Ancient Greek City-States: Independent Communities with Shared Culture

KS2 HISTORY ANCIENT GREECE Ages 9-14 ⏰ 4 min read

What Were Ancient Greek City-States?

Imagine if your country wasn't ruled by one king or government in the capital city. Instead, each town and the farmland around it had its own rules, leaders, and army. That's roughly what life was like in **ancient Greece**. A **city-state** (or **polis** in Greek) was an independent community consisting of a city and the surrounding countryside.

The most famous city-states were **Athens** and **Sparta**. Each one was completely separate and made its own decisions about laws, money, and war. There were dozens of these city-states scattered across **Greece** and beyond, from around **800 BCE** to **146 BCE**.

Think of it like: each city-state was like a separate school in different towns—each had its own headteacher, rules, playground, and sports teams, but all the schools celebrated the same holidays and spoke the same language.

How Did City-States Work?

Each city-state had a government, but they weren't all the same. **Athens** developed **democracy**, meaning citizens could vote on important decisions. **Sparta**, by contrast, was ruled by two kings and a strict military system. Some city-states had tyrants (single powerful leaders), while others were run by wealthy families called **oligarchies**.

Inside each city-state, there was usually a central area called the **agora** (marketplace), a **fortress** on a hill for protection, temples for religion, and housing for citizens. Citizens had rights and responsibilities—they could participate in government but also had to defend their city-state if war broke out.

Think of it like: a city-state was like a small independent company with its own boss, workers, rules, and bank account, separate from other companies nearby.

What Made Them United?

Although city-states were independent, they shared **Greek culture**. All Greeks spoke similar languages, worshipped the same gods (like **Zeus** and **Athena**), and participated in shared events like the **Olympic Games** every four years. Trade and family connections linked the city-states together.

However, city-states also competed fiercely. Rivalry between **Athens** and **Sparta** led to the terrible **Peloponnesian War** (lasting **27 years**), which weakened Greece overall. Eventually, in **146 BCE**, the **Roman Empire** conquered Greece, and the city-state system ended.

The Greek city-states invented many ideas we still use today, including democracy, philosophy, theatre, and the Olympic Games. Their way of organizing society shows how communities can balance independence with shared values.

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