

Notes on Quiz #1: The Greek Dark Age

1. (a) Why is the early Iron Age in the Aegean sometimes called the “Greek Dark Age”? (b) Is this period more like what came before, or more like what came after? Explain your answer.

The “dark age” is dark to us, because we have much more difficulty “seeing” this period than the surrounding ones, for several reasons.

- (a) With the collapse of the Bronze Age civilization of the Mycenaean Greeks around 1100 BCE and the abandonment of cities that resulted, the Greeks lost all urban technologies including writing, so there is no documentary evidence giving us direct testimony until a new writing system is developed around 750 BCE.
- (b) The dispersed, rural civilization of the dark age is also harder to study archeologically because their extremely localized, agricultural economies produced much fewer material goods, because their communities are spread out and difficult to locate and excavate, and because the larger ones became the foundations of cities still occupied today in the modern Aegean.

But the dark age was not dark to them. In rebuilding their society they broke from the Mycenaean past, laying the foundations of the coming Greek world. The dark age was a time of cultural, technological, and social fertility and evolution in which many of the foundations of Greek society were developed, so that Hellas is in many ways already established when the Greeks become “visible” to us again after the 8th century.

In particular much of the cultural interconnectedness of the Greeks, weaving the fiercely isolated and independent communities of the Aegean together—through the epic poetry spread by the rhapsodes, intercity competition, and mutual trade relations—developed and flourished during the dark age.

2. **Homer’s epics, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, are set during the Bronze Age war against Troy. What makes Homer’s works important for understanding early Iron Age history? Give examples.**

Homer’s works preserve the cultural and social conditions of his own time, the 8th century BCE, the last century of the dark age. Key elements include the dominance of chiefs—the local basileus who was both leader and best warrior, represented in Homer as the heroes from all the Greek localities like Achilles, Ajax, and Odysseus. Men were judged on bravery and honor (timē), and were expected to strive to surpass (aretē) in competition with their peers (agon).

Strangers arriving in another Greek city expected to be treated with guest-friendship (xenia), a reciprocal pledge of protection, lodging, and assistance symbolized by gifts. This diplomacy and intercity relations were focused through (a) the trade taking place between them and (b) the personal relationships of their chiefs.

EC1. All of the following were found at Lefkandi EXCEPT:

- (a) A gold necklace and an ivory-handled dagger
- (b) A larger house belonging to a village chieftain
- (c) A pair of burial shafts containing a man, a woman, and two horses
- ✓ (d) The preserved bones of a young dragon of indeterminate gender

EC2. How would you describe the religion of the Greeks that emerges during this period? What are some of its key characteristics?

Two main characteristics remain constant from the Bronze Age: the Greek religion is (a) polytheistic, worshipping many gods; and (b) honors the gods with public, communal displays—sacrifices, processions, music, dancing, and singing.

What it did not do is impose doctrines of compulsory beliefs, nor was there a caste of priests or an institutional church to create an orthodox interpretation of the gods. The Greek religion belonged to the public and contradictory stories were told of the gods.

The gods insist on proper honors in Homer, but do not police human criminal behavior, though they do condemn oath-breaking and inhospitality. Zeus, leader of the gods, becomes the upholder of justice in literature from Hesiod onward.