

Were the greek dark  
ages, really dark?



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In this assessment, one will investigate the timeline (1100 – 750 BC), the so-called (Greek Dark Ages), (Dark) being a term loosely used by Greek poets in their prose, to explain five centuries without recorded history. During ones research, one has discovered that this topic is still, like many archaeological topics, (Passionately Debated). One has considered the significants of archaeological evidence gathered from (Greek Iron Age) sites, and scholarly debate on the topic, to put forward opinion to whether this timeframe in ancient Greek history, was indeed dark, shadowed, or a period of enlightenment.

1600 – 1200 BC was a period of particularly strength and growth in southern Greece, the (Late Helladic Culture) dominated the entire Aegean and Cyprus. It is due to the impressive archaeological findings in Mycenae, that we now know and have named this culture (Mycenaean). For reasons not yet completely understood, and variously interpreted by scholars, these Mycenaean towns completely collapsed towards the end of the Bronze Age 1200 BC, and suffered further significant decline during the following early Iron Age. The consequence being the transition into the Greek Dark Ages (AMA 2009: pp15-31; Murray O. 1993: Chapters 3-10).

## The Collapse of the Mycenaean World:

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The archaeological evidence presents an overall picture of this period, particularly during 1100 BC and partly into 1000 BC. (Murray O. 1993: Chapters 3-10).

**Age of Iron:**

Iron was introduced probably at first for farm implements, such as the plough, smelting and casting takes considerable skill and (Initially) the iron was soft, so bronze weapons remained in favour. However, due to limited trade opportunities, copper was in short supply hence, as iron ore was more

abundant, iron implements and weapons grew in popularity as smelting and casting skills improved

(Murray O. 1993: Chapters 3-10).

### **Dorian Invasion / Migration:**

Greek Mythology since ancient times, attributes the Mycenaean collapse to the Dorian invasion and the return of the Herakleidae, this myth spoke about the displaced descendants of Hercules who joined the Dorians to invade Peloponnese and destroy the Mycenaean centres. The Dorians of the Peloponnese and the later colonies, were separated into three sub-tribes: Dymanes, Hylleis, and Pamphyloi. The Dymanes were acknowledged as the oldest original Dorian sub-tribe, the Hylleis were believed to have descended from Hyllos, the son of Heracles, being the sub-tribe from which the historical (The kings of Sparta), Dorian royalty claimed to descend from. Nothing much is known about the Pamphyloi, only the fact that their name literally means (Mix of all tribes).

The views of (Modern History and Archaeology) scholars on the authenticity of the Dorian invasion, and its relationship to the Mycenaean collapse, range from a total dismissal of the concept of an invasion, to its recognition as a historical fact.

In general, a majority of History and Modern Science scholars, are inclined to adopt an intermediate positions agreeing that the Mycenaean collapse was not an acute process, having both internal and external causes. On the authenticity of the Dorian invasion most scholars now acknowledge that migration did occurred however, it was a substantial mix between Doric and  
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Pre-Doric populations, which became the Dorians of the Peloponnese and their colonies.

Archaeological finds and literary, reveal that there were population shifts among the Dorians of central Greece and Peloponnese, and it is probable that the population did decline, though the idea that some parts of the land became totally uninhabited is probably exaggerated (Snodgrass, A. M. 2000; Eder, B. 1998: 225-36; J. L. Fitton, 1996: 48-103; Chadwick 1973: 209-529).

### **The Major Settlement at Lefkandi:**

Recent archaeology has revealed that there was a major settlement at Lefkandi on the west coast of Euboea during the Dark Age, flourishing and reaching its height of prosperity in the 900 BC. Burial customs changed communal tombs and cremation becoming more fashionable. There is an 800 BC tomb of a hero who is buried with his horses in a heroon, and his bones are contained in a bronze jar inlaid with hunting scenes. Beside him is his inhumed consort, adorned with gold coils in her hair, rings, gold breastplates, and heirloom jewelry, this indicates great wealth and prestige. The region of Thessaly, Boeotia, and Euboea has been shown by archaeology to have possessed a common culture of which the Lefkandi settlement is its centre (M. R. Popham, E. Touloupa, and L. H. Sackett, 1985).

