

Geography and the Early Greeks

Geography Shapes Greek Civilization:

The Greeks developed one of the greatest ancient civilizations in the world's history. However, the land where they settled was challenging. The Greeks lived on rocky, mountainous land surrounded by water. They lived on a **peninsula**, an area of land surrounded by water on three sides. The Greek peninsula is also surrounded by thousands of small islands.

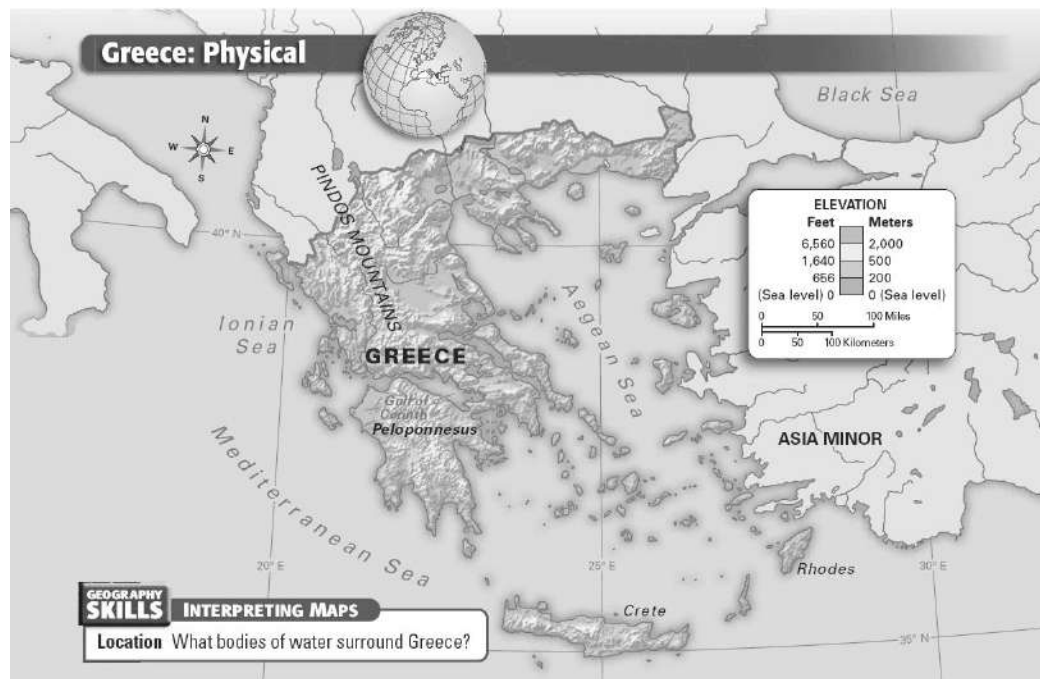
The Greek peninsula itself is dominated by mountains that run almost all the way to the sea. Just a few small valleys and coastal plains provide flat land for farming and villages. Despite the difficult conditions, the Greeks established a great culture.

Mountains and Settlements:

Because mountains cover much of Greece, there are only a few flat areas for farmland. People soon started to live in those small flat areas where they could grow crops. They set up villages that were separated from each other by mountains and seas.

Traveling across the mountains and seas was very difficult, so communities were far apart from one another. Because they were isolated from each other, the people created their own different ways of life. Even though they all spoke the same language, Greek communities saw themselves as individual countries.

Two of the earliest groups of people to live in the Greek lands were the Minoans and the Mycenaeans.



The Minoans:

The Minoans lived on an island called Crete, just south of the Greek mainland. Because they lived on an island, the Minoans spent much of their time at sea. They were among the best shipbuilders of their time. Minoan ships carried goods such as wood, olive oil, and pottery all around the eastern Mediterranean. They traded these goods for copper, gold, silver, and other jewels.

Although Crete's location was excellent for Minoan traders, it was sometimes dangerous. Sometime in the late 1600SBCE, a huge volcano erupted just north of the island. This eruption created a giant wave that flooded much of Crete. In addition, the eruption threw up huge clouds of ash, ruining crops and burying cities. This eruption probably led to the end of the Minoan civilization.

Although they lived in what is now Greece and influenced Greek society, historians don't consider the Minoans to be Greek. This is because the Minoans didn't speak the Greek language. The first people to speak Greek, and therefore the first to be considered Greek, were the Mycenaeans.

The Mycenaeans:

At the same time the Minoans were sailing around the Mediterranean Sea, the Mycenaeans were building fortresses on the Greek mainland. The largest and most powerful fortress was Mycenae, after which the Mycenaeans are named.

By the mid-1400SBCE, Minoan society had declined, and the Mycenaeans took over Crete and became the most powerful group of people in the eastern Mediterranean. They set up towns as far away as northern Greece and Italy where they were able to trade their goods.

The Mycenaeans did not think trade had to be done peacefully. They often attacked other people. Some historians think the Mycenaeans attacked the city of Troy, possibly starting the legendary Trojan War, which is featured in many books and movies today.

Mycenaean culture began to fall apart in the 1200SBCE when invaders from Central Asia came into Greece. At the same time, earthquakes destroyed many Mycenaean cities. As Mycenaean civilization crumbled, Greece fell into a time of war and confusion; a period called the Dark Age. During this time period (which lasted almost 300 years), the Greeks left no written records. Everything we know about this time period comes only from archaeological findings.

Greeks Create City-States:

About 300 years after the Mycenaean civilization fell, the Greeks started to join into small groups for protection. Gradually, these groups set up separate villages, which later became city-states. The Greek word for a city-state is **polis**. The creation of city-states marks the beginning of what is known as Greece's Classical Age. A **Classical Age** is an age that is marked by great achievements.

Life in a City-State:

A Greek city-state was usually built around a strong fortress. This fortress often stood on top of a high hill called an **acropolis**. The town around this acropolis was usually surrounded by walls for more protection.

Not everyone who lived in the city-state actually lived inside the city walls. For example, farmers usually lived outside the walls where they could farm easier. In times of war though, women, children, and elderly people all moved inside the walls for protection. They remained safe while the men of the polis formed an army to fight off the enemies.

Life in the city usually centered on the marketplace, or **agora** in Greek. Farmers brought their crops to the market to trade. Craftspeople brought their creations to the markets as well. Because it was a large open space, the market also served as a meeting place. People held both government meetings and religious services in the market.

The city-state became the foundation of Greek civilization. Besides providing security for its people, the city gave them an identity. People thought of themselves as residents of a city, not as Greeks. Because the city-state was so important to them, the Greeks expected everyone to participate in making the city a better place.