



History Lesson 4
The Rise of Ancient Greece
(Grade 6)

Instruction 4-1
Aegean Civilizations (Grade 6)

Greece is often considered the birthplace of Western civilization.

It gave us:

Democracy,
Trial by Jury,
The Theatre (Tragedy and Comedy), and
The Olympic Games.

The Greeks also made lasting contributions in:

Architecture,
Science,
Mathematics,
Medicine,
Literature,
Language,
Philosophy,
Politics,
Military Strategy, and
The Arts.

But if *our* civilization began in Greece, where did *Greek* civilization begin?

On Crete, an island in the Aegean Sea just south of mainland Greece.

Crete

Historians think that the people who settled both Greece and Crete came from northwest Asia Minor (probably Phoenicia).

They think that Crete was settled first -- before 3000 BC.

By 3000, a Bronze Age civilization was already thriving on Crete.

This civilization was protected by a mighty navy. It was paid for by trade with Egypt, Turkey, Cyprus, Afghanistan and Scandinavia.

The first culture that arose on Crete is called Minoan -- after Minos, a mythical King. According to Greek legend, Crete is where Rhea, the Earth Mother, gave birth to Zeus. Zeus was the chief god of the Greeks and the father of Minos.



An archeological dig in 1900 found the ruins of three palaces on Crete. These palaces were Knossos, Kato Sakro and Mallia.

Knossos was the most spectacular.

The Palace of Knossos

The Palace of Knossos was huge. It was made out of stone. It had many stories. It spread out over 5-1/2 acres of land.

Knossos was the home of the King of Crete. His family, servants, craftsmen and advisors lived there with him.

It had elaborate bathrooms and plumbing. It even had ventilation and waste disposal systems.

It also had plenty of storage space for trade goods.

These trade goods included copper, ivory, amethyst, lapis lazuli, carnelian, amber, gold and pottery.

The 1900 excavation even found oil jars still in place.

Knossos also contained a maze (called the *labyrinth*) where young men and women from Athens (a rival city-site) were sacrificed. They were supposedly sacrificed to the *Minotaur*. The Minotaur was a mythical man-eating monster. It had the head of a bull and the body of a man.

According to myth, the Minotaur was eventually killed by Theseus, son of the King of Athens. Theseus was helped in this by Ariadne, King Minos' daughter, who had fallen in love with him.



Minoan Civilization

Between 1700 and 1500 BC, Minoan civilization reached its peak. It dominated the entire Aegean region because of its mighty sea power.

The King and the Nobles controlled all aspects of life, including trade, art and religion. The Minoan religion centered around the worship of several goddesses and high priestesses. The symbol for the mother goddess was a double-bladed ax, called a labrys. That is how the maze -- the *labyrinth* -- got its name.

There were three classes of Minoan people -- Nobles, Citizens and Slaves. Slaves seem to have been treated well. The only ritual they couldn't take part in was bull leaping. Bull leaping meant leaping in mid-air onto the back of a bull and trying to stay there. It was somewhat like today's bull riding -- only harder.

Much of what we know about the Minoans comes from their art. That's because their written language (called Linear Script A) has never been deciphered.

Fortunately, artists recorded many aspects of daily life on frescos (wall panels) and pottery. Women are often shown working alongside men. These women wore elaborate hairstyles and puffy-sleeved dresses with flounced skirts.

To see some examples of Minoan art, pottery and jewelry, click on <http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/prehistory/aegean/galleryimages/imagegallery.html>

By the middle of the 15th century BC, Minoan civilization came to an end, although nobody knows exactly why. Possible explanations include the eruption of the volcano Thera or the rise of Mycenaean culture on the island.

Myceneae

The Minoans had lived by trade. One of their major trading partners was the City of Myceneae on the mainland of Greece.

As we said, historians think that mainland Greece was settled by the same kind of people who settled Crete. These people probably came from Asia Minor.

For years, trade between the Minoans and Myceneans was peaceful. But as Mycenaee became more powerful, it challenged Minoan supremacy on the Aegean Sea.



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Rivalry grew, and in 1450 BC the Myceneans invaded Crete. They captured Knossos and other palaces. They ruled Crete for 50 years until a volcano destroyed Knossos.

Mycenean civilization continued to grow on the Greek mainland, however.

Mainland Greece

Myceneans spread out and formed the cities of Athens, Thebes, Tiryns and Pylos. They absorbed much of the Minoan culture (including their art and myths). But they had a very different social structure.

The Myceneans were ruled by an all-powerful king and a warrior / religious aristocracy.

There were many different trades and professions. People lived as landlords and tenant farmers, servants and slaves. Some became priests or priestesses in the worship of Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Ares, Artemis, Athena and the other gods of Mt. Olympus. We'll tell you more about them in an upcoming Instruction. But if you want to check them out now, click on:

<http://www.etap.org/members/langartsfiles/english/grade7/langart1/lesson.html> (Greek Myths -- Gods and Goddesses)

With the fall of Minoan Crete, Mycenea took over the Aegean trade.

The Aegean Trade

Mycenea is known to have had trade relations with Cyprus, Egypt, Sicily, Palestine, Troy and Macedonia.

Trade goods included perfumed oils, olive oil, wine, art, ivory, plaques, pottery, bronze, gold, copper, tin, spices, elephant tusks and dye.

