

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

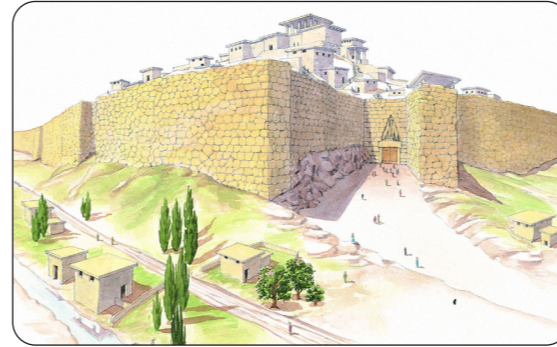
The Minoan civilisation existed between c3000 BC and c1100 BC on the Greek island of Crete. At the civilisation's peak, around 10,000 people lived in 90 cities. As Europe's first developed civilisation, the Minoans lived in towns with roads, wells and a basic sewerage system. They were capable farmers 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 Mycenaeans 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 Mycenaeans 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.



Timeline

c6000–c3000 BC	People start to farm and make produce in Neolithic Greece.
c3000–c1100 BC	The Minoan civilisation exists on the island of Crete.
c1600–c1100 BC	The Mycenaean civilisation exists on the Greek mainland.
c1450 BC	The Mycenaeans take control of Crete.
c1100–c800 BC	Greek cities are destroyed or abandoned during the Greek Dark Age.
c800–c500 BC	Greece develops quickly and city states are founded in the Archaic period.
776 BC	The first Olympic Games are held in Olympia.
c507 BC	Cleisthenes introduces the world’s first known democratic system to Athens.
c500	The Classical period begins.
356 BC	Alexander the Great is born.
323 BC	Alexander the Great dies and the Classical period ends.
323–30 BC	Greece becomes divided during the Hellenistic period.
30 BC	Ancient Greece is conquered by the Romans.

Lasting legacies

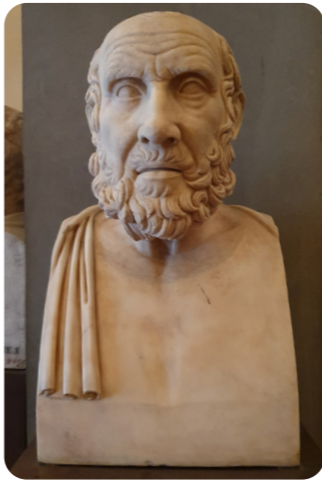
Democracy

The world’s first democratic system was created in Athens in the fifth century BC. The system was designed to give the Athenian people a say over how their city was run. Today’s democratic systems, although different from Athens’, follow the same principles and allow ordinary citizens to have a say in how their country is governed.



Philosophy and mathematics

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were some of the greatest philosophers of their time, and their ideas are still influential today. Socrates’ method of questioning and discussion, known as the ‘Socratic method’, is still used in schools and universities. The ancient Greeks also made hugely significant advances in mathematics and the ideas of mathematicians, such as Pythagoras and Archimedes, are still relevant today.



Olympic Games

The Olympic Games were invented in ancient Greece. It was one of the greatest sporting and religious festivals of its time and drew in competitors and spectators from all parts of Greece. Today’s Olympic Games share some of the same core values of excellence, respect and friendship that underpinned the original Olympic Games.



Arts and culture

Theatre was an important tradition in ancient Greece. Over 40 plays have survived from the Classical period. Poetry was another source of entertainment and education. Epic Greek poems have provided information about historical and mythological events. Sculpture was an important part of ancient Greek art and their method of painting designs onto pottery was also distinct and inspired many other civilisations.



Glossary

acropolis	The upper fortified area of a Greek city that is usually built on a hill.
architect	Someone who designs buildings and makes sure that they are built correctly.
Athenian	A person from Athens.
citadel	A central fortified area of a city or town.
city state	A city and the area surrounding it with an independent government.
civilisation	A highly developed culture, including its social organisation, government, laws and arts.
democracy	A political system, which allows people to have a say in the way their country is governed.
empire	A group of countries or states ruled by a single authority, such as an emperor or monarch.
mathematician	Someone who studies, teaches or is an expert in mathematics.
mythology	A collection of religious and cultural stories.
Parthenon	A temple on the Acropolis in Athens.
philosopher	Someone who studies basic ideas about knowledge and reasoning.
warrior	A soldier with skill and experience in fighting.