

## Description Cards

### Description #1

We begin with the Balkan peninsula, a mountainous region, of which Greece is a part. It has high rugged peaks and twisting barren ranges that are broken by deep fissures and valleys. They cut and separate the landscape into barely accessible entities. It is the geography that determined the development of the Greek city-state. With each area at a distance from its neighbors, it is equally protected and isolated because of the mountain barriers and the deep valleys. Each settlement grew and developed along its own charted path, whether Sparta, Thebes, Corinth, or Athens. The contour map gives an indication of the rugged landscape found throughout Hellas (Greece). The topography is sharply defined by flat level areas that quickly give way to the rise of vertical slopes, hills, and mountains.

### Description #2

The earliest settlement in a particular location began in a very small way. It possibly had only several small habitations by a road that intersected with another major thoroughfare leading off into the mountains and valleys. The early settlements were "agrarian," with the farmers using whatever fields and soils were available to the utmost. The Mediterranean Triad—grains (barley, or wheat), the vine, and the olive tree—was the staple of existence in Greece and throughout the Mediterranean world. The grains would be grown on the flat, fertile lowland fields. The lands that rise slightly to a higher elevation would be cultivated with the vines. These bountiful vineyards would produce succulent grapes yielding the wines the Greeks enjoyed. In the upper reaches of the sloping ground, on the barren and arid slopes of the surrounding hills and the high ground of the mountains, would be planted the olive trees. This tree is hardy and grows well in areas with a moderate rainfall. Its roots go deep and suck out whatever moisture it needs to exist in such barren places while yielding a nutritious crop of olives.

### Description #3

With the small settlement gaining in prominence at its crossroads setting, the people would collectively find the space to build the "agora" or their marketplace. The agora quickly became the center of the commercial activity of the polis, as well as its social center. The agora could be entirely enclosed by the stoa, a building that surrounds the marketplace. Or it may just have one or two walls to mark the structure of the marketplace. This was a building with a row of columns, sometimes even two stories high, with shops located behind the columns. This created open rooms. People built wooden counters and areas where the shopkeepers could display their merchandise and goods. In the center of the agora were stalls where the farmers from the surrounding countryside would come and set up their tables, selling fish, meat, cheese, vegetables, eggs, and chickens. Marble slabs would be used for the fish, to keep them cool and fresh. Close by would be the kyklos, a large platform where pots, textiles, and slaves would be displayed and sold. Moneychangers would also have their place close by to do business. The craftsmen of the polis were also situated in buildings close to the agora, working in their homes as jewelers, blacksmiths, shoemakers, potters, whatever occupation and craft, so that customers would have ready access to their wares.

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### Description #4

With the agora in place, the settlement prospered and grew. Many additional buildings would enlarge the community and bring about the evolution into a large city-state. There would be an organized plan to the growth, with streets and thoroughfares being carefully plotted, and the dwellings carefully constructed and placed around the base of the high ground. The agora would remain the center of the commercial and social life of the community. That role never diminished because it became the wherewithal of the city-state's existence. When life was good, the Polis evolved into a thriving community. Farmers from the surrounding countryside had a place to sell their wares and the city people offered goods and services. With a bit of luck, contentment and prosperity would grow. Soon the polis could easily become an urban setting where 250,000 people had their own small world of peace and happiness.

### Description #5

The immediate high-ground above the city was the place where the earliest of settlements had the citadel. This was a well constructed fortress on the highest point of land. The acropolis, the "high-city" or the fortified high ground, was situated at a place where the steep cliffs and the vertical slopes made an attacker's or invader's approach very difficult. The citadel was the place where the people of the polis took refuge if they were under attack. The acropolis was chosen for its location because it was a place that could be easily defended. More importantly, it was also a place where there was a spring, where water could be found when the need arose during an attack. It was not only a safe haven from attack, it was also where weapons and armor could be stored. The hoplites, the "citizen-soldiers" of the polis, would need easy access to them when they would defend the fortress from the enemy.

### Description #6

Eventually, as the polis prospered and grew in size, it became necessary to build a series of walls that totally surrounded the city-state. They would embrace the citadel as well, and make it all part of a defensive system that would keep the enemy beyond the gates. At different intervals there would be watchtowers, as well as gates that allowed access to the city. The walls would totally embrace the entire perimeter of the city-state. The only areas where walls would be considered unnecessary were near the cliffs, for these were places where an enemy would find it hard to maneuver and gain access into the polis.

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### Description #7

In time, as the city-state gained in wealth and population, the citadel atop the acropolis became outdated, a relic having outlasted its usefulness. The most powerful of the city-states could now field an army of hoplites that fought in formations of massed spearmen called a phalanx. Or else, they relied on their citizens for a navy and fleets to defend the homeland. In many city-states, the high ground, or the acropolis, became the place where the citizens could display their pride in the community. They built temples to their patron god or goddess, or created public buildings that showed the entire world what was accomplished through their labors. The entrance to the sacred grounds was the propylaeum, an elaborate and ornate gateway endowed by craftsmen and stonemasons with a beauty befitting the entrance to the religious temple areas. The temples and public buildings were built lavishly, by the finest sculptors and masons who devoted their time to their polis. With loving pride, they created statues and structures that would demonstrate the power, wealth, and the greatness of all the people in the city-state.

### Description #8

The city-state that evolved into a democracy—as did Athens—would have had several public buildings where elected officials could carry out their duties and responsibilities. The bouleuterion was a special, large, extra-long building, for meetings of the city council. The tholos was a building where the leaders, or the executives, of the city council met. Another important structure was the gymnasium, the school for boys and young men, which also contained lecture rooms and a library. The greatest sculptors and artists would embellish the public buildings and the temples of the polis with their work. In Periclean Athens, the artistic genius of masters like Pheidias, Scopos, Praxiteles, and Myron all enhanced the glory and reputation of the city-state.

### Description # 9

The intellectual creativity of the Greeks was a marvel. Many of the city-states provided a theater for the entertainment of the citizens. In Athens, a building close by the theater called the Odeon, was the site for music and poetry contests held on festival days. A special contest was held during the Dionysia, one of the great religious celebrations in honor of one of the ancient Olympian gods. It lasted several days. During this time, the Greeks would hold a contest to select the best play as either a comedy or tragedy. In Periclean Athens—what is considered the “Golden Age” of Greek civilization and democracy—some of the greatest plays were written by Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes. Some of the Greek theaters had seating for 14,000. There were even special seats carved into stone for honored playgoers.