

Why was greek
colonisation so
widespread in the
mediterranean and
black sea areas...



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The period of extensive Greek colonisation beginning in the early eighth century BC, after the initial wave of Dorian, Ionian and Aeolian tribesmen had settled around the Aegean coast and Greek mainland, is a movement which encourages debate. This is because it is difficult to identify any exact stimuli in each case, due to the relatively limited primary evidence available.

Regardless of this, historians across the ages have suggested a number of explanations as to why the Greek peoples were inclined to colonise this area as far west as the Straits of Gibraltar (and possibly beyond) and as far east as the east coast of the Black sea and Asia Minor. These include suggestions such as the need for more land after analysing the topography and demography of early Greek settlements in conjunction with populations increase, the commercial benefits of colonising, and political factors.

The variety of potential causes implies that reasons may have evolved as Greek culture, society and politics evolved and also that peoples of individual city states may have colonised for very different reasons. As it would be extremely challenging to account for each example in the period, in this essay I will deal with a selection, which may provide some general suggestions to explain the wider colonising movement.

One of the most rational and accepted explanations for colonisation of land throughout this area during this period, is the demand for more fertile land, stimulated by population increase and for some historians, such as Aubrey Gwynn, this is the main reason 'above all else'¹. This may be because, following the argument of Gwynn, that the Greek states that championed colonisation including Corinth, Chalcis, Phocaea and Miletus were all coastal

settlements with a certain amount of fertile land and were prevented from expanding inland by ' natural obstacles or by the neighbourhood of powerful states'² once the population begun to rise.

If we examine the example of the colonisation of areas such as Massalia (modern day Marseille) and Lampsakos in the North Aegean Sea by the peoples of Phocaea, insight may be gained into reasons for colonisation elsewhere in Greece, as well as possibly explaining why the Phocaens became reputable sea-farers and colonisers. For example, Phocaea lies in a sheltered bay, ideal for arrival and departure of ships and this, in conjunction with the community's natural boundaries such as rocky, infertile land, and the rival neighbouring city of Smyrna would have been likely to make the settlement an out-looking one.

However, as G. L. Cawkwell highlights, the evidence for population increase leading to over-population of existing settlements lies in a clear increase in the number of burials in areas such as Attica³, and we can question the credibility of using such evidence to explain such large a movement as Greek colonisation, as an increase in the number of burials revealed by excavation may simply mean something such as a change in burial customs at the time. Political rivalry between villages of established settlements may have been a more important cause of such a movement.

It may have led to breakaway groups wishing to begin new communities away from the polis from which they originated and to political freedom. The colonisation by certain Corinthians may be an example of this and such an enterprise is described by Strabo, who informs us that one of Corinth's

villages, Tenea, ' prospered more than the others and that finally it followed its own political line, abandoned Corinth' and ' joined the Romans'⁴, the Corinthians subsequently colonising areas around Italy, such as the arable Syracuse in Sicily and Corcyra, modern day Corfu.

The increased capacity for commercial enterprise in archaic Greece from the eight century onwards played a key role in the formation of coastal colonies throughout the Mediterranean. The development of Greek technology and culture, and conflict between states created demand for materials found in abundance elsewhere which would stimulate trade and colonisation, specifically of valuable metals.

For example, areas such as the island of Pithekoussai may have been colonised for the production of iron ore, or at least as a trading post, remains of metal working industry and slag being excavated there. Some historians believe that the search for deposits of bronze and iron explains the Greek colonisation of coastal areas in the Near East⁵, leading to the increase of bronze and iron imports in the eighth century for the production of weaponry and armour in an age of rivalry and conflict between city states.

Colonies at areas as far east as Colchis on the east coast of the Black Sea, may have been formed after traders at established emporia were alerted to the valuable natural resources to be found there. As historian Robert Drews suggests, it may have been ' from the Urartians, who were allies and patrons of the north Syrian cities around Al Mina and Sukas, that the Greeks learned of silver, gold and iron of ' Alybe' and Colchis'⁶ and this may partly explain the choice of the most distant sites.

If we consider Cawkwell's argument that the furthest away Greek colonies, for example, Colchis in the Black sea, or Massailia in the west were founded first, as they would lie at the end of a trade route, thus encouraging more ships than trading posts in between⁷, it could explain the widespread nature of Greek colonisation and also why some sites with less desirable landscape, such as those on the Black Sea coast were chosen.

