

# Ancient Greece: Geography

Greece is a small country in southern Europe. The mainland of Greece is a peninsula - a piece of land almost surrounded by water or projecting out into a body of water. Mainland Greece is a land of steep, rocky mountains, almost entirely surrounded by turquoise-blue seas. Greece also includes many islands throughout the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas.

## Travel

In ancient Greece, communities were isolated from one another because of the high mountains. It was hard to travel over the mountains, so there was little communication between people in different settlements.

Travel by land was especially difficult. People walked, or rode in carts pulled by oxen or mules. Roads were unpaved and sharp rocks frequently shattered wooden wheels. Travelers could stop at inns on the main roads, but many inns provided only shelter. People had to bring their own food and other supplies with them. Slaves or pack animals carried bedding, food, and other necessities. With all these things to carry, the Greeks had to travel in groups that moved more slowly than someone traveling alone.

Traveling by boat was easier, but it was still uncomfortable and dangerous. Travelers might be attacked by pirates or robbed by dishonest sailors. The greatest danger was from the

sea itself. Sudden storms sometimes drove ships off course or sent them smashing into the rocky shoreline. Even in open waters, ships could sink.

The Greeks treated the sea with great respect. Whenever possible, sailors kept their ships close to shore. They sailed only during daylight and stopped each night to anchor. And a wise captain always made a sacrifice to the sea god Poseidon before sailing.

## Farming

Most people in ancient Greece survived by farming. But farming wasn't easy in that mountainous land. Even in the plains and valleys, the land was rocky and water was scarce. No major rivers flow through Greece, and it rains mostly during the winter months.

With so little flat land available, Greek farmers had to think of the best ways to use the land they had. Some farmers built wide earth steps into the hills to create more flat land for planting. A few farmers were able to grow wheat and barley, but most grew crops that needed less land, especially grapes and olives. Greek farmers produced a lot of olive oil, which was used for cooking, soap, and fuel for lamps.

Greek farmers also raised animals. Instead of cattle, which

need lots of flat land for grazing, they raised sheep and goats, which can graze on the sides of mountains. Sheep supplied wool for clothing, while goats provided milk and cheese. Farmers kept a few oxen, mules, and donkeys for plowing and transportation. Many Greek families also kept pigs and chickens.

The shortage of good farmland sometimes led to wars between Greek settlements, with each one claiming land for itself. Some settlements were also forced to look beyond the mainland for new sources of food and other goods.



## Colonies

As the populations of Greek communities grew, some communities did not have enough farmland to feed their people. One solution to this problem was to start colonies. Many Greek communities sent people over the sea, hoping they could grow food in new lands and send it home.

Colonists had many preparations to make before starting their journey. Often they began by asking the Greek gods if their efforts would be successful. To do this, they consulted an oracle. An *oracle* was a holy person whom they believed could communicate with the gods. Next, the colonists gathered food and supplies. They made sure to take a flame from their town's sacred fire so they could start a sacred fire in their new home.

Starting a colony wasn't easy. First, there was a long sea voyage to survive. Then settlers

had to find a place for their colony. They looked for areas that had natural harbors and good farm- land. They also tried to avoid places where the local people might be strong enough to prevent them from settling. Finally, they had to establish their new community and work hard to make it survive.

The Greeks established colonies over a period of more than 300 years, from 1000 to 650 B.C.E. The first group of settlers created a colony called Ionia in Asia Minor, in what is today Turkey. Later, Greeks started colonies in Spain, France, Italy, and Africa, and along the coast of the Black Sea. The colonies helped to spread Greek culture. Some of the colonies became quite wealthy through farming and trade.

## Trade

Besides starting new colonies, many Greek settlements on the mainland used trade to get

goods they needed. Some settlements had enough farmland to take care of their own needs, so they traded very little. But others relied on trade because they had too little land to grow

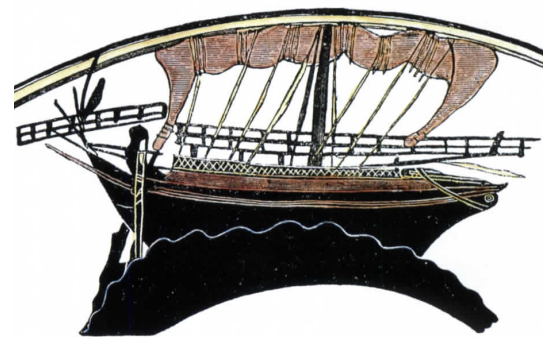
everything they required.

The Greeks traded among the city-states, with Greek colonies, and in the wider Mediterranean region. Olive oil, pottery, and wine from the mainland were traded for such goods as grain, timber, and metal.

Most goods traveled on ships owned by merchants. Merchant ships were built of wood, with large rectangular cloth sails. Merchants built their ships for space to hold goods rather than for speed. Because ships traveled about three to five miles per hour, journeys were long. A one-way trip from the mainland could take two months.

Navigating the ships was difficult. The Greeks had no compasses or charts. They had only the stars to guide them. The stars could tell sailors where they were, but they could not tell them what hazards lay nearby. No lighthouses warned sailors of dangerous coastlines.

In spite of these dangers, adventurous sailors carried more and more goods, and trade flourished along the Mediterranean coast.



**Merchant ships like this sailed around the Mediterranean Sea around 500 BCE**

