

Preparing to Read *Antigone*

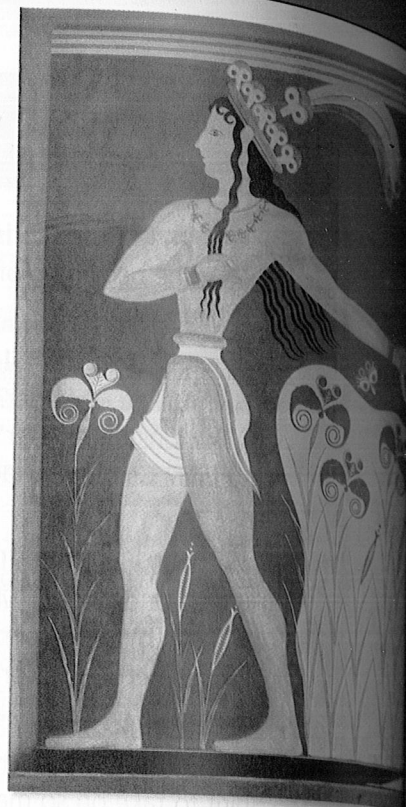
The cultural and political influence of ancient Greece extended throughout the Mediterranean and into central Asia.

Historical Background: Ancient Greece

The Earliest Greeks More than one thousand years before the birth of Sophocles, the playwright who wrote *Antigone*, a people that we call the Mycenaeans (mī sə nē ənz) began to settle throughout the Greek mainland, which juts down from Europe into the Mediterranean Sea. They established strongholds in Thebes, Pylos, Athens, Mycenae, and elsewhere, building thick-walled palaces decorated with bronze metalwork. From the Minoans (mi nō ənz), a sophisticated people who lived on the southern Greek island of Crete, they learned about writing, and they recorded palace business and other transactions on clay tablets. Many of these tablets have survived. The writings reveal a complex society that included administrative officials, priests, slaves, tradesmen, craftsmen and artisans, and an active warrior class. At the top of the social pyramid in each stronghold was a wanax, or king. If a historical Antigone existed, she would have been royalty, the daughter of the king of Thebes.

In about 1450 B.C., Minoan civilization collapsed, and the Mycenaeans became the dominant culture on Crete. Their influence spread throughout the Mediterranean islands and into western Asia Minor, or present-day Asian Turkey. On one of their most famous military ventures, the Mycenaeans successfully attacked the city of Troy in northern Asia Minor. We know that conflict as the Trojan War, which later became the subject of Homer's epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It was among the last of the Mycenaean military successes. Soon afterward, Mycenaean civilization collapsed into a period called the Greek Dark Ages. The art of writing was lost, and the kingdoms broke down into small tribal units.

Re-emerging from Darkness In about 850 B.C., a vibrant Greek culture began to re-emerge, spurred by flourishing trade throughout the Mediterranean. Along with the economic boom came a resurgence of arts and learning capped by Homer's masterful epics. Although Homer composed in the oral tradition,



▲ This fresco depicting the Prince of Lilies is a beautiful example of Minoan art. It appears on a wall in the Minoan Palace of Knossos on the Greek island of Crete.

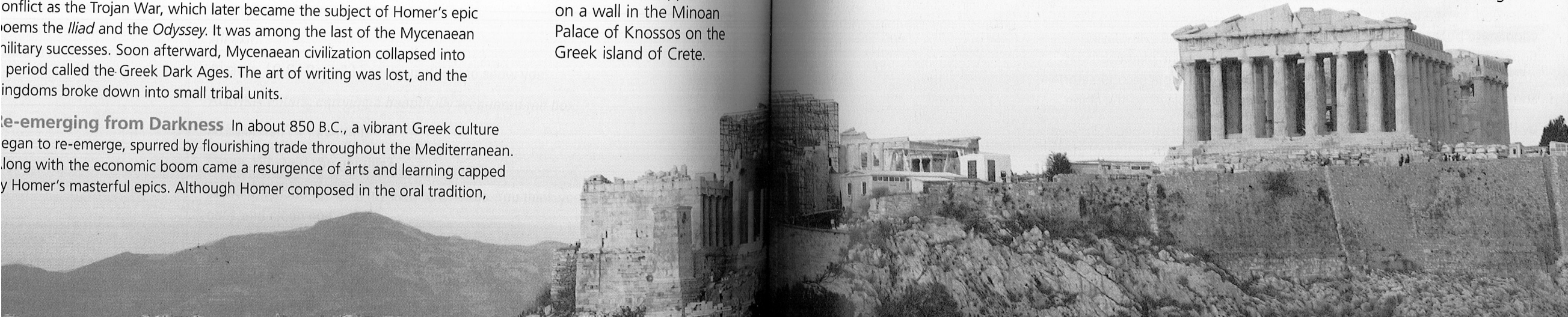
the Greeks soon began writing again, this time adapting the Phoenician writing system into the first true alphabet. They also began regrouping into city-states, or cities that functioned independently, just as countries do. By 500 B.C., the two most powerful city-states were Sparta, on Greece's Peloponnesian (pel'ə pə nē' shən) peninsula, and Athens, which stood east of Sparta in an area called Attica. Sparta was a monarchy with a powerful ruling council and a strong military tradition. Athens developed a government in which decision-making was shared by all adult males (other than slaves). It was, in short, the world's first democracy.

