Trade in ancient Greece

At a very early point in the history of ancient Greece, as soon as populations became any larger than small villages, the need for more food arose. Wheat is difficult to grow in Greece, largely due to the mountainous areas and varied rainfall, and not enough could be produced to keep up with the demands of the people. The need for food led to the creation of colonies in more fertile areas and a well-established system of maritime trade. As the number of colonies grew, trade became increasingly important for the economy of ancient Greece. Raw materials were produced in the colonies, and traded back to the larger cities on the mainland to be made into finished products. Trade also existed between the Greeks, Near Eastern cities and Egypt. Colonies were found in Asia Minor (now Turkey), Spain and North Africa, one of the most important being Naucratis, a port city in Egypt. Athens’ port city, Piraeus, flourished and brought the city wealth as trade grew.

Grapes and olives grow well in Greece, and wine and olive oil became some of their most important exports. The fame and quality of Greek artists also ensured that their finished products were in high demand. Pottery and completed vessels of bronze, silver and gold were among some of the most desirable, while the metal ore was imported in exchange. Intricate woollen textiles were also made in Greece and traded out to Greeks living abroad, as well as foreign peoples. Sicily became one of the main areas of import for wheat into Greece. Another one of the main imports into Greece were people, in the form of the slave trade, and this cheap labour allowed the economy to grow even larger.

Trade led to many innovations and events in the history of the Greek people. The idea of coinage was foreign, probably originating in Lydia, and brought to Greece as global interaction increased. Banking grew drastically to allow citizens to buy on credit when it was inconvenient to travel with a large amount of wealth. Standard weights and measures were implemented and this greatly helped with trade as well. Even the Greek alphabet came from early interactions with some of the best maritime traders in history, the Phoenicians. It is from this alphabet that our own derives. The importance of maintaining control of the seas was made clear with the development of trade, and great navies were built, one of the largest being that of Athens. Warfare, such as the campaigns of Alexander the Great, opened up trading routes over land and sea, leading to networks that stretched all the way to India.