The Persians & Greeks: Crash Course World History #5

Crash Course: World History
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=====Intro (0:00)=====

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History, and today we're going to do some legitimate comp. civ., for those of you into that kind of thing. Stan, I can't help but feel that we have perhaps too many globes. That's better.

Today we're going to learn about the horrible totalitarian Persians and the saintly, democracy-loving Greeks. But of course we already know this story — there were some wars in which no one wore any shirts, and everyone was reasonably fit. The Persians were bad; the Greeks were good. Socrates and Plato were awesome; the Persians didn't even philosophize. The West is the Best; Go Team! Yeah, well, no.

(Intro)

=====Persian Empire (0:38)=====

Let's start with the Persian empire, which became the model for pretty much all land-based empires throughout the world. Except for — wait for it — the Mongols. [Mongoltage]

Much of what we know about the Persians and their empire comes from an outsider writing about them, which is something we now call history, and one of the first true historians was Herodotus, whose famous book The Persian Wars talks about the Persians quite a bit. Now the fact that Herodotus was a Greek is important because it introduces us to the idea of historical bias. But more on that in a second.

So the Persian Achaemenid dynasty... Achaemenid? Hold on...

Computer: AkEEmenid or AkEHmenid

They're both right? I was right twice!?

Right, so the Persian AkEEmenid or AkEHmenid dynasty was founded in 539 BCE by King Cyrus the Great. Cyrus took his nomadic warriors and conquered most of Mesopotamia, including the Babylonians, which ended a sad period in Jewish history called The Babylonian Exile, thus ensuring that Cyrus got great press in the Bible.

But his son, Darius the First, was even greater, he extended Persian control east to our old friend the Indus Valley, west to our new friend Egypt, and north to Crash Course newcomer Anatolia. By the way, there were Greeks in Anatolia called Ionian Greeks who will become relevant shortly.

So even if you weren't Persian, the Persian Empire was pretty dreamy. For one thing, the Persians ruled with a light touch, like, conquered kingdoms were allowed to keep their kings and their elites as long as they pledged allegiance to the Persian King and paid taxes, which is why the Persian king was known as The King of Kings.

Plus, taxes weren't too high, and the Persians improved infrastructure with better roads and they had this pony express-like mail service of which Herodotus said: "...they are stayed neither by snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness from accomplishing their appointed course with all speed."

And the Persians embraced freedom of religion. Like they were Zoroastrian, which has a claim to being the world's first monotheistic religion. It was really Zoroastrianism that introduced to the good/evil dualism we all know so well. You know: god and Satan, or Harry and Voldemort... But the Persians weren't very concerned about converting people of the empire to their faith. Plus, Zoroastrianism forbid slavery, and so slavery was almost unheard of in the Persian Empire.

All in all, if you had to live in the 5th century BCE, the Persian Empire was probably the best place to do it. Unless, that is, you believe Herodotus and the Greeks. We all know about the Greeks: architecture, philosophy, literature. The very word music comes from Greek, as does so much else in contemporary culture. Greek poets and mathematicians playwrights and architects and philosophers founded a culture we still identify with. And they introduced us to many ideas, from democracy to fart jokes.

And the Greeks gave the west our first dedicated history, they gave us our vocabulary for talking about politics. Plus they gifted us our idealization of democracy, which comes from the government they had in Athens.

Past John: Mr. Green, Mr. Green, Mr. Green, Mr. Green — did you say fart jokes?

Present John: Uhh. You don't ask about Doric, Ionian, or Corinthian columns. You don't ask about Plato's allegory of the cave. It's all scatological humor with you — It's time for the open letter? Really? Already? Alright.

=====Open Letter (3:34)=====

An open letter [the whoopee cushion sounds]... Stan! To Aristophanes. Dear Aristophanes... Oh right, I have to check the secret compartment. Stan, what... oh. Thank you, Stan. It's fake dog poo. How thoughtful.

So, good news and bad news, Aristophanes.

2,300 years after your death — this is the good news — you're still a reasonably famous. Only eleven of your forty plays survived, but even so, you're called the Father of Comedy; there are scholars devoted to your work.

Now, the bad news: Even though your plays are well-translated and absolutely hilarious, students don't like to read them in schools. There always like, why do we gotta read this boring crap? And this must be particularly galling to you, because so much of what you did in your career was make fun of boring crap, specifically in the form of theatrical tragedies. Plus, you frequently used actual crap to make jokes. Such as when you had the chorus in The Acharnians imagining a character in your play throwing crap at a real poet you didn't like.

You, Aristophanes, who wrote that under every stone lurks a politician, who called wealth the most excellent of all the gods... You, who are responsible for the following conversation:

"Praxagora: I want all to have a share of everything and everything to be in common; there will no longer be either rich or poor; [...] I shall begin by making land, money, everything that is private property, common to all. [...]

Blepyrus: But who will till the soil?

Praxagora: The slaves.

Blepyrus: Oh."

And yet you're seen as homework! Drudgery! That, my friend, is a

true tragedy. On the upside, we did take care of slavery. It only took us two thousand years.

Best wishes,
John Green

=====Trouble (5:04)=====

When we think about the high point of Greek culture, exemplified by the Parthenon and the plays of Aeschylus, what we're really thinking about is Athens in the fourth century BCE, right after the Persian Wars. But Greece was way more than Athens; Greeks lived in city-states which consisted of a city and its surrounding area. Most of these city-states featured at least some form of slavery, and in all of them citizenship was limited to males. Sorry ladies...

Also, each of the city-states had its own form of government, ranging from very democratic — unless you were a woman or a slave — to completely dictatorial. And the people who lived in these cities considered themselves citizens of that city, not of anything that would ever be called Greece. At least until the Persian wars.

