

Mountains and Sea

As Poseidon explains in the *Iliad*, three brothers born to Rhea and Cronus divided the universe into equal shares among themselves on the death of their father. Poseidon got the sea as his eternal domain, while Zeus was allotted the broad sky with clouds and bright air and Hades received the underworld. Earth and Mount Olympus were common realms to all. The gods, too, understand the importance of the mountains and the sea.¹

The division also describes the two physical features that have shaped life throughout the region bounded by the Aegean and Adriatic seas from deep antiquity to the present: mountains that are the predominant feature of the Greek landscape and the omnipresence of the sea. Comprising 75 percent of the landmass, the mountainous terrain prescribed a way of life in both economic and political respects while the surrounding seas provided access to outsiders and enabled inhabitants to expand beyond their core.

A history of a culture should begin with its physical environment for two reasons. First, of the two major elements that shape the nature of a culture – namely the nature of its environment and the humans that do the shaping of the environment – the environment was earliest in place. Thus the essential nature of the environment had been formed millennia before the human element entered the picture. A second reason is that for the prehistoric past, it is difficult – sometimes impossible – to identify the human element. Bones, when they have been found, do not speak a language and, consequently, identification with a specific people is impossible. In the case of Greece, the setting also deserves priority inasmuch as the entire history of Greece is grounded in virtually the same place and environment. Thus, many of the same climatic conditions and natural resources as well as the configuration of the land and proximity to the sea have presented both assets and difficulties to the people who must deal with them. The physical situation of people bounded primarily by the Aegean and Adriatic/Ionian seas brought contact with other groups over the millennia of the human story. Contact may occasion hostility or it may produce borrowings of features of other cultures. The interplay is an on-going theme of this book.



Figure 1.1 Greece: “Mountains and Seas.” Source: Jason Shattuck

Greek culture is not unique in being shaped by its physical environment but it is important to appreciate the enormous role that its physical setting has played in the 9,000 years of Greek history. Positioned mid-way between the prevailing environmental conditions of the European continent and those of North Africa, Greece must be understood in terms of its location within the sea that combines the conditions of Europe with those of Africa. The relation shaped its earliest way of life and remains fundamental today as each period of Greek history demonstrates.

Although it was identifiable as a body of water 150 million years ago, the final shaping of the Mediterranean occurred more recently, some 15 million years ago. In size, the sea is 2,965,500 square kilometers. It extends 3,733 kilometers from west to east and its width varies considerably due to the configuration of the surrounding land: the southern coast is generally smooth while the northern coast is defined by jutting peninsulas and deep bays that are seas in their own right. The configuration draws continents together at several points, but separates them in other regions. In the west, the Iberian peninsula is separated from northern Africa by the Strait of Gibraltar which, at its narrowest point, is a little more than 24 kilometers. Moving eastward, the islands of Corsica and Sardinia are separated from the mainland by the Ligurian Sea to the north and the Tyrrhenian Sea to the east that extends to the 1,046 kilometer long peninsula of Italy. The toe of Italy is narrowly separated from the island of Sicily which, in turn, is roughly 160 kilometers from the north coast of Africa. The Adriatic Sea divides the Italian peninsula from the Greek peninsula while the Aegean stands between the Greek peninsula and Anatolia. A voyage of more than 885 kilometers, as the crow flies, must be undertaken to reach the coast of Africa

from the northern Aegean. However, even in the more expansive eastern waters, a sailor is rarely out of sight of land, either a portion of the coastal ring of land encompassing the sea or one of the numerous islands that dot the waters of the sea. Knowledge of distances between landmasses coupled with an understanding of seafaring on the part of peoples in the Mediterranean sphere make contact between them likely.

The Mediterranean is connected with other bodies of water by straits to both the west and the east: the Strait of Gibraltar leads to the Atlantic Ocean and the Dardanelles provide an entrance to the Propontis and ultimately to the Black Sea. Inflow of water from these two points provides much of the replenishment of an otherwise essentially static body of water. This contained nature of the water produces a high salinity due to a greater rate of evaporation than of precipitation of new water. The seafloor is deep; in most parts of the Mediterranean the water's depth is at least 10,620 meters; in the Ionian Sea soundings have indicated a depth of twice that amount. Water temperature remains quite constant at 13°C throughout the year. The consistency of these conditions throughout the Mediterranean stimulates common environmental conditions, with both positive and negative results.

Since it is so tightly enclosed, the water is virtually tide-less. Currents, which cause its movement, are dependent upon the inflow of water, particularly that coming through the Strait of Gibraltar which is stronger than the current from the Black Sea. The current from the Atlantic continues along the North African coast, up the coast of the Levant, and west along the southern shore of Anatolia. Still moving westward, the current flows along the Greek coast and into the Adriatic. At Sicily, the current turns north along the Italian coast, then it flows along the coasts of southern France and Spain. Smaller, local currents exist in several areas such as the eastern and western coasts of Crete and off southern France. When sailors understand the force of the currents, maritime travel becomes easier.

