Ancient Greece Essay, Research Paper

Sub-Mycenaean Period and the Early Iron Age

(Protogeometric Period)

Circa 1100 – 900 B.C.

The final collapse of the Mycenaean civilization around 1100 BC marked the end of the Aegean Bronze Age. A period of severe economic and cultural depression followed. The depths of this depression occurred from circa 1100 to 1050, in what is known as the Sub-Mycenaean (on the Greek mainland) or Sub-Minoan period (on Crete). Crude, simplified versions of the old Mycenaean and Minoan pottery were produced. Metal craftsmanship was mostly rudimentary, although the new technology of iron working was adopted, perhaps from Cyprus.

The next century and a half (ca. 1050 to ca. 900 BC), known as the Protogeometric period from its pottery, represented a time of ever-increasing recovery. Colonies from mainland Greece and the nearby islands settled on the west coast of Asia Minor and the north coast of the Aegean. Strong trade links with the Near East were again established, and there was a gradual increase in wealth. Craftsmanship again became skilled, as is seen in both .

Geometric period

The Geometric period was a time of startling innovation and transformation in Greek society. The population dramatically increased and proto-urban life re-emerged, bringing with it overcrowding and political tensions. The Greeks moved to new lands to the east and west where they founded commercial trading posts and colonies.

Written language, lost with the passing of the Mycenaean civilization, re-emerged with the adoption of the Semitic alphabetic script, encountered through contacts with the Phoenicians. It is probably in this same period that the epic poems of Homer, such as the Iliad, became widely known and were recorded.

Sanctuaries, sacred zones devoted to the worship of deities, developed. As the worship of the gods became formalized, so the need arose for temples to house the deities+ statues.

Early Archaic Period

Circa 700 – 600 B.C.

During this period, the concept of the polis, the Greek city-state, became well developed. Tyrannical political figures seized control of many of these city-states in the 7th and 6th centuries.

Greek colonies abroad continued to flourish and new settlements were established, particularly in the region of the Black Sea. Colonies were founded at Mediterranean sites such as Cyrene on the North African coast and Massilia (Marseilles) in southern France. Highly developed commercial contacts continued in Egypt, Anatolia and the Levant. These contacts stimulated an influx of eastern imports and the manufacture of Greek objects with an “oriental” appearance or featuring “oriental” motifs.

was invented by the East Greeks or by the Lydians, the neighbors of the Greeks on the coast of Asia Minor, and was systematically adopted by the Greek city-states. The first Greek monumental stone sculpture appeared. The Doric and Ionic architectural orders were born and the Greek temple reached its developed form.

Archaic Period

Circa 600 – 479 B.C.

The city-states continued to flourish during the Archaic period, in spite of internal political and social unrest. By the 6th century BC a majority of the most important and powerful city-states were ruled by tyrants. Commerce and the arts flourished under the auspices of these more or less benevolent dictators. Corinth especially prospered. Athens undertook a massive building program, and the region of Attica dominated the pottery market for about a century and a half with its high-quality pottery.

The origins of democracy can be traced to Athens in the years following the fall of the tyrannical Peisistratids (560-510 BC). By the beginning of the Archaic period large statues of nude males (kouroi ) and draped females (korai ) were produced as dedications for sanctuaries and as markers for graves. Colossal marble temples to house huge cult images of the gods were built in various parts of the Greek world.

External troubles came from both east and west. The Persian Empire attempted to extend its control over the Greeks in Asia Minor. The final victory of the Greeks over the Persians was celebrated in Greek art and literature as a symbol of the triumph of civilized peoples over the forces of barbarism.

Classical Period

Circa 479 – 323 B.C.

The end of the Persian Wars marked the beginning of the Classical period. In this period Athens reached its greatest political and cultural heights: the full development of the democratic system of government under the Athenian statesman Pericles; the building of the Parthenon on the Acropolis; the creation of the tragedies of Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides; and the founding of the philosophical schools of Socrates and Plato.

In the late 5th century, the Peloponnesian Wars between Athens and Sparta caused turmoil throughout the Greek world. After the surrender of the Athenians, democracy was restored. Meanwhile, in Sicily and Italy a conflict was being played out between the Carthaginians and the Greeks of the region. By the end of the 5th century the Carthaginians and their main adversary, the Syracusans, arrived at a truce.

During the 4th century Athens, Sparta and Thebes vied for political dominance of Greece. Peace was finally established when Sparta, backed by Persia, won control. In the second half of the 4th century, a divided Greece and the decline of the polis gave rise to the powerful Macedonian state under Philip II and his son, Alexander the Great. After bringing all of the eastern world to the continent of India under his control, Alexander died in Babylon at the age of 32 (323 BC). By the time of his death Hellenism had reached much of the known world and the Classical period was over.

Hellenistic Period

Circa 323 – 31 B.C.

Following the death of Alexander the Great, his kingdom was split into three by his generals. The Antigonid dynasty maintained control of mainland Greece. The Seleucids governed the entire eastern empire, the largest portion of the territory, while the Ptolemies ruled the land of ancient Egypt.

The Hellenistic period was an international, cosmopolitan age. Commercial contacts were widespread and peoples of many ethnic and religious backgrounds merged in populous urban centers. Advances were made in various fields of scientific inquiry, including engineering, physics, astronomy and mathematics. Great libraries were founded in Alexandria, Athens and the independent kingdom of Pergamum. The old beliefs in Olympian gods were infused with foreign elements, especially from the east; “Oriental” ecstatic cults, such as those of Cybele, Isis, and Mithras, become popular in the Hellenized world.

The 3rd century BC saw the rise of ancient Rome. After securing most of the Italic peninsula, Rome entered into a protracted conflict with the Carthaginians for control of Sicily, Spain and the other regions of Punic domination in the Punic Wars. The former empire of Alexander was taken steadily and methodically into Roman hands. The great city of Corinth was destroyed (146 BC), Athens captured (86 BC), and Cleopatra and Mark Antony defeated at the Battle of Actium (31 BC). Their defeat marks the end of the Hellenistic Age.

Greek Pottery

and its Archaeological Importance

The classical archaeologist relies to a great extent on pottery as important evidence for reconstructing Greek life. In the study of all ceramic&endash;making cultures, pottery is used as a chronological indicator because pottery shapes and decoration change over time. The association of these changes with other cultural phenomena or, in the case of the ancient Greeks, with specific datable events allows the archaeologist to build a chronological framework of a culture.

Greek pottery also provides important documentation for many aspects of ancient Greek life through painted scenes, especially on . A large number of these scenes illustrate the myths and legends of the ancient Greeks. Through these we find an ancient interpretation of the stories and a picture of how the ancient Greeks viewed their deities. Because of the Greek painters’ fondness for labeling individual characters in a legend, we are able in some instances to piece together parts of scenes from lost plays or obscure myths. Evidence for the way in which Greek tragedy and comedy was staged is also available through vase representations. Other depictions provide valuable information about dress and objects of everyday life.

In studying Greek painted pottery, specialists look for identifying characteristics of the potter or painter which might help to identify a body of works executed by the same artist or workshop. In Attica, the tendency for potters and painters to sign their works gives us a firm basis for the study of an artist’s style or preferred subject matter. By studying which potters and painters worked together, specialists have been able to piece together information about the time period in which these artists worked, their workshops and social status.