
In the middle of the twelfth century BC there were still a few places in Greece where the palaces survived. But these signs of economic and cultural vitality soon fade from the archaeological record. By the early eleventh century, the Greek world had settled into its “Dark Age,” a period of steep decline and slow recovery that lasted until the eighth century. During those obscure centuries, new social and political patterns were formed, out of which would emerge, in the eighth century, a new type of political organization, the city-state (polis).

DECLINE AND RECOVERY (C. 1150–900 BC)

There were no more kings, officials, scribes, palace staffs, or state armies; gone was the elaborate redistributive system. Monumental stone buildings were no longer erected, elaborate frescoes and fine furniture were no longer commissioned, and even the art of writing was lost. Bronze, gold, and other luxury imports dwindled to a trickle, as vital trade links were broken. All across the Greek world, towns and village were left abandoned, their inhabitants either dead or gone to other places, some as close as Achaea and Arcadia, some as far away as Palestine and Cyprus. It is true that movements and dislocations of people can exaggerate an impression of overall depopulation; yet it is safe to say that in the two centuries following 1200 Greece emptied out far more than it filled up. By 1000 BC its population was probably the lowest in a thousand years.

For the early twentieth-century historians who coined the phrase “Greek Dark Age,” the four centuries that lay hidden between the fall of Mycenae and the
birth of the city-state were a period of total obscurity coupled with utter poverty and stagnation. Recent archaeological findings, however, indicate that some regions within Greece recovered much sooner than others and that recovery took different forms. Areas bordering on the Aegean Sea appear to have suffered a briefer period of decline and to have bounced back sooner than regions in western Greece. In fact, at several major centers, including Athens, occupation continued without interruption; many were reoccupied within a generation or two after their destruction.

What survived from the world of the thirteenth century into the world of the eleventh, and what was lost? For those who remained in Greece, life was a lot simpler than it had been during the palace period. But that does not mean that Greece lapsed into a primitive state. Farmers continued to farm, growing the same crops they had always grown; herders tended their flocks as before; women spun and wove their wool and flax. Potters, metalworkers, and carpenters still practiced their crafts (though at a lower level of skill and refinement), and the people kept worshiping their gods and performing religious rituals. In short, the timeless rhythm and activities of the agricultural year and the farming village remained unchanged, and would remain constant over the following centuries.

Even when the material culture appears to have been at its nadir, important technological innovations appeared. Around 1050 the combination of several new techniques and small inventions produced a superior pottery that was well proportioned and finely decorated. A faster potter’s wheel improved the shape of the vases. For the first time, potters were using a compass, to which several brushes were attached, to draw perfect arcs, half-circles, and concentric circles. Lines were drawn with a ruler instead of free-hand. New shapes and designs emerged, enhanced by more lustrous glaze achieved by firing at a higher temperature. This new style, called Protogeometric (c. 1050–900), seems to have originated in Attica and spread to other regions.

It was also about this time that Greek metal workers mastered the difficult process of smelting and working iron. Iron weapons and tools were harder than bronze and kept their edge better. Iron technology was long known in the East, but the Mycenaeans had not exploited the sources of iron ore available in Greece. But when the disruption of trade largely cut off access to copper and tin, necessity proved the mother of invention. From 1050 on, small local iron industries sprang up all across the mainland and the islands. By 950, almost every weapon and tool found in graves is made of iron, not bronze.

Beginning around 1050 there was an accelerated movement from the Greek mainland across the Aegean Sea to the Anatolian coast. During this time a number of settlements were established, among them Miletus (the earliest), Ephesus, and Colophon, that would become thriving cities. These population shifts created what the Mycenaeans had not—a large permanent presence in the East—and ensured that the Aegean Sea would one day be known as the “Greek Sea.” On the mainland during this time, some major settlements, like Athens and Corinth, might have had populations in the low thousands; however, most sites held no more than a few dozen to a few hundred people.
Society in the Early Dark Age

With the dissolution of the intricate ties that had bound the outlying settlements to the palace-complexes and to one another, the former centers and peripheral villages found themselves largely on their own, politically and economically. Some think that the Greeks reverted to government by local “big men”—similar to the leaders who presumably had managed the affairs of villages in the pre-Mycenaean period, before the consolidation of power by a single chief. A local “big man” may have presided over the Dark Age village of Nichoria in southwestern Peloponnesus, which was excavated in the 1970s. Originally a large subsidiary town of the kingdom of Pylos, Nichoria was abandoned around 1200, and came back to life about 1075 as a much smaller village-cluster, with a peak population of about two hundred in the early ninth century BC. Dark Age Nichoria was fairly prosperous in a humble way. The forty or fifty families dwelt on a
ridge overlooking a plain. There was an abundance of good farmland and plenty of open pasture for animals, notably cattle.

At the center of the ridge top excavators uncovered a large tenth-century building, consisting of a spacious megaron and a small porch (room 2), which they identified as the “village chieftain’s house.” A remodeling in the ninth century added another room at the rear (room 3) and a bigger courtyard in front, enlarging the house to an impressive 52 feet by 23 feet wide. It is suggested that the chieftain’s house also functioned as the religious center, and perhaps as a communal storehouse. This was the place where the elders would gather to feast and talk about local affairs. Although much better constructed than the surrounding houses, it had the same shape and was made of the same materials; its floor was packed earth and its walls were of mud brick, supporting a steep thatched roof. Clearly, the family that lived there enjoyed very high status in Nichoria itself and in the surrounding countryside. Yet they lived in a style that was not much different from that of their neighbors.

