During the first millennium BCE, the Phoenician culture, centered on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean in what today is mostly Syria, sailed west and ... up at such keypoints as Carthage and Utica (in North Africa), Gades (in Spain), Genoa (in Italy), and Cyprus, by 750 BCE.

Bronze Age civilizations flourished in the Aegean region from about 3000 BCE until about 1100 BCE, most notably the Minoan and the Mycenaean cultures.

Phoenician traders were based in Tyre or Byblos, but had influence throughout the Mediterranean region. They traded in pottery and jewelry, and from the western Mediterranean, to North Africa, to the Iberian Peninsula, and as far west as the mountains of modern Spain. Phoenician prosperity ended with the Babylonian conquest of Tyre in 573 BCE.

The center of the Minoan culture was the island of Crete. The early Minoan period lasted from 3000 to 2100; the Middle period from 2100 to 1550; and the Late period from 1550 to 1100 BCE. The Minoans traded with peoples throughout the Mediterranean, including Egypt, the Levant, and the Near East. They left behind the earliest writing in the Greek language.

During the same period that the Phoenicians expanded trade throughout the Mediterranean, what would be the great city-states of Greece, including Athens and Sparta, were forming.

In 1400, Athens was a major capital of the Mycenaen empire.

When Dorian invaders sacked other Mycenaen cities in 1180, Athens was spared, and its citizens did not disperse. The city lost influence during the Greek Dark Ages, but began to regain power in the 7th century BCE. In 594 BCE, the Aeropagus instructed the leader Solon to create a constitution. Solon divided Athenians into four classes, based not on birth but on wealth and achievement. In 510, Cleisthenes reformed Solon's system into a kind of democracy.

During the 400s BCE, a Greek coalition led by Athenians, the Delian League, defeated the Persian Empire in the battles of Marathon and Salamis. During this time, too, the intellectual, political, cultural, and religious developments that marked the time and place as a peak of world culture—the "Golden Age of Greece."—can be observed.

Athens' successes laid the groundwork for its rise as the preeminent power of the ancient world.

Alexander, born in 356 BCE, the son of King Philip of Macedon, lived only 33 years. In that brief lifetime, however, his amazing conquests made him one of history's most influential figures.

Philip of Macedon was a military innovator: for hundreds of years most fighting had been conducted via horse-drawn chariots; Philip added mounted infantrymen, charging in formation, to hold off the enemy. His army was unwieldy, but his ability to change tactics made him a successful conqueror; by the year 336 BCE, he had subdued Greece and made it part of a Greco-Macedonian union. That year, too, Philip was assassinated. Alexander, then 20 and already a skilled general, became king.

He first consolidated power in Greece. Then, in 334 BCE, he moved against the Persian Empire. He conquered the western part of Asia Minor and then Tyre and Gaza in 332. Next, Syria and Egypt fell, and Babylon and Central Asia were conquered by 328. Alexander advanced as far as the Punjab region in the eastern part of India by 326 BCE, and he was prevented from going farther only by his own mutinous men. He then headed west through what are now parts of Afghanistan and Iran, stopping at Susa and then heading to Babylon. Alexander died of a fever in 323 BCE at Babylon.

Alexander's empire fragmented after his death. His most enduring importance lies in the fact that his military conquests spread Greek culture throughout much of the Old World.

Critical-Thinking Question: From the point of view of geography, why do you think the Minoans were able to develop a great civilization on Crete? What purpose is served by the inset map of the Greek homeland?
In 304 BCE, an invasion of India by Seleucus's forces was rebuffed; over the next few years, the provinces of Gedrosia and Arachosia broke free. By about 275 BCE, the Seleucid Kingdom had been reduced to Syria, Bactria, and Parthia, and in 250, Bactria and Parthia seceded.

Despite the political disintegration of the Seleucid Kingdom, its fragments, along with Macedon and Egypt, all retained features of the Hellenistic culture. Great advances were made in science, technology, and the arts throughout the Hellenistic world.

Antiochus III, the most powerful of the Seleucid kings, ruled the Syrian region from 223 to 187 BCE. His attempts to extend his power over Greece, however, were resented by the rising Roman Empire, which would eventually conquer all the lands Alexander had won for Hellenism. Meanwhile, Hellenic expansion created various tensions in Greece itself that weakened the great civilization. By 146 BCE, Greece was no more than a Roman province itself.

When Alexander the Great died in 323 BCE, there were few strong connections among the far-flung regions his armies had conquered. There also was no undisputed leader to replace him. Instead, his generals divided the empire... for its leader Seleucus I Nicator. By 281 BCE, only the Seleucid and Egyptian dynasties remained as political entities.

Seleucus's reign was marked by overreaching, defeat, and finally the assassination (in 281 BCE) of its leader.

Critical-Thinking Question:

How does the map indicate that Greek influence was widespread after Alexander's conquests?

The emergence of the Persian Empire was one of history's examples of a swift transformation of an obscure people into a great world power. In 549 BCE, King Cyrus II took control of the ancient city of Media and by 539 BCE was able to establish an Empire that stretched from modern-day Egypt to the region of Central Asia and the Indus Valley. Lands as far west as Egypt and Thrace, on mainland Greece, fell under Persian sway.

A bureaucracy based in Persia controlled the Empire, and its government was marked by its relatively humane treatment of conquered people. Cyrus wrote of working with the local leaders to ensure that the new policies were effective and fair. He created a system of provinces, each ruled by a governor (satrap). Military officials appointed by the king checked the satraps' powers.

The Persian Empire, the most powerful the ancient world had known, was famous for its post roads that linked major cities. Stations were set up every 14 miles to allow travelers to change horses. The Empire was also known for its artistic tradition, to which all civilizations under its control contributed.

Critical-Thinking Question:

Why would the construction of well-main-tained and supplied roads have been a priority for the leaders of the Persian Empire?

In about 550 BCE, King Croesus of Lydia gained control of the Greek city-states on the coast of Asia Minor (Ionia), only to be conquered in 546 BCE by the Persian Empire. The Persians, led by the powerful Artaxerxes I, marched into Greece and defeated the Spartans at the Battle of Thermopylae, thereby gaining control. Many Greeks chafed under Persia's harsh rule, which included onerous taxation and forced military service.

For this reason, an independence movement was gathering by 499 BCE, spearheaded by the Persian-appointed leader of Miletus, Aristogorus. Aristogorus sought to rally the Greeks against the Persians, but his efforts were met with resistance from the Athenians, who were more interested in competing with Corinth and Sparta. The independence movement was short-lived, as revolutionary enthusiasm had waned, and Persia had reasserted its authority. The Persians sacked Miletus that year.

Persian leaders wanted to punish the Athenian rebels so, under King Darius I, they launched an offensive in 490. The Greeks, under command of Miltiades, defeated the Persian Empire at Marathon. It was a great Greek victory, but the Persian Empire remained powerful and still planned to punish Greece.

In 486 BCE, Xerxes succeeded Darius as Persian king. Athens, urged by the powerful Themistocles, was meanwhile assembling a large navy. Led by Sparta, Corinth, and Athens, the Greeks met the Persians at the Battle of Salamis, where the Greek fleet defeated the Persian fleet. Two years later, a hold-out Persian general, Mardonius, fell at the Battle of Platea. Greek dominance in the region was assured.

Critical-Thinking Question:

How does the map allow us to reconstruct key events from the Persian Wars?