



# **THE ORIGINS OF GREEK CIVILIZATION:**

**FROM THE BRONZE AGE TO THE POLIS  
CA. 2500–600 B.C.E.  
A Collection of Three Teaching Units**



**Bronze Age Civilization in the Aegean:  
Crete, Mycenae, and Troy Ca. 2500–100 B.C.**

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**Homer's Odyssey: An Elementary Passion**

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**The Polis**

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## GENERAL BACKGROUND

### I. OVERVIEW

Anything new?" is the inevitable question people ask ancient historians in the expectation, of course, that there is nothing new to know about the musty ancient past. The actuality is different. Far from everything being known, ancient historians often feel their area of study is in constant flux and that textbooks are out of date almost before they are published, and for good reason. This is partly the result of historians exploring new subjects and using innovative methodologies. In the main, however, the excitement of the subject comes from the constant influx of new evidence thanks to the great expansion of the archaeological investigation of the great centers of ancient civilization that has made the nineteenth and especially the twentieth centuries the greatest period for the discovery of new sources for ancient history since the Renaissance. The continuing revision of historians' understanding of the early history of Greece and the origins of Greek civilization is a striking example of the impact these developments have had and continue to have on the writing of ancient history.

For over a millennium from its first appearance in the eighth century B.C.E. to its disappearance in the third century C.E. the *polis* or city-state was the focus of Greek history and Greek life. From modern Afghanistan to eastern Spain, from southern Russia to North Africa, Greeks lived out their lives in almost fifteen hundred of these tiny urban centers. Each was a fiercely independent state with its own distinctive traditions and composed of a tightly knit community of citizens, adult males, sometimes as few as five hundred, rarely more than five thousand in number, who took an active role in all areas of the city's life from politics to religion. So much did Greeks take the *polis* system for granted that Aristotle could deny without fear of serious contradiction the capacity of the vast majority of humanity to live in freedom by defining man as a "political animal," that is, a *polis* animal.

Until the second half of the nineteenth century historians viewed the early history of Greece much the way the ancient Greeks did. According to this view, Greek history and Greek literature began in the ninth or eighth century B.C.E. with the almost simultaneous establishment of the first city states and the publication of the two great epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, written by the mysterious poet Homer with the aid of the recently borrowed Phoenician alphabet which had been adapted to write Greek. Before what was generally considered to be the earliest datable event in Greek history, the celebration of the first Olympic games in 776 B.C.E., all was legend, fitfully illuminated by the Homeric poems and other works of Greek literature but not susceptible to historical analysis. Like their Greek predecessors, however, the pioneers of modern Greek historiography never doubted that, if they could ever separate fact from fiction in the mass of Greek legend, they would discover earlier phases of the history of the classical Greek city states, not another and profoundly different form of Greek civilization as historians today believe was actually the case.

This dramatic change in historians' understanding of early Greek history is the result of over a century of remarkable archaeological achievements that began with the discovery in 1876 by the eccentric German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann of the unlooted tombs of the sixteenth century B.C.E. kings of Mycenae which were filled with a rich and varied collection of weapons and art objects like none ever seen before in Greece. Five years earlier Schliemann had discovered at the site of Hisarlik in northwestern Turkey the remains of the city of Troy and raised the possibility that historical fact lay behind Homer's tales of the Trojan War. The scholarly revolution that had begun with Schliemann's discoveries at Troy and Mycenae continued with the discovery of yet another unknown civilization on the island of Crete by the English archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans in the first decade of the twentieth century together with hundreds of clay tablets written in several different scripts. One of these, a syllabic script historians call Linear B, was also found at sites on the Greek mainland. In 1951 the brilliant English amateur linguist Michael Ventris proved that Linear B had been used to write an early form of Greek. Instead of living in city-states like the historical Greeks, therefore, their second millennium B.C.E. ancestors were revealed to have inhabited a Greece divided into small kingdoms dominated by hilltop fortresses and ruled by warrior kings with the aid of an administration composed of a small corps of literate scribes who tried to monitor all aspects of the kingdoms' economic life. Between the violent end of this first Greek civilization in about 1100 B.C.E. and the historical Greece of city states, stretched a little known four-hundred year period that historians call the Dark Ages and which holds the key to understanding the origins of classical Greek civilization. Attempting to find that key is one of the central tasks of contemporary Greek archaeology.