### **The Art and Culture:**

Archaeologically there have been many craft and pottery finds of figurines made of clay, small bronze figurines and vases, which reveal that the Mycenaeans were gifted potters, artistic expression was restricted to conceptual patterns of which concentric circles were a favourite.

The art changed in 1000 BC, from the (Decadent) and laidback style of the Mycenaeans, to the Dorian geometric style, this new style spread out from Athens to southern Thessaly and the Argolis, also to some of the islands. This proto-geometric art developed into mature Geometric art involving numerous abstract patterns such as squares and oblongs in chequer-board patterns, diamonds and crosshatched triangles. Around 800 BC animal figures start to appear in the designs, and about 750 BC bands showing human scenes of life and death are depicted. Rarely have archaeologists found any gold jewellery from this period, but what has been found is of extraordinary artisanship and quality

(Hurwitt, J. M. 1985: Chapters 1-3).

### **Alphabet:**

During the Dark Age the phonetic alphabet was created it is alleged, by either Cadmus or Diodorus Siculus. The Phoenicians created a script with 22 characters, a mature form of which was in use by 850 BC, an inscription (Mesha, King of Moab who fought Ahab of Israel) has been found using the 22 characters script; The Ionians started to use this script by 700 BC at the latest. The Greeks adapted some of the Phoenician characters to form a set of symbols for pure vowel sounds, while in Cyprus; the 200 signs of the Linear B script were reduced to about 40 (Miller, F. P. Agnes, F. Vandome, F. A. McBrewster, J. 2009).

### **Homer and Hesiod:**

[p]In una società senza scrittura in cui la trasmissione della cultura è affidata all'oralità, la poesia è il principale strumento capace di educare le nuove

generazioni. Any literary work that survives from the Dark Age period is poetry and not history. One of the poetic works of this period is a (Hymn to Delian Apollo), ascribed to Homer a native of Chios, Ionia, who drew upon an oral tradition relating to the heroic age, which he embellished it with his own genius. His works influenced the Greek psyche of the ideal of manhood, in the character of Achilles, his loyalty and friendship for Patroklos and above all, his placing of honour above long life. Odysseus was another kind of hero – resourceful, cunning, yet indomitable. It is known that Homer was the author of the (Iliad), and according to tradition, the (Odyssey)

It is argued that Homer was blind and could not write, this may well explain why he was a travelling (Oral Story-Teller), and why his works were not transcribed until well after his death (Dickinson O. T. P. K, 1986: 20-37).

Hesiod was a farmer from Askra, on the southern side of Mount Helikon in Boeotia. He lived around 725 – 700 BC. In his poem (Works and Days), he begins by upbraiding a lazy brother and proceeds to give a manual of good agricultural practice, which involves a combination of practical knowledge and astrology. His work also indicates that by his day land could be bought and sold.

Hesiod claims that he was inspired by the Muses to write and employs Homeric hexameters and writes in Ionic, which would not have been his native dialect. Hesiod is also credited with writing the poem (Theogony or the Genesis of the Gods) which attempts to provide a systematic account of the early history of the world. In his (Works and Days), Hesiod introduces a theory of human history and the myth of (Five ages of Man), starting with the

Golden Age and culminating with his own age, the Iron Age. He ascribes the Heroic age to the period between the Bronze and Iron Ages (West, M. L. 1988).

### **The Dark Age City-State (Poleis):**

Generally, the regions of Greece were not unified – the exceptions being Attica under Athens and Laconia under Sparta. Each region was divided into city-states or (Poleis). For example, there were twelve city-states in Achaia, and up to thirty in Phokis. In Boeotia, there were fourteen cities each with a population of around 10, 000 inhabitants.

