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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# When was Early Greece?

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## Abstract

This article investigates the boundaries of the chronological-cultural unit of 'Early Greece', a phrase widely used in scholarship but which has little taxonomic meaning. I argue that the phrase, and the values that it encodes, continues to exist in a traditional evolutionary framework of cultural development within the Greek world. Through a bibliographical case study, I further demonstrate that there are different chronological understandings of 'Early Greece' within different subdisciplines, with material-based scholarship applying it predominantly to the Early Iron Age and text-based scholarship predominantly to the Archaic period. Following this, the article connects 'Early Greece' with protohistory, particularly through the lens of Homer references, and explores the ways in which the positionality of 'Early Greece' emphasizes the authority of textual sources over material ones and continues to articulate an under-defined vision of Greece centred on the fifth century BCE.

**Keywords:** Early Greece; protohistory; periodization

## I. Introduction

'Early Greece' is a label that covers all or part of the period between the Late Bronze Age (hereafter LBA) and the beginning of the Classical period but is traditionally deployed without explicit definition. This phrase thus differs from related chrono-historical vocabulary that has been more rigorously interrogated, as seen in debates over 'Dark Ages' versus 'Early Iron Age' (EIA), the valences of 'Orientalizing' or the deterministic function of 'Classical'.[1] 'Early Greece' has largely flown under the epistemological radar and has not been assigned agreed-upon taxonomic meaning. T.B.L. Webster remarked in the 1950s that 'Early Greece is a convenient term which conceals both the gaps in the material and the gaps in our treatment of it.'[2] This article aims to demonstrate that this sentiment is still true some 70 years later.

Hellenizing terminology is part of an entrenched practice of prescriptive periodization in the ancient Aegean. The use of 'Early Greece' as a malleable term depends on a still commonly held notion (explicit or implicit) of a coherent entity that we can call 'ancient Greece', most often one visualized as emerging out of the Bronze Age and reaching a pinnacle of development and achievement in the Classical period. This collective imaginary illustrates Ian Morris' assertion that the 'act of periodization is intimately bound up with the organization of the profession of classical studies; any serious

[1] EIA terminology: Kotsonas (2016); Murray (2018). Orientalizing: Gunter (2009); Arrington (2022). Classical: Pollitt (1972) 2; Whitley (2001) 269–93; Mattusch (2004); Porter (2006); Pollard (2008).

[2] Webster (1952–1953) 18.

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rethinking of periodization leads inevitably to questioning why we continue to pay so much attention to ancient Greece and Rome, and vice versa'.[3] By asking what is 'Greek' about the time (and place) labelled as 'Early Greece', therefore, the corollary increasingly becomes: what is the value that we as modern scholars attach to 'Greekness' and its origins?[4]

While 'Early Greece' remains a common shorthand for parts or all of the period from the 14th to the sixth century BCE, the lack of critical discussion of its parameters and function perpetuates and reinforces both evolutionary narratives and structures of thought in scholarship. This lack of discussion has also perpetuated a divide in how 'Early Greece' is defined chronologically between text-based and material-based scholarship, as I demonstrate through a bibliographical case study. I argue that this lack of agreement stems from differences in the authority granted to different types of evidence for society in the pre-Classical period, as claims of Greekness (broadly painted, not in any strict 'ethnic' or 'national' sense) in any period tend to prioritize the authority of textual sources over material culture. I further explore this authoritative imbalance and the peripheralization of the pre-Classical through the concept of protohistory in order to present multiple suggestions for future approaches to our collective understanding of 'Early Greece'.

## II. Evolutionary paradigms

The creation of narratives and meta-narratives is an inescapable part of archaeology and history as these disciplines are inherently about storytelling.[5] The chronological categories that we employ in this storytelling can reify meta-narratives about the directionality of time and cultural development, even as we deconstruct older evolutionary narratives of progress.[6] Many of the chronological divisions that we use originated in material studies before being adapted more broadly across classical studies,[7] while others have remained in the realm of archaeology because of their more specific stylistic applications (for example, 'Protocorinthian'). The teleological nature of many of these terms ('Protogeometric' encodes 'Geometric') and the blurring of their use as stylistic and cultural labels is widely recognized as a necessary evil in writing archaeological and historical narratives,[8] in part because many such terms, through long-term debate and critique, have acquired suites of specific technical meaning that allow them to be applied taxonomically to the material and historical records.

Not all periodizing terms have agreed-upon taxonomic meaning, however, and thus implied meta-narratives become the driving force in their use and reception. This is the epistemological problem of 'Early Greece': under-defined uses of the phrase reinforce a shared but implicit organizational structure in the study of the ancient world. Even though 'Early Greece' does not have an agreed beginning in the long span of time between the LBA and the Archaic period, as will be discussed further below, there is a common understanding of when it ends: it is the phase that pre-dates the Classical period, and very seldom encroaches past 480 BCE. 'Early Greece', as such, implicitly occupies an anticipatory and deterministic position in our periodizations of the ancient world, leading to the flourishing of Classical Greece.[9] The growth of a shared Hellenic identity in the sixth and

[3] Morris (1997) 99.
[4] *Cf.* Myres (1930) xv–xix.
[5] Last (1995) 144–48; Morris (2000) 110.
[6] Crellin (2020) 6–17.
[7] Such as Archaic: Davies (2009) 4.
[8] *Cf.* Hodder (1995).
[9] See Snodgrass (1980) 11–14, Whitley (2001) 60 and Bernhardt and Canevaro (2022) for similar positioning of the Archaic period. *Cf.* Burn (1960) 3: 'classical Athens, whose "modernity" is a commonplace'.

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fifth centuries, unified by language, customs and blood across political and ethnic boundaries (per Herodotus), underpins part of our modern sense of the Classical period as an inflection point for expressions of Hellenism in a way that is grounded in ancient evidence.[10] 'Early Greece', in the sense that it is usually used, is a modern construct, however; this Greece can only be defined in retrospect and is embedded in a Eurocentric narrative of progress towards the *polis*.[11]

The positioning of Early Greece as the predecessor of Classical Greece follows the long-standing influence of the tripartite phasing system popular with archaeologists that arose out of the Three-Age System, where any era can be divided into early, middle and late periods, with an assumed upward trajectory from early to middle (and often to late).[12] This organizational scheme has also shaped the traditional (art) historical vision of the Classical period as the height of Greek cultural output, preceded by an experimental developmental stage in the EIA and Archaic period, and succeeded by a decline into Hellenistic decadence. In this schema, the society of 'Early Greece' is therefore working towards the Classical period (could we call it Mature Greece or Ripe Greece instead?) in an anticipatory fashion. This is an artificial and old-fashioned picture, of course, drawn from an Enlightenment-era value system that prioritizes the cultural products of the fifth century BCE, but one that still has influence.[13]

The language of emergence that is encapsulated in the concept of Early Greece and Early Greek cultural outputs (pottery, poetry, philosophy, etc.) also presupposes an origin of Greekness, spiritual as well as chronological. Early Greece and, by extension, an entity that we can refer to as 'Greece' must have had a clear beginning, even though explicit searching for the origins of Hellenism has become passé in scholarship in the last few decades.[14]

