

## A Historical Overview of Greece



Greece is located on a peninsula jutting out into the Mediterranean Sea. The Aegean Sea is to the east and the Ionian Sea is to the west. A thin strip of land connects Greece's northern mainland to the Peloponnesus, which is another name for southern Greece. Here the climate and land are poor for farming, but this location is perfect for seafaring—the Greeks have always been excellent fishermen and sailors.

Around 2000 B.C., a tribe called Mycenaeans settled in the Peloponnesus. In 1194 B.C., they attacked the city of Troy on the eastern coast of the Aegean Sea. This began the Trojan War. A blind poet named Homer recorded the deeds of the heroes

of the Trojan War in the *Illiad*. Homer's other famous epic poem, the *Odyssey*, told the adventures of a Trojan War hero as he traveled home to Greece after the war.

Ancient Greeks believed many gods and goddesses controlled the world and lived in the sky on Mt. Olympus.

The mountains and valleys on the mainland of Greece isolated people from each other and caused them to form their own city-states. Everyone thought that their city-state was the best. The Greeks' pride in their own city-state kept them from uniting into a strong country.

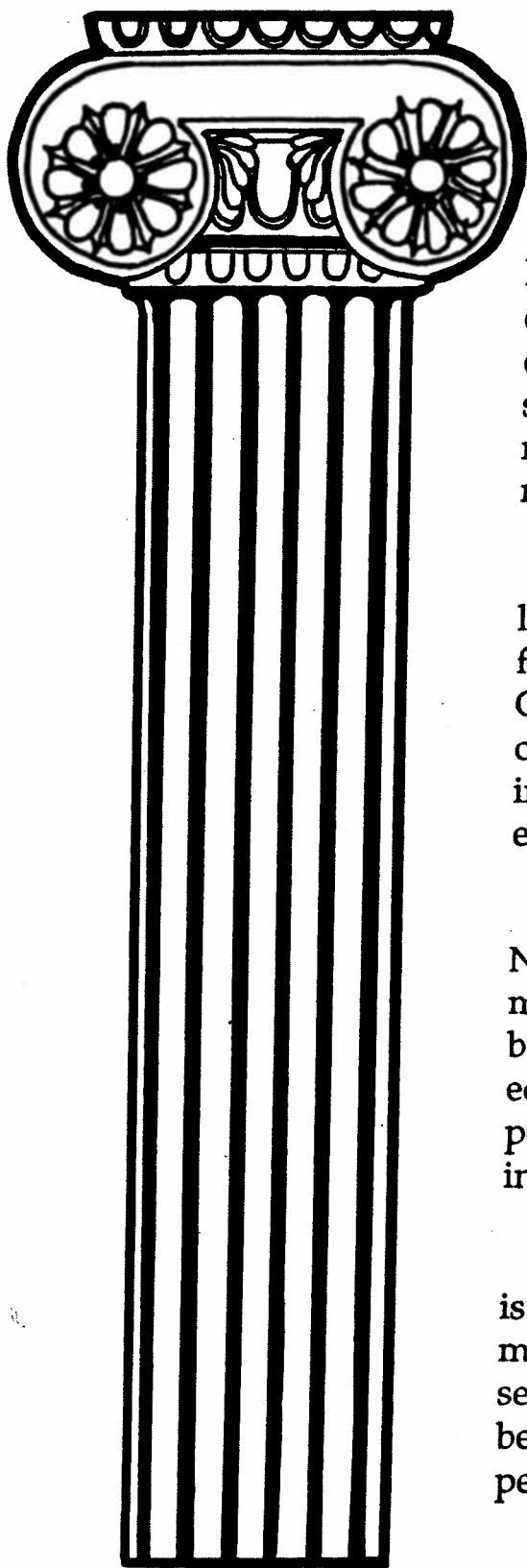
One of these important city-states was Athens. The people of Athens were divided into three social classes: the upper class, free male land-holding citizens born in Athens; the middle class, foreign-born merchants; and the lower class, which were slaves. All citizens took part in the government, which was the beginning of what we call a "democracy" today. (The women of Athens were not considered citizens because they could not take part in the government.) During the reign of the leader Pericles, Athens enjoyed thirty years of growth in the arts and sciences, a period known as the Golden Age.

Sparta was another well-known city-state which was a military society made up of three social classes: the upper class, adult free male citizens; the middle class, foreign-born merchants; and the lower class, slaves called Helots who had been taken as prisoners after wars. Although women could own property in Sparta, they were not considered citizens.



Two major periods of war arose in ancient Greece. The Persian Wars were twenty years of fighting between the Persian invaders and the Greeks. The Greeks won in 480 B.C., and the Golden Age began. Later, the Spartans attacked the Athenians and fought a twenty-five-year war known as the Peloponnesian War. Sparta defeated Athens in 404 B.C., and the Golden Age ended.

In 338 B.C., Greece was conquered by Alexander the Great, who ruled all of the known world until his death in 323 B.C. This began the Hellenistic Age, a time when Greek culture combined with and influenced the cultures of Eastern lands also conquered by Alexander. In 31 B.C. the Roman army conquered Greece.



## Geography

The country of Greece is on a peninsula located in the Mediterranean Sea in southeastern Europe. The Aegean Sea lies to the east and the Ionian Sea lies to the west. A thin strip of land links the southern part of the mainland, called the Peloponnesus, to the northern part.

Mountains and small valleys divide the land into many small areas, each one cut off from its neighbors. During the time of ancient Greece, each area became a mini-country, or a city-state. The soil was full of rocks and farming was difficult; growing enough food for everyone was not easy.

However, the Greeks were close to the sea. No part of Greece is more than eighty-five miles (137 km) from shoreline, so the Greeks became expert sailors. They used their knowledge of the sea to fish, to trade with other peoples, and to colonize other small islands in the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas.

Greece has a warm, dry climate. Because it is only about 40° north of the equator, summers are very hot and winter temperatures seldom freeze the crops. Rainfall averages between twenty and fifty inches (60–127 cm) per year.

## Greece

1. Describe the geography of Greece.
2. What is another name for Southern Greece?
3. Does Greece have good farm land? Please explain your answer.
4. What is the climate like in Greece?
5. Greece is a land of mountains and rocky soil. If you have had lived in ancient Greece, how would you have survived?  

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6. Compare the geography of Egypt and Greece. Explain how they are similar and different.