

Aegean Art

by Sophia

WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson covers some of the characteristics of early Bronze Age civilizations of the Aegean. Myth and legend inspired the search for major archaeological discoveries in this time period as well. This lesson explores:

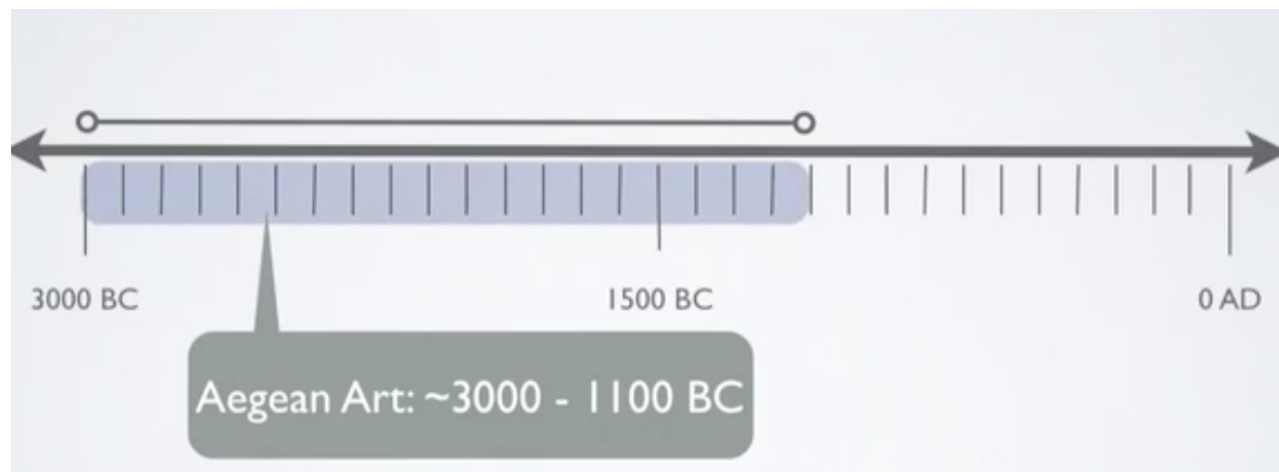
★ BIG IDEA

Early Aegean civilizations were able to share cultural, technological, and religious ideas due to their proximity and mutual reliance on the sea for trade.

1. Time Period and Location: Aegean Art

This lesson explores from about 3000 BCE to 1100 BCE, a period of nearly 2,000 years. Specifically, this lesson looks at the Aegean region around Greece and a circular collection of islands known as the Cyclades, in the Aegean Sea. In addition to the use of the sea for trade, one of the things that linked together the many different cultures of this region was their use of bronze.

The timeline below highlights the period covered in this lesson.



This map highlights the Aegean Sea and the collection of islands known as the Cyclades:



DID YOU KNOW

It is important to understand that it is rather difficult to provide accurate dates from this period. Of the tools used to determine accurate dates, all rely on the examination of the decay rates of organic compounds, which contain carbon. If there aren't any organic compounds to measure, researchers can only make an educated guess. This is a primary limitation of carbon dating.

TERM TO KNOW

Aegean

Relating to the Aegean Sea and/or the Bronze Age civilizations that flourished there.

2. The Bronze Age

The term Bronze Age comes from bronze, a metal that was first used to make tools and weapons during this period. Bronze is an alloy, a combination of the metals copper and tin. Like many great breakthroughs, it was discovered by accident. Production of pottery probably led to the discovery of copper alloys.

DID YOU KNOW

Tin melts at temperatures you would find in the average fire, but copper melts only at much higher temperatures like those you'd find in a kiln for drying pottery. Smelting is the process by which an ore is reduced through heat and chemical change to obtain metal compounds.

TERM TO KNOW

Bronze Age

A prehistoric period between the Stone Age and the Iron Age when many tools and weapons were made of bronze.

3. Examples of Artwork

The Cyclades Islands provide us with many examples of ceramic and marble figures.

→ EXAMPLE Figure of a Woman from Syros, shown below, is a great example of these ceramic and marble figures.



Figure of a Woman from Syros
2500–2300 BCE
Marble

There are several characteristics to take note of in this figure:

- Female figure
- Abstract appearance/use of triangular features
- Emphasizes feminine features (breasts/genital area)—possibly a fertility idol
- Commonly found in graves—possibly used in religious processions

It is also important to note that, unlike their appearance today, such figures would have originally been colorfully painted, with facial features such as the mouth and eyes. There is evidence that these figures would have had large eyes similar to what we would see in Sumerian votive figures. Not only were they painted on the face, but they were also painted on other areas of the body, such as the stomach, which again leads to the idea that they may have functioned as fertility idols. However, their true purpose remains debated.

➔ EXAMPLE Next is a marble figure of a male harp player from the island of Keros.



Figure of a Male Harp Player
2800–2700 BCE
Marble

Male figures such as this were much less common than female figures. The abstraction, juxtaposed with the careful modeling of the arms, hands, and feet, is also noteworthy.

TERMS TO KNOW

Cycladic

Relating to the Cyclades, a group of islands in the Aegean Sea; also used to discuss Bronze Age civilizations that flourished there.

Abstraction (of the Human Figure)

A type of art that involves a simplification, usually into geometric shapes, of objects (bodies) seen in lived experience.

Votive Figures

Sculptures placed in a shrine in fulfillment of a vow.

4. Mythology and Archaeological Discoveries

The area in and around the Aegean is rich in historical art and architectural remains. The focus on the exploration of this area is largely due to the rich culture of mythology and legend that exists in the region. Stories about characters such as King Minos and the stories from the Greek author Homer led some pioneering archaeologists to search for the possible remains of these places.

One of these pioneering archaeologists was Heinrich Schliemann, who is noted for his search for, and eventual discovery of, the supposed city of Troy. Another pioneering archaeologist was Arthur Evans, who is noted for his search for the palace of King Minos that led to the discovery of the palace complex at Knossos on Crete. This also led to the civilization that existed there being called the Minoan civilization after the legendary King Minos.

SUMMARY

In this lesson, you explored the time period and location of Aegean art. The Bronze Age is noted for the discovery of copper alloys that were often used in artwork. Production of pottery most likely led to this discovery.

You looked at examples of artwork, including examples of ceramic and marble figures found in the Cyclades Islands.

Finally, you learned about mythology and archaeological discoveries, such as Heinrich Schliemann's discovery of the supposed city of Troy and Arthur Evans's search for the palace of King Minos that led to the discovery of the palace complex at Knossos on Crete.

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ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Figure of a Woman from Syros](#) | License: CC 2.0



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