

# Geography of Greece

## Carl Seaquist

### Introduction to Greece: Geography

(Slide 1) Welcome to Carl Seaquist's lecture on the Geography of Greece. In this lecture we'll look at the internal geography of Greece, as opposed to its location in the larger Eurasian world. I'll point out its various regions and some of the main cities you'll encounter as you study Greek history and culture.

(Slide 2) Here are the main regions of the Greek mainland and Anatolia. By "mainland" I mean peninsular Greece, or roughly the area that constitutes the modern country of Greece. The southern part of the Greek mainland is known as the Peloponnese. As its name (literally, "the island of Pelops") indicates, it is connected to the rest of the mainland by a narrow strip of land, or isthmus. The great war of the late fifth century, known as the Peloponnesian War, was waged between Sparta, in the southeast portion of the peninsula, and Athens, the main city of Attica, just north of the Peloponnese. Athens in turn is bordered to the north by a true island, Euboea, which hugs the coast tightly. These regions, along with Boeotia, constitute the heart of classical culture on the mainland. The Macedonians lived on the borders of the Greek world, although they became central in the late fourth century when they conquered all of the Greek world, and in fact most of the known world east and south of Greece. The Thracians didn't speak a Greek dialect and, while they interacted with Greeks regularly, they were considered non-Greek. Thessaly was, if you will, the wild west of mainland Greece: Thessalians were known as strong horsemen, and Thessaly was not dominated by city-states as were the regions to the south of it. The northwest was important for maritime commerce to the west, but in many ways it was isolated from the rest of the mainland. A lot of transportation was by sea, except for small distances, so to get to Epirus from Athens, let us say, one would typically circumnavigate the Peloponnese rather than riding overland.

Greek settlement in Anatolia was largely limited to cities along the coast, so the geographical regions identified on the map are mostly those of non-Greek-speakers, though as with Thrace they played important roles in Greek history. The Troad is where Troy was located; the war between Troy and the Greeks of the mainland was the subject of Homer's *Iliad*, the oldest work of literature in classical Greek. Troy was important because it controlled access to the Black Sea, a fertile region that, during the classical period, provided Athens with most of its grain. Access to the Black Sea went through a smaller sea, the Sea of Marmara, which was accessed at both ends by narrows, known as the Hellespont and the Bosphorus.

(Slide 3) The body of water to the east of mainland Greece is known as the Aegean Sea. Crete lies at the southern edge of the Aegean. The body of water to the west of the Greek mainland, and east of southern Italy, is known as the Ionian Sea. North of the Ionian Sea, between northern Italy and the western coast of the Balkans, is the Adriatic Sea.

Now, to complicate matters, the Greek cities in the central portion of western Anatolia, along with some of the islands between Anatolia and the Greek mainland, were known as Ionia, even though they are on the opposite side of the mainland from the Ionian Sea. The reason for this is that linguistically and culturally these regions were related to the speakers of the Ionian dialect of Greek in Attica and Euboea. I've marked these Ionian regions in red on the map. It's worth mentioning that the Aegean is full of islands, a number of them large, which played important roles in Greek history, but thousands of others, small and in some cases uninhabited. In these maps I only include islands when I want to draw attention to them – except for Sicily, Crete, Cyprus, and in most maps Euboea, which are so large that it doesn't make sense to omit them.

There are also islands in the Ionian Sea, though fewer. These include some of importance to Greek history: Ithaca, the home of the hero Odysseus; Corfu (ancient Corcyra), where the conflicts leading up to the Peloponnesian war started; and Cephalonia, the largest of the Ionian islands.

(Slide 4) Although we won't look at them in detail, let me list the island chains that surround the Greek mainland. The Ionian islands lie to the west of Greece, the Cyclades lie due north of Crete, between southern Greece and southern Anatolia. The Dodecanese lie between east Crete and southwest Anatolia. The East Aegean islands lie right off the coast of Anatolia, the north Aegean islands lie in the north Aegean, the Sporades lie north of Athens, and the Argo-Saronic islands lie south of Athens.

