

## **Mediterranean, African, and Asian Geography**

### **Carl Seaquist**

(Slide 1) Welcome to Carl Seaquist's lecture on Mediterranean, African, and Asian Geography. The Greeks didn't live in a vacuum, and in order to understand Greek civilization you need to know something about the cultures that surrounded it. A first step is having some familiarity with the geography of ancient Eurasia, and that's the topic of this lecture.

(Slide 2) This map shows where the Mediterranean is located. It is bordered by Europe to the north, Africa to the south, and Asia to the East. Greece lies along the north of the Mediterranean, a little east of center. Italy and Anatolia, the peninsulas to either side of the Graeco-Balkan peninsula, are also labeled; they were both homes to substantial Greek populations in antiquity.

Egypt and Persia were key players in the drama of Greek history, and we will be encountering both later in this course. The Greeks tended to think that all civilization came from Egypt, and in fact Egypt was one of the first great world civilizations. We could easily spend an entire semester studying Egyptian history without ever getting to the time of Homer, who was the author of the first literary text written in the Greek language – that's how old Egyptian culture was, and a quick indication of how much we know about its early history. Persia had a fairly young history by comparison, though it was an heir to Mesopotamian civilization that was as ancient as the Egyptians'. The word "Mesopotamia" is Greek; it literally means "between the rivers," and it refers to the triangular area of land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, roughly coterminous with the modern state of Iraq. Persia was important to Greece in a very particular way: the Persians tried to conquer Greece in the early fifth century, and these wars were crucial for developments in Greece during the classical period.

(Slide 3) This map labels a lot more areas, to help you see where the Greek world lay in relation to a variety of ancient and modern nations. Terms that are aren't generally used in describing the ancient world are in parentheses. In the case of Bactria and Persia, I've appended the modern name of that region to the name that's used in the ancient period. In order to avoid having to take a stand on whether Tibet is part of China, I've been intentionally ambiguous by also labeling Xinjiang (or Chinese Turkestan) as well. By using a combination of ancient and modern names, I'm hoping to help you overlay in your mind maps of the ancient world on those of the modern world. Let me address the three continents that border the Mediterranean in turn.

This map shows all of southern Europe (including modern Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Greece) and most of northern Europe (including modern England, Germany, Poland, and southern Scandinavia). The Greeks of the Classical period really just came into contact with those European peoples who lived near the coast of the Mediterranean and Black Seas, and in the Balkans. Later, after the Romans had conquered Greece, they came into contact with all the European peoples of the Roman empire.

To the east of the Greek world we see the western and central portions of Asia (including Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and most of India). What's now Pakistan came under Greek rule briefly in the time of Alexander the Great, who we'll encounter in this course, and Greeks ruled Bactria (what's more or less modern Afghanistan) for several centuries. Most of East Asia is off our map, but what you see in this map is all of Asia that was known to the ancient Greek world, and a little bit more. In fact, the word "Asia" to the ancients meant more or less Anatolia. Herodotus traces the origin of the Graeco-Persian wars to the conflict between Troy, a city on the western coast of Anatolia, and Greece; and Asia was in later centuries a Roman province within Anatolia.

(Slide 4) To the south of the Mediterranean is Africa. The ancient civilization of Egypt extended nearly half way down the coast opposite Arabia, and south of it was the ancient kingdom of Kush. But for our purposes "Africa" means North Africa. In antiquity, Egypt lay mostly along the Nile. When the Nile river flows north, it branches out into a lot of smaller rivers as it nears the Mediterranean, in a region known as the "Delta" (because it's roughly triangular, like the capital Greek letter delta). This was the part of Egypt best known to the Greeks. Naucratis, a major port city that had a significant Greek settlement from at least the sixth century BC, was there, as was Alexandria, named after Alexander the Great and probably the most important city of Egypt in the latter portion of ancient history.

By the way, because the Nile flows from south to north, the term "upper Egypt" is used for the southern portion of the country, and "lower Egypt" for the northern portion, including the Delta. Since we tend to think of north as "up" because north is, by convention, at the top of most of our maps, this can be a little confusing. Remember that rivers flow downhill because of gravity, so the source of a river is "up" in geographic terms, regardless of which compass direction the river flows.

(Slide 5) The Greeks believed the Ethiopians lived south of the kingdom of Egypt, in other words, in southwestern Africa, but they didn't have any idea how large Africa was, and they'd be hard pressed to locate Ethiopia on a modern map. The modern country of Ethiopia, of course, begins right around where this map stops, so it is indeed south of Egypt (and the Sudan), but south of it along the coast, in the modern period, are Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique, all before one gets to South Africa. Basically, the Greeks didn't know anything about anything south of the Sahara desert, which stretches along the northern portion of the continent. All they really knew about Africa was Egypt, and the northernmost coastal strip.

Modern Tunisia lies very close to ancient Carthage, which fought major wars with the Roman empire from the middle of the third to the middle of the second century B.C. The Carthaginians had the largest and most dominant empire in the western Mediterranean in the middle of the first millennium BC. You can see from the map how close it is to Rome: the boot of Italy is kicking the soccer ball of Sicily right at it.

(Slide 6) I haven't given a name to the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, and it's not labeled on the map. "Israel" is a politically-charged term, and in any case this only

referred to the southern part of the coast. "The Levant" is a general term for the region, and archaeologists often refer to it as Syro-Palestine, though of course "Palestine" is as politically charged as "Israel." On the map it may look like one region, but in reality it is better to think of it as several. Modern Syria was partly in the Anatolian culture sphere, partly in the Mesopotamian sphere, but there were also independent and powerful Bronze Age city-states in this region, for example Ugarit and Ebla.

Just as Sicily lies between Italy and Carthage, so the island of Crete lies between Greece and Egypt. To the east of it is Cyprus, near the Syrian coast. Modern Cyprus has a Greek half and a Turkish half.

It's worthwhile to remember that the ancient world lasted for a long time. The Old Kingdom in Egypt (let's say for simplicity that that's how back written records in Egypt go) was as distant in time from Plato as the life of Jesus was from the present. In some ways, modern Western culture is a direct descendant of the ancient Greek world, but that world was in turn similarly indebted to much older civilizations. There are six places in the world where advanced civilizations developed more or less independently. Mesopotamia and Egypt were two; the others were the Indus Valley civilization in modern Pakistan, the Han civilization in China (which is east of what you see on this map); the Mesoamerican cultures of southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Costa Rica; and the Incas in what's modern Peru. You can see three of those on this map.

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