

The Greek World

Where Western civilization began

Ancient Greece is called 'the birthplace of Western civilization'. About 2500 years ago, the Greeks created a way of life that other people admired and copied. The Romans copied Greek art and Greek gods, for example. The Ancient Greeks tried out *democracy*, started the *Olympic Games* and left new ideas in science, art and philosophy (thinking about life).

The Ancient Greeks lived in mainland Greece and the Greek islands, but also in what is now Turkey, and in *colonies* scattered around the Mediterranean sea coast. There were Greeks in Italy, Sicily, North Africa and as far west as France. Sailing the sea to trade and find new land, Greeks took their way of life to many places.

What was ancient Greece like?

Ancient Greece had a warm, dry climate, as Greece does today. People lived by farming, fishing, and trade. Some were soldiers. Others were *scholars*, scientists or artists. Most Greeks lived in villages or in small cities. There were beautiful *temples* with stone *columns* and statues, and open-air theatres where people sat to watch plays.

Many Greeks were poor. Life was hard because farmland, water and timber for building were all scarce. That's why many Greeks sailed off to find new lands to settle.

How Greece was ruled

There was not one country called "Ancient Greece." Instead, there were small '*city-states*'. Each city-state had its own government. Sometimes the city-states fought one another, sometimes they joined together against a bigger enemy, the *Persian Empire*. *Athens*, *Sparta*, *Corinth* and *Olympia* were four of these city-states. Only a very powerful ruler could control all Greece. One man did in the 300s BC. He was Alexander

the Great, from *Macedonia*. Alexander led his army to conquer not just Greece but an empire that reached as far as Afghanistan and India.

When did Greek civilization begin?

About 3000 BC, there lived on the island of Crete a people now called Minoans. The name comes from their King Minos. Minos and other Minoan kings grew rich from trade, and built fine palaces. The Minoan civilization ended about 1450 BC.

After the Minoans came the Myceneans. They were soldiers from mainland Greece, and were the Greeks who fought *Troy* in the 1200s BC. After the Mycenean age ended, about 1100 BC, Greece entered a "Dark Age". This lasted until the 800s BC when the Greeks set off by sea to explore and set up *colonies*.

The *Olympic Games* began in 776 BC. This was the start of "Archaic" Greek civilization.

Around 480 BC the "golden age" of Greece began. This is what *historians* call "Classical" Greece.

Growing up in Greece

Sons and daughters

Many Greek parents wanted boy children. A son would look after his parents in old age. A daughter went away when she married, and had to take a wedding gift or dowry. This could be expensive, if a family had lots of daughters.

A father could decide whether or not the family kept a new baby. Unwanted or weak babies were sometimes left to die outdoors. Anyone finding an abandoned baby could adopt it and take it home, perhaps to raise it as *aslave*. If a couple were rich, they might hire a poor neighbour or a slave to nurse a new baby.

Going to school

At 3, children were given small jugs - a sign that babyhood was over. Boys went to school at age 7. Girls were taught at home by their mothers. A few girls learned to read and write, but many did not. School-teachers needed payment, so poor boys did not get much education. A wealthy family sent a *slave* to walk to school with the boys. The slave stayed at school to keep an eye on them during lessons. Most Greek schools had fewer than 20 boys, and classes were often held outdoors.

What did Greek children learn?

Girls learned housework, cooking and skills such as weaving at home. Boys at school learned reading, writing, arithmetic, music and poetry. They wrote on wooden tablets covered with soft wax, using a pointed stick called a stylus. They used an *abacus*, with beads strung on wires or wooden rods, to help with maths.

Part of their lessons included learning stories and poems by heart.

Boys did athletics, to keep fit and prepare them for war as soldiers. They ran, jumped, wrestled and practised throwing a spear and a *discus*. They trained on a sports ground called a gymnasium.

Children's toys

We know about some Greek toys from pictures on *pottery* vases and from *artefacts* found by *archaeologists*. Children played with small pottery figures, and dolls made of rags, wood, wax or clay - some dolls had moveable arms and legs. Other toys were rattles, hoops, hoops, yo-yos, and hobby horses (a "pretend horse" made from a stick).

Children played with balls made from tied-up rags or a blown-up pig's bladder. The ankle-bones of sheep or goats made 'knucklebones' or five-stones. There are pictures of children with pets, such as dogs, geese and chickens.

Marriage and work

Most girls were only 13-16 years old when they married. Often their fathers chose husbands for them. A girl's husband was often older, in his 30s. The day before she married, a girl *sacrificed* her toys to the goddess Artemis, to show she was grown-up.

Most boys had to work hard. They worked as farmers, sailors, fishermen and craftworkers - such as potters, builders, metalworkers and stone-carvers. Some clever boys went on studying. Teachers gave classes to older students. *Aristotle*, who became a great scientist and thinker, went to *Athens* when he was 17 to study at the Academy, run by a famous teacher named *Plato*.

Athens

Why Athens was great

Athens was the largest city in Greece, and controlled a region called *Attica*. Between the many mountains were fertile valleys, with many farms. Athens became rich because Attica also had valuable sources of silver, lead and marble. Athens also had the biggest navy in Greece.