In these three units students will be able to study and compare the two civilizations of ancient Greece, that of the Greek kingdoms of the second millennium B.C.E. and the city states of historical Greece, and to learn how historians use archaeological evidence to reconstruct the history of Mycenaean Greece, while their teachers will find useful suggestions as to how to help their students appreciate one of the principal written sources for early Greek culture, the *Odyssey*.

## II. CORRELATION WITH THE NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR WORLD HISTORY

*The Origins of Greek Civilization: From the Bronze Age to the Polis ca. 2500–600 B.C.E.* provides teaching materials that address the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, UCLA, 1996), World History, **Era 2**, “Early Civilizations and the Emergence of Pastoral Peoples, 4000–1000 B.C.E.” Lessons specifically support **Standards 2B**, **3C**, and **4**, calling upon students to examine how urban civilization emerged and expanded throughout the Aegean region and to understand major trends in Eurasia and Africa from 4000 to 1000 B.C.E.

This unit likewise integrates a number of Historical Thinking Standards including having students 1) draw upon visual and literary sources, 2) make comparisons across eras and regions in order to define enduring issues, and 3) marshal evidence of antecedent circumstances.

### **III. UNIT TITLES**

- I. Bronze Age Civilization in the Aegean: Crete, Mycenae, and Troy, cCa. 2500–100 B.C.  
(Grades 9–10)  
By Rhoda Himmell and Amanda H. Podany
  
- II. Homer’s Odyssey: An Elementary Passion  
(Grades 5–6)  
By David Millstone
  
- III. The Polis  
(Grades 6–10)  
By Peter Cheoros

# **BRONZE AGE CIVILIZATION IN THE AEGEAN: CRETE, MYCENAE, AND TROY CA. 2500–100 B.C.E.**

**A Unit of Study for Grades 9–10**

**Rhoda Himmel  
Amanda H. Podany**



The Lion Gate outside the Mycenae Palace

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## TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

### I. UNIT OVERVIEW

The purpose of this unit is to examine the origins, history and culture of the earliest European civilizations at Crete and Mycenae (my-SEE-nee) with a focus on the archaeological evidence and examination of writing systems that link the two areas.

Background for settlements on the island of Crete and on the Greek Peloponnese, key historic events, and a survey of the cultures of these areas are included. In addition a discussion of both the mythological and archaeological sources for the Trojan War is provided in order to relate the Trojan War to the history of the Mycenaeans (my-suh-NEE-uns).

The study of the first European civilizations is essential in tracing the strands of the development of Western Civilization. Just as we view the history of classical Greece as our ancient history, the classical Greeks viewed the history of Mycenae and Crete as their own. Thus, a continuity of development may be appreciated from that period to the present. Study of the classical civilizations of both Greece and Rome rests upon the foundation of this earlier period.

Further, the value of archaeology as the main source of information about the ancient period is emphasized. In presenting this material, the archaeological sources are paramount.

The importance of early writing as a means of analyzing and interpreting the past is also of great value in developing this unit. Students will have the opportunity to simulate the same process of interpretation that archaeologists and historians have used to arrive at conclusions about the inter-relationships between the cultures studied.

### II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit logically follows the study of the earliest known civilizations in the Fertile Crescent and Egypt and precedes the study of the development of classic Greek civilization and Roman culture.

Students have previously identified the conditions necessary for advanced culture, i.e. agriculture, domestication of animals, dense settlements, writing, use of metals, political, religious and economic organization, specialization, representative art, etc.

It is useful to emphasize that the classical Greeks considered the Mycenaean period to be their ancient history and Homer to be its historian. Many references to the early civilization on Crete are also found in Homer.



**III. UNIT OBJECTIVES**

1. To understand the cross-cultural influences of early civilizations.
2. To appreciate the importance of archaeological sources in the study of the ancient period.
3. To have practice in archaeological interpretation based upon analysis of artifacts and other evidence.
4. To examine the process of cultural change through analysis of artifacts.
5. To identify some causes for the decline of early civilizations.
6. To reinforce the value of using primary source materials in gaining understanding of cultural institutions.
7. To gain practice in the skills of critical thinking.
8. To understand the value of myth and legend in the reconstruction of historical events and to be aware of the problems involved.

