

# GREEK CULTURE

## LOCATION

Today more than ten million people live in Greece, the southeastern most region of Europe. Greece is a peninsular country located between Albania and Turkey, surrounded by all sides, except the North, by water (the Aegean Sea, Ionian Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea).

In ancient times, the Greek world spread far beyond Greece itself. Greeks established many colonies on the coast of Mediterranean and Black seas and, during the Hellenistic period, their empire reached as far as East India.

## HISTORY

The earliest settlements in Greece took place roughly between 10,000 and 3,000 B.C. The first people to inhabit Greece came from the Near East and from Central Europe. Greeks soon developed sea trade across the Aegean Sea to Anatolia and the Near-East. At first, Crete became the prominent political and economic center of the Greek world. The Minoans who lived on Crete expanded sea-trade, venturing as far as Western Spain.

However, a severe earthquake destroyed the power of the Minoans and the rival Mycenaean civilization took control of Crete's Mediterranean commerce. Mycenaean society was mainly based on chiefdoms: a number of small units organized around a palace, the residency of a chief. These residencies were centers of economic and military power.

When they lost power, the Dark Ages followed; during the Dark Ages people migrated to different areas and the population greatly declined. The art of writing was also lost. In this period most people lived in small communities in remote places and lived by means of farming. Most trade and contacts with cultures in the Near East and elsewhere nearly disappeared.

Around the 900 B.C. agricultural production improved and the population began to grow again. Trade with the Near East returned. During this time the Greeks adopted the alphabet of the Phoenicians. It was in this period that the concept of the "polis" (city-state) began to evolve. Aristocratic clans replaced chiefdoms. Greek settlements became city-states, ruled by a council and a king. The Greeks founded colonies in many parts of the Mediterranean Basin and the Black Sea. More than 150 colonies were established along the coast of Northern Greece, in the Bosphorus and on the Black Sea coast. This influence is clearly present even today.

When Alexander the Great invaded Asia Minor, Egypt and Mesopotamia, he established the largest empire ever seen. After his death, a power struggle divided the empire into several parts. The time period after Alexander the Great's death became known as the Hellenistic Age. The Hellenistic kingdoms combined elements of Greek culture with Near-East cultures. Greek language became widely used.

In the fourth century B.C., military conquests in central Italy brought Rome into direct competition with the city colonies of Magna Graecia in Southern Italy. After a long period of warfare, the Greeks fell to Romans in 31 B.C.. Greek states and colonies became part of the Roman Empire. Romans admired Greek culture and were deeply influenced by it. Many elements of Greek religion were adopted by the Romans. Latin and Greek became the dominant languages of the empire.

The modern Greek nation came into existence as a result of a long bloody war against the Ottoman Empire (Turkey) early in the nineteenth century. The Greek were supported in this struggle by the major Central European states and Greece became an independent under the protection (and the influence) of Britain, France and Russia.

## RELIGION

Greeks believed in individualism and were keen observers of the differences in personality and character. They were fascinated by the contradiction that characterizes human life: those very virtues that made a person great that could also lead to one's undoing. Their myths and religion reflect these traits. Their gods often had superhuman strength; many of them were heroic, wise and loving. Yet, like humans, they all made mistakes and were victims of emotions such as jealousy, rage, fear and revenge. Gods and goddesses lived high a top Mount Olympus and were called the Olympians.

Religion provided the context for almost all communal activity throughout the history of ancient Greece. Sports, as in the Olympic Games held to honor Zeus, took place in the religious context of festivals honoring specific gods. Sacrifices, the main aspect of Greek religious rituals, were performed before crowds in the open air. These were

occasions that involved communal feasting afterward on the sacrificed meat. The basis of Greek religion was found in myths (mythos, a Greek word meaning "story" or "tale") about the gods and their relationship to humans.

By the second century AD, Christianity and Hellenism came into close contact in the eastern Mediterranean. In the following centuries, Christian religion became the major Greek religion.

### **SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS**

The many bays and natural harbors in the Mediterranean allowed the Greeks to develop maritime commerce and a culture that was inspired by many outside sources. The mountains across the region served as natural barriers and boundaries which dictated the political character of Greece. From early times, a number of independent communities were formed that lived quite isolated from one another. Gradually, these communities evolved into larger and more complex societies, which led to the creation of the city-state. These are communities formed around an urban center. The city-states are the first example of societies in which large part of the population took part in political activities and decisions.

However, even in Athens, the city-state which had adopted the most democratic form of government, there was much inequality among different categories of people. Greek women were not allowed to participate in politics. Women citizens could not represent themselves in court and had to have men speak for them. The position of slaves and foreigners in Greek society was even worse than that of female citizens. The slaves were usually non-Greek people who had been captured in war, or had been seized by pirates. The Greek called all foreigners who did not speak the Greek language "barbarians" (people whose speech sounded to Greeks like the repetition of the meaningless sound "bar, bar"). Greeks also enslaved fellow Greeks, who were defeated in war. Some slaves, however, enjoyed a certain amount of independence. They worked as public slaves, and were owned by the city-state instead of an individual

Today, Greece (or Hellenic Republic as it is also named) is a parliamentary democracy, and a member-state of the European Union. The long coastlines, the many islands, and the important archeological sites make tourism a key industry that employs many people. Other economic activities are food and tobacco processing, textiles, metallurgy, mining and petroleum. The main agricultural products are wheat, corn, sugar beats, olives, tomatoes, wine, tobacco, potatoes, beef, and dairy products. The majority of the Greek population are Christians (Greek Orthodox Church), though there is a minority that is Islamic.

### **CULTURE:**

The traditional activities for men in ancient Greece were arts and crafts, construction, agriculture, sea faring, manufacturing and trade. Agriculture was the most common activity, since the majority of citizens in all Greek states depended on the land for their basic income. Greeks were also heavily involved in trade (both over land and sea), and exported a number of goods (including marble, ivory, timber, other metals, textiles, wool, fruit and vegetables, dried fish, cheeses, spices, wine, and oil). Politics was also exclusively a man's activity.

Since men spent most of their time outside the home, women dominated Greek home life. Women supervised the daily running of the household and were in charge of raising children, spinning, weaving and sewing the family clothes. In a slave-based economy, many female slaves were available to cook, clean and carry water from the wells. Sometimes, a slave's responsibility also included the tutoring of the children. Only women from poor families were expected to carry out these duties themselves.

Greeks felt that the education of their children was very important. Formal education in school in ancient Athens was at first limited to aristocratic boys. By the 4th century B.C., all 18-year-old males spent two years in a state school devoted to the overall physical and intellectual development of a young man. More advanced education in philosophy, mathematics, logic and rhetoric was available to the aristocracy in special schools like the Academy of the philosopher Plato and the Lyceum of the philosopher Aristotle. Although girls in ancient Greece received no formal education in the literary arts, many of them were taught to read and to write informally in the home.

The richness of Greek's cultural world has left a long-lasting influence on western culture and beyond. Still today, ancient Greece's poets and philosophers are widely read by students all over the world.

