

Evaluation of the dark age of greece



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Was the ' Dark Age' of Greece really dark? Evaluate the Kinds of Evidence we have for this Period of Greek Archaeology

The aim of this essay is to explore whether the ' Dark Age' of Greece was really a dark, bleak time in the nation's history through considering the archaeological evidence found for conditions during this period. The Dark Age of Greece, also known as the Homeric Age, the Geometric Period or the Greek Dark Ages, is dated c. 1000-750 B. C. This was the period that followed the collapse of the Mycenaean palatial civilisation and the state-level system of government that supported it (Alcock, 2012: 134). The Dark Age therefore covers the period dating from the end of the Mycenaean palatial civilisation around 1100-1000 B. C. to the beginnings of the establishment of the Greek city states in the ninth century B. C.

Archaeological finds suggest that the Bronze Age civilisation experienced a collapse in the Eastern Mediterranean world at the beginning of the Dark Age when the cities and palaces established by the Mycenaean's were abandoned or destroyed (Lemos, 2002: 193). After several major cities from Gaza to Troy collapsed fewer settlements remained and those which did showed signs of famine and a population decline (Alcock, 2012: 134).

Furthermore, Greek culture was in decline during the Dark Age as the Linear B writing of the Greek language used by Mycenaean bureaucrats died out (Colavito, 2014: 50). Also, the decoration found on Greek pottery produced after c. 1100 B. C. is less decorative than that on Mycenaean pottery and is instead limited to simple, geometric styles (Kidner et al., 2009: 69). As well as this, it was believed that during the Dark Age all communication ceased between the mainland of Greece and foreign powers, leading to a lack of

cultural growth and progress (Colavito, 2014: 50). However, the excavation of Lefkandi which began in the early 1980s challenged this belief as the site indicated that significant cultural and trade links remained in place between the Greek Islands and the East from around 900 B. C. onwards (Whitley, 2001: 78). Hence, archaeological evidence indicates that not all parts of Greece were isolated or went into decline during the Dark Age.

To explore these points in detail, the following paragraphs will present arguments for the Dark Ages being truly 'dark' based on archaeological evidence, after which it will be suggested that archaeological evidence does exist, particularly from Lefkandi, which suggests otherwise. Following this, conclusions will be presented on this topic.

The reason why the Mycenaean palatial civilisation collapsed remains under dispute. One theory is that the Dorian people invaded, destroying the Mycenaean palaces and therefore the infrastructure the Mycenaeans had created (Lemos, 2002: 191). The problem with this theory is that Mycenaean archaeological material that has been found dates to a period many years after the invasion supposedly took place. Furthermore, areas where the Dorians purportedly settled, such as Laconia, remained depopulated until later in the tenth century B. C. (Lemos, 2002: 192).

However, Desborough argues that the available archaeological evidence is in fact consistent with two major invasions taking place. He suggests that the first invasion was responsible for the catastrophe that took place at the end of the Late Helladic IIIB, approximately 1200 B. C., after which the invaders withdrew from the sites they had destroyed while they remained a threat for

most of Central Greece and the Peloponnese throughout the Late Helladic IIIc (Lemos, 2002: 192). Following this invasion, Desborough argues that a second wave of arrivals, most likely from the North-West of Greece arrived and it is this group that then account for the changes that took place later in the period (Lemos, 2002: 192). Desborough also suggests that the Dorians were only associated with the first wave of invasion. He argues that the second wave of invaders were a separate group of newcomers because of the different archaeological features that emerge; such as the adoption of single burials and the introduction of new dress ornaments (Lemos, 2002: 192).

But Desborough's theory is disputed by Snodgrass who suggests that the changes that heralded the Dark Age were not attributable to either invaders or new interlopers. Instead, he suggests that it was due to a revival of the Middle Helladic Substream, i. e. an overthrow of the Mycenaean palatial civilisation was initiated by the lower classes (Lemos, 2002: 192). This overthrow is reflected by the low socio-economic archaeological features of this period such as single burials and the use of handmade pots (Lemos, 2002: 192-193). However, neither of these theories are provable. The only certainty is that a crisis took place at the end of the Mycenaean period leading to a decline in population and social, economic and political upheaval.

