7.1: Early Periods in Greek History

Greek Dark Ages

The Greek Dark Ages were ushered in by a period of violence, and characterized by the disruption of Greek cultural progress.

Learning Objectives

Understand the characteristics of the Greek Dark Ages

Key Takeaways

Key Points

- The Late Bronze Age collapse, also known as the Age of Calamities, was a transition in the Aegean Region, Eastern Mediterranean, and Southwestern Asia. It took place from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age. Historians believe this period was violent, sudden, and culturally disruptive.

- Many historians attribute the fall of the Mycenaeans, and overall Bronze Age collapse, to climatic or environmental catastrophe combined with an invasion by the Dorians (or Sea Peoples).

- During the Dark Ages, Greece was most likely divided into independent regions according to kinship groups, and the oikoi, or households.

- Toward the end of the Greek Dark Ages, communities began to develop that were governed by elite groups of aristocrats, as opposed to singular kings or chieftains of earlier periods. Additionally, trade with other communities in the Mediterranean and the Levant began to strengthen, based upon findings from archaeological sites.
Key Terms

- **oikoi**: The basic unit of society in most Greek city-states. In some usage, it refers to the line of descent from a father to a son throughout generations. Alternatively, it can refer to everybody living in a given house.

- **Linear B**: Syllabic script that was used for writing Mycenaean Greek, the earliest documented form of the Greek language.

- **palace economy**: A system of economic organization in which a substantial share of wealth flows into the control of a centralized administration (i.e., the palace), and then outward to the general population.

Age of Calamities

The Late Bronze Age collapse, or Age of Calamities, was a transition in the Aegean Region, Eastern Mediterranean, and Southwestern Asia that took place from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age. Historians believe this period was violent, sudden, and culturally disruptive. The palace economy of the Aegean Region that had characterized the Late Bronze Age, was replaced, after a hiatus, by the isolated village cultures of the Greek Dark Ages—a period that lasted for more than 400 years. Cities like Athens continued to be occupied, but with a more local sphere of influence, limited evidence of trade, and an impoverished culture, which took centuries to recover.

Fall of the Mycenaeans

Many historians attribute the fall of the Mycenaeans, and overall Bronze Age collapse, to climatic or environmental catastrophe, combined with an invasion by the Dorian or Sea Peoples—a group of people who possibly originated from different parts of the Mediterranean like the Black Sea, though their origins remain obscure. Historians also point to the widespread availability of edged iron weapons as an exasperating factor. Despite this, no single explanation fits all available archaeological evidence in explaining the fall of the Mycenaean culture.

Many large-scale revolts took place in several parts of the eastern Mediterranean during this time, and attempts to overthrow existing kingdoms were made as a result of economic and political instability by peoples already plagued with famine and hardship. Some regions in Greece, such as Attica, Euboea, and central Crete, recovered economically quicker from these events than other regions, but life for the poorest Greeks would have remained relatively unchanged. Farming, weaving, metalworking, and potting continued at lower levels of output and for local use. Some technical innovations were introduced around 1050 BCE with the start of the Proto-geometric style. However, the overall trend was toward simpler, less intricate pieces with fewer resources being devoted to the creation of art.

None of the Mycenaean palaces of the Late Bronze Age survived, with the possible exception of the Cyclopean fortifications on the Acropolis of Athens. The archaeological record shows that destruction was heaviest at palaces and fortified sites. Up to 90% of small sites in the Peloponnese were abandoned, suggesting major depopulation. The Linear B writing of the Greek language used by Mycenaean bureaucrats ceased, and decorations on Greek pottery after about 1100 BCE lacks the figurative decoration of the Mycenaeans, and was restricted to simpler geometric styles.

Society During the Greek Dark Ages

Greece was most likely divided into independent regions according to kinship groups and the oikoi, or households.
Excavations of Dark Age communities, such as Nichoria in the Peloponnese, have shown how a Bronze Age town was abandoned in 1150 BCE, but then reemerged as a small village cluster by 1075 BCE. Archaeological evidence suggests that only 40 families lived in Nichoria and that there was abundant farming and grazing land. Some remains appear to have been the living quarters of a chieftain. High status individuals did exist during the Dark Ages; however, their standards of living were not significantly higher than others in their village.

