

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-42614-6 - British Survey Handbooks: Greece
Compiled by Kathleen Gibberd
Excerpt
[More information](#)

GREECE

CHAPTER I

GEOGRAPHY OF GREECE

A line drawn diagonally across the map of Europe from north-west to south-east would join the two great island nations of Europe—Great Britain and Greece. But whereas Great Britain is entirely cut off by sea from the Continent, the greater part of modern Greece lies in the continental mainland and there has a common frontier with four other Balkan countries. Thus, Greece may be said to have one foot in south-eastern Europe and one in the Mediterranean, a position which partly accounts for a very different history from our own.

CONFIGURATION OF THE COUNTRY. The Greek mainland, excluding its southern extension, Morea—more commonly called by its old name, the Peloponnese—is roughly in the form of a crescent, embracing the waters of the northern Aegean and with its back to the Ionian Sea. Its long upper arm seems, on the map, to support the countries of Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, while reaching out to touch the western limit of Turkey. Under the curve of the arm, like an excrescence, is the curiously shaped peninsula of Chalcidike. Almost resting on the nether arm is the long island of Euboea. South of the crescent and separated from it by the Gulfs of

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-42614-6 - British Survey Handbooks: Greece

Compiled by Kathleen Gibberd

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Corinth and Aegina is the Peloponnese, which, although linked to the mainland by the Isthmus of Corinth, was converted into a large island by the completion of the Corinth Canal in 1893. Farther south, by sixty miles of the Mediterranean, is Crete. These are the larger portions of Greek territory and they are set in a constellation of small islands—the Ionian islands, forming a chain down the west coast, and on the east the three hundred islands of the Greek Archipelago, scattered like irregular stepping-stones from Greece to Asia Minor.

The total area of the country, including all the islands, is estimated at 50,147 square miles, that is, a little more than half the size of Great Britain or approximately equal to England without Wales. The coast line is out of all proportion to this, for it is broken by innumerable creeks, peninsulas and bays. The sea, therefore, is the first geographical factor for this country, and second to it are the mountains. Almost the whole of Greece is mountainous. In the mainland the Pindus mountains form a backbone with ramifications over the whole area. The Peloponnesus mountains radiate from the central highlands of Arcadia. Crete has four mountain groups and the highest peaks hold the snow all the year round. Nearly all the smaller islands are dominated by hills or high rocks. The people of Greece live on the coastal plains, in wide, low valleys among the mountains and on high plateaux; but four-fifths of the land is unsuitable for cultivation, consisting of forest, scrub or bare rock. In these circumstances it is not surprising that the total population is less than that of Greater London. In 1938 it was estimated at 7,207,000. The only large towns, by

GEOGRAPHY OF GREECE

3

western standards, are Athens, with its port Piraeus (1,125,000), and Salonica (575,000).

This sketch of the position and main physical features of the country is the necessary preliminary to a more detailed examination of its geography. For this purpose it will be convenient to follow five natural divisions: Southern Greece (the Peloponnese); Central Greece; Northern Greece (Thessaly and Epirus); North-eastern Greece (Macedonia and western Thrace); Crete and the smaller islands.

THE PELOPONNESE. Like other parts of Greece, the Peloponnese has a very indented coastline, but economically the coast is not here so closely related to the interior of the country as it is farther north. In parts it is steep and inhospitable and except on the channel in the north such ports as exist are not easily accessible from the lowland plains or upland plateaux, where most of the people live. Sparta, for instance, the ancient centre of civilization for this region, lies in a fertile plain not far distant from the Gulf of Laconia in the south, but a rocky ridge bars the way to the sea. Rivers in the Peloponnese, as elsewhere in Greece, are of little use for navigation. Owing to the prevailing limestone and to the mountainous nature of the country, they are, for the most part, rushing torrents which sometimes plunge into chasms and find an underground course to the sea. The limestone also produces lakes and swamps. These last, although unhealthy, are often extremely productive and are particularly suitable for the growth of maize (an alien crop imported from America) wherever the water drains away in full summer.

I-2

4 GEOGRAPHY OF GREECE

The centre of the Peloponnese is the great upland of Arcadia. Here at a distance of no more than some thirty miles from the sea, but barred from it by difficult country, the shepherd and goatherd live much as they did in classical times, although much less comfortably than in the idealized Arcadia of legend and literature. The weather is by no means always serene and when a storm breaks it may strew rocks and rubble over the lonely farmsteads.