Prevailing winds blow from both north and south into the Mediterranean. Strongest are the two paths of the Mistral which join over southern France; second in force is the Bora which reaches the Adriatic in the northeast. The Meltemi winds push down from the Dardanelles strait into the Aegean in the summer months and the Scirocco winds head northward into the Mediterranean along much of the African coast. The areas experiencing the strongest force of winds are the Aegean, the northern Adriatic, and the coastal area of southern France near Marseilles. Knowing and using the winds is essential to navigation in the Mediterranean. Thus, if the Mistral was blowing, it would provide power for eastward travel and if it was strong "then it and the eastbound north African current between them would carry the ship two-thirds of the way there, almost automatically, leaving the captain with no problem in seamanship more profound than managing to dodge Sardinia and Sicily."² In sailing westward, on the other hand, the task was to avoid the Mistral which, coming head-on, would impede rather than aid the journey. Recent evidence indicates that people had learned the nature of the currents and winds of the Mediterranean and appreciated the benefits and threats of sailing as early as 125,000 years ago.

The lands that surround the great sea and the large number of islands in that sea share many features. Low-lying coast is generally limestone or earth impregnated with lime and, thus, the soil is often thin. Certain river mouths, such as the Nile, Po,

and Rhone, are especially fertile and, as a consequence, may be objects of desire to outsiders. The coastal land does not extend deeply into the hinterland which is regularly separated by mountains. Toward the interior, larger expanses of land take the opposite forms of arable plains and deserts depending on the prevailing climate of the region; the Saharan climate of Africa produces more of the latter while the more temperate climate of the European region results in more arable land. In the north, extensive mountain ranges and their spurs divide the plains from one another, producing serious challenges to unification between regions.

Broad regional differences exist between both the east and west basins of the Mediterranean and the north and south coasts. The two basins divide at the Sicilian channel between that island and the peninsula of Cap Bon in modern Tunisia. In addition to their different configurations, the western basin is smaller in size and more temperate in climate than the eastern. Mountains extend almost to the coastline, leaving a narrow strip of land by the sea in the west while they do not reach so near the shore in the east. Mountains are greater in extent and size in the northern Mediterranean lands than in the southern, a mixed blessing since in return for the valuable resources they provide they exact a regular toll in volcanoes and earthquakes. The southern Mediterranean lands, by contrast, are characterized by deserts: the Sahara desert seems endless with its 14,811,562 square kilometers relieved only by occasional oases. This contrast identifies another difference – namely in the rainfall, which is greater in the north and west than in the south and east. These differences influence a different pattern in the northern and southern regions of the Mediterranean basin.

For much of their long history, humans have been at the mercy of the environment as were the non-human inhabitants, especially when threatened with extinction during the great glaciations lasting thousands of years. In the final glaciation that continued until circa 16,000 before the present (BP), many of the large mammals and giant rodents disappeared. The human population plummeted. The authors of *Greece Before History* give a vivid image of the results: “A traveler sailing along the Greek coastline after the ice caps melted and the sea had risen to its present-day height would have seen wooded slopes and plains devoid of people, inhabited only by wild boar and deer, with sea birds, seals, and turtles massed on the shore.”³

Climatic and environmental conditions of lands bordering or situated in the Mediterranean are capable of sustaining the life of plants, animals, and humans when a deep blanket of ice does not cover the earth. Much of the land is maquis and garigue – that is, rough land that can support a combination of shrubs such as laurel, myrtle, and wild olive; undershrubs including broom, daphne, and gorse; and herbaceous plants including clovers, grasses, and asphodel. True forests exist in northern and eastern regions, from the cedars of the Levant through the mountain forests of Macedonia and the Apennines to the significant forests of southern Spain. Most dominant are varieties of oak and pine. In addition to their fruit and timber, the forests were home to a number of wild animals: deer, bears, wolves, lynxes, panthers, leopards, lions, and boars as well as smaller animals. Regions without great forests also had a large complement of wild animals: lions, deer, and smaller animals in the north and the more exotic pygmy elephants and hippopotami, and monkeys of North Africa.

But the environment was becoming manageable. Melting of ice and warming temperatures extended the coastlines and some wild plants and animals had survived.

