

# **EPISODE 13**

## **SOMETIME AROUND THE YEAR ZERO**

### **PART ONE**

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is episode number thirteen of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. So now we're finally going to start in with the history lessons.

Now I'm going to be going through a couple of thousand of years of history in just ten or so episodes. So it would be absurd to think that this is in any way going to be exhaustive or complete. And I'm assuming going into this that you at least have that vague understanding of history that I just outlined at the end of episode 12. Well, it shouldn't surprise you at this point, but I'm here to tell you that said outline, with Greece and Rome and Christianity and the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and the Reformation and all that, is all wrong. Not that the specific facts that you might have learned are wrong. But, just as if had you grown up in the Soviet Union your history would have had been totally colored by Marxist ideology, so, too, by growing up in the West your history has been totally colored by Liberal ideology.

And—for the umpteenth time—by 'liberal' we're referring to John Stuart Mill and his friends. Not Nancy Pelosi and hers. A belief in the centrality of Self Interest, not of Left Wing politics.

And, again, it's not like there was some insidious plot. No, it just turns out that in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century a lot of the historians were of the British liberal outlook. And so they naturally could only see history through the prism of their ideology.

Well, my goal in all of this is to try to correct the false narrative.

And here's their first mistake: They just assumed that, since the West was now dominant, the West was also the only place where true Civilization really arose. Yes, they knew that India and China had their civilizations, but it was obvious to them that these were degenerate civilizations built by degenerate races.

Because here's something that will no doubt surprise you: The modern belief in so called scientific racism can be readily traced back to liberal theorists. Specifically to one Herbert Spencer,

who, next to John Stuart Mill, was the leading liberal theorist of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He was the person who coined the phrase 'survival of the fittest'. And since at this point in time Caucasians had survived the best, clearly they must have been the fittest.

Not that John Stuart Mill wasn't a racist himself. Because for all of his preaching for the political rights of women and of the non-aristocracy, these were white women and white working non-aristocracy. He considered the people of India, for instance, as far too backwards for anything like democracy.

Well, back to ancient history: It turns out that both China and India had developed civilizations which were at least the equal of anything in the West. Because back when Jehovah was still being a Jewish, local, jealous god, both of the Eastern civilizations had already developed sophisticated and transcendent philosophies, religions, and ethical systems. Confucius lived around 500 BC. So did the Buddha. Further, they both, especially China, created intricate art, pottery, textiles and technology quite independently of the West.

More importantly for our purposes, they both serve as important illustrations of a wider point I'd like to make at this time. Because I've already been mentioning how science is totally independent of any ideology or political system. And I'd now like to expand that statement to include all learning, all art, and all culture in general. It all seems to bubble up independently of whoever is running the show. And this phenomenon can be easily seen in the history of both China and India. For instance, China, and the rest of East Asia for that matter, never believed in the sanctity of the individual. The welfare of the group was always considered as far more important than the welfare of the individual. Further, the Chinese emperor almost always reigned as a supreme dictator whom you had to bow and scrape to, assuming of course that you were even allowed to approach. And yet this didn't stop the Chinese from thinking deep and original thoughts. Nor did it stop them from creating the silk, the porcelain, the art, the gigantic canal systems, etc., etc.

Even more interesting is India. Because for over three thousand years Hinduism was first and foremost an incredibly strict caste system. That is to say, that if you were born into the caste of, say, the brick makers, then that's who you were for your entire life. No ifs, ands, or buts. Don't even think about it. Nor could you even think of marrying outside your specific caste. And I'm certainly not recommending such a system. But the plain fact remains that it was remarkably stable over those three thousand plus years. And somehow, despite this total lack of individual freedom, India produced all that incredible artwork and all those incredible temples, and its thinkers produced all that poetry and all

those mathematical proofs.

But, having said all that, and having made my point, those cultures were still in the East. And here we're trying to figure out the West. So this poses the question of: Where do we start?

