

Ancient Greece

The First European Civilization

Ancient Greece

The first great European civilization emerged in the period from 1200 B.C. to A.D. 500 on the Greek peninsula. The Greeks developed a seafaring civilization focused on trade because their country had no rivers of importance and irrigation was out of the question. To further complicate the situation, three fourths of their country was mountainous, giving them little land for food production and making travel difficult. Their geography forced the creation of a society different from that of the Egyptians, Sumarian, Indians, and the Chinese. The Greeks worked to overcome this harsh environment and built a remarkable society.

The history of ancient Greece is a story of individual thinkers, artists, writers, soldiers, and leaders who contributed greatly to later western civilization. Although in time the Greeks were conquered, their culture spread to distant lands. Their ideas became part of Western civilization, which spread to Europe and the Americas and remains a part of your cultural heritage today. Please watch the clip below on the importance of Ancient Greece today and complete the appropriate activities within the activity document.

This video clip runs about 5 minutes.

The Importance of Geography to Ancient Greece

Greece was not a united country but a collection of lands and islands where Greek-speaking people lived. The mainland of the ancient Greeks was a rugged peninsula that jutted out into the part of the Mediterranean Sea known as the Aegean (ee-JEE-uhn) sea. The rest of Greek territory consisted of lands on the coast of Asia Minor and hundreds of islands in the Aegean and Ionian (eye-OH-nee-uhn) seas. The Greek Peninsula is a land of rough mountains, narrow valleys, and no navigable rivers. It had a long coastline with many inlets and bays. This combination of factors lead the Greeks to turn to the sea for a living rather than agriculture.

The Sea

Scholars have argued that the Greeks, unlike the Mesopotamians, Egyptians and Chinese, did not live on the land but instead around a sea(s). These seas were the Aegean Sea, and the neighboring Ionian and Black Seas. These bodies of water were used by the Greeks to trade and move among the various parts of their civilization. The mountainous terrain of the Greek peninsula made it virtually impossible to freely move among Greek city-states. Olympia was only 60 miles from Sparta, but it took 3 weeks to travel between the two. Therefore, sea travel was a key element of early Greek civilization. Greek sailing skills also allowed them to compensate for their homelands lack of resources through trade with Egypt, Mesopotamia, and other ancient cultures.

The Land

The mountainous terrain isolated communities in Greece and made travel difficult, but it also greatly influenced their political development. It was very difficult to unite the Greek people under one government. The isolation forced the Greeks to live in small independent communities. Home was their valley and the mountains that enclosed it. It was a small world that

encouraged self-reliance and individualism. These small valleys were watered by many small streams that prevented the development of a priestly ruling class to predict and control the flow of water from a major river. The Greeks were able to produce enough food for themselves but never developed a system that produced the luxuries of other cultures. Meat was rare and fruit and vegetables could grow only in the small valleys. The three principle crops were grains, grapes, and olives. The average Greek citizen could live on a few olives, simple vegetables, and barley bread.

The Climate

The Mediterranean climate greatly influenced the life of the average Greek citizen. Temperatures were moderate and rain fell only during the winter months. This meant that Greeks could spend a good amount of time outdoors attending community events. Greek men spent all their leisure time at the agora (AG-uh-ruh) or marketplace, at the gymnasium, in political meetings, at the theater, and at civic and religious functions. This meant that Greeks developed a rich civic life and often decided issues through a democratic process.



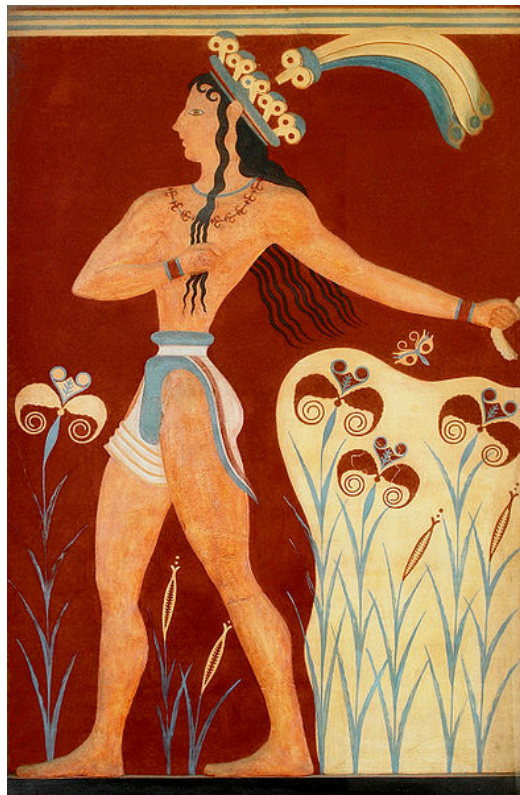


Maps of the Greek Peninsula and the location of Greece (in green) within the Mediterranean Region taken from Wikimedia Commons

