

## LECTURE 2: OVERVIEW OF EARLY GREEK HISTORY, RELIGION, AND POETRY

### Bronze Age Greece, c. 3000–1150 B.C.

A Time of Myth and Legends . . .

The most important phase of prehistoric Greece was the Bronze Age, which began about 3000 B.C. and lasted until about 1150 B.C. In this period several peoples in the islands and along the shores of the Aegean, a sea between the modern countries of Greece and Turkey, began to use bronze tools and developed their civilizations slightly later than the states of Egypt and Mesopotamia. The most important of these peoples were the *Minoans* and the *Mycenaeans*; later Greek civilization was heavily based upon these earlier cultures, and they were the setting for many Greek myths and legends.

#### Minoan Civilization (c. 3000–1400 B.C.)

The Minoan Civilization was centered on Crete, a large island in the southern Aegean Sea. The name *Minoan* comes from the legendary King Minos who, according to Greek myth, ruled from a fabulous palace in a city called Knossos. Minos' palace in mythology seems to have preserved a Greek memory of the elaborate palaces that surrounded great central courtyards that were easily accessible from the outside and that served as the centers of Minoan life: they were the residences of the rulers, contained elaborate storehouses and markets, and served as the focus of religious and community events. The Minoans sailed and traded widely, growing rich through commerce and using their wealth to build and embellish their palace centers. Surprisingly these centers were not fortified and few weapons are found in Minoan graves.

#### Mycenaean Civilization (c. 1400–1150 B.C.)

At the time Minoan Civilization began to decline, perhaps as a result of natural disasters such as earthquakes and nearby volcanic eruptions, another civilization became powerful on the nearby Greek mainland. This civilization is called Mycenaean and takes its name from its most important center, a site called Mycenae in an area of southern Greece called the Peloponnesus. Many aspects of Mycenaean culture seem to have been borrowed and adapted from the Minoans. The Mycenaeans built palace centers that in some ways were similar to those on Crete and they decorated them in similar fashion. They even had a writing system, called *Linear B*, which was developed from the Minoan alphabet.

Other aspects of Mycenaean culture, however, were quite different. Their palace centers contained some courtyards like those in Crete, but they were heavily fortified and contained great halls that were centered on large open hearths. Such a hall is called a *megaron*, and its position in the center of the palace suggests a less public focus. The fortifications of the Mycenaean palaces and the great numbers of weapons and pieces of armor in Mycenaean graves suggest that they were a much more warlike people. Such Mycenaean burials, originally done in deep *shaft graves* that were later grouped in walled-off grave circles near or outside the fortifications of the palace center, reveal that the Mycenaeans were incredibly rich, perhaps from the trade that they took over from the Minoans. Nevertheless, the Mycenaeans did not seem to

constitute a single kingdom. Instead each fortified palace center seemed to control surrounding territory and villages in a system that may have been somewhat similar to the feudal system that later would develop in Medieval Europe. Each center had its own king or *wanax*, and the strongest of these may have exercised some kind of general leadership over the others.

Unlike Linear A, the Mycenaean writings in Linear B have been deciphered and have revealed that the language of the Mycenaean was actually an early form of Greek. As was the case with the Minoan writings on Crete, most of the Linear B writings that have been preserved on clay or stone tablets appear to be routine palace records. Interestingly, however, names of many of the gods and goddesses in these records prove to be early forms of the familiar deities of later Greece, including Zeus, Poseidon, Athena, and even Dionysus (who was believed by later Greeks to have been a late addition to their pantheon).

### **The Greek “Dark Age,” 1150–750 B.C.**

About 1250 B.C. the Mycenaean centers began to collapse economically and politically, and subsequently waves of Greeks speaking a dialect called *Doric* moved from northern Greece into the Peloponnese. The Dorians had mastered the working of iron, so militarily they were superior to the bronze age Mycenaean, although in most other areas their culture was less advanced.

This so-called “Dorian Invasion” around 1150 B.C. led to a period called the *Greek Dark Ages*. The weakened Mycenaean palace centers were sacked and destroyed, and no effort was made to restore them. The art of writing and many signs of material culture in the forms of architecture and art were largely lost. While civilization was certainly less advanced in the more than four hundred years that followed the collapse of Mycenaean civilization, the expression “dark age” says more about our knowledge than it does about the actual level of culture in the period: without written records or a lot of archaeological evidence, we are the ones who are in the dark about what happened in this period.

