

CHAPTER 1

WHAT'S A GREEK? GREECE AND GREEKS

“ HOMER

Where is Greece? Who are the Greek people? Nowadays, it's easy to answer these questions. Any encyclopedia or atlas shows where Greece is, what borders define it, and which islands in the Mediterranean Sea are Greek and which are part of Turkey or Italy or someplace else. And it's easy enough to say who the Greek people are—they are the citizens of Greece.

But it would have been hard to answer those questions 2,500 years ago. At that time there was no such country as “Greece,” and the people who lived in what we now call “Greece” didn't consider that they all lived in the same country. They lived in communities that governed themselves without consulting each other. Sometimes they were at war with each other and sometimes they formed alliances, but they were separate and independent.

And if there was no such country as Greece, who were the Greeks?



THE MYSTERIOUS INDO-EUROPEANS

Indo-European refers to an ancient people and their language, which modern scholars think was spoken over the greater part of Europe and extending into Asia as far as northern India.

About three hundred years ago scholars were surprised to discover strong similarities between Sanskrit, the language used in ancient times in India, and the ancient and modern languages of Europe. They came to realize that these languages had a common ancestor that has now disappeared, and which we now call Proto (early)-Indo-European. The speakers of Proto-Indo-European were spread out from India to Europe. In time different branches of their language split off in different places.

Basically, when we say the “the ancient Greeks,” we mean the people who lived near the Mediterranean Sea between about 2000 BCE and 500 CE and who spoke Greek, a member of the family of languages that we now call Indo-European. But since it takes too long to write “the people who spoke Greek,” from now on we’ll just call them “the Greeks.”

The Greeks had more than just their Indo-European heritage and their language in common. They also shared many traditions and customs. They sometimes got together for sporting events and other festivals.

It’s difficult to go further than that, or even to define where exactly the Greeks lived, since they traveled and set up colonies in what are now other countries. Some of these colonies lasted for centuries, but some were unsuccessful and the Greeks in them died or came home in a short time.

One other element that united the Greeks was their religion.

In the northern part of what is now Greece stands a mountain so high (9,573 feet, or 2,918 meters) that visitors often can’t see the top of it through the mist that cloaks its sides. The beautiful Mount Olympus looks mysterious, and a modern tourist driving past can easily see why the Greeks thought that something special must be at its peak. They thought that the top of the mountain was the home of their gods.

The Greeks believed that gods walked the earth along with people. They were different from people in that they could never die and they had magical powers. But they also loved and hated, got angry, made peace, and performed kind deeds and some foolish ones—behaved a lot like human beings, in fact. And just like humans, they had to live someplace. What could be a better home for them than a mountain that stretched so high that it seemed to be a halfway point between the heavens and the earth?

If the Greek gods decided to use their extra-sharp eyes to look over the whole area filled with people who believed in and worshiped them, what would they see?

They would see a large body of water with many islands, some so tiny that a person could easily swim around them,



Sure-footed goats were well adapted for life in rocky Greece. Their milk, wool, meat, and hides were useful products, and their strong little bodies could carry people and other burdens. This pelike was a kind of pot used for holding wine or water.

and some so large that it would take days to walk across them. They would see lands curving into and out of this sea, with mountains that had been formed by volcanoes. The land that was the home of the people who called themselves “Hellenes,” and whom we now call “the ancient Greeks,” originally was a small area bordering the Aegean Sea and some islands near that land. Eventually the Greeks occupied territory that stretched from Spain in the west to what is now Turkey, and eventually even India in the east.

The land explains a lot about the Greeks and their way of life. The mountains aren’t particularly high, but they cover four-fifths of the Greek mainland. This is one reason why the Greeks didn’t feel united with each other. In the earliest days of Greek civilization, there weren’t even any horses. It took days or weeks to get from one area to another on foot, so it would have been difficult to feel like a fellow citizen with someone from a different place. Messengers would take a long time to carry word from one place to another and could get lost or even killed on their way, so communication was slow and uncertain.

The mountains defined other things about the Greeks. For example, olives and grapes grow well on their slopes, but wheat and other grains need a different kind of soil and flatter land for plowing. Sheep, goats, and pigs can thrive in areas that are too steep for cows and other large animals. It’s

The Greek World

The philosopher Plato realized that the people who spoke Greek took up only a small part of the land around them. He wrote in his dialogue the *Phaedo*,

“The earth, if you ask me, is quite vast, and those of us who live between the Pillars of Heracles and the river Phasis [the then-known world] inhabit only a small part of it around the sea, like ants or frogs around a pond.”



Whole families joined in the grape harvest. The artist who decorated this vase emphasized the graceful curves of a grapevine.

not surprising, then, that the Greeks grew olives and grapes and raised many of these smaller animals. Cows belonged mostly to wealthy people, and for a long time wheat had to be imported.

Life by the sea molded the Greek character and Greek society. The warm water kept the winters from being very cold, and the Greeks spent much of their time outdoors. They shopped in open-air markets and conducted much of their legal business out in public where everyone could see it. Plays

were held in outdoor theaters, and elections were held outside on a hill called the Pnyx.

The sea helped the Greeks' economy, too. They had to travel to trade their precious olive oil and wine for other supplies such as wood, metal ores, grain, and animal products like meat, hides, and wool. So they developed fast, sturdy boats and learned how to navigate.

The sailors didn't just trade. Some of them became pirates, and travelers also would take advantage of any opportunity to conquer other people and take their belongings. In the epic poem the *Odyssey*, written about 725 BCE, the Greek hero Odysseus spent many years sailing home from war. Whenever he had the chance to raid the cities he came across on his travels, he did so. The author of the *Odyssey*, Homer, says that Odysseus boasted to one king he met on his journey,

“ Homer, *Odyssey*, about 725 BCE

From Troy, the great winds seized us and then let us off
At Ismarus . . .

I sacked the city and I killed its folk,
And taking all the women and the goods,
We split them up amongst ourselves, fairly,
In such a way that none would get shortchanged.

Apparently, it didn't occur to Odysseus that the women of Ismarus were also people, and that the “folk” whose possessions got split up evenly among the raiders would disagree with his idea of what's fair and what isn't.

Some other ancient people were afraid of the Greeks because of their skill at seafaring and their piracy. In the *Odyssey*, the mythical cyclops Polyphemus spoke for a lot of the neighbors of the Greeks when he asks Odysseus,

Strangers, who are you?
 From where do you come sailing o'er the watery way?
 Is it on some business, or are you recklessly roving
 As pirates do, when they sail on the salt sea and venture
 Their lives as they wander, bringing evil to alien people?

66 Homer, *Odyssey*, about
 725 BCE

So the land and sea shaped the Greeks. But the Greeks were curious and inventive people, and they took what nature had given them as a starting point for new achievements. In time their gods were able to look down from Mount Olympus onto amazing cities. The goddess Athena could see workmen bustling around her special city, Athens, building the temple to her called the Parthenon. The king of the gods, Zeus, had a great seat from which to watch the games that were held in his honor every four years, many miles away. All the gods could observe people gather together and vote, watch plays, or argue over important questions. The civilization the Greeks were carving out in this beautiful land was something that the world had never seen before, and that still influences our lives today.



The giant cyclops Polyphemus (here shrunk down to fit on a pot) was blinded by Odysseus and his men after he started eating their companions.