At the opposite end of Greece from Nichoria—at Lefkandi on the island of Euboea—stood a much wealthier settlement that is still yielding up its secrets today. Like Nichoria, Lefkandi had been a bustling Mycenaean town that revived after the collapse of the palace system and prospered during the Dark Age. In 1981, excavators were examining burial grounds in this area when they uncovered the largest Dark Age building yet found. Dated to about 950 BC, the long narrow structure (150 by 30 feet) covered more than twice the area of that of any contemporary building. But the biggest surprise of all was the discovery of two burial shafts sunk into the building’s central room.

In one of the shafts lay two pairs of horses, one on top of the other—reminiscent of the grave offerings given to exceptional warriors during the Late Bronze Age, centuries earlier. The other compartment held the remains of two humans: a cremated man (the warrior) and an inhumed woman, apparently his wife. The man’s ashes were well preserved in a large bronze amphora that had been made in Cyprus about a century before the funeral. Next to it lay an iron sword, a spearhead, a razor, and also a whetstone for sharpening the weapons: the toolkit of a fighting man. The horse sacrifices and the costly imports deposited in the couple’s grave suggest to some scholars that this man had been a wealthy, hereditary chief with Eastern contacts. Others posit that he belonged to an elite “warrior class.”

The woman whose skeleton was found beside the warrior has aroused at least as much curiosity as her spouse. Gold-plated coils flanked her head, broad gold rings decorated her fingers, and her breasts were covered with large disks made of fine gold foil. Around her neck, the excavators found the gold beads and central pendant of an elaborate necklace believed to have been fashioned in the Near East at least 650 years before the time of the burial. This necklace might have been a family heirloom, or it might have been purchased from Near Eastern traders roaming the Aegean Sea. All her adornments reveal that the woman’s social status was equal to the man’s. But how can we explain the ivory-handled dagger that had been positioned beside her head? Was this woman offered as a sacrifice to the man along with the horses?
Figure 2.2a. Axonometric reconstruction of the “chief’s house” at Lefkandi, showing the grave of the basileus of Lefkandi and his consort (c. 950 BC). This is the largest Dark Age building yet discovered.

Figure 2.2b. Plan of the ninth-century “village chieftain’s house” at Nichoria.
Soon after the funeral the whole building was demolished and covered over with a mound of earth and stones so huge that its construction must have required the labor of the entire community. Even the function of the building continues to be a subject of debate: Was it the couple’s house or was it erected to be a mausoleum for the chief? In any case, Lefkandi has shown that we cannot presuppose that Protogeometric Greece was uniformly impoverished and isolated.

REVIVAL (c. 900–750 BC)

Around 900 BC, as the conservative Protogeometric style evolves into the Geometric style (c. 900–700), a new artistic and aesthetic spirit becomes evident. There is no dramatic break with tradition, and in some regions the old style continues for some time. Nevertheless, new shapes and new decorative features mark the
Figure 2.3a. Gold jewelry from the cremation grave of a wealthy Athenian woman, c. 850 BC. In addition, she was buried with a number of fine vases, bronze and iron pins, ivory seals, and a faience necklace.

Figure 2.3b. From the same grave, a large terra-cotta chest, surmounted by a lid with five model granaries, as well as a separate granary model, all attesting to the agricultural wealth of her family.
The “Dark Age” of Greece and the Eighth-Century “Renaissance”

Geometric as a distinctly new period. Circles and semicircles give way to linear angular motifs, such as the famous “meander pattern” (see Figures 2.5a and b). Eventually painters would fill up the entire surface of a vase with zones of meanders, zigzags, triangles, and crosshatches, alternating them with solid bands and lines. Ninth-century craftsmen were now producing costly luxury items like fine gold jewelry, ivory carvings, and bronze vessels, both for domestic consumption and long-distance trade. This development attests to the renewed availability of raw materials from abroad, including bronze, which now begins to appear in larger quantities.

Homer and Oral Poetry

An oral poet was a skilled storyteller who sang or chanted in verse before an audience, to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument called the kitharis. Later Greeks revered Homer, the composer of the Iliad and the Odyssey, as their greatest poet, although they knew nothing about his life aside from the tradition that he was blind and from Ionia. The two poems are generally dated to between the later eighth and early seventh century BC, about the time when writing reappeared in Greece. It is possible that Homer, an illiterate bard, dictated his long epics to persons who could write. To us it seems impossible that works of such artistry and length—the Iliad is around 16,000 lines and the Odyssey 12,000—could have been created without writing. Yet modern comparative studies of traditional oral poetry have shown that bards can in fact compose long, complex narratives as they perform.

