

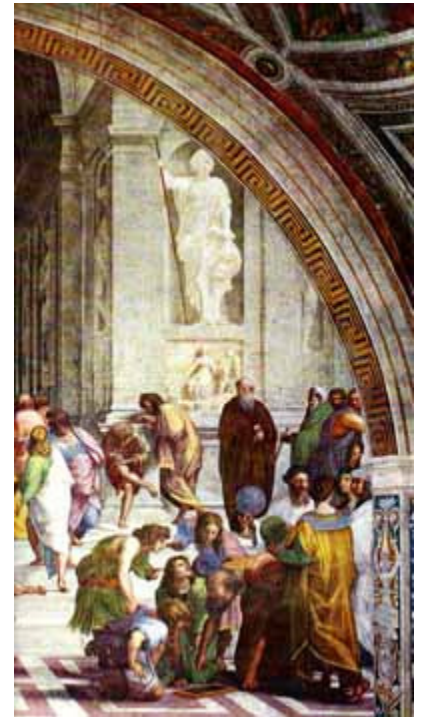
Ancient Greece - Brief Summary

For centuries Greece has exerted an enchantment over the imaginations of men. The Romans, who incorporated Greece into their empire, and in the process did not hesitate to sack its cities, were deeply impressed by Greece. Young Romans were sent to study at the university in Athens, and educated Romans looked to the Greeks as their masters in philosophy, science and the fine arts. Despite the Romans' confidence in their own imperial mission and their gift for government, they felt, a little uneasily, that there was much in art, letters and thought which they could never hope to do as well as the Greeks.

When the Italian Renaissance of the 15th Century A.D. brought an intensified interest in the ancient world, Rome at first held the attention. But behind the imposing Roman facade, scholars and poets felt the presence of something more powerful and more alluring. Slowly this was disentangled from the mists of the past, and the full majesty of the Greek performance, and its subsequent adoption by the Romans, was revealed. So great was Greek prestige that Greek ideas on medicine, astronomy and geography were accepted with unquestioning faith until the 17th Century, when the birth of a new scientific spirit inaugurated the era of experiment and inquiry into which we ourselves have been born.

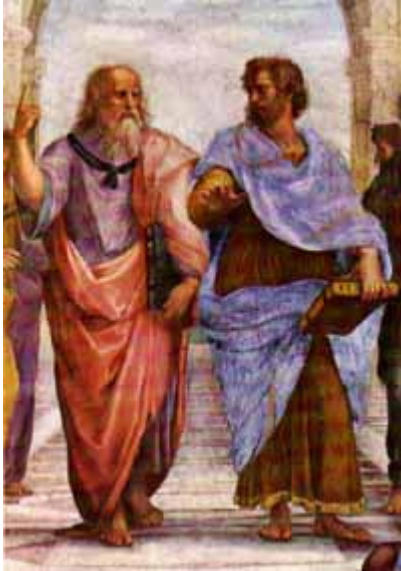
Even today, when we have discarded so many creeds and cosmologies, the Greek view of life excites and exalts us. Greek thought and Greek assumptions are closely woven into the fabric of our lives almost without our knowing it, and for this reason alone we are right to wish to know about the Greeks, to assess the value and the scope of their achievement. No people can afford to neglect its own origins, and the modern world is far too deeply indebted to Greece to accept in unthinking ingratitude what it has inherited.

At the center of the Greek outlook lay an unshakable belief in the worth of the individual man. In centuries when large parts of the earth were dominated by the absolute monarchies of the east, the Greeks were evolving their belief that a man must be respected not as the instrument of an omnipotent overlord, but for his own sake. They sought at all costs to be themselves, and in this they were helped by the nature of their country.



Raphael's *School of Athens*
Euclid shown in the foreground





School of Athens: Plato and Aristotle



Geographically, Greece was in ancient times very much what it is today: the southernmost extremity of the huge Balkan mass. A land of hard limestone mountains separated by deep valleys, it is cut almost in two by the narrow divide of the Corinthian Gulf. To the east the structure of the mainland is continued intermittently by islands, and the whole pattern is rounded off to the south by the long rampart of Crete, which has been called "the steppingstone of continents." Even including the islands, Greece is a small country, smaller than Yemen or Florida. Moreover, this small area has never been able to support more than a few million inhabitants, and yet in the history of Western civilization it has played an enormous part.