However, the idea of a basic skeleton of colonies throughout the Mediterranean and Black Sea being set up in this way is rather simple, and another complexity lies in the fact that colonies themselves may have formed additional colonies further away, once further resources were located. This can be seen in the case of Emporion on the coast of Spain, founded around 600BC by the peoples of Massailia, of Phocaean descent, and Trapezus, founded by those of Sinope, who were originally from Miletus, where metals, fish and grain seem to have been exported⁸.

The original colony may also have been threatened by mainland tribes, explaining why some groups may have travelled elsewhere, such as the Ischians, originally from Chalcis and Eretria moved to the more secure and more defensible Cumae on the Italian coast. The climate and weather conditions may have influenced the distribution of Greek colonies in the Mediterranean and Black Sea areas. Prevailing winds from the north and east witnessed today suggest that ships in an age of comparatively primitive sea travel may have had a tendency to sail in this direction.

Strabo testifies to this by disclosing information on how the Chalkidians of Euboia supposedly colonised areas of Sicily and later Kyme on the

Neapolitan coast of Italy, stating how 'Theokles the Athenian was carried to Sicily by the wind' and after appreciating the 'richness of the land' and 'weakness of the natives' and failing to persuade fellow Athens to colonise it, 'took many of the Chalkidians of Euboia... Ionians and even some Dorians'⁹.

This evidence may propose one reason that contributed to the widespread distribution of colonies, but analysis of the behaviour of the Greek peoples themselves is required to suggest reasons for them embarking on voyages to found colonies in the first place. It could be rather crudely suggested that prevailing winds explain the choice of site in the colonisation by the peoples of the island of Thera of Cyrene in Libya, south-west of the motherland, but two other important factors are brought to our attention about this particular example of colonisation and may explain why other states in Greece may have expanded and colonised.

Details are disclosed to us by Herodotus, and from his Histories, we can propose a series of suggestions for this resettlement, possibly more than any other in archaic Greece, about which there is less substantial written evidence. For example, Herodotus explains that 'not a drop of rain fell in Thera, and every tree on the island, except one, withered and died'¹⁰ leading us to the logical deduction that some Greeks may have resettled when natural disaster occurred, such as the drought described by Herodotus.

However, spirituality may be another factor more important in compelling Greek peoples to form colonies as, in keeping with Greek superstition, the Therans blamed the fact that Battus had defied the Oracle at Delphi who had

demanding he found a colony, despite this being irrelevant to the question posed.

The fact that according to Herodotus 'the islanders ... refused to allow them (those sent to form the colony) to come ashore' and even 'threw things at them'¹¹ is testament to how eagerly the Athenians wished for this colony to be formed, even as far away as Libya, fuelled by superstition. The impulse for sending settlers as far as Libya was, according to G. L. Cawkwell, 'solely to avert evil'¹², suggesting that the Gods were held responsible and were punishing the chosen colonists for failing to carry out the demands of the oracle and that colonising wherever the oracle demanded was the only option to end the drought.

Choice of site by those wishing to send a colony may have been influenced by the Oracle at Delphi, who, according to G. L. Cawkwell, may have gained knowledge of the most commercially prosperous areas from traders¹³. However, although consulting the oracle on matters such as colonisation seemed to have been common among Greeks, the idea that the Oracle recommended sites that would benefit from trade may just be speculation.

The historian must also not make the assumption that the sending of colonies was generally a state-sanctioned undertaking, as this may cause them to dismiss a number of ideas for widespread colonisation in early Greece, such as the political rivalry mentioned earlier, such as that of the villages of Corinth. One must also be careful not to assign one overriding reason for colonisation to each city state in archaic Greece, as the evidence

is not formidable enough in most cases to make such assertions and settlements may have colonised for any number of reasons.

We must also take into account the fact that the choice of site in the formation of colonies throughout the Mediterranean and Black Sea areas, once an incentive for colonisation was established, may have been, along with the aforementioned reasons, partly due to chance and the development of sea travel, combined with a spirit of adventure in an age where maps were limited and inaccurate. Colonisation by one city state may have begun a chain-reaction, compelling other states to colonise, whether it be to increase trade, to launch the identity of the polis and so on.

However, even with the limited evidence available, certain reasons appear more likely than others in stimulating colonisation, and although an increasing population throughout the eighth century may have forced inhabitants of Greek settlements to find arable land elsewhere, I believe that the demand for metals, combined with the spread of knowledge of the sources of such resources and trade is the key factor in causing such widespread colonisation in the Mediterranean and Black Sea.