Lesson One – Ancient Greece Geography and Development

6.46 On a historical map of the ancient Mediterranean area, locate Greece and trace the boundaries of its influence to 300 BC/BCE. On a contemporary map trace the current boundaries of Greece. Compare and contrast the sphere of influence of Greece in those two different eras.

6.47 Explain how the geographical location of ancient Athens and other city-states contributed to their role in maritime trade, their colonies in the Mediterranean, and the expansion of their cultural influence.

6.52 Analyze the causes, course, and consequences of the Persian Wars.

Ancient Greece Geography and Development

Geography

Ancient Greece was located in southeastern Europe along the Mediterranean Sea, which separates Europe from Africa. Greek civilization was surrounded by other great civilizations of the age, including the Egyptians to the south, the Etruscans and the Romans to the west, the Persians to the east, and the Phoenicians to the southeast.

Unlike many of these other civilizations, the Greek civilization did not develop in a river valley, but it was bordered by water. Ancient Greece had the Mediterranean Sea to the south, the Ionian Sea to the west, and the Aegean Sea to the east. Greece is actually a series of islands—pieces of land surrounded completely by water—and peninsulas, or pieces of land surrounded on three sides by water. These islands and peninsulas were covered with high mountains, making travel across the land very difficult. As a result, the ancient Greek people mostly traveled by water.

Because Greece's mountains, islands, and peninsulas separated the Greek people from each other and made communication difficult, Greek civilization developed into independent city-states, or cities that governed themselves and the land that surrounded them.

The mountainous islands of Greece limited the amount of fertile farmland that was available to the Greeks. The shortage of farmland meant the Greeks needed to look elsewhere for resources they lacked, such as sufficient grain and metals. This prompted the Greeks to conquer other areas. They also established colonies along the Mediterranean, in areas where farmland was more plentiful, such as Southern Italy, Northern Africa, Turkey, and the southern coast of France. In addition to military conquests and the establishment of colonies, trade became an important aspect of Greek life.

1. How was Greece's geography differ from previous civilizations?

2. Describe the geography of ancient Greece.

3. How did Greece's geography influence the following aspects of their civilization?

Government -

Economy -

Military -

Early Civilization: Mycenae

One of the earliest settlements in ancient Greece was Mycenae. The Mycenaeans ruled much of southern Greece from 1500 BCE to 1100 BCE. Like most of the Greek city-states, Mycenae suffered from a shortage of rich farmland. Instead of relying only on agriculture, the Mycenaeans used the sea to improve their civilization. Mycenaean civilization was heavily influenced by contact with the Minoan civilization. The Minoans flourished on the Island of Crete from about 3000 BCE to about 1100 BCE. In fact, the Minoans dominated the Mycenaeans politically for some time. However, by about 1400 BCE, the Mycenaeans freed themselves from Minoan control and became a dominant force in the Aegean Sea. The Mycenaeans' strong naval fleet controlled nearby waters and attacked other cities. After conquering these cities, they established colonies that traded with the central Mycenaean city-state.

The Mycenaeans also traded with other kingdoms. Trade helped them get some of the resources they needed. The sea was an important part of Mycenae's early economy. Historians believe the Mycenaeans traded with civilizations in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. Mycenaean merchants established outposts in other parts of the Mediterranean, bringing wealth to Mycenae. Mycenae's trade with other civilizations and its military strength made it a center of trade and

culture until about 1200 BCE.

Around 1200 BCE, the Mycenaeans fought a war with the city of Troy. This war is believed to be the basis for the story of the Trojan War in Greek mythology, although it is unlikely that the actual events of the war match the legends. While the Mycenaeans were fighting Troy, invaders from the sea conquered much of their homeland. These two events marked the end of the Mycenaean period. After the fall of Mycenae, there was period of chaos and conflict on the Greek **peninsula**. Toward the end of this time of disorder, other Greek city-states rose in stature.

1. What is the name of the first powerful civilization to emerge in Greece?

2. How did they strengthen their city-state?

3. What is the Trojan War?

Greek City-States

After the time of unrest that followed the decline of **Mycenae**, several other Greek city-states began to increase in power and influence. **Athens**, **Sparta**, Corinth, and **Thebes** were among the most powerful of these city-states. Eventually, Athens and Sparta developed as rival powers. Because of their geographic isolation, each developed its own style of government and culture that would eventually influence other Greek city-states and civilizations throughout history.

Travel, trade, and communication among cities was possible, but the isolating nature of the geography made it difficult to have one central government. For this reason, the city-states developed independently. Their governments, cultures, and economies were often quite different from one another, based on their locations. For example, the city-states of Corinth and Thebes both became powerful in part because of their location and the resources available to them.

