

The Greek world

The city-states of ancient Greece

Today, Greece is a single country made up of a mainland and many islands. It has one capital city, Athens. Up until around 800 BC, most Greeks lived on the mainland and a few islands. But Greece was not one single country. Instead, there were many small countries called city-states, each with a main town and the territory around it. Famous city-states included Athens, Sparta, Corinth, Thebes, Elis and Argos.

The Greeks spread beyond Greece

In the 700s BC, the Greeks started to have more trading contacts with other peoples such as the Egyptians and the Phoenicians, who lived in the region of modern Lebanon. Groups of Greeks left their home city-states and founded new cities all over the Mediterranean area. In some cases, the Greek migrants conquered or drove off the local people; in others, they lived alongside them.

Some of these migrants were sent out by their home cities because there was not enough land or too many people at home. Many probably left because they were ambitious and were looking for an opportunity to become rich through trade and farming.

The Athenian thinker Plato wrote that his teacher said this about the world:

'I believe that the world is vast and that we who live between the river Phasis in the east of the Mediterranean and the Pillars of Herakles in the west inhabit only a tiny part of it. We live around the sea like ants or frogs around a pond.'



This map of the world was made by the ancient Greek scholar Hekataios, who was born about 550 BC. He came from the Greek city of Miletos in modern Turkey. He wrote two geography books which described the lands around the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Scholars like Hekataios used different sorts of evidence to help them understand the world: their own travels, descriptions from Greek travellers and soldiers, information from foreign travellers, information from merchants who traded goods with distant lands, traditional stories and ancient myths.