

The Greek Dark Ages

Mycenaean civilization collapsed between 1200 and 1100 BC. From this time until the beginning of classical Greek civilization around 800 BC, Greece is considered to have entered a dark age. Writing and other evidence becomes very scarce. The period has come to be called the “Greek Dark Ages” because this lack of evidence has meant that scholars can know little for sure about what went on in Greece during the period. Nonetheless, from what we do know, it would be wrong to see this as a 200- to 300-year period of chaos and decline, because it actually saw a number of important developments in Greece.

Societal Collapse

It is uncertain why Mycenaean civilization collapsed around 1100 BC. This has been traditionally blamed on the invasion of the Dorians, though recently scholars have questioned this theory. One alternative theory focuses on the Sea People, an enigmatic group of maritime raiders. They caused the collapse of the Hittite Empire and came close to toppling the 19th and 20th Egyptian Dynasties (though the Egyptians battled them back). These people may have also raided Greece and destroyed many of the Mycenaean sites. It could also be that continual raids by other less-developed but well-armed Mediterranean peoples, such as the Lycians, Sardinians, Tyrrhenians, or Sicilians brought down the Mycenaeans. Another theory is that Mycenaeans destroyed themselves in constant warfare. Yet another theory is that the Mycenaeans were not destroyed in war, but collapsed because of internal problems. The large number of scribes, priests, kingly retainers, and other people who did not farm may have stretched the agricultural base too thin. Without enough food to feed these non-food-producing members of society, the Mycenaeans faced upheaval. Other factors, such as earthquakes, famine, or simply a breakdown in Mycenaean society, may have played a role.

Whatever the case, the social system that ruled Greece for hundreds of years came to a sudden and violent end. The great palaces were destroyed. Populations fled or retreated to the hills. The population of Greece dropped significantly, whether due to disease, famine, or simply an inability to sustain previous levels after so much destruction. Linear B, the language of the scribes and bureaucrats that exercised so much power in the Mycenaean palaces, disappeared, as did all writing it seems. Monumental construction also ceased. Thus, there is little written or archaeological evidence for this period. The population retreated into small, easily defendable hilltop villages. It seems to have been a volatile time, and the survivors struggled to rebuild.

A New Society

With the collapse of Mycenaean society and the disappearance of writing, we have very little evidence for events and daily life in Dark Age Greece. What we do have, however, are Homer’s epic poems, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, some of the oldest works of literature in the Western world. Though the form in which they come down to

us was probably influenced by later generations of Greeks, early forms of these poems were recited by bards in Dark Age Greece. Thus, though they purport to record earlier events—from the Mycenaean period—and they were probably changed and updated in later times, Homer's poems likely originated in the Greek Dark Ages, and therefore tell us something about Greek society in that period.

The Greece depicted in these poems is politically divided into many small kingdoms, each with farmland and several towns. Such a territory was called a *demos*, and was led by a ruler known as a *basileus* (though the old Mycenaean title of *anax* was sometimes used). The king would be followed by a retinue of bodyguards, called *hetairoi* (companions), and often engaged in minor warfare with neighboring kings, raiding their lands and stealing their livestock. Among this warrior elite, honor was of principle importance, and it was gained through bravery in battle, piety toward the gods, and keeping one's word.

The basic social unit in this society was the *oikos*, or household. Kinship ties were essential. Each *oikos* had a *kleros*, a plot of land sufficient for the family. The land would remain a family inheritance passed down along the male line. The plots of land differed in size: most families had a small *kleros* that was enough to sustain them, and only required the work of the family members and perhaps a few slaves, while the powerful had large plots that brought them great wealth and required numerous slaves.

Decline and Recovery

Pottery is a very useful source for ancient history, since a great deal survives and it can tell us much about how people manufactured items for daily use. Pottery became far simpler in the Greek Dark Ages, with old Mycenaean techniques apparently being forgotten. At first, Dark Age settlements produced only very crude pots. Figural representations no longer appeared on the pottery. Around 1000 BC, however, a new, faster type of potter's wheel was introduced to Greece, probably from Anatolia. This allowed for more complex pottery, as one or more paintbrushes could be attached to a single arm of the wheel, which enabled some basic decoration, usually horizontal lines running across the pottery (a style called Protogeometric). By 900 BC, this style of decoration evolved into angular patterns and shapes, and it is thus called Geometric style. Geometric style flourished, especially around Athens, and included complex shapes and patterns. The development of Geometric style is a sign of a return to high-quality manufacturing and art. By the beginning of the eighth century BC, pictorial representations of humans began to appear on pottery. These depictions were rather abstract—a triangular body, a round head with a large nose, and crude legs—but this marks the reemergence of figural representations in Greek art.

