

Independent cities

Ancient Greece was comprised of hundreds of essentially independent city-states, partly due to the geography of Greece. Communities were separated by mountains, hills, and water. Rather than a unified nation, Ancient Greece was more like a network of communities with a shared religion and language that sometimes led to a sense of common belonging.

Despite these cultural commonalities, affiliations between city-states were loose and short-lived. The Delian and Peloponnesian Leagues, for example, were dominated by one strong city-state. Another good example is how conflict with Persia prompted several city-states to unify against a common enemy, but not all Greek city-states were involved; further, once the external threat was diminished, conflict between the city-states resumed.

Even as Greeks colonized the Mediterranean and Black seas, new colonies, while recognizing a “mother” city-state, were largely independent. Even after Philip II of Macedon brought mainland Greece under his League of Corinth, the individual city-states still retained much of their essential independence.

Shared culture and religion

Ancient Greeks were unified by traditions like the panhellenic games and other athletic competitions. These competitions also had religious significance and were often tied to Greek mythology. The most significant of these games were the Olympic Games.

The ancient Olympic Games were a sporting event held every four years at the sacred site of Olympia in honor of Zeus, the supreme god of Greek religion. Involving participants and spectators from all over Greece and beyond, the Olympic Games were the most important cultural event in ancient Greece and were held from 776 BCE to 393 CE, a run of 293 consecutive Olympiads.

In the ancient Greek world, religion was personal, direct, and present in all areas of life. It revolved around myths which explained the origins of mankind and gave the gods a human face. Temples dominated the urban landscape

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and city festivals and national sporting and artistic competitions were frequent, so religion was never far from the mind of an ancient Greek.

Individuals in Greek society probably had varying degrees of religious belief—and some may have been skeptics—but Greek society could only function as it did because certain fundamentals were generally accepted throughout society: the gods existed, they could influence human affairs, and they welcomed and responded to acts of piety and worship.

The temple was the place where, on special occasions, religion took on a more formal tone. Gods were worshipped at sacred sites and temples in all major Greek communities during ceremonies carried out by priests and their attendants.

At first, sacred sites were merely a simple altar in a designated area, but over time massive temples were built in honor of particular gods. These temples usually housed a cult statue of the deity being honored; two famous examples are the huge statue of Athena in the Parthenon of Athens and the statue of Zeus at Olympia.

Athletic Games and competitions in music and theatre—both tragedy and comedy—were held during festivals honoring particular gods, such as the City Dionysia of Athens and the Panhellenic games at the sacred sites of Olympia, Delphi, Nemea, and Isthmia. These events were attended by visitors from all over Greece, and the experience was perhaps more akin to a pilgrimage rather than a modern sports event. Warfare was prohibited during these sacred events and pilgrims were guaranteed free passage across Greece.

Life in the polis

Although individual poleis—plural of polis, or city-state—each had their own particular institutions and practices, there were several features common to the majority of Greek city-states. In most poleis, the majority of the population lived in the city rather than being spread across small farm communities in the surrounding territory; also, the heart of the urban area was usually a sacred space with one or more temples.

From the seventh century BCE, cities were usually fortified with city walls—Sparta being a notable exception—and the agora space, a common public area, was created for civic and commercial activity. From the fifth century BCE,

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many poleis displayed evidence of town planning—especially in newly established colonies—with specific areas of the city designated for private, public, and religious functions. Many poleis also had designated spaces for public assembly, either for political purposes or for entertainment—for example, a theatre or a gymnasium.

In Greek society, men were the most powerful group, but other social groups—women, children, enslaved people, freed people, labourers, and foreigners—could make up as much as 90 percent of the total polis population. All of these groups had to be included and involved in the polis in order for it to function as a cohesive community.

One way of doing this was to create a sense of solidarity by fostering a social identity that differentiated the polis from all others. This identity was achieved in various ways, such as the creation of a communal space where people could mix and socialize—the agora. Polis-specific festivals and celebrations on specific dates in the year—usually of a religious nature—reinforced the idea that the polis had a unique, often mythical, founder and patron deity.

1. Why did the geography of Greece prevent city-states from being geographically unified?

2. What were some common features of Greek city-states?