Greek Lessons 1 and 2

The goal of Greek Lessons 1 and 2 is to survey Greek civilization, both its history and mythology. The legacy of ancient Greece to the modern world cannot be overstated. In so many ways ─ government, literature, philosophy, entertainment, religion ─ we owe who we are to Greek-speaking peoples who inhabited the eastern Mediterranean region during the first millennium BCE. Their remarkable culture changed the course of history and put the western world on the path to modern life. The questions they asked, which are often better than the answers they posed, still direct our thoughts: where did the universe begin, what forces shaped the past, what makes a good life or a good government, why is life so often cruel, what is love? Their exploration and insight into the human condition have defined and directed our vision of ourselves, and their experiences and narratives inform both our own and the very language in which we give expression to all we see and know. The ancient Greeks have bestowed on us, their heirs, not only many words but also a panoply of terms drawn from their history and myths, references to events real and imagined, which in one way or another speak eternal truths to us about existence. Ancient Greek civilization is as alive today as the words you and I speak. Let's explore a few of them.

In Greek Lessons 1 and 2 Mr. Ayers lists about fifty terms, organized alphabetically, that derive from Greek mythology, history and philosophy. I'm not going to require that you learn all these terms ─ I'll cut the list down considerably ─ and instead of presenting the terms I want you to know in an alphabetical list, in this video presentation I'll mention them in historical order, that is, as they relate to Greek civilization chronologically. In other words, I'll discuss the terms you are to learn in the order they occurred over time, from the earliest ones to the latest. That will make this presentation the fastest survey of ancient Greek history you'll ever see, I guarantee it. Be sure your seatbelt is securely fastened and take note of the exit doors. Bad news! This is a college class. There are no exit doors. You're stuck on this flight. But here's the good news. There are no bases or affixes introduced in these lessons, so there will be no audio presentation accompanying this video. The gods give small mercies … sometimes.

Greek history begins, as all histories do, in prehistory, a period preceding the existence of written records. Without documents it's often more difficult to say what happened, but in this case some larger trends are clear. The ancient Greeks belonged to one of the many groups of Indo-Europeans who spread throughout Eurasia in early times. The Indo-European sub-group who would eventually become the Greeks began entering the Greek peninsula at some point during the early part of the second millennium (i.e. after 2000) BCE. There were already people living in the area, a mysterious folk later called the Pelasgians about whom and whose language we know very little. Some Greek names and words may derive from a Pelasgian source, for instance, the word "plinth" ("brick") and the name of some cities in Greece like Corinth. Otherwise, the invading Indo-Europeans completely overwhelmed the natives they encountered and overtook their lands, crushing and obliterating their culture. The comparison to European colonists in the Americas is very tempting.

Indo-Europeans did not enter Greece only once, but in several waves. One sub-group called the Ionians settled what would later become the city of Athens and across the Aegean Sea the western coast of Asia Minor (today we call it Turkey). Another sub-group called the Dorians

took over the southern part of the Greece, an area called the Peloponnese. While these different Indo-European peoples shared a linguistic and cultural heritage, their differences were also profound and later defined important political divisions. To Ionians, Dorians spoke a different dialect of the Greek language and had distinct attitudes about government and family. These ethnic cultural markers came to have a racial quality with all the bias that imports, eventually leading the Ionians and Dorians to distrust and dislike each other. Out of these cultural and political conflicts would later arise a series of civil wars that proved disastrous for Greek civilization.

But returning to prehistory, the Indo-European invasions precipitated complete economic collapse, what historians call a "dark age," not because the sun didn't shine or nothing happened ─ far from it, it is an essential period in the development of ancient Greece ─ but because we have all but no written records for almost three centuries, from 1100 to 800 BCE. Archaeology fills in many blanks, but material culture can only tell us so much about what happened in this formative period of Greek civilization. For a greater sense of how the people living then felt about their times, we must turn to the Greeks' own records of this day, that is, what later Greeks remembered about this early age and would ultimately come to be called Greek mythology.

