Over the centuries, the Greek islands have been the stepping stones between North Africa, Asia Minor and Europe. The islands’ close proximity to other strong ancient civilisations, such as the Persian, Roman, Egyptian and Phoenician, helped establish strong cultural references and artistic exchange, economic endeavours and, often, political upheaval. Though the Greek nation is still challenged by geopolitical issues due to its Mediterranean location, it continues to celebrate the legacies of many significant historical influences.

ANCIENT CIVILISATIONS
Around 3000 BC, settlers from Phoenicia introduced the processing of bronze into Greece, which helped forge two remarkable ancient civilisations: the Cycladic and the Minoan.

Cycladic Civilisation
The Cycladic civilisation – centred on the islands of the Cyclades – comprised a cluster of small island communities that relied primarily on Neolithic farming methods and fishing. However, their society developed a sophisticated artistic temperament.

The most striking legacy of this civilisation is the carving of the statuettes from Parian marble – the famous Cycladic figurines. The statuettes depicted images of the Great Mother (a pagan goddess). Other remains include bronze and obsidian tools and weapons, gold jewellery, and stone and clay vases and pots. Cycladic sculptors are also renowned for their impressive, life-sized kouros (marble statues), carved during the Archaic period.

The Cycladic people were also accomplished sailors who developed prosperous maritime trade links with Crete, continental Greece, Asia Minor (the west of present-day Turkey), Europe and North Africa.

Minoan Civilisation
The Minoans – named after King Minos, the mythical ruler of Crete – were the first advanced civilisation to emerge in Europe, drawing their inspiration from two great Middle Eastern civilisations: the Mesopotamian and the Egyptian.

The Minoan civilisation reached its peak during the Middle period; around 2000 BC the large palace complexes of Knossos, Phaistos, Malia and Zakros were built, marking a sharp break from Neolithic village life. Evidence uncovered in these grand palaces on Crete indicates a sophisticated society, splendid architecture and wonderful detailed frescoes. It had highly developed...
agriculture, an extensive irrigation system and advanced hydraulic sewerage systems (that included the use of ventilation shafts).

The advent of bronze enabled the Minoans to build great boats, which helped them establish a powerful *thalassocracy* (prosperous maritime trade). They used tremendous skill to produce fine pottery and metalwork of great beauty, and exported their wares throughout Greece, Asia Minor, Europe and North Africa.

Scholars are still debating the sequence of events that led to the ultimate demise of the Minoans. Scientific evidence suggests the civilisation was weakened by a massive tsunami and ash fallout attributed to the eruption of a cataclysmic volcano on Santorini (Thira) around 1500 BC. Some argue a second powerful quake a century later decimated the society.

The decline of the Minoan civilisation coincided with the rise of the first great civilisation on the Greek mainland, the Mycenaean (1900–1100 BC), which reached its peak between 1500 and 1200 BC. Its own collapse is often attributed to Dorian incursion (see Geometric Age, below); however, this was a period of major upheaval throughout the eastern Mediterranean, and scholars are considering whether natural disasters are responsible.

**GEOMETRIC AGE**

The warrior-like Dorians filtered through from northern Greece, later fanning out to occupy much of the mainland, seizing control of the Mycenaean kingdoms and enslaving the inhabitants. The Dorians also spread their tentacles into the Greek islands, founding the cities of Kamiros, Ialysos and Lindos on Rhodes in about 1000 BC, while Ionians fleeing to the Cyclades from the Peloponnese established a religious sanctuary on Delos.

The Dorians also brought iron with them and developed a new style of pottery, decorated with striking geometric designs – although art historians are still divided on whether these were merely refinements of the sophisticated oriental forms and designs perfected by Ionians in Attica.

**ARCHAIC AGE**

During the so-called Archaic age, from around 800 to 650 BC, Greek culture developed rapidly; many of the advancements in literature, sculpture, theatre, architecture and intellectual endeavour began; this revival overlapped with the golden age (opposite).

By about 800 BC Greece had begun to settle into a new social and political structure. The Dorians had developed into a class of landholding aristocrats and Greece had been divided into a series of independent city-states. Led by Athens and Corinth (which took over Corfu in 734 BC), the city-states created a Magna Graecia (Greater Greece) with southern Italy as an important component.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>800–700 BC</th>
<th>800–650 BC</th>
<th>594 BC</th>
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<td>Homer’s classic work, the ‘Iliad’, relates in poetic epithet a mythical episode of the Trojan War. Its sequel, the ‘Odyssey’, recounts the epic adventures of Odysseus and his companions in their journey home from the Trojan War.</td>
<td>Independent city-states begin to emerge in the so-called Archaic Age as the Dorians mature and develop. The Greek alphabet emerges from the Phoenician script.</td>
<td>Solon, a ruling aristocrat in Athens, introduces rules of fair play to his citizenry. His radical rule-changing – in effect creating human and political rights – is credited as being the first step to real democracy.</td>
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