

FARMING (1)

As in most of the early civilizations, agriculture in Ancient Greece was the most important occupation and employed most people. Around 6000 B.C., people from the eastern Mediterranean regions settled in eastern Greece and began to farm the land. In the following centuries, it became traditional for Greek freemen to own land and their wealth was indicated by the size of their property and the number of animals they owned. Some smaller farmers could not afford slaves and just managed to scrape a living for their families. If there was a crop failure, poor farmers could not usually support themselves and would have to work for their landowners on larger estates or seek work in the city. There were no huge farming estates run by hundreds of slaves as in the later Roman Empire, but there were slaves used on the larger farms owned by noble families or rich landowners from the cities.



Coin from a Greek colony in southern Italy. A grain motif shows the importance of this crop.

Copy of vase in the British Museum showing the olive harvest. Olives were picked by hand or dislodged from the trees with sticks. This pot was made in Athens about 520 B.C.



With so many mountains, soil in Greece was generally poor. Most of the good farmland was near the coast, though there were well-watered areas like one about 20 km northwest of Corinth which was famous for its fruit and vegetables. Bread was the most important food, so barley, wheat (in more fertile areas) and other grains were the main crops. Athens could only grow about 30 percent of its grain requirements, so large quantities had to be imported. Olives were also an important crop. Poor farmers could plant olive trees for they would grow on poor soil. Some olives were eaten but most were pressed to obtain oil for cooking and lighting, or for export to sell or barter for other goods. In the city-state of Athens it was a criminal offence to dig up an olive tree, possibly because they took so long to mature, but probably because of their importance to the economy.

Activity Box

1. The most important crops were grains and _____
2. When did early settlers first cultivate the land in Greece?

3. Which city-state grew fine fruit and vegetables?

4. Why was olive oil so important?

5. Olive trees grow quickly. True or False?

6. How did the Greeks pick their olives?

7. What was the most important food made from farm produce?

8. Which Greeks could own land?

9. Why could olive trees grow on mountain slopes?

10. Which city-state had to import grain?