By the mid- to late 8th century BCE, a new alphabet system was adopted by the Greek, and borrowed from the Phoenician writing system. This writing system introduced characters for vowel sounds, creating the first truly alphabetic (as opposed to abjad) writing system. The new system of writing spread throughout the Mediterranean, and was used not only to write in Greek, but also Phrygian and other languages.

It was previously believed that all contact had been lost between mainland Hellenes and foreign powers during this period; however, artifacts from excavations at Lefkandi in Euboea show that significant cultural and trade links with the east, especially the Levant coast, developed from approximately 900 BCE onward. Evidence has also emerged of a Hellenic presence in sub-Mycenaean Cyprus, and on the Syrian coast at Al Mina. The archaeological record of many sites demonstrates that the economic recovery of Greece was well advanced by the beginning of the 8th century BCE. Many burial sites contained offerings from the Near East, Egypt, and Italy. The decoration of pottery also became more elaborate, featuring figured scenes that parallel the stories of Homeric tradition. Iron tools and weapons also became better in quality, and communities began to develop that were governed by elite groups of aristocrats, as opposed to singular kings or chieftains of earlier periods.

### Archaic Greece

The Archaic Period saw the increasing urbanization of Greek communities, and the development of the concept of the *polis*.

### Learning Objectives

Understand the changes to Greek society during the Archaic Period

### Key Takeaways

#### Key Points

- The Archaic period saw significant urbanization, and the development of the concept of the *polis*, as it was used in classical Greece.
- Archaic Greece, from the mid-seventh century onward, has been referred to as an "age of tyrants."
- The Homeric Question concerns the doubts and consequent debate over the historicity of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as the identity of their author, Homer.

#### Key Terms

- **synoecism**: The amalgamation of several small settlements into a single urban center.
• **polis:** The literal translation of this word from Greek is “city.” It typically refers to the Greek city-states of the Archaic and Classical periods.

## Archaic Greece

The Archaic period of Greek history lasted from the 8th century BCE to the second Persian invasion of Greece in 480 BCE. The period began with a massive increase in the Greek population and a structural revolution that established the Greek city-states, or *polis*. The Archaic period saw developments in Greek politics, economics, international relations, warfare, and culture. It also laid the groundwork for the classical period, both politically and culturally. During this time, the Greek alphabet developed, and the earliest surviving Greek literature was composed. Monumental sculpture and red-figure pottery also developed in Greece, and in Athens, the earliest institutions of democracy were implemented.

Some written accounts of life exist from this time period in the form of poetry, law codes, inscriptions on votive offerings, and epigrams inscribed on tombs. However, thorough written histories, such as those that exist from the Greek classical period, are lacking. Historians do have access to rich archaeological evidence from this period, however, that informs our understanding of Greek life during the Archaic period.

![View from Philopappos, Acropolis Hill](https://human.libretexts.org/Under_Construction/History-Boundless-1581241200.epub/07%3A_Ancient_Greece_and_the_Hell…)

**View from Philopappos, Acropolis Hill:** The Acropolis of Athens, a noted polis of classical Greece.

## Development of the *Polis*

The Archaic period saw significant urbanization and the development of the concept of the *polis* as it was used in classical Greece. However, the *polis* did not become the dominant form of sociopolitical organization throughout Greece during the Archaic period, and in the north and west of the country it did not become dominant until later in the classical period. The process of urbanization known as “synoecism” (or the amalgamation of several small settlements into a single urban center), took place in much of Greece during the 8th century. Both Athens and Argos, for example, coalesced into single settlements near the end of that century. In some settlements, physical unification was marked by the construction of defensive city walls. The increase in population, and evolution of the *polis* as a sociopolitical structure, necessitated a new form of political organization.

## Age of Tyranny

Archaic Greece from the mid-7th century onward has been referred to as an “age of tyrants.” Various explanations have
been provided for the rise of tyranny in the 7th century. The most popular explanation dates back to Aristotle, who argued that tyrants were set up by the people in response to the nobility becoming less tolerable. Because there is no evidence from this time period demonstrating this to be the case, historians have looked for alternate explanations. Some argue that tyrannies were set up by individuals who controlled private armies, and that early tyrants did not need the support of the people at all. Others suggest that tyrannies were established as a consequence of in-fighting between rival oligarchs, rather than as a result of fighting between oligarchs and the people.

