

Greek Influences and Contributions to Today's Society

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[Anonemuss](#)

more

Langston studies international politics and is interested in ancient civilizations, international politics, and geography.

[Contact Author](#)



Alexander Mosaic showing Alexander the Great. | Source

What Is Greek Influence?

The culture of Greece was evolved over thousands of years, and is widely considered to be the cradle of modern Western culture. This is because political systems and procedures such as democracy, trial by jury and lawful equality originated there.

Aside from these important Greek-derived features of Western civilization, ancient Grecian thinkers and architects laid the intellectual foundations of many fields of study. Whether it be astrology, mathematics, biology, engineering, medicine or linguistics, nearly all of the information we take for granted today was first discovered by the ancient Greeks.

As if all of this wasn't enough, when it comes to the realm of art—including literature, music, architecture, design and the performing arts—the Greeks established many of the standards by which identify beauty and creative value.

In short, if you live in the West, you are more like an ancient Grecian than you may realize. This article hopes to highlight some of the many thoroughly-Grecian contributions we experience and benefit from every day.

The following is a list of Greek inventions and discoveries that have had profound impacts on Western culture and society.

Greek Contributions to Western Civilization

1. *Democracy*
2. *The Alphabet*
3. *The Library*
4. *The Olympics*
5. *Science and Mathematics*
6. *Architecture*
7. *Mythology*
8. *The Lighthouse*
9. *Standardized Medicine*
10. *Trial by Jury*
11. *The Theater*

Democracy

According to Merriam-Webster, a democracy is a government by the people "in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections."

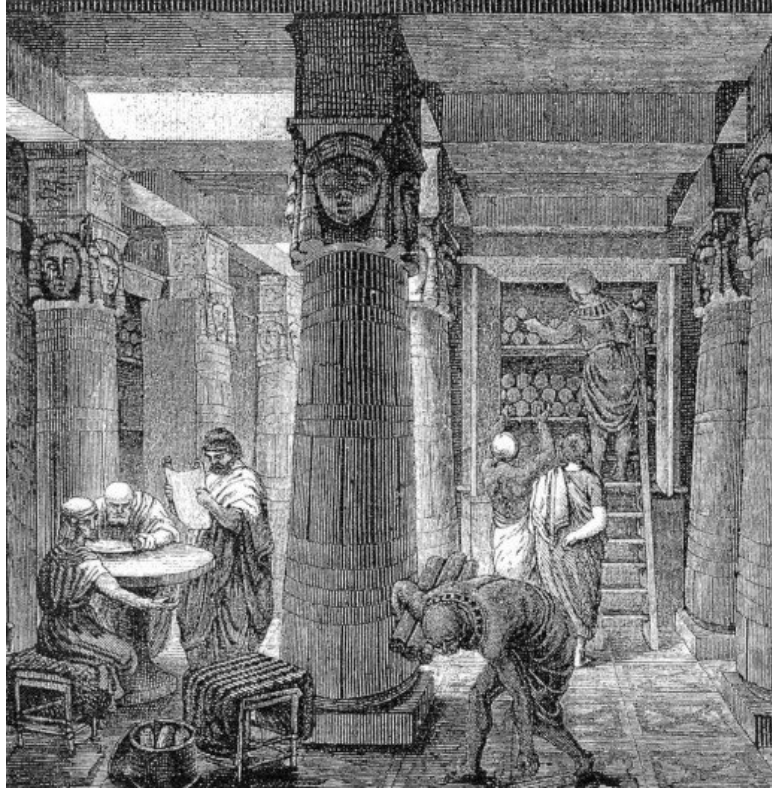
The ancient Greeks created the world's first democracy. Athens started out with a monarchy and then advanced to an oligarchy until it finally reached a democracy. The democratic government consisted of 6,000 assembly members, all of whom were adult male citizens. The assembly voted on issues throughout Athens. In order for a law to pass, the number of votes needed to be a majority. But in order to banish or exile someone, all 6,000 votes were needed.

Today, at least in the United States, we use a democratic system. But instead of a direct democracy, we have a representative democracy in which the citizens democratically vote on who should make the decisions in the country. This is different than ancient Greece's direct democracy wherein citizens voted on the decision rather than choosing people to make the decision.