Well, how about ancient Egypt? After all, they were pretty much the first civilization anywhere. And, New Age speculation aside, it's pretty clear that you needed a really far ranging and sophisticated culture in order to even attempt to start on a good pyramid, let alone a Great one.

But I remember standing at the massive temple of Karnak, in Luxor in upper Egypt. And staring at the weird hieroglyphics and the gargantuan columns and the gargantuan statues of kings and gods and godkings. And thinking of what a bizarre, colossal ego trip those guys must have been on. And then I had thought back to a couple of weeks earlier, when I had been visiting Athens. And the clear, clean, more rational, more human scale of the Parthenon and the Agora and the like. And it was pretty clear to me why it was that we consider ancient Greece to be our true foundation.

Except...

Except that when you delve into it, you find out that the real history isn't so nearly simple as Egypt versus Greece. Because here we come upon a word that you might not have heard of, but that is really critical to know in order to understand, not only the culture, but also the philosophy and the religion of the ancient world. And that word is: Syncretic. That is to say, that in the ancient world nothing ever really developed in a vacuum. Everybody borrowed from everybody else. The Greeks certainly may appear to have been much more similar to us than the Egyptians. But in reality the Greeks readily absorbed ideas and techniques from all who had come before. They took their alphabet from the Phoenicians. There is a certain thought that their gods were taken from the Egyptian ones. It is definitely the case that their sculpture and their architecture was derived from Egypt. In fact, Greeks freely admitted that the Egyptian was the older, wiser culture.

It is true, however, that by the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC Egypt had more or less fallen on hard times. And it is also true that, unlike Egypt, the Greeks were an incredibly colonizing people. Which brings up another important point. Because nowadays we think of ancient Greece as synonymous with Athens. And we think of the ancient Greeks as synonymous with, well, the country of Greece. But that's not how it was back then. Turks, for instance, didn't even show up in Turkey until around the year 1000 AD. So that the entire coastal region of Turkey back then was actually considered Greek. Same with Sicily. In fact, Greek colonies stretched all the way from Spain in the west to the eastern coast of the Black Sea.

Now I'm not going to pretend that Athens wasn't incredibly important to the wider Greek culture. Even during the latter stages of the Roman Empire it was the world's most important center for the study of philosophy. And during its Classical period in around 400 BC, it was the home of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Also of the greatest of the Greek playwrights, like Aristophanes. Also of the historian Thucydides. It would be hard to overstate the amount of important thought and culture which took place during that comparatively brief period.

And in that era Athens was certainly the largest and the wealthiest of the city-states. But that's all that it was: A city-state. It was by no means the capital of a unified country called 'Greece'. Nor by any stretch of the imagination did the other Greek entities necessarily agree with or copy the various social and political practices of Athens.

Nonetheless, in our modern way of thinking we act as if Athens was synonymous with Greece. So why is that?

Well, now we're back to ideology messing with history. Because, as you'll recall, back in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century people didn't pay that much attention to ancient Greece. It was ancient Rome which was the inspiration for our Founding Fathers. But in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century those liberal thinkers and historians developed this image of ancient Greece as a long ago precursor of their current liberal thinking. You know, attempting to create an aura of ancient authority from the distant past. Thus Athens in 400 BC became the birthplace of individuality and individual freedom. Of philosophical reasoning instead of religious superstition. Of honest history and of the beginnings of honest science. And, of course, of Democracy itself.

Even though all of the great Athenian names which I just mentioned a couple of paragraphs ago actually hated the idea of democracy. Even though it was clear in the pages of Plato's greatest book, 'The Republic', just how much he disparaged the idea of democracy.

What's more, for instance, Thales, considered to be the Western world's first true rational philosopher, lived not in Athens but in what is modern day Turkey. And Herodotus, considered to be the first true historian, also came from there. And Pythagoras, acknowledged to be the first great Greek mathematician, came from the island of Samos. Still it soon became a central idea of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century thought that Classical Athens was where the liberal ideal—democratic, rational, individual, free humans—first made its appearance.