If the stories which gave rise to these myths have any historical basis and belong to an actual time period, it is the prehistoric age. Some are clearly recollections of events datable to the second millennium BCE. In particular, the Trojan War seems remarkably realistic and quite a few scholars are comfortable talking about it as a historical event, even giving it a date (1185 BCE). Whether Homer's famous epics based on that war, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, also reflect historical reality is a matter of considerable debate among scholars.

In the first of those masterpieces, *The Iliad*, Homer recounts the lead-up to the Greeks' destruction of the great walled city of Troy. The central figure in this epic is Achilles, famous for his heel which according to myth was the only part of his body that any weapon could penetrate. So an "**Achilles' heel**" is a weak spot. Another famous character in *The Iliad* is **Cassandra**, one of the Trojan king Priam's many children. She was a prophetess whom the god of prophecy Apollo had granted the power to see the future, but for various reasons in various myths he imposed a terrible curse on her, that no one would ever believe her. So even before the fall of Troy she could see that her city would be destroyed, but she couldn't convince anyone she was right. Eventually she went mad, and her name became synonymous with anyone who warns about an upcoming disaster but whose advice goes unheeded.

In Homer's other epic masterpiece *The Odyssey*, the title character Odysseus (also called Ulysses) wanders the Mediterranean Sea trying to get home to wife and son. Among those who support the long-absent hero's family is an aged advisor named **Mentor**, the tutor of Odysseus' son. Mentor's name has come to designate those who guide and teach others.

The religion itself underlying these epics has produced terms we still use. For instance, among the Olympian deities ruling Homer's universe is Zeus who has a magical shield called the **aegis**. Aegis today means "protection." A song sung in praise of Zeus' son Apollo was called a **paean**, a word still used to mean a hymn of thanksgiving or praise. But the Olympians were not the only divinities in Greek myth. Older demon-gods lurked on the horizon of Greek religion, such as the

so-called Titans, one of which was **Atlas** who was said to hold up the sky. Because his image was often used in the corner of maps, his name was attached to any collection of maps. Darker deities populated this world, too, blood-demons like **Nemesis**, the goddess charged with ensuring retribution. Her job was to make sure that those who wronged others suffered accordingly. Today someone's nemesis is the foe or the punishment they deserve for the crimes they've committed. Take that!

Many of these myths center around cities and localities familiar to the Greeks from early on, places such as Athens where the hero Theseus lived. In one of his greatest adventures he works his way through a huge, dangerous maze called the **Labyrinth**, a term still used for any complex system of paths or roadways. In another myth Theseus kills a murderous innkeeper named Procrustes who made his guests "fit" their beds. That is, if they were too big for the bed, Procrustes cut off their limbs; too small, he stretched them out. A **Procrustean** solution is one that does more harm than good by enforcing rigid conformity. Later, Theseus performed another difficult task. He married an **Amazon** queen. The Amazons were a tribe of women who preferred to wage war with men rather than live with them, hence our word "amazon" meaning "a powerful, masculine woman."

Across the Aegean Sea from Greece in Asia Minor is the setting of other important Greek myths. One concerns a man named Tantalus who, after he died, was punished for his crimes in Hades (Hell), where his feet, the Greeks imagined, are fixed forever in a river. Above his head hangs fruit on tree branches, but every time he reaches down to drink, the river flows away, and whenever he attempts to grab a piece of fruit, the wind blows it out of his grasp. Starving and thirsting, he is eternally "**tantalized**." From Asia Minor too comes the tale of Narcissus, a handsome young man who fell in love with his own image. While gazing into a spring, he became fixated on the beauty of his own reflection and fell in and drowned, the victim of his own **narcissism** ("self-love"). In the same locale the goddess Venus became enamored of another handsome youth, **Adonis**, whose name is now synonymous with pretty boys.

