

# How the Ancient Greeks Colonized the Mediterranean

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The ruins of the ancient city of Ephesus in Turkey. It was once a Greek colony. Photo from Wikimedia.

Around 800 B.C., about 2,800 years ago, the Greeks started colonies across the Mediterranean. Most became fully independent city-states. Sometimes, their culture was very Greek. In other cases, the culture remained closer to the local peoples. People, goods, art, and ideas spread the Greek way of life. In total, the Greeks established about 500 colonies with up to 60,000 Greek citizen. By about 50 B.C., about 4 out of 10 Greeks lived in these new territories.

## Expanding their horizons

The Greeks were great seafarers. Even Greek myths included tales of exploration on the seas, like Jason and his search for the Golden Fleece, and the journey of Odysseus. The first colonists were traders and small groups of people. They wanted to start a new life away from their competitive and over-crowded cities. The first colonies were on nearby islands. They got their start as trading centers and marketplaces.

Greek colonization was very different from later European colonization of places like the Americas and Africa. In modern times, the term "colonization" usually refers to the domination of people who lived in a place before the colonizers arrived. It also tends to refer to a feeling of cultural superiority by the colonizer. There are a few similarities between ancient and more recent colonization starting around the 1700s, such as the institution of slavery. However, Greek colonization was in many ways a less brutal process.

The Greeks began selling luxury goods to their colonies, like fine Greek pottery, wine, oil, metalwork, and textiles. They also imported local resources, like timber, metals, and grains. Colonies often became wealthy trading centers and a source of slaves. A city might also set

up a colony so it could establish a military base there and protect its trading routes. Some colonies even managed become rivals the greatest founding cities. Syracuse, for example, located in what is now Sicily, eventually became the largest city in the entire Greek world.

**"Greater Greece"**



Greek city-states were soon attracted by the fertile land, natural resources, and good harbors of what is now southern Italy and Sicily. These colonies had such a strong Greek identity they were called "Greater Greece" or Megalē Hellas. Cumae was the first colony in southern Italy. It was founded around 740 B.C.

## **Settling in Ionia**

Greeks then created settlements along the Aegean coast of Ionia, in present-day Turkey. Important colonies included Miletos, Ephesos, Smyrna, and Halikarnassos. The area became known for Greek culture and ideas, and produced some of the greatest of Greek minds.

## **France and Spain, and the Black Sea**

Greeks then began city-states, in what is now France and Spain. The Black Sea was the last area to be settled. Eventually, almost the entire Black Sea was surrounded by Greek colonies. Colonies in present-day Spain were not as important to the Greeks. The region seems to have been considered a distant and remote land, based on Greek literary sources.

## **Maintaining a Greek way of life**

Most colonies took the different forms of Greek governments. Some were democracies where the people all participated in government. The colonies felt Greek, even though they might be far from Greece. Colonists spoke Greek, ate Greek food and worshiped Greek gods. They participated in Greek sports, theater, art and science. On the surface, a Greek colony could look and behave very much like any other city in Greece. Goods like wine, olives, wood, and pottery were exported and imported between cities. Even artists and architects themselves

moved and set up workshops in colonies. Across the Mediterranean, temples, sculpture and ceramics followed Greek art styles.



Some colonies were more affected by the local peoples, and they combined Greek and local cultures. The colonies were also not as peaceful as Greece, and civil wars were more common. Nevertheless, some colonies did extraordinarily well. Many eventually outdid the founding Greek superpowers.

Colonies fought each other. Some of them tried to become powerful and fully independent city-states. Syracuse, for example, constantly tried to get more territory and create an empire.

At the same time, the colonies were expected to be an active part of the Greek world. They supplied soldiers, ships, and money for wars. They also sent athletes to the great sporting games, like the Olympics.

Each Greek colony was very different. However, all were part of the same Greek World. The effect was long lasting. Even today, the cultures of southern France, Italy and Greece share many similarities.

## Quiz

1 Read the introduction [paragraph 1] and the final section, "Maintaining a Greek way of life."

What is the connection between these two sections?

- (A) The introduction explains what caused Greece to want colonies, and the final section shows how they tried to be independent.
- (B) The introduction summarizes how Greek colonies fit into Greek culture, and the final section gives more details about this.
- (C) The introduction outlines the amount of time that Greek colonies lasted, and the final section explains what caused them to end.
- (D) The introduction describes how Greece took over its colonies, and the final section shows that the colonies were grateful to Greece.

2 The section "Expanding their horizons" is organized using a compare and contrast structure.

WHY did the author choose to use this structure?

- (A) to explain where and when Odysseus traveled in Greece
- (B) to explain why and how the Greeks set up their colonies
- (C) to show where and when Europeans colonized Greece
- (D) to show why and how some Greek colonies were larger than others

3 Read the paragraph from the section "France and Spain, and the Black Sea."

*Greeks then began city-states, in what is now France and Spain. The Black Sea was the last area to be settled. Eventually, almost the entire Black Sea was surrounded by Greek colonies. Colonies in present-day Spain were not as important to the Greeks. The region seems to have been considered a distant and remote land, based on Greek literary sources.*

What is the MOST accurate explanation of this paragraph?

- (A) The main goal of Greeks was to create colonies in France and Spain.
- (B) Settling the Black Sea allowed the Greeks to colonize Spain.
- (C) Many Greek citizens did not want Spain to become a Greek colony.
- (D) Some Greek colonies were seen as more important than others.

4 Read the section "Maintaining a Greek way of life."

Which sentence from the section explains WHY there was conflict between some Greek colonies?

- (A) The colonies felt Greek, even though they might be far from Greece.
- (B) Across the Mediterranean, temples, sculpture and ceramics followed Greek art styles.
- (C) Some colonies were more affected by the local peoples, and they combined Greek and local cultures.
- (D) Syracuse, for example, constantly tried to get more territory and create an empire.