The Dark Age of Greece began around 1100 B. C. when many settlements were abandoned; an event that indicates that a severe population decline began around this date (Whitley, 2001: 79). This event has been attributed to

a combination of social and economic crisis (Thomas and Conant, 1999: 85-86).

It has been said that:

‘ Some of the Aegean regions were abandoned, while others were populated and then destroyed or abandoned again. People went as far as Cyprus and Cilicia looking for better and safer places to live. This mobility is well-documented in the archaeological record and has an important effect in the crystallization of conditions in the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean at the end of the Late Bronze Age’ (Lemos, 2002: 193).

A pattern that continues throughout the Dark Age of Greece is the appearance of post-Mycenaean refugee settlements from c. 1250 B. C. onwards (Whitley, 2001: 77-78). Generally, these sparse, isolated settlements were located over 500m above sea level, such as the one at Karphi. These settlements maintained the old traditions but population levels did not change during the Dark Age period, nor did any evolution or development take place (Whitley, 2001: 78). Dark Age settlement occupation patterns are also characterised by decline in population or partial ruin as seen at Mycenae or by continuity with new elements, such as increased consumption of cattle, as seen at Nichoria (Thomas and Conant, 1999: 85).

The Dark Age of Greece had a significant impact on the archaeological record as the structure of the countryside prior to the Dark Age had been closely tied to palatial organisation. Consequently, the result of the Dark Age in archaeological terms was a decline in rural presence and a scarcity of settlements (Alcock, 2012: 134). Modern academics explain this decline by

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arguing that it was caused by population decline, political chaos and a subsequent return to pastoral activity, which leaves fewer permanent traces on the countryside (Alcock, 2012: 134).

It is generally accepted that Dark Age communities were poor and isolated and Early Iron Age settlements in Greece and the surrounding area tended to be small and disconnected from wider civilisation (Whitley, 2001: 86). An example of a typical Dark Age archaeological settlement is Nichoria in the south-west of Peloponnese (modern and ancient Messenia).

The late Bronze Age settlement at Nichoria was characterised by rectilinear structures arranged in rows of streets. However, the settlement's Dark Age predecessor was found to consist of scattered house plots placed at odd angles to one another (Whitley, 2001: 84). One example of a typical structure discovered by archaeologists and dating to the Dark Age period of settlement at Nichoria is Unit IV. 1, which dates from the tenth century B. C. This building seems to have been rectangular in shape and its walls were built from mud brick placed on stone foundations. The building was crowned by a thatched roof that was supported by a timber frame (Whitley, 2001: 84-85).

The layout and building style of mud brick on stone foundations, thatched roof and wood frame as well as the scattered pattern of the settlements found to exist in tenth century B. C. Nichoria (Whitley, 2001: 84-85) are typical for the kind of buildings found in Dark Age Greece. Over time, the rectangular buildings that dominated tenth century Nichoria evolved and gave way to semi-circular forms that were larger than what had gone before

them (Whitley, 2001: 85; McDonald et al., 1983: 317). Also, like many Dark Age settlements, Nichoria was located close to the sea, so although unfortified, it was located in a strong position that protected it from outside attack (McDonald et al., 1983: 317).

It is difficult to compare the settlement patterns of Nichoria to those present at Lefkandi and the associated settlement of Xeropolis. However, Popham et al. (1980, p. 7) observe that some of the Dark Age settlement of this area was surprisingly regular, rather more like the Bronze Age settlement at Nichoria than the sparse Dark Age dwellings mentioned by Whitley (2001, p. 84). A similar regular pattern of habitation exists at the Xeropolis site (Popham et al., 1980: 7). As such, it appears that, generally, settlement patterns in Dark Age Greece were sparse and scattered, perhaps in reaction to social, economic and political upheaval, but that this pattern was by no way universal as illustrated by the examples of settlement patterns at Lefkandi and Xeropolis.