Origin of Greek Society: The Minoans and Crete

Across the southern end of the Aegean Sea lies the largest of the Greek islands, Crete. An elegant civilization developed on this island around 2,000 B.C., which scholars call Minoan Civilization. The civilization was named after Minos, a legendary king of Crete. The Minoans were a sea faring people with great power in the Mediterranean world. They carried on a thriving trade in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. The wealth from this allowed the Minoans to build elegant palaces. Minoan life appeared to have been pleasant and centered around athletic contests, festivals, and dances. Nature was very important to the Minoans and they had mastered a number of key technologies such as running water and flushable toilets.

Minoan civilization ended abruptly around 1200 BC. The cause is not known but many scholars believe it was prompted by a natural disaster or foreign invasion. In either case, Minoan civilization declined rapidly and they were eventually conquered by invaders from mainland Greece carrying many of their ideas with them.



Minoan Art and Architecture from Knossos taken from Wikimedia Commons

Mycenaean Civilization

While Minoan Civilization thrived on the island of Crete, a foreign people known as Mycenaeans (MY-suh-NEE-uhnz) moved into the Greek peninsula. They were a part of a series of migrations from South and Southwest Asia into Europe and the Mediterranean region. The Mycenaeans took their name from the largest settlement or city known as Mycenae. Mycenae was a fortified city on the side of a mountain built to withstand almost any attack. Similar cities dotted the landscape of southern Greece. Each was ruled by a warrior king. Mycenaean civilization dominated Greek life until 1200 B.C.

The warrior kings accumulated great wealth for their people through conquest and trade. The nobility lived lives of splendor. Their houses and halls were decorated with murals, and gold and silver ornamentation. When they died, they were often buried with their richest treasures. The body of one child was completely covered with a golden suit. The peasants lived far more simple lives as farmers, weavers, goat herders, shepherds, stonemasons, bakers, metalworkers and nurses. Their tools were made of wood and stone and their houses of simple brick and mud.

We have learned much about Mycenaean Civilization from the poet Homer. His stories communicated orally for thousands of years tell of a civilization that was at war most of the time. Their trading business was dependent on a network of cities in and around the Mediterranean Sea, which was maintained through conquest. The greatest trading war was the Trojan War, which was the siege of the great seaport Troy on the coast of Asia Minor. This was probably a cooperative effort among several Mycenaean city-states. Homer's story tells of a grand war fought to regain the wife of a great Greek king, Helen, from a young man from Troy. We know today, however that the war was simple a trading raid against another city. Homer's stories do contain some important and accurate facts. Heinrich Schlieman used these stories to discover the lost city of Troy and unearthed the remains of the great city.





The acropolis or fortress at Mycenae and an example of Mycenaean gold taken from Wikimedia Commons



Please stop and test your knowledge of the material that you have learned to this point. Select the link below and take this quick quiz.

The Greek Dark Ages

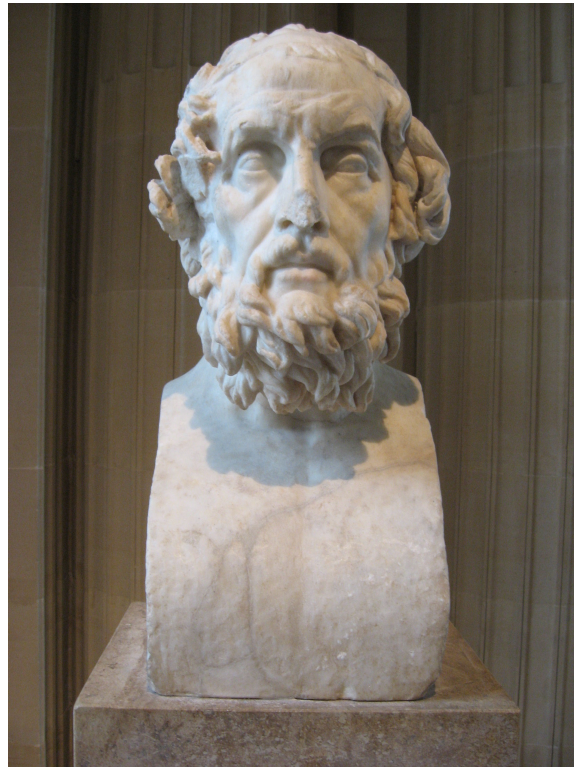
Sometime around 1200 B.C., Mycenaean cities fell into decline. Scholars do not know whether this resulted from internal civil war or outside invasion or both. This period of chaos corresponds to a similar one in Egypt, Crete, and Mesopotamia, which was attributed to an invading people called "the sea people." In either case, many Mycenaean cities were burned and collapsed.

