

Food and Agriculture in Ancient Greece

By Ancient History Encyclopedia, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.08.17

Word Count **983**

Level **870L**



Olive trees on the Greek island of Anaxos. Cereals, olives and wine were the three most produced foodstuffs in ancient Greece, suited as they are to the Mediterranean climate. Photo by: Pixabay

The ancient Greek city-states were very prosperous. They were successful largely because of the ways they produced food. Agriculture is the practice of growing crops and raising livestock such as cattle for people to eat.

The Greeks were particularly skilled at agriculture. Their farming skills allowed them to produce more food than they needed. Having extra food meant that not everyone needed to worry about producing food year-round. People were able to attempt other trades and create other goods that could be exported, or shipped out. These could be traded for other necessities.

The climate in Greece was perfect for growing grains, olives and grapes. As Greece's influence grew, its farming ideas and products spread to other places around the Mediterranean Sea.

A network of smallholdings

Most farms in Greece were private and family-owned. Anyone could grow crops and own livestock on their own land.

Farms in Athens ranged in size from 5 hectares to 20 hectares. A hectare is about the size of a football field. In Sparta, farms were a little bigger on average, as large as 44 hectares for the richest citizens. The poorest citizens had no land at all. They may have worked on the land of others, or would rent land and farmed it themselves.

It is not clear if farmers lived on their farms or lived in the city and traveled to their farms each day. What they did probably depended on how close they lived to the city. Rich farmers may have bought slaves to work the land.

Crops

Greece is surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea. This part of the world has a very particular climate. The Mediterranean climate has dry hot summers with warm winters. It usually rains in the winter. However, rain is not easy to predict and sometimes it didn't come. Crops often failed.

Wheat crops may have failed once every four years, and barley crops once every 10 years. Only one-fifth of Greece had farmable land, so there was a lot of pressure to use that land for farming.

The four most popular crops in Greece were wheat, barley, olives and grapevines.

Greeks didn't make bread from wheat, but they did make baked goods called barley cakes. They usually made gruel, a sort of cereal made from barley. Broad beans, chickpeas and lentils were grown. Many private households tended fruit such as figs, apples and pears, and vegetables such as cucumbers, onions, garlic and salads. Nuts like almonds and walnuts were popular, too.

Crop management

In October, November and December, farmers plowed their soil and planted seeds. This was an important and busy period. Athens did not hold any festivals or government meetings during this time. Grain was harvested in May and June. In June and July, grain was stored. Grapes were gathered and made into wine in September. In the autumn, olives were harvested and pressed into oil.

It appears that ancient Greeks rotated their crops, moving them to different parts of their land each year. This helped keep the soil fresh and keeps bugs away from the crops. Trenches, or ditches, were sometimes dug around trees. This would hold rainwater for when it was most needed. These trenches were an early kind of irrigation system, providing water for the crops.

Digging, weeding and plowing usually done by hand using wooden or iron-tipped plows and hoes. They used these to turn the soil up and down in order to keep it fresh. Wealthier farmers had oxen to help pull plows through their fields. Sickles, a kind of sharp blade, were used to harvest crops.

The crops were then winnowed, or cut down, using a flat shovel. This would separate the grain from its outer shell, called the chaff. Grains were then trampled on by livestock. This would further separate the wheat from the chaff. Grapes were crushed underfoot in containers. Olives were crushed in stone presses.

Animal husbandry

The ancient Greeks did not have large herds of livestock. Some households kept animals, perhaps no more than 50 in a herd. These included sheep, goats, pigs, chickens and some cattle. They were useful for their meat, milk to make cheese, eggs, wool or leather.

More animals were raised in areas where land wasn't fit for farming. These animals were often fed straw, stalks of vegetable plants, damaged fruit and leftover bits of grapes and olives. Horses, mules and donkeys were also raised. They were used to transport people and things.

Trade of foodstuffs

Most farmers would have only produced enough food for their own family. They would have traded extra food for things they did not produce themselves, like cheese, honey and fish.

About 2,500 years ago, Athens' port of Piraeus became the most important trading center in the Mediterranean. You could find almost anything you wanted at the market in Piraeus.

Greek merchant ships sailed the Mediterranean. They shipped wine, olives and olive oil to such places as Egypt and Asia Minor, which is now the country Turkey.

Many Greek city-states were trade centers for hundreds of years. The ports of Athens, Delos and Rhodes were especially important.

State intervention

The government didn't get too involved in trade and the sale of agricultural products. However, they did want to make sure Greece had plenty of grain. This was to make sure there was enough food in case Greece did not get enough rain during the year.

Grain was imported from other places, such as Egypt.

Government officials walked through food markets to make sure that the food being sold was of good quality. Other officials made sure that prices for grain were fair.

City-states often put a tax on goods that were traded at ports. Goods that were sent outside Greece, or came from other places, were more likely to be taxed. The government wanted people in Greece to pay less for food and wanted to make money from foreign farmers.

Quiz

- 1 Read the section titled "State intervention."

Which paragraph BEST explains how the government controlled the price of goods in Greece?

- 2 Read the paragraph from the section "Animal husbandry."

More animals were raised in areas where land wasn't fit for farming. These animals were often fed straw, stalks of vegetable plants, damaged fruit and leftover bits of grapes and olives. Horses, mules and donkeys were also raised. They were used to transport people and things.

What is the MOST accurate explanation of this paragraph?

- (A) The ancient Greeks fed their animals garbage in order to give them more energy.
- (B) The ancient Greeks used resources they could not use otherwise to raise and feed animals.
- (C) The ancient Greeks had a hard time finding food for animals in areas they could not farm.
- (D) The ancient Greeks used animals to travel to places where the land was better for farming.

- 3 One MAIN idea of the article is that trade was a very important part of agriculture in ancient Greece.

What is another MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) Ancient Greeks used their grain to make baked goods called barley cakes.
- (B) Farms in Ancient Greece could range in size from 5 to 20 hectares.
- (C) Skilled Greek farmers used the Mediterranean climate to grow a variety of crops.
- (D) Agriculture allowed skilled Greeks to work other kinds of jobs instead of farming.

- 4 Read the paragraph from the section "Crop management."

It appears that ancient Greeks rotated their crops, moving them to different parts of their land each year. This helped keep the soil fresh and keeps bugs away from the crops. Trenches, or ditches, were sometimes dug around trees. This would hold rainwater for when it was most needed. These trenches were an early kind of irrigation system, providing water for the crops.

How does this paragraph support the MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) by showing the ancient Greeks were organized farmers
- (B) by showing trade was an important part of farming in Greece
- (C) by explaining how Greek farmers were able to keep their soil fresh
- (D) by explaining the ancient Greeks invented irrigation