Name: _____

Date: _____

ANCIENT GREECE
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The Early Greeks

More than 2700 years ago, a traveling poet walked into a Greek village with nothing but a lyre and a memory full of stories. No one in the crowd could read or write. Soon, the crowd would hear heroic stories of a wealthy land. Their land. But something happened; they didn't know what. Neither do we, but today more than one hundred clay tablets sit in museums, covered in writing no one can read.

We don't know what these cultures called themselves, but we refer to them as the Minoans, named after the legendary King Minos of Crete, and the Mycenaeans, for one of their cities.

The Minoans

The Minoan culture developed on Crete, an island southeast of the Greek mainland as early as 2700 BCE. The Minoans were a seafaring culture that traded with cultures around the Mediterranean Sea. They developed a writing system that modern scholars call Linear A. Although we have more than 100 examples of Linear A writing, most are on pottery fragments. Scholars have not yet deciphered Linear A, so we know little about the Minoans. Around 1450 BCE, a catastrophic volcanic eruption may have struck the region. Soon after, the Minoan civilization disappeared.

The Mycenaeans

The Minoans traded with the Mycenaeans, another culture on the Greek mainland known for making bronze weapons and pottery. Unlike the Minoans, the Mycenaeans built stone walls around their cities, walls so massive that later Greek legends suggested they were constructed by one-eyed giants called Cyclopes. The Mycenaeans had a syllabic script, which scholars call Linear B, because evidence suggests it developed from Minoan writing. About a millennium before the Common Era, the Mycenaean culture grew weak and was conquered by invaders from the north known as Dorians.

The Greek Dark Age

For the next several hundred years, Greece entered a period known as the Greek Dark Age. After about 1200 BCE, there is no evidence of Linear B anywhere in Greece, and no writing system replaced it for roughly four hundred years. The massive palaces that once housed scribes and kings were destroyed or abandoned. Once common imported goods became rare, and pottery became less sophisticated. Archaeologists have found far fewer settlements from this period than from the preceding one, suggesting that many Greeks scattered or that entire communities vanished.

The Bards

During the Greek Dark Age, wandering poets called bards traveled throughout Greece, reciting long poems called epics. The epics entertained people with stories of the Heroic Era, a distant time of kings, palaces, and glory. People often paid to hear these stories of the distant past, as a respite for the dreary lives they lived.

The Lyre

Some epics could last for hours, so bards plucked a stringed instrument called a lyre to help keep the strict rhythm, a memory aid for holding such a long performance together without ever writing a word down. Shorter, more personal poems, called lyric poetry, were also sung to the lyre. That is where the word lyrics comes from.

Writing Returns

The Dark Age ended when writing returned to Greece. As population and trade recovered, Greek sailors once again ventured across the Mediterranean, much as the Minoans had centuries before. Around 800 BCE, these traders came into regular contact with the Phoenicians, a seafaring people from the coast of present-day Lebanon. The Greeks adapted the Phoenician alphabet, adding vowel sounds to create a more flexible alphabet.

As the Dark Age passed and writing returned to Greece, the stories the bards had carried for centuries became the basis of Western literature. Two of those poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey, would inspire Greeks and non-Greeks alike, from then to today.

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Fill in the Blanks

Two early Greek civilizations, later called the M__n__a__s and the M__c__n__e__ns, rose and disappeared long before the era of Classical Greece. The Minoans, based on the i__l__nd of C__e__e, developed a writing system called L__n__ar A that has never been d__c__p__e__ed. Their civilization disappeared around _____ BCE, possibly after a catastrophic v__l__a__ic eruption. The Mycenaeans, known for bronze w__a__o__s and massive s__o__e walls, developed a s__ri__t called L__n__ar B. For roughly four hundred years, no evidence of writing exists during the Greek D_____ A____. During this time, w__n__e__i__g bards traveled throughout Greece, reciting long p_____ called e_____ and using a l_____ to help keep the r__y__hm. Writing returned to Greece around 800 BCE, when Greek traders adapted the P__o__n__c__an alphabet, adding v__w__l sounds. The Greek a__p__a__et made it possible to record the I__i__d and the O__y__s__y, epics that would i__f__u__n__e Greeks and non-Greeks for *m__l__e__n__a.

Answer in Complete Sentence

1. How did the Minoans differ from the Mycenaeans?

_____

_____

_____

2. What is a "dark age?"

_____

_____

_____

*3. What might happen to cause a "dark age"?

_____

_____

_____

*4. Why do you think people were willing to pay the bards for their talents?

_____

_____

_____

*This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.

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