IV. Ancient Greece

What Teachers Need to Know

Background: The Geographic Setting of Greece

Greece is situated on the Balkan Peninsula, which juts into the Mediterranean Sea. To the east is the Aegean Sea and to the west, the Ionian Sea. About one-fifth of Greece is made up of islands. Crete, which marks the southern end of the Aegean Sea, is the largest Greek island. About 75% of Greece—mainland and islands—is mountainous.

The terrain greatly affected how ancient Greece developed. Greece has no flooding rivers, like the Nile or the Tigris and Euphrates (which children should have learned about in Grade 1), or the Ganges, Indus, Huang He, and Yangtze. Nor does it have fertile valleys or broad plains to farm. Only an area known as the Peloponnesus on the mainland’s southern tip has some fertile lowlands, and some of the larger islands also have small fertile valleys.

Some early Greeks did farm, but many others took to the sea to earn their living. The position of Greece in the Mediterranean, Aegean, and Ionian Seas led to the development of a large and profitable trading network for the Greeks. The early Greeks established colonies around the coasts of the Aegean, Ionian, Black, and Mediterranean Seas. Especially important were the Greek colonies in southern Italy, on the island of Sicily, and in Asia Minor. (Asia Minor is the historical name for the peninsula jutting out from Southwest Asia between the Mediterranean and the Black Seas; it is the area known today as the Anatolian Peninsula, or what forms the greater part of Turkey.)

Unlike the Egyptians, Sumerians, and others who developed civilizations around rivers in flat regions, the ancient Greeks did not build vast empires. The mountains, valleys, and water surrounding Greece cut off groups of people from one another. Instead, the Greeks developed a series of small, independent city-states that were highly competitive. In fact, the intense rivalry often led to war. The two most famous city-states were Athens, famous for its democracy and culture, and Sparta, famous for its conservatism and military might.

Crete

Today, Crete is an agricultural center and popular tourist site. The main cash crops are grapes, olives, and oranges. By 1600 BCE, Crete was the seat of the Minoan civilization, named after its legendary king, Minos.

The island was at the crossroads of a trading network that joined ancient Egypt in North Africa with Mesopotamia in the Middle East. In addition to its warm, sunny climate, one of the reasons that tourists visit Crete today is the palace at Knossos, the one-time capital of Minoan civilization. The palace is famed for its frescoes, watercolor murals painted on wet plaster. The paintings chronicle Minoan life, their religious practices, and their clothes, hairstyles, and activities, and indicate the place that the sea held in the lives of the Minoans.
By around 1400 BCE, Minoan civilization had disappeared. An earthquake or a volcanic eruption on a nearby island could have destroyed it, or invaders could have conquered the island.

Sparta

One of the fiercest of the Greek city-states was Sparta, founded on the ideal of war. Between 600 BCE and 500 BCE, the Dorians from the north had moved into the Peloponnesus and conquered the inhabitants, whom they enslaved and called helots. In order to maintain their power, the Spartans turned their city-state into a military machine. The only occupation a full-fledged citizen could have was that of soldier. All other jobs were done by helots and other noncitizens. The Spartans kept the helots under strict control and crushed all helot uprisings ruthlessly.

Spartan education was designed to raise fearless, obedient soldiers. Boys were cared for by their mothers until age seven and then were taken from their homes to become part of a military company. The military training they received was intense and brutal. It included marching, fighting, and gymnastics. The young soldiers were fed too little in an effort to force them to steal food and thus learn craftiness, a useful skill in times of war. If caught stealing, they were beaten, which they were expected to accept without complaint, or risk disgrace.

Spartan mothers urged their sons to return from wars “with your shield or upon it,” in other words, “victorious in combat or dead.” Spartan boys learned Homer’s Iliad by ear and songs of war as well, but reading and writing were not considered important parts of their education. The qualities prized in Spartan men are those we still associate with the phrase “spartan virtue”—stoic endurance of hardship, disdain for luxury, and toughness of mind and body.

Spartan boys were also taught to be succinct and direct in their speech. According to one story, students who gave answers that were too long were bitten on their fingers by their teachers! Our modern word laconic, meaning “terse” or “of few words,” derives from the speech habits of Spartans.

Spartan Soldiers

Spartan Soldiers

Spartan girls were given different training. They were expected to exercise and remain in good physical condition. Reading and writing were seen as having little value, although dancing was considered important because it was good exercise.

