

# Ancient and Modern Greece

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CONTENT:

Ancient and Modern Greece .....	3
1. A brief history of Greece .....	3
2. The differences between Ancient and Modern Greece.....	4
A) Olympic Games .....	4
Origins .....	4
The main differences in Modern and Ancient Games .....	5
B) Religion and politics .....	6
C) From ancient to modern: struggle for equality .....	8
D) Acropolis .....	9
E) The Greek language .....	11
F) Dance.....	14
Conclusion: .....	15

## **Ancient and Modern Greece**

### ***1. A brief history of Greece***

The ancient Classical and Hellenistic eras of Greece are undoubtedly the most splendid, having left behind host of ideas, concepts and art to provide the foundation of what we call “western civilization”. However, the two previous millennia that lead to these ancient eras, as well as the other two millennia that succeeded them are all part of the history of Greece and have left culture footprint on the land.

Greece is one of the oldest civilizations in the world. The first signs of inhabitation were the Cycladic, Minoan and Mycenaean maritime civilizations that lived and ruled during the Bronze Age (3000-1200 BC). However, this collapsed by the 11<sup>th</sup> century BC and a Dark Age followed. By 800 BC, there was a cultural and military revival and city-states like Athens and Sparta sprang onto the world map. The Classical or Golden Age started soon after and gave rise to many of the world’s cultural emblems before ending with the Peloponnesian Wars (431-404 AD) in which the Athenians were vanquished by the Spartans.

Alexander the Great, who marched into Asia Minor, Egypt, Persia and parts of what are now Afghanistan and India, ushered in the Macedonian empire. It ruled for three dynasties and it is known as the Hellenistic period. During this time, Greek ideas and culture was amalgamated with other ancient cultures and a new tradition was created.

The powerful Roman Empire turned its sights on Greece around 205 BC and over the next few centuries, the country came under the Romans, the illustrious Byzantine Empire and the Ottoman Turks. All these influences combined to create a unique culture. A cultural revival in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century precipitated the War of Independence and in 1827 Russia, France and Britain intervened that Greece became independent.

During World War I, Greek troops fought on the Allied side. In 1936, General Metaxas was appointed as a prime minister by the king and quickly established a fascist dictatorship. Although Metaxas had created a Greek version of the Third Reich, he was opposed to German or Italian domination and refused to allow Italian troops to traverse

Greece in 1940. Despite Allied help, Greece fell to Germany in 1941. The destruction and economic problems lead to a civil war that lasted until 1949.

With economic help from America, Greece recovered after this and royalist established an anticommunist government and implemented the Certificate of Political Reliability, which remained valid until 1962. Greece has been a member of European Community<sup>1</sup> since 1981, a member of Economic and Monetary Union since 2001, NATO since 1951, the OECD since 1960, WEU since 1995 and the ESA since 2005. Moreover, in 2004 the country hosted the Olympic Games.

Athens, one of the first cities in the world, is the capital of Greece. The birthplace of Socrates, Pericles, Sophocles and other prominent philosophers, politicians and writers of the Ancient world, Athens remains a vibrant cultural centre even today. It is also the site of the Greek Parliament, the Athens Trilogy (Library, University, and Academy) and the new Athens Olympic Sports Complex.

## ***2. The differences between Ancient and Modern Greece***

### ***A) Olympic Games***

One of the differences between these two versions of Greece is the way of conserving the Olympic Games. A great deal of the ancient games still exists to the modern and yet so much has changed.

### ***Origins***

Traditionally it has always been said that the Games started at Olympia in 776 BC, about the time that Homer was born. However, for several centuries before that date Olympia had been a cult site for the worship of Zeus, a numinous location away from human dwellings, overlooked by a hill, with the sacred River Alpha flowing through it. What was it that caused people to change from honoring Zeus solely with dedicatory offerings, to honoring him through athletics? Several factors seem to have been involved. One is the rise of the Greek polis, or city-state. As city-states in different locations grew, each wanted a means of asserting its supremacy, so would send representatives to Olympia to become supreme in physical competition. The Games were an attractive

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<sup>1</sup> Now the EU

means of getting men fit. Another factor is the traditional Greek view that the gods championed a winner, so by establishing a competition aimed at producing supreme winners, they were thereby asserting the power and influence on humans of the supreme god, Zeus. Today's Olympic Games are based on what took place at Olympia, in Greece, nearly three millennia ago. What were the ancient Olympics like, and how different were they from those of modern times?

### ***The main differences in Modern and Ancient Games***

1. The Ancient Olympic Games only allowed people of Greek descent to participate and today, people all over the world can attend this event.

