



1 GREECE IN THE BRONZE AGE

Historians refer to the period that immediately succeeded the Minoan as the “Mycenaean Period,” or the period in which “Mycenaean” civilization was dominant in mainland Greece and the Aegean. We saw above that the term “Minoan civilization” is a modern confection created with ingredients deriving from ancient Greek myth. The same is true of the name of Mycenaean civilization, which is derived from the name of the city of Mycenae. Archeological excavation at the site of Mycenae, on mainland Greece, has revealed that it possessed considerable wealth and power in the period beginning in about 1700 BC. But the same can be said of some other mainland Greek cities at this time. The reason Mycenae has been singled out to provide a name for this period of prosperity is that Agamemnon, the mythical king of Mycenae, was supposed to have been the leader of the Greek forces in the Trojan War. According to the poet Homer, Mycenae sent a larger contingent of troops to fight at Troy than any other Greek city. Accordingly, we now refer to this earliest period of Greek civilization as “Mycenaean.”

The Greeks Speak Up

It is legitimate to refer to this as a period of *Greek* civilization because, as we will see, the people who lived in Mycenae and other cities of mainland Greece at this time were Greek speakers. Mycenaean civilization, then, was the earliest expression of Greek culture for which we have any evidence and it was located primarily in the settlements of mainland Greece, in contrast to the Cycladic and Minoan civilizations, which were non-Greek or pre-Greek civilizations of the Aegean islands. No written records remain from Cycladic civilization, but the people of Minoan Crete used the form of writing, mentioned in the foreword, known as Linear A. The Linear A tablets record the language of administration in Minoan Crete, and that language was apparently not Greek. There is evidence, however, that by the fourteenth century BC the language of administration at Cnossus either had become or was well on the way to becoming Greek. It is possible to account for this change in a number of different ways, but the most attractive explanation is that control of the palace at Cnossus (and of the palaces elsewhere on Crete) had passed into the hands of a different group of people, people from the mainland who spoke Greek.



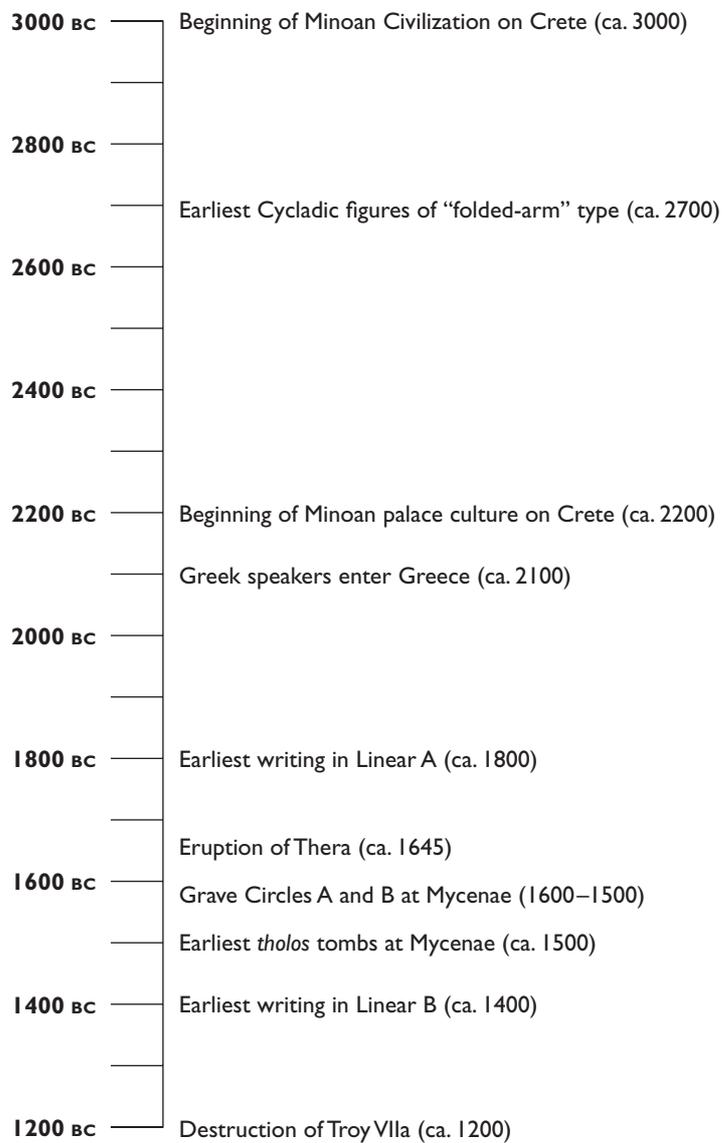
Greek is a member of the Indo-European family of languages, a family that comprises a number of languages spoken by peoples who inhabited Europe and Asia. The Celtic, Germanic, Baltic, and Slavic languages are examples of European branches of the Indo-European family, while Sanskrit, Persian, and Hittite are Indo-European languages spoken in Asia. There is evidence of considerable movement of peoples who spoke Indo-European languages in the period around 2000 BC, and it is widely believed that it was in connection with this movement that Greek speakers migrated into mainland Greece at roughly this time. Archeological evidence exists that seems to be consistent with the appearance in Greece of a new group, or new groups, of people in the centuries just before about 2000 BC, but the evidence is difficult to interpret and not all scholars are convinced that it necessarily points to a large-scale movement of people. The character of the artifacts that archeologists have uncovered in mainland Greece from this period exhibits significant differences from the immediately preceding period, and several sites on the mainland have revealed evidence of destruction at this time. But the destruction is not universal, nor does it follow a neat pattern that might suggest the gradual progress of a new, belligerent population. If this is the period in which the Greeks first made their home in mainland Greece, it appears that we should think not so much in terms of a hostile invasion as a steady infiltration that resulted, here and there, in localized outbreaks of violence.

