Ancient Greece 2000–280BC

With the exception of the Basques in Spain and the Ugro-Finnic group (Hungarians, Finns and Estonians), all European peoples speak Indo-European languages, which include Celtic, Germanic, Italic, Slavonic and Greek.

The home of the Indo-Europeans was in the region between central eastern Europe and southern Russia, and about 2000BC they began to migrate in two directions: westwards into Europe and south-eastwards into Asia Minor and India.¹

It was in the period 1850–1600BC that the westward group penetrated what is now Greece, gradually infiltrating the area and merging with the original Mediterranean population mostly living in coastal areas.

The first Greek civilisation was that of Mycenae, based on a community in southern Greece, the Peloponnesus, although other communities were established in such places as Athens and Thebes as well as the islands of the Aegean sea and even along the coast of Asia Minor. These Mycenaeans were both warriors and traders and are believed to have overthrown in the fifteenth century BC the brilliant Minoan civilisation on Crete that had been founded by migrants from Asia before the second millenium. This opened the way for trade with Italy, Sicily and Egypt. It was probably trade that brought the Mycenaeans into conflict with Troy, a city near the entrance to the Dardanelles. The sack of Troy in about 1200BC by the Mycenaeans under their king, Agamemnon, and the aftermath, provided the inspiration for Homer’s eighth century BC epic poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey, the first works of European literature which in turn provided numerous themes for classical Greek tragedians and later European playwrights.

But hardly a century after the Trojan War the Mycenaeans were themselves overthrown by new-comers from the north. These were Dorian and Ionian Greeks who were militarily superior to the Mycenaeans because they had weapons of iron whereas the latter only had bronze.

Over the next three centuries these Dorian and Ionian Greeks not only took over the Mycenaean settlements on the mainland but also those on the islands, including Crete, and along the coast of Asia Minor.

¹ A. Alcock, A Short History of Europe © Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited 1998
It was from these settlements that city-states or ‘polis’, developed, small self-contained communities, areas for common security, perhaps around a fortress on a hill and controlling the local countryside in order to be as self-sufficient as possible in food.

What was important about these city states was that the ways they governed themselves provided the foundation of European political thought and experience. At various times some were ruled by one person, a king or a tyrant, (Sparta even had two kings), some by an aristocratic or wealthy élite, and others by the citizenry as a whole.

But although all these city-states were Greek, that did not prevent bitter rivalry, frequently ending in armed conflict. By the sixth century BC two city-states had become prominent – Sparta and Athens.

Sparta developed a society that was based on a military-style disciplinary education in which male children were taken from their families at the age of five. It enabled Sparta to have the largest army and become the most efficient – and feared – military power in Greece and to dominate the Peloponnese. It was probably the Spartans who developed the characteristic army of the ancient Greeks, infantrymen heavily armed with a shield, short sword and a nine-foot long thrusting spear, formed into phalanxes eight ranks deep. Athens, on the other hand, had gained a reputation for the arts, through the holding of drama festivals and games open to all Greeks (the Olympic Games were started in the seventh century BC) and by the construction of splendid buildings and temples.2

From 750–550 BC Greek civilisation spread around the coasts of the Black Sea, North Africa, Italy, and southern France. One important reason for this expansion overseas in large numbers was the poor soil in Greece, which was unable to provide for a growing population. Another was the need to develop maritime trade and commerce. Colonies were established at places ideal for trade and where raw materials, particularly metals, could be obtained. A colony would be founded by a mother-city. Although politically autonomous, the colony usually retained contact with its parent.

It was in this period too that an economy based on money rather than barter was introduced, due to the development of coins by the rich and cultured Kingdom of Lydia which controlled the western coast of Asia Minor.

What was important about city-state culture was the basic belief of its citizens that they owed their personal and spiritual