The time period around 1400 B.C. was an era where Mycenae, the traditional home of Agamemnon, brother of Menelaus and leader of the Greek warriors in Troy, dominated the mainland, and his island of Crete assumed the political and military status of master of the eastern Mediterranean. A golden age of splendor arose during this period, as shown by excavations of the royal graves at Mycenae, and the cultural and religious traditions of the eminent classical Greece began to take form. This is the Homeric, or Herioc, Age - also called Mycenaean, or Late Minoan - for the culture and values of the latter part of this period are those permanently embodied in the Homeric poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey. The fall of this age is often credited with the Dorian Invasion which is believed to have happened around 1100 B.C., and which came to be the conclusive death blow to the Minoan civilization.

According to Greek legend, it was in this age that the Oedipus tragedy evolved, and the story later depicted in Aeschylus' Oresteia was played out. This was the time of the famous Trojan War, which left the Trojans and Greeks alike bereft of some of their most beloved and courageous men who died as heroes on the incarnadine battle fields. This was the time of the wonderings of Aeneas and Odysseus after the war, and a time where the inhabitants of Mount Olympus interacted with the humans more than ever. Homer did not live during the time period which is named after him. He is believed to have lived three hundred years after the Homeric Age of which he wrote about in his epic poems. He is, of course, our most important literary source for knowledge of this period, combining the history, religion, myth, and lore of many generations.

**Society**

The political and economic systems of Homeric Greece were far less developed than in the later well-known Classical period of ancient Greece. Greece was not Greece. To clarify that more, there was no one nation of these Greeks. They did not even refer to themselves as Greeks. In the Iliad and in the Odyssey Homer denominates this group of distinct people as Achaeans, Argives, and Danaans. These people were only linked to each other by the relationships of the city-states that shared the same language--with varying dialects. Basically, Homeric Greece was a tribal society controlled by a ruling class known as basileis, whose responsibilities constituted those of a king, general, and judge, with certain religious duties as well. Unlike the absolute Oriental monarch, the basileus' power was that of primus inter pares, first among equals, and of a restricted nature. The aristoi, or noblemen, assisted him in his deliberations and comprised a boule, or advisory council; and the agora, an assembly or speaking forum comprised of the laos, or fighting men, voted yes or no on issues presented to them, particularly those concerning war and peace.

In this society, women, even participating vigorously in athletic competitions, enjoyed a status and freedom that they were never again to experience in later Greek times. Still, the society was patriarchal, acknowledging a common ancestor and common king, and though slavery existed, the slaves were few and mostly captive females. The work was done by the nobles themselves and their hired men, as well as the slaves. The main activities were fighting, hunting, grazing, a rudimentary form of agriculture, and the pursuit
and enjoyment of robust manly pleasures. Xenia - guest- friendship, or hospitality - was practiced with zest and enthusiasm, and the aoidos, or bard such as Demodocus and Phemius in the Odyssey, was always present at court functions to chant his epic song.

**Reciprocity**

Now given the lack of a formal governmental or economic structure for these "Greeks" as a whole, most transactions relied on a simple system of reciprocity. Reciprocity is simply a mutual exchange between two or more people. If I offered you a jar of olive oil for my spear that I so feverishly desire, and if you considered this a fair trade, then the both of us would benefit from this reciprocal transaction. Say, on the other hand, that I was not so nice of a person, I could hit you on the head and take the spear. This kind of exchange is called negative reciprocity. Such a system works only so long as the victim cannot reciprocate. This could take place due to the fact that there was no national or local laws or police to govern behavior. (This is a reason why the raiding cities prevalent in the works of Homer are acceptable.)

However, there may be times when I may want to give a gift, not expecting something in return immediately. Suppose that something terrible happens to my home like a fire, or someone has stolen all my belongings, I might come to you and ask for some provisions. Since I have nothing to repay you, there is no question of an exchange. A long term loan is not really practical because there is no writing at this time. So you reason that if you give me some food, I may not repay you, but some day if something terrible happens to you, I could help you out as you did me. You do this because you would like to rely on the kindness of others at some future date, which is still an act of belief in reciprocity. You are simply not expecting to be reciprocated at the moment. This is known as deferred reciprocity. This sort was used extensively by travelers (especially in the Odyssey).

**Arete**

The concept of arete, or excellence, was one of the Homeric Age's most important contributions to Western culture; in fact, in many ways the Iliad and the Odyssey are actually paens to arete. In Homer, even nonhuman things such as noble horses and powerful gods may possess arete; an ordinary person does not possess arete; and an aristos, or noble, who becomes a slave loses half is arete. Werner Jaeger observes that the nobility is the prime mover in forming a nation's culture, and that the aristoi, or "the best," are responsible for the creation of a definite idea of human perfection, an ideal toward which they are constantly educated. Arete became the "quintessence of early aristocratic education," and thereafter the dominant concept in all Greek education and culture; it has remained with us as an educational ideal ever since.

It was not possible to separate leadership from arete, the Greeks believed, because unusual or exceptional prowess was a natural manifestation of leadership. Since each man was ranked in accordance with his ability, arete became an ideal of self-fulfillment or self-realization in terms of human excellence. A noble's arete, in Homer, is specifically indicated by his skill and prowess as a soldier in war, and as an athlete in peace. War provides the occasion for the display of arete and the winning of kleos, or glory. This is one of the most important understandings of why many Greeks went to Troy (most specifically Achilles). The aristoi compete among themselves "always to be the best and to be superior to others." In his personal conduct, the Homeric hero possess aidos, or a sense of duty. An affront to this sense of duty is known as nemesis, and is aroused in the hearts of others when aidos is slighted.

Finally, the meaning of arete was enlarged to signify the union of nobility of action and nobility of mind, and
an accompanying imperative of honor. Thus, Phoenix, the counseler and tutor of great Achilles, in Book IV of the Iliad, reminds the great warrior of the aristocratic ideal of arete, which he was charged to impart to him, to make him a speaker of words and a doer of deeds. Ultimately, arete means intellectual as well as physical excellence, the realization of a man's total potential. There are, however, more foundations to society, as the Boeotian peasant Hesiod was to point out in his poem Work and Days. One is ergon, or good hard work. Without it, no society can exist. In both Theogony, a poem describing the origin and genealogy of the gods, and in Work and Days, Hesiod introduces the question that will become central for Solon, the Greek tragedians, and the Athenian philosophers - the problem of dike, or justice. In his attempt to organize the Greek pantheon into understandable categories - henotheistically, with one supreme deity among the number of deities - Hesiod sees Zeus as the protector of justice, both on the human and divine levels, through his divine daughter Dike, or Justice, who watches over the deeds of men and reports them directly when justice is violated. A city that practices justice is assured prosperity, whereas the city that practices injustice reaps the fruits thereof and the vengeance of Zeus. So important was the Greek idea of dike, that eventually it would become an economic and political, as well as moral, issue.