If this is, indeed, the time when the Greeks first entered Greece, it was at about the time when the Cycladic civilization had passed its artistic prime and the Minoan civilization was just entering upon its prime. What then happened to the earlier populations of Greece and the islands when the Greek-speaking population entered the region? Clearly they did not simply disappear, their place being taken by a new group of inhabitants. For one thing, the Linear A tablets show that the non-Greek language of Crete continued as the language of administration until around the middle of the second millennium. If the Greeks had driven out the earlier inhabitants or killed them off (for which, in any event, we have no evidence in the archeological record), the language would have disappeared as well. In fact, communities of people who spoke a non-Greek language are said to have existed on Crete a thousand years after Minoan civilization had come to an end. So it seems inevitable that Greek speakers and non-Greek speakers coexisted for an extended period of time. Eventually the Greek language prevailed over the other language or languages, but recognition of that fact does not help us to know what happened to the people who had been speakers of some language other than Greek. Presumably they and their descendants learned Greek and became themselves Greek speakers. Also, presumably, they intermarried with the newly arrived Greek speakers, so that the later population of Greece was a mixture, with any given individual increasingly likely, in the passage of time, to have among his or her ancestors members of both groups.

Along with the Linear A tablets, mentioned above, archeologists have also uncovered over five thousand tablets written in a script that is later than and different from Linear A. This script, called "Linear B," is clearly derived from Linear A and is, therefore, its lineal descendant, so to speak. Tablets in the Linear B script have been



GREECE IN THE BRONZE AGE



Timeline 2 The Bronze Age in Greece.

found on Crete and in a few locations on the mainland, dating from the end of the fourteenth to the beginning of the twelfth century BC. While the Linear A tablets record a language that is almost certainly not Greek, the Linear B tablets represent the earliest evidence in written form of the Greek language. We know this as a result of a brilliant feat of decipherment by the British architect and amateur linguist Michael Ventris. In 1952 the 30-year-old Ventris showed that the Linear B tablets