Sparta was ruled by kings and by a council of elders. The council of elders was a group of 28 men over the age of 60 who acted as advisers to the king as a law court. In addition, the council was responsible for inspecting all new babies. Those whom the council deemed too sickly were left to die on a mountain.
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Sparta was a closed society. Spartans could not travel outside Spartan territory, except in case of war; nor could foreigners travel within Spartan territory. This was because the Spartan leaders believed their way of life was best and did not want this way of life corrupted by foreign ideas.

Athens: The Beginnings of Democracy

Athens was the other well-known ancient Greek city-state, and it was about as different from Sparta as it could be. While Sparta was ruled by a few, Athens was the birthplace of democracy. While Sparta kept its people at home, Athenians traveled and traded all around the world. While Sparta emphasized military training at the expense of all other forms of education, Athens aimed to develop well-rounded citizens. While Spartan children were taught to speak only a few words, Athenian writers and philosophers wrote plays, poems, and philosophical works that are still read today.

Athens is located on the eastern side of the Greek mainland toward the center of the peninsula. The government of Athens slowly evolved over time from one ruled by a king to one governed by its citizens. The first people settled in this area before 3000 BCE.

Originally, the Athenian government seems to have consisted of a king and nobles who owned much of the land. The nobles eventually displaced the king and dominated the government, choosing the three archons, or officials, who oversaw the government. Although there was a general assembly made up of all adult male citizens, the only power was in the hands of the landowning nobles.

Poor harvests created hard economic times that increased the feelings of powerlessness among ordinary people. Independent farmers lost their lands and became tenant farmers on estates of the wealthy nobles. Some farmers even sold themselves into slavery to pay off their debts. The economic problems added to the political discontent. Merchants clamored for their rights, and foreign craftworkers—those from other Greek city-states—resented their lack of citizenship.

In 594 BCE, Solon was appointed as the chief officer. A wise and thoughtful leader, he made many reforms that not only eased problems in Athens, but also began its evolution to democracy. Solon outlawed debt slavery and freed those who were already enslaved for debt. The status of citizen was granted to some foreign craftworkers—those from other Greek city-states—resented their lack of citizenship.

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After Solon, leaders with varying degrees of interest in maintaining and expanding the rights of Athenian citizens came to power. Some attempted to restrict those rights, and others like Cleisthenes furthered democracy. Under Cleisthenes, the people of Athens were divided into 10 tribes, which were based on location of residence, replacing the four tribes based on aristocratic descent. The Athenian assembly became the legislative, or lawmaking, branch of the government. All citizens, whether property owners or not, were eligible to attend and debate. A council of 500 proposed laws for the general assembly. Any citizen over 30 was eligible to serve on the council, whose members were drawn by lottery.
The council of 500 proved to be too large and unwieldy to function effectively as an administrative branch, so it was divided into 10 committees of 50 men each, which were further divided into smaller units representing towns. The Athenians referred to each of the latter as a deme, from the Greek word for “people.” This is the root of the English word democracy. The word democracy is a Greek word meaning “rule by the demos, or people.”

Unlike the representative democracy of the United States, in which citizens elect representatives to speak for them in government, Athenian democracy was direct democracy. Citizens discussed, debated, and voted on laws themselves. In order to decide on issues, at least 6,000 citizens had to be present in the assembly, which met several times a month.

Although Athens pioneered democratic government, their institutions differed in some key ways from modern American democracy. Citizenship did not extend to women, slaves, and most non-native residents. This was true even during the greatest age of Athenian democracy, which occurred under the rule of Pericles from 461 BCE to 429 BCE. Pericles extended the ability of poor men to serve in public office by paying a small salary to public officeholders. He also saw to it that jurors were paid for the time they spent in jury duty.

Besides democracy, Athens was also famous for its culture. It was the birthplace of both comedy and tragedy in theatre, and was also the home of the great philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

**The Persian Wars: Marathon and Thermopylae**

While Greek city-states warred with one another, the threat of war from outside the peninsula could unite them. In 499 BCE, Athens had aided fellow Greek city-states in Ionia, the Greek area of Asia Minor, when they rebelled against rule by the Persians and their king, Darius. Persia is the historical name given to the high plateau area of what is today Iran.

