

The Cyclades are a large group of islands that stretch from the mainland of Greece to Crete and Asia Minor. The traditional heart of this group has been the island of Delos, famous in antiquity as the birthplace of Apollo and Artemis. Indeed, modern tourists still flock to Delos to behold its impressive complex of ruins, including temples, porticoes, and elaborate private houses.

Delos, however, is a relative late-comer in terms of Cycladic history. Long before Delos made a mark on the Greek world, other islands had been centres of an advanced and complex Bronze Age culture, known today as the Cycladic civilization. Current archaeological excavations are now making clear the extent of that civilization, especially with regard to the islands of Melos, Kea, and Santorini (Thera).

The island of Melos, best known today as the find-site of the famous "Venus di Milo", became important early in the Bronze Age as a source of obsidian for international trade; drawn by such natural resources, new settlers, most likely from Asia Minor, arrived in the Cycladic chain sometime around the year 2800 B.C. By trading in obsidian and in local marbles, these settlers soon reached a high level of prosperity. Nowhere on Melos is this prosperity better seen than at the site of Phylacopi, where three cities seem to have existed during the course of the Bronze Age.

Excavations at Phylacopi are presently being conducted by British students under the direction of Colin Renfrew. The British, however, are not newcomers to Phylacopi: a British expedition to Melos in 1896 was one of the first to draw attention to Cycladic civilization. What the new excavations are achieving is a clarification of the historical picture: the ruins at Phylacopi are now known to date from three periods. The earliest settlement (2200 B.C.) seems purely Cycladic in nature, the second settlement begins to show signs of Minoan influence, and the last settlement reveals strong connections with the culture of Mycenaean Greece. This past summer, for example, the excavators uncovered part of a Mycenaean shrine that should reveal much about the latest Bronze Age phase on the site.

Less famous than Melos, the island of Kea (or Keos) has been gaining more and more attention as a result of American excavations at the site of Agia Irini. Here very extensive ruins (many walls in fact are complete up to six feet or more in height) and numerous artifacts are expanding our picture of the Cycladic world during the Bronze Age. The current excavations, under the direction of John Caskey, have so far brought to light tombs, city walls and gates, houses, and even what is

believed to be the earliest temple known in the Aegean world. One of the most impressive finds has been a group of female figures in terracotta which are close to life-size. Dating from the 15th - 14th centuries B.C., these figures were found in the aforementioned temple, and although they have a somewhat Minoan look about them, they seem to have been purely local products, since no comparable figures have been discovered on Crete itself.

The Greek excavations on the island of Santorini (or Thera) have already received attention in the first issue of Labyrinth. Since the unfortunate death of Spyridon Marinatos, the excavation has been conducted by Christos Doumas, who is now preparing for a final and comprehensive publication on the site of Akrotiri. With each season of digging, more buildings, some of extensive proportions, are reclaimed from the layer of pumice and ash that covered the site when the volcanic island exploded around 1450 B.C. Many new frescoes have been found, including one which seems to portray a group of female worshippers and their goddess. Also, as expected, more and more pottery is continuously being recovered.

All of the excavations are serving to increase our knowledge of the Cycladic civilization. In general, the present picture is one of a unique culture gradually being overwhelmed by its more powerful Minoan and Mycenaean neighbors. The Cyclades thus offer us a good opportunity to study cultures in conflict and cultural diffusion, and should be a fruitful ground for archaeologists for many years to come.