Statue of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and protector of cities. Foreground: temple of Poseidon

Fifteen-year-old Pericles, as you read in the story, watched his fellow Greeks defeat Persia, the greatest empire on Earth. The battle of Salamis was a turning point in Greek history. After Salamis, Greek culture reached a peak in art, drama, philosophy, and political science. It helped form Western civilization—the civilization of Europe and the Americas. The Greeks gave us words and traditions such as democracy, geometry, politics, and the Olympic games. How did the Greeks come to have so much influence on our world?

**Geography of the Greek World**

In ancient times, there was no country called Greece. Instead, there were communities of Greek speakers scattered across the islands and coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. This early Greek world lay on the fringe of two continents—Europe and Asia. Travelers and traders passed through the region exchanging goods, ideas, and customs.

**A Rugged Land** Modern Greece occupies a large peninsula that juts into the Mediterranean Sea. A peninsula is a land area almost surrounded by water. A number of other peninsulas also extend from the peninsula of mainland Greece. The largest of them, in southern Greece, is called the Peloponnesian (pel uh puh NEE shun) Peninsula.

About 2000 B.C., Greek-speaking peoples entered these lands from the north. They settled on mainland Greece. A mainland is an area of land that is part of a continent. Greek speakers also settled on the islands of the Aegean (ee JEE un) Sea.
Mainland Greece is divided by mountain ranges. Between these ranges lie narrow valleys and small plains. The mountains were good for grazing sheep and goats, but they were too steep and rocky for farming. Less than one quarter of the land could be used to grow crops. The only fertile land was in the lowland valleys and plains. Here people settled in farming communities.

The mountains isolated these lowland communities. So a fiercely independent spirit developed among the Greeks. They never attempted to unite under a single government. In fact, Greek cities were often at war with one another.

**Surrounded by the Sea** Although mountain ranges isolated communities, the sea brought contact with the wider world. The Greeks became skillful sailors and merchants. Greek fishing and trading ships crisscrossed the waters of the Mediterranean Sea to the south, the Aegean Sea to the east, and the Ionian (eye oh nee un) Sea to the west. This led to contact with the older, more complex cultures of North Africa and Asia.

**A Mediterranean Climate** Greece has a Mediterranean climate, with mild, wet winters and hot, dry summers. The lack of rain made it difficult to grow shallow-rooted crops such as grains, which need frequent watering. So the mainland Greeks were always searching for foreign sources of grain. On the other hand, the Mediterranean climate was ideal for growing deep-rooted plants such as olive trees and grape vines. Olive oil and wine became important trade goods and brought in wealth.

**Reading Check** How did physical geography shape Greek culture?
Early Greek History

The Greeks were influenced by an early civilization—the Minoans. Minoan culture developed on Crete, an island south of mainland Greece. It spread across the Aegean islands and influenced mainland Greece around 2000 B.C.

Minoan Civilization  Minoan civilization was highly advanced. The Minoans had a writing system and built huge stone palaces with running water, like the one at Knossos (nah sus). They traded goods throughout the Mediterranean.

Around 1450 B.C., Minoan palaces and towns were mysteriously destroyed. Most historians believe that mainland Greeks were responsible.

The Mycenaean  The Minoans influenced a civilization that developed among Greek speakers on mainland Greece. This civilization, known as Mycenaean (my suh nee un), developed around 1600 B.C. Each Mycenaean town was governed by a monarchy, a government headed by a king. Mycenaean rulers lived in stone fortresses on hilltops overlooking their towns.

The Mycenaean made fine bronze weapons and pottery. They traded these goods for copper, ivory, and luxury goods from other lands. Mycenaean sometimes raided other peoples and one another for gold and other goods.

Eventually, the Mycenaean kingdoms grew weak. Then, around 1100 B.C., this civilization was destroyed by newcomers from the north known as Dori ans.
The Dark Age  With the fall of the Mycenaean, Greek culture declined. People lost the ability to read and write. The following period, which lasted roughly from 1100 to 750 B.C., has been called a dark age. During these centuries, mainland Greeks migrated across the Aegean, settling the islands and the west coast of Asia Minor, an area that became known as Ionia (eye oh nee a).