In terms of the kinds of materials and evidence of diet and sustenance found in Dark Age settlements in Greece the material deposits at Nichoria suggest that the community was materially poor.

For example, some externally local wheel-made pottery has been found, together with a number of bone ornaments, some trinkets and some iron, all of which was produced in the region in which it was found (Whitley, 2001: 85). Furthermore, no imported material was found at Nichoria, indicating that it was an isolated settlement (Whitley, 2001: 85). But archaeological evidence does indicate that Dark Age Nichoria was 'rich' in one respect as it

had a large supply of cattle and, therefore, meat. Analysis of animal bones found at Nichoria suggests that far more cattle were being grazed at Nichoria during the Dark Age than was in the Bronze Age. This evidence ' indicates that there was a switch away from reliance on cereal agriculture and pulses and towards herding of cattle' during the Dark Age period (Whitley, 2001: 85). Although cereal production was not abandoned at Nichoria during the Dark Age, the archaeological evidence shows that the rearing of cattle became much more important in this era and had a greater impact on the overall diet of the residents within settlements than it did during other periods of Nichoria's history (Whitley, 2001: 85). The reason why this might be the case is that herding was a much more practical economic strategy when labour was in short supply due to population decline but land remained plentiful (Whitley, 2001: 85-86). Another example of large volumes of meat consumption at a Dark Age site has been found at Kavousi Kastro and Kavousi Vronda in the uplands of Crete. However, in this area sheep/goat was more frequently grazed than cattle. For example, archaeological findings indicate that sheep accounted for 70 percent of bones identified at both sites (838 from Vronda and 2164 from Kastro) (Whitley, 2001: 86). By way of contrast, cattle and pig only accounted for 5 to 8 percent of all bones identified at both sites (Whitley, 2001: 86). Significantly, the Kavousi Kastro and Kavousi Vronda area has been heavily grazed by sheep and goats throughout history and this pattern continues into the present day (Whitley, 2001: 86). The examples of archaeological findings at Nichoria, Kavousi Kastro and Kavousi Vronda therefore suggest that subsistence strategies were in place across Greece that allowed the population to survive during an economic downturn.

Archaeological evidence found at Lefkandi, located on the south shores of the island of Euboea directly challenges the idea that all areas of Greece were poor and isolated during the Dark Age. Lefkandi, like Nichoria, consisted of a loose collection of households scattered over the neighbouring hills of Xeropolis and Toumba (Whitley, 2001: 86). Dark Age activity in the area dates back to 1100 B. C. and ends around 750 B. C., the date when the Archaic Period begins (Whitley, 2001: 78-79). According to archaeological finds in the areas, there were six associated cemeteries found at Xeropolis alongside the remains of a large proto-geometric building (Drissen, 1994: 252; Popham et al., 1993: 1; Whitley, 2001: 86-88). The chronology of Lefkandi can be specifically identified through the pottery styles found on the site. These range from those discovered that date from the sub-Mycenaean phase to the Late Geometric period (Popham et al., 1980: 7, 11-12). Significantly, at Xeropolis, evidence has been found to suggest that the 'lost wax' process for casting bronze was already in use by 900 B. C. (Whitley, 2001: 86). Furthermore, the cemeteries found at the settlement in both Lefkandi and, particularly, Toumba revealed a series of rich grave goods. The six cemeteries found on the site are situated near the low hill slopes to the north of Xeropolis (Popham et al., 1980: 101). Examples include pottery imported from nearby Attica and an abundance of gold ornaments, bronze objects and faience, the origins of which were traced to Phoenicia and Egypt (Popham et al., 1980: 109). However, the activity found in the cemeteries spans a shorter period than that of the total site record, corresponding with the sub-Mycenaean to the sub-Protoegeometric periods (c. 1100-825 B. C) (Driessen, 1994: 252). This pattern of usage is consistent across all six cemeteries located on the site; earlier activity was found toward the north

and east of each site and later activity in the south and west of each cemetery (Popham et al., 1980: 105). This suggests that the cemeteries were in use for most of the period and that the inhabitants of Lefkandi remained comfortably well off with access to exotic goods for most of the so-called Dark Age.

