

Ancient Greece

"Party at the Parthenon"

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. By the Bronze Age, the area we now know as Greece was divided into many small kingdoms, known as city-states, each the size of a city and its surrounding countryside. The best known were Athens, Sparta, Corinth, Ithaca, Pylos and Mycenae. The Greek word for city-state was "polis," a root that's been incorporated into our language in words like "metropolis" and "politics."

City-states, originally formed for protection, were usually built on an acropolis, or hill, because hills were the most defensible positions. Walled fortresses were built around cities, and people from nearby farms would race into the walls at any sign of trouble. Inside, the city was typically organized around an agora, or marketplace, where the residents would come to trade, shop or gather for socializing and meetings. People often felt real attachment to their city-state and considered themselves Athenians, Spartans or Corinthians rather than Greeks.

Notes

2. Spartans were a military-obsessed people who lived in an area surrounded by mountains—a good wall of defense. By most accounts, Sparta was the only city-state to have a permanent, full-time army. Most of the others had citizen soldiers who could be called upon in time of war to fight but who held other jobs. The Spartans had a standing army who trained constantly. Consequently, they were tough to beat. They worked hard. They sent their boys to live in army barracks at the age of seven. And they worked out, fighting and fitness training constantly.

There were two classes of people in Sparta. One was the Perioeci, the soldiers and people who paid taxes and were protected by law. The other were the Helots, the serf or slave class. These were the former inhabitants of nearby Messenia. The Spartans conquered it in 640-620 BCE and put the Helots to work in Sparta. They had to grow food and do a lot of other work, thereby allowing the Perioeci to concentrate on their military activities.

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3. Of all the Greek city-states, it was Athens that most influenced the way we think about ancient Greece. The Athenians gave us democracy. The city fostered the arts and letters. It's where the Acropolis and the Parthenon are; it was home to the great writers and thinkers Socrates, Aeschylus, Aristotle and Plato. The city has always been admired and loved by Europeans and Americans.

Early Athenians were very forward-thinking in their politics. They were the first to come up with the concept of democracy, or "government by the people" in about 500 BCE. Before that, rule in Athens was by oligarchy, which means "government by a few." A handful of aristocrats, or rich noblemen, made all the decisions. But then, an aristocrat named Cleisthenes rose to prominence. He believed the rich classes in Athens had too much power, so he and the populace threw out the aristocrats and set up the world's earliest democracy. Many of the early city-state governments not only allowed people to participate—they expected it. It was almost a requirement that people be involved. Voting residents of Athens were called citizens.

4. One of the great Athenian rulers was Pericles (c. 495-429 BCE). Born in the city, Pericles helped make Athens the most important city-state. During his time, the Parthenon was built, among other great buildings of the Acropolis.

The Parthenon was a large temple devoted to Athena, goddess of wisdom and war and protector of Athens. A model of the classical style of architecture, it was surrounded by 46 columns. The building was designed by the sculptor Phidias, whose statue of Athena is inside. It remains one of the most famous buildings in the world.

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5. The Athenians placed a high value on intellectual development, art and culture. They achieved great things in the fields of philosophy, literature, mathematics and the sciences. Three of the greatest philosophers of all time came from Athens: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

Socrates (469-399 BCE) was a teacher. He was famous for his questions. If a student were trying to figure something out, Socrates would ask him questions and make him draw his own conclusions. He taught many famous pupils, including Plato.

Plato (429-347 BCE) is perhaps most recognized for his book *The Republic*, in which he describes his idea of the best government. He thought that smart people should run it with fairness and justice (rather than a democracy, which was open to people he considered less wise).

Aristotle (384-322 BCE), Plato's student, is perhaps the greatest thinker of all in Greece. He tutored Alexander the Great. Aristotle is famous for his organized manner of thinking. He believed in using logic and reason, a careful thinking process that works like this: If A is true, and A equals B, then B is true.

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6. The Peloponnesian War took a lot out of the Greeks. The huge battles between the Athenians and the Spartans ravaged much of the territory, and killed many men. King Philip of Macedon, a country to the north of Greece, saw this and decided the area was ripe for the taking. He moved in and conquered Greece. His son, now known as Alexander the Great, took over in 336 BCE at the age of 20.

Alexander became one of the most successful military leaders in history. When he assumed power after his father was assassinated, many people thought he was too young and that he'd have a hard time holding onto Greece. Not only did he retain the city-states of Greece, but he took over Persia, Phoenicia, Israel and Egypt. He expanded his empire all the way to what is now India and Afghanistan. Alexander was a huge fan of Greek culture and spread it throughout his empire.

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7. The Greeks liked their poetry, especially epic poetry. Epics were long poems, as lengthy as novels today. They usually told the story of a great hero and his travels. The two most famous epics of ancient Greece were The Iliad and The Odyssey, both of which were written by the poet Homer in about 700 BC. The Iliad is about the Trojan War, a huge conflict between the Greeks and the people of Troy. The Odyssey recounts the adventures of the Greek warrior Odysseus as he struggles to return home from the war and meets all kinds of crazy creatures.

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8. The Greeks believed in a pantheon of gods, one for just about everything. They had a god for love, for celebration and for metalworking. In Greek mythology, these deities, who resided atop Mount Olympus, explained all manner of natural phenomena. Thunder and lightning, for example, came from Zeus, king of the gods. The sun shone thanks to Apollo. And, interestingly, they believed that the gods could and did come down from on high and interact with regular people. Hercules, half man, half god, may be the best-known result of a relationship between a god and a human.

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