

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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ANCIENT GREECE – Trade

The physical geography of Greece A look at the map of Greece will make it clear that trade, on that rocky extension into the Mediterranean, will be and was largely by water. The mountains are rough and the roads through them are impassable and slow—to this date. Homer’s world, the first we know of in Greece, was evidence enough for the lasting condition of the country; both of Homer’s epics are sea or sea-shore centered.

Growth of trade in the 8th to 4th centuries B. C. E. By the time of Homer—can we target the 12th-8th centuries B.C.E.?—Eastern Mediterranean trade has begun to develop, though seafaring, rather than trade, is still the dominant practice. By the seventh century B.C.E. maritime *trade* has fully begun, among the regions and small cities of the Eastern Mediterranean. Greek culture had diversified to the point where there were over four hundred Greek outposts scattered around the Mediterranean; all of them hungry for Greek goods, and many of them producing and distributing the goods. (Among the goods being distributed were cereals, wine, olives, figs, pulses, eels, cheese, honey, meat {especially from sheep and goats}, tools {e.g.: knives}, perfumes, and fine pottery, especially Attic and Corinthian wares.)

Conditions favoring trade The prosperity of the Greek *poleis* increased substantially by the seventh century B.C.E. At that period coinage, in place of barter, was introduced along the Asia Minor coast; coinage served to facilitate economic transactions and to undergird the beginnings of a larger scale market for Greek products. (The spread of literacy was equally important, at this time, for it enabled traders to coordinate, give written contracts, and verify documents.) It was in the seventh century that trade in wine and oil grew rapidly, and small factories, such as for pottery making, and hiring fifty or sixty employees, sprung up around Athens to supply bulk needs overseas. For such developments larger cargo ships were constructed, and a banking and lending system was developing, which enabled major entrepreneurs to lend—at high rates, 12% to 100 %--to aspiring captains of maritime investment. By the end of this period the range of ocean trading, among the Greek cities, included colonies in Southern Russia, the Black Sea, and southern Italy and France.

Government oversight of trading For the most part the Athenian government, about which we know most, permitted trade to flow freely in and out of its ports. (Far the largest of these was Piraeus, the port of Athens itself). The exception to this *laissez faire* trade occurred in war times, when taxes on foreign goods had to be levied, and when strict control was maintained over exports of wheat—a commodity of which the Athenians themselves rarely had enough, and which they needed badly for their own foodstock. To assure ample supplies of especially needed commodities, market-supervisors were appointed, in Athens, with the responsibility of enforcing limitations on trade.

Hellenistic trade After the death of Alexander the Great at the end of the fourth century B.C.E., Greek trade expanded widely, to the ends of the Empire of Alexander—to India and France, for example, and most lucratively to Alexandria in Egypt, which became a rich entrepot for the profusion of Egyptian products. Not only was vast wealth at stake, in this commercial activity, but the spread of Greek culture, throughout the civilized world, was immensely enhanced.

Readings

Hopkins, Clark, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos*, New Haven, 1979.

Kinzl, K.H., ed., *A Companion to the Classical Greek World*, New York, 2010.

Discussion questions

Does the growth of Greek trade intermesh with the development of Greek culture—epic, drama, lyric, architecture? What evidence do you see for such an interaction? Is it the case today that trade and the arts are mutually reinforcing?

Homer writes about a seafaring culture. Is there evidence in his epics of nautical trading practices? Do you see merchants, buyers, or commodities in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*?

It was a common classical Greek belief, forcefully and influentially expressed by Aristotle, that buying and selling are the work of inferior men, dully involved with their own self-interest? Does that attitude persist at all to our time? Has the idea any merit?