

Greece
World History
Kienast

Early Greece

Some of the people who settled on the Greek mainland around 2000 B.C. were later known as Mycenaeans. The name came from their leading city, Mycenae (my•SEE•nee).

Mycenae was located in southern Greece on a steep, rocky ridge and surrounded by a protective wall more than 20 feet thick. The fortified city of Mycenae could withstand almost any attack. From Mycenae, a warrior-king ruled the surrounding villages and farms. Strong rulers controlled the areas around other Mycenaean cities, such as Tiryns and Athens. These kings dominated Greece from about 1600 to 1100 B.C.

Sometime after 1500 B.C., through either trade or war, the Mycenaeans came into contact with the Minoan civilization. From their contact with the Minoans, the Mycenaeans saw the value of seaborne trade. Mycenaean traders soon sailed throughout the eastern Mediterranean, making stops at Aegean islands, coastal towns in Anatolia, and ports in Syria, Egypt, Italy, and Crete.

The Minoans also influenced the Mycenaeans in other ways. The Mycenaeans adapted the Minoan writing system to the Greek language and decorated vases with Minoan designs. The Minoan-influenced culture of Mycenae formed the core of Greek religious practice, art, politics, and literature. Indeed, Western civilization has its roots in these two early Mediterranean civilizations.

The Mycenaeans fought a ten-year war against Troy, an independent trading city located in Anatolia. According to legend, a Greek army besieged and destroyed Troy because a Trojan prince had kidnapped Helen, the beautiful wife of a Greek king.

For many years, historians thought that the legendary stories told of the Trojan War were totally fictional. However, excavations conducted in northwestern Turkey during the 1870s by German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann suggested that the stories of the Trojan War might have been based on real cities, people, and events. Further archaeological studies conducted in the 20th century support Schliemann's findings. Although the exact nature of the Trojan War remains unclear, this attack on Troy was almost certainly one of the last Mycenaean battle campaigns.

Not long after the Trojan War, Mycenaean civilization collapsed. Around 1200 B.C., sea raiders attacked and burned many Mycenaean cities. According to tradition, a new group of people, the Dorians (DAWR•ee•uhnz), moved into the war-torn countryside. The Dorians spoke a dialect of Greek and may have been distant relatives of the Bronze Age Greeks.

The Dorians were far less advanced than the Mycenaeans. The economy collapsed and trade eventually came to a standstill soon after their arrival. Most important to historians, Greeks appear to have temporarily lost the art of writing during the Dorian Age. No written record exists from the 400-year period between 1150 and 750 B.C. As a result, little is known about this period of Greek history.

Epics of Homer Lacking writing, the Greeks of this time learned about their history through the spoken word. According to tradition, the greatest storyteller was a blind man named Homer.

Little is known of his personal life. Some historians believe that Homer composed his epics, narrative poems celebrating heroic deeds, sometime between 750 and 700 B.C. The Trojan War forms the backdrop for one of Homer's great epic poems, the Iliad.

During the Dorian period, Greek civilization experienced decline. However, two things changed life in Greece. First, Dorians and Mycenaeans alike began to identify less with the culture of their ancestors and more with the local area where they lived. Second, by the end of this period, the method of governing areas had changed from tribal or clan control to more formal governments—the city-states.

Rise of the Greek City States: Athens and Sparta

By 750 B.C., the city-state, or polis, was the fundamental political unit in ancient Greece. A polis was made up of a city and its surrounding countryside, which included numerous villages. Most city-states controlled between 50 and 500 square miles of territory. They were often home to fewer than 10,000 residents. At the agora, or marketplace, or on a fortified hilltop called an acropolis (uh•KRAHP•uh•lihs), citizens gathered to discuss city government.

Greek city-states had many different forms of government. In some, a single person, called a king, ruled in a government called a monarchy. Others adopted an aristocracy (AR•ih•STAHK•ruh•see), a government ruled by a small group of noble, landowning families. These very rich families often gained political power after serving in a king's military cavalry. Later, as trade expanded, a new class of wealthy merchants and artisans emerged in some cities. When these groups became dissatisfied with aristocratic rule, they sometimes took power or shared it with the nobility. They formed an oligarchy, a government ruled by a few powerful people.

In many city-states, repeated clashes occurred between rulers and the common people. Powerful individuals, usually nobles or other wealthy citizens, sometimes seized control of the government by appealing to the common people for support. These rulers were called tyrants. Unlike today, tyrants generally were not considered harsh and cruel. Rather, they were looked upon as leaders who would work for the interests of the ordinary people. Once in power, for example, tyrants often set up building programs to provide jobs and housing for their supporters.