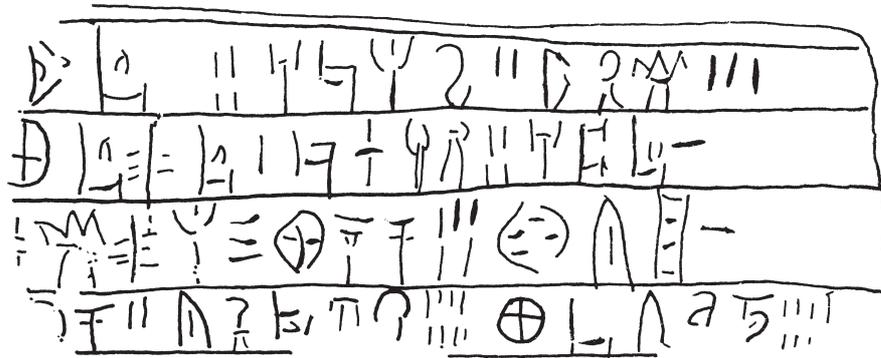


Figure 6 Linear B tablet Ue 611 from Mycenae, ca. 1200 BC. The four lines of text read (from left to right):

ku-pe-ra 4 *a-po-re-we* 2 *pe-ri-ke* 3
ka-ra-te-ra 1 *po-ro-ko-wo* 4 *a-ta-ra* 10
pa-ke-te-re 30 *ka-na-to* 5 *qe-ti-ja* 10
qe-to 2 *ti-ri-po-di-ko* 8 *ka-ra-ti-ri-jo* 7

Drawing reproduced with the permission of the Istituto di studi sulle Civiltà dell'Egeo e del Vicino Oriente (CNR) from A. Sacconi, *Corpus delle iscrizioni in lineare B di Micene*, Incunabula Graeca 58 (Rome 1974), p. 60.

are a record of an early form of Greek. Linear B is a syllabary, a system of writing in which each symbol represents a syllable, like *do re mi*. Some languages, like modern Japanese, are well suited to representation by a syllabary; some, like English, are not. So, for example, the Japanese syllabary requires three symbols to represent the monosyllabic English word “golf”: *go-ru-fu*. Greek is like English in this regard, and the Linear B script rather awkwardly represents the Greek language. This is understandable, since Linear B is derived from Linear A, which was designed to represent a language unrelated to Greek. We can see this in the Linear B tablet shown in figure 6, which gives an inventory of vessels and other household items of various sorts. The first word in line 2, for example, is a form of the Greek word *KRATER*, “mixing bowl” (the origin of the English word “crater”), in the Linear B script, here represented by the four syllabic signs having the value *ka-ra-te-ra*. Line 4 records the fact that eight *TRIPODS* are on hand, giving a form of the Greek word *tripodiskos* as *ti-ri-po-di-ko*. (Words printed in small capitals, like *KRATER* and *TRIPOD* above, can be found in the glossary at the back of this book.) It should be noted that all forms of writing are merely approximations of a spoken language. We will see later that the Greeks eventually came to use a more satisfactory system of writing than Linear B, but the system they came to use was not (and is not) identical with the Roman alphabet used in this book. For this reason, Greek words and Greek names will appear in this book according to a conventional, but by no means universal, system of transliteration. So, for example, the names that have appeared above in the forms “Cnossus,” “Menelaus,” and “Athena” may be found in other books written in



English according to a different (and perfectly acceptable) system as “Knossos,” “Menelaos,” and “Athene.”

The Emergence of Mycenaean Civilization

Mycenaean civilization developed within the context of and shows the pervasive influence of the Minoan civilization that it supplanted. Still, there are prominent differences in the character of the two civilizations. The point of transition, however, between the two periods is not at all well defined. It seems that the replacement of Minoan culture by Mycenaean was the result of a gradual transformation rather than a sudden overthrow. That is not to say that the transition was peaceful and without incident. In fact, there is evidence in the archeological record of varying degrees of destruction among the Minoan palaces of Crete in the years following 1500 BC. Mycenaean control of locations on the mainland began some time before 1500 BC, and we may date the Mycenaean Period as beginning around 1600 BC and lasting until roughly 1200 BC.