Other historians question the existence of a 7th century “age of tyrants” altogether. In the Archaic period, the Greek word *tyrannos* did not have the negative connotations it had later in the classical period. Often the word could be used as synonymous with “king.” As a result, many historians argue that Greek tyrants were not considered illegitimate rulers, and cannot be distinguished from any other rulers during the same period.

The Homeric Question

The Homeric Question concerns the doubts and consequent debate over the identity of Homer, the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; it also questions the historicity of the two books. Many scholars agree that regardless of who authored Homer’s works, it is highly likely that the poems attributed to him were part of a generations-old oral tradition, with many scholars believing the works to be transcribed some time in the 6th century BCE or earlier. Many estimates place the events of Homer’s Trojan War as preceding the Greek Dark Ages, of approximately 1250 to 750 BCE. The *Iliad*, however, has been placed immediately following the Greek Dark Age period.

The Rise of Classical Greece

Classical Greece rose after the fall of the Athenian tyrants and the institution of Cleisthenes’ democratic reforms, and lasted throughout the 5th and 4th centuries BCE.

Learning Objectives

Understand the significance of Cleisthenes’ reforms to the rise of Classical Greece

Key Takeaways

Key Points

- The classical period followed the Archaic period, and was succeeded by the Hellenistic period.
- Much of modern Western politics, artistic and scientific thought, literature, and philosophy derives from this period of Greek history.
- Through Cleisthenes’ reforms, the people endowed their city with isonomic institutions, and established ostracism.
- A corpus of reforms made to Athenian political administration during this time led to the emergence of a wider democracy in the 460s and 450s BCE.
Key Terms

- **trittyes**: Population divisions in ancient Attica, established by the reforms of Cleisthenes in 508 BCE.
- **ostracism**: A procedure under Athenian democracy by which any citizen could be expelled from the city-state of Athens for ten years.
- **isonomic**: A word used by ancient Greek writers to refer to various kinds of popular government with the general goal of “equal rights.”
- **Cleisthenes**: A noble Athenian of the Alcmaeonid family, credited with reforming the constitution of ancient Athens, and setting it on a democratic footing in 508/7 BCE.
- **Classical Greece**: A 200 year period in Greek culture, lasting from the 5th through 4th centuries BCE.

Classical Greece was a 200-year period in Greek culture lasting from the 5th to the 4th centuries BCE. This period saw the annexation of much of modern-day Greece by the Persian Empire, as well as its subsequent independence. Classical Greece also had a powerful influence on the Roman Empire, and greatly influenced the foundations of Western civilization. Much of modern Western politics, artistic and scientific thought, literature, and philosophy derives from this period of Greek history. The classical period was preceded by the Archaic period, and was succeeded by the Hellenistic period.

Rise of the City-States

The term "city-state," which is English in origin, does not fully translate the Greek term for these same entities, *polis*. *Polis* were different from ancient city-states in that they were ruled by bodies of the citizens who lived there. Many were initially established, as in Sparta, via a network of villages, with a governance center being established in a central urban center. As notions of citizenship rose to prominence among landowners, *polis* came to embody an entire body of citizens and the term could be used to describe the populace of a place, rather than the physical location itself. Basic elements of a *polis* often included the following:

- Self-governance, autonomy, and independence
- A social hub and financial marketplace, called an *agora*
- Urban planning and architecture
- Temples, altars, and other sacred precincts, many of which would be dedicated to the patron deity of the city
- Public spaces, such as gymnasia and theaters
- Defensive walls to protect against invasion
- Coinage minted by the city

*Polis* were established and expanded by synoecism, or the absorption of nearby villages and tribes. Most cities were composed of several tribes that were in turn composed of groups sharing common ancestry, and their extended families. Territory was a less helpful means of thinking about the shape of a *polis* than regions of shared religious and political associations.

Dwellers of a *polis* were typically divided into four separate social classes, with an individual’s status usually being determined at birth. Free adult men born of legitimate citizens were considered citizens with full legal and political rights, including the right to vote, be elected into office, and bear arms, with the obligation to serve in the army during wartime.
The female relatives and underage children of full citizens were also considered citizens, but they had no formal political rights. They were typically represented within society by their adult male relatives. Citizens of other poleis who chose to reside in a different polis possessed full rights in their place of origin, but had no political rights in their new place of residence. Otherwise, such citizens had full personal and property rights subject to taxation. Finally, slaves were considered possessions of their owner and had no rights or privileges other than those granted by their owner.

