

## The First Aegean Civilization

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The Cyclades, a group of islands in the Aegean Sea north of Crete, are today a very popular tourist destination, thanks mainly to a warm climate and excellent beaches. For much of their very early history, however, they remained unpopulated: their barren landscape and lack of rainfall could not hope to attract settlers from the more fertile surrounding lands. Thus, while the Greek mainland had inhabitants some 100,000 years ago, in the Palaeolithic Age, the Cyclades would not see permanent occupation until the fifth millennium BC, in the Late Neolithic Age. Nonetheless, these ecologically fragile islands did have something the mainlanders wanted very much: the volcanic glass known as obsidian, useful for tools and weapons and found in abundance on the Cycladic island of Melos. By 8000 BC mainlanders were sailing to Melos to collect this valuable commodity, and were most likely exploring other Cycladic islands as well.

After the start of the Neolithic Age (perhaps ca. 7000-6000 BC), small groups of mainlanders began to establish modest settlements on these barren lumps of rock. Better ships now existed, not only to enable them to travel safely farther from home but also to carry back needed resources from new trading partners to the east and the south. It was logical that the

Cycladic islands, given their geographical position between Europe, Asia Minor and Africa, would serve as convenient trading stations along newly established trade networks. Thus, sometime in the Late Neolithic Age, immigrants from mainland Greece established a small settlement at Saliagos, now a rather unimposing islet, but then a peninsula on the land bridge that joined the large island of Paros to the neighbouring island of Antiparos. The settlers engaged in mixed farming (raising grains and animals), fishing, and, perhaps most importantly, trade—importing obsidian from Melos and emery from Naxos, while providing a safe harbour to merchant ships at sea. Other Late Neolithic settlements followed: e.g., Grotta on the island of Naxos, Kephala on Kea, and Akrotiri on Thera. Still, by the end of the Neolithic Age, fewer than 20% of the islands were settled, and the entire population of the Cyclades was only around 3000.

It was the coming of the Early Bronze Age (EBA) ca. 3200 BC that marked the emergence of civilization in the Cyclades. During the 1200 years of the EBA, the number of Cycladic settlements reached a high of ca. 140, with a combined population of roughly 34,000. Some islands were settled for the first time as "longships" (ca. 20 metres long and powered by oars) enabled them to be incorporated into the expanding trade network of the Aegean. Trade was continuing in obsidian and emery, but a new commodity was now in great demand: metals. What the Cyclades lacked in agricultural resources they made up for in their metal deposits: copper, lead and silver were to be found on many of these otherwise resource-poor islands, and the metallurgical revolution of the EBA made the Cyclades central to the rise of Aegean civilization. The rapid growth of metallurgy and of trade in metals led to the creation of complex urban communities in the Cyclades, replacing the tiny hamlets of the Neolithic Age.

Between 2800 and 2400 BC Cycladic civilization reached its acme. Not only were settlements larger and more populous, they were also richer - as attested by the artefacts found in the graves of this period. The Cycladic islanders had become wealthy merchants and middlemen (and perhaps even successful pirates) in a trade network that now encompassed the Greek mainland, Crete, Asia Minor and Egypt. Their exports included high quality pottery, marble vessels, bronze tools and weapons, as well as the traditional obsidian and emery. What they imported is less clear: most likely perishable goods, including the food that the islands themselves were unable to provide for their growing population.

This climax of EBA Cycladic civilization is best known for the production of the famous "Folded Arm Figurines" to be found in all major museums. Made of high-grade island marble, these figurines range in size from a few centimetres to life-size; they come in several different styles or "varieties" (differentiated by proportions, head shape, etc.); they were originally painted; and they generally have been found in graves. Their exact purpose, however, remains enigmatic.

The final phase of the EBA, however, brought disruption to the Cyclades: indeed it seems that around 75% of the settlements on the islands were abandoned. Moreover, a new type of settlement appears: the hill-top fort, surrounded by walls and usually placed in a remote location. It was long thought that these forts had been built by the islanders themselves as places of refuge from some new enemy, perhaps the Minoans of Crete, but in recent years analyses of pottery and metal objects from the forts have led to a new theory - namely, that the hill-top forts were the homes of intruders descending on the Cyclades from the north-eastern Aegean (e.g., from Lemnos and/or Lesbos). The eventual destruction of the hill-top forts is now attributed to the local Cycladic inhabitants, who drove the intruders away and reclaimed their territory.

With the destruction of the forts, Cycladic life recovered, and large coastal towns emerge on many islands, the best known being Phylakopi on Melos, Ayia Irini on Kea, and Akrotiri on Thera. But, all in all, the "great age" of Cycladic civilization was drawing to a close: to the south the sleeping giant of Minoan Crete awakened, and the Middle Bronze Age (MBA) would see the gradual "Minoanization" of the Cyclades begin. Nonetheless, no matter how "Minoan" the islands became in art, architecture, etc., they always retained their basic "Cycladic-ness", and, even today, a unique Cycladic culture remains on these small islands of the Aegean.