**Marathon**

In 490 BCE, Darius launched an attack against Athens in retaliation for its earlier support of the Ionian Greeks. Few of the other Greek city-states answered Athens’s call for help. As a result, the Athenian force of 11,000 soldiers was greatly outnumbered as it faced 15,000 Persian invaders on the battlefield at Marathon. Through fierce hand-to-hand combat, the Athenian soldiers ousted the Persians.

The battle at Marathon is known as much, however, for the story of Pheidippides as it is for the Athenian victory. The leader of the Athenian forces, Miltiades, sent the runner Pheidippides to Athens to announce the victory. Pheidippides ran so fast and so hard over the 26 miles that, after he gave his message, he collapsed and died on the spot. The Olympic marathon, roughly 26 miles long, honors Pheidippides’s feat.

**Thermopylae**

When Darius’s son Xerxes attacked Greece in 480 BCE, Sparta and other city-states joined Athens to fight the Persians. The Persian army landed above a narrow pass called Thermopylae, which at the time controlled the only road between northern and central Greece. On one side of the pass are mountains and on the
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Other side, cliffs and the sea. Before the battle, Xerxes sent a message to the Spartan commander, Leonidas, telling the Spartans to lay down their weapons. As noted earlier, the Spartans were famous for sending short, “laconic” answers. Leonidas’s reply was “come and take them.”

The early stages of the battle were described by the Greek historian Herodotus in his work The Persian Wars:

The pass’s defenders [the Greeks] are deployed around the rocks and as the Persians attempt to move through the pass, they are speared. Many of the wounded fall into the sea.

After some fighting Xerxes learned from a Greek traitor that there was a back way that would enable him to outflank the Greeks. Xerxes ordered his soldiers to take the mountain path and attack the Greeks from the rear. On the third and final day of the battle, the pass was defended by 300 Spartans and 400 Thebans, soldiers from the city-state of Thebes, all commanded by Leonidas, the king of Sparta. These brave men faced thousands of Persian soldiers. They knew that they would almost certainly die, but they were willing to sacrifice their lives in order to slow down the Persian advance and allow the remainder of the Greek army to retreat to safety. In the end, all of them were killed defending the pass.

The Spartans’ refusal to surrender and willingness to die for their city-state has come to symbolize heroic resistance. The last stand at Thermopylae has been immortalized in a short epitaph:

Go and tell the Spartans, stranger passing by,
That here, obedient to their laws, we lie.

After mowing down the brave Spartans and Thebans, the triumphant Persians headed for Athens. The people of the city had been evacuated, and the Persians entered an empty city. They burned Athens and would probably have achieved complete victory, had it not been for the cunning of the Athenian commander, Themistocles. Themistocles tricked the Persians into bringing their entire fleet into a narrow channel along the Bay of Salamis, from which Greek fighting ships called triremes emerged to ram and attack. The Persians lost over 200 ships and this naval victory proved to be the turning point of the war. In 479 BCE, the Greeks took the war to Persian territory and defeated them.

The cultural significance of the Persian Wars was enormous. The great Battles of Marathon, Thermopylae, and Salamis acquired almost mythic status and were retold in drama, poetry, sculpture, and wall paintings for years to come. These battles were indicators of the greatness of Greece and the bravery of the Greek people.

Olympic Games

The earliest recorded Olympic Game occurred in 776 BCE. It was a footrace held to honor Zeus, the supreme god of Greek mythology. The original location for the games was Olympia Valley in the shadow of Mount Olympus.

The games were held every four years and were one of the few times that the Greek city-states came together—but still as competitors. During the games, a truce was declared and there was no fighting allowed between the city-states. The games included such sports as boxing, wrestling, footraces, chariot racing, discus throwing, and the broad jump.
Emperor Theodosius of the Eastern Roman Empire stopped the Olympic Games in 393 CE. Cheating among the athletes and the use of professional athletes rather than amateurs had become problems. In addition, the dedication of the games to Greek deities came into conflict with the newly adopted Christianity of the Roman Empire. Christians insisted that there was only one God, and they objected to games held in honor of Zeus and other pagan gods. The modern Olympic Games were reinstated in 1896, and now take place every four years. The games were suspended in 1916 during World War I, and in 1940 and 1944 during World War II. After the 1992 games, the summer and winter games were split so that instead of taking place during the same year, the two sets of games occur in two-year intervals. The next winter games were held in 1994 and the next summer games in 1996. In 2004, the Olympic Games returned to Athens for the first time since 1896.