Homer and other Greek oral poets would have had at their disposal a store of traditional plots, characters, and themes that they had learned from previous generations of singers, who in turn had learned them from their elders, and so on back in time. In retelling the ancient stories that were familiar to their audiences, poets could also draw on an inherited stock of “formulas” (fixed phrases, lines, and blocks of text), which they had memorized and could vary as the occasion demanded. Over a lifetime of private rehearsals, “writing” and “rewriting” the poetry in his mind, a skilled poet like Homer would have crafted and perfected the poems that bore his personal signature. At the same time, the traditional narrative framework was flexible enough to permit the changing and varied concerns of his audiences to be incorporated into the bard’s performances; each performance would be fresh and “updated.” When the epics were finally committed to writing—probably within the poet’s lifetime—they were fossilized, so to speak, and thus lost this ability to be continuously recreated, yet they gained the advantage of some degree of protection from further modification.

The epics are set in the age of heroes, which encompass a generation or two before, and one generation after, the legendary Trojan War. The tale of the Trojan War is a classically simple folk saga. Paris, the son of King Priam of Troy, seduced and brought back to Troy the beautiful Helen, the wife of Menelaus, ruler of the Spartans. To avenge the insult, Menelaus and his brother, Agamemnon, wanax of Mycenae, gathered a huge army of Achaean warriors. The Achaeans...
sailed to Troy, destroyed the city after a ten-year siege, and then dispersed, each contingent to its own homeland.

Whether or not a Trojan War actually occurred will probably never be known. For the Greeks, however, it was the pivotal event of their early history. Yet the epics, though set in this distant past, are not really about history nor are they about the Trojan War. History and war are the background for the enactment of social dramas, whose protagonists are caught up in the kinds of dilemmas that every generation experiences and must deal with.

The nagging question for historians is this: Do the epics tell us anything about actual Greek society, whether of Homer’s own day (late eighth or perhaps early seventh century) or of some earlier date? Or are they pure fictions, which have only symbolic meaning? The answer, of course, is somewhere in the middle. The Homeric world was a past world that was in every way bigger, better, and more fantastic than the environment of the contemporary audiences. For instance, Hector, the Trojan leader, picks up a stone to use as a weapon, “which two men, the best in the land, could not easily lift from the ground onto a wagon, men such as mortals are today” (Iliad 12.445–449). Such a scene serves the purpose of “epic distancing,” which gives the aura of a long-ago heroic society. The poet deliberately leaves out innovations that were known to him, such as the reintroduction of writing. Nevertheless, aspects of that imaginary world—its interests, passions, ideologies, and to some degree its social institutions—must have conformed to audience’s real-life experiences. The norms and values of Homeric society are internally consistent and coherent enough to be given a place in the not-so-long-ago past, which we may assign roughly to the end of the Greek Dark Age.

HOMERIC SOCIETY

Homer’s Greece is divided geographically into independent regions of various sizes, each one constituting a demos, a word that denotes both the territory itself and the “people” who inhabit it. A typical demos would contain several settlements—towns and villages—along with their adjoining farmlands and pastures. For example, in the catalogue of the contingents that make up the Greek army at Troy there is this entry for the large region of Aetolia.

Thoas, son of Andraemon led the Aetolians, those who dwelled in Pleuron and Olenos and Pylene and Chalcis by-the-sea, and rocky Calydon, . . . .

and with him followed forty black ships.

(Iliad 2.638–644)

The official title borne by warrior-leaders like Thoas is basileus. Interestingly, the word occurs in the Linear B tablets (in the form qa-si-re-u) where it denotes a minor official, apparently a sort of mayor or headman of a town or village within a Mycenaean kingdom. In Greek, basileus is usually translated as “king.” This is
The “Dark Age” of Greece and the Eighth-Century “Renaissance” somewhat misleading, however, for clearly basileis (plural) in the Iliad and the Odyssey are not kings in the sense of monarchs who hold absolute sway over their subjects. A Homeric basileus more closely approximates a “chief,” the word that anthropologists use to describe a leader with great authority and stature, yet limited in his power to coerce others into obeying him.

A good-sized demos will often contain other chiefs, lower in rank, but called by the same title of basileus. When Odysseus enters the magnificent house of Alcinous, ruler of the island of Scheria, he finds the basileus and his wife Arete, the basileia, entertaining the other basileis. In Alcinous’ own words,

Twelve renowned basileis hold sway as leaders in the demos, and I myself am the thirteenth.

(Odyssey 8.390–391)

There is no question that Alcinous is supreme among them—the “paramount chief”—yet he must also take counsel with them, for they are not merely subordinates, but men of power in their own local districts. It is against this background of loosely centralized territorial units that we may envisage social life in the Homeric epics.

Community and Household

Social and economic life at the end of the ninth century was centered in the local communities, most of which were still quite small. The Greeks did not live in isolated farmsteads, but clustered together in small settlements. Farmers would walk out each morning to their plots and return to the village at dusk. Communities were closely knit through generations of intermarrying with other families within the village and in other villages of the same demos. Law was customary law; public disapproval would have sufficed to deter antisocial behavior. Many disputes could be resolved by the local chief and the simple court of the village elders. Homicide, interestingly, was mostly a private matter, to be settled by the families involved, either through material compensation or the exile of the offender. The alternative would be a continuing blood feud, which, if allowed, would disrupt communal solidarity.

