

# Unit 5: Ancient Greece

Statutory Unit

1200BCE – 500CE (Classical period: 490BCE-350BCE)

## Period Overview

The first thing to realise is that this is a long chronological period: Ancient Greek culture begins with the Minoan civilisation in around 2700 BCE and ends with the collapse of the Hellenistic period in 150 BCE. Most units focus however on the period known as Classical Greece: 490-350 BCE. The second thing to appreciate is that the Ancient Greeks did not think of themselves as belonging to a single country; what made you Greek was a shared culture and language. Your citizenship was of your town or city; you were Athenian first and Greek second. The geography of Greece, dominated by the sea and by mountain ranges, created and supported this local identity. Finally it is vital to appreciate the huge legacy the Ancient Greeks have given to modern Europe: civilisation, democracy, scientific and mathematical knowledge, written history, satire and bras to name but a few!

## Life in Ancient Greece: farming and food

Greece was primarily an agrarian society with most people, even in the classical period, spending every day growing crops and tending animals. The most important crops were: wheat, barley, grapes, olives and vegetables. Small numbers of animals were kept such as sheep and goats, useful for their milk, wool and to sell to others for sacrificing in religious ceremonies. Oxen, for ploughing, and some pigs and cows were also kept. Hunting supplemented the food for many, wild boar and hares were hunted with traps, bows and spears which proved useful in maintaining skills for warfare. Fishing was a vital industry to the Greeks, most fish were caught close to shore with large nets but huge prices could be gained for fish caught further out in deeper waters. The Greeks loved fish. They ate a fish sauce with many other foods. A typical breakfast would be bread dipped in olive oil, lunch cheese or beans, lentils, chick peas with bread with the main meal, including meat or fish for the more wealth being in eaten in the evening. They drank lots of wine but mixed it with water.

## Homes and families

Greek homes were simple. The door from the street opened onto a courtyard and all rooms opened off from this. A main living room for the family, the *andron* (men's room) where visitors would be received and the women's quarters. Cooking was done outside and washing in private quarters. The Greeks used the word *Oikos* to describe the home, all their possessions there and the people living in it. Women were second class citizens at best in most cities. They were expected to spend most of their time in the home and in some households veiled in front of guests. They could not own property and any they held upon marriage became part of their husband's *oikos*. Poorer women however had to work, often working alongside their husbands in the markets or farms. Marriage was an important feature of Greek life, girls married at around 14 and men at 25. Divorce was possible for men and women. Many boys were formally educated but only within rich families. Girls received a domestically focused education teaching them skills such as needlework. Slavery was fundamental to Greek society. In 431BC Athens had 50,000 male citizens and 100,000 slaves. Religion formed a central part of everyday life throughout the region.

## Possible Enquiry Questions

- **What mattered to Ancient Greeks?** This question allows children to explore ideas around empathy, why people thought and felt as they did.
- **How similar was life in Ancient Greece to today?** This change/continuity question allows children to compare disparate time periods.
- **Which individual was the most important? (to the Ancient Greeks/to us today).** This explores the idea of significance, what makes some individuals more or less important can and does change over time.
- **Why did Ancient Greece lose its power?** This is a causation question and link to the Romans

## Key Individuals

**Philosophers:** Plato, Socrates, Aristotle.  
**Scientists/mathematicians:** Euclid, Archimedes, Anaximander, *Aspasia the Physician*  
**Writers:** playwrights (Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, Aristophanes) poets (*Sappho*, Homer) historians (Thucydides, Herodotus)  
**Athletes:** Milo of Criton, *Cynisca of Sparta*, Theagenes of Thasos  
**Gods/Goddesses:** Zeus, *Athena*, Apollo, *Demeter*, Poseidon, *Artemis*, Ares, *Hera*  
**Leaders:** Cleisthenes, Pericles, Leonidas  
*(women in italics)*



Parthenon on the Acropolis, Athens<sup>5</sup>

### What have Ancient Greeks ever done for us?

The Greeks have influenced many aspects of our lives today in Western Europe. From how we run our countries (**democracy**), to what we think makes people (especially men) and buildings beautiful (**Doric, Ionic** columns), to how we teach (**Socrates'** questioning). Biology (**Anaximander's** ideas about species evolving from one another), astronomy, maths, medicine and physics (**Archimedes' screw**) all have Greek roots. We still tell their stories (from **Homer** to the myths), put on their plays (**Euripides'** Medea) and take part in their games (**Olympics**).

### Timeline of Key Events:

All dates are approximate:

- 505 BCE** Cleisthenes introduces democracy in Athens
- 490 BCE** Greek/Persian wars led by Xerxes
- 468 BCE** Sophocles writes his first tragedy
- 461 BCE** Peloponnesian wars begin between Sparta and Athens (to 446 BCE)
- 449 BCE** Construction of Parthenon begins
- 443 BCE** Pericles leads Athens (to 429 BCE)
- 441 BCE** Euripides writes his first tragedy
- 431 BCE** Second Peloponnesian wars
- 430 BCE** Outbreak of Bubonic Plague in Athens
- 420 BCE** Construction of Temple of Athena
- 399 BCE** Socrates executed for his opposition to the Thirty Tyrants
- 386 BCE** Plato found the Academy
- 384 BCE** Aristotle born
- 359 BCE** Philip II becomes King of the Greeks
- 356 BCE** Alexander the Great born
- 356 BCE** Alexander the Great defeats Persians at Issus and is given Egypt
- 323 BCE** Alexander the Great dies at Babylon

### Athens vs. Sparta

**Sparta:** a region on the Peloponnesian peninsula known as Laconia; the only state to have a professional army and a fixed and unchanging system of government: 2 kings took the role of general and priest; elected officials (*ephors*) and a council (*gerousia*) administered the state. A huge population of slaves allowed the economy to function whilst the male citizens fought and ruled. Boys began military training at 7. Spartan women had an education and married later (around 18), owned property and ran the business affairs of the family whilst men fought.

**Athens:** on the Greek mainland in the region known as Attica. State most associated with democracy. *Ekklesia* was the general assembly open to all male citizens over 18; the *boule* was the council of 500 that administered the decisions made by the *ekklesia*. Athens formed a defensive league of Greek states to protect against the Persians, the *Delian* league. This helped to spread Athenian power and influence.

**The Peloponnesian Wars** lasted 30 years from 431BC but led to the weakening of both states. Following the end of the war it was Thebes who became the dominant state until Macedonia under Philip and Alexander took over.

### Places to Visit:

Inevitably there are relatively few places to visit in the UK relating to the Ancient Greek period but you can spot their influence in the buildings of most cities. However, some museums do include interesting artefacts:

- [British Museum](#), London
- [Leeds City Museum](#), Yorkshire
- [World Museum](#), Liverpool

### Further Information:

- British Museum: <http://bit.do/bmgreece>
- BBC Primary History: <http://bit.do/bbcgreeks>
- BBC History: <http://bit.do/bbcancientgr>
- Greece4Kids <http://bit.do/greece4kids>
- Children's University: <http://bit.do/cuman>

<sup>5</sup>Image of the Parthenon is in the public domain, having been released by 'Mountain'. The Wikimedia page can be seen at <http://bit.do/parth>