Evoked by this vocabulary, but also nebulous, is the appearance of 'Greeks' to inhabit this 'Early Greece'.[15] The emergence of 'Early Greece', in the sense that it is deployed by authors referring to the EIA, is separate from the 'coming of the Greeks', especially the sort of arrival of Greek-speaking groups in the Early or Middle Bronze Age that was espoused by mid-20th-century archaeologists.[16] A possible exception to the chronological disconnect between a 'coming of the Greeks' and 'Early Greece' is the model most prominently articulated by Anthony Snodgrass: post-Mycenaean material changes, such as the rise in cist graves, were interpreted as the re-emergence of a Middle Helladic (MH) Greek substratum whose signal had been suppressed by the emergence of palatial Mycenaeans but which now re-exerted itself in the Iron Age.[17] This model has since been critiqued on material and cultural grounds.[18] Recent approaches to continuity in general tend to focus on models of contemporary status negotiation in the impetus for and consumption of new forms, rather than static long-term identities.[19]

[10] Hall (1989); Hall (2002); Mitchell (2007). See also Myres (1930) xxi–xxii, 319–22. For the development of Panhellenic sanctuaries as institutions: Morgan (1993).

[11] Vlassopoulos (2007). *Cf.* Starr (1961) vii; Papadopoulos (1993) 178.

[12] Hodder (1993); Kotsonas (2020) 79. The Three-Age System was first introduced to the Aegean by Evans (1964) 24–30, by way of Egypt.

[13] *Cf.* Hamilakis (2007) 85–103.

[14] *Cf.* Burns (2005).

[15] See Vlassopoulos (2007) 38–63.

[16] Wace (1954). See also: Hopper (1976) 16; Pullen (2010) 38–41.

[17] Snodgrass (1971) 385–86; (2006) 160–70.

[18] Dickinson (1983); (2006) 183, 190, 244. More recent investigations of the Late Helladic (LH) I–II archaeological record suggest that continuity in MH–LH III was much greater than previously thought and was masked by low visibility of LH I–II material in the survey record and an over-emphasis on forms circulating at first within small decentralized elite networks: Kramer-Hajos (2016) 56–69, 171.

[19] *Cf.* Chrisomalis and Trigger (2004).

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Even if a Snodgrass-type vision of a population whose suppressed but unaltered collective identity was expressed through a resurgence of older materialized practices centuries later held up to archaeological scrutiny, there remains a difference in the framings of and approaches to labelling group identity in Middle Bronze Age (MBA) Greece and EIA–Archaic Greece. Middle Helladic 'Greece', although defined by a particular suite of archaeological material that marked distinctive cultural practices, is much more of a geographical label that separated that (material) culture from those of the Cyclades and Crete: 'Greece' in this case signifies the southern Greek mainland and a few nearby islands in its immediate cultural sphere, such as Aegina.[20] EIA–Archaic 'Greece' expands geographically to include the Aegean Islands and Crete and subsequently colonized areas around the Mediterranean but is also unified in modern scholarship by a larger perceived cultural spirit, embodied by 'the Greeks' that lived in it who were the direct ancestors of the Classical Greeks. In addition to the archaeological difficulties of tracing unilinear continuities from the MBA to the EIA, there are therefore also important shifts in what is signified by the historical category of 'Greece' and its connection to an under-defined collective of 'the Greeks' over this same period of time.

Furthermore, despite a growing emphasis on tracing continuities in the archaeological record between the LBA and the EIA in recent decades as a result of ongoing fieldwork in the Aegean and heightened awareness of similar continuities in other regions of the Mediterranean, there is still a strong periodic division *ca.* 1200 BCE in scholarship following the collapse of the Mycenaean palatial system.[21] Accompanying this, traditional narratives of post-Bronze Age migrations of Greek speakers, particularly Dorians, have been linked with the emergence of both 'the Greeks' and 'Greece'.[22] Even though the historical reality of these migrations has been rejected on archaeological and linguistic grounds, they are still routinely cited in introductory synthetic texts as a major factor in the shaping of the historical Greek world.[23] The idea of ethnic continuity between these putative new populations and the later historical Greeks whose texts inform us about these quasi-mythological migrations therefore also contributes to the idea of 'Early Greece' emerging as a new entity post-Bronze Age.[24] There is still little explanation in scholarship regarding why EIA populations should be labelled as Greek in a way that Bronze Age populations were not, however: there remains a distinction between Bronze Age (particularly palatial Mycenaean) populations that spoke Greek and already worshipped Greek deities, and 'the Greeks' of the post-Bronze Age.[25]

Whether one accepts a view of a lower-class MBA Greek population reasserting itself in the 12th and 11th centuries BCE or one prefers a vision of an entirely new cultural ethos emerging after the LBA, the end of the Mycenaean palaces and, more broadly, of Aegean prehistory as a historical rupture has been and still is routinely considered intrinsic to the origins of 'Early Greece', if not necessarily to the appearance of 'the Greeks'.[26] This idea is closely related to the long-standing stance that the Mycenaean palaces and their political and cultural structures were in a sense non-Greek, despite their use of the Greek language,

[20] See divisions in Shelmerdine (2010a), for example.

[21] Kotsonas (2020) 85.

[22] Judson (2023) 161–62.

[23] Cartledge (2009) 38–40. *Cf.* Dialismas (2004) 65.

[24] Implicit in this idea of ethnic continuity is also one of the racial continuity of 'the Greeks', and thus a broader tension between socially constructed identity categories and 'natural' ones that has not necessarily been resolved during terminological shifts over the 20th century: *cf.* McCoskey (2003); MacSweeney (2021) 103–05, 113–14.

[25] Wace (1954) 153–54 is an exception. On Linear B's historical entanglements with discussions of linguistic continuity, cultural rupture and/or evolution and definitions of Greekness between the Bronze and Iron Ages: Duray (2020) 164–98.

[26] For long-standing objections to the divisive periodization of the Bronze–Iron Age transition, see Morris (1989) 47–50; (1995); Papadopoulos (1993) 194–97; (2018).

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in that they emulated Near Eastern palatial societies in their organization and administration. The idea that a static Eastern-style Mycenaean palatial system could never have developed into the dynamic heights of Classical Greece was first formulated by Moses Finley but has continued to be repeated in scholarship.[27]

The question of the origins of a Greek identity is therefore a sprawling and thorny one, and only some of the directions it takes can be summarized here as background in order to set the stakes of the much narrower question that I set out to answer: what are the chronological boundaries of the 'Early Greek' period as it is conceptualized in scholarship, and what are the implications of these boundaries for our imagination of the pre-Classical?

