

## **“Ancient Greece” By Ekaterina Zhdanova-Redman**

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Washed by the waters of three seas—the Aegean, Ionian, and Mediterranean--Greece was a crossroads for different cultures. Its history began on the island of Crete about 6,000 years ago. Major seaways, power, religion, and law were the basis for Crete's developed commerce and trade. At the heart of that civilization was a huge palace at Knossos--a city in ancient Crete. Knossos was the capital of the legendary King Minos. This civilization of Crete is also called the Minoan civilization because of him.

The history and culture of ancient Greece is closely tied to the seas and natural forces. Around 1,500 BC, a terrible earthquake happened not far from Crete and destroyed much of the island. Scientists supposed that was one the main causes of the end of the great Crete civilization. It was not completely gone, though. Art, culture, and traditions of Crete had a very strong influence on those of mainland Greece.

The first important civilization on mainland Greece developed around 1,400 BC in the northeastern part of the Peloponnese. Many small kingdoms and fortresses were built, and the most important of them was the city of Mycenae. Mycenaean were very strong and powerful. They learned to sail as far as Egypt, developed the cult of Olympic gods and the basics of the culture that was later known as the culture of ancient Greece.

This period in Greek history is called the Heroic age. It is described in the poems of Homer and Greek myths about Heracles, Theseus, Jason, and others. The culmination of that period was the Trojan War. According to legend, Greece fought the ten-year Trojan

War to win back beautiful Helen, wife of Menelaus, who had been abducted by Paris and taken to Troy.

You probably know the story about the Greek trick with the wooden horse. Greeks ended the siege of Troy by leaving the horse outside the city and pretending to sail away. The Trojans dragged the horse inside the city walls, not realizing that it was filled with Greek warriors. The soldiers got out of the horse at night and opened the city gates for the Greek army.

The real causes of the war might be different, but the war weakened the country and tribes of wild and uncivilized Dorians took over the Peloponnese. After the invasion, it took Greece a very long time to revive and reestablish its former prosperity. It gradually turned into a new civilization as a mix of Cretians, Mycenaeans, Dorians, and other cultures.

The period from 800 to 500 BC is called the archaic age. It was marked with great economic and cultural growth, and the political development of Greece. The country was not united under the same government; it was made up of about 300 separate city-states. Each city-state, called "polis"--that's where the modern word politics came from--had its own laws and government. Athens and Sparta were the two largest and most powerful city-states. They were very different in their lifestyles and laws and often competed with each other.

Sparta was founded by war-like Dorians and was unwalled because its citizens boasted that their swords and their courage were better than any walls! Their state was the most

disciplined in Greece. When children were born the city elders inspected them and, if considered weak, they were exposed on a hillside to die. At the age of seven, boys were taken to military-style schools and trained to endure hardship and discomfort. The Spartan Code produced the best soldiers, but very little culture.

Meanwhile, Athens was rising to the greatness of its classical age. Intellectual and artistic achievements were encouraged by the growing political freedom introduced by the reforms of Solon (640-560 BC), the statesman who laid the foundation of Athenian democracy. Science, art, and philosophy flourished in Athens at that time. Democracy helped education to be available to almost everyone. Books written by famous Greek historians, philosophers, orators, and poets were very popular among common citizens of Athens.

Athens was a very human society, completely different from Sparta. Not to show any interest in public events was considered something very stupid. Greeks even had a special term for someone who attended only to his own affairs and did not bother with those of the city. The modern word "idiot" derives from that Greek term.

The 20-year Persian War starts the classical period in the history of ancient Greece. The first Persian invasion came in 490 BC under King Darius. The Athenians beat off his attack by a great victory at the city of Marathon. A messenger ran 26 miles to Athens with news of the victory--the first "marathon" run. Unfortunately, after delivering the news he collapsed and died.

During the 5th century BC, Athens led the Greeks into a series of victorious battles

against Persia. However, Athens later suffered an economic decline because of the Peloponnesian Wars fought against Sparta. Later, in the 4th century BC, Greece was conquered by Philip of Macedon (382-336 BC). Macedonia, a mountainous kingdom to the north of Greece, was home to Greek-speaking people. They were much less civilized, spoke Greek with an accent, and were viewed by Ancient Greeks as the "barbarians."

Philip was a great war-leader with a lot of respect for Greek culture. He wanted to unite Greece and spread its culture to the neighboring territories. He chose the famous Greek philosopher Aristotle to be the tutor for his young son, Alexander, who was later to become Alexander of Macedonia, or Alexander the Great.

Alexander the Great was to achieve his father's dream; he spread Greek thought and culture over the whole of the Middle East. He went as far as the Himalayas and the Ganges on the east and Egypt on the west. Unfortunately, Alexander died at the age of 33, his great empire collapsed, and its immense territories were divided among his generals. One of Alexander's favorite generals was Ptolemy. Macedonian by birth, he assumed the title of the king of Egypt. He started the last Egyptian dynasty -the Ptolemies- the last of whom was legendary queen Cleopatra.

Divided into numerous small kingdoms, Greece was no longer a powerful state and it could not resist the invasion of Rome in 275. Macedonia and Greece were absorbed into the Roman Empire. Fortunately, Romans highly respected Greek culture and Greek civilization became a part of the heritage that Rome passed on to the rest of Europe.