

Ancient Greece: The Birth of the City-State

By History.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.19.17

Word Count **663**



The ancient temple of the Parthenon atop the Acropolis hill is illuminated in Athens, Greece, on April 26, 2016. Photo by: Aris Messinis/AFP/Getty Images

The term ancient Greece refers to the time between 800 and 500 B.C. Those years are also known as the archaic period.

The archaic period was an important time in world history. There were advances in art, writing and science. Most of all, though, it was the age in which the city-state was invented. A city-state is a city that governs itself, rather than being controlled by a country or empire.

The Greek city-state is also known as the polis. It was the center of Greek life for hundreds of years.

Protected by a god or goddess

During the so-called “Greek Dark Ages” before the archaic period, people lived scattered around Greece in small farming villages. As these villages grew larger, they began to develop. Some built walls, and most built a marketplace and a community meeting place.

They developed governments and organized their citizens according to some sort of set of laws. They raised armies and collected taxes. Every one of these city-states was said to be protected by a particular god or goddess. For example, Athens' goddess was Athena.

The largest city-state was Sparta, which controlled about 300 square miles of territory. The smallest had just a few hundred people. They all mostly relied on agriculture, rather than trade. For this reason, land was every city-state's most valuable possession. Also, most of the city-states had overthrown their kings, and were ruled by a small number of very rich nobles.

These nobles had all the power. For example, they refused to let ordinary people serve on the councils that made decisions. They also controlled the best farmland, and some even claimed to be descended from the gods. According to the fourth century B.C. philosopher Aristotle, "the poor with their wives and children were enslaved to the rich."

Colonies without a king

As the city-states grew, land became harder and harder to get. Many families decided to move away from their city-state and into less populated areas in Greece and beyond. Between 750 B.C. and 600 B.C., Greek colonies sprang up from the Mediterranean to Asia Minor, from North Africa to the coast of the Black Sea. By the end of the seventh century B.C., there were more than 1,500 colonial city-states.

Each of these city-states was independent. In this way, the colonies of the archaic period were different from other colonies we are familiar with, such as colonial America before it declared independence. The people who lived in the Greek colonies were not ruled by or bound to the city-states from which they came. The new city states were entirely self-governing.

The rise and fall of the tyrants

As time passed and their populations grew, many of these agricultural city-states began to produce goods for sale, such as pottery, cloth, wine and metalwork. Trade in these goods made some people very rich. Usually, these traders were not members of the old landowning class.

The newly rich traders were unhappy with the nobles who were in power. They banded together to put new leaders in charge, sometimes with the help of soldiers.

These new leaders were known as tyrants. Some turned out to be every bit as unjust as the nobles they replaced. Others proved to be enlightened leaders. For example, Theagenes of Megara brought running water to his city.

The rule of the tyrants did not last, however. The classical period that followed the archaic period brought great change. The tyrants were replaced by a system known as demokratia, or “rule by the people.” This system was the beginning of what we call democracy today.

Archaic renaissance?

The archaic period was a time of tremendous growth in the arts and sciences. The poet Homer produced his "Iliad" and "Odyssey." Artists created beautiful, lifelike statues. The scientist Anaximandros developed a theory of gravity. Xenophanes discovered that fossils were the remains of ancient animals.

The archaic period was an important time. It laid the groundwork for the monumental changes of the next few centuries.

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the article BEST supports the idea that the archaic period in Greece helped lead to a very important time in world history?
- (A) There were advances in art, writing and science.
 - (B) It was the center of Greek life for hundreds of years.
 - (C) They banded together to put new leaders in charge, sometimes with the help of soldiers.
 - (D) It laid the groundwork for the monumental changes of the next few centuries.
- 2 According to the article, how did villages develop into city-states?
- (A) Villages were forced to join larger cities by kings who wanted more land and money for their people.
 - (B) Villages built and organized their communities and created governments with laws as they grew larger.
 - (C) Villages grew larger and elected leaders to govern them through a process similar to modern democracy.
 - (D) Villages were created by rulers called tyrants so they could make money from those who sold things.
- 3 What was the relationship between nobles and traders during the archaic period in Greece?
- (A) Nobles and traders owned almost all the land in the city-states, so the poor people worked to put new leaders called tyrants in charge.
 - (B) Nobles and traders worked together to help city-states become more independent, but nobles eventually stole money from the traders.
 - (C) Traders who were rich but did not own land were unhappy with the power of the land-owning nobles, so they put new leaders in charge.
 - (D) Traders who were very rich worked hard to buy land from the nobles so they could become part of the land-owning class and have power.
- 4 Select the paragraph from the section "The rise and fall of the tyrants" that suggests changes in Greek leadership influenced modern government.