delphi

To better understand the ancient Greek religion and the role that oracles

played in that religion, let us now travel to Delphi, located high in the

mountains about 100 miles northwest of Corinth to the great sanctu-

ary of Apollo, where for over 1000 years, the most famous of the Greek

oracles performed her mystical duties.

Delphi, unlike Corinth, was simply a religious center and never served

any commercial or military purpose.

The ancient Greeks believed that Delphi had been founded by Zeus.

The legend says that one day Zeus, who lived with the other immortal

gods on far distant Mount Olympus, decided to locate the center of the

universe. And so he sent out a pair of his sacred eagles to find it for him.

Eventually the eagles met above the mountainous site of Delphi, thus

identifying it as the hub around which the entire universe rotated.

Beneath the spot where the eagles met, an open crack in the ground

released mysterious vapors that were said to have “an odor like the

rarest and most beautiful perfume," and nearby pure sweet water

flowed from a sacred spring where Zeus’s son Apollo is said to have

killed a giant snake named Python that guarded the spring.

Because Apollo felt regret for killing Python, the god punished him-

self; and for eight long years lived the life of a simple shepherd–a way

of life that is still pursued around Delphi today.

The myth of Apollo and Python formed the basis of many of the reli-

gious rites at Delphi–rites that involved acts of ritual purification, es-

pecially in cases where an unjust death had occurred.

The temple to Apollo at Delphi, whose ruins we see here, once con-

tained inscriptions that read: "Nothing in excess" and "Know thyself."

The Temple was built on a site marked by this strange sculpture that

stood at the exact center of the universe and that was decorated with

patterns of crisscrossing thunderbolts which were the weapons favored

by Zeus.

Near the spot where the thunderbolt sculpture stood, but hidden deep

beneath the temple, was the sanctuary of the oracle, the woman cho-

sen to be the human voice of the god Apollo.

To prepare herself for the questions that were put to her, the oracle

took her seat on a three-legged cauldron, drank water from the sacred

spring , breathed smoke from the leaves of Apollo's tree, the laurel,

and then entered a trance.

The priests of the temple interpreted the sounds made by the oracle as

well as the movements of her body, and their interpretations were

passed on to those who had come seeking her advice.

Only men were allowed to consult the oracle, and they usually had to

travel great distances, almost always by sea. And not only were they

required to sacrifice animals to the god, they also had to pay a fee that

helped to maintain the sanctuary.

During the winter months, which could be quite snowy at Delphi, the

sanctuary remained open, but the oracle did not answer questions be-

cause it was believed that Apollo, the sun god, was not present during

winter, the darkest season of the year.

Instead, another god, Dionysus, took his place. And being the god of

wine and pleasure, wild festivals occurred which stood in stark con-

trast to the more subdued rites that were held during the warmer

months of the year.

All of the Greek city-states built treasuries within the temple enclosure

at Delphi...something they did at all of their great religious shrines.

These treasuries were used to store the special offerings their citizens

had made to the gods.

The building seen here is the treasury of the Athenians. It was con-

structed between 490 and 480 B.C. Alongside this treasury were once

displayed the shields, spears and other items captured when a huge

force of Persian invaders were defeated by the Athenians following

the famous battle of Marathon.

Every four years, a very special religious festival, called the Pythian

Games, was held at Delphi. During this time a great procession passed

by the treasuries on its way to the temple where sacrifices were made

to Apollo on an altar that stood outside.

And in this huge theater next to the temple, up to 5000 people would

listen to the priests sing hymns honoring the gods or watch “mystery

plays” which portrayed the struggle between Apollo and Python.

High up the mountainside, above the theater, this stadium once ech-

oed to the sounds of the crowds that watched the athletic competitions

that took place here, for in ancient Greece the cultivation of the body

went hand-in-hand with the cultivation of the soul.

But in ancient Greece, the largest athletic competitions were the Olym-

pic Games. In part two of this program we will visit the great sanctu-

ary of Zeus at Olympia where these famous games were first held over

2700 years ago.

Olympia

The first Olympic Games were held at the great religious sanctuary of

Olympia, whose ruins are seen here, in the year 776 B.C. And to this

day, the Olympic torch is still lit here and carried by hand to ignite the

Olympic flame wherever the games are being held.

Olympia was built to honor Zeus, the ruler of all the gods, and also to

honor Zeus’s wife Hera...sometimes called the "mother of the gods."

To better understand how the Olympic Games first came to be, let us

have a look around ancient Olympia.

At the very center of Olympia, in a sacred grove of wild olive trees,

once stood the magnificent temple of Zeus, which contained one of the

seven wonders of the ancient world, a gold and ivory statue of the

king of the gods that stood over 44 feet high and that always produced

a deep sense of reverence among those who saw it.