**Worship of Gods and Goddesses**

The Greeks believed in a family of deities, and the 12 most powerful gods lived on Mount Olympus. The most important of the Greek gods are listed below:

- **Zeus**: the ruler of all gods; he was notorious for throwing his lightning bolt and chasing after young girls. This last pastime did not endear him to his wife, Hera.
- **Hera**: the goddess of marriage, guardian of women, jealous wife of Zeus
- **Apollo**: the god of music and poetry
- **Artemis**: the goddess of hunting, sister of Apollo
- **Poseidon**: the god of the seas and earthquakes. He carried a trident, a three-pronged staff, that he used to stir up the oceans.
- **Aphrodite**: the goddess of love, unfaithful wife of Hephaestus. She was said to have been born from the foam of the sea.
- **Demeter**: the goddess of grain and the harvest
- **Ares**: the god of war
- **Hermes**: the speedy messenger of the gods, who wore winged sandals
- **Poseidon**: the god of the seas, often depicted in pictures with a long beard and a trident (long pitchfork)
- **Aphrodite**: the goddess of love and beauty, had a son called Eros
- **Zeus**: the king of the gods, controlled the heavens and decided arguments among the gods
- **Apollo**: god of light, poetry, music, healing, archery
- **Hera**: wife of Zeus, queen of the gods and the goddess of marriage
- **Poseidon**: god of the sea, god of light, poetry, music, healing, archery
- **Hermes**: speed of speech, goddess of the muse and of hunting
- **Aphrodite**: goddess of love, often depicted in costume with a long gown and a trident (long pitchfork)
- **Aphrodite**: goddess of love and beauty had a son called Eros

These 12, with their great virtues and huge defects, were believed to dwell in splendor on the craggy peaks of Mount Olympus in northern Greece. There they feasted, drank ambrosia, quarreled, fell in love, protected their mortal allies, hatched plans against enemies, plotted revenge, and sometimes outwitted each other. Many delightful stories are told about these gods and goddesses. Some of these are listed in the Language Arts curriculum for this grade. Others may be found in the works of Homer and Hesiod, and in modern collections of Greek mythological stories.
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City-states set aside certain days every year for festivals to honor their patron deities. City-states also established shrines and temples in their honor. Some of the shrines were noted for their oracles, male and female priests through whom the deities spoke. A petitioner could ask a god a question about the future and the god would answer through the oracle. The oracle at Delphi, a shrine to Apollo, was famous throughout Greece.

Some of the finest sculpture and architecture of the Greeks was created to serve and honor the deities. The Parthenon in Athens, for example, was built to honor Athena.

Great Thinkers

Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were three Athenian philosophers whose lives were connected. Plato was a student of Socrates, and Aristotle was a student of Plato. These three great philosophers attempted to use reason to discover truth and an ethical system of behavior. Prior to their work, Greek philosophers had focused on trying to understand what the universe was made of. With Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the focus was more on human behavior.

Socrates (469–399 BCE)

Socrates developed what is known as the Socratic method. Through a series of questions, he attempted to prod his students into seeing the inconsistencies and contradictions in their thinking about fundamental questions like “How should we live? What is goodness? What is justice?” He believed that there was an objective truth and that people could discover this truth for themselves by looking inside themselves. “Know thyself,” he taught his students. This ultimate truth would, hopefully, lead people to adopt a course of correct behavior.

Socrates had a distinctive way of teaching, which involved asking questions—“How do you know? What do you mean?”—and then using these questions to guide his hearers toward his point of view. Through reasoned dialogue, he helped make abstract concepts, such as “courage,” “justice,” and “beauty,” specific and meaningful. His questioning method is still used in many colleges and universities today. The following brief example of the Socratic method is taken from a dialogue called the *Meno*, written by Plato in 380 BCE:

Meno. If you want to have one definition of [all virtue], I know not what to say, but that virtue is the power of governing humankind.

Socrates. And does this definition of virtue include all virtue? Is virtue the same in a child and in a slave, Meno? Can the child govern his father, or the slave his master; and would he who governed be any longer a slave?

Meno. I think not, Socrates.