Well, here are some of the weirder aspects of Athenian life that you might not want to feel a close association to. I've already mentioned their over-extensive use of slavery, the low status of their

women, and all of the wars that they started. Now consider the Parthenon. Today its stone columns evoke simplicity and clarity. But back in the day it was entirely covered in gaudy shades of red, green, and blue. Same with all those Greek statues. Today they are austere white marble. But back then they were painted with all the subtlety of the garish colors of a carnival midway. And that's how the Athenians liked their art.

Next let's look at what really went down with what you've no doubt heard were their supposedly 'gay' practices. First, in no way did they think that some x percentage of people were 'born gay'. Rather what they were into was that an older man would approach the father of some 13-14 year old boy and offer him a certain amount of money so that his son would then become the older man's passive 'lover' for the next several years. Of course, once these youths became full grown men (in other words started growing beards) they were then expected to get married and raise a family. And, in due time, to start the process over again with their own contracted out young lover. So what was really going on was pretty much pretty hard core pedophilia.

Now these peculiar sexual practices were most specifically Athenian, and were by no means universal throughout the rest of Greek culture. In fact, the rest of the ancient world considered the Athenians to be a bunch of perverts. As would we. Which helps make all that 'birthplace of democracy' stuff really bizarre.

Speaking of which, let me remind you that for many purposes the minimal quorum for making any kind of decision was 6000 people. The simplest of court trials required at least 200 people. All of this from about 30,000 eligible voters in a total population of around 300,000. As you can no doubt guess, all of it quickly became somewhat unwieldy. Especially if all 30,000 of those voters decided to show up at once. Without, of course, any loudspeakers or the like. What's more, a crowd of 10,000 or so is hardly the place for a considered discussion. Not to mention how easy it was for skilled demagogues to sway the crowd any which way they wanted. No wonder the smart people thought that it was stupid. And it was also a remarkably unstable system, too. At various times it was replaced by different oligarchies, and its entire length of existence was barely more than a century.

Now let's briefly look at Athens as the birthplace of free individuals. Once again, the majority of the population was either slaves, women, or foreign residents who had no citizenship or rights. And, although going back to the Iliad and the Odyssey, Greek poetry and tradition certainly glorified the great hero, such as Achilles or Agamemnon, in reality the 'rugged individual' back then bore little relationship to the vision that we have today. Because those heroes were only heroic insofar as they

glorified their family, their clan, their tribe, or, ultimately, their people.

Likewise each and every citizen of Athens (or any other city-state) was first and foremost a member of a family or clan or tribe. And often those loyalties and obligations were far more important than one's obligation to the city-state. Further, Greek thought didn't even recognize 'individuals' as we imagine the term today. Nowadays when we hear the term 'political animal' we think of someone who enjoys debates about politics or government policies. But back then the term 'political animal' literally meant that Man was seen as first and foremost as a social being, and that his central essence was of being part of a larger group, or polity. Thus every right and privilege that a man had was balanced by a corresponding responsibility to his larger group. This is why when Socrates was ordered to drink the poison hemlock, and when in reality there were any number of people who would have helped him just leave Athens and go to some other city-state, he chose to stay and voluntarily submit. After all, he argued, he had accepted all the benefits of being an Athenian his entire life. So now, if he were to remain true to his vocation of being a philosopher, he had to accept the judgment of the legal mob, even if it were an objectively unjust judgment.

So, in short, for us to project some 19<sup>th</sup> Century imaginary definition of 'individual rights' back to ancient Greece is just flat out wrong.

Well, how about Greek philosophy being rigorously rational and qualitatively different from ancient religious beliefs and traditions? Here again it turns out that there is less than meets the eye. Pythagoras, the almost mythical first great rational mathematician, actually established a cult which worshiped the circle, the Pythagorean theorem, and the like as mystical, divine concepts. And, when you think about it, if you were the first one to come up with the bizarre neverendingness of the irrational number pi or the fact that a square plus b square equals c square, you would probably think that you had stumbled upon the hidden beauty of the Creator, also.