2. Also, only men were allowed to compete in the ancient games. Athletic training was part of every free male citizen's education. Nevertheless, there were separate games for women in Olympia dedicated to the goddess Hera that consisted of wrestling, foot and chariot races. The first woman to win the gold in Modern Olympics was Margaret Abbott, a Chicago socialist who was studying art in Paris in 1900.

3. The ancient Olympic Games were held as a religious event to honor the Greek god Zeus. A hundred oxen were typically given as a sacrifice. True, at least in the beginnings. Within several centuries, the Olympics became a far more commercial spectacle, in which the emphases among the highly professional athletes were on winning and athletic prowess. In some ways, the competition of Greek city states resembled a microcosm of the modern Olympic emphasis on international competition.

4. The ancient Olympics yielded only the winner. A crown of olive leaves was placed on his head and a statue in his image was erected in Olympia. However, the Modern Olympic Games yield not only the winner but also the first three competitors with a golden, silver and bronze medal.

5. Winter Olympics are a modern invention. The ancient Greeks never thought of featuring skiing or other cold-weather events. The first Winter Olympic Games were first held in 1924 in Chamonix, France. Two hundred and fifty-eight athletes participated from seventeen countries. The Winter Games today have sports such as figure skating, skiing, and bobsledding.

6. The ancient games were only held in Olympia. Today, every fourth year the host is a different country. Today, a torch is lit at Olympia to symbolize the ancient Olympics. Various athletes carry this torch throughout the country.

7. In the Ancient Olympic Games, there were only ten sports, while in modern Olympics there are substantially more. Still, as in the modern games, they slowly added more. In the ancient games, they had four running races, equestrian racing, wrestling, boxing, pentathlon, and chariot races. In Modern Day Olympics, they have gymnastics, triathlon, cycling, fencing, and volleyball, and of course, there are all the winter sports. However, the sports of chariot races have been discontinued.

### ***B) Religion and politics***

Not only the Olympic Games have changed, but also many other things. For example, religion has changed a lot. While in Ancient Greece people believed in gods, today in the modern country people believe in one God. Religion was associated with the Olympics. Zeus, who was the greatest of all the gods, was taught to look down on the competitors, favoring some and denying victory to the others. A grand sacrifice of 100 oxen was made to Zeus during the Games. Olympia was home to one of Greece's great oracles, an oracle to Zeus, with an altar to him consisting of the bonfire-heap created by burnt sacrificial offerings. As the offerings were burnt, a priest, who pronounced an oracle - an enigmatic and often ambiguous prediction of the future - according to his interpretation of what he saw, examined them. Athletes consulted the oracle to learn what their chances in the Games were.

However, today things are more different. Close to 98 percent of the Greeks are Orthodox Christians, just over 1 percent are Muslims, and there are small numbers of Jews, Seventh Day Adventists, Roman Catholics, and members of Protestant denominations. Greeks became involved in Christianity very early. Tension between the Christian patriarchs of Constantinople and Rome ultimately led to the Schism of 1054, which divided the religion into Orthodoxy and Catholicism. In 1833, after the revolution, the Orthodox Church of Greece became the first of several national Orthodox churches in the region, each autonomous while recognizing the spiritual leadership of the patriarch in Constantinople. Today there are sixteen separate Orthodox churches and patriarchates.

The Orthodox Church of Greece is officially designated the religion of the nation, its officials exert some influence in state matters, and it receives state funds.

Orthodoxy includes a series of daily, weekly, and annual rites, including the Sunday liturgy and the Twelve Great Feasts, of which the most important is Easter and the Holy Week that precedes it. Twenty to twenty five percent of the population attends weekly services, while many people are present at annual ones. There are four periods of fasting and saint's days in honor of the three hundred Orthodox saints. There are also rites associated with key events in the life cycle, such as funerals, weddings, and baptisms. Many people integrate religious practice into their daily lives, crossing themselves while passing a church or entering to light a candle, pray, or meditate.

In Orthodox belief, at the time of death, a person's soul begins a journey toward judgment by God, after which the soul is consigned to paradise or hell. Relatives wash and prepare the body for the funeral, which is held in a church within twenty-four hours of death. The body is buried, not cremated, for decomposition is considered part of the process by which a person's sins are forgiven and the soul travels to paradise. The next forty days are a precarious time, at the end of which the soul is judged. Visits are paid to the relatives of the deceased, and additional rituals are held, some with open displays of grief and singing of laments. Three to seven years after burial, the bones of the deceased are exhumed and placed in a family vault or a communal ossuary. The degree to which the body has decomposed and the bones have turned white is seen as evidence of the extent to which the person's sins have been forgiven and the soul has entered a blissful state.

