

The Electronic Passport to Ancient Greece

The Cradle of Western Civilization

The civilization of ancient Greece flowered more than 2500 years ago but it influences the way we live today. Greece is a peninsula in southeastern Europe. The people of the region attempted to explain the world through the laws of nature. They made important discoveries in science. They developed democracy, where people govern themselves rather than being ruled by a king. The Greeks also valued beauty and imagination. They wrote many stories and plays that continue to be performed today. The ancient Greeks developed a great deal of what we take for granted. This is why Greece is often known as the Cradle of Western Civilization.

The people of ancient Greece could not farm most of their mountainous, rocky land, so they became excellent sailors who traveled to distant lands. The Greeks learned the alphabet from the Phoenicians, a sea faring people from modern day Syria and Lebanon. The mountainous land also meant that it was difficult to invade Greek lands. The Balkan Mountains in the north and the Mediterranean Sea form barriers that made it difficult for outsiders to attack.

Ancient Greece was not a unified nation, but a collection of *poli*. *Poli* is the plural of *poli*, a word often translated as city, but a polis is much more. When we think of a city, we generally think of a place. A Greek *polis* consisted of a small walled area that was generally no larger than a few city blocks, the farmland that surrounded it, and most importantly, the people who lived there. Today we think of the people who live in a place as citizens, but to the ancient Greeks the people were as much of the *poli* as the land or the buildings. The word politics is derived from the Greek polis.

The *poli* often developed alliances, called leagues, for protection against other cities and foreign invaders. The *poli* of ancient Greece were eventually conquered, but their advances eventually spread across Europe and have influenced the way we live today.

Each *polis* was a nation of its own, but the *poli* of ancient Greece had many things in common. The Greek *poli* developed independently of one another because they were isolated by rugged mountains or were located on small islands, but the *poli* spoke a common language. The *poli* were also small and often had to depend on one another to survive. Further, the *poli* met every year at a great athletic contest known as the Olympics. *Poli* that were at war would suspend hostilities until after the contests. There is a modern nation known as Greece, but the *poli* of ancient Greece extended east to land we today know as Turkey.



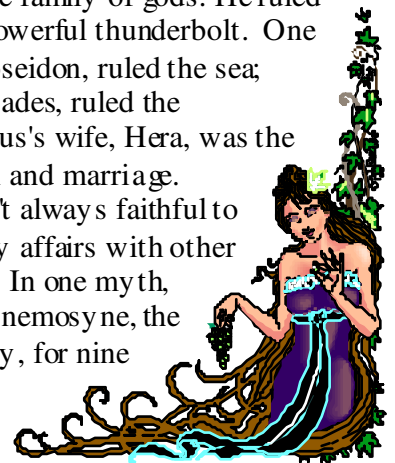
Greek Mythology

The ancient Greeks were polytheistic. This means they believed in many gods. Writers and artists use the stories and symbols of Greek myths to this day. While we no longer view the myths as religion, many people still enjoy reading them. Today, most people who live in the Western Hemisphere believe in one god. People who believe in one god are monotheistic.

Myths are traditional stories. The Greeks used myths to explain things they did not understand. At first, myths were passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. Later, Greek poets created epic stories based on those legends. An epic is a long poem about great heroes and their deeds.

The Greek gods lived atop Mount Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece. Zeus was the head of the family of gods. He ruled the sky with his powerful thunderbolt. One of his brothers, Poseidon, ruled the sea; another brother, Hades, ruled the “underworld.” Zeus's wife, Hera, was the goddess of women and marriage.

Zeus wasn't always faithful to Hera. He had many affairs with other gods and humans. In one myth, Zeus lived with Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, for nine days. Their union produced nine daughters known



as the “muses.” The nine muses were the goddesses of inspiration, learning, and the arts. Words like music, amusing, and museum originally referred to the goddesses.

The Greeks would often consult priests or priestesses called oracles before making important decisions. They believed that the gods spoke to the oracles. The oracles were said to be able to read the rustling of leaves or marks on animals as signs from the gods. The oracles would often respond in unclear ways so it would be difficult for people to prove them wrong.

