**CHW3M The Greeks, National Geographic Video Notes**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPsHcZA1VxU> (The Greeks Part 1, National Geographic)

This episode tracks the rise of ‘Greece’ from Neolithic villages to the spread of trade and ideas, writing and government up to dark age (during the bronze age 1200 BCE) when there was a global economic collapse.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3uRN2NcArD4> (The Greeks Part 2, National Geographic)

**The Good Strife**

**‘Greek’ Culture Coming Out of the Dark Age**

Cultural values included hard work and competition. Dark Age (opposite of a golden age) didn’t mean total cultural collapse – palaces and government were gone but farmers and artisans were still around; the cult of individuality grew out of this. Stories were told and then written down when writing was adapted from the Phoenicians. Homer’s works were copied and read widely showing a Greek identity (in the cultural sense, not in the political sense because there was no unified Greece at this time). There was no nation called Greece. There were individual city states, *polis*.

**Religion**

Religion was central – gods/goddesses/spirits were thought to be everywhere. The traditional history put city development before religious development; new discoveries show altars older than the formation of cities – helped Greeks shape their identity, survive the dark age as city states grew around temples, not vice versa. Delphi was a very sacred (holy) place where the prophecies (predictions of the future) of Apollo were spoken by female priestesses. Greek gods resembled humans and thought like them too, they were not dragons or animals.

**Athletics**

Greeks thought the best way to become immortal was to do something good. Olympia (site of the Olympic athletic competitions) allowed them to do that starting in 776 BCE – competitors had to be Greek, male, and naked. Running, wrestling, and boxing were the main sports. There was only one winner – the competitive ethos was called *agon*.

**Science**

Greeks liked ideas. Miletus (in modern day Turkey) was home to a revolution in thought – they lost their harbour due to the movement of the river – they didn’t blame the gods, rather they studied the geology and natural causes. They were the first scientists. Famous Greek scientists included Thales who used geometry and predicted a solar eclipse, Pythagoras who used numbers to explain the universe, Hippocrates who devised a code for practising medicine, and Democritus who said all matter could be divided into small bits called atoms. The 6th century expansion of the Persian Empire further west pushed Greeks back west out of Turkey. Thus began a flood of reason.

**The Athenian Democratic Revolution**

Before Athenian democracy there were aristocratic rulers or tyrants. Debt slavery was widely practiced. There were strict Draconian laws. Solon’s reforms freed debt slaves, took political power into hands of citizens in the Council of 400 but it was only for the wealthiest Athenians. The context for the democratic revolution of 508 BCE was a clash between rival aristocrats – Isagoras and Cleisthenes. Cleisthenes was banished. The elite was on his side. Cleisthenes turned to the common people and promised to allow elections and trials by jury. A huge revolt happened that resulted in Isagoras and his Spartan allies being sent away from Athens. Cleisthenes rode the wave into power. It was the first time the people could be a political agent. There were restrictions; one could have a democratic voice if free, male, and Athenian born. That accounted for a mere 50 000 out of 200 000 people in Athens. Overall, this was a time when individual talents worked together to make life better.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRMMT5Qf94s> (The Greeks Part 3, National Geographic)

**Chasing Greatness**

**Persian Invasion**

Athens sent a runner from Marathon to Athens to ask for protection from the Persian invasion only 16 years after the birth of democracy. It was 490 BCE. There was no concept of ‘Greece’ or Greekness. The Golden Age would only be 170 years long. Previously the runner (Phidippides) had run to Sparta and back. Sparta said they had to wait for the full moon for religious reasons in order to help. Athens was outnumbered 2:1 by the Persians. The Persians were defeated at first with huge losses for the Persians, only 192 dead for the Greeks, according to historian Herodotus, at the Battle of Marathon.

Shortly after, silver was found. Themistocles, an Athenian leader, knew the Persians would return but he had to work his idea through democracy. He made Athenians feel pride in order to spend the riches on a fleet: 200 triremes (ships that had three rows of rowers). 200 crew members were needed on each ship, so that was nearly 40 000 in total to man the fleet. Themistocles pitched his fleet construction plan as a way for ordinary people to get in on the democratic action.

