

What is Greece?

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Introduction to Greece: Geography

(Slide 1) Welcome to Carl Seaquist's lecture "What is Greece?" In the modern world, Greece is a nation, by which we mean a country, a political entity. In the ancient world, it was a nation in the sense of "a people." It's impossible to appreciate Greek history and culture without understanding this distinction, so it's worth spending a little time getting clear on what the distinction means.

(Slide 2) The modern country of Greece is in southern Europe, along the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, just east of the center of the Mediterranean. It is the southern portion of a large peninsula, the northern portion of which makes up the various Balkan states (many of which were parts of the country of Yugoslavia for most of the twentieth century). Two other, major peninsulas lie near the Graeco-Balkan peninsula: Italy to the west and Anatolia to the east.

(Slide 3) "Italy" is (geographically) the name of the peninsula and politically the country that occupies it (actually the modern nation state extends a little north of the peninsula itself). "Anatolia," in contrast, is just a geographic name; the modern country that occupies it (and extends somewhat east of the peninsula) is Turkey. It would be misleading to call ancient Anatolia "Turkey," however, because the Turks, after whom the modern state is named, did not arrive in Anatolia until well after the classical period on which we will be focusing in this course. So I'll try to only use "Turkey" for the modern country, and when I'm talking about the geographical area I'll call it "Anatolia." I should add that geographic Anatolia is also sometimes known by the Latin term "Asia Minor," and I might sometimes call it this by accident, but I'll try to stick mostly to "Anatolia."

(Slide 4) Today, if you call someone a "Greek" you probably mean that he lives in the country of Greece, or maybe that he was born there or that his ancestors came from there. There aren't a lot of people in Italy or Turkey whose primary language is Greek, or who self-identify as Greek. That wasn't the case in the ancient world, however. Greece, in antiquity ("antiquity," by the way, is just another name for the ancient world) – Greece, in the antiquity, was larger, we might say, than it is today. It wasn't just the southern portion of the peninsula, but rather it was wherever Greeks were a significant portion of the population. There were a lot of Greeks in southern Italy, and in Sicily, the large island to the southwest of Italy. There were a lot of Greeks along the coast of Anatolia, especially along the western coast, but also along the southern coast and the northwest coast, which borders the Black Sea. There was an important Greek colony in the delta of Egypt, and there were Greek colonies along the Mediterranean coast of what are now France and Spain. Greece in antiquity, then, was not a landmass with clear borders. It was discontinuous, but for the most part centered on the southern Graeco-Balkan peninsula and portions of the large peninsulas to the east and west of it.

Now, in a way this characterization makes sense, but in a way it begs the question. If Greece was wherever a large portion of the population was Greek, that simply replaces the question "what is Greece" with the question "what did it mean to be Greek?" That's in a way a harder question, but it will help us to note that the Greeks had a clear understanding of the boundary between Greek and non-Greek, even if they sometimes just *presumed* where the boundary lay. That said, they sometimes did try to define what it meant to be Greek.

(Slide 5) A well-known and often-quoted passage in the *Histories* of Herodotus is relevant in this regard. He cited five criteria (depending on how you count them) as constituting Greekness:

- the community of blood
- language
- temples
- ritual, and
- "our common way of life"

Blood here means heritage, or inheritance: a person is Greek if their ancestors were Greek. The other criteria are probably straightforward, though "our common way of life" is certainly vague. Herodotus seems to be presuming here that someone who is Greek will share all of these qualities. We might ask, what of a merchant from Egypt or Persia, who lives in Greece for many years, learns the language, and even engages in Greek ritual practices and other aspects of the Greek "way of life" – can he become Greek even if he isn't Greek "by blood"? Or what about someone who is Greek by blood, but moves to Persia and adopts their language and ways, or what about his children, who are Greek by heritage but never even learned to speak Greek? Well, Herodotus' definition of Greekness, if we may call it that, isn't a scientific definition – it isn't intended to address such borderline cases. Plenty of borderline cases did exist in the ancient world, but the ancient Greeks didn't spend a lot of time debating the question what it means to be Greek in quite the same way that in this country we debate what it means to be American. They thought and wrote a lot about the boundary between Greek and non-Greek, but didn't concern themselves much with people on the periphery.

(Slide 6) In explaining what the word "Greek" meant in the ancient world, I've talked a little bit about the geography of the eastern Mediterranean – enough, I hope, to emphasize the fact that Greek history in the ancient world covers a large swath of territory. I'm a firm believer that a good knowledge of history requires a fair knowledge of geography, and also of general trends in chronology. Subsequent lectures, therefore, will address in more detail the geography of the Greek mainland, the Mediterranean generally, and western and central Asia. Similarly, other lectures will provide an overview of ancient Greek chronology.

If you want to understand a particular event in history, you need some ability to place that event in time and space. You'll probably want to listen to these lectures early on, and perhaps come back to them later on as necessary.

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