So between 490 and 480 BCE, the Persians made war on the Greek City states. This was the war that featured the battle of Thermopylae where three hundred brave Spartans battled — if you believe Herodotus — five million Persians.

And also the battle of Marathon, which is a plain about 26.2 miles away from Athens.

The whole war started because Athens supported those aforementioned Ionian Greeks when they were rebelling in Anatolia against the Persians. That made the Persian king Xerxes mad, so he led two major campaigns against the Athenians, and the Athenians enlisted the help of all the other Greek city-states. And in the wake of that shared Greek victory, the Greeks began to see themselves as Greeks, rather than as Spartans, or Athenians or whatever.

And then Athens emerged as the de facto capital of Greece and then got to experience a Golden Age, which is something that historians make up. But a lot of great things did happen during the Golden Age, including the Parthenon, a temple that became a church and then a mosque and then an armory until finally settling into its current gig as a ruin.

You also had statesmen like Pericles, whose famous funeral oration brags about the golden democracy of Athens with rhetoric that wouldn't sound out of place today. "If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences... if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition."

When you combine that high-minded rhetoric with the undeniable power and beauty of the art and philosophy that was created in ancient Athens, it's not hard to see it as the foundation of Western civilization. And if you buy into this, you have to be glad that the Greeks won the Persian Wars. But even if you put aside the slavery and other injustices in Greek society, there's still trouble.

Do I have to say it, seriously? FINE. TROUBLE RIGHT HERE IN RIVER CITY WITH A CAPITAL T AND THAT RHYMES WITH P AND THAT STANDS FOR PELOPONNESE.

Pericles's funeral oration comes from a later war, The Peloponnesian War, a thirty year conflict between the Athenians and the Spartans. The Spartans did not embrace democracy but instead embraced a kingship that functioned only because of a huge class of brutally mistreated slaves. But to be clear, the war was not about Athens trying to get Sparta to embrace democratic reform; wars rarely are. It was about resources and power. And the Athenians were hardly saintly in all of this, as evidenced by the famous Melian Dialogue. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

=====Thought Bubble (7:52)=====

So in one of the most famous passages of Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians sailed to the island of Melos, a Spartan colony, and demanded that the Melians submit to Athenian rule. The Melians pointed out that they'd never actually fought with the Spartans and were like, "Listen, if it's all the same to you, we'd like to go Switzerland on this one," except of course they didn't say that because there was no Switzerland.

To which the Athenians responded, and here I am quoting directly, "The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must."

Needless to say, this is not a terribly democratic or enlightened position to take. This statement, in fact, is sometimes seen as the first explicit endorsement of the so-called theory of Realism in international relations. For realists, interaction between nations, or peoples, or cultures is all about who has the power. Whoever has it can compel whoever doesn't have it to do pretty much anything.

So what did the meritocratic and democratic Athenians do when the Melians politely asked not to participate in the fight? They killed all the Melian men and enslaved all the women and children.

So, yes, Socrates gave us his interrogative Method; Sophocles gave us Oedipus; but the legacy of Ancient Greece is profoundly ambiguous, all the moreso because the final winner of the Peloponnesian War were the dictatorial Spartans. Thanks for the incredible bummer, Thought Bubble.

=====Conclusion (9:09)=====

So here's a non-rhetorical question: Did the right side win the Persian wars?

Most classicists and defenders of the Western Tradition will tell you that of course we should be glad the Greeks won. After all, winning the Persian war set off the cultural flourishing that gave us the Classical Age. And plus, if the Persians had won with their monarchy that might have strangled democracy in its crib and given us more one-man rule. And that's possible, but as a counter that argument, let's consider three things:

First, it's worth remembering that life under the Persians was pretty good, and if you look at the last five thousand years of human history, you'll find a lot more successful and stable empires than you will democracies.

Second, life under the Athenians wasn't so awesome, particularly if you were a woman or a slave, and their government was notoriously corrupt. And ultimately the Athenian government derived its power not from its citizens, but from the imperialist belief that Might Makes Right. It's true that Athens gave us Socrates, but let me remind you, they also killed him. Well, I mean they forced him to commit suicide. Whatever, Herodotus, you're not the only one here who can engage in historical bias.

And lastly, under Persian rule the Greeks might have avoided the Peloponnesian War, which ended up weakening the Greek city-

states so much that Alexander “Coming Soon” the Great’s father was able to conquer all of them, and then there were a bunch of bloody wars with the Persians and all kinds of horrible things, and Greece wouldn’t glimpse democracy again for two millennia. All of which might have been avoided if they’d just let themselves get beaten by the Persians.

All of which forces us to return to the core question of human history: What’s the point of being alive? I’ve got good news for you, guy. You’re only going to have to worry about it for about 8 more seconds. Should we try to ensure the longest, healthiest, and most productive lives for humans? If so, it’s easy to argue that Greece should have lost the Persian Wars. But perhaps lives are to be lived in pursuit of some great ideal worth sacrificing endlessly for. And if so, maybe the glory of Athens still shines, however dimly.

Those are the real questions of history: What’s the point of being alive? How should we organize ourselves, what should we seek from this life? Those aren’t easy questions, but we’ll take another crack at them next week when we talk about the Buddha. I’ll see you then.

=====Credits (11:09)=====

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson, the graphics team is Thought Bubble, and the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and me.

Our phrase of the week last week was "Un mot de français". If you’d like to guess this week’s phrase of the week you can do so in comments. You can also ask questions about today’s video in comments where our team of historians will attempt to answer them.

Thanks for watching, and Don't Forget To Be Awesome.