The separate settlements were likewise bound together to ensure the survival of the territorial demos. Individual villages within the demos might quarrel with one another but they united against threat from outside. Inside the boundaries of the demos all who shared the demos-name—the “Ithacans,” or the “Megarians”—could live and move safely. Once outside the homeland one was “in the demos of others,” in an alien country, so to speak, where the protection of tribal ties ended, and one was a stranger, without rights. In Homer, when a stranger appears in an alien demos he is asked to identify himself by naming his “demos and polis.” By polis, the questioner means the main town of the demos, the most populous settlement, the place where the paramount basileus lived, and where the assembly of the demos met.
From Homer we may infer that the smallest unit of Dark Age society was the household (oikos). The oikos was the center of a person’s existence; and every member was preoccupied with its preservation, its economic well-being, and social standing. The word oikos signified not only the house itself but also the family, the land, livestock, and all other property and goods, including slaves. Greek society was patrilineal and patriarchal. The father was supreme in the household by custom and later by law. Descent was through the father, and on his death the property was divided equally among his sons. Although daughters did not inherit directly they received a share of their parents’ wealth as a dowry. Because daughters in Homer are prized, suitors customarily give hedna (wooing gifts) to the bride’s father as part of the marriage contract. The new bride took up residence in the house of her husband; thus their children belonged to the husband’s oikos, not to hers.

Among chieftain families—which are the only ones described in Homer—married sons continue to reside in the paternal oikos with their wives and children. Not infrequently, though, the custom is reversed. A powerful chief brings his daughter’s new husband into his own household instead. In this way, he gets to keep his daughter and acquires a new man to fight and work for the oikos. Another means of increasing the oikos is for the father to beget additional children by slave women. But that could cause friction in the family. Odysseus’ father did not sleep with a newly bought slave woman and so “avoided his wife’s anger.” Although the male children of slaves are inferior to the legitimate sons in respect to inheritance rights, they are otherwise full members of the family and part of its fighting force and workforce. Illegitimate daughters seem to have the same status as their legitimate half-sisters.

All members of a basileus’ oikos do a share of the work. Odysseus, Homer tells us, built a bedroom and bed for him and his wife Penelope all by “himself and no one else.” The sons of basileis tend the flocks and herds, the main wealth of the family. Homeric wives work alongside the women slaves in the tasks of spinning and weaving, while young daughters do other tasks, such as fetching water from the communal fountain, or washing clothes by the river. Most of the labor of a wealthy household, however, was provided by female and male slaves (either bought or captured), and by thêtes (sing. thès), poor free men who worked as hired hands.

The main economic resource for each of the families in a village or town was its ancestral plot of farmland called a klēros (literally an “allotment”). Without a klēros a man could not marry. A lotless man (aklēros) had two options: He could eke out a precarious existence on a poor patch of unclaimed marginal land, or worse, hire on as a thès. The latter was a galling life, not only because it was hard work for very little pay (essentially his keep), but also because working for another man’s family was felt to be an indignity.

The economies of ordinary and elite households in the Dark Age differed primarily in scale. An ordinary farmer would probably have owned a yoke of oxen for plowing, and perhaps a mule. No doubt he pastured enough sheep and goats for the family’s consumption of wool, cheese, and meat. The rich man had more
of everything, particularly animals, but also more farmland and workers. Even with many more mouths to feed, a wealthy oikos produced a large surplus, while the average family, if it was a good year, would have had just a little extra to spend on its wish list, another ox, for example, or a pair of gold earrings. A wealthy oikos, though, could exchange its surplus production of woolen goods and leather for slaves, metal, and expensive ornaments of the sort that increasingly show up in the ninth-century graves. By this time, we observe such signs of increasing stratification in more and more places. In the ninth century socioeconomic divisions into an elite group and a commoner mass become quite clear.

Chiefs and People

In Homer, the office and title of basileus passes from father to son as in chiefdom societies everywhere. But inheritance alone is not enough to secure the title. In accordance with the aristocratic ethos that permeates the poems, a basileus must be competent to fulfill his role as leader of the people in war and peace. He should be both a good warrior and a persuasive speaker. When Peleus, basileus of the Myrmidons, sends his son Achilles off to the Trojan War, his advice is, “Be both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds.” Above all, it is the deeds, “the works of war,” that make a leader. In Homer, a chief’s status is measured by how many warriors follow him, and few will go fight with a leader who is not a good warrior.

In Homer’s world, raiding is a way of life. Any chief may raise his own following of hetairoi (“companions”) and go on raids against the villages of another demos, either to even the score in some ongoing quarrel, or just to steal or plunder their livestock, valuables, and women.

In recruiting men for a raid, a warlord draws on his large surplus of animals to provide them feasts, thereby showing himself to be a generous leader. Odysseus, for example, describes how he outfitted ships and gathered a following:

and for six days my trusty companions (hetairoi) feasted, and I gave them many animal victims both to sacrifice to the gods and to make a feast for themselves, and on the seventh we got on board and set sail . . .

(Odyssey 14.247–252)

Going on a raid tests manliness and brings honor and glory. Whether on a raid or in a war, the basileus is the one most severely tested, for he is literally the leader, stationing himself “among the front-fighters.” Because the leader risks his life fighting in the thick of battle, his people are obligated to repay him with honors and gifts.

