

Chapter 8: The Greek Adventure: 8-1 Geography and Political Development

Book Title: World Civilizations

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8-1 Geography and Political Development

More than most societies, Greece was shaped by its geography. In ancient times it consisted of the numerous, small islands of the Aegean Sea, often called the *Cyclades* (SIGH-clah-dees) Islands; the western end of Asia Minor; and the mountainous southern tip of the European mainland (see [Map 8.1](#)). Most of this area had little land that was suitable for large-scale farming, no broad river valleys, and no expansive level plains. No place within it was located more than eighty miles from the sea. Dozens of protected harbors and bays were scattered all along the coast. From the beginnings of their civilization on the Cyclades Islands and Crete, the Greeks were expert sailors, so ships and shipping were always a major part of their livelihood. Because the mountains of the peninsula made overland travel there difficult, it usually was easier to travel and trade by sea than by land.

Map 8.1

Early Greece

At the height of Greek power, there were more than two hundred independent poleis, many of them quite small and located on the numerous islands of the Aegean Sea and the Ionian coast. A few were entirely urban but most combined a town with surrounding rural agricultural areas. The inset shows Mycenaean Greece, the earliest period in the history of the peninsula.

Thinking About This Map

What are two ways in which its distinctive geography shaped Greek culture?



This geography also encouraged political fragmentation. The people in each island, valley, and river basin developed their own separate sense of community and identity. Greeks grew up thinking of themselves first as residents of a given place or town and only secondarily as sharing a common culture and language with the other inhabitants of the peninsula. This would be a critical weakness in the development of a united Greek nation.

Reconstruction of the Ice Man.

Nicknamed “Oetzi” (OH-tsee) by his examiners, the “Ice Man” was found in a partially melted Alpine glacier in 1991. Examiners have established that he lived about 3200 B.C.E., a time when Western Europeans were living by farming grains and breeding livestock. The stone, wood, hide, and copper tools and weapons found with him have provided many clues about Bronze Age Europe.



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