The Pythagoreans also believed in the transmigration of souls, an idea which was further promoted by the supposed rationalist Plato. In fact, what with his description of an immortal soul, his allegory of the cave and the divine light which only a few can see, plus his stories of ancient Egypt and Atlantis, it is not surprising that Neoplatonic mysticism should exist for centuries after his death. Even Aristotle, who is always presented as the most rational and secular of minds, wrote about his religious beliefs in works that are now lost.

In fact, I should now probably introduce you—if you are not already aware of this—to the reality that, although the ancient myths of Zeus and Hermes and Aphrodite and all were still

remembered and told and retold at this time, and even though great temples were built to these gods throughout Greek civilization, by this time any educated person saw these gods at best as easily remembered manifestations of basic principles of Creation, such as Beauty, Wisdom, Courage or Death. Much as like when Hindus today worship, say, Shiva, they are not worshipping a person or a personality, but rather a principle. And the ancient educated pagans then, just like educated Hindus today, freely recognized that there must be a First Principle, as it were, an undifferentiated Supreme Being, as it were, behind all of that. So that this Pagan conception of God was actually much more sophisticated than the Hebrew vision of Jehovah sitting on a throne somewhere.

Most important for our purposes, however, is that the Greeks didn't see any contradiction between reason and the spiritual world. Like Thomas Aquinas, who would come around 1500 years later, they assumed that God (or in their case the gods) would manifest through reason. Further, like those Medieval Franciscan monks who I keep talking about, the Greeks believed that the patient study of Nature was one of the best ways to understand the nature of the Divine.

Finally, as regards the real Athens, there's the plain fact that it was the arrogance and imperialism of democratic Classical Athens which started the Peloponnesian War, which resulted in all of the city-states becoming so weakened that they ended up being easy prey for Philip of Macedon to easily conquer a few decades later. Now, granted, when you study ancient history, it sometimes seems like everyone everywhere was always fighting a war. But there is this modern day fantasy that democracies never start wars. Which we shall see is total hogwash. Well, that hogwash was even more than definitely true as regards Athens. Because those giant democratic meetings turned out to be far more angry and militant than did the much smaller and deliberative councils of other city-states.

Anyway, for all its weirdness and warlike behavior, I need to reiterate that Athens did actually succeed in creating a lot of great sculpture, poetry, and philosophy. But the real reason Greek culture came to dominate the entire Mediterranean, even during the height of the Roman Empire, had little to do with Athen's Golden Age of around 400 BC. Rather it had to do with a certain Alexander the Great, son of Philip of Macedon, who lived around 330 BC.

Now, adding insult to injury to all of the civilized city-states, Macedonians were considered by the rest of the Greek world as little better than barbarians. Nevertheless, besides conquering Persia and Afghanistan and getting as far as the Indus River in the East, Alexander also swept down through the present day Middle East, and established in Egypt the then greatest city in the ancient world, Alexandria. Cleopatra, by the way, was 100% Greek, as were all Egyptian rulers from the time of

Alexander on.

And here we come back to that word 'syncretic'. Because by conquering Persia Alexander incorporated certain elements of Persian culture into this new Hellenistic period. Most importantly he brought Persia's main religion, Zoroastrianism, to the Mediterranean world. Although only handfuls of so called Parsis survive today, this religion was once one of the world's greatest. And various Parsi doctrines are thought to be responsible for such later Christian concepts as an eternal battle between Good and Evil, Heaven and Hell, and judgment at death. But that wasn't the only religion that moved west. Because by making it as far as India Alexander was also responsible for Buddhist thought coming to the Mediterranean. Which then greatly influenced Greek philosophy for the next several centuries.