Reciprocity—mutual and fair exchange—governs all social relationships in the Homeric world. Accordingly, fairness rules the distribution of the spoils of war. Following a raid, the booty is gathered together. First the chief takes his share,
including something extra as his special “prize”; only then is the rest given to the men “to divide up, so that no one may go cheated of an equal share.”

A leader who keeps more than his due risks losing the respect of his followers. He cannot afford not to appear generous and openhanded. Similarly, in their relations with one another, chiefs constantly exchange gifts and feasts. In this way basileis show off their wealth, cement alliances, win new friends, and collect obligations that will have to be paid back later.

Despite the authority that comes with his status, a basileus has limited ability to coerce others to do his bidding. He is a chief, not a king. Once, when Odysseus’ followers decide to do exactly the opposite of what he has ordered them, he responds that as “one man alone” he must abide by the will of the many.

In a society in which performance is more important than descent, a weak successor will be challenged by rivals eager to replace him as head chief. That is the situation confronting Odysseus’ son Telemachus in his father’s twenty-year-long absence from Ithaca. Telemachus is barely twenty years old, with no experience of leadership, and he has only a few supporters, since his father’s hetairoi have gone to Troy with him. Meanwhile, a group of young chiefs and sons of chiefs have permanently camped out in his courtyard, feasting on his livestock, seducing the slave girls, and wooing his mother, Penelope, now presumed a widow. The suitors assume that the one who succeeds in marrying Penelope will take over as basileus, even though they admit that the office belongs to Telemachus by his “paternal birthright.” In the end, Odysseus returns, kills the suitors, and assumes his rightful place as the basileus of Ithaca and the nearby islands. In most instances, however, weakened ruling dynasties would not have fared as well as the house and lineage of Odysseus.

Government and Diplomacy

Governmental institutions in Homeric society were few and simple. A council, the boule, made up of chiefs and other influential men, met in the great hall (megaron) of the ruling chief to feast and to discuss policy for the demos. The leader has the decisive voice, but usually heeds the advice and counsel of the “elders,” as the boule-members were called (though many were actually younger men). Their deliberations were presented to an assembly of the people, held outdoors in the agora or “place of gathering.” The attendees were all the men of fighting age and older. Women did not attend. In the Homeric assembly, only men of high rank bring up a matter for discussion, and although it is permissible for any member of the demos to respond, only rarely does an ordinary man step out of the mass to speak out. Rather, the demos makes its will known collectively, in a chorus of shouting or muttering, or by total silence. The council and the assembly would remain the essential organs of government in the later city-states.

Besides being the military and political leader, the top basileus played a religious role in the life of the community. He was not a priest, nor did he claim to have prophetic powers. But his position was divinely sanctioned; Homer firmly emphasizes that Zeus upholds the ruling authority of the office of basileus. When
the basileus prayed to the gods at public sacrifices, he was the spokesman for the people, similar to a father sacrificing on behalf of his family.

Foreign relations among epic heroes are often conducted personally through the institution of xenia (“guest-friendship”). Appearing first in Homer, xenia occurs frequently in Greek authors from all periods of antiquity. Xenia was a mutual bond of friendship and trust between individuals who belonged to separate dēmoi (plural), often very far apart. Xenoi (“guest-friends”) would provide each other entertainment, lodging, and valuable parting-gifts whenever they received one another into their dēmoi and homes. But xenia was more than just hospitality; its duties extended to protection, diplomatic aid, and even intervention to save a guest-friend’s life. In some ways, the obligations of xenia are more like those of kinship than friendship. Once the bond was established, it was assumed to be perpetual, and the relationship was passed down from generation to generation through the male line.

In the *Iliad*, Diomedes, a Greek, and Glauclus, a Lycian ally of the Trojans, encounter one another in battle. Hostility, however, turns into amity when Diomedes recalls to Glauclus that his grandfather Oeneus had hosted Glauclus’ grandfather Bellerophon for twenty days, and that to cement the xenia-bond Oeneus gave a scarlet belt, and Bellerophon a two-handled golden cup. Now, two generations later, Diomedes proposes that they renew the old ties, saying “Let us exchange armor with each other so that these men [i.e., the Greeks and Trojans] may know that we declare that we are ancestral guest-friends” (*Iliad* 6.231–232).

**Social Values and Ethics**

The code of behavior followed by Homeric males is typical of warrior societies. A man is called “good” (*agathos*) when he exhibits bravery and skill in fighting and athletic contests. He is “bad” (*kakos*) if he is a coward or useless in battle. A “good man” should honor the gods, keep promises and oaths, and be loyal to friends and fellow warriors. He should exhibit self-control, be hospitable, and respect women and elders. Pity should be shown to suppliant strangers and beggars, who are sacred to Zeus. But these gentler qualities, though they are desirable, are not required; a man may be merciless and cruel and still be agathos.

A warrior society must breed into its future warriors a love of the grim “works of Ares.” Thus Hector, the leader of the Trojans, prays to the gods that his infant son may grow up to be a better warrior than his father and “bring back the bloody spoils of a dead enemy and make his mother’s heart glad” (*Iliad* 6.479–481). Likewise, when Homer’s “good men” capture an enemy village, they are apt to slaughter the male survivors, even including children, and rape and enslave the women and girls.

