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The End of the Bronze Age

The advanced Bronze Age civilizations of the Near East that had formed dur-
ing the second millennium BC were subjected to mounting internal strains and
external pressures towards the close of that era. Successive waves of Indo-
European invaders from the barbarian fringes, strengthened by improve-
ments in metallurgy that both cheapened the cost of bronze and opened up
the abundant deposits of iron for implements of war and agriculture, swept
through the Mediterranean basin, overturning dynasties and empires in the
process and rupturing the slender trading links that sustained the refine-
ments of elite high culture.[1] The Hittite empire in Anatolia collapsed under
these protracted onslaughts, as did Kassite rule in Babylonia; even the great
pharaohs of Egypt found themselves pressed to repel raiding "sea peoples"
who descended repeatedly on the Delta. In roughly the same period, c. 1200
BC, the Bronze Age or "Mycenaean" civilization of the Greek mainland and
Aegean also fell victim to unidentifiable forces of violence. Several of the
major palace complexes—Mycenae, Tiryns, Thebes, Pylos—were sacked
and burned, while scores of other settlements were simply abandoned amid
the spiraling chaos. As Mycenaean society had been centered on the palaces,
with their elaborate bureaucratic management of production and distribu-
tion, the resulting administrative anarchy entailed widespread social disrup-
tion: the scribal craft of writing disappeared, large-scale construction ceased,
and material culture relapsed into a phase of degenerate poverty.[2]

The famous chronology of early Greek history provided by Thucy-
dides is a confusing tangle of myth, legend, and fact, but the great histo-
rian's description of a primitive and turbulent period for the immediate
post-Mycenaean world is strikingly consistent with what has been
unearthed by the archaeologist's spade:[3]

> It appears the country now called Hellas was not firmly settled in ancient
> times, but that migrations were frequent, each tribe readily abandoning its
> own territory whenever constrained by others more powerful. For at that
> time there was no commerce (*emporia*), nor did people have secure dealings
> with each other, either by land or by sea. The use they made of their land was
> sufficient for daily necessities, but they had no surplus left over for capital
> (*chrêmata*), and they did not plant the earth with orchards, it being uncertain
> when an invader might appear and—in the absence of walled fortifications—
> deprive them of their lands.

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This ancient testimony to unsettled populations, undeveloped agriculture, and depressed standards of material life, finds confirmation in various aspects of modern research. From the distribution of Greek dialects in later times, linguistic specialists have been able to retrace the earlier migratory movements and contacts of major tribal "peoples" such as the Dorians, Ionians, and Arkadians. The widespread abandonment of settlements indicated by archaeological surveys—the number of known inhabited sites for the thirteenth, twelfth, and eleventh centuries is roughly 320, 130, and 40 respectively—suggests not only a return to pastoral-nomadic modes of survival, but also, when coupled with information yielded by the study of burial sites, a drastic falloff in population.[4] The paucity of artifacts made from precious metals during the eleventh and tenth centuries is striking in comparison to the glittering wealth found for the Mycenaean period, as is cessation of all major construction featuring stone and marble. A shattered social order, in sum, precipitated not only a massive demographic "emptying" of the peninsula, but a pronounced decline in material culture as well.

When the migratory influxes and relocations of the Hellenic peoples came to an end early in the first millennium, there emerged three basic patterns of settlement that were to have lasting significance on the pace and nature of subsequent developments in the various Greek communities.[5]

In a few areas the invading forces enserfed or enslaved surviving indigenous populations and on that basis created highly militarized, aristocratic societies. Sparta and Thessaly are the two most significant examples of such "conquest states," but collective domination over earlier inhabitants was practiced elsewhere, notably in parts of Krete and later in the colonized regions of the Black Sea and Greek Sicily. In the case of Sparta, a corporate body of militarized citizens came to be sustained by the labors of a servile class known as Helots, while other productive functions were performed by politically dependent communities of *perioikoi* ('dwellers around'). In Thessaly a more decentralized, quasi-feudal system took form, one in which the expansive estates of warrior-horsemen were cultivated by an enserfed people aptly designated as *penestai*, or 'toilers'. These and other conquest societies would face serious and enduring problems of social control, as the subject populations—in some cases numerically far larger than their rulers—frequently revolted, and the mechanisms of domination that evolved to meet this challenge gave an indelibly authoritarian and rigid stamp to their way of life.

