

# Food and Agriculture in Ancient Greece

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Olive trees on the Greek island of Anaxos. Cereals, olives and wine were the three most produced foodstuffs in ancient Greece, suited as they are to the Mediterranean climate. Photo by: Pixabay

The ancient Greek city-states were able to flourish because of agriculture. Farming skills allowed the Greeks to produce more food than what they immediately needed. This extra food meant that most people in ancient Greece did not have to constantly worry about whether there would be enough food. This allowed them to pursue other trades and create goods that could be exported, or shipped out. These goods could then be traded for other necessities.

Cereals, olives and wine all thrived in the Mediterranean climate and were the three most produced foodstuffs in Greece. As Greeks colonized the Mediterranean, they spread their agricultural ideas and products.

## **A network of smallholdings**

The state government did not control what was farmed. Anyone could grow crops and own livestock on their own land. Most farms in Greece were private and family-owned.

Farms in Athens ranged in size from 5 hectares to 20 hectares for the wealthy aristocracy. A hectare is about the size of a modern football field. In Sparta farms were a little bigger on average, as large as 44 hectares for the richest citizens. The poorest citizens had no land at all, and often worked on the land of others, or would rent land and farm it themselves.

It is not clear if farmers lived on their farms or resided in the city and traveled each day. What they did was probably dependent on how close they lived to the city and their amount of wealth. Some may have been able to buy slaves to work the land.

## **Crops**

Greece is surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea. The region has a distinct climate. It is known for a combination of dry summers and mild winters. It usually rains in the winter, but rainfall can be unpredictable. As a result, crop failure was a regular problem in ancient Greece.

Wheat crops may have failed once every four years, and barley crops once every 10 years, because of insufficient water supply. Some areas had different soils and weather conditions that made them more fertile than others. As a whole, only one-fifth of Greece's land is farmable, so pressure to use the land was quite high.

The most common food products in Greece were wheat, barley, olives and grapevines.

Greeks didn't make much bread from wheat, but they did make baked goods called barley cakes. They also made gruel, a sort of cereal made from barley. Broad beans, chickpeas and lentils were grown. Many private households tended fruit such as figs, apples, pears and pomegranates, as well as vegetables such as cucumbers, onions, garlic and salads. Nuts like almonds and walnuts were popular, too.

## **Crop management**

Plowing of soil and planting of seeds was carried out in October, November and December. During this crucial and busy period, Athens did not hold any religious festivals or government meetings. In the early spring, vines were pruned back and in May and June, grain was harvested. In June and July, grain was loosened from its husks and stored, and in September, grapes were gathered and made into wine. In the autumn, olives were harvested and pressed into oil.

There is evidence that the Greeks rotated their crops, moving them to different parts of their land each year. In more difficult times, some fields would have been used throughout the year or planted with numerous crops at the same time. Small plots used for growing fruit and vegetables would have been irrigated with small water channels. Trenches were sometimes dug around trees to hold precious rainwater for when it was most needed.

Equipment used in Greek agriculture was basic. Digging, weeding and plowing was usually done by hand using wooden or iron-tipped plows and hoes. Wealthier farmers had oxen to help plow their fields. A tool called a sickle was used to harvest crops. The crops were then winnowed, or cut down, using a flat shovel and baskets to separate the grain from its outer husk, known as the chaff. Grains were then trampled on by livestock, which further separated the wheat from the chaff. Grapes were crushed underfoot in special containers while olives were crushed in stone presses.

## **Animal husbandry**

The ancient Greeks did not manage large herds of livestock. However, many private households would have kept a small number of animals, perhaps no more than 50 in a herd. These included sheep, goats, pigs, chickens and some cattle. They were useful for their meat and milk. The ancient Greeks did not drink a lot of milk, but they did use it to make cheese. Animals were also useful for their eggs, wool or leather and their waste, which could fertilize crops.

More animals were reared in areas where land wasn't suitable for agriculture. These animals were often fed meals of straw, stalks of vegetable plants, damaged fruit and leftover bits of grapes and olives after they were pressed. Horses, mules and donkeys were also reared so they could transport people and things.

### **Trade of foodstuffs**

Most farmers would have only produced enough food for their own families' needs. They would have traded extra produce for things they did not produce themselves, such as cheese, honey, fish and shellfish. Some of the wealthier citizens with larger plots could make a profit from selling their extra crops at the market.

During the fifth century B.C., Athens' port of Piraeus became the most important trading center in the Mediterranean. It gained a reputation as the place to find any type of goods on the market.

Greek merchant ships sailed the Mediterranean and exported, or shipped out, wine, olives and olive oil to such places as Egypt and Asia Minor, which is now the country Turkey. Many Greek city-states were trade centers for hundreds of years. The ports of Athens, Delos and Rhodes were especially important.

### **State intervention**

The state didn't get too involved in the production and sale of agricultural products. However, they did take an interest in keeping a high supply of grain. Grain was imported from Egypt and the Black Sea area to ensure that the population didn't starve during times of drought. It was so vital to feed Athens' large population that trade in wheat was controlled by a special "grain buyer." Anyone who tried to block the government from bringing in grain could be put to death.

Government officials patrolled food markets to make sure that the products being sold were high-quality. Grain had its own supervisors who made sure that prices and quantities were fair.

## Quiz

- 1 Which section highlights the idea that grain was an essential and highly regulated foodstuff?
- (A) "A network of smallholdings"
  - (B) "Animal husbandry"
  - (C) "Trade of foodstuffs"
  - (D) "State intervention"
- 2 Select the paragraph from the section "Crop management" that explains HOW Greek farmers maintained their crops despite unpredictable rain.
- 3 Which of the following answer choices describes two MAIN ideas of the article?
- (A) Agriculture was vital to the success and trade of ancient Greece. The ports of Athens and Rhodes were especially important places to meet and trade goods.
  - (B) Agriculture was vital to the success and trade of ancient Greece. Greek farmers developed organized farming methods to use the resources and land available.
  - (C) The Mediterranean climate allowed Greek farmers to grow a variety of crops. Farms in Athens ranged in size from 5 to 20 hectares for the wealthy aristocracy.
  - (D) The Mediterranean climate allowed Greek farmers to grow a variety of crops. The ancient Greeks also used milk from their animals to make items they could trade.
- 4 Which sentence from the article would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) Farming skills allowed the Greeks to produce more food than what they immediately needed.
  - (B) Anyone could grow crops and own livestock on their own land.
  - (C) During this crucial and busy period, Athens did not hold any religious festivals or government meetings.
  - (D) More animals were reared in areas where land wasn't suitable for agriculture.