Scribes kept careful records of these trade goods on clay tablets in a language called Linear Script B.

Linear Script B is thought to have come from the Minoans' Linear Script A. Unlike Linear Script A, Linear Script B *has* been deciphered. That's why we know more about the Myceneans than we do about the Minoans.



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We also know about Mycenaean from the excavations of Heinrich Schliemann. In 1870, Schliemann uncovered much of the city, including its stone walls. He found graves of men and women wearing gold masks, breastplates, armbands and exquisite ornaments.

Mycenaean civilization fell sometime between 1300 and 1000 BC.

It fell largely as the result of wars between its own kingdoms.

The most famous of these wars is known as the Trojan War.

Homer

Much of our information about Mycenaean civilization comes from the writings of the poet Homer. Homer wrote his greatest works, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, long after Mycenaean fell.

Historians think that Homer lived sometime between 850 and 650 BC. They think he based his works on oral accounts of earlier events passed down by *bards*. These bards were storyteller / historian / entertainer / singer / poets.

We know little about Homer, except that he was blind. Some scholars even think that his works were written by several different people.

We do know that -- like many great storytellers -- Homer blended fact and fiction. He included a masterful retelling of many ancient Greek myths and legends.

The Iliad describes the Greek siege of Troy in graphic detail. It is considered by many to be the finest adventure story ever written. Even today, readers can't put it down.

The Iliad

The story of Troy has been retold countless times, especially in the movies. In 2004 a new movie opened called *Troy*. It stars Brad Pitt as Achilles and Orlando Bloom as Paris.

The Trojan Wars are supposed to have taken place sometime between 1250 and 1185 BC.



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At one time, it was thought that *The Iliad* was almost entirely fiction.

But archeologists (Schliemann, Michael Wood and others) are convinced that they have found the remains of the real Troy (in Turkey). Actually, they found 12 Troys built on top of each other. Homer's Troy is probably #7.

For a fascinating account of the search for the real Troy, rent Michael Wood's DVD "The Search for the Trojan Wars."

The Iliad is a summary, in verse form, of a long war conducted by the Greeks against Troy. Troy was a city on the Aegean Sea across from the Greek mainland.

The Face that Launched 1,000 Ships

The Trojan War was fought because of a woman -- the most beautiful woman in the world.

Her name was Helen.

She was the wife of Menelaus, king of a Greek city-state called Sparta.

Helen had been abducted by Paris, the handsome son of King Priam of Troy.

Menelaus wanted her back.

So he called on the kings and princes of the other Greek city-states to help him. Those who answered his call included Achilles (Greece's greatest warrior), Ajax, Diomedes, Odysseus and Nestor.

Agamemnon, Menelaus' brother and the King of Mycenae, was commander-in-chief of the expedition.

An army of 100,000 men and 1,000 ships assembled at the Greek port of Aulis. This gave rise to the saying that Helen's face was "the face that launched 1000 ships."

But the wind wouldn't blow so the fleet couldn't sail. It was said that this was because Agamemnon had killed a stag that was sacred to the goddess Artemis (Diana). Her anger could only be appeased by the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter, Iphigenia.



Reluctantly, Agamemnon led Iphigenia to the altar for the sacrifice. But at the last moment the goddess snatched her away. A deer was left in her place.

The wind came up and the fleet set sail.

The Siege of Troy

When the Greeks arrived in Troy, they found it well prepared for a siege. It was surrounded by walls many inches thick.

Its defenders included Hector, Troy's greatest hero (another son of King Priam).

For 9 years the Greeks besieged Troy without success.

Achilles quarreled with Agamemnon and refused to fight for several years. But when his best friend Patroclus was killed, he vowed revenge.

Achilles then killed Hector in battle. He was eventually killed himself.

The Greeks despaired of ever winning. But Odysseus came up with an idea.

The Trojan Horse

Aided by the goddess Athena, Odysseus directed the construction of a huge wooden horse. This horse was empty inside. It was big enough to hold many warriors.

When the horse was finished, the warriors climbed inside.

The rest of the Greeks left the horse outside the walls of Troy. They then boarded their ships as though they were going to sail home in defeat.

The Trojans thought that the horse was a peace offering. Even though one of their priests warned against "Greeks, even bearing gifts."

Cassandra, King Priam's daughter, also warned of disaster.

But the Trojans wouldn't listen (nobody ever listened to poor Cassandra). They breached the wall and dragged the gigantic horse inside.



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That night, as the Trojans slept, Greek warriors crept out from inside the horse. They signaled the ships to bring the other Greeks back. Soon, thousands of Greeks swarmed into the city.

By morning, only ruins remained. Most of the Trojans were dead.

Helen returned to her husband. The Greeks sailed directly home to Greece. All except Odysseus, who took the long way home.

Odysseus is the hero of Homer's other masterpiece, *The Odyssey*.

The Dark Ages in Greece

Rivalry between kingdoms dominated the history of ancient Greece.

Greece became so weak that in about 1100 BC it was overrun by a barbaric tribe from the north. This tribe was called the Dorians.

The Dorians occupied the areas where Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations had stood. Cities fell apart and much of the culture was destroyed. So were the trade routes originally established by the Minoans.

The "Dark Ages in Greece" had begun. They lasted for 300 years until they were ended by the Ionians.

But it was not until the Golden Age of Athens (under Pericles) that Greece became rich and powerful again.