The idea of representative government also began to take root in some city-states, particularly Athens. Like other city-states, Athens went through power struggles between rich and poor. However, Athenians avoided major political upheavals by making timely reforms. Athenian reformers moved toward democracy, rule by the people. In Athens, citizens participated directly in political decision making.

The first step toward democracy came when a nobleman named Draco took power. In 621 B.C., Draco developed a legal code based on the idea that all Athenians, rich and poor, were equal under the law. Draco's code dealt very harshly with criminals, making death the punishment for practically every crime. It also upheld such practices as debt slavery, in which debtors worked as slaves to repay their debts.

More far-reaching democratic reforms were introduced by Solon (SO•luhn), who came to power in 594 B.C. Stating that no citizen should own another citizen, Solon outlawed debt slavery. He organized all Athenian citizens into four social classes according to wealth. Only members of the

top three classes could hold political office. However, all citizens, regardless of class, could participate in the Athenian assembly. Solon also introduced the legal concept that any citizen could bring charges against wrongdoers.

Around 500 B.C., the Athenian leader Cleisthenes (KLYS•thuh•NEEZ) introduced further reforms. He broke up the power of the nobility by organizing citizens into ten groups based on where they lived rather than on their wealth. He also increased the power of the assembly by allowing all citizens to submit laws for debate and passage. Cleisthenes then created the Council of Five Hundred. This body proposed laws and counseled the assembly. Council members were chosen by lot, or at random.

The reforms of Cleisthenes allowed Athenian citizens to participate in a limited democracy. However, citizenship was restricted to a relatively small number of Athenians. Only free adult male property owners born in Athens were considered citizens. Women, slaves, and foreigners were excluded from citizenship and had few rights.

Located in the southern part of Greece known as the Peloponnesus (PEHL•uh•puh•NEE•sus), Sparta was nearly cut off from the rest of Greece by the Gulf of Corinth. In outlook and values, Sparta contrasted sharply with the other city-states, Athens in particular. Instead of a democracy, Sparta built a military state.

Around 725 B.C., Sparta conquered the neighboring region of Messenia and took over the land. The Messenians became helots (HEHL•uhts), peasants forced to stay on the land they worked. Each year, the Spartans demanded half of the helots' crops. In about 650 B.C., the Messenians, resentful of the Spartans' harsh rule, revolted. The Spartans, who were outnumbered eight to one, just barely put down the revolt. Shocked at their vulnerability, they dedicated themselves to making Sparta a strong city-state.

Spartan government had several branches. An assembly, which was composed of all Spartan citizens, elected officials and voted on major issues. The Council of Elders, made up of 30 older citizens, proposed laws on which the assembly voted. Five elected officials carried out the laws passed by the assembly. These men also controlled education and prosecuted court cases. In addition, two kings ruled over Sparta's military forces.

The Spartan social order consisted of several groups. The first were citizens descended from the original inhabitants of the region. This group included the ruling families who owned the land. A second group, noncitizens who were free, worked in commerce and industry. The helots, at the bottom of Spartan society, were little better than slaves. They worked in the fields or as house servants.

From around 600 until 371 B.C., Sparta had the most powerful army in Greece. However, the Spartan people paid a high price for their military supremacy. All forms of individual expression were discouraged. As a result, Spartans did not value the arts, literature, or other artistic and intellectual pursuits. Spartans valued duty, strength, and discipline over freedom, individuality, beauty, and learning.

Since men were expected to serve in the army until the age of 60, their daily life centered on military training. Boys left home when they were 7 and moved into army barracks, where they stayed until they reached the age of 30. They spent their days marching, exercising, and fighting.

They undertook these activities in all weathers, wearing only light tunics and no shoes. At night, they slept without blankets on hard benches. Their daily diet consisted of little more than a bowl of coarse black porridge. Those who were not satisfied were encouraged to steal food. Such training produced tough, resourceful soldiers.

Spartan girls also led hardy lives. They received some military training, and they also ran, wrestled, and played sports. Like boys, girls were taught to put service to Sparta above everything—even love of family. A legend says that Spartan women told husbands and sons going to war to “come back with your shield or on it.” As adults, Spartan women had considerable freedom, especially in running the family estates when their husbands were on active military service. Such freedom surprised men from other Greek city-states. This was particularly true of Athens, where women were expected to remain out of sight and quietly raise children.

Danger of a helot revolt led Sparta to become a military state. Struggles between rich and poor led Athens to become a democracy. The greatest danger of all— invasion by Persian armies— moved Sparta and Athens alike to their greatest glory.

