

Chapter 1

When, Where, What, Who? Meeting the Ancient Greeks

In This Chapter

- ▶ Exploring the land and sea of ancient Greece
 - ▶ Organising ancient Greek history
 - ▶ Writing and reading ancient Greek
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Modern Greece is very different to the Greece of the ancient world.

Today, Greece is a medium sized member of the European Union that uses the euro as its currency. To the north-east it's bordered by Macedonia and to the north-west Albania. Most people think of it as a popular tourist destination, and during the summer months people from around the world flock to the seaside resorts on the mainland and on islands like Crete and Rhodes.

For these visitors, the material remains of the ancient world are still visible. Tourists can look at ruined temples and statues while they sit drinking Mythos beer in bars and restaurants named after Greek gods and heroes. Often, they stay in towns whose names are redolent of the ancient world, like Athens, Delphi, Olympia, and Corinth.

Much like the rest of the Mediterranean, visitors to Greece find great food, friendly people with a strong sense of honour and family values, and a seductively relaxed way of life that seems to go at a slower pace than the rest of the world.

This idyllic and fascinating holiday destination, however, is in sharp contrast to the focus of this book – the Greece of the ancient world. Ancient Greece is about huge events, incredible battles, and tremendous advances in science and understanding that took place over 2,000 years ago.

In this chapter I put the ancient Greeks in historical and geographical context – answering the questions ‘When?’ and ‘Where?’. I also address the fundamental questions about them – precisely who they were, where they came from, and why what they did is still incredibly important.

Understanding Why the Ancient Greeks Matter

Hopefully, you have already decided that the ancient Greeks are worth bothering with – otherwise you wouldn’t be reading this book.

Falling for all things ancient Greek

Simply put, the ancient Greeks were amazing. Their society and culture is endlessly fascinating. If you don’t believe me, try the following for size:

- ✔ Zeus, the ancient Greeks’ most powerful god, changed himself into a bull, a swan, and a shower of gold so that he could make love to beautiful women without his wife finding out. Oh yes, and his wife was also his sister. (See Chapter 19 for more on Zeus and the rest of the ancient Greek gods.)
- ✔ Ancient Greeks thought that the world was an island entirely surrounded by water that looked rather like a fried egg. (See Chapter 19.)
- ✔ They invented the Olympic Games, and their greatest Olympian trained by carrying a cow around for four years. (See Chapter 16.)
- ✔ The Greeks had elaborate religious cults that participated in strange rituals, including swimming with pigs. (See Chapter 21.)
- ✔ One of their philosophers jumped into a volcano to prove he was a god. When he didn’t come back, people realised that he wasn’t one. (See Chapter 22.)

Noting the Greeks’ contributions

Everybody goes on about the Romans and the massive advances in civilised life that they were responsible for such as central heating, straight roads, and Latin. Well, the Romans certainly did a lot, but they were preceded by the Greeks, who were pretty inventive too.

The ancient Greeks are responsible for a fascinating number of creations and inventions: money, democracy, written history, bras, satire, and musical notation are all things that the Greeks are at least partly responsible for creating. You can read more about these and other inventions in Chapter 23.



While inventions are all well and good, the most impressive thing that the Greeks came up with was civilisation itself. *Civilisation*, the whole idea of living together in large towns and cities, was a fairly new concept that the Greeks initiated in Europe.

So who were these fascinating, inventive, and civilised people?

Meeting the People of Ancient Greece



Modern Greece is very different from the Greece of the ancient world. The biggest difference is that what you may think of Greece and being Greek is nothing like the ancients' experience.

'Being Greek' in the ancient world meant that you shared a way of life with people, rather than the citizenship of a single country. Greeks lived all across the Mediterranean: Spain, North Africa, Sicily, southern Italy, Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), the Aegean islands, and of course the land mass that folk call modern Greece. This way of life included:

- ✓ The language that you spoke (see the later section 'Talking the Talk: Ancient Greek Language').
- ✓ The gods that you believed in (see Chapter 19).
- ✓ The food you ate (see Chapter 15).
- ✓ All the other things that make up an individual's identity.



Furthermore, the Greeks of the ancient world didn't necessarily consider themselves to be Greek; rather, they classified themselves as being citizens of the towns or cities from which they came. Greeks only really considered themselves to be Greek in comparison to foreigners. So an Athenian talking to an Egyptian described himself as a Greek, whereas if the same Athenian was talking to somebody from Corinth (another Greek town), he called himself an Athenian.

Locating Ancient Greece

Ancient Greece was very spread out, which means that the people, ideas, and events that I talk about in this book came from and took place all around the Mediterranean and sometimes beyond, as Figure 1-1 shows. Eventually, there were people who considered themselves to be Greek in Spain, France, Italy, North Africa, Libya, and Asia Minor – and in Greece itself of course.