That is why we should not think of the Greek Dark Ages as only a period of decline or stagnation. The sudden catastrophe of the fall of Mycenaean civilization was followed by a slow but steady recovery, sometimes by means of new and innovative methods. Important progress that would have a lasting impact on Greek culture took place in this period. One of the most important was the discovery of iron working, which meant that iron superseded bronze as the most important metal and brought an end to the Bronze Age. Iron was easier to produce and easier to work with, allowing more

tools and weapons to become available. It was also more durable. By the height of the Greek Dark Ages, most Greek soldiers went to war with iron weapons, giving them a distinct advantage over any who still used bronze.

Trade routes were interrupted by the fall of the Mycenaeans, but the inhabitants of Greece quickly began to trade with overseas neighbors once again. At first, trade was very limited, but over time trade routes grew larger and more numerous than they had been under the Mycenaeans. Trade with Anatolia, Egypt, and Phoenicia (the area around modern day Lebanon) was particularly important. A major innovation that probably came as a result of such trade was the adoption, late in the Greek Dark Ages, of the alphabet. The alphabet was adapted from the Phoenician writing system. The Greeks may have originally adopted it in order to keep records of their trade and contracts with these people. But with the emergence of the Greek alphabet, writing once again took place, and eventually it would come to be used not just for commercial records, but for the composition of literature as well.

Recovery and the Eighth-Century Renaissance

By the eighth century, Greece was once again home to a burgeoning civilization. The population, after a decline in the aftermath of the fall of the Mycenaeans, began to grow quickly. Around Greece, the *demoi* slowly evolved into early city-states. Soon, the population could no longer be fed by Greece's rough, rocky terrain. *Stenochoria*, the lack of land, meant that new land had to be found. Small colonies of Greeks began to appear overseas, in Asia Minor and southern Italy. In Asia Minor, the colonists joined other Greeks (Ionians), the descendants of people who had fled there in the wake of the Mycenaean collapse. They colonies supplied not only food, but also new materials that had not been available on the Greek mainland.

The eighth century also saw the emergence of a more unified Greek identity (still, the Greeks were far from completely united). Though each city had its own patron god, by this time the standard gods of the Greek pantheon were more or less agreed upon throughout Greece. The Greeks created Panhellenic sanctuaries and festivals to the various gods, where all Greeks could come and worship. Out of some of these festivals, Panhellenic games also began to develop. In 776 BC, the first Olympic games were held as part of a festival dedicated to Zeus. All Greek speakers could compete in the Olympics, which became part of a shared Greek identity.

Art was becoming more complex. After the emergence of abstract images of people at the beginning of the century, soon images of animals and complex scenes emerged. Pottery began to depict battles or mythological creatures from the East, such as griffins and sphinxes. The Geometric period of Greek art gave way to the Orientalizing period, in which images and themes were imported from Egypt, Anatolia, and the Middle East.

Greek literature began to emerge in this period. At first, all stories were transmitted orally—bards had sung the stories of heroes and events like the Trojan War for generations. Now such stories became more standardized, and people may have already begun writing them down. Though the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are attributed to Homer, they took shape as oral tales that were passed down through the generations,

and they evolved over a long period of time. Around the end of the eighth century, Hesiod wrote *Works and Days*, a treatise on farming and economics and a practical guide for a Greek farmer in charge of his own *kleros*. He also wrote *Theogony*, a myth-filled description of the beginning of the world, the gods, and Greek religious customs. Hesiod's works, like Homer's, represented the gods as anthropomorphized—that is, they represented the gods as looking and thinking like humans, though they were immortal.

With the flourishing of Greek art and literature, the Dark Ages of Greece came to an end and Greece entered the classical period. The beginning of the classical period, the Archaic period, saw a continuation of many of these trends and saw Greece come into its own as a civilization.

Summary

- The Greek Dark Ages began after the fall of the Mycenaean civilization. It is uncertain what led to the collapse of the Mycenaeans; the traditional explanation has been that they were defeated by an invading people called the Dorians. However, seaborne raiders, civil war, or food shortages are other possible causes.
- After the fall of the Mycenaeans, the population of Greece shrank, and most fled into hilltop villages that could be easily defended.
- Writing in this period seems to have stopped—Linear B disappeared—and monumental construction came to a halt. This leaves us with little literary or archaeological evidence for the period.
- The Greeks developed small, petty kingdoms ruled by a king (*basileus*) and nobles who gained legitimacy through honor and bravery in battle.
- The basic social unit of the time was the household (*oikos*). Each *oikos* had a *kleros*, or piece of land, which would be worked by the family and its slaves and passed down along the male line as an inheritance.
- The Greek Dark Ages, despite the name, saw many important developments. One was the advent of iron working, allowing iron tools and weapons to supersede bronze implements.
- Another important development was the Greek alphabet, which was adapted from the Phoenician writing system.
- The eighth century saw a surge in Greek population and major changes to Greek civilization, such as the development of early city-states, colonization, and a Panhellenic identity.