Today no trace remains of Zeus’s great statue. His temple lies in ruins,

and the stone sections that formed its huge pillars lie where they crashed

to the earth over 1500 years ago following a powerful earthquake.

But still standing, not far from the temple ruins and up a short flight of

steps, we can see the workshop where the famous sculptor, Phidias,

labored for several years creating that enormous work of art, and the

delicate marble carving seen here serves to remind us of the fantastic

skill it took to carry out this remarkable task.

A long time ago, the temple of Zeus was ringed with altars, and on

some sacred sacrificial fires burned that were never allowed to be go

out. Sprinkled among the altars were the statues of the victors of past

Olympic Games, and everywhere grew the wild olive trees that were

sacred to Zeus.

A few hundred yards from Zeus’s temple stood the temple of his wife,

Hera. Although it can’t be seen here, inside her temple there was a

statue of the goddess seated on a throne with Zeus standing next to

her, and this statue of Hermes, the messenger of the gods who was

honored for his great speed and agility, stood nearby.

Outside the boundaries of the sacred grove, flowers now cover the floors

of the buildings where the Olympic athletes once trained. These are

the gymnasium and the "palestra," that was a wrestling and boxing

school. But even though their floors lie buried, many of the pillars that

once supported the roofs of these fine buildings still stand today.

On the opposite side of the sacred grove from the gymnasium, the an-

cient Olympic stadium can be entered by passing through this high

stone archway.

The Olympic Games were held here every four years at midsummer,

and tens of thousands of men came from all over Greece either to par-

ticipate in them or just to view them. Women, however, were not al-

lowed to attend.

Because the games were in honor of Zeus, a sacred truce was declared

out of respect for the god, and all wars between the city-states stopped

for an entire month.

The Olympic Games became so important in ancient Greece that, for

nearly all of the 1200 years they were held, even the passing of time

came to be measured in four-year units called Olympiads.

The Olympic Games always possessed a strong spiritual message–that

men should abandon destructive warfare and turn instead to healthy,

physical competitions, and that they should extend themselves to the

limits of their human abilities and, as a result, become more godlike.

The first day of the Olympic games was always devoted to religious

ceremonies as a great procession of priests, officials, and participants

made its way into the sanctuary, stopping to make offerings at three

different altars outside the temples.

The next day, here in the stadium, the competitions began and these

consisted of a variety of events; among them were foot races, wrestling

contests, and boxing matches. Besides these events, horse races and

chariot races were held in the Olympic racecourse located just beyond

the stadium.

On the last day, the awards were given. First, branches were removed

from a wild olive tree that grew in Zeus’s sacred grove. Then these

branches were woven into simple wreaths having no material value

but possessing immense spiritual value. And it was these wreaths that

were used to crown the victors of the Olympic games.

Epidauros

Approximately one hundred miles east of Olympia, at Epidauros, this

huge theater was constructed in about the 81st Olympiad. It was de-

signed to hold 14,000 spectators, and unlike the Olympic games, women

were allowed to attend the events held here.

The ancient Greeks thronged here to watch the all-day plays that were

performed in the circular area at the foot of the grandstands, called the

orchestra, where, at its exact center, an altar to the god Dionysus was

placed...for theaters were, in fact, temples to this god.

Perhaps because Dionysus was the god of pleasure, the events that

took place in the theaters were greatly enjoyed by the spectators, not

just for their religious merit, but for their entertainment value as well.

The Greeks were very famous for their plays, and all of them were

based on legends and myths. Many Greek plays are still performed to

this day; but whether tragedy or comedy, the actors in ancient times,

who were always men, wore masks that had strange exaggerated ex-

pressions.

The row of seats nearest to the altar of Dionysus was always reserved

for the priests and teachers from the sanctuary of the god of medicine

that stood among the trees and meadows of a nearby valley. For, more

than anything else, Epidauros was the greatest center of healing in

ancient Greece, and people came here to be cured of their illnesses by

seeking the help of this god, who they called Asclepius.

Asclepius was the son of Apollo, and legend said he had learned the

healing arts from a very wise being–half man and half horse–called a

centaur.

The temple of Asclepius, whose ruins are seen here, was at one time

protected by thousands of sacred snakes that were symbols both of the

god and of the healing profession. And it was outside this temple that

animals were sacrified and the offerings burned by those seeking to be

cured.

After making their offerings, sick people took a path through the woods

to a kind of hospital building where they would spend the night sleep-

ing on the skin of the animal they had just sacrificed. And while they

slept, Asclepius sometimes appeared to them in their dreams.

In the morning the patients would tell the priests their dreams and,

just like doctors today, the priests would prescribe various treatments

to cure their illnesses.

