Life as a Skilled Craftsman in Ancient Greece

**Authors:** Driscoll, Sally

**Source:** Ancient Greece: Life as an Skilled Craftsman in Ancient Greece, 2011, p1

**Document Type:** Article

**Lexile:** 1260

**FullTextWordCount:** 2202

**Accession Number:** 50504691

---

**Life as a Skilled Craftsman in Ancient Greece**

Ancient Greek Craftsman at a Glance

Craftsmen were an important part of the ancient Greek culture and economy, as they provided the goods and services needed for a fully functional society. They worked in cities, in the countryside, and on the islands that comprised the ancient Greek civilization. Skilled craftsmen included cobblers, carpenters, blacksmiths, coin-engravers and other metal workers, stonemasons, potters, and musical instrument makers. They came from the ranks of slaves, citizens and foreigners.

The life of the craftsman in ancient Greece was very different from the Middle Ages, when guilds existed for every type of craft and there were social standards and wages set for each work level (apprentice, journeyman or master). Craftsmen in ancient Greece had few, if any, regulations and guidelines. They had to fight individually for their social status and for their earnings, especially when competing for jobs with slaves.
• **Time Period Dates:** c. 750 BCE–146 BCE
• **Time Period Name:** Ancient Greece

• **Geographic Location:** Greece is a peninsula found in southeastern Europe. The country also includes numerous islands scattered off the mainland in the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. The ancient empire expanded to include parts of Italy, Spain, France, and northern Africa, and eventually parts of India and Afghanistan. These are no longer part of the modern nation, which is officially known as the Hellenic Republic.

• **Class Rank:** Banausoi (Trades-people or artisans)
• **Typical Life Span:** 35 years due to the high infant mortality rate.

**Childhood**

The typical craftsman was raised in a family that was neither rich nor destitute. The family might have owned a slave or two, or some farm animals if they lived in the country, and may have been able to afford some luxuries. The cost of schooling, however, might not have been within their reach.

Mothers were the sole caregivers of children while the fathers earned a living. The mother would have managed the children's playtime, enlisted their support to help with chores, and taught them basic reading and musical skills (depending on her own ability).

Most children participated in the rituals, processions and festivals associated with the gods and goddesses to whom the family was devoted. Outside of religious functions and school, the only other occasions when a child left the home would have been to visit or help with the father's business.

When an Athenian male reached eighteen, he served a two-year compulsory term in the military, or longer if needed in battle. He was then expected to fulfill civic duties and take up his father's occupation. (Males who grew up in the militaristic city-state of Sparta became career warriors.)

**Education**

The educational level for most craftsmen was low, although basic math and reading skills would have been required to acquire certain skill sets and to perform some occupations. Mothers were responsible for providing an education to the children while they were young. The quality of such an education, however, would have been dependent on her own educational experience, and few women were formally educated.

The skills needed to perform a job were usually taught by fathers or other male relatives, with informal and formal apprenticeships available in some city-states. It is believed that most craftsmen learned on the job.

**Personal Relationships & Family Life**

Men did not typically marry until their late twenties or early thirties, which was considered late
in life. The marriages were usually arranged, generally to much younger girls (early teens). Although marriage and family were considered extremely important, some men may have remained bachelors, as their itinerant lifestyle did not lend itself to marriage. Others may have engaged in polygamy, although this was neither socially sanctioned nor legal. Only craftsmen who were Athenian citizens could marry an Athenian woman, and thus some craftsmen who had relocated to Athens remained bachelors by chance, and not choice. In addition, a son was expected to take care of his parents in their old age. Since many women died in childbirth, the lifespan for males was approximately ten years longer.

Living Quarters
Residential neighborhoods in Athens were crowded. The typical arrangement consisted of several houses built around a common courtyard, where women would cook and men would set up workshops if they worked at home. Houses ranged from small two- or three-room structures to two-story homes with multiple rooms. Although most craftsmen lived modestly, some may have been able to afford the larger houses.

The houses were built of stone with plaster walls that were often painted in vivid colors. Bathrooms were not invented until the Roman period, and houses were lit with olive oil lamps. Homes generally featured a hearth or brazier in which charcoal or wood was burned during the cold winter months.

The temporary shelters built to accommodate workers at sanctuaries, where stonemasons, metalworkers, and others helped build temples and other structures, would likely have been primitive.

Typical Appearance
Although clothing styles changed somewhat between the eighth and second centuries BCE, most free men wore a chiton, or tunic. They also wore a himation, which is a mantle fashioned from a long piece of fabric that could be draped over one shoulder where it was pinned or buttoned. The major difference between the wealthy man and the craftsman was most often reflected in the length of his clothing and the type of fabric. Aristocracy could wear the chiton to the ankle, and they were often made of fine, imported linen, while a craftsman wore a cheaper woolen chiton above the knees, called an exomis, which allowed him to move about freely while working. Underneath, the craftsman might also wear a loincloth. If he only owned one or two chitons, the craftsman might have worked only in his loincloth so as not to soil his limited clothes.

When practical, the craftsman went barefoot or wore sandals, but for work he likely invested in a pair of leather shoes or boots. A pair of good, solid shoes might be his only physical protection. A craftsman could also be identified as a potter by his red hands, a blacksmith by the soot on his face, or a stonemason by the smudges of dirt all over his body.

