

# Geography Shapes Greek Life

## **BACKGROUND:**

In ancient times, Greece was not a united country. It was a collection of separate lands where Greek-speaking people lived. By 2000 BCE, the Minoans lived on the large Greek island of Crete. The Minoans created an elegant civilization that had great power in the Mediterranean world. At the same time, Indo-European peoples migrated from the plains along the Black Sea and Anatolia. The Indo-Europeans settled in mainland Greece. Seaborne commercial networks spread ideas as well as resources throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

Ancient Greece consisted mainly of a mountainous peninsula jutting out into the Mediterranean Sea. It also included approximately 1,400 islands in the Aegean and Ionian seas. Lands on the western coast of Anatolia were also part of ancient Greece. The region's physical geography directly shaped Greek traditions and customs.

## **THE SEA:**

The sea shaped Greek civilization just as rivers shaped the ancient civilizations of Egypt, the Fertile Crescent, India, and China. In one sense, the Greeks did not live on a land but AROUND a sea. Greeks rarely traveled more than 85 miles to reach the coastline. The Aegean Sea, the Ionian Sea, and the neighboring Black Sea were important transportation routes for the Greek people. These liquid highways linked most parts of Greece. As the Greeks became skilled sailors, sea travel also connected Greece with other societies. Sea travel and trade were also important because Greece itself was poor in natural resources. Greece lacked timber, precious metals, and usable farmland.

## **THE LAND:**

Rugged mountains covered about three-fourths of ancient Greece. Mountains divided the land into a number of different regions. The mountain chains ran mainly from northwest to southeast along the Balkan peninsula. They significantly influenced Greek political life. Unlike the Egyptians or the Chinese, it was difficult to unite the ancient Greeks under a single government. Greece developed small, independent communities within each little valley and its surrounding mountains. Most Greeks gave their loyalty to these local communities.

In ancient times, the uneven terrain also made land transportation difficult. Early Greek roads were little more than dirt paths. For example, the city-state of Sparta was only about 60 miles from Olympia, the site of the Olympic Games. Yet it took Spartans almost seven days to travel that distance.

Much of the land itself was stony and only a small part of it—approximately 20 percent—was arable, or suitable for farming. Tiny but fertile valleys covered about one-fourth of Greece. The small streams that watered these valleys were not suitable for large-scale irrigation projects.

With so little fertile farmland or fresh water for irrigation, Greece was never able to support a large population. It is estimated that no more than a few million people lived in ancient Greece at any given time. Even this small population couldn't expect the land to support a life of luxury. As a result, the Greeks based their diet on basic staple crops such as grains, grapes, and olives. A desire for more living space, grassland for raising livestock, and adequate farmland may have been factors that motivated the Greeks to seek new sites for colonies.

## **THE CLIMATE:**

Climate was the third important environmental influence on Greek civilization. Greece has a varied climate with temperatures averaging 48 degrees Fahrenheit in the winter and 80 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer. In ancient times, these moderate temperatures supported an outdoor life for many Greek citizens. Men spent much of their leisure time at outdoor public events. They met often to discuss public issues, exchange news, and take an active part in civic life.