The Greek Achievement

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Scared by time and weather, the ruins of the Athenian Acropolis stand against a vivid blue sky and overlook the trees and buildings of a modern city sprawled beneath. These ruins are striking symbols of a departed civilization whose principal center was Athens.

In the fifth century B.C., the temples and statuary of the Acropolis were gleaming and new, fresh from the hands of builders and sculptors. Five hundred years later, when Greece was a province of the Roman Empire, they still appeared so to Plutarch:

_The works ... are wonderful; they were quickly created and they have lasted for ages. In beauty each one appeared venerable as soon as it was finished, but in freshness and vigor it looks even now new and lately built. They bloom with an eternal freshness that seems untouched by time, as though they had been inspired by an unfading spirit of youth._

Today the Acropolis no longer appears to be "untouched by time"; yet for us no less than for Plutarch, ancient Athens and the civilization that was centered there has retained an "eternal freshness." Greece's accomplishments were to prove...
enduring. Its magnificent intellectual and artistic legacy would provide much of the cultural heritage of Western civilization. And when we look at the Greek experience as a whole—political, economic, social, religious, and cultural—we can understand the significance of Arnold Toynbee's words, "The Greeks went over the same road before us."

THE BACKGROUND: AEGEAN CIVILIZATION, 2000–1200 B.C.

Greek civilization was preceded by an advanced civilization located on the lands surrounding the Aegean Sea. This Aegean civilization, which came into full flower about 2000 B.C., and collapsed suddenly following 1200 B.C., developed through two major periods.

The first and longer phase of Aegean civilization ended about 1450 B.C. and is called Minoan after the legendary Cretan king Minos. Crete was the center of Minoan civilization, which spread to the Aegean Islands, the coast of Asia Minor, and mainland Greece (see map, p. 40). The last period of Aegean civilization, the two-and-one-half centuries following 1450 B.C., when the center of Aegean political power and culture lay on the Greek mainland, is called Mycenaean after its most important site at Mycenae.

The Minoans

The narrow, 160-mile-long island of Crete was a stepping stone between Europe, Asia, and Africa. Stimulated by immigrants from Asia Minor and by contacts with Mesopotamia and Egypt, a brilliant civilization emerged here by 2000 B.C.

Minoan prosperity was based on large-scale trade that ranged from Sicily, Greece, and Asia Minor to Syria and Egypt. The Minoans employed the first ships capable of long voyages over the open sea. Chief exports were olive oil, wine, metalware, and magnificent pottery. This trade was the monopoly of an efficient bureaucratic government under a powerful ruler whose administrative records were written on clay tablets, first in a form of picture writing and later in a script known as Linear A, whose 87 signs represented syllables. As neither script has been deciphered, our knowledge of Minoan civilization is scanty and imprecise; most of it is derived from the material remains uncovered by archaeologists.

It was the epoch-making discoveries of the English archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans that first brought to light this civilization, whose existence had previously only been hinted at in the epic of Homer and in Greek legends such as that of the minotaur; half bull and half man, who devoured youths and maidens sent as tribute from Greece. Between 1900 and 1905 Evans unearthed the ruins of a great palace at Knossos, the dominant city in Crete after 1700 B.C. Rising at least three stories high and sprawling over nearly six acres, this "Palace of Minos," built of brick and limestone and employing unusual downward-tapering columns of wood, was a maze of royal apartments, storerooms, corridors, open courtyards, and broad stairways. Equipped with running water, the palace had a sanitation system that surpassed anything constructed in Europe until Roman times. Walls were painted with elaborate frescoes in which the Minoans appear as a happy, peaceful people with a pronounced liking for dancing, festivals, and athletic contests. Women are shown enjoying a freedom and dignity unknown elsewhere in the ancient Near East or classical Greece. They are not secluded in the home but are seen sitting with men and taking an equal part in public festivities—even as toreadors in a form of bullfighting. Their dresses are very elaborate, with gay patterns and colors, pleats, puffed sleeves, and flounces. Bodices are open in front to the waist, and hair is elaborately fashioned with ringlets over the forehead and about the ears.

The most notable feature of Minoan culture was its art, spontaneous and full of rhythmic motion. Art was an essential part of everyday life and not, as in the ancient Near East, an adjunct to religion and the state. What little is known of Minoan religion also contrasts sharply with conditions in the Near East: there were no great temples, powerful priesthoods, or large cult statues of the gods. The principal deity was the Mother Goddess; her importance reflected the important