## III. A bibliographical case study

Many scholars who use the label 'Early Greece' seem to have a clear image in their own minds about when it was, based on how they use it in their publications, but they typically do not define it as a chronological phase. A telling example of this is Oswyn Murray's influential book *Early Greece*. Despite the title and the sporadic use of the phrase throughout the text, Murray does not at any point explicitly define 'Early Greece'. Rather, the broad equivalence of the term with the period spanning the eighth through the early fifth century BCE is presented as self-evident through its application to the contents of the book. The chronological bounds of 'Early Greece' are defined by Murray's chosen evidence: Homer and subsequent authors, Archaic inscriptions and archaeological material of eighth- to sixth-century BCE date.[28] This sense of self-evidence is the problem that I address in the following bibliographical exercise to demonstrate that 'Early Greece' is not, in fact, a well-defined unit, even in simple chronological terms.

In order to demonstrate both quantitatively and qualitatively that any individual surety about the chronology of 'Early Greece' is not a product of collective consensus, I analyse publications containing the phrases 'Early Greece' or 'Early Greek period/phase' in the title and examine how this phrase is deployed. Two citations using 'the early age of Greece' are also included, as the phrase conveys the same basic idea and both authors also use the phrase 'Early Greece' in the bodies of their texts.

For the purposes of this article, I limit discussion to publications in English for linguistic consistency in usage and for searchability across bibliographical resources. This practical decision means that the ensuing discussion of 'Early Greece' and related concepts centres trends in Anglo-American scholarship and thought. However, while roughly equivalent terminology exists in other common publication languages (*frühes Griechenland*, πρώιμη Ελλάδα, *Grèce primitive*, *Grecia primitiva*), they appear significantly less frequently than in English-language publications and with greater variability of chronological meaning. The problem of defining 'Early Greece' therefore appears to be more pressing for anglophone scholarship, but the question of different academic traditions is relevant to the discussion of protohistory in the next section.[29]

Included in the accompanying database are single-authored volumes, edited volumes, individual papers in edited volumes, journal articles and doctoral dissertations. One hundred and nineteen titles met the selection criteria (see Supplementary Material).

[27] Finley (1956) 13–18, 159–62; (1981b) 205–32. See Nakassis (2025) for a deconstruction of this narrative. *Cf.* Starr (1961) 55–58, 73–74; Cartledge (2009) 25–26. On Orientalism in the EIA, *cf.* Morris (1995) 124.

[28] Murray (1993) 16–34.

[29] Non-native English-speaking authors are in the minority although well-represented in the bibliographical sample. Many of them are or were educated and/or employed by anglophone institutions at some point in their career (while the opposite very seldom holds true). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, the broader question of the hegemony of English as a publishing language and of researcher mobility into the anglophone academic sphere as the dominant direction of movement is an important one to keep in mind.

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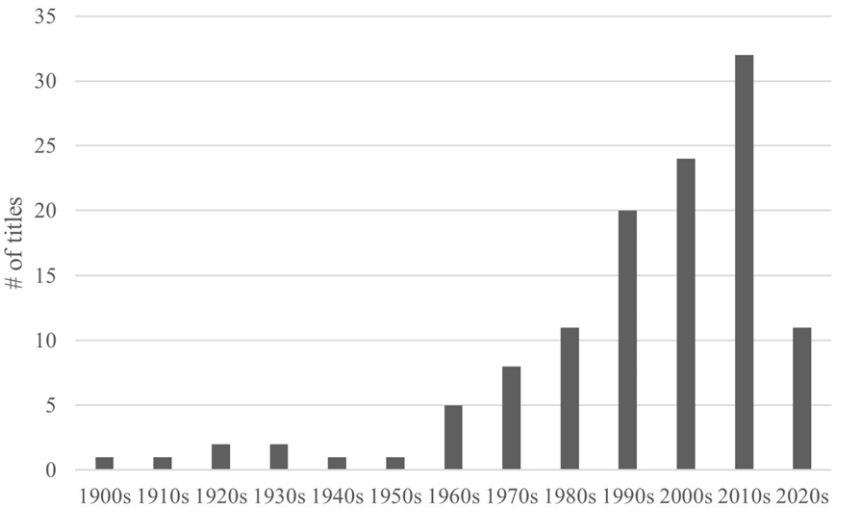



**Fig. 1.** Citations with 'Early Greece' in the title by decade.

The first observation of note is the steadily increasing popularity of 'Early Greece', at least as an evocative titular phrase, since the mid-20th century (fig. 1). The major upswing in interest in EIA archaeology over the last four decades or so has driven the upward trend to a large extent, but it is not the only factor, given the steady numbers of philological and historical publications also represented during the same time span (fig. 2). Its popularity is also driven by a subset of scholars who habitually use the phrase in titles and therefore inflate the trend: Susan Langdon and Hans van Wees are both represented by five publications each and many other authors are represented more than once. Based on its ongoing popularity, better defining 'Early Greece' is therefore a present and pressing concern.

For each citation, I record three pieces of information. The first is the approximate date range of the period discussed in the publication and/or of the evidence used to support the author's argument. For the majority of publications, the period under discussion and the date of the evidence are the same. Many 'Early Greece' publications focus on the Homeric epics and on the internal social norms of the texts rather than on the historical society of the epics' audience, however. In order to be consistent in the current case study, I treat the texts themselves as artefacts underpinning the authors' arguments, assigning them a broad date range of the eighth to sixth centuries BCE (the approximate period of the coalescence and recording of the texts that we now have) in the database.[30] Only in the case of publications where the Homeric texts are used to describe life in a specific earlier historical (as opposed to mytho-historical) phase is a different date recorded.

The second piece of information that I record is whether the phrase 'Early Greece' or 'Early Greek period' is *explicitly* defined by the author, either with reference to a discrete date range in the title or in another programmatic way. Such explicit definitions have become more frequent over time, but they remain rare and their frequency has risen in direct proportion to the number of relevant titles rather than representing a greater percentage of publications over time. Only 12 publications define 'Early Greece' in the title (for example, Maximilian Rönnberg and Veronika Sossau's *Regions and Communities in Early*

[30] Nagy (2020) 83–85.

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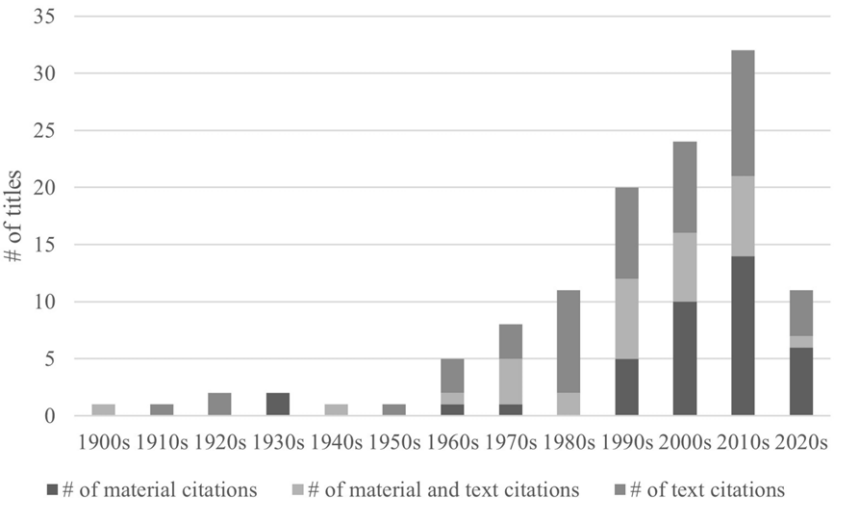



