

## Life as a Tradesman or Merchant in Ancient Greece.

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#### Ancient Greek Tradesman/Merchant at a Glance

In ancient Greece, the tradesman and the merchant were both involved in commerce. The term "tradesman" refers to skilled artisans or craftsmen who worked at a trade. This category covers jewelers, sculptors, painters, stonemasons, bakers, tanners, architects, and others who worked with their hands and for themselves. Some may have hired other artisans, whether free laborers or slaves, to work for them, while others may have sold goods out of shops.

The term "merchant" refers to traders. In ancient Greece, merchants generally engaged in trade by sea. The mountainous terrain of ancient Greece discouraged overland trade, although some merchants did travel the rough Greek roads. A maritime trader owned the goods--and the slaves used to import and export them--but usually somebody else owned the ship that he traveled in. Like tradesmen, some merchants may have operated shops.

- **Time Period Dates:** c. 480-323 BCE
- **Time Period Name:** The Greek Classical age, when city-states flourished
- **Geographic Location:** Ancient Greece comprised the southern Balkan Peninsula, nearby islands, and colonies throughout the Mediterranean Sea region. Much of the information available to scholars refers to the city-state of Athens, on the southeast coast of mainland Greece.
- **Class Rank:** Tradesmen and merchants both ran their own business. Together with farmers, these private entrepreneurs formed a kind of middle class.
- **Typical Life Span of Ancient Greeks:** A significant number of people lived to old age, 60 or more years. However, the life expectancy at birth was around 30 years because of a high mortality rate during infancy.

### Childhood

A quarter of all infants born in ancient Greece may have died before the age of one. Those who survived, if they lived in a prosperous household, likely were raised with the help of a nurse, who was often a slave. Children in the tradesman class would have played with tops, rattles, dolls and other common toys. They also would have played ball games and board games. The childhood of merchants, most of whom were foreign-born, might have varied considerably from those of the typical Greek.

### Education

For much of the Classical period, formal schooling was only available through private tutors. Only the wealthiest families could afford to educate their children this way for more than a few years. Education for male children typically began around the age of seven. In schools of perhaps a dozen students, they learned to read and write. At least one city-state, Athens, insisted that citizens be literate so they could ably perform their civic duties. Male students also studied music and engaged in physical exercise. Girls received training in household skills, but generally not much more. Sons often took on their father's trade. Alternatively, they might serve as apprentices in that or another trade, continuing their education in the workplace.

### Personal Relationships

The men of ancient Greece generally waited to marry until around the age of thirty, which is considered late for the time period. Women married at a much younger age, as they were expected to begin reproducing as soon as they were physically capable. Because of the high infant mortality rate, the typical family included just two or three children.

### Living Quarters

Merchants (when not at sea) and most tradesmen lived in houses in urban areas. As a rule, Greeks built their houses with mud-brick walls supported by stone. Inside, the walls were often plastered and then painted white or red. The houses had earthen floors and a thick layer of brush or clay tiles formed the roof. Various rooms opened onto a rectangular courtyard. Within the house or in the courtyard, a self-supporting artisan might have built a workshop. Before the

Classical period, cottage industries abounded. Women spun wool and weaved cloth in the home workshop. Men produced a wide variety of other goods. Later, with the expansion of urban life, many tradesmen moved to cities and set up shop there to take advantage of the larger market.

Merchants spent much of their time aboard sailing ships. Most of the cargo was stored below decks, in the hull. The ship's officers and the merchant most likely would have been housed on the deck. Scholars know little about the design of merchant ships and less about what form the living quarters took.

### **Meals**

The ancient Greeks ate a lot of bread--made of wheat if they could afford it, or barley if not. Generally, they ate two meals, lunch and supper. With the bread, the poorer tradesmen/merchant families might have eaten olive oil, honey, or cheese. Wealthier families might have also had poultry, fish, vegetables, or fruits, with wine (watered-down) following the meal.

### **Religious Life**

The ancient Greeks had no formal religion, but they worshipped many gods and goddesses. They also had a vast collection of myths that explored the relationships among gods, goddesses, heroes and monsters. The major gods represented various forces of nature and elements of Greek civilization.

Tradesmen/merchants would have been familiar with Zeus, the chief god and the ruler of humankind; Aeolus, god of the winds; the god Hermes, a patron of merchants; and the goddess Athena, a patron of arts and crafts. Foreign-born merchants or tradesmen might have added their own personal gods to this mix. Religious rituals included prayer as well as animal sacrifice and offerings of food. Greeks could make those sacrifices and offerings in temples dedicated to specific gods.

