

# ANCIENT GREECE HISTORY

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**History of ancient Greek society** The history of ancient Greek society can be divided into three main periods: the Homeric; the Classical; the Hellenistic.

**The Homeric period** The Homeric period is a catchword for the period of early Greek society, in which the Homeric epics provide us a picture of the way people lived during the society's formative stages. From Homer's work we learn a great deal about the character of ancient Greek society during the late Mycenaean, the four or five centuries prior to the institution of writing in, perhaps, the eighth century B.C.E. We see a world of fighting men, walled citadels and island manors, travel and trade by sea, as well as peasants, suitors, oafs and moms. It is a feudal society, rich with plunder and aggression, and has in it a taste for excellence and bravery, a taste which will pass on into the Hellas that inherits it.

**The Classical period** The classical period, which we can date from the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E. on, and which lasts, say, til the end of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.), is a period of rapid growth and change, heralded in by the development of coinage and writing, spearheaded by enlightened archons like Solon (638 B.C.E.—558 B.C.E.). The development of the polis system, the independent city state, becomes the trademark for social growth in the fifth century B.C.E. Under this system, as it plays out in Athens, democratic social opportunities, for male citizens—not for women or slaves—flower; rich cultural achievements, built from artistic genius and an intense competitive spirit, generate lasting works of artistic greatness; social life, even within the quietude of the women's quarters, in middle class families, profits from a climate of economic fervor and sophisticated self-awareness. On the theory that all boats rise in a rising sea, one might say that for many people, during at least the first two thirds of the fifth century B.C.E. in Athens, social and cultural life was as good as it gets.

**The Hellenistic period** The period marked off from the death of Alexander the Great (323 B.C.E.) to the Battle of Actium (31 B.C.E.), when the Roman Republic fell to Octavian, and Rome set off conquering the remains of post-Alexander Greece, is vast and diverse, and the social customs prevailing, in a wide variety of far-flung outposts of Hellenism, from India to France, no longer resembled the homey and gender-stable traditions of dynamic but socially conservative fifth century Athens. If one views the condition of women in Hellenistic times, the evidence largely concerns the already wealthy and prominent. Among those fortunate women, say resident in Greek Egypt, there are women of high education, political positions, and even women business traders, who were effectively CEO's within the wine and oil trade.

**History as the voice of the powerful** All the above hasty generalizations, about the development of Greek social culture, simply stress the truism that history is written by the wealthy and powerful. We have glimpses of 'the little woman' here and there, in the literature written by brilliant guys: we see the slave or the resident foreigner in flashing glimpses. There are many men out there, especially in the classical period, who are making like brilliant, and some of them are brilliant.

## Readings

Hornblower, Simon, *The Greek World 479-323 B.C.E.*, London, 2011.

Martin, Thomas, *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times*, New Haven, 2013.

## Discussion questions

In its classical period Athens was a functioning city state. Did that polis function as a creative structure for the members of the society? What was there in the way of citizen protection or social services? Was the citizen safe on the streets?

What was daily life like for the fifth century Athenian slave? Were there slave communities or networkings within the state?

What was the particular excellence of Pericles, as leader of the Athenian polis? Did his thinking represent the apogee of Greek social consciousness?