The Alphabet

Derived from the earlier Phoenician alphabet, the Greek alphabet was the first alphabet in the western sense of the word, featuring distinct letters for vowels and consonants. It was developed after the Dark Ages and consisted of 24 letters, ordered from alpha to omega.

Believe it or not, the word "alphabet" originates from the first 2 letters of the Greek alphabet: alpha and beta. Today many letters of our modern alphabet originate from the Greek alphabet, including letters such as A, B, E, and O. The Greek originally had a single form of each letter but created upper case and lower-case versions of the letters later.



Artistic rendering of the Library of Alexandria, based on some archaeological evidence. ("The Great Library of Alexandria" by O. Von Corven) | Source

The Library

The first library in the world, the library of Alexandria, was actually built in Egypt. During this time Egypt was under Greek control after submitting to Alexander's rule. The Macedonians started spreading the Greek way of life to all of the conquered lands, including Egypt. After Alexander's death, there was a power struggle and the Kingdom of Egypt came under the rule of Alexander's general, Ptolemy.

Ptolemy ordered the construction of a library which would contain over 700,000 scrolls of work. There was also a rule that all ships passing through the Alexandrian harbor had to declare if they had any works of science or philosophy. If they did, the work was copied and placed in the library, and the original copy would be returned to the captain. Because of this accumulation of knowledge, many great discoveries took place in the library. For example, Eratosthenes calculated the circumference of the earth and drew up plans for steam power. Today we have many libraries all over the world with billions of works of literature, but the first library in the world was the library of Alexandria.



Mythology

Many of us still read Greek myths today. Others read Greek myths without knowing it, the godly characters being replaced by humans. Some of the most famous myths include the tales of Peruses, Theseus, and, of course, Heracles. The Greeks often used these myths to explain things that science couldn't prove, but today, we mostly enjoy the Greek myths for entertainment purposes.

Greek mythology has pervaded nearly every form of popular culture imaginable. Many Greek myths have been adapted into modern novels, movies, TV shows, video games and even brands. Some well-known instances of Greek mythology in pop culture are:

- Disney's *Hercules*
- The bestselling novel *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*
- The *God of War* video game franchise
- The TV show *Battlestar Galactica*
- Mary Shelley's Gothic novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*
- The brand Nike (Nike was the Greek goddess of victory)
- The use of the term "Achilles' heel" to describe a weak spot



The Lighthouse of Alexandria, built under the rule of Ptolemy. | Source

8. The Lighthouse

Like the first library, the first lighthouse in the world was located in the Greek-controlled Egyptian kingdom of Alexandria. The structure was called the Lighthouse of Alexandria, or the Pharos of Alexandria. Taller than the Statue of Liberty, it was the second tallest structure of its day (only the Great Pyramid of Giza was taller than it).

The lighthouse had three layers:

- A square-shaped base
- An octagonal mid section
- A round beacon on top

The lighthouse could be seen by fire at night, and by the smoke of the fire by day. Sadly, the lighthouse was destroyed by earthquakes, but it set the model for all future lighthouses.



The ancient theater of Delphi. | Source

The Theater

If you've ever gone to a concert, play or movie, you've benefited from one of the ancient Greeks' most obvious contributions to the modern world: the theater.

The word "theater" is derived from the Greek word "theatron," meaning the seating section of outdoor arenas where people watched plays. The first western theater originated in Athens, and was, like many other ancient Greek theaters, a semi-circular structure cut into a hillside that was capable of seating 10,000 to 20,000 people.

The standard Greek theater consisted of three parts: a dancing floor, dressing room and scene-building area. The acoustics of the theater were one of its most important features, allowing the words of the exclusively male actors to be heard by everyone within. The ancient Greeks loved plays and each town had its own performing company which would compete against that of neighboring towns.

When Did "Theater" Begin?

Beside creating the physical structure of a theater, the ancient Greeks also created "theater," the art form which employs actors, stage setting and sometimes music to create a story—usually a

comedy, tragedy or satyr play—in the 6th century BCE. The first playwrights (as we use the word today) originated in Greece with men like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. These men deserve the credit for theater as we know it, and have had no small impact on the methods by which storytellers throughout the ages have chosen to deliver their narratives.