### **Work Life**

Tradesmen might have worked on site or in their own shop, by themselves or alongside a number of employees, either free men or slaves. They owned their own tools and worked with their hands. Tradesmen also had to have certain business acumen or skills to negotiate compensation for their goods and services. The work they did was often rough, demanding and dangerous. Workshops could be noisy, dusty, hot and chaotic. For example, potters had to use rudimentary kilns and metalworkers worked with pit fires, furnaces and forges, and both faced the daily prospect of disfiguring burns. Similarly, stonecutters and miners could be crushed to death in their respective trade, while other artisans, such as dyers or tanners, worked in horrid-smelling environments.

Merchants spent about six months of each year trading. They carried olive oil, wine and manufactured goods such as pottery, textiles and weapons from ancient Greece to various ports around the eastern Mediterranean, including other Greek colonies. Return cargoes

included grain, timber, metals and slaves. Men engaged in trade led a demanding and often dangerous life, and consistently faced the threat of financial disaster. In times of war, they suffered attacks by enemy warships. During the rest of the year, when foul weather kept ships in the harbor, merchants may have farmed on rented land or engaged in other money-making pursuits.

### Typical Earnings

The earnings of tradesmen/merchants varied considerably. Most made a comfortable living, forming what we might today call a middle class. Many tradesmen did not earn wages. Carpenters, potters, shoemakers and other artisans sold their services or the goods that they had made, or they earned a commission, or fee, for the work that they did. In either case, they worked for themselves. Still, some free laborers worked for shop-owning tradesmen. The average wage-rate for skilled artisans appears to have been around one drachma (ancient Greek currency) per day in the early part of the period, and perhaps two drachmas later on.

Merchants earned money from buying and selling goods. Some of these maritime traders earned or inherited enough wealth to own their own ships. For these fortunate few, trading could bring great riches. Most merchants who engaged in long-distance trade, especially the grain trade, relied on what are called bottomry (or bottomage) loans. This kind of loan, used to buy and ship trade goods, insured the cargo from the bottom of the ship up. The merchant might secure a loan from a professional money-lender or from a well-to-do trader. They charged interest rates that often topped 20 percent.

In general, data on the cost of living in this period is rare. The little evidence that exists suggests that a family could buy enough wheat for a year for 100 drachmas, a goat for 10 drachmas, a wooden bed for 8 drachmas, and a slave for from 50 to 360 drachmas.

### Societal Standing

Aristocrats, or land-owning nobles, dominated society in most of the city-states of ancient Greece. Professional tradesmen/merchants were commoners, in a class below the aristocratic nobles. Many of them owned workshops or retail shops. They supported themselves, earning them a societal standing above wage-earners or slaves. The Greeks scorned people who had to work for someone else, equating their dependence to slavery. Farming one's own land was held up as the ideal occupation.

Adding to their low societal standing, the tradesman performed manual labor, which some in the higher classes found demeaning. Some Greeks associated merchants, whose activities while at sea were somewhat mysterious, with pirates. Still, urban residents could not have functioned without the skilled tradesman and the capable merchant. They provided services and goods that city-states needed to survive and grow. The tradesman who prospered as a result often bought land--land ownership being the traditional route to wealth and social status.

By the third century BCE, a number of tradesmen and many merchants in Athens were metics, or resident aliens. These foreign settlers also included Greeks who had moved from other city-

states. They could not own land without obtaining special permission, and they had no political rights. Still, these non-citizens had to pay taxes and serve in the military. Other city-states probably placed similar restrictions and demands on their metic population. Greek society did not quite know what to think of its metics. Because they performed a vital service, they gained some social standing, but citizens continued to look down on them as outsiders.

### Political Life

Citizen tradesmen, rich or poor, had equal political rights with other social classes. In the ancient Greek democracies, such as Athens, tradesmen were entitled to attend decision-making assemblies. There they could speak their minds and cast their votes on issues large and small. Metics, however, whether tradesmen or merchants, had no rights at the assemblies. As non-citizens, they could not take part in official decision-making processes, but they could participate in the unending political discussions that took place in or near the agora, the outdoor gathering place in the heart of the ancient Greek city. The agora often served as the city's marketplace, with temporary stalls set up to sell fruits and vegetables. The surrounding area would have been full of permanent shops as well.

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