#### **IV. INTRODUCTION TO BRONZE AGE CIVILIZATION IN THE AEGEAN: CRETE, MYCENAE, AND TROY CA. 2500–100 B.C.E.**

By Amanda H. Podany

While Mesopotamian civilization was flourishing during the Bronze Age, other distinctive cultures were forming elsewhere in the world. Egyptian civilization was at its height along the Nile River at this time, and civilizations which were to shape their countries' futures blossomed in the Indus Valley in northwest India, in the Yellow River valley in China, in Anatolia (modern Turkey), and in the Aegean region. This was also the period during which the Hebrews came to be identified as a people, although it was not until the Iron Age that they established themselves in the Levant and began to have an impact on political history.

In this unit we turn to the Aegean region during the Bronze Age. The civilizations which flourished there, which we now know as Minoan and Mycenaean, constituted the “ancient history” of the Classical Greeks and were recalled by them in myths and epics which had profound influences on Greek culture. The influence can still be felt today. Whereas early Mesopotamian civilization was completely forgotten by later generations and had to be rediscovered by archaeologists, the civilizations of the Minoans and Mycenaeans were recalled in Greek mythology, which was never lost or forgotten but has been passed on from generation to generation right down to the present day.

The role of archaeologists in the Aegean initially was not to discover previously unsuspected cultures but to demonstrate the existence of cultures that had previously been dismissed as mythical. Archaeologists have shown that a great civilization did indeed exist on the island of Crete, as legend had suggested. The Minoan civilization was centered around large administrative complexes or “palaces” (we cannot be certain whether they housed kings or queens because none of the scripts used by the Minoans has yet been deciphered), of which there were a number on the island. The elegant Minoan architectural style and abundant wall paintings have captivated the imagination of viewers ever since the first excavations on Crete, but our knowledge of the civilization there is limited. We do not know, for example, what type of government ruled the island, what the details of the religion may have been (although some aspects of the religion can be studied in the artwork), even what language the people spoke. We do know that the civilization came to a somewhat abrupt end, around 1450 B.C.E., apparently as a result of the combined effects of natural disasters (earthquakes and the eruption of the nearby volcanic island of Thera) and invasion from the Greek mainland.

Greek-speaking Mycenaeans settled at the principal Minoan city of Knossos after catastrophes had crippled much of the rest of the island. They altered the last of the Minoan written scripts (Linear A) and fashioned it into a form more suitable for writing Greek (Linear B). Prior to their arrival in Crete, the Mycenaeans already had a thriving civilization on the Greek mainland, where the majority of the Greeks contin-

ued to live. The occupation of Crete was apparently brief (although there is considerable controversy on this point).

The Mycenaean civilization, in turn, came to an end over two and a half centuries after the demise of the Minoan civilization. The traditional date of the Trojan War lies in the closing years of the Mycenaean period, and the epic poem may represent a folk memory of a war in which the Greeks were involved at that time. Greeks of the Classical period recalled the Mycenaean period as a “Heroic Age” of men with super-human strength, great valor in battle, and a close relationship with the gods.

Some modern historians doubt that there was ever a Trojan war, but others believe evidence from the excavated site of Troy and from Mycenaean sites correlates closely enough with details given in Homer’s *Iliad* to provide support for the historicity of the war. In this unit students are given a chance to analyze some of the evidence from which historians have drawn their conclusions. There is no right or wrong way of interpreting this evidence; we still do not know which of the archaeological levels at Troy represents the time of the Trojan War; we do not even know for certain whether the site of Hisarlik was in fact the city of Troy, as is commonly believed. This is one of the great puzzles of ancient history. For all the romance of the great legend of the Trojan War, for all the influence it had on Classical Greek culture, and for all the energy and expense devoted to the excavation and analysis of Troy, we do not know whether the Trojan War really happened.

