

Early Cycladic Art and Culture



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Essay

The Cyclades, a group of islands in the southwestern Aegean, comprises some thirty small islands and numerous islets. The ancient Greeks called them *kyklades*, imagining them as a circle (*kyklos*) around the sacred island of Delos, the site of the holiest sanctuary to Apollo. Many of the Cycladic Islands are particularly rich in mineral resources—iron ores, copper, lead ores, gold, silver, emery, obsidian, and marble, the marbles of Paros and Naxos among the finest in the world. Archaeological evidence points to sporadic Neolithic settlements on Antiparos, Melos, Mykonos, Naxos, and other Cycladic Islands at least as early as the sixth millennium B.C. These earliest settlers probably cultivated barley and wheat, and most likely fished the Aegean for tunny and other fish. They were also accomplished sculptors in stone, as attested by significant finds of marble figurines on Saliagos (near Paros and Antiparos). In the third millennium B.C., a distinctive civilization, commonly called the Early Cycladic culture (ca. 3200–2300 B.C.), emerged with important settlement sites on Keros and at Halandriani on Syros. At this time in the Early Bronze Age, metallurgy developed at a fast pace in the Mediterranean. It was especially fortuitous for the Early Cycladic culture that their islands were rich in iron ores and copper, and that they offered a favorable route across the Aegean. Inhabitants turned to fishing, shipbuilding,

and exporting of their mineral resources, as trade flourished between the Cyclades, Minoan Crete, Helladic Greece, and the coast of Asia Minor.

Early Cycladic culture can be divided into two main phases, the Grotta-Pelos (Early Cycladic I) culture (ca. 3200?–2700 B.C.), and the Keros-Syros (Early Cycladic II) culture (ca. 2700–2400/2300 B.C.). These names correspond to significant burial sites. Unfortunately, few settlements from the Early Cycladic period have been found, and much of the evidence for the culture comes from assemblages of objects, mostly marble vessels and figurines, that the islanders buried with their dead. Varying qualities and quantities of grave goods point to disparities in wealth, suggesting that some form of social ranking was emerging in the Cyclades at this time.

The majority of Cycladic marble vessels and sculptures were produced during the Grotta-Pelos and Keros-Syros periods. Early Cycladic sculpture comprises predominantly female figures that range from simple modification of the stone to developed representations of the human form, some with natural proportions and some more idealized (1972.118.104; 68.148). Many of these figures, especially those of the Spedos type, display a remarkable consistency in form and proportion that suggests they were planned with a compass. Scientific analysis has shown that the surface of the marble was painted with mineral-based pigments—azurite for blue and iron ores, or cinnabar for red. The vessels from this period—bowls (2001.766), vases, kandelas (collared vases), and bottles—display bold, simple forms that reinforce the Early Cycladic predilection for a harmony of parts and conscious preservation of proportion.

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