

THE RISE OF HELLENIC CIVILIZATION

During the four centuries B.C. following the Mycenaean civilization, Greece fell into a period of decline. The prosperity and wealth of the Mycenaean period had gone. The flourishing arts, monumental architecture, and knowledge of writing disappeared. Trade declined, and the Mycenaean palaces were abandoned. The period is known as the "Dark Ages," and it lasted from about 1200 to 750 B.C.

Homer, who wrote about the heroic deeds of Mycenaean kings in the *Iliad*, also described the events within the social and political background of this dark period. Agriculture had returned to a simple level of subsistence. Every man owned and cultivated his own small plot of land for individual survival. The king was no longer the supreme and authoritative ruler, but was advised in regard to what action should be taken by a small group of nobles or aristocrats. The *monarchy* of the Mycenaean period, where the king was supreme, was replaced by a "rule of a few men," called an *oligarchy*. A small group of wealthy nobles had all the power.

Another significant change that occurred at the beginning of this period was the introduction of iron for making tools and weapons. Accordingly, this period is also known as the "Iron Age."

One major event that characterizes the "Dark Ages" was a migration of Greeks across the Aegean Sea. Thucydides, a fifth century B.C. Greek historian, called this the Ionian Migrations. (See map on page 87.) Three groups of Greeks, based on dialects they spoke, moved to and settled on the western coast of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). The Dorians, who spoke Doric, settled in the southern part; the Ionians, who spoke Ionic, inhabited the middle part; and the Aeolians, who spoke Aeolic, went to the northern part of the area. The Greeks living in this coastal area were later to be the cause of conflict between the Greeks and the Persians.

By the middle of the eighth century B.C., Greece had recovered from its darkest period in history, and a new civilization emerged. This was called the Hellenic (or Greek) civilization. Trade once again began to flourish. The alphabet was introduced into Greece from Phoenicia, a seafaring state located in today's Lebanon. Because the alphabet contained no vowels, vowels were added to adapt to the Greek language. Most importantly, a new political institution emerged, which typified the rest of Greek political history—the *city-state* or *polis*. Because Greece is a very mountainous region, small independent political units developed rather than a large political union. Another factor in the development of city-states was the Greeks' love for freedom and independence. Each city-state was autonomous with its own laws and constitution, leaders and army, system of taxation, and sometimes its own coinage system. The largest and most important of Greek city-states



Homer wrote about the period in Greek history known as the Dark Ages.

were Athens in Attica, Sparta in the Peloponnese, and Thebes in Boeotia.

Until about 650 B.C., most city-states were ruled by the aristocrats. They had an oligarchic form of government. The political power was in the hands of a few wealthy families who owned the best land and abused the majority of the city-state's citizens who were poor farmers. Sometimes these farmers got into debt and were forced to work for the aristocrats to pay off their debts. Some even became slaves.

Starting about 750 B.C., due to poverty and insufficient farming land, these poor farmers began to leave their homelands and seek new opportunities elsewhere. Other reasons for emigration, even though less important, were trade, personal adventure, and political refuge. A phase of "Greek colonization" was launched. (See inset map on page 87.) Colonies were set up along the coasts of southern Italy and Sicily (known as Magna Graecia or Greater Greece), France, Spain, and along the coast of the northern Aegean and Black Seas. Some important colonies include Syracuse (Sicily), Phaestum and Cumae (Italy); Massalia (modern Marseille, France), and Byzantium on the Black Sea (modern Istanbul). The Greek city-states that took part in this colonization process were mostly Athens, Corinth in the Peloponnese, Eretria and Chalkis on the island of Euboea, and the Greek-Asiatic cities of Miletus and Phocaea. The Greek colonies became city-states of their own and were politically and economically independent. The only ties that remained with their mother city-states were cultural and religious. By 600 B.C. the Greeks had spread their people and ideas throughout the regions of the Mediterranean and Black Seas. This Greek influence was later to have a profound effect on Roman culture.

One of the results of Greek colonization was the emergence of a new social class of people, the middle class or merchants, who had become wealthy through industry and trade. This new middle class also wanted a share in the political power of the city-states. Consequently, at home in Greece, the discontent of the poor was solved in another way. Tyrants, men from the new middle class, came to power in many city-states between 650 and 500 B.C. with the support of the people. This type of government is called a *tyranny*. A Greek tyrant, however, unlike today's tyrant, was not a brutal ruler, but a ruler who had not taken power according to the constitution. In fact, most Greek tyrants were good rulers and brought many benefits, such as power and wealth, to the city-states. Coinage was introduced, trade and colonization were encouraged, and athletic, musical, and dramatic contests were established. One notable tyrant was Peisistratus of Athens (560–529 B.C.), who embellished the city with monuments, stimulated trade and industry, and helped the poor farmers. He increased the prestige of Athens.

A very important change that took place during this time, and one which may also have helped the rise in power of tyrants, was the development of an infantry army. A new type of heavily-armed soldier (*hoplite*), placed within a tight formation, called a *phalanx*, fought many successful battles for the next three centuries.

The rule of tyrannies did not last very long, however, because some of the tyrants in power became too authoritarian. Instead, the governments of the city-states became once again oligarchies or changed to a new form of rule, *democracy*. Democracy, or "rule by the people," was first developed in Athens. Sparta, on the other hand, retained a form of oligarchic rule. The other Greek city-states followed the lead of either Athens or Sparta.

Name _____ Date _____

CHALLENGES

1. What are the three developments that led to the recovery of Greek civilization by 750 B.C.?

2. What significant change took place in the Dark Age period?

3. What major event characterizes the Dark Age period?

4. Who were the three groups of Greeks that took part in the Ionian Migration?

5. What were the three largest and most-important city-states in Greece?

6. Where did the Greeks colonize?

7. Which Greek cities were involved in setting up colonies?

8. What new social class emerged as a result of Greek colonization?

9. Who was Peisistratus?

10. Name three Greek colonies.

11. What is a monarchy?

12. What is an oligarchy?

Name _____ Date _____

POINTS TO PONDER

1. Why did the Hellenic civilization develop the political institution of the city-state or polis? Describe the function of a city-state. What effect do you think this kind of political setup will have on the political history of Greece?

2. Explain the main reason for Greek colonization. What other factors were involved in Greek settlement abroad?

3. Describe the term *tyrant* as it was originally used in Greek history. Compare it to a tyrant in today's society.

4. Why is the period following the Mycenaean period called the "Dark Age" or the "Iron Age"?
