Cradles of Urbanism: Colonies and Capitals

Ancient civilizations were associated with urbanism and the sea. They had been remarkably urban since the pre-classical period, and several European concepts, ideas, and life patterns were conceived within their walls. Athens and Rome developed in an area marked by substantial existing urban civilizations, from the Mycenaean in the Peloponnesian to the Phoenician in Carthage, from the Ionian in the Aegean to Magna Graecia in southern Italy and the Etruscan in central-northern Italy. Cosmopolitanism and learning created a rich culture in several cities, which were by no means “secondary,” except perhaps from our modern perspective. They were significant in their own right, and challenged Athens and Rome in different respects.

The myth of Europa, the Phoenician princess abducted by Zeus in the form of a bull, which for millennia stirred popular imaginations in Greece and the Roman Empire, recognizes that civilization came to Greece from the Orient, from Phoenicia and beyond, and flourished first in Crete, in the Minoan cities. This was the advanced Bronze Age civilization in Europe, established about 5,000 years ago, and based on the civic center of Knossos, a palace-city without walls because it was naturally fortified.

Ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean
There were a number of centers of civilization around the Mediterranean apart from Rome and Athens, some of which were arguably as significant in laying the foundations of modern urbanism. The cities shown here flourished before the 8th century BCE, with the exception of Alexandria (since 331 BCE) and Constantinople (between 395 and 1453 CE, previously Byzantium).

Urban civilizations and areas of influence 1800–600 BCE

- Minoans c. 27th–15th centuries BCE
- Mycenaean c. 16th–10th centuries BCE
- Cities of Magna Graecia 8th century BCE
- Ionian cities and Aegean islands 7th–6th centuries BCE
- Greek colonies in the Western Mediterranean 6th century BCE
- Macedonia 4th century BCE
These undefended Minoan palace-cities were eventually conquered by the Mycenaeans, who by 1450 BCE controlled the Aegean archipelago as far as Troy. They were based in important cities of the Peloponnesse like Argos, Mycenae, Epidaurus, and Corinth, and flourished until 1200 BCE. Then they collapsed, along with the Aegean civilizations, possibly as a result of natural disaster such as a volcanic eruption, or from wars.

The period between the 13th and the 9th centuries BCE is lost in the dark ages between the decline of the civilization around the Aegean archipelago and the beginnings of the classical period. During the 8th century BCE a first scientific revolution took place in constellations of glamorous Ionian cities, the port cities on the shores of Asia Minor, and the nearby Aegean islands, where Greeks had established colonies: Miletos, Efesos, Alikarnasos, Amaseia, and cities of the Aegean islands such as Samos, Lesbos, Kos, and Rhodes. On mainland Greece there was Athens but also Sparta, the other pole of urban structure, based on military power.

Greek colonies were also established as towns of Magna Graecia—south Italy and Sicily (Syracuse, Agrigentum, Messina)—and farther from those, in southern France (Marseilles) and eastern Spain, up to Gibraltar. But the really glamorous major cities were in the eastern Mediterranean: Babylon, the celebrated Mesopotamian city; Alexandria, established in Egypt in 331 BCE as one of several new cities of the same name by Alexander the Great and outshining the Macedonian capitals of Aegae (today associated with Vergina), Pella, and Dion as an uncontested center of knowledge; and Constantinople, the earlier Byzantium, re-established in 395 CE as the capital of the East Roman Empire, and called simply Polis, i.e., the City; its later Turkish name, Istanbul, is derived phonetically from the Greek "Is tan Polin," "to the City."