The Greeks in Ionia never forgot the “heroic age” of the Mycenaean. They told and sang stories of the world that existed before the dark age. One of these stories was about the Trojan War.

Reading Check  What happened during the dark age?

The Trojan War
In the legend of the Trojan War, warriors from Mycenaean kingdoms sailed across the Aegean to attack Troy, a city in Asia Minor. The ten-year-long conflict ended when the Greeks tricked the Trojans into accepting a “gift” of a large wooden horse. Greeks hiding in the horse crept out and opened the city gates. The Greek army entered and burned Troy to the ground.

For centuries, the stories of the Trojan War were recited or sung, as the Greeks could no longer read or write. Then, in the 700s B.C., the Greeks developed an alphabet based on the Phoenician alphabet. According to tradition, a poet named Homer shaped the stories of the Trojan War into a long epic poem, the Iliad. The poem was eventually written down.

The Iliad tells of events during the war but stops before the Greeks’ eventual victory. Homer’s Odyssey is another epic poem, which describes the adventures of the hero Odysseus on his journey home after the war.

The Iliad and the Odyssey shaped Greek culture. Students learned the verses by heart. The values expressed in these poems became part of Greek identity. One of those values was courage. In the Iliad, the warrior Achilles speaks to his troops before battle:

“Every man make up his mind to fight
And move on his enemy! Strong as I am,
It’s hard for me to face so many men
And fight with all at once....
And yet I will!”

—Homer, the Iliad

The ancient Greeks tried to live up to the ideals of bravery, strength, and honor expressed in Homer’s work.

Reading Check  How did Homer preserve the memory of Mycenaean civilization?
Emergence of City-States

By the time Homer’s epics were composed, each Greek community had begun to organize itself into a polis, or city-state. The city-state became one of the most important features of Greek culture. The Greeks created such city-states everywhere they settled.

The Polis  A polis was more than just a city. It was a community with its own government. The government of a polis ruled a wide area that included not only the city but its surrounding villages and countryside as well.

Each Greek city-state usually had a marketplace and government center. Here members of the city-state who had legal rights—the citizens—would meet to make laws and discuss issues affecting the entire community.

The area and population of a polis were generally small. All the citizens of the polis could gather to make decisions as a single group.

The City-State of CORINTH

Corinth was one of the richest city-states in Greece. The city’s economic power grew from its location. Corinth controlled not only the north-south land route across the Isthmus of Corinth, but also the east-west sea route. A special roadway allowed ships to be dragged across the five-mile-wide isthmus.

THINK CRITICALLY  Study the map. Explain why Corinth’s location was important to communication and trade.

The ruins of ancient Corinth ▼
The High City  A typical polis was usually built on two levels. On a high hill stood the **acropolis** (uh KRAH puh lis), a word meaning “high city.” Public buildings and marble temples were located in this area. The acropolis also served as a fortress in times of danger. On lower ground, below the hill, lay people's homes, shops, and farms. In Athens, the lower city included the agora, or marketplace. There people gathered to discuss public affairs.

Politics in the Polis  The word **polis** gave rise to the term **politics**, the art and practice of government. Each city-state had a different kind of government. Some city-states were monarchies, ruled by a king. In early times the polis was governed by an **aristocracy**, a hereditary class of rulers. Aristocracy meant “rule by the best people.”

But in some city-states an extraordinary thing happened—the citizens began governing themselves. Rule by citizens made such Greek city-states unique. By contrast, in most of the world, priests and kings held all the political power.

Even though self-government was a feature of most city-states, not everyone was allowed to participate in making decisions. Women, slaves, and foreigners were all excluded from the process. The polis had three kinds of inhabitants: citizens (who could vote), women and free foreigners (who could not vote), and slaves, who had few rights at all.

Pride in the Polis  Citizens felt strong pride and loyalty toward their polis. Greeks believed that a good citizen should always be willing to sacrifice for his city. He should be prepared to die for his polis, if necessary.

As one historian wrote, “The polis was the framework of Greek life.” Greeks identified with their city. If their polis was a success, so were they. Throughout the history of ancient Greece, the polis played a key role in Greek life.

Reading Check  What was the polis?