(Slide 5) Now let's narrow our attention to the southern and central portions of Greece, so that we can identify some smaller regions. The south of the Peloponnese is naturally divided into two regions, Laconia in the east and Messenia in the west. In the classical period these were dominated by Sparta. Sparta was originally a collection of four villages that synoecized (or combined to form a larger settlement) and then took control of Laconia and, after that, Messenia. The Spartan state was composed of a relatively small citizen body, who controlled governmental and military functions, and a larger group composed of what we might consider resident aliens (*perioikoi*) and slaves (*helots*). Apparently both of the classes were composed of Peloponnesian groups that had been conquered by the Spartans and given subordinate roles in the society. When the Spartans conquered Laconia and Messenia is not entirely clear, though probably in the ninth through seventh centuries. In any case, it was after the end of the Bronze Age. Whereas in the classical period Laconia was clearly dominant, in the Bronze Age the dominant power was in southern Messenia, at a place called Pylos.

Arcadia lies in the middle of the Peloponnese, and the inhabitants of this area spoke an archaic dialect similar to that spoken on Cyprus, the island near the Syrian coast. A mountainous area, it was relatively less fertile than other regions of Greece and, being removed from the coast, it was less accessible for commerce. The largest urban settlements in Arcadia were in the east. The northern coast of the Peloponnese, known as Achaea, did not have good harbors, though it lay along the Gulf of Corinth, and the twelve largest towns were joined in an alliance that largely stayed out of the major events

of Greek history until the third and second centuries, when the Achaean Confederacy became the chief power in Greece.

Greek culture in the Bronze Age extended into Elis in the Northwest Peloponnese, although the region is best known for the sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia, which held a popular festival in which contestants competed in athletic pursuits – the Olympic games. Over time the festival became Panhellenic, meaning that it was open to all (and only) Greeks, and thus Olympia played a role in the development of a distinctive notion of Greek identity. Olympia should not be confused with Olympus, a mountain on the border between Macedonia and Thessaly, which became widely (though not universally) identified as the home of the gods.

(Slide 6) Let me now point to some of the main cities in mainland Greece. The two most dominant cities in the ancient Greek world were probably Sparta, in the Peloponnese, and Athens, in Attica, but focusing just on these two cities ignores much of the diversity of ancient Greece. In subsequent lectures I'll address what we mean by "city," but very roughly, the word "city" translates the Greek word *polis*, which is sometimes glossed as "city-state" because each city was nominally independent until the late fourth century. There was no country of Greece in the classical period: Greece was just a collection of poleis (that's the plural of "polis"). The Copenhagen Polis Centre, a research project organized in Denmark, has counted over 800 poleis attested in the archaic and classical periods, and another 500 or so settlements that probably should be classified as poleis. It should also be noted that many of the classical poleis were formed when settlements that previously had been independent were joined together. In some cases we have direct, historical evidence for this joining (called "synoecism") whereas in other cases our evidence is indirect.

The isthmus connecting the Peloponnese to the mainland is where the city of Corinth was located, and the body of water separating the two to the west of the isthmus is known as the Gulf of Corinth, or Corinthian Gulf. To the east of the isthmus is the Saronic Gulf. The peninsula in the northeast portion of the Peloponnese was known as the Argolid, and the classical city of Argos, along with the Bronze Age centers of Mycenae and Tiryns (the latter two aren't marked on the map), lay here, more or less south of Corinth. I've also marked Thebes, in Boeotia, on the map, Olympia, the home of the Olympic games, and Delphi, where the sacred precinct of Apollo was the home of the most famous oracle in the Greek world. Even non-Greeks on the borders of the Greek world, such as king Croesus of Lydia (in Anatolia) consulted the oracle here. Delphi was also the home of the Pythian games, similar to those of Olympia.

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