**The Persians Return**

10 years after Marathon, the Persians returned at Thermopylae. Sparta’s 300 fought back the Persians at first but eventually they passed and headed toward Athens. The city had to be evacuated and men had to fight on the ships. They fought at Salamis: 200 ships from Athens, 200 from other Greeks. The Persians had over 400 ships. Athens lured the Persian ships into the narrow straight and trapped them, then rammed them with their sleek triremes. They sank half the Persian ships. This was a turning point in western civilization. Rowers felt they had contributed to democracy. Now they could turn their attention to non-military matters: government, philosophy, art.

**The Golden Age**

Athenians sought perfection during the golden age. Under Pericles, an Athenian leader, the acropolis (a huge rock formation in the centre of Athens) was built up. Pericles spent a lot of money in the name of pride in the city. The gold and ivory statue of Athena was hugely expensive. In all it took 15 years to build the Parthenon, a temple to the city’s patron goddess, Athena. Its friezes (carvings) depicted human heroes of democracy. Down below was the *agora* where people gathered for political, commercial and athletic activities, like a central square.

**Athenian Democracy**

Athenian democracy was very different from ours because it was direct, not representative. Men were selected to serve, like jury duty. They weren’t elected to represent (or speak for) others. It was a voluntary but a sacred duty – you were seen as an *idiot* if you didn’t participate and a *parasite* if you only served yourself. They citizens proposed new laws only. Ordinary citizens voted. They felt power corrupted, so they invented *ostracism* to get rid of bad politicians – if enough people voted for a certain person, he would be banned from Athens for 10 years. It happened to a lot of leaders, including Themistocles. Athenian democracy had limitations – less than 20% of the population could vote – so foreigners, slaves, and women were entirely excluded.

**Athens – The Cultural Empire**

The Agora was the place for networking. Socrates, one of the earliest philosophers, talked to people as he walked around the agora. The unexamined life is not worth living, he suggested. He questioned people and bugged them, seeing himself as a gadfly stinging a horse awake. The question and answer dialogue was his method to get at the truth, even exposing those in power.

Also, it was a time of a new art called drama. Actors, a chorus, and a narrator put on plays in theatres. Comedy, tragedy, and drama all explored deep themes. Comedy made fun of politicians, including Pericles. They gave prizes for comedy and tragedy. Athens was now a cultural empire.

**The Peloponnesian War**

Humans, not gods, were central in the rise of Athens. However, their thoughts of themselves got too big. They had too much hubris – excessive pride. Other Greeks were not so happy as Athens taxed them (for naval protection against a potential Persian return). Sparta had totally different priorities – athletic and military. Boys left home at age 7. They were treated very brutally to harden them. Sparta felt Athens was arrogant and declared war against them. They fought for nearly 30 years. Plague killed ¼ of the population, including Pericles. Athens fell out with its earlier values. Socrates was put on trial. Leaders didn’t like his questioning during the war. They preferred order and obedience and faked charges against him: corruption of the youth, disbelief in the gods. He would be the guy who made waves and fought for equality – he made people think. He could have saved himself but he didn’t. He drank poisonous hemlock, the traditional Athenian death penalty.

**End of the Golden Age.**

War was over and Athens had lost. In 338 BCE democracy died. Greece continued under the monarchy from the north, Macedon. Philip wanted to be an enlightened monarch and invade Persia, but he was murdered. His son Alexander was trained by Spartan warriors and tutored by Plato, a famous philosopher. Alexander invaded Persia and Egypt and expanded the Persian empire to the east. He used local traditions but spread Greek ideas. Mixing was created and led to a common civilization: Hellenic. Alexander died of typhoid or poison at age 32. His death was followed by the spread of Greek culture. Romans liked Greek culture, too, and spread it, until Constantine converted to Christianity centuries later. Then Greek became seen as ‘pagan’. The Christian Church shut down Delphi and the Olympics. It took until the Renaissance in the 1400s to rediscover Greek reason, logic, realistic art. [That is what the video says but in actual fact Islamic civilization held on to many Greek ideas and they spread these ideas back into Europe in the Middle Ages.]