

The Ancient Greeks: Myths & legends, beliefs and culture



Quick summary



Ancient Greece was one of the earliest major civilisations of Europe, and its culture has had a significant impact on modern society. The Greeks told some of the greatest, most influential and powerful stories, such as The Iliad and The Odyssey, written by Homer. Although many of the myths and legends varied in detail across the different Greek city-states, they shared the same gods and goddesses, heroes and villains. These characters played a significant part in Greek culture and pastimes, and helped to shape Greek religious beliefs. These famous texts, still printed and read by thousands today, provided inspiration and guidance for the Ancient Greeks to explain their daily lives and understand the world around them. The Ancient Greek city-state of Athens was one of the first to use a democratic system of government. Ancient Greek art and sculpture continues to influence modern ideas of beauty and modern architecture is still heavily influenced by buildings that are over 2000 years old. When we consider the impact of Greek language, architecture, art and culture, it is possible to argue that Ancient Greece was the most influential ancient civilisation in history.



Culture and pastimes

- . The Ancient Greeks admired physical perfection in their art as well as in their daily life; physical education and competitive sports were a significant part of their culture. They held athletic competitions near Mount Olympus which inspired the modern Olympic Games we celebrate every four years today.
- . The Greek city-states shared many traditions, stories and festivals. Famous myths and legends (like Theseus and the Minotaur) told stories about gods, heroes and how the universe was created as well as telling people how to behave in everyday life; inspiring them to act in a particular way. Scenes from these stories were often painted on beautiful pottery.
- . The Ancient Greeks told many stories about their gods, demigods and heroes and used theatre to share their messages with as many people as possible. The amphitheatre was a central part of life for the Ancient Greeks. Plays were a vital part of religious festivals, and almost every Greek city had a theatre. Some of the most spectacular could hold nearly 15,000 people. Built on hillsides, these semi-circular open-air theatres were designed to give everyone in the audience a good view. The acoustics were also excellent, and are evidence of the superb engineering and building skills developed by the Ancient Greeks. The theatre of Dionysus (the Greek god of wine, fertility and entertainment) on the slope of the Acropolis in Athens, is the oldest theatre in Greece. The Epidaurus amphitheatre is the largest and most well-preserved.
- . The city-state of Athens was famous for its great thinkers, art, architecture and philosophy. The ideas developed there have been very influential in many of today's societies.



Beliefs

The Ancient Greeks believed in three generations of gods. The first generation – the sky, the earth, the heavens, mountains and other physical things – came into existence from nothing. The second generation were called the Titans (also known as the elder gods) and were the children of Uranus (heaven) and Gaia (earth). There were twelve Titans in total, six female and six male. From these gods came the third generation, the Olympians, who took on the appearance of men and women. The Olympians, including Zeus and Poseidon, defeated the Titans and came to rule over the world. Numerous other deities also appear frequently in Greek mythology.

- Generation:** people in a group of similar age
- Demigods:** less important gods, usually half god, half human
- Techniques:** particularly skilful methods for doing something
- Amphora:** two-handed narrow necked jars for oil and wine
- Lekythos:** flasks with a narrow neck
- Civilisations:** organised groups of humans with their own culture
- Democratic:** based on the idea that everyone has equal rights and is involved in making decision
- Literature:** written work, especially with artistic value
- Architects:** people who design buildings



Artefacts

- . The famous Greek epics, 'The Iliad' and 'The Odyssey', have influenced writing, storytelling and literature for almost three thousand years. They are also a valuable source of evidence about Greek life, culture and religious beliefs.
- . Greek myths and legends, portraying the adventures of gods and heroes, can be found on many of the artefacts from this time. Some of the objects show the red-figure and black-figure pottery techniques. The red-figure technique shows red figures (usually Greek gods or heroes) against a black background. Black-figure pottery is the opposite. Not only do these pieces of pottery tell us about famous gods and heroes, they also provide useful evidence of daily Greek life. Amphoras, for example, were used to store wine and grain, while lekythos were used to store ointments and oils.



Location



Vocabulary



Settlements



Beliefs



Culture and pastimes



Location



Main events



Food and farming



Travel and exploration



Conflict



Society



Artefacts