Northern Greece is often depicted in Greek tradition as a savage and barbarous place, but one myth recounts the happy marriage of King Ceyx and his queen Alcyone. When he drowned in the ocean, she was so overwhelmed with grief that the gods changed them both in seabirds who build floating nests on the open sea. To keep their young from falling out, the gods gave these noble birds the magical power to calm the waves. Thus in remembrance of this pious queen, "**halcyon** days," when the seas are peaceful and travel by ship is easy, have come to betoken those times when life was good and free of difficulties, that happy, peaceful past so many recall in their fantasies of times long past.

After the Dark Age, myth gives way to history. By 800 BCE the lights come back up and written documents return. In this so-called Homeric Age ─ because the poet Homer is believed to have lived then ─ a new form of writing based on the alphabet emerged in Greece. Its creation is witnessed in many inscriptions carved into marble that date to this period. These reveal the history of this age. But literacy not only alters our view of this time, but it accompanied all sorts of other changes, in particular, the development of city-states which the Greeks called *poleis* ─ the singular is *polis* ─ like Athens, Thebes, Corinth and Sparta.

The last (Sparta) lies in a region of southern Greece called Laconia ─ think of it this way: Sparta is the city and Laconia is the county it sits in ─ so the adjective "**laconic**" is another way of saying "Spartan." Spartans were famous in the ancient world for many things, among them, not talking a lot. Thus, "laconic" came to mean "brief, pithy, concise." There's a famous example of this. During one of their many conflicts with the Spartans, the Athenians intercepted a message being relayed back to Sparta after a setback in battle. It read: "Ships lost. Commander dead. Men starving. Please advise." An Athenian would have written a whole tragedy; a Spartan delivers just the facts.

Another development during this early historical period was the rise of tyrants. At some point, most of the city-states in Greece fell under the sway of strongmen who rose to power usually through military means. While our word "tyrant" might lead one to assume these men were violent, vicious autocrats ─ and no doubt about it, some were ─ the historical record shows that quite a few were fair and reasonable rulers who created law codes. So, another name for this period is the "Age of Lawgivers." The new alphabetic form of writing enabled a better brand of justice. Whereas earlier, oral traditions were susceptible to the whim of elders who were entrusted with recalling them and often did so selectively, when even the average person can read a city's *nomoi*, a Greek term which originally meant the oral customs of a city but later came to mean its written laws, law as we know it was born.

Athens had a tyrant-lawgiver of this sort named Draco ─ not Malfoy but it's hard not to believe the real Draco didn't inspire Rowling's choice of name ─ the ancient Greek Draco imposed very severe laws upon the Athenians, harsh punishments for even the most minor of crimes. It's a clear attempt to stifle lawlessness with the threat of pain and suffering. His name spawned the adjective "**Draconian**" ("extremely severe"), often applied to government measures which attempt to right wrongs through brutal and inhumane treatment of wrongdoers. As other cultures have discovered, the Athenians soon learned that the prospect of punishment rarely deters criminals. Only one generation later, Draco's Draconian code was repealed and a new one implemented with punishments more suitable to the degree of the offense committed.

Another important development during this period in history is the Greeks' colonization of the lands around them. Their expansionism rested not only on navy or military aggression but on their merchant marine ─ that is, trading ships ─ and their economic interests. Having few natural resources in their homeland, many ancient Greeks were forced to make their living abroad, going from port to port, buying and selling goods, traveling on sailing vessels like the one depicted on this vase here. Eventually their business networks stretched from as far east as the Black Sea all the way west to Sicily, and even beyond. In selling their products, Greek merchants also built international connections and seeded Greek communities which eventually expanded into towns and cities, colonies where Greek customs and language flourished.

Well, these colonists *claimed* to speak Greek, but as you well know from American English, once settlers are separated from their home country, their speech patterns will start to change, sometimes going in drastically different directions from the way the language is being spoken back home. Such was the case in the Greek colony of Soli in the southeastern corner of Asia Minor. There, a radically different variant of Greek evolved, so harsh-sounding to those born in

mainland Greece they considered it barbaric and substandard. Today a "**solecism**" is a lapse in grammar or spelling, or indeed any of the social niceties that well-bred people espouse.

