

## ANCIENT GREECE

### Background Information 19: Work and Agriculture

#### Sources on agriculture – early poetry

- In sources, men reared and worked with domestic animals.
- Homer: mentions ploughing, winnowing and threshing in the Iliad. In Odyssey, have description of Laertes' development of a farmstead.
- Hesiod's poem Works and Days contains important ideas:
  - Farming is main work and is done by men.
  - Women are 'naturally' fitted to work in the house e.g. textiles.
  - Work, particularly farming, is hard and is result of the end of the Golden Age and punishment by Zeus (nature no longer spontaneously produces food).
  - Religious and social calendars of city-states are closely linked to the patterns of the agricultural year.
- Hard work is seen as an unwelcome necessity imposed by Zeus.

#### Agriculture

- Land economically of greatest value and status in terms of political, social and symbolic power.
- Commonest cause of small scale warfare was territory.
- Most Greeks in most states actively involved in agriculture – most were small farmers, 'peasants'.
- Small farmers formed the basis (the hoplites) of the citizen armies of their states.
- Much of the land was owned by the propertied rich.

- Farming strategies included:
  - Following
  - Alternating cereals and legumes
  - Multi-cropping on same field.
  - Owning a number of small farms in different parts of a territory.
- The 3 most important products were cereals, olives and the vine.
- Hilly ground was terraced.
- Kept grazing and working animals – used to work land, produce manure and for food, sometimes for leather.
- Pigs were an important part of animal husbandry.
- Workforce for farms included many slaves in Athens, Corinth, Chios and other major city-states.
- In Sparta, subject Greeks, the helots, formed major labour force for farming.
- In Athens, seems most farmland was controlled by the propertied rich, managed in separate units. Sometimes leased land to tenants but all made use of slaves.
- The olive was fundamental to Greek agriculture and became symbol of the identity of Athens.

## Trade

- Surplus agricultural produce was exchanged for imported necessities e.g. metals.
- When there was a poor harvest, staple cereals may be imported.
- From early 6<sup>th</sup> century coinage was introduced making exchanges easier.
- Money changers/bankers exchanged between the many coinages used by different city-states.
- Markets were held in the agorai.
- Most traders operated on a small scale, owning one ship.
- A gulf existed between the economic worlds of farming and trade, as traders were mostly metics so couldn't own land.
- Quarrying and mining were found in abundance in some city states.

## Crafts and manufacturing

- Craft industries seem to have involved smaller working groups – often a craftsman with a few slaves producing sculpture and pottery.
- Cottage industries – owner and slaves living in the house where work was done.
- Textile production mostly done by women in the household – either do themselves or supervise slaves.
- Poorer women might work in the fields or sell their husband's produce in a shop or market stall.
- Some manufacturing workshops were on a larger scale: many manufacturing slaves (particularly in Athens) lived and worked independently in shops/houses.
- Many slaves involved in trade also lived and worked independently.

## Slavery and work ideology

- Slave or serf labour in nearly all sectors of city-state economies – affected attitudes to work of free population.
- Poorer farmers, craftsmen and retailers hoped to buy their own slaves.
- The groups above would not wish to engage in slavish work i.e. working for another person long term.
- Farmers looked down on craftsmen and traders (weren't land owners)
- Wealthy looked down more on those in manufacture/trade than on poor farmers.
- Only the very poor would undertake wage labour as this had slave connotations.