**Fig. 2.** Citations with 'Early Greece' in the title by decade, separated by evidence type.

*Greece (1200–550 BCE)*).[31] There can also be an authorial statement of the type, 'By Early Greece, I mean…' in the publication's text, which often occurs in connection with discussions of other periodizing terminology. Because these definitions are even rarer (eight, one of which also has a definitional title), they are worth including verbatim here:

1. The expression Early Greece refers, chronologically, to the time previous to the end of the Bronze Age and, geographically, to mainland Greece, Macedonia, the Troad, Crete and the other Aegean Islands. In the almost complete absence of literary records, I have based my work largely on archaeological evidence, and to a lesser extent on that of language.[32]
2. The term 'Greek' will denote in this work only that coherent structure of thought and art which flourished in the great achievements of classical Hellenism and its direct roots, as visible in the pottery of the Dark Ages and in the epic. Many inhabitants—though not all—of the Aegean in the second millennium spoke Greek, but their culture was not 'Greek' in the sense just stated. This is not an idle precision; there was a great gulf between 'Mycenaean' and 'Greek' times once they passed beyond the simplest level of rural life. From this point of view the period 800–500 B.C. may be called the time of 'early Greece', but I shall also use the terms 'age of expansion' and, less often, 'archaic era' (an expression which comes from artistic time-divisions).[33]
3. The 'Early Iron Age' of Knossos—or, as I prefer to say, Early Greek Knossos—can be defined with unusual clarity, thanks to the dead. This is the entire period of the collective chamber tombs of the North Cemetery, Fortetsa and elsewhere in the Knossos area, from the Sub-Minoan of the eleventh century down to the Orientalising of the seventh.[34]

[31] Rönnberg and Sossau (2022).
[32] Vickery (1936) 5.
[33] Starr (1977) 197 n.5.
[34] Coldstream (2006) 581.

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4. Deposits from the early Greek periods span the entire range from the Subminoan to Orientalizing periods (eleventh to seventh centuries BCE), but their distribution over the area of excavation was uneven.[35]
5. The term 'Archaic Age' is used for the period between 800/750 B.C. and the 'Classical Age' of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. because the elements which are typical of classical Greek culture (like the *polis*) then begin to appear. Conventionally, we speak of a 'Dark Age' (but now no more so dark) between the sub-Mycenaean period, after the destruction or abandonment of the Mycenaean palaces and the Archaic Age (± 1025–800 B.C.). The so-called 'Homeric society', if ever one existed, is dated by various scholars variously in the later part of the Dark Age or the earlier one of the Archaic Age. Besides, I use the term 'early Greece' rather vaguely but intentionally so for the entire period, or an unspecified part of it.[36]
6. The term 'Early Greece' is not an invention of my own, but generally can be used to refer to Greece from the Late Bronze Age down to the Persian Wars, in the manner of, for example, Moses Finley's *Early Greece: The Bronze and Archaic Ages*.[37]
7. The sharpness of the division of the period [LBA–EIA] is apparent from the fact that the archaeological literature has devised no single term to refer to it collectively, despite the range of—often contested—names that have labeled parts of it. We have used the heuristic term 'Early Greece' on the cover of this book to refer to the 14th to early 7th centuries in the hope that a shorter and less technical title will be more inviting to students and non-experts. Traditionally, the term 'Early Greece' has been widely but loosely applied to periods of varying length extending from Prehistoric to Archaic times. This is why our different chapters systematically make more specific references to (parts of) the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age.[38]
8. I saw a need for synthesis in the ever-growing body of material associated with early Greece, by which I mean the Mycenaean Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age, a pre-/protohistoric span of time, in which linguistic and cultural traditions related to later Greek populations can be clearly identified, but before their widespread institutionalization in the Archaic and Classical periods.[39]

Except for the two Knossos-specific statements, which indicate a site-level terminological choice by excavators, these statements already make clear the lack of agreement over the chronological definition of 'Early Greece' and its broad but variable applicability to the Bronze Age through the Archaic period. A commonality in these statements is the sense that this term is useful *because* of its lack of chronological specificity. This is made explicit in the statement by Irene Lemos and Antonis Kotsonas in reference to its non-technical and familiar nature for the benefit of non-specialist readers.

The majority of the citations in the database therefore do not contain definitional statements by the author(s) about their parameters for 'Early Greece'. Many do not even use the phrase in the body of their text. All of these publications discuss material from a particular bounded period of time, however, often itself explicitly defined. In these cases, therefore, the author's definition of 'Early Greece' is understood to be coterminous with that date range. It is in this implicit understanding that some major methodological and, by extension, disciplinary boundaries are reinforced.

[35] Hatzaki et al. (2008) 225.
[36] Van der Vliet (2008) 215–16 n.2.
[37] Brouwers (2013) 151. Finley does not define his own use of the term in *Early Greece* (1981a) and begins his survey in the Early Bronze Age; the starting point of the LBA is therefore Brouwers' own editorial choice.
[38] Lemos and Kotsonas (2020) xxiii–xxiv.
[39] Knodell (2021) xiii.

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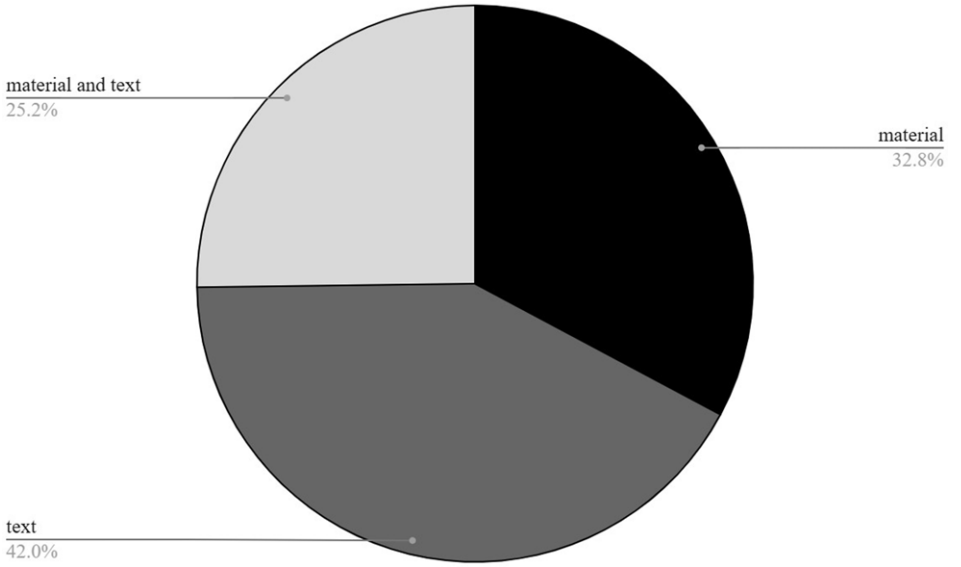



**Fig. 3.** Distribution of evidence types for publications in the database.

The third piece of information included in the database is therefore whether the publication examines textual evidence or material/visual evidence or a combination of the two (figs 2, 3). The textual category consists of philological and ancient historical publications examining mostly poetic texts. The material category covers archaeological and art historical publications consisting of synthetic studies of excavated and surveyed sites and material objects.[40] The combined material and textual category consists primarily of ancient historical publications. This text/material dichotomy is a crude distinction but clear differences in chronological understandings of 'Early Greece' or the 'Early Greek period' follow this broad division.