Now if you were relatively unaware of this Hellenistic period, which lasted from approximately 300 BC to the time of Christ, some of that has to do with the fact that almost immediately after Alexander's early death at the age of 32, his world empire fell apart into constantly squabbling small kingdoms. But it is mostly due to the fact that those 19<sup>th</sup> Century historians were so enamored of Athens's purported individualism and rationality and its supposedly wonderful democracy that when that relatively short experiment was cut short by Alexander the Great and his much more efficient empire it was therefore assumed that nothing of consequence could have possibly happened afterward.

But it did. For instance, the most famous Greek sculptures, such as Venus de Milo and the Winged Victory at Samothrace, were created centuries after the Classical period in Athens. So was most of what we remember of Greek science, from all the findings of Archimedes to our friend Erasthenes and his computation of the Earth's circumference. The famous library at Alexandria accumulated some 700,000 books during that period. And although Athens did remain a place for studying philosophy and such, it was at Alexandria that most new learning in the ancient world took place.

And even though all of those small kingdoms were constantly squabbling, they were each headed by a Greek. So that Greek art, Greek architecture, Greek coinage, and Greek law permeated the entire ancient world, including Afghanistan and India. Which meant that when the Roman Empire made its big expansion eastwards right before the time of Christ, both the Greek culture and the Greek language were pervasive. And, as we shall soon see, the Romans were pretty clear headed about what they were good at and, more importantly what they weren't so good at. So they had absolutely no problem letting things remain as they already were, with the result that Greek culture ended up

becoming the dominant one in the entire Roman Empire, but particularly in the Eastern half.

It would be kind of like if, in twenty or so years from now, China had become the world's leading economy, etc. And yet English remained the universal language, and everyone still preferred American films and other entertainment.

But if the ancient Greek was by no means the person envisioned by 19<sup>th</sup> Century liberal historians, that doesn't mean that he wasn't incredibly important in the development of Western culture. Real Western culture, that is. Because now I'd like to introduce you to a completely different head space than that of the Modern. And it's one that I will call the Classical.

Now in presenting this I don't mean to pretend that back then everyone was walking around in togas deep in philosophical thought. Then as now merchants were trying to make money and young men were trying to get ahead in the world. Then as now serious interest in serious thought was a minority pursuit. What's more, even in the world of philosophy there were many different and competing schools of thought. But whether one was a Peripatetic or a Platonist, an Epicurean or a Cynic, what they all had in common was an attempt to find an inner peace or balance, what they called eudomonia, which is usually translated as happiness, but which has more of the characteristics of the phrase 'well being'. And it was pretty much agreed that the way to achieve this peaceful, balanced state of mind was through the practice of virtue.

Now the most important of the Greek schools of philosophy was that of the Stoics. And for them not only was virtue its own reward, but it was also totally sufficient in and of itself for achieving this peace of mind. So that it therefore followed that both chasing pleasure and running away from pain were equally a waste of time. Not to mention owning or accumulating physical possessions. And in fact it is not too difficult to see parallels between Stoicism and that Buddhist way of thinking which had been introduced to the Mediterranean. What's more, as we shall soon see, both Neoplatonist thought and early Christian ethics were also pretty similar to this.

And here are the virtues which were prized by all of these philosophies and religions: Self control. Self restraint. Humility. Honesty. Selflessness, patience, and moral probity. Most importantly, lack of attachment to praise or humiliation, to pleasure or pain, to worldly success or failure.

Anyway, that was the ideal. The Classical vision, as it were. And although throughout history most religious ideals have been most honored in the breach, still it was a commonly held vision which

spanned the ancient world. And most people of any education or upbringing at the least made some sort of token attempt to live up to it.

So that this, along with those Corinthian and Doric and Ionic columns, the Archimedes Principle, and the plays of Sophocles, is the real heritage which the ancient Greeks left us. And this is the part of ancient Greece that we should be celebrating.

Anyway, if you've ever had any misconceptions about Ancient Greece, I hope that his has helped to clear them up. And next time we will be focusing on misconceptions about Ancient Rome.

In the meantime, though, once again thanks again for so far having listened.