Being good at slaughtering and pillaging brings honor and glory, as well as wealth, and so warriors compete with one another in the art of killing. The purpose of this excessive striving is to enhance and preserve one’s *timé*, one’s value and worth, respect and honor. The spirit of competition permeates every facet of life and is not bounded by class or gender. The highest good is to win and be
called “best” (*aristos*), whether in spear-throwing, running, playing ball, or chariot-racing; in speaking or in displays of cunning; or in weaving or crafting pots. A poor farmer is roused to work hard when he sees his neighbor getting rich, says Hesiod (c. 700) and “potter resents potter and carpenter resents carpenter, and beggar is jealous of beggar and singer of singer” (*Works and Days* 21–26).

Elite males especially insist that their value be recognized publicly, whether by a seat of honor at a feast, or a choice piece of the booty. Not to be honored when honor is due, or worse, to be dishonored, are unbearable insults. In the *Iliad*, when Agamemnon takes back Achilles’ “prize of honor,” the captive girl Briseis, Achilles is so keenly stung by the assault against his worth that he refuses to fight.

It is more difficult to access the feelings of Homeric women, because their behavior and motives are revealed to us through a male lens. What the poems do accurately describe is a male-dominated society in which women’s roles and the range of behaviors deemed socially acceptable are constructed for them by men. Needless to say, their assigned roles as housewives and mothers dictated a different set of expectations. Like men, women also compete, though only within the few arenas of excellence allowed them; for example, this one or that one, “surpassed her age-mates in beauty and work [e.g., weaving] and intelligence.” They are expected to act modestly in public and in the company of men, and above all to be chaste. Although males are permitted to have concubines, adulterous females bring great disgrace and dishonor upon themselves and their families.

**Document 2.1.** Andromache mourns over the body of her husband Hector, slain by Achilles. Her lament centers on the fate of the helpless women and children.

White-armed Andromache led the lamentation
As she cradled the head of her man-slaying Hector:
“You have died young, husband, and left me
A widow in the halls. Our son is still an infant,
Doomed when we bore him. I do not think
He will ever reach manhood. No, this city
Will topple and fall first. You were its savior,
And now you are lost. All the solemn wives
And children you guarded will go off soon
In the hollow ships, and I will go with them.
And you, my son, you will either come with me
And do menial work for a cruel master,
Or some Greek will lead you by the hand
And throw you from the tower, a hideous death,
Angry because Hector killed his brother,
Or his father, or son.

The “Dark Age” of Greece and the Eighth-Century “Renaissance”

Despite the severe limitations placed on them by male society, Homeric women are included in the public space. They go freely about the village and countryside, participate in festive and religious events, and serve as priestesses. Nor are they without power. Strong women abound in Homer. Clytemnestra puts a dagger through her husband Agamemnon; Arete, the wife of the Phaeacian basileus, shares some of his authority; and Penelope is as cunning and resourceful as her husband, Odysseus. Nevertheless, in the Dark Age, as in later Greece, women from birth to death were dependent on and under the control of males: fathers and brothers, and then their husbands and grown sons. However much Greek women may have contributed to public opinion, they possessed no political rights of their own.

Gods and Mortals

By the eighth century, the Greek pantheon had attained much the same form it was to have throughout the rest of pagan antiquity. According to the fifth-century historian Herodotus, Homer and Hesiod

are the ones who created a theogony for the Greeks. They gave names to the gods, decided what their special skills were and what honors they should be given, and described their appearance.

(The Histories 3.38; Blanco 1998)

Hesiod’s *Theogony* gives a genealogical “history” of the gods. From ancient Mesopotamian narratives Hesiod derives the idea that creation was essentially the separation of an originally undifferentiated mass into its component forces, conceived as deities. This division provoked a series of generational wars among the primordial gods, until the last generation gained control and brought order to the universe.

In the Greek version, Uranus (Sky) is defeated by his son Cronus with the help of his mother Gaia (Earth). Cronus in turn is overthrown by the third generation of gods, after a ten-year war that shook the universe to its foundations. Their leader, Zeus, the youngest child, would rule forever as the unchallenged patriarch of gods and humans, wielding his lightning bolt from cloud-covered Mount Olympus. After their victory, Homer tells us, the brothers divided up the cosmos by lottery, Zeus receiving rule of the sky, Poseidon the sea, and Hades the underworld, where the souls of humans go when they die. Earth is assigned to no particular god, but forever remains the charge of them all, especially of Demeter, the nourisher of the crops.

Unlike in Genesis, the Olympian gods had no hand in creating the physical world, but as descendants of mother Earth and father Sky, were part of it, and they were identified with the particular spheres of nature that they controlled. So, for example, one could say “Zeus rains,” or “Demeter smiles.” Likewise, Ares, the god of war, is the spirit of blood lust that enters a warrior and makes him eager to kill, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love, is the irresistible force of sexual desire.
As in the Near East, the Greeks anthropomorphized their gods. Greek gods look, think, and act like humans. Zeus and Hera, for example, are notorious for their marital bickering. At one family dinner on Olympus, Zeus accuses Hera of being a suspicious and meddlesome wife, and the other gods become so troubled that the couple’s son Hephaestus is forced to intervene, begging his mother to humor his father (Iliad 1.536–604).

