

SOCRATES AND PLATO

Born into the golden age of ancient Greece, Socrates (469 B.C.-399 B.C.) abandoned the trade handed down to him by his father and instead decided to pursue loftier goals--mainly philosophy. In Greek philosophy means "the love of wisdom," and philosophers, a group that got its start in ancient Athens, dedicated their lives to the pursuit of wisdom. Soon Socrates had gained a



following of students, but unlike the sophists (another group of teachers in Athens) Socrates did not accept money for his services. Also, while the sophists trained students to argue either side of an argument convincingly, Socrates wanted his students to pursue only the Truth.

One of Socrates' brightest students was the philosopher Plato (428 B.C. - 348 B.C.), who wrote down many of his mentor's dialogues. Plato captured Socrates' style of teaching, the Socratic Method. Rather than handing out answers, Socrates asked questions--question after question after question. Under his constant questioning, Socrates' students were forced to examine their own ideas and form new ones based on their own understanding. Socrates wasn't after brainless disciples. He was trying to create a new breed of thinkers, ones who explored the world with their minds. (In many ways, ancient philosophers are the forerunners of modern scientists.)

Socrates' students were such good pupils that they mastered his technique and began to use it on their own. They began questioning everyone, even the government. At this time the Athenian government was fighting a losing war with Sparta and did not have time for these ungrateful teenagers questioning the way things had always been. To them philosophy sounded more like rebellion. A group of powerful politicians brought charges against Socrates, accusing him of corrupting the youth of Athens with his bizarre ideas. If convicted, Socrates would be forced to drink hemlock, a deadly poison.

Their charge was more of a scare tactic than anything. They expected Socrates to back down, but being a man of principle he did not. Surrounded by his closest friends, Socrates declared that he was willing to die in the name of wisdom and drank the fatal draught.

After the death of Socrates, Plato founded his own school and kept the philosophical ideals of his master alive. In time he went on to formulate many of his own ideas and write extensively on various subjects. Plato's most famous work is *The Republic*, a dialogue discussing the perfect society. Plato's school met in a grove sacred to the Greek hero Academus. They called his school "The Academy."

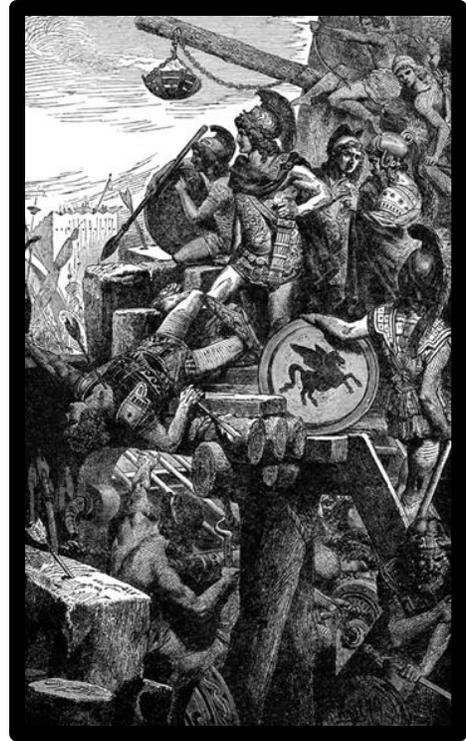
ALEXANDER THE GREAT

In 338 B.C. after winning a war against the Athenians, King Philip II of Macedon (a region of northwest Greece) became the first ruler to unite the squabbling city-states of ancient Greece. He did not have long to enjoy his success though. During a wedding feast, he was assassinated by one of his own bodyguards. A newly formed empire fell into the hands of Philip's twenty-year-old son, Alexander.

Luckily, Alexander had plenty of ambition. He had intelligence as well. His father, sparing no expense, had even sent to Athens to arrange for a famous philosopher to be his son's tutor. Aristotle, himself trained by Plato, found in Alexander a brilliant pupil. At the age of fourteen Alexander thwarted a rebellion, while his father was away campaigning. At sixteen he led his father's troops and helped to defeat the Athenians.

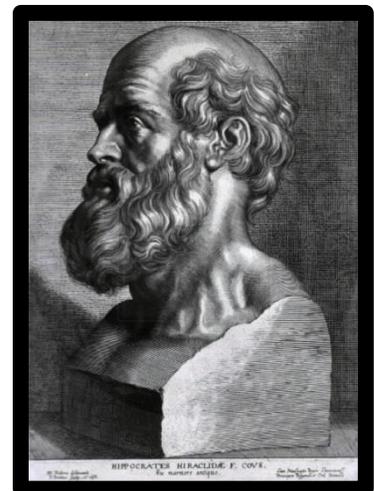
After the death of his father, Alexander immediately acted on his desire to spread Greek culture throughout the known world. He rallied his armies and set out on one of most amazing military careers of all time. In the next twelve years he conquered the massive Persian Empire and brought the known world (Asia Minor, the Middle East, Mesopotamia, Egypt) as well as part of India under his rule. One evening as he celebrated his victories, he fell ill and soon after died. Some speculate his cause of death to be poisoning, but most assume it was a case of malaria. He was only thirty-two.

There are many reasons why Alexander was such a successful conqueror. He was the first leader to use the technique of colonization, creating new cities based on Greek ideals in conquered lands. He not only brought armies to these new lands, but also engineers, architects, scientists, and philosophers, spreading Greek culture across the world. Without Alexander the Greek world would never have had the far-reaching impact that it has on the modern world.



HIPPOCRATES (460 B.C. – 370 B.C.)

Disease was an enormous problem in the ancient world. Half of children died before they were the age of ten. (Perhaps this is why ancient cultures were so unsentimental toward their children.) Hippocrates (called the "Father of Medicine") was the first to apply the Greek systematic approach to the body. He rejected the common idea that a sickness was caused by supernatural forces. Instead he relied on observation and experimentation to understand exactly how the human body worked. He founded a hospital dedicated to this type of study on



the Greek island of Cos. Although his ideas were primitive (bloodletting and leeching being two of them), his Hippocratic Oath has become the creed of physicians everywhere.



HERODOTUS (484 B.C. – 425 B.C.)

Herodotus has been called the "father of history." He was the first writer that we know of who tried to find out exactly what happened in the past "so that what people did will be remembered later, so that the great and admirable monuments that the Greeks and the barbarians made would be famous, and, among other things, to write down the reasons why they had a war."

When Herodotus was a child, the Greeks fought their legendary war against the Persian Empire and surprisingly won. As an adult, Herodotus decided to go back and investigate exactly how the ragtag alliance of Athens and Sparta was able to defeat the most powerful force on the earth.

Apart from his histories of the Persian Wars, Herodotus also visited exotic places (including Egypt, Africa and India) and wrote about the cultures he found there. Truly, he was the first historian.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What qualities do these famous ancient Greeks have in common?
2. What modern traditions or institutions come from their work?
3. The Persian army almost conquered Greece, which would have effectively ended Greece's influence on the rest of the world. How would the world have been different if it wasn't for the ancient Greeks?
4. The Athenians were most known for their great learning and inventiveness while Spartans were known for their dedication to war. The Athenians receive credit for developing some of the great traditions of western civilization. The Spartans receive credit for stopping the invading Persian army from wiping out all of Greece. Which is more important—the art of learning or the art of war? Or a combination of the two? Explain.