

Geography of Ancient Greece

At the same time that the Shang dynasty was ruling much of the Huang He River valley and the Egyptian pharaohs were building the New Kingdom along the Nile, another civilization was beginning, along the northeastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. The civilization was that of the ancient Greeks.

In Greece, there was no great river carrying layers of fertile silt to create rich farmland. Instead of finding themselves in an environment provided by a river valley, ancient Greeks found themselves on a peninsula, a piece of land almost entirely surrounded by the sea, with a rocky landscape that offered few natural resources.

Ancient Greece was located on the southern European mainland. The modern day country of Greece includes not only the mainland portion, but also includes hundreds of islands. The biggest of these islands is Crete, south of the mainland. Northeast of Crete is another large island called Rhodes.

Mountains and hills cover nearly three-fourths of Greece. Western Greece is the most mountainous, and there, travel by land is very difficult. The land is not very fertile, either, but farmers herd goats and sheep on the rugged hillsides.

Eastern Greece has more land suitable for farming. Some of these farmlands are on the peninsula of Attica. Attica also has excellent natural harbors, or sheltered places, for ships. Peloponnesus, a large peninsula southwest of Attica, is a mountainous region outlined by a thin area of fertile soil. Here can

be found several rivers, but unlike rivers in Egypt or Mesopotamia, these rivers dry up in the summer.

The climate of Greece also presented a challenge for early farmers. Summers were hot and dry, and winters were wet and windy. Ancient Greeks raised crops and animals well suited to the environment. Wheat and barley were grown, and olives and grapes were harvested. The many hills and mountains provided shrubs to feed the herds of sheep, goats, and cattle.

Because farming didn't produce huge surpluses, and travel across the terrain was difficult, the Greeks came to depend on the sea. People living near the Mediterranean, Aegean, and Ionian Seas became fishers, sailors, and merchants. Because of Greece's location in the eastern Mediterranean, it was a perfect location for trade. Greek sailors were highly skilled, and traveled as far as ancient Egypt to trade their products. Greek merchants competed with traders from other Mediterranean cultures. One of these cultures was the Phoenicians. Traders from all over were eager to exchange their goods for Greece's olive oil, wool, and wine. Those who traded with the Greeks especially prized Greece's olive oil. It added flavor to food, along with its usefulness as a lamp fuel and body lotion.

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