

## Early Greece: Prehistoric Greece and the Beginning of the Bronze Age

The land that would come to be known as Greece had been populated by humans for over 40,000 years. Hunter-gatherers moved through the rocky terrain, living off what they could forage and hunt. With the emergence of agriculture, imported to Greece around 7000 BC from Mesopotamia and Egypt, the first signs of permanently settled people emerge in the archaeological record. Still, without any great rivers (there are, in fact, no navigable rivers in Greece), in contrast to the Nile in Egypt and the Tigris and the Euphrates in Mesopotamia, Greece was not an ideal place for an early explosion of agricultural communities. Indeed, the terrain of Greece is rough and rocky, even mountainous in places, so it can be difficult to farm. Nonetheless, early communities did emerge, though more slowly and in fewer numbers than in the early cradles of civilization.

Early egalitarian communities probably gradually gave way to more hierarchical social structures, though marked social stratification wouldn't emerge until the Bronze Age. Evidence of the beginning of the Bronze Age in Greece comes almost exclusively from archaeology and linguistics, as written sources from the time are rare, and there are no surviving historical or literary works.

### *The Helladic Period*

The Bronze Age in mainland Greece is known as the Helladic period (2800–1000 BC). The early Helladic period saw the development of settlements near the sea toward the north of Greece. This period saw strong cultural influence coming from Anatolia (modern-day Turkey). We know almost nothing about the people who populated Greece in this period, though they seem to have built towns with walls (implying warfare) and some monumental structures. By the period from 2500 to 2300 BC, there is evidence of *megara*, halls over which rulers could preside (the layout of a *megaron* would eventually become the basic plan of a Greek temple). These halls provide evidence of specialized architecture and powerful rulers. Around 2000 BC, the towns of Greece seem to have been either destroyed or abandoned. One theory is that Indo-Europeans, speakers of the ancestral language of Greek (and most other Western languages), invaded Greece from Anatolia and conquered the native population. These Indo-Europeans settled in the area and their language slowly evolved, with some influence from the language of the natives, into a language recognizable as Greek. This is just one theory, however, and the emergence of Greeks as a people is shrouded by the mists of time.

Regardless of when or how they arrived, by the middle of the Helladic period the ancestors of the Greeks had appeared in Greece. They were the Ionians and Aeolians. They spread inland and into the Peloponnese—into areas that were mostly unoccupied up to that point. They tended to cluster in settlements on hilltops, and society was headed by a *wanax*, a lord or king. This society gradually evolved into the Mycenaean civilization, which would dominate the later Helladic period.

## *Cycladic Period*

At the same time that Helladic culture was developing in mainland Greece, a different culture emerged in the islands of the Aegean. Named for the island chain lying between southern Greece and Anatolia (the Cyclades), it probably arose around 4000 BC. Since the Cycladic Islands were too small to sustain large populations, inhabitants traveled to and traded with other islands, spreading the culture. The Cycladic culture is probably best known for the art it produced, especially figurines. These depictions of human forms, typically of women and musicians, were highly stylized, and surviving examples, usually found in graves, look almost like modern art.

The Cycladic culture of the Aegean thrived until around 2000 BC. It was then subsumed by the growing cultural influence and trading empire of the Minoans. From the island of Crete, the Minoans created one of the great and long-enduring civilizations of the Greek Bronze Age. Indeed, the Mycenaean, Cycladic, and Minoan cultures are the three primary cultures of Bronze Age Greece.

## *Summary*

- In contrast to the areas around the Nile River in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent in Mesopotamia, sedentary civilization developed later and more slowly in Greece.
- The Helladic period denotes the Bronze Age in Greece, from about 2800 to 1000 BC.
- The people who lived in Greece in the early Helladic period were likely displaced by the invading Indo-Europeans, who brought the first early forms of the Greek language.
- The Cycladic period in the Aegean Islands saw the development of a separate culture, made famous in modern times by its unique figurine sculptures.
- The Mycenaean, Cycladic, and Minoan cultures are the three primary cultures of Bronze Age Greece.