Into this war torn countryside moved a new people from the north, the Dorians. The Dorians spoke a dialect of Greek but were far less advanced than the Mycenaeans or Minoans. They lacked artisans and had little skill at trading. More importantly, the art of Greek writing was lost for about 400 years. This period is known as Greece's dark ages. Without any written records, it is difficult to determine the major events that define the age. Dorian and Mycenaean culture blended and merged during the dark ages through a process of epic storytelling. The Greeks of the dark ages relied on the spoken word to pass on knowledge to their children. Bards or wandering poets told stories from the past, like the Trojan War. These stories could take several days to tell and

the most famous storyteller was a blind man named Homer.

We know very little about the man, Homer, but his two most famous works were the Iliad and the Odyssey. The Iliad is a story of heroes at war. All the action takes place outside the walls of Troy at the end of the Trojan War. Homer does not seek to explain the war but instead focuses on the lives of individuals and their various trials and tribulations. The Odyssey, concerns the adventures of Odysseus (oh-DIHS-ee-uhs), a Greek hero. According to the Odyssey, Odysseus spends the ten years after the Trojan War in a series of adventures on his way home. Only through never-failing cunning is he able to survive.

Homer's tales taught Greek children the ideal called arete (AR-eh-tee), which meant to strive for excellence, to show courage, and to win fame and honor. It was believed that these were the principles by which a Greek man was to live his life. The famous battle between Achilles and Hector in the Iliad demonstrates this point when Hector chooses to fight and die rather than be seen as a coward. Greeks demonstrated arete in war but also during times of peace on the field of Olympia. These peace time competitions became known as the Olympics and began somewhere around 776 B.C. The games lasted five days and allowed athletes to demonstrate through competition honor and fame.





A bust of Homer held by the Louvre and an image of Hephaistos making Achilles armor taken from Wikimedia Commons

Greek Religion

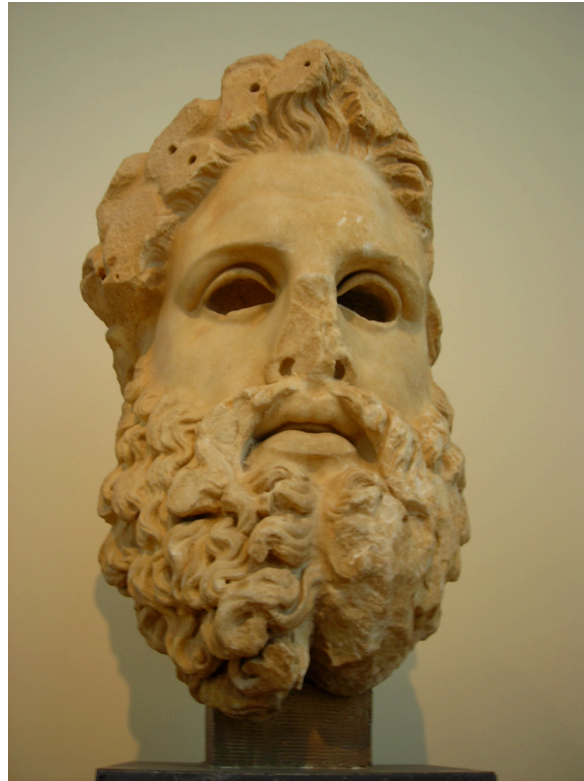
According to Homer, the most important Greek gods and goddesses lived on Mount Olympus in Northern Greece. The Greeks practiced a polytheistic religion. Their most important deities were:

- **Zeus:** King of the Gods, the ruler of Mount Olympus and the god of the sky and thunder in Greek mythology. His symbols are the thunderbolt, eagle, bull, and oak.
- **Hera:** the ancient Greek queen of heaven, a daughter of Cronus and Rhea and the wife and sister of Zeus.
- **Hades:** Oldest male child of Cronus and Rhea and brother of Zeus. According to myth he helped defeat the Titans and claimed rulership of the underworld.
- **Poseidon:** God of the sea and, as "Earth-Shaker," of earthquakes in Greek mythology.
- **Artemis:** an ancient Greek goddess, the daughter of Leto and the sister of Apollo, characterized as a virgin huntress and associated with the moon.
- **Apollo:** Recognized as a god of light and the sun; truth and prophecy; archery; medicine, healing and plague; music, poetry, and the arts; and more. Apollo is the son of Zeus and Leto, and has a twin sister, the chaste huntress Artemis.
- **Athena:** Goddess of civilization, wisdom, strength, strategy, craft, justice and skill in Greek mythology. Also known as the protector of Athens.
- **Aphrodite:** Goddess of love, beauty and sexuality.