Human survivors also gained manageable resources. Widespread in the Mediterranean were sheep and goats. Transhumance of flocks of sheep and goats between summer and winter pastures became an increasingly common way of life for people living in the northern and eastern lands of the Mediterranean. Basic grain crops – wheat, barley, oats, and green millet – were also cultivated, as was a range of legumes, orchard fruits and nuts, grapes, and olives. For Lawrence Durrell, who lived most of his life in the Mediterranean, the olive tree describes superbly the basic requirements of a staple in the Mediterranean: “It seems to live without water although it responds readily to moisture and to fertilizer when available ... it will stand heat to an astonishing degree and keeps the beauty of its grey-silver leaf; ... the wood ... can be worked and has a beautiful grain when carved and oil.”⁴ These basic foods can also support a sedentary existence in upland area. Fernand Braudel, a French scholar who knew and understood the Mediterranean as well as any person can, painted a vivid picture with his description that “every mountain [in the Mediterranean region] has some arable land, in the valleys or on the terraces cut out of the hillside.”⁵

The sea also contributed to the livelihood of humans even though its high salinity and exhaustion through its great longevity have made it difficult for some species of fish to survive in its waters. In the wide-ranging voyages of the ancient traveler Odysseus there were few occasions to dine on fish. Even so, a variety of marine life was present. The tunny is perhaps the most important fish; swordfish, octopus, and squid are present along with several varieties of shell fish.

The mineral wealth of the northern Mediterranean lands prompted travel. It was in the guise of a traveler for metals that Athena arrived on Ithaka to assist Odysseus’ son, Telemachos, in his dealings with the suitors of his mother. It was a believable disguise. Copper was available in Cyprus, the Balkans, northern Italy, Sardinia, Anatolia, and southern Spain but, in the southern Mediterranean, only in the Sinai peninsula where there were also gold resources. The northern Aegean, Attica in Greece, and the Cyclades had silver resources; there are gold resources in the northern Aegean, the eastern Black Sea, Cyprus, and Spain; iron was plentiful in northern Italy and Spain; tin was rarer, although it was present in Spain, the northern Aegean, perhaps the Levant, and northern Italy. Base metals occur in much of the north as well as along the western African coast and flint and obsidian – the black volcanic stone – are found in Anatolia, and the island of Melos in the Aegean, the Lipari islands north of Sicily, and Sardinia.

Stretching between three continents where so many of the earliest developments in human history occurred, the Mediterranean experienced and supported a human presence even in the Paleolithic Age. As people learned to use its water for travel, ideas as well as people and objects moved between the northern and southern coast and from its eastern to western extremes. The ecological and geological diversity of the region produced a variety of cultures; however, groups of people were not greatly distanced from one another and there were geographical and resource connections between them. Life for Greeks was changed in every respect by the skill to course through Poseidon’s realm. The legacy of that mode of travel is evident in the importance of shipping in contemporary Greece as well as in massive developments in Greek life brought about by Mediterranean neighbors from the time of the Romans, to the fall of the Byzantine Empire, to events of World War II.

The Physical Character of Greece

On AcroCorinth the sun faded
 Setting the rock ablaze. And,
 From the sea, seaweed's fragrant breath
 Began to intoxicate my slender stallion.

With foam on the bit and the white of his eye
 Glistening, he fought my grip,
 Held close on the bridle,
 Wrestling to leap into the horizon.

What was the hour? What were the many fragrances?
 Was it the deep scent of the sea?
 The distant breath of the forest?

Ah, would that the meltemi had lasted longer.
 I would know how to clench the bridle
 And the ribs of mythical Pegasus!⁶

While the Mediterranean provides a unifying force to the lands that border it, there are distinct qualities in those lands. Greece shares more affinities with the eastern half of the Mediterranean and especially with the northern quadrant. The mountains, comprising roughly three-quarters of the land, are beautiful, as Angelos Sikelianos' poem describes, and they offer many resources but also serious challenges. The sea too provides great benefits but, at the same time, it presents major trials.

Awe and fear of the mountains have figured powerfully in Greek religious belief. Mount Olympus, reaching more than 10,000 feet, was easily accessible by the ancient gods but mortals did not attempt to reach its heights. Most of the mountain slopes are precipitous so that they appear to reach for the sky. Formed by two different tectonic movements, one system extends southward from Macedonia eventually into the northern and central Cyclades. In fact, the islands are peaks of now submerged mountains. The second system is to the west, formed as part of the formation of the Alps, and from the Pindos range separating Macedonia from ancient Epirus/modern Albania it extends through the Ionian islands, the Peloponnese, the southern Cyclades, and the islands of Crete, Karpathos, and Rhodes.

Many valuable resources are gifts of the mountains: stone; trees – especially the oak; minerals; natural springs closer to their bases; wild animals as well as grazing ground for domesticated animals that are brought from lower ground into higher summer pasture. However, human and animal use of the resources produces problems, particularly deforestation caused by overcutting of the trees or destruction of the trees by pasturing animals, especially goats.

