

Groundbreaking Greeks

Ancient Greek lands were made up of the Greek mainland, surrounding islands and Greek colonies across the Mediterranean Sea. Ancient Greece was almost entirely surrounded by sea, and the mountains on the mainland made travelling by land difficult.



Significant periods of Greek history

Ancient Greek history can be divided into seven main periods or civilisations: Neolithic, Minoan civilisation, Mycenaean civilisation, Dark Age, Archaic period, Classical period and Hellenistic period. Greece is often referred to as the birthplace of Western civilisation because of the advances that its people made in politics, science, mathematics, philosophy, literature and art.

Minoan civilisation

The Minoan civilisation existed between c3000 BC and c1100 BC on the Greek island of Crete. At the civilisation's peak, around 10,000 people lived in 90 cities. As Europe's first developed civilisation, the Minoans lived in towns with roads, wells and a basic sewerage system. They were capable farmers and skilled craftspeople. Their architects oversaw the building of palaces. They were also skilled in making pottery. They traded goods, such as olive oil, pottery and cloth. The Minoans also used an early writing system known as Linear A.



Reconstruction of the palace of Knossos

Mycenaean civilisation

The Mycenaean civilisation existed between c1600 BC and c1100 BC on the Greek mainland. They took control of Crete in c1450 BC. The Mycenaean were excellent warriors. They invaded and settled in areas around the Mediterranean Sea and developed trade links with Egypt, Cyprus and many Greek islands. The Mycenaean chiefs lived in palaces within fortified hilltop citadels. The Mycenaean people were influenced by the Minoans. They developed the Minoan Linear A script into Linear B and were the first people to speak the Greek language.



Artist's impression of the citadel at Mycenae

Dark Age and Archaic period

In c1100 BC, the Minoan and Mycenaean civilisations collapsed and society began to decline. Greece entered its Dark Age. Many people left Greece and skills, including writing, were lost. The few remaining people lived in small family groups and reared livestock for food. They also began to mine iron to make spears and tools. Then, around 800 BC, Greece entered the Archaic period. This was characterised by the re-emergence of society, government, art and architecture. A new alphabet was devised, the population grew, city states developed and the first Olympic Games were held.

Classical period

The Classical period started in c500 BC and ended in 323 BC. It is known as the golden age of ancient Greece because many discoveries and advancements were made. People in the Classical period believed in gods and mythology from earlier periods, although philosophers and scientists at the time began to challenge those beliefs. Their architecture featured symmetrical designs and columns. Like the Minoans and Mycenaean before them, people in Classical Greece established trade links both within Greece and with surrounding countries.



Aerial view of the Acropolis

City states

During the Classical period, ancient Greece was a collection of city states, rather than one united country. Each city state, known as a polis, included a city and its surrounding villages, farms and land. Each city state had its own government and hierarchy, although they spoke the same language and followed the same religion. The design of each city was also similar. They all had a connection to the sea for trade and transport, outer walls for protection, a variety of buildings inside the city walls and an acropolis built on a hill. Despite similarities and trade links between the city states, they were often at war with each other in a bid to gain power and land.

Family life and social class

In ancient Greece, class and gender determined the roles people could play in society and at home. Only male citizens were allowed to vote and make decisions. Below them in society came men called metics, who were not citizens and lastly, slaves. Men worked as politicians, landowners, artists, architects, sculptors, scientists and scholars. Women were expected to run the home, bring up the children, supervise the slaves and make clothing. They were not allowed to own land, vote or take part in politics.

Significant people

Ancient Greece is known for its many great thinkers, including philosophers, political leaders, scientists, mathematicians, historians and writers.

Pythagoras (c580–c500 BC) was a philosopher and mathematician. He developed a method to help people to calculate the longest side of a right-angled triangle.

Cleisthenes (c570–c508 BC) was a political leader in Athens. He developed the first democratic system.

Pericles (c495–429 BC) was a political leader in Athens. He ordered the construction of the Acropolis and Parthenon.

Socrates (c470–c399 BC) was a great philosopher. He used questions to help people to examine their knowledge and beliefs.

Hippocrates (c460–c375 BC) was a doctor. He carried out medical research and became known as the 'father of medicine'.

Plato (c427–c347 BC) was a philosopher and student of Socrates. He founded the first university in Athens.

Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) was a military leader. He expanded Greece's territory to create the ancient world's largest empire.