The Rise and Fall of Athens From 490 to 479 B.C., Athens and Sparta fought as allies in the Persian Wars, when the powerful Persian Empire (present-day Iran) twice tried to invade Greece. Despite Sparta's military prowess, it was Athens that led two important victories: the Battle of Marathon in the beginning and the Battle of Salamis later. These victories helped usher in a Golden Age of prosperity and achievement for Athens. Led by the statesman Pericles (per' ə klēz'), Athens became a great intellectual center, attracting artists, poets, scientists, and philosophers. Impressive new buildings were constructed, and civic festivals grew more splendid. Among those who contributed greatly to this cultural flowering was Sophocles: playwright, government official, and—briefly—general in the Athenian military.

Unfortunately, Pericles' foreign policy aroused the resentment of other Greek city-states. In 432 B.C., Sparta and its allies joined against Athens and its allies in what became known as the Peloponnesian War. Athens was defeated, and for a time, Sparta, and later Thebes, exerted control over the Greek world. In the end, however, it was Philip of Macedon, a monarch from a kingdom to the north of Greece, who rose to ascendancy. Philip's son Alexander would embark on an amazing series of military conquests that would spread Greek influence all the way into central Asia. His exploits would earn him the title by which he is still known today: Alexander the Great.

According to legend, after the Battle of Marathon, an Athenian soldier raced 26 miles back to Athens to share news of the victory. He then collapsed and died. The 26-mile race known as a marathon originated in his honor.

▼ The Parthenon, a temple dedicated to the goddess Athena, appears in the foreground of this photo of the Acropolis in Athens. The temple is among the most important surviving structures from Greece's Golden Age.



Ancient Greek Theater

An art form rooted in religious ritual gave rise to plays of enduring power.

Religious Foundations Greek theater was rooted in Greek religion, which was based on a belief in many gods. Each god was associated with one or more aspects of nature or human behavior. Poseidon (pə sī' dən), for example, was god of the seas, while Apollo was the god of light. Athena (ə thē' nə) was the goddess of wisdom, while Aphrodite (af' rə dī' tē) was the goddess of love. Zeus (zōōs') ruled over all the gods, yet even he was not all-powerful. Like human beings and lesser gods, Zeus could not alter fate.

The gods are key characters in Greek **mythology**, the set of stories the Greeks told to explain the world around them. In these myths, the gods often behave like human beings at our worst—they are angry, jealous, and petty. They are even deceitful and often vengeful. They are especially quick to punish human beings guilty of **hubris** (hyōō' or hōō' bris), or excessive pride.

From Ritual to Art Theater in ancient Greece originated at annual festivals called Dionysia (dī' ə nī' sē ə), which were dedicated to Dionysus, the god of wine. At these festivals, a **chorus**, or group of singers, honored Dionysus by chanting hymns called **dithyrambs** (dith' ə ramz'). According to legend, at one festival a poet named Thespis stepped away from the chorus. He began a dialogue with the chorus leader while role-playing figures from the Greek myths. Thus, drama was born. The playwright Aeschylus developed the dramatic form further by adding a second actor, and the playwright Sophocles later introduced a third player to the stage.

By the time Sophocles was writing, plays had become great spectacles each performed in a large outdoor amphitheater with thousands in attendance. The amphitheater was built on a slope with seating that rose in a semicircle from the performing area, or **orchestra**. There was no curtain, but painted scenery could be hung at the back. Performers wore large masks that allowed the same actor to perform different roles.

At the Dionysia, prizes were awarded to the best playwright. By 501 B.C., the three-day festival featured work by three competitors. Each playwright presented a **tetralogy**, or group of four plays, on a different day. The plays usually included a heavy drama called a **satyr** (sā' tər) play, as well as three



▲ This mask depicts Dionysus, the god of wine, adorned with full beard and a grapevine crown.

From the name of Thespis, the first actor, comes the English word *thespian*, an elegant term for an actor. The Greek word for an actor, however, was *hypokrites*, meaning "someone acting a part." That

Dramatic Structure Greek plays are **verse drama**, in which the dialogue takes the form of poetry. Typically, the plays follow a consistent format. They open with a **prologue**, or exposition, that presents the background of the conflict. The chorus then performs a **parados** (par' əd əs), or opening song. This is followed by the first scene. Additional songs, called **odes**, divide scenes, as a curtain does in most modern theaters. At the end of a tragedy, the chorus performs a **paeon** (pē' ən) of thanksgiving to Dionysus. The tragedy then concludes with an **exodus** (eks' ə dəs), or final scene.

The chorus is central to the production, providing key background information and commentary on the action. Chorus recitals often divide into a **strophe** (strō' fē) and an answering **antistrophe**. During the strophe, the chorus sings while twisting or dancing from right to left. During the antistrophe, the chorus moves in the opposite direction. Some odes have a concluding stanza, or **epode**, when the chorus may have stood still. To help propel the plot, the chorus leader, or **choragos** (kō rā' gəs; also spelled *choragus*), often exchanges thoughts with the rest of the chorus as well as with the actors.

Strophe is Greek for "twist." Originally, a *catastrophe* was simply the ending, or final plot twist, of a play. Because the endings of Greek tragedies involved disastrous events, the word has come to have its current meaning of a disastrous outcome.

THE THEATER OF DIONYSUS IN ATHENS

The earliest dramas were likely performed in the Agora, or marketplace, in Athens. Later, the Theater of Dionysus (shown below as it appears today) was built on the slope of the Acropolis, the upper part of the city where other important buildings also stood. Stone seating was not used at first; instead, theatergoers probably sat on wooden benches.