The mountains themselves have unwelcome qualities; frequent volcanoes and earthquakes; thin soil; deep gorges that are traversed only with difficulty; the flow of silt down the river courses due to the winter rains. An intrepid traveler to Epirus in 1930, Nicholas Hammond (who would survive to become an eminent archaeologist and historian of ancient Macedonia) experienced all of these difficulties:

At one point where the river ran through a deep gorge between high peaks ... I found I was faced with a long scree, which extended from high up the mountainside to the lip of

the cliff overhanging the gorge. I decided to run across it Off I went at full speed, but the whole scree began at once to move under me and my course was becoming a parabola leading to the cliff-edge, when I managed to reach the low branch of a tree, and pulled myself to safety. I lay flat, hearing the stones fall into the gorge⁷

Yet another contribution to human life in Greece is the regionalism that the mountains create. Travel between the lower pockets of land where settlements tend to be located is difficult in most cases, particularly in southern Greece and on the islands where few perennial rivers exist. And because conditions vary between these settlements, specific features of their cultures will differ; for example, a village high in the mountains will have a different set of resources than a lowland town and there are significant differences between northern and southern Greece: Macedonia and Thessaly do have perennial rivers which are absent in southern Greece and plains in the north are broader just as forests are more expansive. One answer to limited resources is to gain more from a neighboring area. Consequently, relations between the individual communities are more often unfriendly than cooperative. In antiquity, your nearest communal neighbor was often your worst enemy.

Sea-water defines the shape of Greece: to the east, the Aegean Sea separates the mainland of Greece from Anatolia and identifies the southern border of eastern Europe and, to the west, the Adriatic and Ionian seas separate the Greek mainland from the Italian peninsula. Islands in these seas, especially those closer to the mainland, will generally be part of the Greek world but they can serve as approaches to Greece for inhabitants of Italy. A second vital function of the sea is to provide access among the highly divided regions of the land. While the mountains make travel by land extremely arduous, inroads of the sea allow most settlements to exist within about 30 miles of its shore. From any point in the Aegean, and several points in the Adriatic, sailors are never out of sight of land. At the same time the sea serves to reinforce regionalism, dividing the land into smaller portions by its abundant bays, gulfs, and arms.

From the Aegean, travel into the Black Sea is possible and, since both seas connect with the Mediterranean, travel to the Strait of Gibraltar and beyond is relatively secure as noted above. Due to the poverty of their land, Greeks are likely to understand the rules of seafaring from their early history into the present. A general equation holds true: when Greece prospers, it will be active in seafaring; when conditions are poor, seafaring will be limited.

On the other hand, the sea provides its own challenges. Since the sea is tide-less, there are few estuaries to provide good harbors. And since heavy winter rains sweep silt from the mountains to the coast, deposits accumulate and often become swamp land that, without modern technology, tends to become a breeding ground for malaria-carrying mosquitoes. Even in the Bronze Age, as analysis of human bones demonstrates, malaria was present in several coastal regions of Greece.

In many respects, consequently, Greece and Poverty are step-sisters, as the historian Herodotus believed. On the other hand, the environment produced challenges that could be managed, given a high level of stamina in the inhabitants. A view that a culture's location determines its character is associated with the name of Hippocrates, the renowned physician of antiquity who lived in the fifth century BCE. Among the large number of writings associated with his name is a study entitled *Airs, Waters and Places* which associates human health with an individual's diet,

environment, and the way of life. The author maintains that the differing characteristics of Asian and European peoples are linked to climate: the absence of major changeable climatic conditions in Asia produces a soft people while the more volatile extremes of Europe mold a tough people. Aristotle argued along similar lines in the fourth century BCE. Asian peoples are intelligent but lack spirit while Europeans are spirited although of less native intelligence.⁸ Most fortunate were those situations between the two extremes. For Aristotle and Hippocrates the Greeks occupied the middle position and, hence, were both highly intelligent and spirited. Inasmuch as the physical environment of Greek life has remained much the same, these forces played an important part in its 9,000 year history.

Earliest Inhabitants

When humans chose to make their homes on the shores of the Mediterranean about 750,000 BP in the early Paleolithic Age, the physical nature of Greece was less inviting than that of other regions. Consequently human presence in Greece dates only from 300,000 or 400,000 years ago on evidence of a cranium discovered in a cave on the Chalkidike peninsula in the northern Aegean. Use of caves for occupation describes the dependence of people on their environment, as does the use of readily available stone for their tools. The limited number of identified sites reflects a very small population until roughly 150,000 BP when the number of sites increased and included open-air as well as cave locations. An ability to survive in constructed sites reveals greater control over the natural environment. During the long duration of what is known as the middle Paleolithic Age to circa 30,000 BP, new tools such as harpoons, bone needles, and bows attest new practices – fishing, sewing, and new ways of hunting. Along with a growing tool-kit, humans became familiar with seasonality of certain food sources, knowledge that led groups of migrants to return seasonally to specific places that were remembered as providing sufficient food and water and protection at a fairly predictable time of year.

