

Geography of the Mediterranean Region

Water

Mediterranean, Aegean, and Adriatic Seas

The Mediterranean is the world's largest inland sea. It takes its name from Latin and means "middle of the land." It refers to the sea's position between Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East as well as to its central place in the life of the early Romans.

For centuries, the Mediterranean served as a major route for commerce and cultural diffusion among Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere in Asia. In the 1300s CE, with the rise of the Ottoman Turks, and in the late 1400s CE with the opening of the sea route around Africa to Asia, the Mediterranean became less important. The construction of the Suez Canal, connecting the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, revived some of the commerce between Asia and the Mediterranean countries.

The Aegean and the Adriatic Seas are arms of the Mediterranean. The Aegean separates modern-day Greece from Turkey. South of the Aegean, between Southeastern Italy and Western Greece, the Mediterranean is called the Ionian Sea. The area is dotted with islands, most of them settled by Greeks. The Aegean area was the site of early Greek civilization.

The Adriatic Sea separates Italy from the Balkan Peninsula (modern-day Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, and Albania). The Italian and Balkan coasts of the Adriatic are very different. The Italian coast has a few tiny islands and generally has shallow water. The historic port city of Venice, on Italy's northeastern coast, is marshy with many lagoons. There are also many lagoons in the Italian Po River area. The Balkan coast, on the other hand, has many islands, and the water can be deep, particularly in some parts of Slovenia and Croatia.

Strait of Gibraltar and the Atlantic Ocean

The Strait of Gibraltar is a natural waterway that lies at the western end of the Mediterranean Sea and links it to the Atlantic Ocean. The strait is only 8.5 miles wide and has been of great strategic importance throughout history.

The European area that juts out into the Mediterranean at this point is today the British Crown Colony of Gibraltar. Approximately two miles square, this colony sits at the tip of Spain. Across from it is the North African nation of Morocco.

Bosporus and the Black Sea

Another important strategic passageway is the water link to the Black Sea at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. From west to east, the Aegean is linked by the Dardanelles to the Sea of Marmara and then to the Bosporus, which opens into the Black Sea. The Dardanelles and the Bosporus are both straits. The Black Sea lies between Asia and Europe. Like the Mediterranean, the Black Sea is an inland sea and was an important waterway in ancient commerce. Today, the Rhine–Main–Danube Canal links the Black Sea to the North Sea. Pollution has become a problem for the Black Sea.

Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean

Beginning in 1859, a French company dug the Suez Canal through a narrow strip of Egypt between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. Opened in 1869, the canal enabled ship traffic to travel from the Mediterranean through the

Red Sea into the Persian Gulf and from there into the Indian Ocean. This new route cut four thousand miles off the old trip from Western Europe to India, which had required sailing around the southern tip of Africa.

Land

Greece

Greece is the most easterly of the four large European countries around the Mediterranean. The majority of Greece is situated on the Balkan Peninsula, which juts out into the Mediterranean Sea. Approximately one-fifth of Greece is made up of islands. Crete, which marks the southern end of the Aegean Sea, is the largest Greek island. About seventy-five percent of Greece—mainland and islands—is mountainous.

The terrain greatly affected how ancient Greece developed. Greece has no flooding rivers like the Nile, Tigris, and Euphrates. Neither does it have fertile valleys or broad plains to farm. An area known as the Peloponnesus, on the mainland's southern tip, has some fertile lowlands, while some of the larger islands have small fertile valleys. Some Greeks did indeed farm for a living, while others took to the sea to find their livelihood. However, the location of Greece in the Mediterranean, Aegean, and Ionian Seas also led to the development of a large and profitable trading network for the Greeks.

Crete

Today, Crete is an agricultural center and popular tourist site. The main cash crops are grapes, olives, and oranges. By 1600 BCE, Crete was the seat of the Minoan civilization, named after its legendary king, Minos. The island was at the crossroads of a trading network that joined ancient Egypt in North Africa with Mesopotamia in the Middle East. In addition to its warm, sunny climate, one of the reasons that tourists visit Crete today is the palace at Knossos, the one-time capital of Minoan civilization. The palace is famed for its frescoes, watercolor murals painted on wet plaster. The paintings chronicle Minoan life, their religious practices, and their clothes, hairstyles, and activities, and indicate the place that the sea held in the lives of the Minoans.

By around 1400 BCE, Minoan civilization had disappeared. An earthquake or a volcanic eruption on a nearby island could have destroyed it, or invaders could have conquered the island.

Italy

Italy lies on a peninsula that juts into the Mediterranean. A number of islands, the largest of which are Sicily and Sardinia, are also part of this country today. The Italian peninsula is shaped like a boot. A section of the Alps Mountains arcs across the north, while the Apennine Mountains run along the center of the peninsula like a spine. In the north, a broad fertile plain lies between these two mountain chains. The Po River flows across the plain and empties into the

Adriatic Sea to the east. To the west of the Apennines is a broad coastal plain. Rome was built in this area along the Tiber River.

Italy was easier to unite than Greece because the Apennine Mountains have a lower elevation than the mountains in Greece. They also run north and south along the boot and do not break the peninsula up into isolated valleys. The fertile coastal plain provided a geographic and economic base for the Romans as they moved out to seize control of the peninsula and the territory beyond it.

France and Spain

To the west of Italy are the lands of present-day France and Spain, two areas conquered by the Romans. More than half of France's terrain is lowlands. The remainder consists of hills, plateaus, and mountains, the latter making up less than one-quarter of the terrain. Spain, in contrast, is primarily a plateau about 2,300 feet above sea level. The coastal areas have a Mediterranean climate. Spain's southern coast has the highest temperatures in Europe during the winter months.

North Africa, Asia Minor and Turkey, and Istanbul

The modern-day countries of North Africa are Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. The ancient city of Carthage, which was founded by Phoenician traders and which fought the Roman Republic in the three Punic Wars, was located in what is known today as Tunisia.

The Romans ruled vast parts of the area, and it was during Roman times that camels were introduced into North Africa from Central Asia. The use of camels enabled North Africans to traverse the Sahara and eventually build a trading network that linked West African kingdoms to Europe and Asia.

Asia Minor is a peninsula in Southwest Asia that forms most of the modern country of Turkey. Turkey is divided geographically between Europe and Asia, and the Asian portion is on this peninsula. The ancient city of Troy, described in Homer's epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, was situated along the coast of Asia Minor. The Romans were among the ancient peoples who conquered Asia Minor.

When the Roman Empire in the west ended, Asia Minor became the seat of the Byzantine Empire. In the 1400s CE, the Ottoman Turks seized the area and made it the base of their own vast empire. Although the size and power of the Ottoman Empire eroded over time, it continued to exist until after World War I, when the modern state of Turkey was founded in 1923.

Modern Istanbul is the largest city in Turkey and sits astride the Bosphorus in both European and Asian Turkey. The original city on this site was Byzantium, a Greek colony. In 324 CE, the Roman Emperor Constantine renamed Byzantium "Constantinople." This city became the capital of the eastern half of the Roman Empire, a region that later became the Byzantine Empire. The Ottoman Turks seized the city in 1453 CE and made it the capital of their empire. After the establishment of modern Turkey, the capital moved to Ankara, and Constantinople was renamed Istanbul in 1930.