Great Events from History: The Ancient World, Prehistory-476 C.E.

Greeks Colonize the Mediterranean and Black Sea Regions

**CATEGORY** Expansion and land acquisition

**DATE** c. 734-c. 580 B.C.E.

**Locale** Mediterranean region

*Excess population forced the Greek city-states to establish colonies throughout the Mediterranean world.*

**SUMMARY OF EVENT**

By 1100 B.C.E. the Greek civilizations of the second millennium B.C.E. (Mycenaean and Minoan) had been overrun by other Greek speakers from the north. For three hundred years, the Greek world entered into the Dark Age. When the Greek culture emerged with a new alphabet borrowed from the Phoenicians, it made a dramatic reappearance—as witnessed by the epic poetry of Homer that capsulized its mythological history and religion.

The Greeks imported the alphabet in an attempt to support their excess population. The numerous valleys of Greece, which is on a mountainous peninsula, created a political system of hundreds of independent city-states (the poleis) and a terrain unsuitable for meeting the food needs of the population. The Greeks, forced to become merchants as well as farmers because of the need to import grain and other necessities, needed a commercial alphabet like that of the Phoenicians. They also solved their overcrowding problem by sending Greeks to other regions.

The age of Greek colonization lasted from 734 to 580 B.C.E. The Greek city-states established new settlements on both shores of the Mediterranean and around the littoral of the Black Sea. These colonies shared religious and communal affinities with their mother cities but were entirely independent in their politics. Early colonies were settled by people from a number of cities, leading to divided loyalties. In many cases, this, plus the fact that some settlers were driven from the mother cities by force and coercion, led to tension between the colony and the founding city. One of the causes of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.E.) was a conflict between Corinth and Corcyra (now Corfu), one of the former’s own colonies.

Some Greeks were already familiar with the Mediterranean and knew the best locations for settlements. Others relied on the advice of seafarers or oracles, particularly the Oracle of Delphi, who was also consulted for decision on the rules of government. The Greek colony was called apopikia; the mother city, metropolis.

The two major Greek city-states, Athens and Sparta, did not participate in the creation of colonies with the exception of Tarentum, founded by the latter in the early seventh century. Both controlled large areas during the period and did not suffer the land hunger of the smaller city-states. Furthermore, Sparta’s enslavement of the native Laconians as helots provided an economy that precluded colonization and the exportation of citizens.

The major colonizing city-states were the commercial cities of Corinth and Megara. Sometimes two or more cities established a colony, but settlers from only one took over the leadership. Historian Herodotus relates that the citizens of Thera chose by lot and forcibly expelled about two hundred people, who founded Cyrene (now Shaṭṭāt, Libya) in North Africa, because of a prolonged famine. Trade was another possible reason for colonization, but the evidence that most colonies were founded in plains suitable for agriculture supports land hunger as the chief motive. Some city-states, however, did establish merchant colonies. One example Herodotus mentions is Naucratis in Egypt, where Greek settlers lived in special sections of the city for mercantile reasons. Another commercial colony was Mina in Syria.

Modern scholars generally date the founding of Greek colonies by studying the pottery found at the locations, but ancient authors such as the Greek historian Thucydides give the dates of the founding of the apopikias. The Mediterranean offered a suitable climate, arable unoccupied land, and minerals—tin, iron, silver, and copper.
They were able to establish colonies along the Black Sea coast as the native inhabitants preferred the interior. These new Greek cities were important for trade with the interior populations.

Sicily was an early and favorite area for Greek colonizations. The Greeks occupied most of the eastern half of the island and its western coast, and many city-states sent their citizens there. The first recorded settlers came from Chalkis (now Khalkis) on the island of Euboea to Naxos in 734 B.C.E. In 733 B.C.E., Corinth founded Syracuse and, the same year, Corcyra in the Adriatic. These first settlers were followed by colonists from all over Greece, including Megara, Rhodes, Crete, and other cities on Euboea, over the next two centuries. Southern Italy, called Greater Greece, also was a mecca for the city-states, but Greeks were slower to settle the rest of the Adriatic coast. The Euboens, followed by Corinth and city-states of the Peloponnese, established settlements there, and the western cities then moved to what is now France and Spain.

According to tradition, Cumae (in Campania, Italy), the northernmost Greek colony that was settled by Euboeans, was the oldest colony west of the mainland. Settlers from Achaea founded the major cities of Sybaris (near present-day Terranova di Sibari) and Croton (now Crotone) in southern Italy. Phocaea in Balkan Ionia founded Massilia (now Marseilles, France) around 600 B.C.E., and settlers from there set up trading colonies along the coast into northeast Spain. In the seventh century B.C.E., settlers from Andros and Chalkis founded many colonies on the Chalkidice (named after the latter) Peninsula. Around 685 B.C.E., Corinth founded the major colony of Poteidæa on the Pallene isthmus, also on the Chalkidice Peninsula. Control of Poteidæa was an issue in the Peloponnesian War. Megaran settlers founded Calchedon (now Kadiköy) on the Bosporus, and seventeen years later, nearby Byzantium (now Istanbul), less fertile but fated to become more prosperous and famous. Asia Minor Greek cities led by Miletus founded many colonies along the Black Sea in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E.

In the Eastern Mediterranean, the colonists’ way was blocked by the presence of older, established civilizations, but Libya was open. The Phoenicians, however, colonized Carthage in northern Africa while the Greeks were moving into Sicily and southern Italy.

SIGNIFICANCE

Greek colonization in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E. spread Hellenic culture throughout the Mediterranean world and established the basis for what would become the classical legacy of European civilization. The variety and independence of the Greek city-states in both the metropoleis and the apoikias led to the success of the Greek world as a leading culture of the ancient world but at the same time led to the multitude of conflicts that resulted in the political downfall of Greece at the hands of the Macedonians and Romans.

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Frederick B. Chary

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