The Minoan civilization that the Greek-speaking newcomers encountered was well organized and relatively prosperous. The large palaces on Crete represented the centers of administration, trade, and perhaps religious activity as well. This manner of centralized authority, located in a substantial palace, was adopted by the Greek-speaking Mycenaeans, although there were some very important differences. While Minoan palaces were unfortified and were built in an open area that allowed for expansion, the mainland palaces constructed by Mycenaean Greeks were heavily fortified and occupied high ground overlooking a plain. Most impressive is the palace at Tiryns, which occupies the crest of a low outcropping of rock in the middle of a plain. The fortifications, made of massive blocks of stone, are in some places as much as 8 meters in thickness (figure 7). This kind of fortified palace was common on the mainland, at places like Mycenae and Argos, located near Tiryns in the Peloponnese, and Athens and Thebes, located to the north (map 2). The heavy fortification of the palaces has given rise to much speculation regarding the identity of the enemy against whom these walls were intended to protect the inhabitants. It is usually assumed either that the Mycenaean cities were constantly at war with one another or were fearful of invasion by outsiders. There is, however, yet another possibility, namely that these massive fortifications were constructed for display, as a conspicuous assertion of power, rather than for any practical strategic purposes. This may seem implausible, but the construction of such fortifications would seem to require a protracted period of freedom from outside interference. The “Cold War” of the late twentieth century illustrates the fact that nations can persuade themselves to expend vast resources on “defense” even in the absence of any verifiable threat of attack from outside.

The suggestion that Mycenaean fortifications were intended as much for show as for protection may be incorrect (and may be contradicted by considerations to be presented below), but the Mycenaean Greeks’ fondness for impressive display is

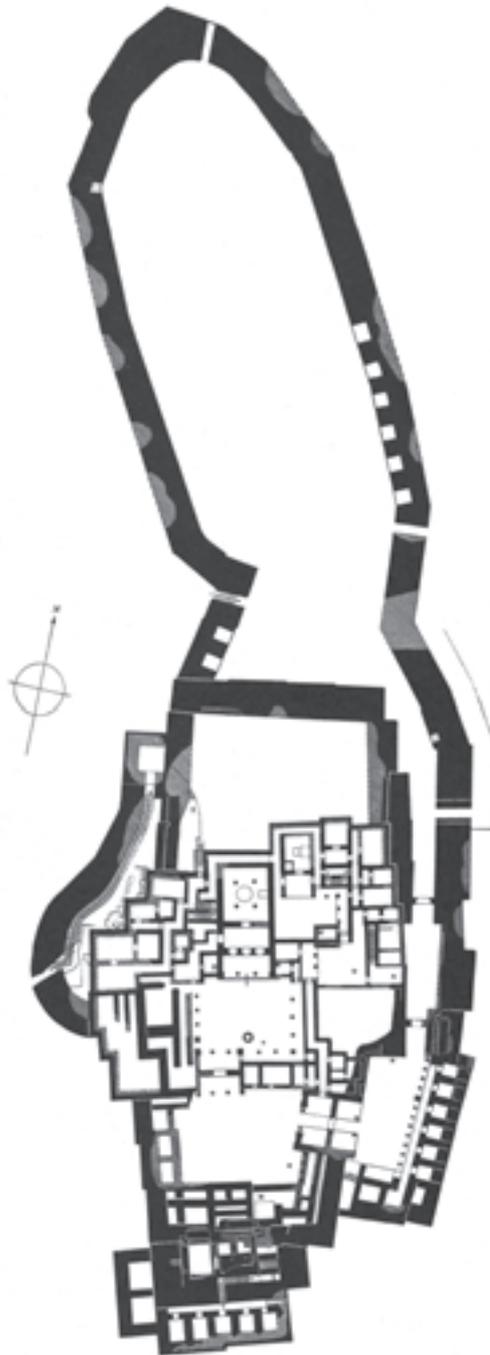


Figure 7 Plan, drawn by Heinrich Sulze, of the Mycenaean palace at Tiryns, thirteenth century BC. Reproduced from K. Müller, *Tiryns: Die Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen des Instituts III* (Augsburg 1930), Tafel 4.



