

Regents Global History and Geography

Historians have noted for centuries that certain things happen in history over and over again. One such pattern of civilization is that seen in the actions of great leaders at the founding of an empire. There is a Great Leader who founds an empire. He borrows from the past and uses religion to support his right to rule. This pattern is not strongly evident in the civilizations of Classical Greece and the Roman Republic, but it is strongly evident in the case of the Hellenistic Kingdoms.

In the case of Classical Greece, it is difficult to identify a single leader who founds an empire because Greece was never united into an Empire in the same way that Babylonia or Egypt was. The mountains "isolated Greeks from one another, causing different Greek communities to develop their own ways of life" (Spielvogel). A loose-fit to the pattern of a great leader who founds an empire could be seen in the case of Pericles, who led the Athenian Empire from 461 to 429 BCE. Athens was a democracy led by Pericles. By controlling the Delian League, a defensive alliance, Athens controlled much of the Aegean. Pericles borrows from the past to support his power in that he built on the democracy established by Cleisthenes and the laws established by Solon a century before. There was only weak connection between religion and democracy in Sparta. Democracy developed as a result of military and naval events. Pericles did not support his power with Greek religion. In short, Classical Greece does not follow the pattern of history of a great leader and its founding.

In the case of the Hellenistic kingdoms, it's easy to identify a leader, Alexander the Great, who conquered everything in his known world by 326 BCE. Alexander follows

the pattern of using religion and tradition to support his power. His mother, and later an oracle in Egypt, supported his claim to be the son of Zeus. Once he conquered Persia, he made himself Persian emperor. Persian emperors are worshipped as divine. Alexander borrowed from the past to support his authority. For example, he “kept a copy of the Iliad [...] under his pillow” and he tried to imitate the Greek hero Achilles (Spielvogel). He was Macedonian, but he was culturally very Greek.

Like Classical Greece, the Roman Republic does not start in the way empires usually start in history. The Roman Republic begins probably in 509 BCE when the Romans expel the Etruscan king Tarquin the Proud. Roman history does not give us the name of a single leader who takes over and forms an empire. We know the names of the first two consuls, L. Iunius Brutus and L. Tarquinius Collatinus. Not only is there no great leader to start Rome, but those leaders that were there seem to avoid the pattern of even pretending to borrow from the past to support their right to power. As for religion and the state, the Roman religion was little more than an advanced sort of animism. “The early Romans believed in a simple animism - that there were spirits/powers, or numina, which surrounded all men. There were no temple/statues” (Sumair and Tsang). It would be centuries before the Roman religion would be used to support the government’s right to rule. By then, the emperor would be worshipped as a god.

Classical Greece and the Roman Republic do not follow the patterns of the rise of an empire. There is no single great leader who imposes his will through military force, who defends his right to rule by claiming to be going along with tradition, and who uses religion to support his right to rule. Alexander the Great did. When Alexander died, his generals divided up his empire into what we know of as the Hellenistic Kingdoms and

they followed Alexander closely as a model. What is interesting to note about these two exceptions is that, in both cases, change comes about because of the people and the government in both cases is strongly democratic. Even though there were limits on who could vote and hold office, there was still greater participation than in monarchy. It seems clear that nations that form from popular uprisings have a different character than those that begin with a king. It would be worth investigating to see whether democratic civilizations have their own historical patterns.

## **Works Cited**

Farah, Mounir A. and Andrea Berens Karls. World History: The Human Experience. Columbus, OH: Glencoe/McGraw-Hill, 2001.

Mackay, Christopher S. Consuls of the Roman Republic. 1998. 11 October 2011  
<<http://www.ualberta.ca/~csmackay/Consuls.List.html>>.

Spielvogel, Jackson J. World History. Columbus, OH: Glencoe McGraw-Hill, 2008.

Sumair, Mirza and Jason Tsang. Roman Religion. 2011. 11 October 2011  
<<http://www.classicsunveiled.com/romel/html/religion.html>>.

The History Channel. History channel - The true story of Alexander the Great (part I). 2009. 11 October 2011 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lSeUustPic>>.