

Early Greek Civilizations

The Impact of Geography

Compared with Mesopotamia and Egypt, Greece is a small peninsula. It is made up of small plains and river valleys surrounded by high mountains. The mountains influenced Greek history, because they separated Greeks from each other. This caused different Greek communities to develop their own ways of life. The small size of these communities encouraged people to be involved in politics. But the rivalries between the communities led to constant warfare. The seas also influenced Greek history. Greece has a long sea coast with many harbors, so the Greeks became seafarers. Greeks also lived on many islands off the Greek mainland. They sailed into the Aegean Sea, the Mediterranean and the Black Seas. They later established colonies that spread Greek civilization throughout the Mediterranean world.

1. How did geography affect Greece?
2. How and why did rivalries develop between communities?

The Minoan Civilization

By 2800 BCE, a Bronze Age civilization existed on the large island of Crete, southeast of the Greek mainland. It was called the Minoan civilization and it flourished between 2000 and 1450 BCE. Remains of a huge palace complex revealed the rich culture of the Minoans. The palace contained vases, ivory figurines, and jewelry. The rooms were decorated with paintings that showed sporting events and nature scenes. Storerooms held gigantic jars of oil, wine and grain. The Minoans were traders, and their ships took them to places like Egypt and southern Greece.

The Minoan civilization of Crete was destroyed around 1450 BCE. Some historians believe that a tidal wave triggered by a volcanic eruption was responsible. Most historians, however, believe that the destruction was the result of an invasion by mainland Greeks called Mycenaeans.

1. What are some characteristics of the Minoan civilization?
2. How was the civilization destroyed?

The Mycenaean's

Mycenaean's come from a fortified Greek city that was known to be very powerful. This civilization flourished between 1600 and 1100 BCE. The Mycenaeans were part of the Indo-European peoples. Over time, they gained control of Greece and developed a civilization. The Mycenaean civilization was made up of powerful monarchies. These monarchies were independent of each other, but they probably formed a loose alliance. Each monarch lived in a fortified palace center. These centers were built on hills and were surrounded by gigantic walls. The royal families lived inside the walls, while the rest of the population lived outside of them.

The Mycenaeans were warrior and they took pride in their heroic deeds in battle. Mycenaean paintings often show wars and battles. They also developed a trade network. Throughout the trade network, the Mycenaeans conquered small islands off the mainland. We know much about the Mycenaeans from the poems by Homer. But by the late 13th century Mycenae began to decline, from invasions to natural disasters, the civilization fell in 1100 BCE.

1. What were some strengths of the Mycenaean civilization?
2. How did the civilization fall?

Greek Dark Ages

Around 1200 BCE, the Dorians had begun their conquests to overrun Greece. They came from north of Greece and spoke a different dialect than the Mycenaeans. They dominated the remaining Mycenaeans and then began to conquer more of Greece. Places like Ithaca, Lesbos, Crete, and many other Greek islands fell to the Dorians. These invasions forced many Greeks to leave their lands and flee to Asia Minor and other surrounding areas.

The Dorian invasions destroyed the cohesion and prosperity of Greece. There was a sharp drop in agricultural production and in population. Greek cities became villages, and writing declined and was eventually lost. Trade between Greece and elsewhere disappeared as the Dorian Greeks had no desire for contact with foreign people, believing that beyond them lived only strange people and monsters.

1. Why was the period known as the Dark Ages of Greece?

The Rise of City-States

The fall of the Mycenaean civilization brought a period of chaos and decline. Then the Dorian Greeks controlled Greece from 1100 to 800 BCE. While under the Dorians, knowledge and writing were completely wiped out. It was a wonder that Greek culture did not die out completely during this period. As a result of the Dorian period, some Greeks left the mainland to settle in colonies on the small islands of Greece and Asia Minor. This helped spread Greek culture.

During the Dorian period, the Greeks developed the political unit which would characterize their classical age: the *polis*, or city-state. Each *polis* consisted of a city and surrounding lands, both under the same government. Greek geography contributed to the rise of *poleis*. A mountainous terrain dotted by valleys, it was an ideal environment for the development of small, isolated city-states. Gradually Athens and Sparta emerged as the most prominent city-states.

Geography further determined the livelihood of the *poleis*. The jagged coastline of the Greek mainland left each *polis* only a few miles from the sea, which promoted trade. The Greeks took to the sea to trade their wine and olive oil in exchange for grains, timber and luxury goods. The rugged terrain of Greece left little land suitable for cultivation; fishing supplemented the diet of the Greeks. Geography also limited the population of the city-states. Because of these limitations the Greeks crossed the Mediterranean to establish colonies on the shores of the Black Sea and Asia Minor. This helped spread Greek culture throughout the Mediterranean world. In addition, trade brought the Greeks into contact with the Phoenicians. From the Phoenicians the Greeks borrowed and modified their alphabet to fit Greek culture. The writings of Homer, *The Iliad*, and *The Odyssey* that followed described many Greek gods and characteristics of Greek society.

1. What is a city-state? How did they develop?
2. How did the Greeks adapt to their geographic features?