At the other end of the Greek world, far to the west in Italy, a different colony called Sybaris also drifted away from the culture of the motherland, in this case toward a luxuriant lifestyle, one purportedly devoted to excesses and indulgence of every sort. Spoiled by their wealth and easy living, they were eventually defeated and overtaken by one of their neighbors but not before their name become synonymous with idle decadence. Thus, a "**sybarite**" is someone enthralled to self-gratification and pleasure.

The greatest period of ancient Greece is the so-called Classical Age, the fifth century (500-400 BCE). These years witnessed Athens' rise to prominence and eventual downfall at the hands of its neighbors, the Spartans. This ascent began with the invention of democracy just before the turn of the century, a novel way of distributing power among a large portion of the population, well, at least a larger portion than the monarchies, tyrannies and oligarchies that preceded and surrounded it. Average people could vote in committees and serve on juries, which gave them a sense of power and participation in government. It also enflamed the hostilities which harsher rulers could tamp down by force. Tyrants often impose silence and call it peace.

Simmering factions and free speech drove the Athenians to invent a political mechanism for removing those who caused too much trouble. If a significant portion of the voting populace favored ejecting a troublesome figure from the city, he could be evicted in a process called "**ostracism**," literally "waste-papering." An ostracon is a piece of broken pottery. In those days paper was very rare and far too expensive to use for casual writing, so people used broken pots ─ of which there were many ─ to write notes and receipts and, yes, even votes on. So to ostracize, to "broken pot" someone was to throw them out of Athens by popular vote. Today we use words like ostracism and ostracize in reference to exclusion from society.

The first major events of the new fifth century centered on the great empire to the east of Greece, Persia. To make a long and very exciting story far too short, twice ─ once in 490 BCE and once again in 481-479 ─ the Persians directed their massive military forces west in an effort to conquer and subjugate Greece. Both times against all odds they failed. It's one of the most dramatic decades in human history. If you've never read the *The Histories* of Herodotus who recounts the events of both wars, make sure you do at some point in your life. It's one of the best books ever written.

The Greeks' defeat of the Persians enriched and emboldened them, especially the Athenians who had led the resistance. With the sort of joy that's born only of victory, they began pouring their hearts and souls, and now ample purses, into the arts. Painting, sculpture and theatre flourished. Their triumph over the Persians also gave them the confidence to ask questions about life that only the brave and the curious do. Philosophy burgeoned. Although it was not born in Athens ─ it first appeared in Asia Minor ─ from teachers called "sophists" fleeing Persian control the Athenians learned about new ways of thinking and asked questions which few had dared to voice in public.

As time passed and the sophists grew ever more daring, their inquiries became bolder, until they began issuing challenges to traditional morality. “Should a son always obey his father? What if the father is wrong? Does the same hold true of the state? Should people fight in a war they don’t believe is just?” As sophists picked apart the glue that binds people into a community, their name was attached to any kind of tricky or subversive argumentation, which came to be called “**sophistry**/**sophism**.” The countercharge against this radical attack on ethics and accepted thinking featured the famous philosophical team of Socrates and Plato who laid the foundation for a response to the sophists’ sophistry in a series of dialogues taught at Plato’s school, the **Academy**, the first of many institutes of learning to bear that name.

The Classical Age came to a dismal end with the Peloponnesian War, essentially a civil conflict within Greece: the Athenians and their allies versus the Spartans and theirs. It took almost thirty years for Sparta to defeat Athens finally ─ and only then by enlisting the help of Persia which horrified many ─ Greece was left in desperate straits both militarily and economically. Worse yet, the war resolved nothing. City-against-city infighting continued, attracting new communities into the fray, in particular, Thebes, a major metropolis north of Athens. When at last the Thebans defeated the Spartans in battle on land ─ something which had not happened in centuries! ─ the hope for peace and stability was a distant dream. Forced to ally with the Spartans, their mortal enemies just one generation ago, the Athenians found themselves at war with Thebes.

