

Topic Page: [Ancient Greece](#)

Definition: **Greece, Ancient** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Period beginning with the defeat of the second Persian invasion in 479 bc and ending with the establishment of Macedonian power in 338 bc. Warring city-states flourished as centres of trade. Athens, the most wealthy and powerful, developed a democratic system under the guidance of Pericles. Its main rival was the military state of Sparta. Classical Greece was the birthplace of many ideas in art, literature, philosophy and science - among them those of Plato and Aristotle. It is traditionally regarded as the birthplace of Western civilization. See *also* Hellenistic Age



Image from: [Signs of Greece's rich classical past are... in Geography of the World](#)

Summary Article: **Greece, ancient**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Ancient civilization that flourished 2,500 years ago on the shores of the Ionian and Aegean Seas (modern Greece and the west coast of Turkey). Although its population never exceeded 2 million, ancient Greece made great innovations in philosophy, politics, science, architecture, and the arts, and Greek culture forms the basis of western civilization to this day.

Origins During the decline of the Mycenaean civilization (c. 1400–1100 BC), the region was overrun by waves of invaders from the north. These peoples, the Archaeans, Aeolians, Ionians, and Dorians, were illiterate, so little is known of the Dark Age until 800 BC. By then knowledge of writing had been regained and permanent settlements had been founded in the valleys. These grew into city-states, usually centred on an *agora* (marketplace) with an *acropolis* (fortified hill) for defence. Mountainous geography and fierce competition for fertile land prevented the cities from uniting, and led the Greeks to take to the sea.

During the years 750–550 BC they became great traders, exporting olive oil, wine, and wool and importing corn, timber, metal, and slaves. Greek colonies were founded on coastlands throughout the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. The most powerful city-states were Athens, which had the strongest navy, and Sparta, which had the strongest army.

Persian Wars After 545 BC, the Persian Empire conquered the Ionian cities in Asia Minor. Aid given them by Athens in an unsuccessful revolt 499–494 BC provoked Darius of Persia to invade Greece 490 BC, only to be defeated by the Athenians at Marathon and forced to withdraw. Another invasion by the Persian king Xerxes was defeated at sea off Salamis 480 BC and on land at Plataea 479 BC. The Ionian cities were liberated and formed a naval alliance with Athens, the Delian League. In 5th-century Athens, Greek civilization was at its peak, in the 'Golden Age'.

Government Though united by language and religion, the ancient Greeks never formed a single nation. The city-states remained proudly independent and their political systems differed. Most passed from monarchy to the rule of a landowning aristocracy, and from there to oligarchy (government by a small group of wealthy people) or democracy. Sparta was a militaristic oligarchy with hereditary kings. The most successful democracy was Athens, where Solon introduced a code of laws 594 BC and Cleisthenes established a democratic constitution 507 BC. All citizens of Athens served in the law-

making assembly, and 500 were chosen by lot each year to form the governing council. Athenian democracy was exclusive (women and slaves did not count as citizens), but from it sprang the enduring political ideals of government by the people, equality under the law, and trial by jury.

Religion The Greeks believed that immortal gods and goddesses with superhuman powers watched over them and directed events. A complex mythology was attached to the principal deities who were supposed to live on Mount Olympus: Zeus, Hera, Ares, Aphrodite, and Apollo. At shrines called oracles, priests and priestesses claimed to foretell the future. Religious festivals were often accompanied by sporting events, like the Olympic Games. The Greeks enjoyed athletics, boxing, wrestling, and chariot racing.

Culture The Greeks, especially the Athenians, encouraged individual development and creativity. Citizens were expected to be able to read and write. Special schools taught rhetoric, music, law, and medicine. Greek thinkers, like Plato and Aristotle, laid the foundations of philosophy and science. With the development of systematic thought came pioneering work in geometry, biology, physics, and history. The arts were transformed by a conception of beauty based on ideas of order and proportion. Greek writers created new forms of expression, like drama and lyric poetry, which became the model for all later Western literature. See also Greek architecture, Greek art, and Greek literature.

Decline Pericles, the democratic leader of Athens 455–429 BC, tried to create an Athenian Empire. Mistrust of his ambitions led to the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC), which ended the Golden Age and destroyed the political power of Athens. Sparta became the leading Greek power until it was overthrown by Thebes (378–371 BC). The constant wars between the cities allowed Philip II of Macedon to conquer Greece 338 BC. His son Alexander the Great created a military empire that reached as far as India. This spread Greek culture throughout the known world. During the 3rd century BC, the city-states tried to maintain their independence against Macedonia, Egypt, and Rome by forming federations; for example the Achaean League and Aetolian League (see Aetolia), but they often fought each other. Rome annexed Greece 146 BC and the city-states ceased to have any political role, but the Romans borrowed much from Greek religion, philosophy, and art. Thus key aspects of Greek civilization were partially preserved and can be linked to present-day society.

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