What sets the gods unbridgeably apart from humans is that they are immortal, ageless, and not subject to disease, and they have the power to manipulate the mortal world. In Homer, humans are the playthings of the gods, who vie with one another to aid their own favorites and to thwart those whom other gods favor.

Did the Greeks believe in their myths? At any given time, many different and often contradictory local versions of the traditional stories would be in circulation around the Greek world. Thus no one version could be taken as literal truth. The myths that exaggerated the gods’ “human” flaws were especially entertaining. Yet these same Olympians—as well as countless lesser divinities like nymphs, dryads, and rivers—inspired awe and even dread because of their power to do humans good or harm. Every community had its own protecting god or gods, and the people spared no expense or effort to honor and placate them with elaborate shrines, precious gifts, and animal sacrifices.

In Homer, the gods insist on their proper honors, but not much else. Acts that are condemned as sins by many religions, such as homicide, stealing, or adultery, do not arouse the wrath of the Homeric gods. They do, however, condemn oath-breaking and mistreating strangers, suppliants, and beggars. In both Homer and Hesiod, humans look to Zeus to keep order and justice in the community at large. Thus, Zeus is said to send severe wind and rain storms against those “who make crooked decrees, using force, in the assembly, and drive out justice, heedless of watchfulness of the gods” (Iliad 16.384–388).

In many religions, earthly sorrow and suffering are eased by the promise of a paradise after death for those who have lived righteously. Homer’s Greeks did not have this consolation: Existence in any meaningful sense ended when the soul (psyche) left the body. Most souls carry on a shadowy afterlife in Hades’ realm. For a few sorry souls, however—primarily those who had tried to deceive the gods or dared to rival them—Hades was a place of eternal punishment. A handful of fortunate souls were assigned to the Elysian Fields—a place of lush meadows and cool waters in a remote corner of the world—“where life is easiest for men.” They were rewarded not because they had led moral lives, or for their achievements, but because they had divine family connections. In the Odyssey, the sea-god Proteus prophesizes to Menelaus: “The immortal gods will send you to the Elysian Fields . . . because you have Helen and you are the son-in-law of Zeus” (Odyssey 4.563–569).

The prayers, rituals, and sacred objects associated with the cult of a god were in the care of priests and priestesses. While there existed no priestly caste as in the Near East and Egypt, Homeric priests and priestesses were not ordinary members of the community, but were drawn from the noble families. Their official duties generally took up very little time, and required little in the way of preparation and training.
THE END OF THE DARK AGE

For many parts of Greece, the eighth century was a period of population growth, technological innovations, and increasing political centralization. The eighth century was dubbed by modern historians the “Greek Renaissance” because it appeared to be a revival of the glories of the Mycenaean Age. During this period trade links multiplied, communication with the East intensified, writing was reintroduced into Greece, and prosperous new communities were established in the West. As the Mediterranean world became increasingly more interlinked, even the more isolated areas of Greece were drawn into networks of cultural exchange.

People of neighboring areas were meeting together more regularly to celebrate religious rituals, which included competitions among athletes and bards. Communities also vied with one another in the production of luxury items, such as finely decorated pottery and bronze tripods, and in building monumental temples. Still, we should not view the eighth century as a radical break from the past, but rather as an acceleration of trends visible already in the tenth century.

The Rise of a Landowning Aristocracy

Population growth put pressure on the land. Although pasture land was nominally open to all, in reality the elite families had long before appropriated the best for themselves, in particular the lush grassy meadows where they grazed their large herds of cattle and horses. They converted more and more of this fertile soil to growing grain and other crops, a much more productive use of land. In this way, the already land-rich oikoi (households) were able to acquire more arable land until, in the course of a few generations, they came to own a disproportionate amount of the total land. No doubt prior occupancy enabled some oikoi to claim some legal right to plow and plant the traditional pasturelands, but quite possibly chicanery and even use of force were involved in this land grab. In any case, by the early seventh century the elite minority had transformed themselves into an aristocracy of large landowners, while the majority continued to live off small-to-medium farm plots and a few animals.

We should, however, be careful to put scarcity of land into perspective. Nowhere in eighth-century Greece did the population approach the carrying capacity of the land. In fact, the countryside continued to be filled in throughout the seventh and into the sixth century. The problem was not that there was no land, but rather that the most productive land was concentrated in the hands of a minority of the families. Sons whose inherited share of their paternal kleros was insufficient for their growing families would be compelled to seek marginal land in the outskirts of the demos (where they had to work harder for less return). For the ambitious, there was another solution to the problem of land hunger: relocation abroad.

Colonization and the Growth of Trade

In the second half of the eighth century substantial numbers of people left Greece to establish new farming communities in southern Italy and Sicily. These colonizers
followed the trail blazed by earlier adventurers, who sailed west, not to farm but to trade. Overseas trade with foreigners, which had been increasing gradually since the tenth century, expanded considerably in the eighth. Shortly before 800, Greeks from Euboea joined the international trading post of Al Mina in northern Syria, and not long after that other Euboeans founded a trading colony at Pithecusae in southern Italy. Once again, Greek ships in significant numbers were plying the trade routes across the Mediterranean, and were even competing with the Phoenicians, who had long been the leading sea merchants in the Mediterranean. The new Greek colonies that sprang up in the West offered the settlers not only a good-sized kleros on good soil but also opportunities to trade their own products and those of old Greece for raw materials, especially metal, with the inhabitants of southern Europe.