### **The Oral Tradition**

Nevertheless, not all knowledge of this period or the Mycenaean or the Minoans that preceded it was lost. A rich oral tradition chronicled the warlike society of the Dark Ages. Wandering bards—poets who sang tales of great events and people of earlier times—memorized stories and passed them down by word of mouth from generation to generation. These stories suggest that in the Dark Ages a warlord society arose in which a local chief or petty king gathered around himself a group of warrior companions. This warlord, the much diminished successor of the great Mycenaean *wanax*, was known as a *basileus*, a term that the Greeks would later use for king. These would defend a local hamlet, village, or town from raids or other incursions, in return for which the common people would support their warlord and his soldiers who lived together in smaller versions of the old Mycenaean megaron. Legends also suggest that a complex code of mutual obligation and martial honor developed, but we know little else about this period.

The oral tradition also preserved memories of the great Bronze Age civilizations in embellished songs that recalled great wars and kings from earlier times. This gave rise to the concept of an Age of Heroes—although not an actual historical period, it was an imaginative era which combined Bronze Age memories with the prevailing warlord society of the Dark Ages. For instance, the oral tradition perpetuated stories of a great Mycenaean expedition against the fabled city of Troy in the northwestern part of modern Turkey. The names of places and perhaps of kings and battles may actually be real, but the tradition mixed these Bronze Age recollections with the society and values of the Dark Age and wove them into a story that may be largely fictitious. To the Greeks who listened to these tales, however, the kings and battles were very real, and throughout Greece there were many a ruined Mycenaean palaces that suggested that there was some truthfulness to the tales and many circle graves that were confidently identified as the tombs of prominent heroes. These heroes were larger than life figures capable of great deeds who, more importantly, came to serve as models of good and bad behavior. The greatest and most successful of them were honored, often with religious veneration at the tombs that were associated with them.

### **The Homeric “Heroic Age”**

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### **The Development of Greek Religion and Poetry**

This period also gave rise to system of Greek religion as it would later exist. Many of the Mycenaean deities were adopted by the new peoples, where they became champions of the warlord culture. The chief of these was the sky god Zeus, king of the gods and controller of wind and weather. Become familiar with him and the other sky or *Olympian* deities described in the “Synopsis of the Greek Pantheon,” which will be a helpful reference as we read throughout this semester. The Olympians were anthropomorphic deities of the sky, water, and nature that were worshiped with sacrifices, part of which was burned on altars where the smoke would rise as an offering to the Olympians. In addition to these gods and goddesses there existed a layer of

even older gods that were primarily associated with the underworld, fertility, and the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. These underworld deities are called *chthonic* from the Greek word for “earth.” They were honored together with the heroes (who also lived under the earth since they had died and been buried) by sacrifices in which the blood of the victim was poured at the base of an altar or in a trench or pit in order to gain the blessings of prosperity and blessings of these invisible beings. The stories that surrounded these gods joined those about the different heroes in a tradition that explained and supported the values of the warrior society.

At the end of the Dark Age, just as the Archaic Age of Greece was beginning, tradition holds that one of these bards composed two great poems that were so wonderful that no subsequent poet could improve upon them. His name was *Homer*, ostensibly a blind singer from the island of Chios. His poems were transmitted almost word-for-word and were written down as soon as the alphabet was reintroduced to Greece. The perfection of his poetry, his insight into human nature, and the nobility of his sentiments were so great that his poems became classics or standards for subsequent Greek literature.

Homer and his younger contemporary, the poet Hesiod, were largely responsible for giving Greek religion the form which we recognize in the archaic and classical periods. The complex process by which Bronze Age fertility deities were dominated by Dark Age Dorian sky gods is largely lost, but Homer’s epics and Hesiod’s didactic poem *The Theogony*, reflected the Dark Age conception of religion and gave the Greek pantheon its final form. The Greek gods and goddesses are as much a part of the Heroic Age as are the kings and warriors that fill the lines of epic poetry. While the Dark Age gave later Greece a fresh start by breaking the cultural tradition of the Bronze Age, the oral tradition, particularly as exemplified by Homer preserved legends and values that would later serve as the basis of the Greek literary and moral systems.