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Physical Geography of Greece

A Greek legend has it that the Gods distributed soil for the entire world through a sieve and used the stones that remained to build Greece.

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.

Greece is the southernmost of the countries of the Balkan Peninsula. Geography has greatly influenced the country's development. The southernmost part of mainland Greece, Peloponnese peninsula, connects to the mainland only by the narrow isthmus at the head of the Gulf of Corinth. The rocky headlands and peninsulas (land surrounded by water on 3 sides) extend outward to the sea where there are many islands. 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

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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.

Athens sprawls across the central plain of Attica, surrounded by four large mountains: Mount Aegaleo to the west, Mount Parnitha to the north, Mount Penteli to the northeast and Mount Hymettus to the east. Beyond Mount Aegaleo lies the Thriasian plain, which forms an extension of the central plain to the west. The Saronic Gulf lies to the southwest. Mount Parnitha is the tallest of the four mountains.

Sparta is located in the region of Laconia, in the south-eastern Peloponnese. Ancient Sparta was built on the banks of the Evrotas River, the main river of Laconia, which provided it with a source of fresh water. The valley of the Evrotas is a natural fortress, bounded to the west by Mt. Taygetus (2407 m) and to the east by Mt. Parnon (1935 m). To the north, Laconia is separated from Arcadia by hilly uplands reaching 1000 m in altitude. These natural defenses worked to Sparta's advantage and contributed to Sparta never having been sacked.

Corinth is located about 78 kilometres southwest of Athens. Geophysically the city is likewise surrounded by the narrow coastal plain of Vocha, Corinthian Gulf, Corinth Canal, the Isthmus of Corinth, Saronic Gulf, Oneia Mountains, and the monolithic rock of Acrocorinth. The Isthmus of Corinth connects the Peloponnese with mainland Greece. In ancient times ships were dragged over the isthmus in transit between the Saronikós and Corinthian gulfs.

Thebes is northwest of Athens and was one of the chief cities and powers of ancient Greece. On the acropolis of the ancient city stands the present commercial and agricultural centre of Thebes. It is situated on a low ridge dividing the surrounding plain. It has abundant springs of water, the most famous in antiquity being called Dirce, and the fertile plain in the vicinity is well irrigated.

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. 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.

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THE CLIMATE:

The climate in Greece is predominantly Mediterranean. The Mediterranean climate is characterized by two seasons: the first dry and hot, from April to September (river beds tend to dry up); the second is humid, and is marked by often violent rain storms brought in by west winds, with mild, frost-free temperatures. As such in the mountains winters can be rigorous and snowy. Attica, Cyclades, the south of Peloponnese, and Crete are more dry than the rest of Greece. 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.

Checking for Understanding

How did the mountains affect the development of city states in Ancient Greece?

Which of the major Greek city states were near mountains?

Why were many Greek city states located near to the sea?

Why did the Ancient Greeks colonize other areas?

Please staple this sheet to the back of your map and hand in to Miss. Lambeck