The majority of titles that focus on material evidence centred on the EIA (12th–eighth centuries BCE). Only three (Kenton Frank Vickery's *Food in Early Greece*, Friedrich Matz's *Art of Crete and Early Greece*, Charline Spretnak's *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece*) focus solely on the periods before the Iron Age (i.e. the Neolithic and Bronze ages).[41] Discussion of the LBA (14th–13th centuries BCE) is sometimes included as a preface to the EIA, and this has become popular in more recent publications that emphasize continuities across the Bronze Age–Iron Age transition *ca.* 1200 BCE rather than a division between the two phases. Within the sample collected in the database, material publications have seen the most sustained growth since the 1990s, I suspect driven in large part by the challenges to the traditional LBA/EIA divide by John Papadopoulos and Sarah Morris in the late 1980s and early 1990s and a subsequent focus on tracing continuities across this phase transition.[42] The social outcomes of this transition, viewed through the material record of the subsequent EIA, remain the primary focus of Early Greece in material studies, however. Within the EIA, there is a greater emphasis in material publications on the eighth century BCE and the Late Geometric period than on earlier centuries, with a few titles continuing their investigations down to the sixth century. A small handful focus solely on the late eighth to sixth centuries (i.e. the Archaic period).[43] Only two publications include

[40] The only primary excavation publication is Hatzaki et al. (2008).
[41] Vickery (1936); Matz (1962); Spretnak (1972).
[42] Morris (1989) 47–50; Papadopoulos (1993) 194–97.
[43] For example, Guralnick (2008).

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substantive discussions of material from the Classical period, although in both the emphasis remains on earlier periods.[44]

Titles that use textual evidence alone focus on the eighth to early fifth centuries BCE, with a particular emphasis on the seventh and sixth centuries. The dating of Homer is most relevant here, as many of the more philological publications discuss the society and values internal to the poems' texts against the background of Archaic society. In the few cases where Homeric discussions are applied to an historical society in these publications, they are projected back no further than the tenth or ninth century.[45] The Homeric epics are overwhelmingly the most popular texts referenced in 'Early Greece' publications. Hesiod is also frequently discussed, while other authors, including Pindar, Empedocles and Solon, remain a minority. Texts dating later than the early fifth century BCE that are contemporary to the subject at hand are seldom referenced (Andrew Gregory's *The Presocratics and the Supernatural* is a prominent exception), and these are always discussed together with and anchored by texts of Archaic date. Only one textual study focuses solely on the LBA, but it uses non-Greek sources.[46] This is the product of both the early publication date (in 1924), when 'Early Greece' more regularly referred to the Bronze Age, and the fact that the decipherment of Linear B was still decades away. Textual publications therefore generally consider 'Early Greece' to be equivalent to the Archaic period. They also link it to the advent of written sources that provide an insight into the development of ancient Greek thought; even those publications that focus on Homer and myth in an ahistorical or achronological fashion do so in order to illustrate the development of recognizable social practices and institutions of the Archaic and Classical periods, such as law (through the lens of poetic and mythological conceptualizations of justice).[47]

Titles that combine textual and material evidence are predictably more mixed, with dates ranging from the LBA through the Archaic period. There is a strong emphasis on the eighth century and the Archaic period, however, also driven by an emphasis on literary testimonia. Three of the eight explicit definitions of 'Early Greece' quoted above fall into this mixed category, perhaps because the chronological and disciplinary dissonances between material and textual studies encourage more direct definition. This category also contains the example that most stretches period boundaries,[48] where the earliness of an 'early Greece' stretching from the Neolithic to the second century CE seems to be defined from a Byzantine or later vantage point, rather than a Classical one.

There is thus a disciplinary divide regarding when 'Early Greece' should be sited as a chronological category, although the eighth century's importance is a point of agreement (fig. 4). While this case study demonstrates that there is confusion about when the chronological unit should be, even within distinct categories of publications, the greatest difference is between different subdisciplines within classical studies and falls along evidentiary lines.

## IV. The problem of protohistory

One of the things that the bibliographic case study demonstrates is that the Homeric texts are integral to the idea of the emergence of 'Early Greece'. Finley famously down-dated, and separated, the society described in the Homeric epics from the LBA to the EIA, beginning a decades-long debate over the relationship between the Homeric epics and the

[44] Hägg (1992); Foxhall (2013).

[45] For the debates, both ancient and modern, about the historicity (or lack thereof) of the society *internal* to the epics: see Whitley (2020).

[46] Giles (1924).

[47] *Cf.* Dickinson (2020) 155.

[48] Dalby (1993).

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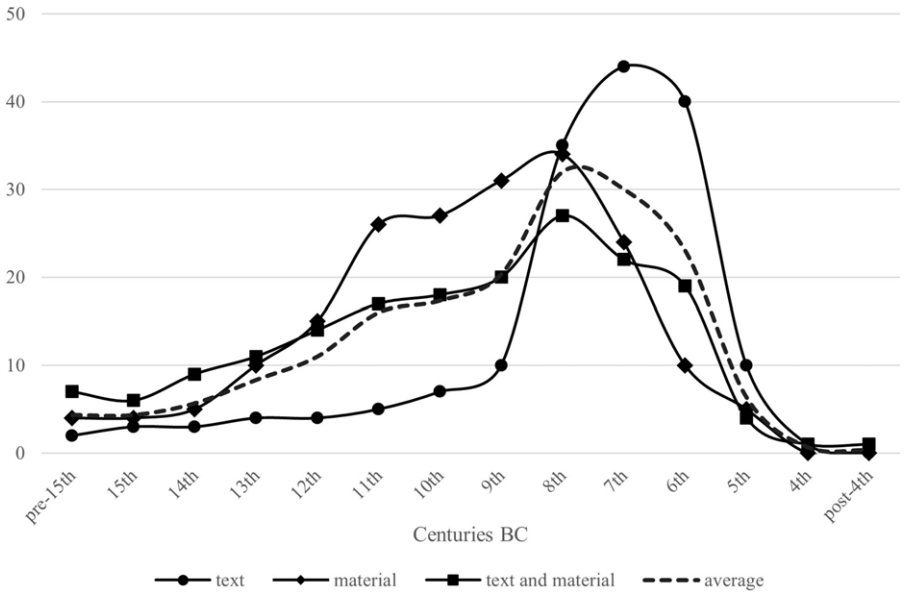



