Trade in Ancient Greece

Trade was a fundamental part of the ancient Greek world. As the centuries went on, Greeks established cities farther from Greece and transportation between them improved. Increasingly, goods could be made in one part of the Mediterranean and bought and sold in another part. New types of food, raw materials and products became available to Greeks for the first time. Also, the export of wine, olives and pottery helped to spread Greek culture to the wider world.

From local to international trade

In Greece, trade existed from around 2600 B.C., which is about 4,600 years ago. Archaeologists have found pottery and precious goods including gold, copper and ivory far from where they were made. These finds are proof that trading took place between Egypt, Asia Minor and Greek city-states. When these civilizations became weaker, trade decreased and almost disappeared.
The authors Homer and Hesiod provide the earliest written evidence of trade and merchants after 700 B.C. International trade grew and spread across the Mediterranean Sea. Different social and political factors led to this increase in trade.

The Greeks built new cities in different parts of the region. Coins became widespread, which allowed traders to use money rather than trade goods directly. Merchants started using the same forms of measurement so that they could compare what their goods were worth. The Greeks also tried to end piracy, which made the seas safer.

New technology also made trade easier. About 600 B.C., shipbuilders began constructing specialized merchants ships that held more goods. The diolkos haulway was a paved road near the city-state of Corinth. This road allowed boats be carried across a body of land, called the Isthmus of Corinth.

Special permanent trading posts sprang up. Beginning around 400 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.

**Traded goods**

Goods were traded within Greece between different city-states. These items included wine, olives, figs, eels, cheese, honey, tools and perfumes.
Many people from other regions also wanted fine Greek pottery. This pottery has been found as far away as the Atlantic coast of Africa. Other popular Greek goods were wine, bronze work, olives, olive oil and marble.
The markets of major Greek cities carried goods that were imported, or brought over, from other parts of the world. These included wheat and slaves from Egypt, and grain from the Black Sea, which is north of today’s Turkey. Papyrus, textiles and spices were also for sale. Other available goods were glass and metals such as iron, copper, tin, gold and silver.

**Trade incentives and protection**

Traders were able to pay for their cargoes with loans. These loans only had to be repaid if the ship safely reached its destination. Interest rates were high, up to 30 percent. This meant that when borrowers paid back money to the lenders, they owed an extra 30 percent.

For the most part, Greek governments did not get directly involved in trade. One good that they were in charge of was grain. It was so important to feed Athens’ large population that the state controlled the sale of wheat. From about 470 B.C. it was against Greek law to block the import of grain or export it out of Greece. The punishment for this crime was death. Government officials made sure that products for sale in the markets were good quality. Grain also had its own supervisors, who made sure that the prices were correct and people were not cheated.
The Greeks protected trade by taxing goods. This meant that if a merchant wanted to sell or buy outside of their own city, they had to pay a tax. Athens tried to tempt traders to choose Athens as their trading partner.

Around 300 B.C., the Greek city-states began fighting each other. Eventually, they were conquered by other civilizations, and international trade moved elsewhere. Nevertheless, many Greek cities continued to be important trading centers, especially Athens and the islands of Delos and Rhodes.
Quiz

1. Which selection from the article supports the conclusion that Greeks developed systems that simplified trade in the Mediterranean?
   (A) New types of food, raw materials and products became available to Greeks for the first time. Also, the export of wine, olives and pottery helped to spread Greek culture to the wider world.
   (B) Coins became widespread, which allowed traders to use money rather than trade goods directly. Merchants started using the same forms of measurement so that they could compare what their goods were worth.
   (C) Beginning around 400 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.
   (D) The markets of major Greek cities carried goods that were imported, or brought over, from other parts of the world. These included wheat and slaves from Egypt, and grain from the Black Sea, which is north of today's Turkey.

2. Read the section “Trade incentives and protection.”
   Select the paragraph that suggests traders were discouraged from trading local goods in foreign ports.

3. Examine the photograph at the top of the article.
   HOW does this image contribute to the reader’s understanding of the importance of Greek trade?
   (A) by showing the largest marketplace built in the capital of ancient Greece
   (B) by showing the types of materials that were commonly traded in Greece
   (C) by showing that the ancient Greeks built large structures for trading goods
   (D) by showing that other city-states made an effort to destroy Greek trade

4. Look at the map in the section “From local to international trade.”
   Which sentence from the article is BEST illustrated by the map?
   (A) As the centuries went on, Greeks established cities farther from Greece and transportation between them improved.
   (B) Also, the export of wine, olives and pottery helped to spread Greek culture to the wider world.
   (C) Archaeologists have found pottery and precious goods including gold, copper and ivory far from where they were made.
   (D) The authors Homer and Hesiod provide the earliest written evidence of trade and merchants after 700 B.C.