The pattern in other mainland areas appears to have been based on some degree of assimilation between conquerors and conquered, a privilege confined in all likelihood to an elite stratum among the vanquished,

since some manner of enslavement of the original inhabitants is indicated by the presence of clearly demarked disprivileged strata, such as the "naked ones" of Argos and the "dusty-feet" at Epidaurus (these and other similar groups being likened by contemporaries to the Helots of Sparta). That select segments of the original population escaped servitude is suggested, however, by the fact that the tribal organization of the conquerors occasionally expanded to incorporate new members. Alongside the traditional three tribes of the victorious Dorians, for example, a fourth, non-Dorian tribe was created at Argos, Sikyon, Epidaurus, and elsewhere. These communities thereby avoided the problems inherent in controlling massive subject populations, but the process of assimilation was not always successful, and in subsequent periods there were several cases in which "racial" antagonisms contributed to factional violence and political upheaval.[6]

As to the third pattern, a few Bronze Age communities managed to survive the protracted turbulence of the Mycenaean collapse—though under greatly reduced circumstances—as invaders either bypassed these regions altogether or encountered effective resistance. Most prominent in this category is Athens, a circumstance that explains why the Athenians came to believe that among the Hellenes, they alone were an autochthonous people, having sprung—as their national myth has it—from the very soil of Attika itself. Athens also apparently served as a temporary haven for groups of refugees fleeing the violence and chaos, for the tradition that Athens organized the Ionian colonization of coastal Asia Minor (c. 1050–950 BC) is well attested by the similarities in speech, tribal organization, religious practices, and mythic traditions that existed between the Ionian cities and Athens. At roughly the same time, the northern region of coastal Asia Minor was settled by groups emanating from Thessaly and Boeotia, while the Dorians came to colonize Krete and the southern Aegean. Again, those overseas settlements were to have somewhat distinctive histories based upon their ecological circumstances, their relations with indigenous peoples, and the proximity and power of neighboring civilizations.

A caveat of methodological import emerges from the foregoing: whenever generalizations about "Polis society" are made in the course of this study, it is essential not to lose sight of the fact that the number of Greek city-states was to grow quite large, with estimates ranging from between seven hundred and one thousand self-governing communities.[7] Notwithstanding certain basic similarities in structural morphology and cultural forms—especially marked among the historically significant fifty or so "major" poleis—diversity on the local and regional levels was considerable. The Polis, moreover, was not the only "organizational shell" for

Greek social life: the *ethnos* pattern, featuring a more rural, territorial-tribal mode of communal federation, tended to prevail in parts of the western Peloponnese and throughout much of central and northern Greece. Though lacking the urban refinements of civilization, and politically static and militarily marginal for much of the early and Classical periods, these "cantonal" communities were integral elements in the larger tapestry of the Hellenic experience, entering into relations of alliance and opposition with various poleis and participating in sundry economic and cultural exchanges.

It has become conventional in historical surveys of ancient Greece to pass rather rapidly from—and over—the fall of the Bronze Age on to the gestation and emergence of Polis society in the Archaic period. That tendency is both understandable and unavoidable, given the discontinuities that separate the world of the Mycenaeans from the world of the Polis, and the paucity of surviving source materials for the Dark Age transition period. Sociologically, however, the consequences of the Mycenaean collapse warrant closer consideration, even if this necessitates giving freer reign to speculation than is customary. Most essential is the established fact that in social-historical evolution, points of departure (or deflection) impart directionality on the course or "trajectory" of subsequent developments.

The destruction and collapse of the palaces entailed a near total rupturing in terms of social organization, particularly marked in the economic and political sectors. The archival records from destroyed centers attest to a highly regimented production-distribution system, featuring specialized occupation categories (some apparently servile) whose services are controlled by palace officials and a military stratum whose armament—light chariots and bronze weaponry—is inventoried and stockpiled in palace storerooms. The Mycenaean order, in short, bears rather striking similarities to the agromanagerial regimes of the neighboring Near East, where narrow circles of ruling elites, bureaucratic and military, exacted the requisite surpluses from toiling subject populations of peasants and artisans. That carapace of power and privilege—its extractive capacity on clear display in the fabulous riches contained in the shaft graves of the Mycenaean warlords unearthed by Heinrich Schliemann—was irrevocably shattered by the violence that brought down the palaces. Amid the turbulence and depopulation that followed, new social arrangements were to arise on Hellenic soil, with considerable ecological space for productive expansion and without the smothering and polarizing impact of bureaucracies and professional armies. The concentration and accumulation of wealth and power by palace-based elites was thus

suspended, with the consequence that in post-Mycenaean Greece, a "state" did not succeed in separating from, and dominating over, civil society.

Much like the so-called European miracle of the early modern period, the remarkable advances of the ancient Greeks would thus seem to owe much to the creative freedoms and opportunities afforded by the absence of centralized, imperial bureaucracies.[8] As we shall see, it is in the unique synergies of the Polis form of social organization—its citizen-based communalism—that the keys to the cultural dynamism of Hellenic civilization are to be found. The violent removal of the Mycenaean palace complex accordingly stands as a prelude to all that follows, a fateful altering of the arc of historical possibility.