

## • Ancient Greek Democracy •

The first great civilizations grew up in fertile valleys along major rivers. Egypt had the Nile. The early Mesopotamian cultures arose along the Tigris and Euphrates. The Indus civilization was centered on the river of that name. Ancient China appeared along the Yellow River. These rivers provided water for farming. Their floods spread fertile soil regularly over the land. The need to control these rivers with dams, canals, dikes, and other irrigation works led people to form complex, organized societies. A powerful ruler or government was needed to regulate this kind of river-based agricultural order.

Ancient Greece was different. Mountains divide it into many separate regions. Its rocky hills and narrow valleys forced the Greeks to look outward to the sea, to trade, to the islands of the Aegean Sea, and to the many other cultures along the coasts of the Mediterranean. The Greeks would learn much from these other civilizations. Yet they always seemed to create something new out of what they learned. Great epics, written history, drama, philosophy, science, mathematics, medicine—all these and more were a part of the great burst of creativity that took place in ancient Greece.

Ancient Greece is not famous for its great wealth or power. It is famous, above all, for its ideas, its art, and its emphasis on human striving. The ancient Greeks told dramatic stories about their gods. What these myths illustrate is the human quality of the gods, as well as the god-like abilities and ambitions of various human heroes. The myths express a sense that human beings are not that different from the gods, and that both can strive and achieve at the highest level.

Ancient Greece never united into a single nation. That was partly due to its geography. The Greek cities were cut off from one another by mountains and coastlines. Because of this they remained small, separate states. These city-states went through many political changes, and a form of democracy developed in some. The most important democracy was at Athens. At the height of its power, Athens

was ruled by elected officials and an assembly of citizens. The assemblies met in public spaces out in the open. In such settings, citizens learned to speak their minds and take pride in their freedom and independence.

Why did democracy develop in ancient Greece? There are many reasons for this. A major one was Greek warfare. The Greek city-states were often at war with one another. At first, warfare was carried on mainly by wealthy nobles rich enough to own horses. But over time, Greeks learned to fight in organized formations of foot soldiers called hoplites. Less wealthy men could afford the sword, shield, and helmet needed for such fighting. And even poor men could join Greek naval forces as rowers in Greece's famous triremes. The growing importance of such soldiers and sailors helped win them greater power and say as citizens.

In Athens and other Greek city-states, free citizens had important rights. But this did not include everyone. Women, for example, could not vote or hold office. In fact, they took very little part in public life at all. Also, foreigners in Greek city-states usually had no political rights.

Slavery was also a part of life in ancient Greece, as it was in every early civilization. Prisoners of war from all over the Mediterranean were enslaved and put to work in households, mines, and shops in the Greek city-states. In the city-state of Sparta, an entire class of farmers—the "Helots"—were serfs who belonged to the state and had no real freedom. Yet the warlike Spartans themselves were equal citizens within their city-state, and Spartan women were among the most free in Greece.

Some historians say the Greek citizen's love of liberty was strong in part because he could see so many unfree people around him. Does this mean Greek democracy was too flawed to be considered true democracy? This lesson's sources will help you discuss and debate this question.

## Ancient Greece Time Line

2200–1200 BCE

From about 2200 to 1500 BCE, Minoan civilization thrives on Crete. From 1600–1200 BCE, Mycenaean civilization flourishes mainly on the Greek mainland. Both cultures will influence Classical Greek civilization. From 1300 to 1200 BCE, Mycenaean palace culture is at its height.

1200–900 BCE

A time of upheaval, migration, invasion, and disruption sets in throughout the Aegean region (and elsewhere). During this “Dark Age,” most Mycenaean palaces and other sites are destroyed and the population declines.

900–800 BCE

Agriculture and population start to recover. Iron begins to be used in tools and weapons. Greeks begin to trade with and learn from many other Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures.

800–700 BCE

Sometime around 750–700 BCE, the Homeric epics are written down. The Greeks begin to write again, now using a Phoenician alphabet modified with vowels. City-states begin to form. Some are monarchies. Others are ruled by wealthy social elites. A concept of citizenship grows in which all of a city-state’s free-born people, even free-born poor, are seen as equal and entitled to some share of political rights. Major city-states begin to found colonies all around the Mediterranean and Black Seas. In 776 BCE, the Olympic games begin, providing a sense of unity among all Greeks.

700–600 BCE

Possibly in 621 BCE, Draco draws up a law code for Athens, which is written down and posted in public. The laws are very harsh—hence today’s word “draconian.”

600–500 BCE

In 594 BCE, Solon rewrites Athens’ law code to ease harsh treatment of indebted farmers and other poor people. This helps reduce social tensions. During this century, the philosophers Thales and Anaximander of Miletus offer purely rational or naturalistic explanations of the natural world. Miletus is a Greek city-state on the coast of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). In 546 BCE, Persia invades and conquers the Greek city-states along that west coast of Asia Minor. In Athens in 508 BCE, after a time of rule by tyrants, Cleisthenes reforms and deepens Athenian democracy.

500–400 BCE

The Persian Wars take place from 490 to 479 BCE. The Persians are finally defeated in 479 by the Athenian navy at Salamis and on land at the battle at Plataea. The Delian League of city-states led by Athens organizes to thwart any new Persian attack. From 461 to 429 BCE, Pericles leads Athens during the high point of its power and influence. Democracy reaches its fullest development at this time. From 431 to 404 BCE, Athens and Sparta and their allies war against each other in the Peloponnesian War. In 404 BCE, Athens surrenders to Sparta. The war is the setting for bitter political conflicts in Athens. A reign of terror there under the Thirty Tyrants (404–403 BCE) is followed by a restored but shaken democracy.

400–300 BCE

In part due to political tensions in Athens, the philosopher Socrates is accused of treason and executed in 399 BCE. His most famous pupil is Plato (428–348 BCE). Plato lives during a time when Greece’s city-states continue to war with one another and grow weaker. He writes critically about democracy. In 338 BCE, Philip II of Macedonia defeats a Greek alliance and ends the age of completely independent city-states in ancient Greece.