The Persian Wars

The Persian Wars, between Greece and the Persian Empire, began in Ionia on the coast of Anatolia. Greeks had long been settled there, but around 546 B.C., the Persians conquered the area. When Ionian Greeks revolted, Athens sent ships and soldiers to their aid. The Persian king Darius the Great defeated the rebels and then vowed to destroy Athens in revenge. In 490 B.C., a Persian fleet carried 25,000 men across the Aegean Sea and landed northeast of Athens on a plain called Marathon. There, 10,000 Athenians, neatly arranged in phalanxes, waited for them. Vastly outnumbered, the Greek soldiers charged. The Persians, who wore light armor and lacked training in this kind of land combat, were no match for the disciplined Greek phalanx. After several hours, the Persians fled the battlefield. The Persians lost more than 6,000 men. In contrast, Athenian casualties numbered fewer than 200.

Ten years later, in 480 B.C., Darius the Great’s son and successor, Xerxes (ZURK•seez), assembled an enormous invasion force to crush Athens. The Greeks were badly divided. Some city-states agreed to fight the Persians. Others thought it wiser to let Xerxes destroy Athens and return home. Some Greeks even fought on the Persian side. Consequently, Xerxes’ army met no resistance as it marched down the eastern coast of Greece.

When Xerxes came to a narrow mountain pass at Thermopylae (thur•MAHP•uh•lee), 7,000 Greeks, including 300 Spartans, blocked his way. Xerxes assumed that his troops would easily push the Greeks aside. However, he underestimated their fighting ability. The Greeks stopped the Persian advance for three days. Only a traitor’s informing the Persians about a secret path around the pass ended their brave stand. Fearing defeat, the Spartans held the Persians back while the other Greek forces retreated. The Spartans’ valiant sacrifice—all were killed— made a great impression on all Greeks.

Meanwhile, the Athenians debated how best to defend their city. Themistocles, an Athenian leader, convinced them to evacuate the city and fight at sea. They positioned their fleet in a narrow channel near the island of Salamis (SAL•uh•mihs), a few miles southwest of Athens.

After setting fire to Athens, Xerxes sent his warships to block both ends of the channel. However, the channel was very narrow, and the Persian ships had difficulty turning. Smaller Greek ships armed with battering rams attacked, puncturing the hulls of many Persian warships. Xerxes watched in horror as more than one-third of his fleet sank. He faced another defeat in 479 B.C., when the Greeks crushed the Persian army at the Battle of Plataea (pluh•TEE•uh). After this major setback, the Persians were always on the defensive.

The following year, several Greek city-states formed an alliance called the Delian (DEE•lee•uhn) League. (The alliance took its name from Delos, the island in the Aegean Sea where it had its headquarters.) League members continued to press the war against the Persians for several more years. In time, they drove the Persians from the territories surrounding Greece and ended the threat of future attacks.

With the Persian threat ended, all the Greek city-states felt a new sense of confidence and freedom. Athens, in particular, basked in the glory of the Persian defeat. During the 470s, Athens emerged as the leader of the Delian League, which had grown to some 200 city-states. Soon thereafter, Athens began to use its power to control the other league members. It moved the league headquarters to Athens, and used military force against members that challenged its authority. In time, these city-states became little more than provinces of a vast Athenian empire. The prestige of victory over the Persians and the wealth of the Athenian empire set the stage for a dazzling burst of creativity in Athens. The city was entering its brief golden age.

Greek Culture

The Parthenon, a masterpiece of architectural design and craftsmanship, was not unique in style. Rather, Greek architects constructed the 23,000-square-foot building in the traditional style that had been used to create Greek temples for 200 years. This temple, built to honor Athena, the goddess of wisdom and the protector of Athens, contained examples of Greek art that set standards for future generations of artists around the world. Pericles entrusted much of the work on the Parthenon to the sculptor Phidias (FIDH•ee•uhs). Within the temple, Phidias crafted a giant statue of Athena that not only contained such precious materials as gold and ivory, but also stood over 30 feet tall.

Phidias and other sculptors during this golden age aimed to create figures that were graceful, strong, and perfectly formed. Their faces showed neither joy nor anger, only serenity. Greek sculptors also tried to capture the grace of the idealized human body in motion. They wanted to portray ideal beauty, not realism. Their values of harmony, order, balance, and proportion became the standard of what is called classical art.

The Greeks invented drama as an art form and built the first theaters in the West. Theatrical productions in Athens were both an expression of civic pride and a tribute to the gods. As part of their civic duty, wealthy citizens bore the cost of producing the plays. Actors used colorful costumes, masks, and sets to dramatize stories. The plays were about leadership, justice, and the duties owed to the gods. They often included a chorus that danced, sang, and recited poetry.

Tragedy and Comedy The Greeks wrote two kinds of drama—tragedy and comedy. A tragedy was a serious drama about common themes such as love, hate, war, or betrayal. These dramas featured a main character, or tragic hero. The hero usually was an important person and often

gifted with extraordinary abilities. A tragic flaw usually caused the hero's downfall. Often this flaw was hubris, or excessive pride.