The reason is partly geographical. In Egypt and Mesopotamia, in the great riverlands of the Nile and the Euphrates, it was easy to subject a large population to a single ruler and to see that each man performed an allotted function in a vast, unified system. But in Greece, where every district was separated from the next by mountains or the sea, central control of this kind was impossible, and men were forced to be not specialists in this or that profession but masters of a whole range of crafts and accomplishments. Each separate group was deeply aware of its own being, and within each group its members were cognizant of their responsibilities. The Greek climate, dry and exhilarating and gifted with the most magical of skies, incited to action, while the sea, which was always at hand, developed in its servants an unusual skill of both hand and eye.

Nature nursed the Greeks in a hard school, but this made them conscious of themselves and their worth. Without this self-awareness they would never have made their most important contribution to human experience: the belief that a man must be honored for his individual worth and treated with respect just because he is himself. In the words of the great Athenian statesman Pericles: "Each single one of our citizens, in all the manifold aspects of life, is able to show himself the rightful lord and owner of his own person, and do this, moreover, with exceptional grace and exceptional versatility."

This is what the Greeks meant by liberty. Just as they detested the thought of being conquered, so in their own circles a man claimed for himself the freedom to do all of which he was capable, to realize his full potential within his society, to speak what was in his mind, to go his own way without interference from other men. The belief in freedom was sustained by a deep respect for personal honor, and nurtured by a love for action.



The Acropolis

This feeling among the Greeks may have started as something vague, but it was deeply felt, and it matured into reasoned philosophy which long after shaped, and still shapes, our own philosophies. Supported by ethical and psychological arguments, it was based on convictions which we take so much for granted today that we can hardly imagine what efforts must have been made to establish the philosophy, or what its absence meant outside Greece. It had its own dangers, of course, especially the risk that in asserting their own claims men would pay too little attention to their neighbors' and reduce society to anarchy. And indeed Greek states did suffer gravely from internal dissensions. Nevertheless they survived as centers of order because the Greek belief in liberty was inextricably associated with the existence of law.

The Greeks did not invent law or originate the notion of it. Codes of law existed in Babylonia when the Greeks were still little better than savages, and the Mosaic Law of Israel is also ancient. But Greek law, which emerged in the seventh century B.C., differed from these in several respects. First, it was not intended to carry out the will either of an omnipotent monarch or of a god; Greek law aimed entirely at improving the lot of mortal humans. Second, while these earlier systems could be changed virtually at the will of a king or a priesthood, Greek law was usually based on some kind of popular consent and could be changed only by being referred to the people for their approval. Finally, Greek law was expected to secure life and property for all members of a society, not just for a select group of leaders or priests. The Greeks regarded themselves as vastly superior in this respect to the Persians, who, utterly dependent on their king's whim, were in the Greek view no better than slaves.

From the first Greek lawgivers stems the whole majestic succession of the West's legal systems. The Romans, great lawmakers in their own right, learned from the Greeks. In turn, the comprehensive codes of Gaius and Justinian gave rise to most modern legal systems.

The belief in law emphasized and strengthened an ethnic pride which shaped the whole political development of the Greeks. A Greek state consisted of a city and of the lands around it which provided its livelihood. Each state formed its own habits, rules and government; as a consequence local loyalties were remarkably strong. But beyond this, the Greeks had a second loyalty, vaguer perhaps and not always paramount, but in the end irresistible. Though they quarreled and fought with one another, they felt strongly that they were all Greeks, men who spoke some form of the same language, worshiped the same gods and obeyed the same customs. Though they never created a truly national state such as those of the modern world, they presented a strong contrast to the multinational empires of Babylonia or Persia, which comprised a large number of different peoples held together not because they shared a common culture or ideal but simply because they were subjects of a despotic ruler. Whenever the Greeks were attacked by a foreign enemy, they fought against him to defend their Greek heritage as well as their local liberties.

The Greeks' sense of personal achievement, of a man's obligation to make the most of his natural gifts, led them to give to the works of their hands the same care and attention that they gave to the structure of political life. In the Greek view, anything worth doing was worth doing well, and the remains of their humblest pots have a remarkable distinction. Even objects so utilitarian as coins are little masterpieces of relief sculpture in gold or silver.



Darius, Persia's King, decides to invade Greece



We may ask why so much of the Greeks' work, which has survived the centuries by accident and is therefore truly representative of what they did, has so high a quality, so fine a design. The answer is partly that the Greek artisans worked for specific patrons instead of manufacturing wholesale for an anonymous public. The patrons (who included the state) knew what they wanted and insisted on getting it. The Greeks wanted their arts and handicrafts to stand the acid tests of time and to keep their attraction for future generations; in this fashion they hoped to prolong their own influence into the future. In addition, they had a strong desire to impose order on any disordered mass of material, such as rock or clay in its natural state. Not content to leave things as they found them, they wished to rearrange and shape them. But they employed restraint in this process, and the result has that quality of balance and completeness which we call classical.