Homer

Greek literature includes the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, two epics written about 1200 years before the Common Era (or before the birth of Jesus). The Greeks believed a storyteller named Homer wrote the poems. We don't know much about Homer, we don't even know he existed, but the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* give us an insight into early Greek civilization.

The ancient Greeks considered the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* great ancient literature in the sixth century before the Common Era. The epics' dialect suggests that Homer came from the western coast of the modern nation of Turkey. Greek legends suggest that Homer was blind, but the vivid imagery of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* suggest that the author of the poems must have had sight at some point in his life. Modern scholars believe that the epics were based on oral legends, but it would be difficult for many people to memorize the long epics. This suggests that the Greeks had some form of writing long before their civilization flourished.

Sparta

Sparta was a *polis* that valued physical courage, strength, and bravery in war. The Spartans gave their complete loyalty to the *polis*. Seven-year-old Spartan boys left their homes to train as soldiers in military camps. Spartan men lived and trained together. When a man married, he would continue to live with his fellow soldiers until he was about 30 years old. Both men and women in Sparta participated in athletic contests to make them strong.

Spartan laws discouraged anything that would distract people from their disciplined

military life. Sparta did not welcome visitors from other cities, and Spartans were not allowed to travel. The Spartans were not interested in other ways of life and did not want to bring new ideas to their *polis*.

Sparta is on the Peloponnesus, a hilly, rocky area at the southern end of the Greek peninsula. The Spartans conquered many people in the region and forced them to work as slaves. They developed their disciplined society because they were outnumbered by slaves, and needed to always be prepared for a slave revolt.

Athens

Athens was a *polis* on the southeastern part of the Greek mainland. The Athenian people valued reading, writing, and music, subjects that the Spartans scorned. Unlike Sparta, the leaders of Athens allowed the people born in their *polis* to visit other places and learn new ideas.

The people of Athens created a democracy: a government ruled by the people instead of a king. Every adult male born in Athens became a citizen and a member of the assembly. The assembly voted on how the *polis* was governed. To ensure equal opportunity for every citizen, Athens chose its leaders by lot rather than by holding elections. The elected officials served for one year. At the end of the year, the leaders were called before the assembly to account for their work.

Not everyone participated in Athenian democracy. Athens encouraged outsiders to move to their *polis*, but did not allow them to vote. Women could own land, but could not actively participate in the assembly. The members of the assembly accounted for only about one-sixteenth of the total population of Athens. About one in four people were slaves. The slaves did most of the work in the *polis*, making it possible for the members of the assembly to spend more time on public affairs.

Athenian democracy was limited, but it gave some people the opportunity to make decisions about how they were governed. Participation in government by common people was a new idea that later became a model for other governments.

Persia

Persia was a kingdom east of the Greek peninsula. The Persians created a vast empire that eventually stretched from Asia Minor (modern Turkey) to Babylon (modern Iraq). In 490 BC, was the king of Persia. He decided to expand his empire by attacking Athens. The Persians landed at Marathon, twenty-six miles from the *poli*. A messenger named Pheidippides ran to Athens without stopping to warn the Athenians of the invasion. Pheidippides died from exhaustion shortly after gasping out his news, but his “marathon run” alerted the Athenian army of the Persian landing. Soldiers from Athens marched to Marathon and forced the Persians to return to their ships. Today, runners call long races marathons in honor of Pheidippides’ run.

Persia planned to conquer the Greek peninsula by defeating individual *poli*, but Athens convinced other *poli* to combine forces with one another. The combined forces were known as leagues. Many *poli* fought the Persians, including fierce warriors from Sparta. The Greek leagues were outnumbered, but they managed to defeat the larger Persian army.

Ten years after the retreat at Marathon, Darius’ son, Xerxes prepared another invasion. Xerxes sent about 200,000 soldiers and 800 ships to fight the Greeks at the Battle of Salamis. The Persian king watched from a mountaintop as the Greeks again managed to destroy more than 200 ships and kill 20,000 sailors. Xerxes was so enraged that he beheaded the few captains who were able to escape the wrath of the Greek armies.

After the wars with the Persians, the Greeks felt a tremendous pride in their culture. The great Persian kingdom no longer awed them. This pride was especially strong in Athens. The artists, poets, sculptures, and architects developed a culture that was unique to Greece. The thirty-year period after the wars (460 BC to 430 BC) was known as the “Golden Age of Greece.”