Moving on politics, I have to emphasize that the Ancient Greeks tried to keep some aspects of politics out of the Olympics, but their efforts met then, as such, efforts do now, with limited success. The Olympic truce was meant to lead to a cessation of hostilities throughout Greece, to allow competitors to travel and participate safely, but it was not always observed. The great historian of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides, tells how in 420 BC the Spartans violated the truce by attacking a fort and dispatching hoplites, and they were therefore banned from the Games. Nevertheless, Lichas, a prominent Spartan, thought of a way round the ban - he entered the chariot race as a

Boeotia. When his true nationality was discovered, however, he was given a public flogging at Olympia.

Today Greece is a parliamentary republic modeled after the French system. The redrawn constitution of 1975 established a single legislative body with three hundred seats. The president serves as the ceremonial head of state, while the prime minister is the head of government. Suffrage is universal for those over eighteen years of age. A large civil service bureaucracy administers a host of national, provincial, and local agencies. Governmental functioning often is described as hierarchical and centralized. A municipal reorganization in 1998 combined smaller communities in an effort to strengthen the power of local government.

### ***C) From ancient to modern: struggle for equality***

Since Greece has joined the European Union, it has been pushed toward modernization at a faster speed. A country still very tied to the legacy of its ancient civilization, Greece has been struggling to find balance between modernity and the country's rich cultural heritage. Even as the country advances technologically, the power of tradition continues to exert tremendous influence.

Greek women, in particular, are caught in this paradox. It is a quiet struggle, but a fascinating one worthy of greater study. The emergence of a women's movement in Greece traces its origins to the late nineteenth century, although this effort involved only a small proportion of middle and upper class urban women. Traditionally, men were associated with public spaces and women with private. Women's role were: economic role in the family; ownership of property; position as mother; wife, and daughter; maintenance of the household; religious activities; and artistic expression through dancing, music, and crafts all worked in this direction. Even as they dared to demand better treatment, these pioneering women did not totally question their traditional female role, fearing that upsetting the institution of family would be seen as threatening society as a whole. At that time, Greek women fought mainly for their right to education; in fact, the first people to speak out in support of more education for women were teachers. In the nineteenth century, women entered Greek universities for the first time, and female writers began to be published in respected publications like *Artemis* or *Eurydice*. Women



received full voting rights in 1956, and the Family Law of 1983 established legal gender equality in family relationships and decision-making. Majorities (53 percent) of students in universities are women, and the percentage of women in public office has increased. Women are now fully present in public spaces, including restaurants, nightclubs, beaches, stores, and public plazas.

### ***D) Acropolis***

This is the greatest monument of the Modern and Ancient Greece, both. Even though its role has changed a lot, it will always be one of the worthiest places to see in Athens representing the great Greek history and reminding us that Ancient Greece is still alive throughout its breathtaking monuments.



**Picture 1 - Parthenon**

The word “Acropolis” means city by the edge, and there are many acropolises all over Greece. They were always situated on a high spot, and were often used as a place for shelter and defense against various enemies.

The Acropolis is believed to have been inhabited since at least the seventh Millennium BC. During the Mycenaean civilization, walls were built around it and there is evidence that there was a Mycenaean palace here as well. The tomb of Ceros also lies here, and the Athenians might have kept a snake here - symbolizing their first king. There were also other tombs and temples here, all connected to kings, heroes and gods that had to do with Athens. In the 6th century BC, the Acropolis had changed quite significantly. It was no longer a place for palaces, but had turned more into a sanctuary that anything

else. Every year a huge procession to the Acropolis took place, and the wooden statue of Athena was dressed and sacrificed to.

During the Persian wars in the 5th century, the Athenians started building the Parthenon, but the Persians burnt the Acropolis and all focus was put on the battles. It was during Pericles era, called Golden Age, when the Acropolis got the structure we see today. Starting in the middle of the 5th century, the Parthenon and a huge bronze statue of Athena was made. It is said that Pericles used unemployed Athenians for workers, and that it was thanks to this initiative, every Athenian had food on his table.

When the Turks came towards the end of the 16th century, they turned the Parthenon into a mosque. Until the 17th century, the temple was relatively unharmed, but in 1687, the Venetians bombarded the Acropolis, and a projectile hit the Parthenon, which the Turks used as a storage room for gunpowder. The temple exploded and this is why the temple does not have a roof today.

In the beginning of the 19th century, the Englishman lord Elgin was allowed by the sultan to take with him various objects from the Acropolis. He took the famous Parthenon marbles, which until today is a matter of controversy since they are housed in the British Museum despite the Greeks plea to get them back.