Athens was a beautiful and busy city. People came to the city from all over Greece, and from other countries, to study and to trade. The city's most famous building was the *temple* called the *Parthenon*. It stood on a rocky hill called the *Acropolis*. Inside the Parthenon stood a statue of the city's protector-goddess *Athena*.

People power

In the early 500s BC a new way of government was invented in *Athens*. It was "*democracy*" or "rule by the people". Not everyone had a vote though. Only a male *citizen* had a say in how the city was run. There were about 30,000 citizens. The ruling Council had 500 members, all men, and chosen for a year at a time. Women could not be citizens, nor could *slaves* or foreigners.

The citizens met to vote on new laws put forward by the Council. Usually around 5,000 citizens met, every 10 days or so on a hill called the Pnyx. In Athens, you can still see the stones of this historic meeting place.

Guilty or not guilty?

Athens had law courts with trial by *jury*. Juries were larger than the ones we have today - 500 *citizens* normally, but sometimes more. There were no lawyers, so people spoke in their own defense. After listening to the evidence, jurors voted by placing metal discs into one of two jars - one for guilty, one for not guilty. Punishments included the *death penalty*. Speeches were timed by a water-clock.

Citizens also voted to get rid of *politicians* they did not like. They wrote the name of the person they hated on a piece of broken *pottery*, called an ostrakon. Any politician who got more than 600 votes was banished from the city of 10 years.

Slaves

Of the 250,000 to 300,000 people in *Athens* (at its biggest), between a quarter and a third of them were *slaves*. Some slaves were captured in wars. Others were born slaves. Some people were forced into slavery when they could not afford to pay money they owed. Some slaves were owned by the state, like slave-*archers* from *Scythia*, who were used as "police" by the Athens government.

A few slaves had special skills, such as nurses, teachers, or *pottery* painters. Most slaves did the hardest and most unpleasant jobs. A lucky slave might save enough money to buy his freedom.

Life in Athens

Athens had yearly festivals for athletics, drama and religious occasions. The city taxes paid some of the cost, but rich *citizens* had to pay

extra. Important people in Athens were the strategoi, who were ten generals chosen from each of the ten "tribes" of citizens. There were also nine archons. Their jobs were mostly ceremonial, to do with festivals and family matters. One of the archons had to organize the Dionysia Festival, for the god Dionysos, every year. It was a time for fun, wine-drinking, parties and plays.

Every man aged 20 to 50 or more could be "called up" for military service. A rich man might have to serve as captain of a warship for a year. He paid the crew and made repairs.

The Olympic Games

The *Olympic Games* began over 2,700 years ago in Olympia, in southwest Greece. The Games were part of a religious festival. The Greek Olympics, thought to have begun in 776 BC, inspired the modern Olympic Games (begun in 1896) The Games were held in honor of *Zeus*, king of the gods, and were staged every four years at Olympia, a valley near a city called Elis. People from all over the Greek world came to watch and take part.

The statue of Zeus

Visitors to Olympia stared in wonder as they entered the great *Temple of Zeus*. Inside was a huge statue of the king of the gods, sitting on a throne. People called it one of the Seven Wonders of the World. The statue was covered in gold and ivory, and was six times bigger than a man. It was built about 435 BC, and no one who made the trip to Olympia missed seeing it.

The Greek gods

The Greeks believed that gods and goddesses watched over them. The gods were like humans, but immortal (they lived for ever) and much more powerful.

A family of gods and goddesses lived in a cloud-palace above Mount Olympus, the highest

mountain in Greece The gods looked down to watch what people were doing, and from time to time, interfered with what went on.

The gods did not always behave very well. Their king, *Zeus*, was always being unfaithful to his wife Hera. He appeared on Earth as a human or an animal to trick women he had fallen in love with.

Zeus and his family

Zeus was king of the gods. He threw thunderbolts to punish anyone who disobeyed him. His brother Poseidon was god of the sea. Another brother, Pluto (also called Hades), ruled the underworld.

Zeus had many children, among them Apollo, Artemis, *Athena* and Ares. Apollo was the sun god, and the god of the arts, medicine, music and poetry. His twin sister Artemis was goddess of the moon, and goddess of childbirth, and of all natural things. She is often shown as a hunter with a bow and arrow. Athena was goddess of wisdom, and of crafts such as spinning, weaving and *pottery*. Ares was the bad-tempered god of war - not even his own father liked him!

Greek heroes

All Greeks loved stories about adventures and brave heroes. A hero was someone like Perseus. He killed the *Gorgon* Medusa, whose gaze turned people to stone. Perseus used his *shield* as a mirror, so he saw only her reflection - and was not turned to stone. Perseus also rescued a princess named Andromeda from a sea serpent - by using Medusa's head to turn the monster to stone!

The most famous Greek hero was Heracles (the *Romans* called him Hercules). *Zeus* was his father, and he was so strong he could kill a lion with his bare hands. He sailed with Jason and the Argonauts to find the Golden Fleece, and performed 12 "impossible" tasks, and was only killed by a trick - he put on a poisoned robe. Zeus liked Heracles so much he took the dead

hero to Mount Olympus to live for ever with the gods.