In ancient times, Greece had three notable dramatists who wrote tragedies. Aeschylus (EHS•kuh•luhs) wrote more than 80 plays. His most famous work is the trilogy—a three-play series—Oresteia (ohr•res•TEE•uh). It is based on the family of Agamemnon, the Mycenaean king who commanded the Greeks at Troy. The plays examine the idea of justice. Sophocles (SAHF•uh•kleez) wrote more than 100 plays, including the tragedies Oedipus the King and Antigone. Euripides (yoo•RIP•uh•DEEZ), author of the play Medea, often featured strong women in his works.

In contrast to Greek tragedies, a comedy contained scenes filled with slapstick situations and crude humor. Playwrights often made fun of politics and respected people and ideas of the time. Aristophanes (AR•ih•STAHF•uh•neeZ) wrote the first great comedies for the stage, including *The Birds* and *Lysistrata*. *Lysistrata* portrayed the women of Athens forcing their husbands to end the Peloponnesian War. The fact that Athenians could listen to criticism of themselves showed the freedom and openness of public discussion that existed in democratic Athens.

After a war called the Peloponnesian War, many Athenians lost confidence in democratic government and began to question their values. In this time of uncertainty, several great thinkers appeared. They were determined to seek the truth, no matter where the search led them. The Greeks called such thinkers philosophers, meaning “lovers of wisdom.”

One of the greatest philosophers was Socrates (SAHK•ruh•TEEZ). He encouraged Greeks to go farther and question themselves and their moral character. Historians believe that it was Socrates who once said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Socrates was admired by many who understood his ideas. However, others were puzzled by this man's viewpoints.

In 399 B.C., when Socrates was about 70 years old, he was brought to trial for “corrupting the youth of Athens” and “neglecting the city's gods.” In his own defense, Socrates said that his teachings were good for Athens because they forced people to think about their values and actions. The jury disagreed and condemned him to death. He died by drinking hemlock, a slow-acting poison.

A student of Socrates, Plato (PLAY•toh), was in his late 20s when his teacher died. Later, Plato wrote down the conversations of Socrates “as a means of philosophical investigation.” Sometime in the 370s B.C., Plato wrote his most famous work, *The Republic*. In it, he set forth his vision of a perfectly governed society. It was not a democracy. In his ideal society, all citizens would fall naturally into three groups: farmers and artisans, warriors, and the ruling class. The person with the greatest insight and intellect from the ruling class would be chosen philosopher-king. Plato's writings dominated philosophic thought in Europe for nearly 1,500 years. His only rivals in importance were his teacher, Socrates, and his own pupil, Aristotle (AR•ih•STAHT•uhl).

Aristotle The philosopher Aristotle questioned the nature of the world and of human belief, thought, and knowledge. Aristotle came close to summarizing all the knowledge up to his time. He invented a method for arguing according to rules of logic. He later applied his method to problems in the fields of psychology, physics, and biology. His work provides the basis of the scientific method used today.

One of Aristotle's most famous pupils was Alexander, son of King Philip II of Macedonia. Around 343 B.C., Aristotle accepted the king's invitation to tutor the 13-year-old prince. Alexander's status as a student abruptly ended three years later, when his father called him back to Macedonia. You will learn more about Alexander in Section 4.

The Peloponnesian War

As Athens grew in wealth, prestige, and power, other city-states began to view it with hostility. Ill will was especially strong between Sparta and Athens. Many people thought that war between the two was inevitable. Instead of trying to avoid conflict, leaders in Athens and Sparta pressed for a war to begin, as both groups of leaders believed their own city had the advantage. Eventually, Sparta declared war on Athens in 431 B.C.

When the Peloponnesian War between the two city-states began, Athens had the stronger navy. Sparta had the stronger army, and its location inland meant that it could not easily be attacked by sea. Pericles' strategy was to avoid land battles with the Spartan army and wait for an opportunity to strike Sparta and its allies from the sea.

Eventually, the Spartans marched into Athenian territory. They swept over the countryside, burning the Athenian food supply. Pericles responded by bringing residents from the surrounding region inside the city walls. The city was safe from hunger as long as ships could sail into port with supplies from Athenian colonies and foreign states.

In the second year of the war, however, disaster struck Athens. A frightful plague swept through the city, killing perhaps one-third of the population, including Pericles. Although weakened, Athens continued to fight for several years. Then, in 421 B.C., the two sides, worn down by the war, signed a truce.

The peace did not last long. In 415 B.C., the Athenians sent a huge fleet carrying more than 20,000 soldiers to the island of Sicily. Their plan was to destroy the city-state of Syracuse, one of Sparta's wealthiest allies. The expedition ended with a crushing defeat in 413 B.C.