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Marble Kore of 510 BC by an artist from Chios

In the major arts, notably in sculpture, this sense of fine workmanship was inspired and reinforced by something more exalted. Greek sculpture was meant to be seen in public places, principally in temples, and it had to be worthy of the gods. It had to have a nobility and dignity, and yet it could not be too remote from everyday things, for in these the gods were believed to be always at work. All this explains why Greek art at its best never aimed at violent, gross or grotesque effects. Instead it showed men in the full strength of their lithe, muscular bodies, women in the rippling drapery of their finest clothes.

When Greek art dealt with animals, as it often did, it displayed dogs alert to every scent and sound, lions leaping on their prey with savage mastery, horses elegantly on the move. This art found its material in the real world, but the artist felt that to do justice to what he saw, he must impart to it an order and balance. What was true of high sculpture was no less true of humbler arts such as decorations on pottery. The explanation in each case is that art was intended to perpetuate something visible by revealing what was most important in it.

The Greeks were a people who lacked inhibitions in speaking about themselves, and as might be expected, they delighted in words. They had at their disposal a wonderfully subtle, expressive and adaptable language, and they made full use of it. With the Greeks, as with many peoples, poetry came before prose. Poetry, in fact, became almost a second religion, and it was created with all the care and insight that was accorded to the visual arts. Poets were highly esteemed. A poet, said the philosopher Socrates, was "a light and winged and holy thing." Greek poets wrote about all sorts of subjects: farming, local lore, the weather. If a man, any man, had something important to say he often said it in verse — which in the early days meant that he said it in song, for almost all Greek poetry was originally sung or spoken to music.



Mask of a buffoon

Poetry was the Greeks' immediate response to a wide range of experience, and to reflect this variety they invented or perfected many of the poetic forms we know today. They seem to have begun with the heroic epic, which is objective storytelling in verse of exciting and tragic events. They followed this with a more personal, more emotional poetry, which was sung to the lyre and is called lyric for this reason. At their high noon the Greeks invented both tragedy and comedy, the first dealing with the darker and more difficult relations between the gods and men, the second viewing with derisive ribaldry all manner of human foibles. Even in later years they continued to write charming poetry, though its strength had become diminished and its subjects less majestic.



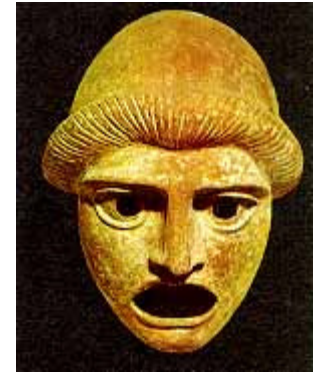
Theater mask of King Priam of Troy

The most striking quality of Greek literature, poetry and prose alike, is that it is as alive and relevant today as it was



Mask of a satyr

when it was first written. We cannot fail to respond to the extraordinary power with which it presents issues of perennial urgency. We may admire it for its technical skill, but what binds us to it is its profound humanity, its wise appreciation of human values. It deals with precise issues in a universal way, and it gains our attention not by arguing for this side or for that but by presenting a situation in full, in all its powerful implications. Its extraordinary immediacy and directness drive home its imaginative thoughts with an irresistible power, and behind it we feel the living force of people who were eager to examine their destinies with the utmost candor and passion.



Mask of a youth



Socrates

The arts were not the only creative fields in which the Greeks excelled. The nature of the physical world excited their curiosity and led them to make spectacular scientific hypotheses. Before them, to be sure, much of a practical nature had been accomplished in such fields as astronomy and engineering by Egyptians and Babylonians. The Greeks' unique contribution was to provide a theoretical basis for these applied sciences. They sought general principles, and in the process became not only the founders of science but of philosophy (literally, "love of knowledge"). To the Greeks the two fields were closely related, both being means by which men could seek to find out more about the nature of things, and both moving by argument and proof from one hypothesis to another.

