

Setting the Stage - Ancient Greece



As sunlight falls on the mountains, hills, and coasts of Greece, reflecting off the surfaces of the glittering sea, white-washed buildings, and ancient ruins, it is dazzling, brilliant, and vibrant. In ancient times, the light of Greece was unaffected by the haze of modern pollution, and was surely even more magical than it is today.

Greece has three main parts: the mainland, which is part of southern Europe; the peninsula, which nearly touches the mainland and is connected to it by just a thin strip of land; and the islands, which number more than 2,000. The peninsula is called the Peloponnese. The largest island, Crete, lies in the Mediterranean Sea, south of the mainland. Most of the islands of ancient Greece, however, were not suitable places for people to make their homes.

Settlement in ancient Greece was influenced by geography, just as it was for people of other ancient cultures. High mountains separated Greek communities from one another, making it easier for the Greek people to interact with outsiders than with each other.

Most of Greece is covered with steep mountains. Mount Olympus is the highest, rising about 9,500 feet above sea level. The rest of Greece is made up of lowlands along its many miles of coastline. Greece is surrounded by seas on three sides: the Aegean to the east, the Mediterranean to the south, and the Ionian to the west. Carved out of the land where it meets the sea are many deep inlets and protected bays. It is understandable why shipbuilding, fishing, and seafaring were important in ancient Greece.



In early times, coastal villages were separated by the high mountains. The soil was poor, and level land was scarce, but farmers grew olives, grapes, and fruit and nut trees along the coast. Cattle could not graze on the steep hillsides of Greece, so the Greeks raised sheep and goats.

Over time, as the population of ancient Greece increased, it became harder to produce enough food for everyone. So the Greeks took to the seas, traveling to Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), France, Italy, Spain, and Africa to set up trading colonies. The map opposite shows Greek colonies and trading routes about 550 B.C.E.

In this unit, you will learn more about the "land of light" and the ways in which the mountains and the sea shaped the history of ancient Greece.