The Peloponnesian War

The Golden Age of Greece was short lived. Athens and Sparta were both powerful *poli*, and each wanted to spread their way of

life. Sparta attacked Athens in 431 BC, beginning the brutal 27 year long Peloponnesian War.

One out four people in Athens died shortly after the war began, but not because they were defeated in battle. When Sparta attacked, the Athenian people crowded behind the walls of the city. The cramped and dirty living conditions were an easy target for disease. A plague, or great sickness, spread through the city. Sickness claimed the life of Pericles, the leader of Athens. Once Pericles died, the people began to listen to demagogues. Demagogues were bad leaders who appealed to people’s emotions rather than logic.

Sparta eventually defeated Athens by building blockade around the walls of the city. This is called a siege. The people of Athens could not leave to get supplies or food from the countryside. Faced with starvation, Athens surrendered to Sparta in 404 BC.

The Peloponnesian robbed Athens of its Golden Age. Great thinkers and teachers lived in Athens during and after the war but the era of support for new ideas and the spirit of democracy had passed.

Philosophy and Sophistry

We have learned many things from the ancient Greeks, but perhaps the most important is the value of ideas. The Greeks believed in wisdom. Ancient Greece was remembered for its many great philosophers. Philosophers were people who discussed, debated, and studied wisdom. The word philosophy comes from the Greek term meaning “the love of wisdom.” The ancient Greeks were concerned with rhetorical skills. Rhetoric is speech that is used to persuade someone. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were three of the greatest philosophers of ancient Greece.

A group of Greek intellectuals were known as the “Sophists.” *Sophos* is a word in ancient Greek that means wise. The Sophists were skilled in rhetoric and were often at odds with the rulers in ancient Greece. They argued that the rulers invented the gods in order to control the people. One of the first Sophists, Protagoras, invented the “adversary system,” in which a student argues both sides of an issue.

Some Sophists were less interested in truth than in using their skills to gain power. Today the term *sophisticated* refers to a person who is cultured and educated. We get that word from the sophists.

Socrates (born 469BC, died 399 BC)

Socrates was a philosopher who taught by asking questions. When teachers ask questions that encourage students to draw conclusions, they are using the "Socratic method" of teaching. The oracle of the prominent polis of Delphi pronounced Socrates the wisest man in Greece. Socrates concluded that while others professed knowledge they did not have, he knew how little he knew. Socrates asked many questions, but he gave few answers. He often denied knowing the answers to the questions he asked.

Socrates was a well-known teacher in Athens. He drifted around the city with his students, engaging many people in arguments about "justice, bravery, and piety." What we know about Socrates comes from what others wrote about him. Socrates did not write any books because he believed in the superiority of argument over writing.

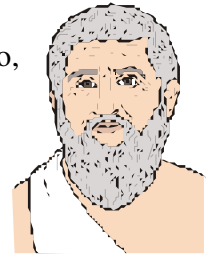
Socrates' students wrote that he believed that evil is ignorance, and that virtue could be taught. According to this philosophy, all values are related to knowledge. Evil is ignorance, and virtue can be taught.

Socrates regarded the tales of the gods as an invention of the poets. The leaders of Athens did not want a critic like Socrates in their city. They threatened to bring him to trial for neglecting the gods and for corrupting the youth of Athens by encouraging them to consider new ideas. The leaders expected the seventy-year-old Socrates to leave Athens before his arrest, but he remained in Athens, stood trial, and was found guilty. A friend tried to plan an escape from prison, but Socrates refused to participate. He believed that he must obey the law, even if he disagreed with it. His last day was spent with friends and admirers. At the end of the day, Socrates calmly drank from a cup of poison hemlock, the customary practice of execution at that time.



Plato (born 429 BC, died 347 BC)

Most of what we know about Socrates comes from Plato, his most famous student. Plato called Socrates "the best of all men I have ever known." When his mentor was executed, Plato left Greece for more than a decade. He returned to start the *Academy*, a school that would operate for more than 900 years.



