Ancient Greece
- The Lay of the Land -

How did Geography shape their lives?

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In this unit, you will learn about the Geography of Ancient Greece, how its environment impacted people's way of life, and how most Greek city-states were forced to build trade alliances to make themselves successful.
Greece is located in the far southeast part of the European continent. Today, Greece’s geography is defined by a series of mountains. This was no different in ancient times. While these high, rugged mountains helped protect from invading tribes, they also created a very intimidating physical barrier that forced many Greek communities to develop independently. Due to the mountainous terrain that spans throughout the region, travel between communities proved to be extremely difficult. Little, if any, communication between different settlements existed.

If one were forced to travel, one could expect the journey to be difficult. Traveling by land was extremely challenging. People walked or rode in carts that were pulled by mules, donkeys, or oxen. Roads were nothing more than dirt paths - dry and dusty in the summer and muddy and uneven in the winter. Carts and wagons would frequently break down as their wooden wheels or axles would shatter on the sharp, rocky terrain. Often, rain turned roads into mud pits where wagons could very easily get stuck!

If a traveler was making a journey to another Greek community, they would surely plan on stopping at an inn. Rooms at an inn were usually small and dark and rarely provided anything other than shelter. People routinely brought their own food and supplies with them. If a traveler could not afford a room, he could look for a lesche. A lesche was a public shelter, which amounted to a roof over one’s head.

In addition to traveling by foot or by a pulled cart, Greeks could also travel by boat. While this was probably the easiest option, it was still unforgettable and just as dangerous. The risk of being attacked or robbed by pirates was high, and the rough and rowdy seas were no place for an inexperienced sailor. Sudden storms would often drive ships off course or send them flailing into the rocky coastline. Too, the quality of ship still left much to be desired - ships could easily take on water and sink.

The Greeks understood how dangerous the sea could be; therefore they treated it with great respect. Before departing, the Greeks would make a sacrifice (often a human sacrifice) to the sea god, Poseidon. As an additional safety measure, traveling was typically done during daylight hours. The dangerous, rocky coastline would help a sailor meet his fate if he was not aware of its location!

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**The Greeks and Their Farms**

Despite living in a very rocky and mountainous climate, most ancient Greeks survived by farming. However, farming wasn’t easy anywhere in Greece. In the mountains, the rocky land provided little opportunity for large-scale crops to develop. In the plains and valleys, water was very scarce. Greece is very unique in that no major rivers flow through it. To make matters worse, Greece has four different types of climates, so only a small portion of mainland Greece is suitable for growing crops at any given time.

With very limited flat land available, Greek farmers had to “think outside the box.” Many were forced to be creative with their use of land in order to allow for the highest crop **yield**. Many farmers experimented with something called **terracing**; the Greeks would dig into the sides of hills and mountains to create flat areas of land. This allowed the Greeks to create more room for crops. A few families were able to grow more “large-land” crops - like wheat, barley, and oats. However, most farmers specialized in crops that required very little land, such as grapes or olives. Olive oil, which was viewed as a source of curing disease, was used frequently in cooking and as a source of oil for lamps. Athletes would even rub olive oil over their bodies before competition to protect themselves from injury! Olive trees were even viewed as sacred. According to Aristotle, a famous Greek philosopher, anyone caught destroying the tree should be put to death!

Greek farmers were forced to **supplement** their limited gardens with animals, but raising animals was seen as a sign of power and wealth. Most people were involved only in agriculture. But, animals such as sheep and goats, which do not need as much grass as cattle, were ideal for Greek farmers. They also were great providers of meat, wool, and milk. Raising chickens and geese was also common. Donkeys and mules were raised as pack animals to lead journeys into the mountains, but horses were seen as a sign of luxury. Because of this, horses were only common in the wealthier areas.

Good farmland in Greece was rare, which made it very valuable and highly sought after. Over time, this land would create wars between the Greek settlements. With limited farmland available, a rising population, and no room to expand, many Greek settlements were forced to look beyond the mainland of Greece for new sources of food - and many would find great successes in doing so!
Many Greek communities struggled to secure useful farmland on the mainland. As populations increased, the ancient Greeks were forced to look elsewhere to find reliable sources of food. One solution was to start colonies, or settlements in distant places, that would grow food and send it back to the mainland. The people sent to live in these new places were called colonists, and their main responsibility was to grow and secure food that could be returned to their community on the mainland.

Setting out on a voyage to create a colony was a big step for a city-state. They had to make sure they were fully prepared for the commitment they were undertaking. As was common throughout much of Greece’s history, these early people turned to their gods in order to bless their journey. First, colonists would ask the Greek gods to protect them on their journey. The Greeks would spend days, even weeks, praying at temples and performing sacrifices so the gods would allow their journey to be successful. Too, Greeks often sought out an oracle, a priest who was believed to be a link to the gods, in order to seek a blessing.

Colonists would then gather the necessary food and supplies for their journey. Many family members and friends would donate items, sometimes even giving valuable gifts and heirlooms as they feared they would not see this person again. To make sure they would have fire in their new land, colonists would keep a lit flame from their town’s sacred fire located in the Prytaneion, the center of government life where the sacred fire from the gods was kept. Once the Greeks received their blessing, had the necessary provisions, and secured the sacred flame, it was time to depart.

However, the most difficult part of the journey was yet to come. Surviving the long sea voyage was a major challenge. Then, colonists had to find a good location to set up a colony. Ideal places would be near a harbor or around an area with good farmland. Sometimes they encountered local people who did not want them in their lands; sometimes battles would ensue to decide who had the right to the land.

The colonies established by the ancient Greeks would keep close ties to their homeland. The first colony created was called Iona in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Eventually, Greek colonies would spread to nearby Italy, Asia Minor, and North Africa, but eventually as far as Spain and Egypt! While these colonies were first intended to find a new avenue for food and wealth, soon they became hubs that actively spread Greek culture throughout the ancient world.
Starting new colonies was not the only option the ancient Greeks had when resources on the mainland were dwindling. Many Greek settlements focused on trade as a way to get the goods they needed. Some settlements had plenty of good farmland; therefore they traded very little. However, others relied heavily on foreign trade because their land limited what they could grow or the animals they could raise.

Greek communities that relied heavily on trade did so with different city-states within Greece, Greek colonies, and foreign countries in the Mediterranean region. Common items that were traded by the Greeks were the abundant resources of olive oil, honey, cheese, figs, pottery, and wine. In exchange, they would often receive wood, tools such as knives and swords, perfumes, and grains. Most trade was conducted on the seas by Greek merchants.

Navigation with Greek ships was a difficult chore. Greeks had only primitive maps or basic directions to guide them. Some sailors used the stars to guide them, but others are believed to have followed the clouds, which typically form over land. Also, some historians think the Greeks tried to follow specific odors that traveled far from land as a way to guide them. Regardless of which method they chose, only risky sailors traveled at night. Dangers lurked everywhere throughout the Aegean, Mediterranean, and Ionian Seas. The rocky, uneven coastline of Greece was known for easily destroying ships, and the abundance of small islands throughout Aegean made even a daytime journey extremely difficult to navigate.

Despite these dangers, trade flourished in the Mediterranean region. Too, Greek culture began to spread to far away regions such as Western Europe, Africa, and even into Arabia and Asia. The more Greek sailors would explore the seas, and the farther colonists would travel to set up colonies in the region, the more the world would come to hear about Greece. As Greek culture began to enter its “golden age”, the region would soon come to know, and fear, this country called Greece.