Greco-Persian Wars

The Greco-Persian Wars, also referred to as the Persian Wars, were a series of conflicts that began in 499 BCE and lasted until 449 BCE, between the Achaemenid Empire of Persia (modern-day Iran) and Greek city-states. The conflict began when Cyrus the Great conquered the Greek-inhabited region of Ionia in 547 BCE. After struggling to control the cities of Ionia, the Persians appointed tyrants to rule each of them. When the tyrant of Miletus embarked on an unsuccessful expedition to conquer the island of Naxos with Persian support, however, a rebellion was incited throughout Hellenic Asia Minor against the Persians. This rebellion, known as the Ionian Revolt, lasted until 493 BCE, and drew increasingly more regions throughout Asia Minor into the conflict.

Eventually the Ionians suffered a decisive defeat and the rebellion collapsed. Subsequently, Darius the Great, the Persian ruler, sought to secure his empire from further revolts and interference from the mainland Greeks, and embarked upon a scheme to conquer all of Greece. The first Persian invasion of Greece began in 492 BCE, and was successful in conquering Macedon and re-subjugating Thrace. In 490 BCE, a second force was sent to Greece across the Aegean Sea, successfully subjugating the Cyclades. However, the Persians were defeated by the Athenians at the Battle of Marathon, putting a halt to Darius’s plan until his death in 486 BCE.

In 480 BCE, Darius’s son, Xerxes, personally led the second Persian invasion of Greece with one of the largest ancient armies ever assembled. His invasion was successful and Athens was burned. However, the following year, the Allied Greek states went on the offensive, defeating the Persian army at the Battle of Plataea and ending the invasion of Greece. The Greeks continued to expel Persian forces from Greece and surrounding areas, but the actions of Spartan General Pausanias at the siege of Byzantium alienated many of the Greek states from the Spartans, causing the anti-Persian alliance to be reconstituted around Athenian leadership in what became known as the Delian League. The Delian League continued the campaign against the Persians for the next three decades. Some historical sources suggest the end of hostilities between the Greeks and the Persians was marked by a peace treaty between Athens and Persia, called the Peace of Callias.

Athenian Democracy

Athenian democracy developed around the 5th century BCE, in the Greek city-state of Athens. It is the first known democracy in the world. Other Greek cities set up democracies, most following the Athenian model, but none are as well documented as Athens. Athenian democracy was a system of direct democracy, in which participating citizens voted directly on legislation and executive bills. Participation was open to adult, land-owning men, which historians estimate numbered between 30,000 and 50,000 individuals, out of a total population of approximately 250,000 to 300,000.

Before the first attempt at democratic government, Athens was ruled by a series of archons, or chief magistrates, and the Areopagus, which was made up of ex-archons. Archons were typically aristocrats who ruled to their own advantage.
Additionally, a series of laws codified by Draco in 621 BCE reinforced the power of the aristocracy over all other citizens. A mediator called Solon reshaped the city-state by restructuring the way citizenship was defined in order to absorb the traditional aristocracy within it, and established the right of every Athenian to participate in meetings of governing assemblies. The Areopagus, however, retained ultimate lawmaking authorities.

### Cleisthenes

In 510 BCE, Spartan troops helped the Athenians overthrow their king, the tyrant Hippias, son of Peisistratos. Cleomenes I, king of Sparta, put in place a pro-Spartan oligarchy headed by Isagoras. But his rival, Cleisthenes, with the support of the middle class and aided by democrats, managed to take over. Cleomenes intervened in 508 and 506 BCE, but could not stop Cleisthenes, who was then supported by the Athenians. Through his reforms, the people endowed their city with institutions furnished with equal rights (i.e., isonomic institutions), and established ostracism, a procedure by which any citizen could be expelled from the city-state of Athens for ten years.

The isonomic and isegoric democracy was first organized into about 130 demes—political subdivisions created throughout Attica. Ten thousand citizens exercised their power via an assembly (the *ekklesia*, in Greek), of which they all were a part, that was headed by a council of 500 citizens chosen at random. The city’s administrative geography was...
reworked, the goal being to have mixed political groups—not federated by local interests linked to the sea, the city, or farming—whose decisions (declaration of war, etc.) would depend on their geographical situations. The territory of the city was subsequently divided into 30 trittyes. It was this corpus of reforms that would allow the emergence of a wider democracy in the 460s and 450s BCE.

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