The interplay between nature and people produced more than a larger tool-kit, if the conclusions of neurobiologists and cognitive psychologists are correct. They argue that the impact between humans and their world has altered the nature of human cognition. Successful interaction with the environment stimulated biological change and, in turn, humans were able to transform their environment with the aid of new cognitive skills. These skills also aided developments in the tool-kit of humans. One of the major stages in this expansion gave rise to human speech as differentiated from the capacity of articulating sounds akin to those of animals.

In spite of these developments, population size remained small. In fact, it is estimated that by 20,000 BCE the total population of all of Europe was between 6,000 and 10,000 people. Major climatic changes were a significant factor in limiting the population as glacial conditions moved southward from the north and reached the northern Mediterranean.

Identity of the population in Greece is difficult to determine due to the lack of evidence. However, the nature of the practices and objects suggests a similarity with the Neanderthals who occupied much of Europe. Thus, it is believed that these people migrated into Greece from the north. However, our understanding of the most

ancient of Greek history changes constantly. Very recent finds on Crete show that the earliest inhabitants of that island traveled by craft capable of open-sea navigation.

Whatever their identity and means of arrival, inhabitants in Greece found that life became easier with the end of the final major ice age in the Paleolithic Age about 20,000 BCE. The 10,000 years stretching from 20,000 to 10,000 BCE witnessed major innovations in many regions of the Mediterranean sphere including Greece; those innovations demonstrate a far greater control over the natural world. The Franchthi cave in the eastern Peloponnese documents this pattern with evidence of human occupation from 20,000 to 3,000 BCE, the last phase of the Paleolithic Age. The earliest visitors to the site were small bands of seasonal visitors attracted by a perennial spring of water and the shelter of the cave itself. They hunted animals like the wild ass, gathered wild plants, and used flint tools. Successive occupants were similarly engaged but they took advantage of a wider variety of plants and animals (deer, bison, and wild goat), and gathered mollusks and caught fish – some as large as the modern tunny fish, which can weigh 200 lb or more.

Over time, people at the site learned enough about the ways of the sea to travel on it; obsidian from the island of Melos in the Cyclades south of mainland Greece identifies one destination. We have considered the presence of the sea in Greece where most communities are little more than a day or two from one of its bays. Currents and winds facilitate sailing. Thus the Aegean has been described as one of the “potential nurseries for the development of maritime technology and navigation.”⁹ Settlers at the Franchthi cave site are evidence of the potentiality of the Aegean.

By 6,000 BCE there are more varieties of animal bones at the site along with new plants. Not simply novel items, they reveal the revolutionary changes of domestication: a sizeable portion of the bones are those of sheep and goats, and among the plants are wheat and barley. At the same time, new tools such as sickles appear, pottery is introduced, and the area of occupation is extended. All signify the agricultural revolution. While this revolution is documented here with evidence of a cave site, its result was the emergence of settled farming villages as the dominant mode of life; the monumental discovery gave birth to a new age: the Neolithic, or New Stone Age.

Neolithic Period: Settled Life in Greece

One thesis proposes that the practice of agriculture spread from an original location probably in Anatolia across the whole of Europe beginning about 7,000 BCE. Settled life based on agriculture and animal husbandry can support and, in fact, requires a larger population than migratory existence. As additional land is needed first within Anatolia and eventually beyond Anatolia, the new form of community is dispersed, a dispersal that can be envisioned as a generational wave of advance. As the distance from the homeland of the earliest farmers increased, the more remote farmers would acquire new features from earlier populations and elements of the different physical environment.

The cave at Franchthi continued to be occupied but there was a second settlement outside the cave, an indication that the site could accommodate more people and that it could serve as a permanent, rather than seasonal, residence. Essentially, this development demonstrates the new way of life in much of Greece. Caves continued

to have importance, but increasingly as religious sites; from circa 7,000 BCE people now lived in villages like Nea Nikomedia in Macedonia, where some 150 dwellers formed a community of twenty mud-brick houses, produced crops, and tended domesticated animals. Northern Greece was the favored location for the first settlements, not surprisingly, since the region has larger expanses of plains and low-lying hills than the steep, tightly packed mountains in southern Greece allow. The land is well watered, and there are more copious rivers.

Sesklo, one of the earliest sites in this area dating to circa 5,000 BCE, eventually covered approximately 30 acres and merits the title of “town” rather than village, with a population between 1,000 and 2,000 people. The main room of one of the houses measured 8.5 by 8.25 meters (about 28 by 27 feet), immense by comparison with previous structures and a sign of social, and possibly also political, differentiation. Neighboring Dimini had several concentric ring walls, perhaps to protect its inhabitants. This site had a main house situated on the crown of the hill. Crete was another location of Neolithic culture by the seventh millennium BCE. Settlers on that island, traveling through the island chain reaching from Anatolia or perhaps by sea from the mainland of Greece, are linked to Anatolia by similarity of objects, their agrarian knowledge, and animal husbandry.