One of the most genial and productive parts of the Peloponnese is the promontory of Messenia in the south. Here, besides the currant-grape, figs, oranges and dates are grown, mulberry trees are cultivated and there are the usual vineyards and olive groves. The north-west corner is, however, economically the most important for it is part of the great currant-producing region of Greece, a factor which did not exist in ancient times; the presence of Olympia in this corner shows that to the ancient Greeks this was neutral territory where Greek peoples from all quarters could meet in friendly rivalry. The largest town in the Peloponnese is the port of Patras, near the entrance to the Gulf of Corinth, and the export centre for the currant trade. Corinth, once a city commanding land and sea routes, has now a secondary importance.

CENTRAL GREECE. Central Greece may be considered as occupying the lower arm of the crescent which forms the mainland; it reaches northward to the southern limits of Thessaly. For modern Greece as for ancient Greece, this is the most important part of the country. Near the nether tip of the crescent is Athens and its port Piraeus, combining the political

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-42614-6 - British Survey Handbooks: Greece
Compiled by Kathleen Gibberd
Excerpt
[More information](#)

GEOGRAPHY OF GREECE

5

capital and the chief port of call for all sea-going traffic.

The Pindus mountains, which form a backbone in the Greek mainland, extend southward into this part of the country and almost at right angles to this main range there are lateral ranges stretching eastward. Between these lateral chains there is a series of low fertile plains reaching towards the sea and it is in these that the population is concentrated, as it was in ancient times. The most southerly plain is that of Attica, and here Athens is situated. Small hills, which break the plain, rise from behind and within the town, the most important being the Acropolis (literally, 'the upper part of the city'). This, which was once the fortress of ancient Athens, now dominates the city—a magnificent reminder of a bygone age. On its summit there stand the broken, but still beautiful, marble columns of the ancient temple, the Parthenon. This is the first sight in Athens which every traveller looks for, and the white marble, sometimes turned to pale gold by the sunlight, can be seen from miles away in the plain.

When Greece regained her independence in 1830, Athens was a mere village and the port of Piraeus a few fishermen's huts. In the next hundred years, both places first became typical Balkan towns, with donkeys and mule-carts plodding through dirty streets, and afterwards developed into characteristic cities of modern Europe. Piraeus is now like a smaller reproduction of Marseilles, and Athens presents in its main streets the usual features of a European capital city—modern shops, blocks of flats, trams, taxis and traffic lights.

The plain of Attica is separated from the plain of

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-42614-6 - British Survey Handbooks: Greece
Compiled by Kathleen Gibberd
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Boetia by a range of mountains extending from Mt. Parnassus in the Pindus and including Mt. Helicon. In a narrow valley at the foot of Parnassus is the ancient town of Delphi, once sacred to the god Apollo and famous for its oracle, a shrine which was the symbol of such religious unity as there was between the Greek city States of classical times.

Wherever among the mountains there is water and cultivable land, there will be a village of white or pink-washed houses, clustering round a central square. All around are mountain slopes, some wooded with great plane trees, some terraced with steep vineyards or olive groves. Here and there are dark patches where the tobacco plant is grown, or lighter ones, showing a field of maize.

NORTHERN GREECE. Farther north are those regions of Greece which were not part of the State when Greece acquired her independence in 1830, but were 'redeemed' later. Northern Greece occupies the body of the crescent and lies between a line drawn westwards from the north coast of the island of Euboea to the Gulf of Arta and the boundaries of Albania and Greek Macedonia.

The Pindus range runs right through the centre of this region with the remote heights of Epirus on its western flank and the wide plains of Thessaly to the east. The general aspect of the country is different from Central Greece. There are fewer vineyards, olive groves and fig trees. Oak forests cover some of the mountain sides and on others the pine-woods make unbroken shadow. The sea is farther off and the means of travel is not by small coastal steamer or a sailing ship, but by motor bus or train

(the main railway of Greece crosses Thessaly) where they avail; but, once off the beaten track, it is mostly a matter of foot-slogging by the side of a pack mule. The climate is less gentle; the skies are more often clouded and the air has lost the translucent quality of the air of Attica. In Epirus (the northern part of which was restored to Greece in 1912 after the first Balkan war) sheep-rearing is the main occupation of the people living in the mountains, but in the south, near the Gulf of Arta, there are upland plains where maize is grown. Most of the coast of Epirus is inhospitable, with few harbours. On the other side of the Pindus range the plains of Thessaly lie encircled by mountains and intersected by a rocky ridge. The River Peneios cuts through this ridge and finally finds its way to the sea through the serene valley of Tempe, with Mt. Olympus to the north and Mt. Ossa to the south. The Thessalonian plains are the chief corn-growing areas of Greece.