If in their practical way the Greeks needed astronomy for navigation and an understanding of weights and stresses for building, they strengthened and broadened this technical knowledge with theories and general principles about the nature of matter and space and motion, which they expressed in mathematics, especially in geometry. Then they often reaped the benefits in other fields: Pythagoras set a firm foundation for music, for example, by discovering the numerical ratios of the lengths of string that would produce a seven-note scale.

While Greek science was developing on a theoretical basis, it also saw the need for observation and experiment. When medicine flowered in the fifth century B.C. under the inspiration of the great physician Hippocrates of Cos, its first task was the collection of data from which deductions could be drawn. Thus, in the identification of diseases, a Greek doctor set great store on the correct description of symptoms, and proceeded from that point to do what he could to effect a cure. Medicine was of course very much in its infancy, and doctors were much better at diagnosing a complaint than in knowing what to do for it, but at least they had made a great advance over the old days when illnesses were thought to be curable by amulets, magic charms and the like. In surgery the beginnings were primitive enough, but by experimenting on animals and learning something about the principles

of physiology, the Greeks were able to deal with fractures and dislocations, which were common among athletes, and with wounds, especially head wounds, received in war.



Plato

The spirit which inspired Greek researches into nature was also at work on human actions, and it made the Greeks the first true historians. Their accounts of past events gradually changed from legend to verifiable fact; "What I write here," said Hecataeus of Miletus at the beginning of the fifth century B.C., "is the account of what I thought to be true; for the stories of the Greeks [of other centuries] are numerous, and in my opinion ridiculous."

In pursuing truth for its own sake the Greeks were hampered by no rigid theology. Since they were not tied to creeds, they were free to ask questions about the scheme of things. Such inquiries, far from being thought impious, were often regarded as a quasi-religious activity because they showed the wonderful workings of the gods. As the philosopher Xenophanes said, "The gods did not reveal everything to men at the beginning, but men, as they seek in time, find something better." Thales, a thoroughly rational man, who was able to foretell an eclipse in 585 B.C., nevertheless insisted that "all things are full of gods," and this was the usual Greek attitude.



Aristotle

Thus Greek art and Greek science fitted in happily with Greek religion; indeed, religion did much to inspire and sustain the poets and philosophers. Though Greek gods might seem to modern minds often to fall below the standards demanded of divinity, they had something impressive in common. They were all to a high degree embodiments of power, whether in the physical world or in the mind of man. From them came literally everything, both visible and invisible, and it was the task of the mortals to make the proper use of what the gods provided.

The Greeks took all the familiar steps to keep in contact with their gods. They offered prayers and hymns and sacrifices; they consulted all kinds of oracles; they had countless shrines containing images of the gods. They hoped that the gods would be kind to them, and they spoke of them in the language of friendship. They had no very clear doctrines. Even on the subject of life after death they varied from thinking that the dead were unsubstantial ghosts to imagining an Elysium beyond the Western Sea.

They felt the gods' presence everywhere, especially in times of need such as battle, but equally on high occasions of festival and rejoicing. They thought the gods far more beautiful than men could ever hope to be, and they did not expect them to follow the rules of human behavior. What counted was their power.

Because the gods were the sources of power, men honored every kind of power and wished to display it in their own lives. This applied equally to war, the arts, athletic games and thought. If a Greek did well in any of these, he was making a proper use of his divinely provided gifts and to that extent he was getting nearer to the gods. This is what Aristotle means when he says: "We must be immortal as far as we can." Thus the Greeks stood in an ambivalent relation to their gods, at once eager to be as much like them as possible, yet knowing that humans must not attempt this too eagerly, lest they imagine that they were gods.

This ambivalence proved of great value. From it came the characteristic Greek mixture of energy and moderation, both in life and the arts. While the Greeks zestfully tried every form of action, they tempered it with the maxim "Nothing in excess," and they praised the desirability of the Mean, the middle state between attempting too much and not attempting enough. Needless to say, they did not always achieve the Mean, but it was at least an ideal, and it set its mark on their civilization. They felt in themselves a driving strength which came from the gods, and they knew that it was their task to make the most of this, not by seeking pleasure and sensation (though of course they enjoyed these as the reward for their efforts) but by shaping their lives to rational and desirable ends. As the Greeks set out to make the best of their natural gifts and to be worthy of their human nature, they dedicated themselves to noble toil, to creating something new and splendid, to keeping their bodies as fit as their minds, to making order out of disorder, and to living in harmony with their fellow citizens.



Rendering of the inside of the Acropolis and its statue of Athena. In her right hand is a statue of Nike, goddess of Victory. On her helmet was a Sphinx and on her breast an ivory Medusa.