These developments are enormous in their accomplishment and consequence. Humans are no longer at the mercy of their environment but have taken command of it not only in Greece but throughout much of the Mediterranean world. The nature of the culture and the time of its emergence will depend on the characteristics of the environment and the qualities of the human population. It is not surprising that the land of Greece was difficult to tame. By 10,000 BCE in the Ancient Near East, greater command was occurring in the domestication of plants and animals. The region of the Fertile Crescent, an arc extending through the highlands above the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, possessed a variety of wild plants and animals capable of domestication as well as good sources of water.

Domestication required larger groups of people to perform a variety of tasks and it also enabled larger numbers in a community. Previously 10 square kilometers was needed to sustain a single person; with domestication 1 square kilometer could support five to ten individuals. The new way of life became the preferred way of life. Anthropologist Colin Renfrew argues for the wave of advance effect as additional land was required for new generations of people. From its original location, agriculture and people spread eventually throughout much of Europe as well as in other directions. People and technology reached northern Greece and Crete early in the dispersal due to proximity by land and by sea.

Another aspect of this argument is to define the people: they are Indo-Europeans, as demonstrated by their language. The Indo-European family of languages has been dated to approximately 10,000 to 12,000 years ago and the earliest evidence points to Anatolia as its location. Greek belongs to this family of languages. The once-common language would gradually develop differences as individual groups encountered different environments and speakers of other languages, although retaining resemblances with related Indo-European languages. Thus those descendants of the original wave of advance who arrived in Greece brought domestication and their form of Indo-European, proto Greek.¹⁰ If this view is correct, Greek speakers have been part of the story of Greece for some 9,000 years.

Kuria

Although we cannot name a person who defines the life of this period, it is possible to identify this way of life through an artifact, a contemporary depiction of a clay figure of a woman holding an infant. The figure comes from Sesklo, one of the larger Neolithic villages in Thessaly excavated by archaeologists. For want of a name, we have called the figurine “Kuria,” which is the Greek word for “lady.” We have chosen to imagine the woman with her child as representing a real person, instead of a goddess or religious figure, with the hopes that by presenting her in a specific context, we can provide a brief illustration of the way of life in Neolithic Greece.

The object itself represents the enormous changes in the lives of humans over the vast extent of the Stone Ages from a migratory existence to a settled village life defined by the domestication of animals and the cultivation of food. Initially, humans in Greece were at the mercy of the environment, using caves as homes, migrating in search of food, using stone to fashion tools. Gradually learning about the environment brought greater command of it: new tools created from the bones of slain animals, knowledge of areas where food was available at certain times of the year, and construction of temporary structures at these places. Such an economy required permanent structures.

It is not surprising that in humankind’s earliest story, depictions on cave walls represented the most important living beings – animals, the source of life – with humans rarely if ever shown. And yet, with new skills in this changing way of life humans



Figure 1.2 Kuria. Source: Amy Absher

represent *themselves*. And the clay objects they created also serve as an excellent symbol of that transformation. Although baked, clay objects are breakable; thus clay wares indicate settled, rather than completely nomadic, patterns of sustenance. Beyond their utilitarian function as vessels, other clay objects represent houses and people.

One can imagine human emotion in this figurine – our Kuria – as her one arm wraps around the child, the other cradling, and the child's arm reaches to the woman's neck. And although we have no way to record the specific words she might have spoken to the child, we do know that Kuria's community would have spoken a form of Greek (proto-Greek) based on the common Indo-European language as previously discussed. It is easy to imagine – given the Greek oral traditions that follow – our Kuria singing the child a story.

It is significant that the figurine depicts a woman and a child. Within Kuria's settled community, perhaps of Sesklo, there were crucial tasks that women, children, and elders could and did perform: children could tend the animals, help with harvest; women wove animal fleece into fabric, stored and cared for the produce; the elderly possessed essential acquired skills such as the techniques of producing storage vessels for the surplus goods by potting and firing clay and knowledge of customs that were critical to the community's survival.

Pottery is the first material created by humans using a precise technology. Clay is abundant and can be molded into various shapes, then fired into durable forms relatively easily. Thus, objects can be – and have been – preserved, enabling us to trace developments over time. Improvements in quality and quantity of the clay objects strongly suggest growing specialization of skills and responsibility. Analysis of the composition of clay can identify the source of particular objects so that individual villages appear to have their own unique style of pottery, handmade and fired in pits and/or ovens also used for bread. Pottery evolved in style, skill, and purpose throughout the region. In the Early Neolithic period, the production of pottery was slight, perhaps about a dozen annually at the Franchthi cave; those pots were not used for cooking. Later, during the time when our Kuria might have lived, there was an increase in volume. Potters were now taking risks, firing their wares at temperatures high enough to produce unique glazes of metallic pigments fused to the clay's surface. By this time, the purpose of pottery was multifold, both utilitarian for cooking and storage, but also used in social exchanges or perhaps as gifts.