They formed themselves into a loose federation, but this did not prevent them from occasionally fighting wars among themselves. Greece (1100 – 750 BC), was more forested than present day, and the plains were fertile, subsequently inhabitants were forced to farm marginal land owing to the pressures of population expansion, and this is because Greece has the reputation for being (Thin Soiled); however, the plains did not deserve this description. Every fertile plain contained at least one city, being fortified by towers and walls and placed in a good defensive position and close to water; citadels were often sited on mountain spurs.

The Greek city-state (Polis) was a community made of adult male citizens; women and children linked to these males were citizens without political rights, as were non-citizens such as slaves and resident foreigners. All of these occupied a region with a defined or undefined constitution. The city would have a market place (agora) and a place of assembly, which was often



also the agora. The citizens were bound together by a sense of community and as a whole, autonomous.

There would be frequent wars arising over border disputes or cattle raids, chariots, and horses conveyed armed men quickly to borderlands in order to meet a raid. The strength of the citadels, made it very difficult for one city to conduct a successful siege against another - the time and expense involved being prohibitive, so even small and relatively weak city-states could survive; distances between cities were also not easily covered.

Kingship disappeared in most cities by 700 BC, the Mycenaean kingships were sustained by trade; without this, kings lacked the means to maintain retainers. In most cities, the government took the form of a Council of the (Aristoi), which would appoint executive officers, originally for life, but later on for shorter period usually of one year.

In the citadels, where there used to be a palace, there now usually stood a temple dedicated to the city's patron deity. The (Best People) or aristoi were those who owned the richer and more fertile land in the plains closer to city walls. Less well-off people farmed more remote and more marginal land, subsequently because they would not always be able to return to the city every night, they became known as perioikoi or (Dwellers Roundabout).

Because the aristoi were much better situated, the gap between rich and poor in these communities widened. The landed aristocracy had more power and prestige within the city-state than the trader did.

It is important to distinguish a colony (Apoikia) from a trading station (Emporion). A colony was founded from the beginning as a separate state with a separate government, laws, and constitution; a trading post was a commercial venture under the control of the parent city (Snodgrass, A. M. 2000; Thomas C. G. and Conant, C. 1999: 12-14; Dickinson, O. T. P. K. 1994: Chapters 1-3).

### **Colonization During the Dark Age:**

In the past scholars were divided over their interpretations of why there was a period of increased colonization, was it a desire for more land or increased trade opportunities that was the determining factor. The hypothesis that it was the desire for land that was the drive behind the increased colonization is now favored, one author who supports this is (Murray 1993).

It is a fact, that the Greeks themselves endorsed this hypothesis of (Land Hunger) as the cause of the increased colonization – case in point, Thucydides states unequivocally that, “ Those who had insufficient land, made expeditions against the islands and subdued them”. Towns, from which the colonial expansion spread, were predominantly coastal towns, with insufficient agricultural land, or were incapable of expanding within its boundaries for some reason – they include Achaea, Corinth, Chalcis, Eretria, Megara, Miletus and Phocaea.

The economy during 800 BC of Archaic Greece flourished, one side effect of this was a population explosion during the second half of the 800 BC. Limited fertile land was available and the tradition of dividing land equally between brothers caused problems.

Hesiod, in his *Works and Days*, raises the issue of (Land Hunger). In the epilog to his work Hesiod complains about the division of land between himself and his brother, accusing him of receiving a larger portion by bribing the aristocratic magistrates. In his writings Solon's also deals with the social problems caused by inadequate arable land. Another reason for the foundation of a new colony would be the reduction of political tension inside the ruling aristocracy. A colony would select a founder (Oikistes) selected from one of the best aristocratic families - thereby, removing from the capital city a prospective rival leader.