Furthermore, in 1981, archaeologists discovered a large, semi-circular building on the Toumba hill that was constructed in a sophisticated manner thought to be impossible in the context of tenth century B. C. Greece (Whitley, 2001: 86). It is a large Protogeometric structure placed on the Toumba hillock so that it occupies the highest point of the settlement and overlooks the nearby cemeteries (Popham et al., 1993: 1). The building was 40 m in length and constructed from dressed stone wall and mud brick. It also had an outer wall of post-settings to support the roof (Whitley, 2001: 86). However, academics are unsure as to what the purpose of the building was as it was found to be unfinished and rich burials have been discovered underneath the floor but it is uncertain whether the burials were in place before the mysterious building was built (Whitley, 2001: 86). But although the purpose of the building is uncertain the methods used to construct it, alongside the rich grave goods found at Lefkandi and Toumba , as well as evidence of the lost wax process taking place at Xeropolis during the Dark Age suggests that the period was far more prosperous in this area than generally accepted.

It has been suggested that Lefkandi is atypical of Dark Age sites, rather than evidence that the Dark Age was not entirely a dark time for Greece. First, Lefkandi, unlike most Dark Age sites, is not a remote settlement (Whitley, <https://assignbuster.com/evaluation-of-the-dark-age-of-greece/>

2001: 77-78). It is also unlike other Cretan sites from the same period per cartographic analysis of the area (Desborough, 1975: 675-676; 199). While the Euboean Gulf makes Lefkandi an isolated settlement, it is only elevated 17m above sea level, far lower than most Dark Age sites, such as another Cretan Dark Age site, Karphi which is 500m above sea level (Whitley, 2001: 78). Furthermore, Lefkandi had two natural harbours, indicating that it was far from remote and inaccessible. Xeropolis is similarly atypical for the Greek Dark Age due to its unfortified coastal location and its dating to the Late Helladic era. As such, it can be argued that Lefkandi and the surrounding area may be an atypical example for the Dark Age period, perhaps suggesting that this site is an exception rather than the rule for Dark Age Greece.

The archaeological evidence from Dark Age Greece is ambiguous in regards to whether the Dark Age was really 'dark' or not. If the plethora of evidence found at Nichoria is considered, it is apparent that this was a dark time for that settlement. Housing was sparsely set out; materials only came from the local area and there were higher levels of meat consumption than there had been in the Bronze Age. However, the archaeological evidence present at Lefkandi and its satellite settlements at Xeropolis and Toumba paints a different picture. Here it is apparent that the local citizens had access to expensive and exotic materials as evidenced by analysis of grave goods found at burials at the six cemeteries in the area dating back to the Dark Age period. Similarly, a large mysterious building partly constructed on the Toumba hill indicates that the local population had access to architectural skills and materials thought impossible in Dark Age Greece. Thus, the

example of Lefkandi appears to suggest that Dark Age Greece was far less bleak and cut off from the wider world than previously thought. On the other hand, it could be suggested that Lefkandi is an atypical example. The settlement is located on one of the Greek islands and this area may have been less severely affected than mainland Greece. Furthermore, historical interpretation of the end of the Mycenaean palatial civilisation by experts such as Desborough and Snodgrass suggests that historical and archaeological evidence from this period is vague and open to interpretation. Hence, while the archaeological evidence found at Lefkandi is interesting and compelling, it is unclear whether it is typical or atypical for the Dark Age period. As such, it can still be argued that the Dark Age was indeed a dark period of Greece's history.

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