In Kuria's village, the decorative pattern of Sesklo ware was red and white, in repetitive squares or curved triangles or controlled flames. There is some scholarly debate over whether these first potters were predominately men or women. Kuria may have been a maker of pots herself, but if not, she could have used pottery for storage, decoration, and/or religious rituals.

Regardless of who did the shaping and firing of clay pots, all settlements had figurines in an astonishing variety of sizes, shapes, and types. And they were found everywhere in Neolithic villages from the Neolithic "kitchen sink" to the village dump or pit, just about anywhere. Scholars have noted that given the volume, figurines may have been as readily discarded as they were easy to make. Frequency of representations in the figurines provides us with a glimpse into the world they represent. Archaeology has revealed that this world is comprised of communal life in villages. It is interesting that female figures are more prominent than those of males. Animals are also represented; unsurprisingly, most are domesticated animals.

If Kuria had not lived in Sesklo, but in a nearby but smaller village, she would have had anywhere from a couple dozen to some 100 neighbors, all individuals living in closely spaced houses made of mud bricks on stone foundations. Their houses were rectangular, often with adjoining rooms the size of a modern closet. Some had two stories. Roofs would have been thatched and covered in layers of clay, with smoke holes. And although the technology to build these houses would be considered primitive by our standards, evidence suggests that the clay was sometimes painted in bright colors, windows and doors outlined in red and white decorations. Homes would have a central hearth or a hearth against one wall. Outside there would have been fire pits, ovens, and refuse pits as well. Sometimes houses were surrounded by enclosures. Given the climate, most villagers could have spent a great deal of time outside, cooking in ovens, tending to their crops and herds, or making tools and art.

Our lady would have likely tended to her infant as she went about the daily business of living, and she may have had other children. She might have helped to farm fields, and tools existed for the work; excavations of villages have yielded many artifacts. At home she would have used tools such as the clay spindle, whorls to spin yarn, and bone awls. She might have wielded the stone axe to chop wood, or left that activity for her spouse. She would have ground grains or cereals into flour on a quern (a base stone).

Food production was the greatest transition from the Mesolithic culture to the Neolithic; remains are preserved by carbonization of cooking fires or accidental destructive fires of the homes. Kuria may have provided meals for herself, her children, spouse, and other family based on communal or family stores. The villagers' diet involved grains (wheat and barley); legumes such as peas, fruit, and nuts; and sheep, goats, cattle, and pigs and the dairy products provided by domesticated animals. An outstanding archaeologist of Greece has described this world well:

Inside the mud-plastered houses the main colors would come from woven textiles and painted vases. There would be beds of piled skin or brush, perhaps raised from the damp on benches of clay or stones. By day these bed or chipped stumps would serve as seats; by night the more valuable animals especially if they were pregnant, warmed by glowing charcoal or dung on the hearth. As in all Greek village life for the next seven thousand years, the outdoor court or street was a principal part of the home. The village itself was so small that it was essentially a family unit It controlled and apportioned neighboring fields and sources of fresh water. It maintained casual contact with other villages in the district but made no attempt to organize into larger groupings.¹¹

The village, then, is the centerpiece of Greek life, and during Kuria's time, the village was likely an extended family. However, the artifacts tell a story of increasing sophistication in the economy: obsidian (a volcanic glass found in some quantity on the Cycladic island of Melos), exotic shell ornaments made of a spiny Mediterranean oyster have been found as far north as present-day Poland, honey-colored flint blades in Greece may have come from modern Bulgaria or Romania. Thus these Neolithic settlements must have had some kind of exchanges with other peoples, whether by bartered exchanges where the objects traveled farther than their makers or in the occasional long-distance trade. The presence of exotic goods in these Neolithic villages presents a different image than the common assumption about

“Stone Age” peoples. Kuria may have had some kind of jewelry made of shells or exotic stones, she likely would have had decorative pots in her home, a communal central room shared with relatives. Kuria, her family, extended family, and other Neolithic farmers were innovators because they had to be and, in so being, developed a particular material culture of long duration.

We cannot know what the clay figurine of the woman and child truly represented to the person or people who made her. There are many possibilities: perhaps the ‘Kuria’ figurine was an image of an idealized mother. The figurine may have served some kind of religious purpose. The mother holding her child could have been made to represent family members who died. A less dramatic interpretation is that the figurine was made of terra cotta because one villager had the time and inclination to do so. It could even have been a way to perfect the art of making a figurine, a more realistic and less abstract person than those mother goddesses found throughout Europe. Our Kuria could simply be a mother holding a baby made by a potter because he or she wanted to tell a story, or capture the moment. One must not forget that even in Kuria’s time, there was likely the same human impulse to perfect a skill or craft. These farmers lived to eat well, store food, likely loved and argued with neighbors, buried their dead, decorated their homes, bartered for what they did not have. Above all, they created a material culture, and in so doing, continue to tell us their stories.