Corinth, which lay approximately 50 miles to the west of Athens, was strategically located near the Isthmus of Corinth, a narrow strip of land between the **Aegean Sea** and the **Ionian Sea**. This location provided Corinth with access to sea routes that made travel between the Greek mainland and its peninsulas and islands quick and easy. Corinth took advantage of this location to establish several colonies in the area, including Corcyra and Syracuse. In turn, these colonies helped Corinth to establish shipping routes throughout the Mediterranean and dominate trade in early **Greece**. Corinth used the wealth it received from trade to become increasingly powerful and influential in the region.

Thebes, unlike Corinth, was northwest of Athens and farther inland. It did not have easy access to the sea but was located near several major springs. These springs provided an abundant source of water for the city's population as well as for use in the irrigation of its crops. This meant Thebes was not as reliant on trade to ensure an adequate food supply. Thebes grew into a military power and became a rival of Athens and Sparta.

Although the Greek city-states developed independently, they did share some common culture and goals. When faced with threats, the Greek city-states were capable of defending themselves individually, but were also willing to work together to protect the common elements of their cultures. These threats often came from another great power— **Persia**. Persia sought to expand its own power and influence in the region and take advantage of the trade routes in the Aegean sea. This often brought Persia into conflict with Greek city-states and colonies.

1. List the names of the Greek City-States

2. Describe why each city-state was so different.

3. What united the city-states?

The Persian Wars

Who was Persia?

East of where Greek **civilization** was developing, a new power was rising. This new empire would become a major rival of the Greek city-states for land and power. In approximately 548 BCE, Cyrus, also known as Cyrus the Great, founded the Achaemenid Empire, uniting most of what is today Iran under his control and establishing himself as the ruler of **Persia**. He then began to expand his empire by conquering the surrounding lands. He conquered the Babylonian Empire (Mesopotamia), large areas of Central Asia, and **Turkey**. **Darius** I, a successor of Cyrus, continued to expand the Persian Empire. Darius I captured northern India to the east, the kingdom of **Macedonia** to the west, and the Greek islands of Lemnos and Imbros in the **Aegean Sea**. Darius and the previous Persian emperors had created one of the largest empires of the ancient world.

During his rule, Darius instituted many practices that allowed the Persians to control their large empire. He divided the empire into 23 satrapies, or provinces, and appointed a satrap, or governor, to rule each one. He introduced a single system of coins to use throughout the empire, making trade and other business transactions easier. The single monetary system also allowed Darius to collect tribute, or taxes, from each satrap each year. Darius improved infrastructure in his empire to allow traders and troops to move swiftly across the land. The Royal Road ran from the coast of the **Mediterranean Sea** all the way to the capital of Persepolis, in modern-day southwestern Iran. Some parts of the Royal Road were even paved with stone. He also encouraged Egyptians under his rule to build temples to their native gods, and he allowed the Jews to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem. Darius usually allowed individual regions to keep their own laws and customs, although he occasionally ordered scholars to modify laws that conflicted with the overall laws of the empire. Despite his attempts to maintain peace and order, not all members of the kingdom were happy with Persian rule.

During the conquests led by Cyrus the Great and Darius I, the Persian Empire conquered most of Turkey—including the Greek colonies along the Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts. This helped the Persians gain control of the Black Sea's profitable trade routes. These colonies resented their Persian satraps and rebelled in 500 BCE. During the revolt, the Persian satraps in these colonies were exiled or killed, and the Greek inhabitants declared independence from the Persian Empire.

1. What was the name of the empire to the east of Greece?

2. Who were the two leaders for this empire?

3. What was the result of the Greek Colony Revolt?

The Persian Wars

The Greek colonies along the Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts maintained close contact with the city-states on the Greek **peninsula**. When King **Darius** sent Persian troops to suppress, or stop, the rebellion in the Greek colonies, the Greek city-states of **Athens** and Eretria sent boats and soldiers to aid the Greek rebels. This was the first in a series of wars between the Greek city-states and the Persian Empire, known as the **Persian Wars**.

The rebellion was defeated, and **Persia** regained control of the territory. However, King Darius was concerned about the influence of the Greek peninsula's city-states on the Greek colonies. He decided that to prevent future rebellions, he would need to conquer all of **Greece**. Historians think Darius was also motivated by the opportunity to expand the Persian Empire even further by taking over Greece and its profitable trade routes.

1. Who from Greece got involved in the revolt?

2. What did this revolt start?

3. What was the outcome of the revolt?

Battle One: The Battle at Marathon

In 490 BCE, King **Darius** sent a fleet of Persian ships to conquer **Greece**. The soldiers landed at the plain of **Marathon**, northeast of the **city-state** of **Athens**. The Persian army was larger than any Greek army, but they had problems getting supplies to their troops across the **Aegean Sea**, which could be dangerous to travel. An early attempt at invasion by the Persians, in 492 BCE, had ended when many of the Persian ships were destroyed in a storm. The natural protection of the sea was a great advantage to the Greek city-states.