Socrates. No, indeed; there would be small reason in that. Yet once more, fair friend; according to you, virtue is “the power of governing”; but do you not add “justly and not unjustly”?

Meno. Yes, Socrates; I agree there; for justice is virtue.

Fellow Athenians were suspicious of Socrates and the way he questioned everything. They came to see him as a troublemaker. He was accused of blaspheming the deities and corrupting the youth of Athens with his teaching. Socrates was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death by an Athenian court. He
was given numerous opportunities to escape. But Socrates refused to flee Athens. Each city-state, he taught, was governed by time-tested laws and constitutions. No citizen had the right to stand above the rule of law. Socrates accepted his fate as a good citizen of Athens. He agreed to drink a cup of a poison called hemlock. The trial and last days of Socrates are described in a series of short and very readable dialogues by Plato, *The Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*.

**Plato (427–347 BCE)**

Socrates left no writings, but his student Plato wrote a series of dialogues that show Socrates' influence as a questioner. Plato's later dialogues present his own views. Plato also taught his ideas in a school he founded, called the Academy.

Plato believed that there is an objective, or ultimate, set of universal truths called Ideals, such as Truth and Beauty. However, people will never be able to discover these universal truths solely through observation because what they see around them is ever changing. Ideals can only be grasped through reason.

One of Plato's most famous dialogues is *The Republic*. In this work, Plato explores the idea of an ideal government based on a true understanding of justice. This government would be very different from the actual government of Athens. (Plato did not like Athenian democracy, which he blamed for the death of his mentor, Socrates.) In Plato's Republic there would be no democracy, but also no slaves. There would be only three social classes: workers, soldiers, and philosophers (or philosopher-kings). The first group would produce the essentials of life, the second would protect the state, and the third would govern through just and humane laws. All property would be held in common. Plato's *The Republic* is still widely read and is available in many translations.

**Aristotle (384–322 BCE)**

Aristotle was a student in Plato's Academy in Athens; however, he disagreed with Plato about some things, including the essence of the ideal. Aristotle believed that the ideals were inherent in the real world, not separated off in a higher world of their own. Aristotle was not willing to confine himself to the realm of ideas, to the theory of knowledge. He was acutely interested in the physical world. In general, Aristotle focused much more on the world as it really exists, whereas Plato focused more on an “ideal” world that he thought should be brought into existence. The distinction between the two philosophers is memorably captured in Raphael's famous painting *The School of Athens*, in which Plato is shown pointing to the heavens, the location of the abstract ideals, while Aristotle holds his arm parallel to the earth.

Aristotle adopted a philosophy of moderation. He believed that humans must find a balance between the extremes of good and evil. This balance would result in moral behavior. Among the highest virtues, according to Aristotle, were self-control and self-reliance. A phrase commonly associated with Aristotle is “the golden mean.” An example of the golden mean comes from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, books 2 and 3, in which Aristotle explains that a shortage of courage is cowardice, but an excess of courage is recklessness. True courage is the “golden mean” between these two extremes. In other words, it is possible to have too much of a good thing; if one has too much courage it ceases to be a virtue. In the same way, Aristotle held that temperance was the golden mean between indifference and boundless desire.

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**Teaching Idea**

While the explanations of the philosophies of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle given here are simplified, the themes can be explored with children to focus on the importance of good behavior.

Talk about how sometimes we know that we are doing something that is not right—a little voice tells us—but we ignore it and do the thing anyway. Apply this to “Know thyself.”

Try a similar approach with the Aristotelean concept of balance. Too much of a good thing is too much—too much running, too much candy, staying up too late, and so on. Ask children for the negative effects of each action to make the point.
Aristotle was a multifaceted genius who wrote on many different subjects. For example, he wrote a book on politics in which he examined different kinds of government, including the governments of city-states, like Athens and Sparta. He wrote a book on poetry and theater that describes how we feel when we see a hero suffering in a Greek tragedy. He also wrote on various scientific subjects. Aristotle’s scientific ideas were extremely important during the Middle Ages. During the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, some of his central ideas were challenged, but some of his works are still widely read.

For a time, Aristotle tutored Alexander, the son of the king of Macedonia. This young lad would grow up to be Alexander the Great, conqueror of much of the known world. After Alexander rose to power, he gave his former tutor a gift that Aristotle used to establish his own school, the Lyceum.