As the long story of Greece reveals, the importance of the family within its larger community has continued from the Neolithic Age to the present. What is more, the mountains and the sea have dictated that these smallish communities have been the center of Greek life for millennia.

Notes

1. Homer, *Iliad* 15.190ff.
2. A. T. Hodge, *Ancient Greek France* (London: Duckworth, 1998), 27.
3. Curtis Runnels and Priscilla Murray, *Greece Before History: An Archaeological Companion and Guide* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 30.
4. Lawrence Durrell, *Sicilian Carousel* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 65–66.
5. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols., translated by S. Reynolds (London: Collins, 1972), 42.
6. Angelos Sikelianos, “On Acrocorinth,” translated by Theodore Antikas and Carol Thomas.
7. Nicholas Hammond, “Travels in Epirus and South Albania before World War II,” *Ancient World* VIII:1 & 2 (1983): 13–46; 39.
8. Aristotle, *Politics* VII, 7, 1327b20f.
9. C. Paul Rainbird, “Islands Out of Time: Towards a Critique of Island Archaeology,” *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 12:2 (1999), 216–234; 231.
10. Colin Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987). Significant support for the original home of the people is that DNA evidence from plant and animal suggests Anatolian roots.

An early review of the wave of advance thesis in Colin Renfrew’s *Archaeology and Language* in *Archaeology* (January/February 1987) by Curt Runnels reported that it was “received with a hail of protest.” It was “revolutionary” and it “brushes away 100 years of

arguments.” Professor Runnels himself found it “a very good book” that “will make you think,” and “your own view of European prehistory and archaeology will be challenged to the core” (88). Scholars are still thinking; there is no consensus a quarter of a century later. However, technological data including DNA analysis of human, plant, and animal remains has entered the picture. It has the support of increasing numbers of distinguished specialists. I have been increasingly persuaded of its merits in accounting for the Neolithic population of Macedonia and Greece and their way of life.

11. Emily Vermeule, *Greece in the Bronze Age* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 12f.

Further Reading

Abulafia, David, ed. 2003. *The Mediterranean in History*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Beginning with the question “What is the Mediterranean?” chapters by specialists describe the history of that sea from prehistory to the end of the twentieth century CE. The abundant illustrations transport the reader into life in the lands circling the sea from deep antiquity to the present.

Barker, Graeme. 2006. *The Agricultural Revolution in Prehistory: Why did Foragers become Farmers?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This discussion of the agricultural revolution ranges widely from Asia through Africa and Europe to the Americas to answer the questions of why and how humans became farmers. Obviously Greece is not the main focus but the location of Greece has made the region an intersection in the process of the transition from hunting-gathering to settled agrarian cultures.

Braudel, Fernand. 2001. *Memory and the Mediterranean*, translated by S. Reynolds. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

An extraordinary account by one of the greatest of European historians allows the reader to see the sea and its march to civilization from the Paleolithic Age to the Roman unification. The author’s earlier two-volume history of *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (Philip II of Spain in the sixteenth century CE) is a virtual encyclopedia of the Mediterranean world that provides a solid understanding of that sea.

Grove, A. T. and Oliver Rackham. 2001. *The Nature of Mediterranean Europe: An Ecological History*. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press.

The scientist authors have produced a detailed, beautifully illustrated study that will appeal to everyone with a serious interest in the history of landscape. The illustrations, many in full color, are a reason in themselves to examine the characteristics and features of land “especially considered as a product of modifying or shaping processes and agents” (12).

Renfrew, Colin. 1988. *Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

In his preface, the author argues that “modern linguistics and current processual archaeology offer the opportunity for a new synthesis” (7). Early reviews were not largely positive of the success of his thesis. He continued to explore those categories of evidence together with traditional archaeological data. Just recently, DNA analysis has provided additional evidence that the success and spread of a settled agricultural way of life created a wave of advance settlement out of Anatolia in several directions, one of them across the Aegean toward Greece.

Renfrew, Colin. 2009. *Prehistory: The Making of the Human Mind*. New York: Random House.

The distinguished archaeologist/anthropologist/linguist examines the prehistory of humans before written records existed through such evidence as DNA analysis, radiocarbon dating, and artefacts. Without these tools, the depth of the human story was unknown until the mid-nineteenth century CE. And this evidence presents an understanding of intellectual as well as material developments from the time of the earliest hunter-gatherers.

Runnels, Curtis and Priscilla M. Murray. 2001. *Greece Before History*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

This readable, well-illustrated account of the earliest occupants of the Greek peninsula is based on the relationship between humans and their environment from the Old Stone Age through the Late Stone and Bronze Ages. It demonstrates that the “prehistoric societies were dynamic in a state of constant change, even if this change has to be measured in centuries and millennia” (154).