Treatments might involve physical excercises or special baths that were

given in nearby buildings, and oftentimes treatments included mental

excercises as well, such as studying certain books or writing poetry.

Athens

Many of the people treated at the sanctuary of Asclepius travelled there

from the magnificent city-state of Athens, which lay about 150 miles to

the northeast of Epidauros.

Athens was named for the goddess of wisdom, Athena, and her fan-

tastic temple, called the Parthenon, which is seen here, looms above

the city from where it stands in the ancient acropolis.

Inside the Parthenon there once was an enormous gold and ivory statue

of Athena made by the same sculptor who fashioned the statue of Zeus

at Olympia, and during religious festivals this statue was draped in a

special garment woven by the women of the city.

Next to the Parthenon, this temple called the Erechtheum with its fa-

mous porch supported by statues of greek maidens, was built on the

spot where the royal palace of the kings of ancient Athens once stood.

The last king of Athens to live on this site was named Codrus. After

Codrus died in 1066 B.C. fighting to save the city from the invading

Dorians, the Athenians decided that no one person could ever take the

place of such a great king, and so the monarchy was replaced by an

oligarchy–rule by a small group of men from noble families.

Then, in 594 B.C., a great statesman named Solon founded a parlia-

ment, a peoples law court and a council of the people, changing the

way the oligarchy governed Athens so that power was more equally

shared by all her citizens.

However, it was this man, Pericles, who was responsible for develop-

ing, for the first time in history, a government “by the people” starting

in the year 461 B.C. following Athens' great victory over the invading

armies of Persia.

Under democracy and the guidance of Pericles, Athens flourished; and

with the help of some of the greatest artists and scholars in human

history, the city grew both in wealth and in beauty....and so Athens

entered her brief but magnificent "Golden Age."

Most of the spiritual life of Athens centered on the temples located

high above the city in the Acropolis. And the sight of these temples

always served to remind the citizens of the great goodness and wis-

dom of Athena, their protector.

Located far below the Acropolis was the marketplace, whose ruins are

seen here, that was once ringed with government buildings, a library,

and a gymnasium.

And on a low hill overlooking the marketplace, they built this fine

temple to the god of fire and metalworking, Hephaestus; for very near

this temple there were, in ancient times, a large number of workshops

where gifted craftsmen labored who sought the guidance and protec-

tion of this god.

And looking across the marketplace from the temple of the god of fire

is the Great Stoa of Attalos where citizens congregated to discuss such

things as politics, prices, their families, and the weather.

As city-states went, Athens was quite large and it encompassed much

of the lower end of the Attica peninsula. And here, at the extreme

southern end of the city-state and overlooking an important sea route,

this marvelous temple was constructed at just about the same time the

Parthenon was being built–around 444 B.C.

This temple honored one of the three greatest of the Olympian gods,

Poseidon, the God of the Sea...and it is his statue we see here.

Sailors returning to Athens after a long voyage to the East could see

this temple from far out on the water, and seeing it always meant that

they would be home soon, and for this they always gave thanks to

Poseidon.

As we have learned, Athens during it’s Golden Age was quite a fantas-

tic place, and yet there were certain flaws in the Athenian democracy...

the same flaws that were to be found the next time people tried to

institute this form of government 2200 years later during the early years

of the United States. Namely, only men were allowed to vote, and

women had no legal voice in decision-making at all.

And the slaves, who were bought and sold like animals, had no rights

whatsoever, even though they made up a large part of the population.

The Golden Age ended mostly because of an outbreak of war in 431

B.C. between Athens and her powerful enemy, Sparta–a highly milita-

ristic city-state a few hundred miles to the south–a war that ended 27

years later with the defeat of Athens.

And although Athenian civilization was not completely destroyed by

this war, it never fully regained the glory that it possessed during its

"Golden Age."

Alexander the Great

Just forty-two years after Athens fell to Sparta, it fell again to the forces

of Greek Macedonia, which lay to the north of Athens.

The Macedonian king, named Philip, died just shortly after his great

victory over Athens; but the new king, Philip’s son Alexander, decided

to follow in his father's footsteps and set off to conquer the lands that

had, a few centuries before, made up the great Persian Empire.

In the year 334 B.C., when he was just 22, Alexander rode out from his

capital of Pella in Macedonia with an army of 35,000 troops. He won

battle after battle as he zig-zagged across the countryside, finally com-

pleting his conquests nine years later when he reached the western

borders of India...and by now he was known as "Alexander the Great."

In western India, as well as everywhere else he conquered, Alexander

set up his own local governments that were required to use Greek

money.

He promoted Greek ideas and laws and even required that he be wor-

shipped as a god.

However, only three years after returning to his new capital of Babylon

in Persia, Alexander, the man who wanted to be a god, died of malaria

at the age of 33 , and his enormous empire soon fell apart.