

Summary: Ancient Greece

The Land and Early History of Greece

Greece is a rocky peninsula with lots of mountains. Few crops can grow in its stony soil. But Greece is surrounded by water, which is its greatest natural resource. Ancient Greeks depended on the sea for fishing and trade.

As their population grew, ancient Greeks formed city-states. A city-state had a central city called a polis. Each city-state had its own form of government and laws. All the city-states shared a common language, religion, and way of life.

Three kinds of government were common in the Greek city-states. In an oligarchy, a few powerful and wealthy people ruled. Other city-states were ruled by a single person who took control against the wishes of the people. This kind of government is called a tyranny. Some city-states were democracies. In a democracy, people take part in their own government.

Two of the most important city-states were Athens and Sparta. Athens, located in the center of the Greek Peninsula, was a democracy. Sparta was in the southern part of the Greek Peninsula. It was an oligarchy ruled by two kings.

Learning and the Arts

The ancient Greeks were known for their great literature, learning, and architecture. Plays are among the finest pieces of literature from ancient Greece. Some modern operas and films are based on these plays.

Ancient Greece had several important thinkers called philosophers. Socrates was a well-known philosopher. He taught about knowledge, friendship, and justice. One of Socrates' students was a philosopher named Plato. Plato wrote about government, mathematics, and astronomy. He also wrote about how people behaved.

The city-states of ancient Greece fought with each other. In 338 B.C. they were conquered by King Phillip II of Macedonia. After Phillip died, his son, Alexander the Great, took control. Alexander conquered new lands. This spread Greek culture, language, and ideas throughout the Mediterranean and as far east as India.



Before You Read

Find and underline each vocabulary word.

city-state *noun*, a central city and nearby villages that shared a government and laws

polis *noun*, a central city in ancient Greece

oligarchy *noun*, a government where only a few powerful and wealthy people rule

philosopher *noun*, a person who studies and thinks about the world



After You Read

REVIEW What were the three forms of government most common in ancient Greek city-states?

Highlight the three forms of government most common in ancient Greek city-states.

REVIEW Name two famous philosophers of ancient Greece who were teacher and student. Draw a box around the teacher. Circle the student.