Beside the fact that Acropolis has left a huge trail surviving through the history, another trail is the new Acropolis Museum, which was given to the public in 2008. The centuries fall away and in this museum is as you are looking at not only the beginning of the history, but of civilization, of democracy, of literature. In this museum, you can also see all the wonders of the Ancient Greece, everything that has survived the centuries and you can understand it.

What makes this museum so special are, "the views over Athens, and the use of the natural light". However, there are other factors. The construction process revealed further archaeological and architectural layers as well as a wealth of art facts. The vast amount of pottery which survives testifies to the ease of making it; the advantage of being able to dry it in the sun. Even the simplest pot or platter has its story.



Picture 2 – The top-level gallery of the Acropolis museum

### ***E) The Greek language***

It is widely known that most European languages – with the exception of Finnish, Hungarian, Basque and some others – have a common origin, they belong to the large family of the Indo-European languages. The Greek language has been spoken in Greece, without interruption for about forty centuries. It has been spoken at least since the year 2000 B.C. and written since the fifteenth century. From the 8th century B.C. until today, we have the written language using "the Greek alphabet", the first real alphabetical writing, starting from Homer's epics and the first Greek inscriptions of the eighth century B.C. until the texts of present-day Greek

The early stage of the language is called Proto-Hellenic<sup>2</sup>. This early language broke into dialects, and the Greeks were divided into several large groups. The main three dialects were the Ionic, Doric and Aeolis and all were spoken during the classical period (around 500 BC). Thus, classical Greek literature was written in all three. A branch of the Ionic dialect with several Doric elements developed in Attica. This was called the Attic dialect. In addition, it was important for the historical reasons because most of classical Greek literature was written in it. In later centuries, the Attic dialect was considered the high point of the Greek language, and authors often tried to write in Attic Greek. Thus, it did influence very considerably the evolution of the Greek language in the next two millennia.

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<sup>2</sup> "Hellenic" refers to the same period as the "Classical Greek". It is the time of Homer and later the great Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

When Alexander the Great united the Greek world and spread Greek culture to the Middle East and North Africa the dialects, under the strong influence of Alexandria as a cultural center, converged to form the common Hellenistic language, the language of the new literature in the Hellenistic<sup>3</sup> and Roman period (from 300 BC to 500 AD). From this Byzantine Greek evolved and the language remained extremely conservative and more or less unified under the influence of the strong center of Constantinople (500 - 1000 AD).

At the beginning of the second millennium, the language broke again into two branches. The Logia or Scholarly Greek, was used by well-educated authors, and was very similar to Classical Greek. The other branch, the demotic, was used by folk poetry, and colloquial literature, and was spoken by most of the population of the Byzantine Empire. With the fall of Byzantium, the demotic broke into dialects again, and those dialects are still alive in Modern Greece, even though in a watered-down version.

The creation of the Modern state in 1830 required an agreed form of the language. However, despite efforts to generalize its usage, the dialects of demotic Greek were still spoken by most of the population and the strange phenomenon of two versions of Greek simultaneously existing sparked a prolonged and spirited debate in Modern Greek cultural life for over a century. A government decree in 1974 put an end to these divisions, by adopting the current language as the official language of the state. Television, radio and press meanwhile had contributed towards the softening of the edges of all these versions of Greek, and had encouraged convergence. The result was a form of the language largely based on the Peloponnesian dialect, spoken by the everyday person, but also allowing for scholarly loans when necessary, in order to increase its expressive potential.

Modern Greek language refers to the varieties of Greek spoken in the modern era.

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<sup>3</sup> “Hellenistic” refers to the period after Alexander the Great conquests that spread the Greek language around the Mediterranean Sea and far into the orient in the 300s BCE. This period lasted through the beginnings of Christianity.

The beginning of the “modern” period of the language is often very symbolically assigned to the fall of the Byzantine Empire<sup>4</sup> in 1453, even though that date marked no clear linguistic boundary and many characteristic modern features of the language had been present centuries earlier- from the third century BC to the tenth century AD.