The Greeks imagined their gods to be very much like humans in most ways. The Greek gods struggled with human passions and weaknesses - love, hate, anger, and jealousy. They quarreled constantly with one another. Their gods differed from humans in one important way, they were immortal. The Greeks developed a rich set of myths about their gods. Through these myths, Greeks sought to understand the mysteries of the natural world and the power of human emotion. They sought to receive prophecies or

predictions about the future at places called oracles. The most famous oracles was dedicated to Apollo at Delphi.

The Greeks did not develop a powerful priestly class, as the Egyptians and Sumerians did. Instead, priests in Greece were ordinary officials. Serving as a priest was not a lifelong career. Rather, it was only one of many civic duties for a Greek citizen. Thus, religion in ancient Greece was closely linked to government and civic pride. In fact, each Greek city developed its own local gods.





An early image of Zeus and the Acropolis at Athens taken from Wikimedia Commons

A Greek Renaissance: The Age of the City-state

Greek civilization emerged from the dark ages around 750 B.C. This period saw the rise of a new Greek institution called the polis or city-state. The word polis is the root for many civic-related words today. For example, police, politics, and politician are all derivatives of the word polis. A polis included a city and its surrounding countryside. Most city-states controlled between 50 and 500 square miles of territory, although the largest, Sparta, controlled about 4,000 square miles.

Most of the polis practiced a democratic form of government where all adult males were expected to participate in public matters. They held meetings in the agora or on the fortified hilltop called an acropolis (uh-KRAHP-uh-lihs). The Greeks understood that such a political system would work with only a small population and argued that the ideal polis should only have between 5,000 and 10,000 citizens. This figure did not include slaves, women, and children as they could not participate in political institutions. Therefore, the actual population of the city-state was much larger.

The polis was the central force in Greek life. Citizenship was based on the ideal of human beings as free and rational individuals. Civic decisions were made by open debate, not by a pharaoh or emperor. In Greece, the freedom to express ideas and the willingness of leaders to listen were not only acceptable but expected. Greece developed this democratic system through the dark ages. The power of the warrior kings was discredited with the collapse of their fortified cities. Power then passed to a small group of nobles within each city. This form of government was called an aristocracy. The nobility oppressed the average Greek worker and rebellions occurred. Citizens were able to defend themselves with a new type of weapon made of iron. Iron weapons were

cheaper and more readily available. These uprisings led to the development of the polis system of government.

A whole new kind of army developed as a result of the use of iron and the decline of noble based armies. Now every citizen was expected to be a soldier for his polis. Those soldiers were called hoplites and fought on foot. They stood side by side, each man with a spear in one hand and a shield in the other. As the hoplites faced their enemy, the shields formed a solid wall bristling with spears. This fearsome group of soldiers was known as a phalanx (FAY-lanks). This system protected each polis and was the most powerful fighting machine in the world.



Temples to Zeus and Hephaestus at Athens taken from Wikimedia Commons

Please watch the following video clip on the development of the Greek Polis Corinth and answer the questions included in the activity document. The video clip runs about 8 minutes.

The Rise of the Tyrants

The artisans and workers who overthrew the nobility and established the polis or city-states needed a strong central leader. They developed a ruler called a tyrant. These rulers ruled on behalf of the citizens of the polis. They were generally ambitious men who came to power during the early rebellions. Hated by the nobility, the tyrants worked to help the poor farmers and artisans. The tyrants divided the estates of the wealthy and provided the land to the poor. They also constructed great buildings, harbors, temples, and forts.

The tyrants would also expand the power of their city-state through colonies. Groups of citizens were asked to move abroad and establish a trading port on islands or the coast of Asia Minor. These colonies remained loyal to their city-state and provided an important source of wealth through trade. As the tyrant form of government developed, some city-states passed power from one tyrant to another and others became more democratic. The two city-states that provide the best examples are Sparta and Athens. A discussion of these two city-states and the Greek Classical Age will be presented in the next presentation. Complete the activities below before moving on to the next presentation.



Periandros, Tyrant of Corinth taken from Wikimedia Commons



Please stop and take this short quiz to test your knowledge to this point.

Key Elements to Remember about Ancient Greece

- The geography of Greece defined the development of its civilization.
- The structure of the Greek city-state encouraged the development of democratic traditions.
- Colonization was prompted by overpopulation and trade.
- Greeks developed a polytheistic religion. Their gods and goddesses took human form and helped to explain natural phenomena and human emotions.
- All Greek free men possessed political rights.
- The two most important city-states were Athens and Sparta. Each city developed a distinct culture.