**Fig. 4.** Frequency of inclusion of centuries BCE in the category of 'Early Greece' by type of evidence.

archaeological record of the EIA and Archaic period.[49] The debate has since shifted to become less about comparisons of the contents of the texts and the archaeological record, and more about the weight laid on the texts by archaeologists and historians in the framework of arguments about the value of material culture to history in which archaeologists have, in the past, been cast as simple sherd-counters or as 'handmaidens of history'.[50]

A dissonance lies in the perception that, once texts are available, historians (and some Classical archaeologists) are wont to view them as authoritative records of the past to be matched to the archaeological record in a relatively straightforward fashion. Implicit (and occasionally explicit) in this is the sense that texts that provide a window into contemporary thought and mindsets are qualitatively more useful than the contemporary material record in discussions of Greekness in 'Early Greece'.[51] This perceived disciplinary discord between the authority of material and textual evidence drives the chronological division of 'Early Greece' in the bibliographical case study presented above, but also points to problems with the way in which approaches to protohistory in the Aegean, and the concept of protohistory in and of itself, centre texts even in archaeological research of the EIA.[52]

Protohistory is a term that is tied to regional definitions of the transition between prehistory and history, but which exists because of the often under-examined evolutionary and teleological nature of the definitions and relationship between the two.[53] Outside of Europe, the creation of a protohistorical phase is often bound up in early modern colonialist divisions between prehistory and history that prioritize the appearance of Western-style literacy and objective record-keeping. As such, it has played

[49] Snodgrass (2017); Nakassis (2025).

[50] Papadopoulos (1999) 382–84. *Cf.* Snodgrass (1987) 36–66; Small (1995); Vermeule (1996); Morris (2000) 8; Dialismas (2004); Sauer (2004) 22–25, 34–40; Martin (2008); Lucas (2010); Sauer (2017).

[51] Papadopoulos (1999) 385–86; Snodgrass (2017) 5.

[52] *Cf.* Papadopoulos (2018).

[53] Andrén (1998) 121–26; Lane (2013).

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a role in the suppression of indigenous modes of knowledge in colonial settings but, along with the prehistory/history dichotomy, it has been increasingly contested as a useful analytical category in postcolonial discourse.[54] In some regions, especially North America, archaeologists have also used the term protohistory to characterize sites or regions that include archaeological evidence for direct or indirect contact with new literate (European) populations, even if textual accounts do not record these specific interactions.[55]

In Europe itself, protohistory has a wider range of chronological boundaries that do not necessarily have textual associations and are concerned more with the emergence of organized sedentary societies. Thus, for at least some French archaeologists and historians, protohistory already begins in the Neolithic period.[56] For most of continental Europe, protohistory encompasses the entirety of the Bronze and Iron ages, although cutting off in Italy in the EIA with the appearance of Greek colonists and thus of 'history'.[57] The periodic characterization operates both around the lack of direct textual evidence and the presence of tribal or chiefdom, rather than state-level, societies that are, through their inclusion in this long protohistory, seen as both static and approachable through ethnographic analogies.[58]

From the perspective of the European Mediterranean, the label 'protohistory' is also applied to the phenomenon of texts in Greek or Latin that describe non-literate societies, often in colonial or military contexts.[59] An example is Classical Greek descriptions of Thracians or Scythians, groups who left behind archaeological evidence but no extensive (deciphered) written records of their own. In this sense, protohistory is as much a geographical category as a chronological one, and is evolutionist in its application, since it applies to a wide range of groups in an ongoing Iron Age that lived on the perceived margins of the Mediterranean world for many centuries while Greece and Rome progressed past their own Iron Ages to their Classical heights.[60] 'Writing' protohistory can also apply in the Greek context in particular to the reading of early texts, such as the Homeric epics, or later mythological traditions about earlier (quasi-)mythological generations that describe interactions with non-Greeks or the founding of new cities. Here, protohistory is separated from history by the unreliability of the narration of recorded events.

The concept of protohistory both highlights and conceals the tension between textual and material sources, in that it marks the advent of a new category of text-based evidence while also often imposing (and naturalizing the imposition of) later text-driven historical narratives onto a contemporary archaeological record. The Mediterranean construction of protohistory therefore exists in parallel with the development and refinement of chronological schemata in zones of multicultural interaction, particularly in colonial contexts in the western Mediterranean. Separating prehistory from history (with protohistory as a mediating stage) is a historiographical process informed implicitly or explicitly by textual sources, while the construction and synchronization of regional chronologies is largely an archaeological one.[61] Nonetheless, the sense of protohistory and

[54] Rizvi (2013) 143; Ogundiran (2013); Frederickson (2000) 95.

[55] Trabert (2018).

[56] Lichardus and Lichardus-Itten (1985); Otte (2008).

[57] Bietti Sestieri (1996) 15–16. The beginning of protohistory is also often placed in the Bronze Age on the non-Aegean large Mediterranean islands. Sardinia: Bernardini (2020). Sicily: Mentesana and Fragnoli (2020). Cyprus: Iacovou (2008); Knapp (2013). For the difficulty defining prehistory, protohistory and history in Bronze Age–EIA Cyprus with regard to written sources and Hellenocentrism: Knapp (2008) 298–99.

[58] Bietti Sestieri (1996) 18–32.

[59] Papadopoulos (2018) 693. *Cf.* Hawkes (1954).

[60] *Cf.* Fabian (1983).

[61] Techniques such as radiocarbon dating have increasingly been used to refine and synchronize local ceramic chronologies across the broader Mediterranean region, in additional to more critical comparisons of the archaeological and textual data regarding colonial foundations: Donnellan et al. (2016).

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the need for historical specificity in this case is bound up in text-driven discourses around colonial interactions.[62]

The process of contact between non-literate and literate societies is therefore central to the concept of protohistory. Embedded in the construction of this concept is a strong sense of centre–periphery superiority indicated by both literacy and a Western-style 'objective' historical tradition.[63] Also important to the idea of protohistory is the indirectness of the textual evidence, although whether the production of texts was carried out geographically or chronologically distant from the society they describe varies. Thus, since Linear B texts found in Mycenaean palatial settings provide direct evidence for Mycenaean societies and economies, the LBA (at least in palatial settings with excavated archives) could be considered historical, but would not fit definitions of protohistory.[64] In settings labelled as protohistoric, the interpretive tension lies between *indirect* textual evidence and *direct* archaeological evidence, since the former is typically given at least equal authoritative or explanatory weight.