MACEDONIA AND GREEK THRACE. The long upper arm of the crescent of modern Greece consists of Macedonia and Thrace. Here is territory which has been much disputed and was only recently won back by Greece. Macedonia, a province twice the size of Wales, was almost unexplored at the beginning of this century, and the population was then a mixed one of Greeks, Turks, Slavs and Vlachs, with an established colony of Jews in the port of Salonika. It is a wild mountainous stretch of country running parallel to the sea, but sloping from the mountains in the west there are, in Central Macedonia, wide stretches of plain, particularly round Salonika. Formerly much of this flat land was marshy and

malarial, but ambitious schemes of drainage and land reclamation were carried out in the 1920's in order to provide settlements for thousands of Greek refugees from Asia Minor. Before the present war there were extensive tobacco plantations, cotton plantations, silk farms and grain lands worked by the settlers. Moreover, by an exchange of populations between Greece and Bulgaria, and Greece and Turkey, the province had become almost entirely Greek in nationality. Salonika, at the mouth of the Vardar river, is not only the great outlet for all Macedonia, but for all the Balkan region beyond. It stands at the end of a series of valleys leading northward to Belgrade over the watershed by Skoplje, which has been one of the great highways of history. Down these valleys the Roman legions went from the Danube to the Aegean; up this route the Allies fought in the last European war; down it again swarmed the Germans in 1941. Important railways as well as roads converge upon Salonika.

A line going north from Salonika connects with the European railway system by way of Belgrade, and this is continued southwards through Larissa, the chief town of Thessaly, and on through Thermopylae to Athens—thence a line runs to Corinth to connect with the two railways of the Peloponnese—one following the coast west and south to Kyparissia and the other threading its way across the centre to meet this again at the terminus. Another leaves Salonika in a north-westerly direction for Monastir in Southern Yugoslavia and, still more important, is the line going east to Constantinople.

The peninsula of Chalcidike which thrusts into the sea like a trident from the plain of Salonika, is

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-42614-6 - British Survey Handbooks: Greece
Compiled by Kathleen Gibberd
Excerpt
[More information](#)

GEOGRAPHY OF GREECE

9

chiefly of interest on account of the religious communities which have been for centuries established in the region of Mt. Athos, in the most easterly of the three prongs. Here a number of monasteries and hermitages form an almost independent republic. The 5000 monks of the Orthodox Church come from other countries besides Greece; they support themselves on their own lands and maintain a mediaeval way of life.

Eastwards from Salonika and beyond a mountain ridge is the plain of Seres, watered by the River Struma, and beyond this again is the valley of the Drama with the port of Kavalla facing Thasos, a small wooded island. This port has been much coveted by Bulgaria. Eastwards again is the valley of the River Nestos usually considered as marking the boundary between Macedonia and Thrace. The rest of the region, Greek or Western Thrace, is mostly lowland and at the outbreak of the present war was fairly densely populated, largely by refugee settlements. It has an outlet to the sea at Dedeagach (Alexandropolis) which was for a short period Bulgarian (1912-18).¹ It is situated a few miles from the main stream of the River Maritsa which forms the frontier between Greece and Turkey.

This north-eastern part of Greece has always been extremely vulnerable to attack from the north. Elsewhere Greece has a sea frontier, but here there is no natural boundary and the valleys have always provided relatively easy means of invasion.

¹ It was one of the grievances of the Bulgarians before the present war that they did not secure possession of this part to which they held they were entitled by the provision of the Treaty of Neuilly assuring them access to the Aegean.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-42614-6 - British Survey Handbooks: Greece
Compiled by Kathleen Gibberd
Excerpt
[More information](#)

10 GEOGRAPHY OF GREECE

THE GREEK ISLANDS. The Greek islands may be considered in three divisions—the Ionian islands of the west coast; the Aegean islands, including the Northern Sporades and Cyclades; and Crete.

The Ionian islands were handed over to Greece by Great Britain in 1864. Among others they include Corfu, Leukas (Santa Maura), Cephalonia, Ithaka and Zante. The last three, together with neighbouring parts of the mainland constitute the main currant-producing area of the world. As will be seen later, it is on the successful cultivation and export of this 'luxury product' that the economic life of modern Greece has until recently largely depended.

Nearly all the islands of the Aegean Sea except the Dodecanese are Greek territory. In the north the Northern Sporades, lying chiefly near the large island of Euboea, are continued in Samothrace and Lemnos to the entrance to the Dardanelles. A few small islands including Imbros and Tenedos near this strategic passage have been retained by Turkey.

In the south the Cyclades extend from the seas neighbouring Piraeus, whence the nearest isles can be seen like sails on the horizon, right across to the shores of Asia Minor. Mitelene, Chios and Samos are close to these shores. The south-eastern group of islands in the South Aegean constitute the Dodecanese, of which the largest, Rhodes, is of great historic interest and strategic importance. Despite Greek claims based on the nationality of the inhabitants, this archipelago has been retained by Italy since the Italian fleet seized them from Turkey in 1912-13 (see p. 30).

None of the Aegean islands can be considered self-supporting—some in fact are little more than