During the Archaic period (c. 776–479 BCE), most men wore their hair long while slaves were forced to keep their hair short (short hair later became popular for all citizens during the
Hellenistic period). Beards and mustaches were fashionable throughout most of ancient Greek culture, although some men began to shave from the Hellenistic period onward. In addition, perfume was often used in lieu of a bath or shower.

**Typical Earnings**
Regardless of the quality of their goods and services, or their line of work, most craftsmen earned adequate wages. Some craftsmen were hired by the day for temporary jobs. Many had to compete with slaves and thus, to remain employable, had to accept lower wages. More successful craftsmen owned workshops that employed many slaves and/or free men, and could afford many luxuries with their earnings.

**Typical Day**
The work performed by most craftsmen was labor-intensive and physically exhausting. A potter might have risen at dawn to dig up a batch of clay, and a woodworker may have spent the morning debarking some freshly cut wood. Primitive tools and simplistic kilns and furnaces meant a great deal of time would be expended for each good or ware produced. Although slaves and apprentices took some of the workload off their master, it is likely even a workshop owner did his share of hard work as well. Many craftsmen would also have worked in a team, such as those who built temples.

Some scholars have noted that for all the hard labor that must have been performed, the craftsman tended to work as few hours as possible. As such, socializing, both on and off the job, was likely an important part of the typical day. Athletics, siestas, visits to the agora, socializing with their peers at other workshops (or checking up on the competition), and general camaraderie with other males may have marked the typical day as much as work.

**Societal Standing**
Craftsmen in ancient Greece had similar societal standings to farmers, soldiers, other laborers, and anyone who had to earn a living. The aristocracy demeaned anyone who had to work, especially the man who worked with his hands, a banousos, especially those craftsmen who performed duties often handled by slaves. Among the working class, there were some who believed the craftsman was lowlier than the farmer, while others valued the work that went into making a pair of fine leather shoes, a wooden chest, or an aulos (flute).

More than being judged on the line of work one did, most Greeks were judged on how much land or how many sheep or slaves they owned. The greater the number, the higher the social status. Most craftsmen, of course, had few luxuries. Additionally, although a few craftsmen inscribed their names on their work, the vast majority of workers remain anonymous. Those who did sign their names are among those considered artists by modern standards, and may have held special social status at the time.

**Personal Time**
The typical craftsman would have participated in religious activities, including rituals, sacrifices and processions that honored the god or goddesses to which his family, his city-state, and, in
some cases, his fraternal organization worshiped. Craftsmen who were citizens of Athens would have enjoyed the activities associated with the major festivals, such as the theatrical and musical competitions at the City Dionysia. Some may have even played an instrument or sang in the festival.

Athletics were an important leisure activity, and most men would have exercised and played sports to keep fit. Although craftsmen would not have had the time to train for the Ancient Olympic Games or other Panhellenic events, they may have traveled to the sanctuaries to watch the competitions. Hunting and fishing, household and farm chores, and other mundane matters would have occupied much of the craftsman’s personal time as well.

**Religious Life**

The religious beliefs of the ancient Greeks were tied into their daily lives; everything they did was, in one way or another, attributed to the anthropomorphic gods and goddesses to whom they were devoted. Craftsmen helped build the altars and temples that were at the heart of ancient Greek religion. They also made the votives that were offered to the deities, including pottery and jewelry. Many lived on site at sanctuaries and their close proximity to daily rituals would likely have reinforced their beliefs. Some served as attendants or priests in a temple.

**Political Life**

Until the sixth century BCE, when the Athenian leader Solon implemented the first major democratic reforms, the craftsman would not have been given a voice in politics, as only the wealthy could serve in government. Solon opened the Athenian Assembly to all male citizens, and thus the craftsman would have been eligible to serve in office if he were a citizen. Citizenship would have entitled him to voting privileges, the ability to serve on a jury, and the ability to own land as well. Citizenship also entitled men to participate in athletic competitions.

Many craftsmen, however, especially those who had relocated to Athens from an island or the countryside, were left out of the process because they were not entitled to citizenship, and were considered metics, or second-class residents. Itinerant craftsmen who traveled constantly from town to town had even less status, and were lumped with slaves and women unless they had gained some amount of professional stature.

In Athens, taxes were collected from the wealthy, including craftsmen who could afford to pay them. Foreigners/non-citizens were required to pay a special tax for the privilege of living and working in the city-state.

**Bibliography**


- *This presents a well-rounded overview of Greek culture arranged by topic, with brief biographies, diagrams and suggestions for further reading.*

• This now classic work, written by and for academics, is a good source for understanding the social status of the craftsman.


• This book covers the life of the ancient Greeks from conception (as understood then) through death, with a glossary of sociological Greek terms.


• This is a very useful reference book on ancient Greece, with entries for every major artist along with hundreds of entries that provide a comprehensive understanding of the civilization.


• This book provides an excellent backdrop for understanding the life of the craftsman.


• Although this book is now out of print, the essays here provide a useful glimpse at the work performed by craftsmen, a subject that has not received much scholarly attention in recent years.

By Sally Driscoll, State College

Copyright of Ancient Greece: Life as a Skilled Craftsman in Ancient Greece is the property of Great Neck Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.