All this internal chaos only served to weaken the Greeks and make them vulnerable to conquest from the outside, not the Persians to the east this time, but their neighbors to the north, the Macedonians. Midway through the century these people, who spoke their own brand of “substandard” Greek and whom the classical cities to the south despised as barbarians, managed somehow to cobble together a formidable army under the leadership of their young, dynamic king Philip II. By the time the southern Greeks realized the scope of the threat he and his forces posed and banded together to push him back, it was too late. Even though they were led by the famous orator Demosthenes whose speeches against Philip, the **Philippics**, have given their name to any bitter denunciation, the Athenians’ loss to the Macedonians at the Battle of Chaeronea in 338 spelled the end not only of southern Greece’s political dominance in the region but its very independence. Henceforth, it would be the possession of some potentate or other. Democracy, tragedy and all the glories of the Classical Age were over. But then soon after, so was Philip who was assassinated in 336. Victory can be as difficult to manage as defeat.

Into his father’s shoes stepped Philip’s son, still a teenager but as a man he would become one of the world’s most famous generals. Yes, Alexander, later dubbed “the Great,” took over his father’s kingdom, inheriting not only a strong army but also many debts, and having little other recourse to pay his men, Alexander launched an attack on the Persian Empire. Over the next ten years, he and his army raced down the eastern Mediterranean seaboard, conquering lands as far south as Egypt, then turned east and headed straight into the heartland of the Persian Empire, which he swept through in no time. He then continued east, crossing the Himalayas, and entered India, at which point his men finally revolted and demanded to return home. Much against its commander’s will, the Macedonian army turned south and eventually returned to Babylon, where a thirty-three-year-old Alexander died in bed of some undetermined disease. Broken and burnt, the world was his funeral pyre.

Such a man is a magnet for legends, so you'll not be surprised to hear that the tales of Alexander's exploits are countless and unconfirmable. According to one set near the start of his military career, he solved a famous riddle, the **Gordian knot**, a puzzle so complicated no one could unravel it. But Alexander solved it, by taking out his sword and cutting through the knot, later seen to be an omen of the brutality he would unleash upon the world.

Legends, as it turned out, were not Alexander's only legacy. Upon his death, the power and empire he had accumulated during his brief life were divided up among his generals who turned out to be petty tyrants eager to receive Alexander's acclaim without having earned it on the battlefield as he did. Indeed, their defeats are more memorable than their triumphs, such as the setback the Greek general Pyrrhus suffered after facing the early Romans in battle. While he defeated them, winning came at such an enormous cost in casualties and resources that Pyrrhus is reported to have said "One more victory like that and we're done for." Today a "**Pyrrhic victory**" is a success that costs more than it's worth.

From Sicily comes another famous story of a king who lived in Alexander's wake. Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, was the object of much adoration, especially among his courtiers, that fawning crowd of yes-men who tend to flock around any despot. One of them, by name Damocles, caught Dionysius' attention, who asked Damocles if he would like to taste the delights of being king. When the courtier said "Oh yes yes! Of course!," he set him at a table and presented him with exquisite dishes laid before him by beautiful attendants. Damocles reveled in this luxury until he noticed a sword had been suspended overhead, pointing downwards right at him, and this sword was attached to the ceiling by nothing more than a single horsehair. Suddenly Damocles saw everything differently. He begged to be freed from his position of potentially lethal delight. The tyrant's message could hardly be clearer: "My life may look wonderful but there's always someone out there trying to kill me." Thus, the "**sword of Damocles**" has come to represent any constant threat, often a hidden one lurking amidst a façade of prosperity.