The most densely populated area was the land mass known as Greece today. It's an area that is really dominated by two things – the sea and very large mountain ranges. For the ancient Greeks, the mountain ranges meant that sections of this big slab of land were sometimes very disconnected from each other. This is one of the reasons why people tended to think of themselves in local terms rather than national ones.



Figure 1-1:
The Ancient
Mediterranean.

Greece isn't a very large land mass, and wherever you stand in it you're unlikely to be more than about 50 kilometres from the sea. The land is fertile but also very hilly, which means that it doesn't have vast plains of workable farmland. These two factors are important when considering why so many Greeks decided to leave the land mass and create new towns on the nearby islands and elsewhere in the Mediterranean (see Chapter 7).

Separating the region

You can divide Greece in two at the Gulf of Corinth, the large body of water that runs through the middle of the region:

- ✔ **To the north:** North of the Gulf was the larger part of mainland Greece, although the south was much more heavily populated. The biggest city in this part of Greece was Thebes and also located in the region was the sacred site of Delphi, which was home to the famous oracle. (See Chapter 21 for more.)
- ✔ **To the south:** Southern Greece was divided in two by the Peloponnese mountain range. Most of the famous cities of ancient Greece were here: Sparta, Olympia, Corinth, Argos, and, to the north-east, Athens.

Touring the islands and beyond

Although the Greek mainland is fairly small, bits of what historians consider to be ancient Greece were spread all over the eastern Mediterranean. All the places that people now go to on holiday – approximately 1,400 islands – were part of ancient Greece, as well other more distant lands.

Here's a brief guide to some of the most notable parts of ancient Greece:

- ✔ **Euboiia:** The big peninsula that's just off the eastern coast of Greece. Its people considered themselves to be very different and separate from those on the mainland.
- ✔ **The Cyclades:** The big group of islands in the south, including places like Naxos, Paros, and Delos. The ancient Greeks called this group 'The Circle'.
- ✔ **Asia Minor:** The western coast of modern-day Turkey. During the Dark Ages, loads of Greeks from the mainland moved there and created the new Greek areas of Aeolia and Ionia (for more, see Chapter 3).
- ✔ **Thrace:** At the top of Figure 1-1, the area is now southern Bulgaria. For the ancient Greeks, this area was wild, hilly country full of warlike tribes – definitely a place to avoid!
- ✔ **Crete, Rhodes, and Cyprus:** Big important islands to the south-east that developed their own civilisations independent of the Greek mainland. In fact, civilisation started on Crete; read all about it in Chapter 2.
- ✔ **The western islands:** Important islands to the west of mainland Greece. Corcyra (modern-day Corfu), Cephallenia, Ithaca, and Zakynthos were all in this part of the Mediterranean.
- ✔ **Other islands:** Of the 1,400 islands, only about 250 were inhabited and many of those by not more than about 100 people. Each of the islands has its own fascinating stories and episodes. Islands like Lemnos, Miletus, Samos, and Lesbos are important to the story of the ancient Greeks.

You can visit these islands and many contain fascinating archaeological evidence, some of which is remarkably well preserved, from enormous chunks of ancient temples to the small personal possessions that people used in everyday life. Chapter 26 suggests several places that you might like to visit when you've finished reading this book!

Clarifying When It All Happened

The period of history that historians consider to be the time of the ancient Greeks is very big. Broadly speaking, it dates from the very early beginnings of the Minoan civilisation in Crete around 2800 BC up until the defeat of the Macedonian king Perseus by the Romans in 168 BC. That's more than 2,500 years – 500 years longer than the time that's passed between the birth of Jesus and the present day.

Clearly, a book of this size can't cover everything that happened during this vast expanse of history – and I don't intend to try! Most scholars and historians agree that the history of Greek civilisation went through several distinct phases (see the later section 'Establishing chronology'). Of these I devote most pages to discussing the period between 900 and 300 BC. That's the period that I think of as ancient Greece: Homer, the Persian Wars, Socrates, Greek tragedy, the Parthenon, and Alexander the Great all came about during this time.

Playing the dating game: BC or AD?

All the dates that I use in the book are followed by the suffix *BC*, meaning 'Before Jesus Christ'. This means that something taking place in 545 BC occurred 545 years before the year in which Jesus Christ is thought to have been born. You count dates BC backwards, so that the year 344 BC was the one that immediately followed 345 BC.