## **V. LESSON PLANS**

1. The Minoan Civilization of Crete
2. Evaluating Evidence: The Decline of Minoan Civilization
3. Mycenae
4. The Trojan War: Causes
5. The Trojan War: Archaeology

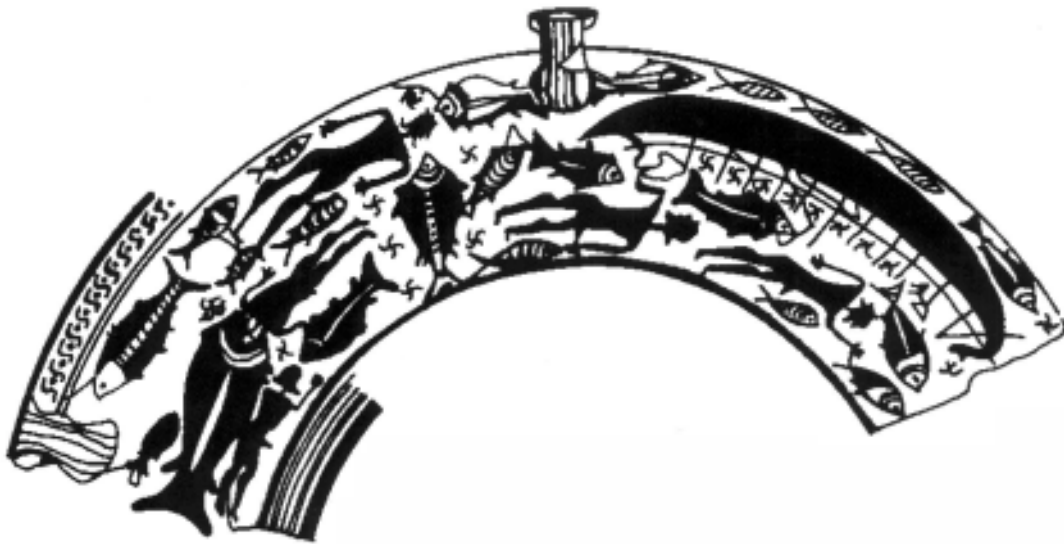
## **VI. EVALUATING THE LESSONS**

1. Test or quiz using objective questions based upon the information presented and essay questions. Possible essay questions:
  - a. Describe the various sources of information that have provided us with knowledge about the ancient Minoans and Greeks.
  - b. What evidence has shown that the Minoan, Mycenaean, and Trojan cultures had contacts with one another?

# HOMER'S ODYSSEY: AN ELEMENTARY PASSION

A Unit of Study for Grades 5–6

David H. Millstone

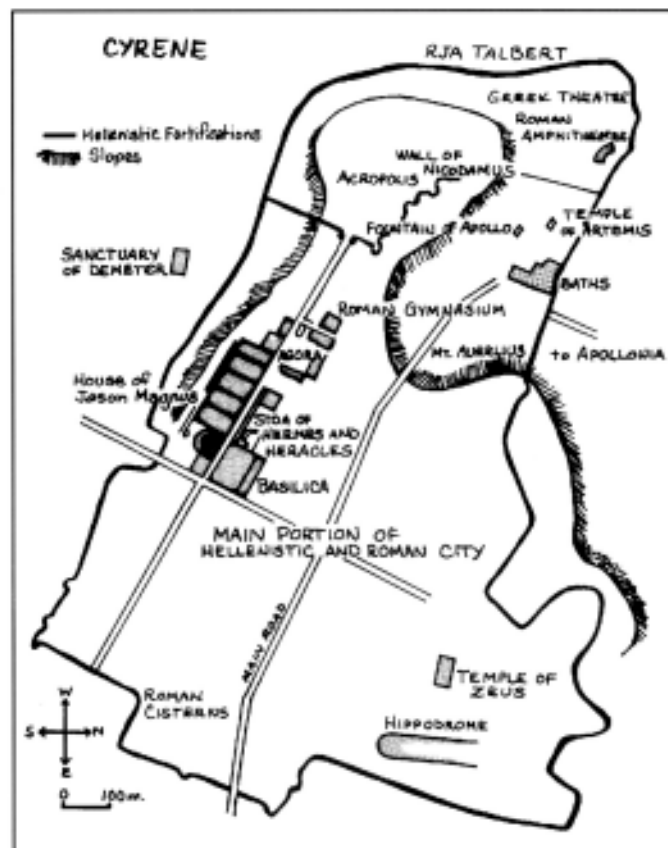


Shipwreck of Odysseus from a geometric vase, 8th Century B.C.E.  
Redrawn by Carole Collier Frick

# THE POLIS

A Unit of Study for Grades 6–10

Peter Cheoros



Carole Collier Frick