Plato described his idea of an ideal society in his most famous book, the *Republic*. Plato did not believe in democracy. He argued in favor of an "aristocracy of merit," rule by the best and the wisest people. Plato believed a small group of people intelligent and educated men and women should govern society. This small group would select the best and the brightest students to join them.

Plato believed the government should rear all children so that everyone would have equal opportunities. Schools would test students on a regular basis. Those who did poorly would be sent to work, while those who did well would continue their studies. At the age of thirty-five, those persons who mastered their education would be sent to the workplace to apply their learning to the real world. After fifteen years, if the student succeeded, they would be admitted to the guardian class.

Plato taught that the ideals of truth or justice cannot exist in the material world. Today we describe a "platonic" relationship as one in which people have mental and spiritual exchanges but refrain from physical intimacy.

Aristotle (born 384BC, died 322BC)

Aristotle was the greatest scientist of the ancient world. He is considered the father of the natural sciences. Aristotle believed in using logic and reason, rather than the anger or pleasure of gods, to explain events.



Aristotle was born in Macedonia, a mountainous land north of the Greek peninsula. At that time, many Greeks believed Macedonia was a backward place with no culture. Aristotle moved to Athens and studied at Plato's *Academy*. He remained at the school for more than twenty years until shortly after Plato died.

Aristotle then returned to Macedonia, where King Philip hired him to prepare his thirteen-year-old son, Alexander, for his future role as a military leader. His student would one day be known as Alexander the Great, one of the greatest military conquerors of all time.

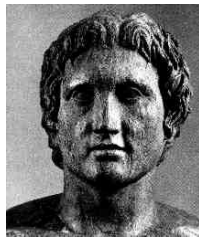
Once Alexander became King of Macedonia, Aristotle returned to Athens and opened a school he called the *Lycium*. For the next twelve years, Aristotle organized his school as a center of research on astronomy, zoology, geography, geology, physics, anatomy, and many other fields.

Aristotle wrote 170 books, 47 of which still exist more than two thousand years later. Aristotle was also a philosopher who wrote about ethics, psychology, economics, theology, politics, and rhetoric. Later inventions like the telescope and microscope would prove many of Aristotle's theories to be incorrect, but his ideas formed the basis of modern science.

Alexander the Great

Alexander the Great became King of Macedonia when his father was assassinated in 336. King Philip had conquered most of the Greek peninsula. The Greeks believed they could free themselves of Macedonia rule, since the new king was a "mere boy." Alexander proved them wrong by capturing the city of Thebes. He destroyed the entire city as a warning to the others. Alexander then conquered Persia, the longtime enemy of Greece, and the mightiest empire in the world.

Alexander was a military genius, possibly the greatest warrior of all time. His troops were better trained and organized than



the Persian army. His soldiers also admired Alexander because of his personal courage. Alexander led his soldiers in battle instead of remaining behind the lines. The troops saw that Alexander was sharing their danger, and was not asking them to take any risks he would not take himself.

Once he conquered the Persians, Alexander quickly assembled a huge empire. In 332 BC, he moved south to Egypt, where he rested his troops. The Egyptians welcomed Alexander as a hero because he freed them from harsh Persian rule. They crowned him Pharaoh and declared him a god.

Alexander eventually created an empire that reached India. Aristotle taught him that the Greeks were the most advanced people in the world, and that all other cultures were barbarians. Once he defeated the Persians, he came to see them very differently. He saw that many Persians were intelligent people and were worthy of his respect. Alexander accepted many Persians into his army and married the daughter of a Persian king.

In 323 BC, when Alexander was only thirty-three years old, he fell ill from a fever and died a week later. Alexander had created a huge empire in less than thirteen years, but it quickly crumbled. Alexander's mother, wives, and children were all killed in the struggle for power that followed his death. In the end, his empire was divided among his generals in three parts.

Alexander changed the world, but not through his accomplishments on the battlefield. Alexander carried the ideas of the Greeks and their love of learning throughout his empire. He founded the great city of Alexandria, which became a center of learning and culture in Egypt. A library in Alexandria housed the accumulated knowledge of the Greeks. This would become very important in the centuries that followed because Greece and Rome would fall to barbarian tribes who could not read.