**Alexander the Great**

Phillip II was king of Macedonia, a region north of Greece. At the time he was king, from 359 BCE to 336 BCE, the Persian Empire was still a major threat to the Greek city-states. Phillip was determined to conquer the Greek city-states and combine their forces with his Macedonians. He believed he would then be strong enough to defeat the Persians. Before Phillip could fully realize his plan, he was assassinated. His son, the 20-year-old Alexander, ascended the throne.

This was the same Alexander who had been tutored by Aristotle. The young man had never learned to pursue Aristotle’s golden mean. He did everything to the extreme. But his studies with Aristotle did affect him in at least one important way. Under Aristotle’s tutelage he had studied Homer’s epic poem *The Iliad*, with its great warrior-hero Achilles. Alexander carried a copy of *The Iliad* with him for the rest of his life, and the poem seems to have inspired him to become a great warrior-hero in his own right.

Phillip had succeeded in conquering the Greeks. Now his son Alexander packed his copy of *The Iliad* and led his joint Macedonian and Greek army into Asia Minor. Alexander soon proved himself a brilliant warrior and stunning tactician. Leading from the front lines of any battle, he took the greatest risks himself and galvanized his troops. His forces defeated the Persians in Asia Minor, and then moved farther into Persian territory. At Issus, they defeated Darius, the Persian emperor. Alexander then turned his attention west to Phoenicia and Egypt, seizing power by force. Once these areas were subdued, Alexander moved back through the former Persian Empire fighting more battles and seizing more territory, including Mesopotamia, until his forces reached the Indus River in India.

As Alexander won battles, his ego grew and grew. He named many cities after himself. (Alexandria in Egypt would become the most important.) He also began to adopt the Persian customs of kingship. Forcing his men to treat him as Persian subjects treated their kings, Alexander made suppliants lie prostrate on the ground before him. Greeks did not believe in these sorts of customs for men, believing that it was too subservient. Alexander’s troops were not pleased, and he was obliged to discontinue the practice.

Alexander continued his wars in the east until, during the monsoon season, with his troops poorly supplied, he and his men encountered the horror of war.
elephants expertly trained in India. The Greeks did not lose, but Alexander’s men did lose heart. They would fight no more. It was said that when Alexander realized he must turn back, he broke down in tears, sobbing that for him there were no more worlds to conquer. Nevertheless, Alexander turned westward. On his return through Babylon in 323 BCE, the great conqueror became ill after an extended period of particularly heavy drinking. Alexander died at age 33, having gone well beyond his father’s dream, conquering much of the known world.

Aristotle’s influence was apparent in Alexander’s attitude toward the people he conquered. He did more than fight wars and seize territory. Alexander was also very interested in spreading Greek culture among the peoples he ruled, and blending Greek, Persian, Indian, and Egyptian customs and institutions. Greek scholars, artists, government officials, and merchants followed Alexander’s army. In Egypt, he founded the city of Alexandria, which became a center of Hellenistic learning. Hellenism is the name given to the merging of Greek and Middle Eastern cultures.

**Bucephalus and the Gordian Knot**

Two stories are commonly told about Alexander the Great, both of which emphasize his cleverness and ability to solve problems that baffled others.

The first story is the story of Alexander’s horse, Bucephalus. This horse was so wild that nobody could ride it. Dozens tried, and dozens got tossed to the ground. As a young man, Alexander watched the horse’s behavior and quickly realized that the animal was scared by his own shadow. Alexander took the horse and turned his face toward the sun so that he couldn’t see his shadow, and thus Alexander succeeded where so many others had failed. Bucephalus became Alexander’s faithful horse for many years to come. When the animal was killed during the Indian campaign, Alexander set up a town and named it after his horse.

The other famous story is the story of the Gordian knot. In Gordium, one of the cities in Asia Minor that Alexander conquered, there was supposedly a knot that was so complex that no one had been able to untie it. An ancient prophecy maintained that whoever succeeded in untying the Gordian knot would go on to rule Asia. When presented with the Gordian knot, Alexander did not attempt to untie it; he simply thought a moment, then drew his sword and sliced it in two. Presto! No more knot. Within the next nine years, Alexander had succeeded in conquering the largest empire the world had yet seen, thus fulfilling the ancient prophecy. Even today, people will speak of “cutting a Gordian knot” when someone comes up with a surprising and unexpected solution to a problem that has puzzled others.