Colonization and the expansion of trade and commerce had broad economic effects throughout the towns and villages of the Greek world. There was more work for craftsmen, sailors, shipbuilders and outfitters, and haulers. Even small farmers took advantage of the economic opportunities offered by this expanded world. Hesiod (c. 700 BC) takes it for granted that a farmer will put part of his surplus production in a boat and sail a fair distance for “profit.” The big landholders benefited most, however, because they could produce large surpluses for the market and could subsidize the costs and bear the losses of long sea voyages.

The Alphabet and Writing

The increased contacts with the East led to the most significant cultural achievement of the late Dark Age, the Greek alphabet. Somewhere—most likely in the eastern Mediterranean—Greeks borrowed letters from the Phoenician alphabet, which consisted primarily of signs for consonants. They adapted certain of the Phoenician characters to represent the sounds of the Greek consonants, and changed the value of other consonant signs, making them into vowels. Thus was born an alphabet that was largely phonetic. It is generally believed that this occurred around 800 BC. To judge from the evidence, which is very meager, it appears that one of the earliest uses for the alphabet was to write down verses of poetry. Two of the earliest examples of connected Greek words are, in fact, bits of epic-like verse scratched on vases dated to the second half of the eighth century. While these graffiti do show that the Homeric epics could have been written down at least by the later eighth century, they do not prove, as some propose, that the alphabet was devised in order to preserve orally composed poems in written form. On the other hand, supporters of this theory point out that the invention of signs for vowels was essential to reproduce in writing the metrical rhythms of Greek poetry. Another early function of writing was to record ownership of personal property and, probably not much later, to keep commercial accounts. Whatever the initial motive, once writing was established it was put to many different uses. The earliest specimen of a civic use of writing is a stone inscription of laws from Dreros in Crete, carved around 650.

Writing spread quickly throughout the Greek-speaking world, though not as one standard alphabet, but rather as numerous local scripts, with variations in
Figure 2.4a. Examples of graffiti on eighth-century vases. The readable portion of inscription (a) says: “He who, of all the dancers, now dances most gracefully” [? will win this pot?]. Inscription (b) identifies the owner: “I am the cup of Qoraqos.” Inscription (c) reads: “I am the drinking cup of Nestor, good to drink from. Whoever drinks this cup, immediately the desire will seize him of beautiful-crowned Aphrodite.”

Figure 2.4b. Late Geometric jug, c. 740 BC, from Athens, on which graffito (a) was inscribed.
the forms and numbers of characters and in the sounds they represented. The alphabetical script of about twenty-five letters was a huge advance over the cumbersome Linear B syllabic system of eighty-seven signs. Because most of the alphabetical characters stood for a single spoken sound, it was fairly easy to learn to read and even to write Greek. And yet, although the numbers of people who could read and write increased over time, mass literacy was never achieved in ancient Greece. Indeed, through the eighth and most of the seventh century, Greece was almost as completely oral-aural as it had been in the Dark Age. Even in the Classical and Hellenistic periods, when literacy was most widespread, most information passed from mouth to ear.

Art and Architecture

A new direction in artistic representation becomes apparent in the pottery of the Late Geometric period (c. 750–700). Except for an occasional horse or a bird, or, even rarer, a human figure, Greek vases had been essentially without images from the eleventh to the eighth century, when suddenly depictions of animals and humans became frequent. Then, around mid-century artists began to paint action scenes, such as battles, shipwrecks, funerals, and chariot processions. On massive Late Geometric amphorae from Athens that were commissioned as funeral monuments for the wealthy, these pictorial narratives occupy a prominent position among the abstract geometric motifs. Eventually the geometric designs become mere decorative frames for the figure scenes. Vase painters add new pictorial elements, and the figures become increasingly more naturalistic. Other media, such as small bronze sculptures and engraved metalwork, also feature dynamic action. Distinct regional and local styles emerged, as craftsmen experimented with, adapted, and discarded homegrown and imported trends and techniques. Around 720 BC, Greek art begins to feature a variety of ornamental motifs such as rosettes, griffins, and sirens, that are associated with the “orientalizing style.” This phase, during which Greeks deliberately used elements of Near Eastern and Egyptian art, sculpture, and architecture, would continue for the next hundred years or so.

The monumental temple, the “signature” Greek architectural form, also emerged in the eighth century. The first temples were small one-room structures that resembled ordinary houses. Early in the century the people of the island of

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Figure 2.5a. Middle Geometric krater from Athens (c. 800 BC) with meander, zigzag, and other geometric patterns. Note the flanking horses, which enliven the severe geometric decoration, and the jug-shaped knob on the lid.

Figure 2.5b. Large Late Geometric grave amphora (c. 750 BC) from the Dipylon cemetery at Athens.

Figure 2.5c. Detail from the same vase, showing the dead woman lying on her funeral bier surrounded by mourners.