Richer than ever before in their history and now able to exploit a world blown open by war, the Greeks wallowed in wealth and worry. This bliss seemed so different from the one their far less wealthy ancestors had enjoyed when they governed Greece. Back then things looked so much happier. The Classical Greeks may have possessed less property than their descendants, but at least they owned themselves. While these later so-called Hellenistic Greeks ─ the age after Alexander is called the Hellenistic period ─ came to idealize that earlier time, overlooking its obvious flaws, at the same time they also began questioning the very values on which those glory days had rested. Were truths eternal the way Plato claimed? Was the universe a predictable place, somewhere justice and happiness can live? And the Olympian gods? Well, they seemed so small to anyone who'd seen Egypt and Persia and India. How could deities who squat on some hill named Olympus in a backwater of northern Greece manage a world this huge? Furthermore, if these deities exist at all, how can they be anything but merciless and cruel, since they're clearly impervious to human suffering and utterly unresponsive to prayer? No, it's better to believe that no gods exist than ones like these. It was time to revisit the basic premises of life.

Thus, as traditional religion began to falter, philosophy and systems of moral codes, often at odds with each other, stepped into the breach. Movements like Stoicism whose followers called **Stoics**

preached a doctrine of devotion to duty and emotional detachment, on the premise that what you don't care about can't hurt you. Conversely, Epicureans espoused withdrawal from the struggles of life and all the pain it brings and taught people to pursue pleasure instead. Later perverted into an excuse for gluttony and self-indulgence, Epicureanism became tied to fine dining. Thus, the words **epicure** and **epicurean** are now synonymous with having good taste in food and wine.

In contrast to both of these, yet a third school of philosophy, Cynicism promoted the rejection of all things material and commercial in life: property, family, clothes. Yes, its followers walked around naked, attacking and mocking social conventions. Indeed, these "cynics," whose name comes from the Greek word for "dog," looked to many like rabid animals. From their habit of questioning basic values, which earned them a reputation as doubters, was born the word "**cynic**" which does not mean "doggy" as it should etymologically, but "doubting," that is, expressing disdain for social convention, often in a sarcastic fashion.

Toward the end of the third century, around 200 BCE, a new power emerged in the Mediterranean basin, Rome, and as the Romans expanded, Greece like many other nations fell under their sway. But the conquered Greeks were conquerors too, at least in so far as Greek culture infiltrated and integrated with native Roman civilization. Greek literature, religion and attitudes toward life merged with Roman ways and customs to create a hybrid "Greco-Roman" culture. This *modus vivendi* (Latin for "way of living") would dominate the western world for centuries to come and was passed on medieval civilization first, then to us, which explains why so many features of our world ─ narrative, drama, art, government, vocabulary ─ resemble and reflect the world of our ancient forebears. We are the Greeks' cultural progeny and owe them what any child owes a parent, the recognition that we wouldn't be who we are, or even have the words to express ourselves, were it not for them.

To end this long presentation let's review the things you're expected to know in these lessons. Please bear in mind that you will be asked to identify terms and phrases only through matching. That is, I won't ask you to tell me what they mean, only match them to their definitions. Starting on page 161 of Ayers' text, please learn the following terms and phrases: #1 Achilles' heel, (on the next page) #2 Adonis, #3 aegis, #4 amazon, #5 atlas, (and on the next page) #6 Cassandra, (turning the page again) #10 halcyon, #13 labyrinth, (next page) #14 mentor, #16 narcissism, (page 166) #17 nemesis, (page 167) #21 paean, #22 procrustean, and finally on page 168 #27 tantalize. Moving on to Greek Lesson 2, starting on page 170: #1 academy, (next page) #4 cynic, #5 Draconian, #6 epicure, (on page 172) #7 Gordian knot, #8 laconic, (next page) #11 ostracism, #12 philippic, (page 174) #13 Pyrrhic victory, #14 solecism, #15 sophistry/sophism, (next page) #17 stoic, #18 sword of Damocles and last but least (on page 176) #19 sybarite.

And that's it for this video presentation about Greek Lessons 1 and 2. There's no accompanying audio presentation here because your only assignment is to learn the terms and phrases I just discussed. So start making flashcards! In the next pair of lessons we'll begin studying the prefixes and bases that have entered English from Greek. Then you can go back to …

Happy Etymologizing!