Events that took place *after* the birth of Jesus are preceded by *AD*, which stands for the Latin phrase *Anno Domini*, meaning the year of Jesus's birth (AD 1 – there's no year zero). So I'm writing this book in the year AD 2007, 2007 years after the birth of Jesus. You count dates AD forwards. So this book was published in 2008, the year immediately following 2007.



Sometimes when you read a book or visit a website about the ancient world, you see dates followed by *BCE* and *CE*, meaning 'Before the Common Era' and 'Common Era' (confusingly, also known as 'Before the Christian Era' and 'Christian Era'). This convention has come about so that people who don't recognise Jesus as the son of God can use a dating system to represent the years in question without the assumption of Christ's divinity. In this book I decided to stick with BC and AD because I've always used them and it's never done me any harm.

Figuring out dates for the ancient Greeks

Obviously, the Greeks didn't think about things in terms of BC and AD, but they also didn't think in terms of the year having a number.

- ✓ Generally speaking, people in the ancient world used major events as a method of dating rather than specifically numbered years. So, for example, an ancient Greek may describe himself as having been born five years after the battle of Marathon (see Chapter 6).
- ✓ Another common method was to date an event by its proximity to the Olympic Games. For example, 'The Spartans attacked our town two years after the 25th Olympiad'.

Of course, things were often not this simple. For a mind-reeling discussion of the intricacies of the ancient Greek calendar, check out Chapter 15.

Establishing chronology

The following is a brief chronology of the whole of ancient Greek history. Of course, the ancient Greeks themselves wouldn't have thought about their history in these terms and their ideas of how the world was progressing were very different (see Chapter 19), but modern historians generally agree on the following sequence of periods.

The Bronze Age: 2700–1100 BC

This period is the earliest of Greek history. During these years the first European civilisation appeared on the island of Crete and became known as *Minoan*. This period was strange and wonderful and seems very alien to modern sensibilities.

Civilisation soon sprang up on mainland Greece, and historians refer to this culture as *Mycenaean*. Around 1300 BC something cataclysmic happened in Crete; the Minoan period came to an end, and the people scattered. Read all about these earliest ancient Greeks in Chapter 2.

The Dark Ages: 1100–900 BC

The Dark Ages are so named because historians know very little about what was going on. Most scholars describe it as time of travelling, and that pretty much sums it up. All the people who left mainland Greece after the end of the Bronze Age travelled far and wide, setting up new towns all around the Mediterranean. As a result trade and diplomacy began in earnest too.

Archaeology: Answering the impossible

Written source material from ancient Greece reveals a phenomenal amount about the Greeks and their lives. But this source material is never truly complete. The science of archaeology has been hugely useful in understanding who the Greeks were and where they came from. A little over 100 years ago we didn't know anything about the Minoans or Mycenaeans. Now, thanks to archaeological discoveries in the early years of the 20th century we know how influential

these civilisations were on the development of the ancient Greeks (see Chapter 2 for more on this). New archaeological discoveries are continually being made, producing more and more 'material culture' to sit alongside the written sources that we've always had. In this book there's a bias towards written evidence (because it really helps to emphasise points that I make!) but don't ignore the impact of archaeology!

Early Greece: 900–490 BC

This period was when Greece started to grow up. The hundreds of communities and colonies that had been established during the Dark Ages grew into new societies and what became known as *city-states*.

These city-states had different forms of government, but remarkably the market town of Athens decided upon the system of *democracy*. You can read about how it happened in Chapter 4.

All the city-states soon faced a major challenge, however, when the immense Persian Empire launched a series of attacks against them. Look at Chapter 6 to find out how they got on.

The Classical period: 490–350 BC

After dealing with the Persians, the Athenians began throwing their weight around and soon possessed an empire. The money that the empire generated was responsible for some of the fabulous culture that ancient Greece is famous for. You can read more about Athens in Chapter 7 as well as nearly every aspect of Greek life during the Classical period in Part III.

Athens's domination, of course, came to an end when the Peloponnesian War began with Sparta (see Chapter 8). After its defeat, Athens declined in influence and a whole series of squabbles between the city-states broke out with no clear winner. Until . . .

The Hellenistic period: 350–150 BC

. . . the Macedonians arrived on the scene. Under King Philip II, the Macedonians dominated the whole of Greece through both war and diplomacy. Philip's son Alexander then took things further by invading Persia,

seizing control of the Persian Empire, and journeying as far as India in a quest of discovery and conquest. You can read more about this brilliant story in Chapter 11.

After Alexander died without a strong heir, his empire broke up into warring territories ruled by his former generals. Eventually, the Romans arrived in the middle of the second century BC, and what we call the Greek period came to an end.