Besides framing interactions on the margins of the Greek world in the Archaic and Classical periods, protohistory has also been applied as a label to the EIA Aegean, often without technical definition. In this sense, its application in the Greek world is a chronological departure from its use in the rest of Europe and the Mediterranean, where protohistory starts in the Bronze Age and narratives of rupture at the beginning of the EIA are not as marked. Indeed, protohistory does not always even apply to the entirety of the EIA in the Greek world, but only to later phases that can be associated with the textualization of the Homeric epics.[65] A recent symptomatic example of this pattern is Alex Knodell's differentiation between the Prehistoric EIA (1050–800 BCE) and Protohistoric EIA (800–700/650 BCE), and his general consideration of protohistory as a sort of middle ground between prehistory and history.[66] He defines the Protohistoric EIA both through the rapid growth visible in the archaeological record in central Greece and the reappearance of writing primarily in the form of the Homeric texts. He uses the label protohistoric rather than historic because of the oral past and mythological nature of the texts in question and because 'the societies of early Greece … did not produce intentional histories, and the documentary record they did leave behind does not compare well with sources available to historians of the Archaic period (seventh to sixth centuries BCE) onward'.[67] This statement epitomizes a common desire not just for texts-as-phenomena but texts-as-records as a criterion for the division of prehistory, protohistory and history, despite acknowledging the importance of the former for encapsulating the spirit of the age. In this sense, 'Early Greece' and 'protohistory' as applied to the Greek EIA overlap as heuristic categories in archaeological scholarship as well as in historical and philological publications.

I therefore argue that we often frame the Greek EIA as a chronological (rather than geographical or cultural) periphery of 'Greece' proper, when viewed through the lens of conceptualizations of protohistory and 'Early Greece' outlined above.[68] This framing reinforces the role of the EIA as a bridge between the prehistory of the Bronze Age and the

[62] *Cf.* Tsetskhladze and Hargrave (2011).

[63] Also bound up in this are Western conceptions of time, temporal epistemology and positionality: Fabian (1983) 2–35, 95–97, 122, 143–45.

[64] Taylor (2008) 6–7; Papadopoulos (2018) 694–95. Shelmerdine (2010b) 15 delineates prehistory from history more as a set of methodologies and as an intellectual project than as an evidentiary division. See Konstantinou (2021) 65–68 for modern Greek pedagogical applications of 'protohistory' to the Mycenaeans in a nationalistic historical framework.

[65] *Cf.* Polychronopoulou (1999) 15–17.

[66] Knodell (2021) 7, 11–12, 253.

[67] Knodell (2021) 13.

[68] *Cf.* Snodgrass (1987) 39.

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history proper of the Archaic period onwards. The effect of using a label that inherently prioritizes (historically unreliable) textual evidence has been to continue to position EIA archaeology as a prologue to Classical archaeology and ancient history, however, rather than as a continuation of prehistory, and to centre the developments of the eighth and seventh centuries. The lack of literacy throughout most of the EIA can therefore still be viewed as something of a shortcoming, a major factor in the period's original label as a Dark Age.[69] The solution to this problem, especially for historians, has been the continued authority of Homer for the period, which allows the disciplinary centre of the (textual) Archaic and Classical periods to extend back into the earlier phase.[70]

As recently discussed by Oliver Dickinson, the Homeric epics (and Greek mytho-historical 'tradition' more broadly) are not reliable texts in any real historical or ethnographic sense.[71] More narrowly, consensus holds that the Homeric epics do not have a one-to-one relationship with the archaeological record of the EIA or with the social lived experiences of that time period.[72] 'Homeric archaeology' as it was previously practised, whether applied to the LBA or the EIA, is therefore now frowned upon in scholarship as old-fashioned and overly literal in its approach to textual and material records.[73] At the same time, however, the Homeric label remains a popular reference point in titles of publications about the archaeological record and material culture of the EIA (notable examples include Susan Langdon's *From Pasture to* Polis*: Art in the Age of Homer* and Sigrid Deger-Jalkotsy and Lemos' *Ancient Greece: From the Mycenaean Palaces to the Age of Homer*).[74] As with 'Early Greece', there may be technical discomfort with the Homeric label, and the term may not appear often or at all in individual contributions in collected volumes, but it remains a popular shorthand for titles; it conjures up a particular set of ahistorical associations and expectations for potential readers.[75]

I argue that this sense of a familiar ethos induced by Homeric references, more than any technical disciplinary arguments over periodization, is at the heart of the popular conceptualization of 'Early Greece' and is a major driver of the ongoing discord over its classificatory or taxonomic force. Here the tension between text and material culture is both clearest and most difficult to unravel. I am confident in saying that everyone who publishes on 'Early Greece' and the majority of those reading such publications will have read or otherwise consumed Homer in some form, given the primacy of these texts both within the field and across the broader Western canon. For readers of 'Early Greece' publications based on textual material, whether philological or historical, familiarity with the Homeric texts is often enough, as these publications tend to focus on the internal society of the poems and essentially recreate 'Early Greece' within their ahistorical boundaries. On the material side, however, only a subset of these Homer-literate readers will be as familiar with the archaeological record(s) of the 14th to sixth centuries BCE. The familiarity of the Homeric texts and their internal society therefore serves a narrative function for non-specialist audiences: to fill in a fragmented and regionalized archaeological landscape and to render the EIA and even the early Archaic period more relatable across disciplinary and periodic boundaries. This is not to dismiss the ongoing importance of the Homeric texts in modern approaches to the material and historical parameters of the EIA and Archaic period, but to point to the ways in which the society of these poems (whose questionable historicity but unquestioned protohistoricity has

[69] Snodgrass (1971) 2; Papadopoulos (2014) 181; Kotsonas (2016) 241–42.

[70] See also Vlassopoulos (2007) 3–4, 15 on the modern naturalization of the *polis* as an institutional centre around which Greek history can be organized.

[71] Dickinson (2020).

[72] Sherratt and Bennet (2017).

[73] Kotsonas (2018); Abell (2020).

[74] Langdon (1993); Deger-Jalkotsy and Lemos (2006).

[75] *Cf.* Kotsonas (2020) 88.

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spawned its own dedicated corpus of scholarship) has been used to reinforce the unexamined periodization of 'Early Greece'.

These overlapping chrono-mytho-historical categories (protohistory, Homeric Greece and 'Early Greece') are anti-localizing and essentializing in nature: they serve to recreate a larger and more generic chrono-spatial unit than the individual archaeological stratum or even the geographical region, although they exist in an often uneasy relationship with real geographical space and measured time. There are no stratigraphically defined phases that are labelled as 'protohistoric' or 'Homeric' in the archaeological record at individual sites within the Greek world of which I am aware and 'Early Greece' is by nature a chronologically non-specific unit, as demonstrated above. These labels are thus almost impossible to apply usefully on a local scale, especially within the diverse archaeological landscape of the LBA–Archaic Aegean.[76] As such, they serve to paper over some of the gaps that exist between textual and material evidence in these periods and to elide discussions of the authority or compatibility of different types of testimonia.[77] This broadness means that 'Early Greece' remains an under-defined cultural unit that is distanced from (although not unconnected to) the specificities of language use, artistic styles or ethnic identity in the 14th to sixth centuries BCE. What is left unspoken is a definition of what it meant to be Greek or the boundaries of 'Greece' as a cultural unit before the Archaic period.

## V. Down with Early Greece?

The use of the phrase 'Early Greece' in scholarship demonstrates that, while there are clear disciplinary inconsistencies in its chronological application and its beginnings, it perpetuates a shared vision of the progression of ancient Greece towards the Classical. Attempting to clarify the parameters and the associated network of chrono-historical vocabulary of the phrase shows that this vision remains in many ways a teleological one that is embedded in our habitual periodizations.