Despite early Persian victories, a few combined Greek city-states were able to beat the Persian army at the battle of Marathon. After the defeat at Marathon, the Persian troops retreated back to their empire. Legend has it that an Athenian man ran from the battle of Marathon all the way back to Athens to share news of the victory. The first modern marathon race, which was run at the 1896 Olympics in Athens, mirrored the route of this legendary ancient Athenian.

1. Where did the first battle take place?

2. What was the outcome of this battle?

3. What did Persia do after the battle?

Battle Two: The Battle at Thermopylae

The Persian army returned to Greece in 480 BCE, 10 years after the battle of Marathon, under the command of **King Xerxes**, the son of Darius. Xerxes sought not only to avenge his father's defeat at Marathon but also, like his father, to establish Greece as a Persian province and gain control of its trading network. Unlike his father, however, Xerxes traveled not over sea, but instead marched his armies around the Aegean Sea and invaded the Greek **peninsula** from the north. Meanwhile, the Persian navy sailed south along the Greek coastline.

Because of the size of the Persian army, which historians estimate at 360,000 men, and the rocky and hilly terrain of Greece, the Persian army moved slowly. This gave the Greek city-states time to prepare a strategy for battle. The Greek city-states worked together to try and stop Xerxes's march southward. The Athenians, who had a fleet of warships, were charged with destroying the Persian fleet, while the formidable Spartan army was sent to stop the Persian ground forces.

The Spartans met the Persians at the battle of Thermopylae with a force of about 7,000 men. The Greeks decided to fight in a narrow canyon, where the Persians could only send a few soldiers at a time, which limited the advantages of the Persians' larger army. However, a Greek soldier betrayed the Spartans and showed the Persians how to circle around behind the Spartan army. Trapped on both sides, the Spartan commander decided to let most of his army flee and prepared to hold off the Persians with only 300 Spartan soldiers, as well as soldiers from Thespiae and **Thebes**. Although all the soldiers who remained behind died in the battle, they held off the Persian army for about a day and allowed the rest of the Greek troops to escape.

After the Persian victory at Thermopylae, Xerxes's army conquered Athens and burned it to the ground. Most Athenians had been able to flee the city to nearby islands in advance of Xerxes's army. However, a battle at sea would change the course of the war.

1. What was the name of the Persian leader after Darius I?

2. Describe the events at the Battle of Thermopylae.

3. What was the outcome of the battle?

Battle Three: The Battle at Salamis

Although the **city-state** of **Athens** had been conquered, the Athenian navy was still intact. The Greek fleet was made up of ships called triremes. These ships were designed to allow the Greeks to travel quickly between and around the islands. They also had sharp points on their ends, designed for ramming enemy ships.

In 480 BCE, the Greeks lured the Persian fleet into a narrow channel between the mainland near Athens and the Greek **island** of Salamis, knowing that the speed and maneuverability of their ships, along with their knowledge of the waters, would give them a significant advantage. The larger Persian ships could not move as effectively in such a narrow space, allowing the Greeks to ram multiple Persian ships and eventually win the battle of Salamis.

1. Where did this battle take place?

2. What was the outcome of this battle?

3. Describe the strategy used by the Athenians.

Battle Four: The Battle at Plataea

The defeat at Salamis discouraged the Persians. They waited until the next spring to attack the Greeks again but lost the battle of Plataea. The Persian army withdrew, and the **Persian Wars** were over. **Greece** would remain independent from the Persian Empire. Following the Persian Wars, Persian military ambition in the Aegean ended rapidly. Xerxes' interest was drawn to the politics of his own empire's capital cities. This led to his assassination in 465 BCE.

Xerxes' successors were mostly relatively weak rulers who struggled through wars and loss of territory. Following the end of the Peloponnesian War in 404 BCE, Artexerxes II lost control of Egypt. Artexerxes III was able to win it back in 343 BCE. However, these constant struggles left **Persia** open to attack, and Alexander the Great overthrew the empire in 330 BCE, putting an end to the Achaemenian dynasty.

1. What was the outcome of this battle?

2. What happened to Xerxes?

3. What happened to the Persian Empire?

Ancient Greece Map
Use the map on the next page to label the following

Geography
A. Mediterranean Sea
B. Aegean Sea
C. Ionian Sea
D. Crete (Island)

Places
1. Mycenae
2. Athens
3. Sparta
4. Corinth
5. Thebes
6. Persian Empire

Events
I. Troy (The Trojan War)
II. The Greek Colony (Ionian) Revolts
III. The Battle at Marathon
IV. The Battle at Thermopylae
V. The Battle at Salamis
VI. The Battle at Plataea

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Greece