Talking the Talk: Ancient Greek Language

The language that historians and scholars call *ancient Greek* came into being around 1100 BC and first appeared in written form around 750 BC. As I note in the earlier section 'Establishing chronology', this is a time period when all the travelling and colonisation was going on, after the collapse of the Minoan civilisation in Crete.

Developing differences

Language-wise, ancient Greek came in roughly three different types:

- ✓ **Dorian Greek** was spoken by people who lived on most parts of the Greek mainland and on the islands of Cyprus and Crete.
- ✓ **Ionic Greek** was spoken by people who lived on most of the smaller islands, as well as on the eastern coast of mainland Greece (such as the people of Athens) and the south-western coast of Asia Minor.
- ✓ **Aeolian Greek** was spoken by everybody else! This included people who lived in the northern part of the Mediterranean Sea (called the Aegean Sea) and on the north-western coast of Asia Minor.



Just like today, people also spoke in their own localised dialect. These individuals would all have been able to understand each other, but regional differences existed, even within the three types of Greek mentioned in the preceding bulleted list. (For example, people who lived in Athens spoke a slightly different form of Ionian Greek called *Attic*.) It's the same today: Think of the differences in accent between people in Glasgow and Texas. They speak the same language but with huge regional differences.

(Not) lost in translation

You can read a huge number of ancient Greek dramatic, literary, historical, poetic, and philosophical texts in translation. Many translations are available and they often vary quite considerably. Some people argue that you can never really appreciate the true nature of these works unless you read them in the original Greek but, quite frankly, that's a load of old rubbish!

Translation of these ancient texts has been going on for centuries. It's only because of the work of medieval monks (who zealously made copies) that we still have these amazing works

of literature. Modern translators are incredibly skilful at producing work that captures the spirit of ancient Greek literature while still making it accessible to readers.

Try the translations of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by Homer and *The Oresteia* by Aeschylus that have recently been completed by Robert Fagles (available in Penguin Classics). They are vibrant and powerful, retaining all the chutzpah of Homer and Aeschylus while still feeling contemporary today.



In the film *Alexander* (2005), Colin Farrell, who plays Alexander the Great, speaks in his own natural Irish accent, as do all the other Macedonian officers. The more refined Greek characters (the Athenians, for example) speak standard British. This use of modern dialects was a great way of showing that, despite all speaking Greek, the Macedonians would have spoken in a slightly rougher rural dialect as opposed to the more refined Greek of the folks in Athens.

Creating the Greek alphabet

If you spoke ancient Greek, people pretty much all over the Mediterranean could understand you. Part of the reason for this is that some time around 750 BC the Greeks began to use writing to record business transactions and contracts. In doing so, they came up with a method of reproducing the sounds of their language in symbols. The result was the ancient Greek alphabet.

The Greek alphabet was made up of 24 symbols that represented letters or groups of letters, like alpha α and beta β . Figure 1-2 shows the letters of the Greek alphabet.



The ancient Greek alphabet was heavily influenced by the eastern world and ancient Mesopotamia. Indeed, initially the Greeks wrote their script from right to left, like modern Arabic. However, by the Classical period, when many of the great works of literature were produced, the Greeks had adopted the left-to-right writing style familiar to writers of English.



If you look at a modern version of ancient Greek text, it includes accents and marks to suggest where you should leave gaps for breathing when reading it out. These are all modern additions. The Greeks didn't use punctuation initially (it developed during the Hellenistic period) – just plain text. Mind you, as they invented writing as we know it, we can probably let them off for skipping the commas and full stops! The Greeks used spaces between lines of dialogue to indicate a change in the speaker. This system was known as *paragraphos* and the English word 'paragraph' comes from it.

A	B	Γ	Δ	E	Z
Alpha (al-fah)	Beta (bay-tah)	Gamma (gam-ah)	Delta (del-ta)	Epsilon (ep-si-lon)	Zeta (zay-tah)

H	Θ	I	K	Λ	M
Eta (ay-tah)	Theta (thay-tah)	Iota (eye-o-tah)	Kappa (cap-pah)	Lambda (lamb-dah)	Mu (mew)

N	Ξ	O	Π	P	Σ
Nu (new)	Xi (zie)	Omicron (om-e-cron)	Pi (pie)	Rho (roe)	Sigma (sig-mah)

Figure 1-2:
The letters
of the Greek
alphabet.

T	Υ	Φ	X	Ψ	Ω
Tau (taw)	Upsilon (up-si-ion)	Phi (phe)	Chi (che)	Psi (sigh)	Omega (oh-may-gah)

Ancient Greek was a *phonetic* language (the letters of the alphabet represented a single sound) but certain stresses were employed, especially on vowels.