The archaeological records support the theory that there was a substantial (Increase) in the population in Greece during 800 BC. For example, a statistical analysis of datable graves in Attica indicates that the number of graves during the ninth century BC was relatively static, whereas during the period 800 - 700 BC the number increases six fold. It is likely that the population of Attica increased by four times during the first half of the 8th Century, and double again in the second half. Whilst this evidence is not conclusive, combined with other sources it strongly suggests that the population of Attica, and the whole of Greece, (Dramatically increased at this time).

The foundation of Zancle (Messina) 730 BC can best be explained by the strategic need to control the straits of Messina and trade with the Etruscans. The foundation of Olbia 645 BC on the northern shore of the Black Sea, Messalia (modern Marseilles), and northeast Spain around the same was probably also motivated by trade in grain, tin and silver. During the 800 BC

the Euboean confederation appears to have fragmented, this may be the cause of their colonizing activity.

There was a war between Chalcis and Eretria 730 BC, which according to Thucydides split the Greek world into two camps. One speculation is that the war between Phrygia and Assyria that raged 720 – 710 BC sparked off conflict within Greece. It is likely that Lefkandi was the site of Eretria, and the conclusion of the war was its demise. Lefkandi was abandoned and the Eretria was defeated. As this began as a border war between Chalkis and Eretria in Sicily, it is known as the Lelantine War. Samos and Miletos joined the two sides as allies respectively.

It was during this war 733 BC that the Corinthians took Kerkyra (Corcyra, Corfu) from the Eretrians and founded Syracuse in Sicily. It is possible that the war also contributed to the wave of emigration that took place in the late 8th Century BC, with settlers moving from the mainland, Ionia, and the islands. The Euboeans subsequently established colonies on the north-west coast of the Aegean.

According to tradition, the Olympic Games were established in 776 BC. The site of Olympian in Elis was originally sacred to the Great Goddess, who was subsequently identified with Hera. The date of 776 BC was calculated by Hippias of Elis at a later date by working backwards from the records of victors at the games, but one cannot say with certainty that he got the calculation right (Graham, A. J. 2001).

## **Summery and Conclusion:**

The phrase (Dark Ages) is placed in quotations because, as with the post-Roman period, there is a debate about just what it means. The phrase suggests a society lost, without art or literature, without the social institutions commonly associated with civilization, and there is archaeological evidence to support both sides of this debate.

The Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations were striking in the material evidence they left behind; clearly, these civilizations were strong, wide reaching, and vibrant. While there are signs of record keeping, much of the surviving language is undecipherable to us today, so we cannot know if they used written language for more than records. We cannot also be completely certain how closely related to ancient Greeks the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations were, though they are commonly covered in most introductions to the Greek world courses in Colleges and Universities.

When compared, the decay and fall of these two civilizations can certainly make the following five centuries seem like a (Dark Age). Beyond this comparison though, there is also archaeological evidence that areas that may have been proto-Greek and later Greek regions, underwent agricultural difficulties, as well as political conflicts; this has resulted in few remaining buildings or towns for archaeologists to investigate.

The dating of Homer and Hesiod to the Dark Ages by most scholars, suggests that they was working within a culture of strong oral traditions, where the ideas and stories of earlier generations was being passed down. Along side this evidence of a creative oral tradition there are images on vases,

weapons, shields, and statuary, which demonstrate that art as well as traditions continued to be important, even if strong political and economic centers had faded.

Over the five centuries, the philosophical and political groundwork was being laid for the development of the city-state or polis, which would be the foundation for what moderns often consider being (Greek civilization at its height). Therefore, by comparison, 1100 - 750 BC was indeed (Darker) in the (Greek) world, then they had experienced under the Minoan or Mycenaean kingdoms.

Like the legendary (Phoenix), after 500 years the mighty Greek civilization arose out of the ashes to influence most of the western civilizations, during the (Golden Ages) that were to follow. Conversely, one feels that rather than seeing this period as one of (Darkness) with little information, we should view it as a period of (Illuminated Transition).