Names shape the categories that they describe. 'Early Greece' or 'Early Greek' is not only a classificatory or taxonomic label to be utilized like other imposed modern chrono-cultural-geographical labels indicating an initial stage of development (to return to 'Protocorinthian'). Such terms are also teleological in that they anticipate a further developmental phase and as such reinforce meta-narratives of progress, but they at least denote a bounded stylistic phase with agreed-upon chronological limits that can be cross-referenced with other regional material forms and stylistic chronologies. 'Early Greece' also has much vaguer boundaries than increasingly debated cultural labels like 'Mycenaean' that are problematic as ethnic or social categories but which still have commonly understood material correlates: 'Mycenaean Greece' is a modern construct that becomes increasingly nebulous outside of palatial centres, but as a shorthand it continues to have taxonomic meaning for archaeologists and historians.[78] 'Early Greece', in contrast, has no such prescribed chronological, stylistic, geographical or material boundaries. Thus, there are also no boundaries placed on what it is to be Greek in 'Early Greece' without reference to later definitions. While the increasing use of 'Early Greece' by archaeologists in particular to bridge the LBA–EIA gap may serve to smooth out any divisive boundaries between the two periods and to emphasize continuities over ruptures, it also presents another set of historically retrograde implications for cultural periodizations.

[76] An exception that perhaps proves the rule is Coulson's use of 'Dark Ages' as a stratigraphical phasing label at Nichoria in order to counter the stylistic, cultural and chronological challenges posed by trying to apply more widespread (but often Athenocentric) periodic labels (LH IIIC, Protogeometric, etc.) to a 'peripheral' region: Coulson (1990); Kotsonas (2016) 258–59; Duray (2020) 314–22.

[77] Foxhall (2018) 679.

[78] The problem of 'Mycenaean': Nakassis (2021). *Cf.* Kramer-Hajos (2016) 66.

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I see three possible solutions to this problem, all with their strengths and drawbacks, which address different aspects of the broader epistemological knot at the core of 'Early Greece'. The first is to stop using the phrase altogether, and instead only use established chronological phase terminology with greater classificatory and temporal clarity (such as LBA, EIA, Archaic, along with their subphases). This action would not affect the content or the impact of such publications since, as demonstrated by the bibliographical case study above, the majority of authors who use 'Early Greece' in their title do not use it in their text and furthermore separately define the time period and cultural sphere under investigation. This move also allows for the full integration of Aegean sequences into broader Mediterranean chronological and narrative schemata, thereby facilitating more interregional investigation of the archaeological and textual records. Removing the malleable 'Early Greece' from use would therefore have the effect of increasing the clarity of chronological and disciplinary frameworks in publications. This suggested step rids us of the immediate problem of chronological definitions. Unless authors also begin to consistently include explicit rationales for not using the phrase in publications (which seems unlikely to catch on as a sustained practice), however, this solution does not provide an intellectual challenge to or replacement of the old underlying master narrative of a post-Bronze Age emergent Greece.

At the heart of the vagueness of 'Early Greece' is the problem of both defining Greece and what it means to label some*thing*/some*time*/some*one* as 'Greek' before the late Archaic period. 'Early Greece', in this sense, is a narrative entity rather than a measurable phase or geographical place. A second, more polemical, solution to the problem of 'Early Greece' is therefore to continue its use, with the caveat that authors should not only define its chronological boundaries but also specify their other working parameters of both Greece and Greekness during this time period (material, linguistic, geographical, etc.), thereby providing it with some sort of testable taxonomic meaning.[79] The difficulty of articulating what, specifically, is meant by 'Greek' in modern scholarship about the Bronze and Iron ages and even earlier parts of the Archaic period is a major stumbling block for moving beyond the Eurocentric master narratives of ancient Greece, especially in terms of conceptualizing continuities between phases. This is a project that no one has effectively taken on to date and is one that is separate from, if connected to, previous work on the development of ancient collective Hellenic identities.[80] A collective push to articulate individual working definitions and boundaries, however partial they may be in any given publication, will therefore provide a better foundation for future intellectual responses to our collective imagining of the trajectory of Greece in scholarship and pedagogy, whether they include better consensus about the practical use of this common shorthand or its rejection and subsequent search for better terminology. This is, essentially, a call to crowdsource a concrete definition of how we should frame the identity of Aegean populations before the late Archaic period without anachronism, placing the region and the time period within its broader Mediterranean context.

A third, even more polemical, suggestion is to address the close relationship between 'Early Greece' and the EIA-as-prototextual-protohistory by bringing the chronological usage of the term protohistory in the Aegean into alignment with the rest of the Mediterranean and pushing its application back into the Bronze Age. A more self-evident move would be to argue for a strenuous reclassification of the EIA as prehistory and thus marry it more closely to the subdiscipline of Bronze Age archaeology in the Aegean.[81] Suggesting an uncomfortable periodizing move in the opposite direction, however, unlikely as it is to be implemented in practice, serves to highlight the inconsistencies between current *archaeological* practices of

[79] On the purpose of polemic: Fabian (1983) 153. See also Lucas (2017).
[80] See Hall (2002).
[81] Papadopoulos (2018) 691.

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unearthing the EIA and the *historiographical* and *disciplinary* terms in which we narrativize it. This suggestion will likely not go over well with Aegean prehistorians in particular, who may see it as a threatened encroachment of Classical archaeology into their subdiscipline. It is meant, however, to prompt reflection about disciplinary structures in the study of different parts of the Bronze Age Mediterranean, particularly the western Mediterranean, by sparking debate over the exact criteria for defining phases as prehistoric or protohistoric and about the relative authority of textual versus archaeological evidence in creating periodizations. Within the Aegean, it would also result in a further softening of the period and disciplinary divide between the LBA and EIA. In periodizing terms, extending protohistory back into the Bronze Age would result in further supporting the current trend in archaeological scholarship of placing the beginning of 'Early Greece' in the LBA and emphasizing continuity over rupture, although it would not erase the teleological connotations of either term.

A final closing thought about the impact of this topic: uncritical repetition of teleological terminology such as 'Early Greece' in specialist writing encourages an inertia of entrenched frameworks of thought about the entity of 'ancient Greece' that makes systemic change difficult in the non-specialist realm, despite the admitted usefulness of accessible terminology. Patterns formed in undergraduate classrooms and textbooks and other texts written for general audiences that we consume as students exist in a circular, self-reinforcing relationship with professional research and scholarship. The simplistic concept of 'Greece' and, by extension, of 'Early Greece' is one that does not have much technical emic meaning in an ancient Mediterranean world characterized by porous political, geographical and ethnic boundaries, but is still one that is embedded in tacitly (and sometimes not-so-tacitly) understood disciplinary boundaries that are set in curricular decisions. Defining 'Early Greece', even on a piecemeal basis in future publications, is a concrete step towards rethinking how and why we pedagogically frame Classical Greece for the next generations of students and scholars.

**Supplementary material.** To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426925100281

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