Today, Standard Modern Greek, based on Demotic, is the official language of both, Greece and Cyprus. Greek is spoken today by approximately 12-15 million people, not only by the Greeks, but also by minority and immigrant communities in many other countries. The Greek language is conventionally divided into the following periods:

a) Proto-Greek: Proto-Greek speakers possibly entered the Greek peninsula in the early second millennium BC. Since then, Greek has been spoken uninterruptedly in Greece.

b) Mycenaean Greek: is the language of the Mycenaean civilization. It is recorded in the Linear B script on the tables dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards.

c) Ancient Greek: in its various dialects was the language of the Archaic and Classical periods of the Ancient Greek civilization. It was widely known throughout the Roman Empire. Ancient Greek fell into disuse in Western Europe in the middle Ages, but remained officially in use in the Byzantine world, and was reintroduced to the rest of Europe with the Fall of Constantinople and Greek immigration to the areas of Italy.

d) Koine Greek: The fusion of various ancient Greek dialects with Attic, the dialect of Athens, resulted in the creation of the first common Greek dialect, which became a lingua franca across Eastern Mediterranean and Near East. Koine Greek can be initially traced within the armies and conquered territories of Alexander the Great, but after the Hellenistic colonization of the known world, it was spoken from Egypt to the fringes of India. The origin of Christianity can also be traced through Koine Greek. It is also known as the Alexandrian dialect, Post-Classical Greek or even New Testament Greek, as it was the original language the New Testament was written in.

e) Medieval Greek: also known as Byzantine Greek: the continuation of Koine Greek during Byzantine Greece, up to the demise of the Byzantine Empire in the 15th

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<sup>4</sup> “Byzantine” refers to the period in which Byzantium (later Constantinople) was the controlling economic and religious center for most of the eastern part of the waning Roman Empire.

century. Medieval Greek is a cover term for a whole continuum of different speech and writing styles, ranging from vernacular continuations of spoken Koine that were already approaching Modern Greek in many respects, to highly learned forms imitating classical Attic. Much of the written Greek that was used as the official language of the Byzantine Empire was an eclectic middle-ground variety based on the tradition of written Koine.

f) Modern Greek: The Greek that is spoken today is generally seen as the sixth stage of the evolution of the language. It is known as Modern Greek and most scholars see the start of Modern Greek as the fall of the Byzantine Empire in the 14th century. Obviously, the language has still changed since then and is still changing today. Regional dialects are still in use, although there is much less variation between them than there was in ancient Greece. Greek has made itself known in numerous other languages across the world, especially in Europe. Many words, which are to do with science and academia, are of Greek origin. The impact of the language of Greek can be seen everywhere, but most of all in universities and schools. All words pertaining to great Greek discoveries such as astronomy and philosophy, and indeed academic, stem from the Greek language.

## ***F) Dance***

One more thing that has left its trials behind is dance. Greece has a continuous history of native dances reaching from antiquity until the modern era. It began in Minoan period. Ancient Greeks believed that dancing was invented by the gods and therefore associated it with religious ceremony. They believed that the gods offered this gift to select mortals only, who in turn taught dancing to their fellow men. Periodic evidence in ancient texts indicates that dance was held in high regard, in particular for its educational qualities. Dance, along with writing, music, and physical exercise, was fundamental to the education system and many classical authors extol its virtues as means of cultivating physical and spiritual wellbeing. The leader of the dance was called the *koryphaios* or *chorolektes*, and he began the song and ensured that the circle was maintained. They usually danced in a circle, but when they did not dance in a circle, the dancers held their hands high or waved them to left and right. As they danced, they sang, either set songs or extemporized ones, sometimes in unison, sometimes in refrain, repeating the verse sung by the lead dancer.

Greece is one of the few places in Europe where the day-to-day role of folk dance is sustained. Rather than functioning as a museum piece preserved only for performances and special events, it is a vivid expression of everyday life. Occasions for dance are usually weddings, family and celebrations. Dance has its place in ceremonial customs that are still preserved in Greek villages, such as dancing the bride during a wedding and dancing the trousseau of the bride during the wedding preparations. Greek taverns providing live entertainment often include folk dances in their program. Popular dances are Syrtos, Geranos, Mantilia, Saximos, Pyrichios, and Kordakas. These dances have their origins in the ancient period and are still danced in some form today.

The avant-garde choreographer, director and dancer Dimitris Papaioannou was responsible for the critically successful Opening Ceremony of the 2004 Olympic Games, with a conception that reflected the classical influences on modern and experimental Greek dance forms.

### ***Conclusion:***

However, despite these differences, Ancient Greece has left many marks, which are indelible and will last forever. It has left marks of course on the Olympic Games, which continued preserving even though all the changes they have passed through. Moreover, every time we hear the words "Olympic Games" we remember of Greece because Games were invented there and they will always be one of the most important criteria of Greece.

#### Index:

Acropolis, 9, 10, 11  
Ancient, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 13  
dialects, 11, 12, 13, 14  
Greece, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13,  
14  
Greek, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14

Hera, 5  
language, 11, 12, 13, 14  
Modern, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 12, 13, 14  
Olympic Games, 4, 5, 6  
Zeus, 4, 5, 6

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