GREECE IN THE BRONZE AGE



Map 2 Mainland Greece.

paralleled by another aspect of their culture, one which again serves to distinguish them from their Minoan predecessors. The people of Crete, during the Minoan Period and even during the Mycenaean Period, buried their dead in rather undistinguished communal graves. These graves took a variety of forms, but the deceased were generally buried in simple fashion, sometimes in a container and sometimes just laid on the floor of the tomb, with few grave goods or, in many instances, with none at all. The contrast presented by Mycenaean burial practice is great, and begins quite early in the Mycenaean Period. Dating to the period between about 1600 and 1500 BC are two circular burial plots at Mycenae. One, which was excavated in the 1950s, contains twenty-four graves while the other contains only six graves, but the spectacularly lavish manner in which the deceased, undoubtedly members of the Mycenaean royal family, were buried made this the richest find of grave goods in the Greek world.

This burial plot, known as “Grave Circle A,” was discovered in 1876 by the pioneering figure in the archeology of prehistoric Greece, Heinrich Schliemann. In fact, the site of Mycenae was the first in Greece to be subjected to modern



archeological excavation. Schliemann was encouraged to explore the site of Mycenae by his success a few years previously, when he excavated the remains of Troy. He had been impressed by the vividness of Homer's descriptions of the landscape and topography of Troy, which convinced him that Homer was accurately describing a real location. His conviction seemed to be confirmed when he uncovered the remains of a prosperous prehistoric city. That the city revealed unmistakable evidence of having been overrun by attackers and destroyed by fire at one point in its history proved to Schliemann that Homer's account of events was as reliable as his descriptions of locations. For Schliemann, this was the destruction inflicted on Troy by the victorious Greek forces at the conclusion of the Trojan War, whose historicity could no longer be doubted. Inspired by this apparent confirmation of his faith in Homer's trustworthiness, Schliemann began digging at Mycenae, the home of king Agamemnon, which Homer describes as "abounding in gold." What Schliemann discovered in his excavation of Mycenae satisfied both his exalted opinion of Homer's historical accuracy and his craving for valuable treasures. Among the objects unearthed in Grave Circle A was a series of gold death masks, one of which Schliemann proclaimed "the death mask of Agamemnon." As it happens, the burials in Grave Circle A date to a time some hundreds of years before the traditional time of the Trojan War, in which Agamemnon is supposed to have participated.

Schliemann's discoveries, therefore, do not provide exactly the sort of confirmation that he had hoped to find (and thought that he *had* found), but they do reveal the considerable power and prosperity that Mycenae and its rulers enjoyed in the middle of the second millennium BC. In addition to the death masks of gold foil that were found placed over the faces of some of the men (but none of the women) buried in the grave circles, other valuable objects in large quantities were placed in the tombs. These objects include elaborately decorated drinking vessels of gold, silver, and bronze, ceramic and stoneware vases, jewelry, and weapons of war. These burial goods are impressive (and were intended to impress) not only by reason of their quantity and their value, but also because they represent the extent of these Mycenaean rulers' connections outside of mainland Greece. The jewelry in these tombs, for example, includes quantities of amber beads, which can only have found their way to Mycenae as a result of trade with the inhabitants of northern Europe. Some of the stoneware and ceramic vessels are of Cretan origin; others are from the Cyclades. The metalwork is so strongly reminiscent of Minoan craftsmanship that much of it was likely imported from Minoan Crete.

Some of the grave goods – particularly the large number of weapons, elaborately inlaid in gold, silver, and lapis lazuli – are likely to have been made to order for the Mycenaean rulers by craftsmen brought in from elsewhere, namely from Crete or even from the Near East. The reason for this assumption, that skilled workers were brought in from outside to create luxury items for the Mycenaean rulers, is that, while the craftsmanship of these items is paralleled elsewhere, the nature of the decoration is often specifically designed for Mycenaean tastes. And those tastes run very largely in the direction of scenes of warfare and hunting (figure 8). This fact,



Figure 8 Limestone stele (grave marker) from Grave Circle A at Mycenae, with scene of warfare or hunting; height 1.33 m, 1550–1500 BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, 1428.



Figure 9 Early Minoan ceramic jar from Phaistos; height 50 cm, seventeenth or eighteenth century BC. Archaeological Museum of Herakleion.

along with the presence of large numbers of weapons in the early Mycenaean burials and the imposing fortifications by which Mycenae, Tiryns, and other mainland cities were protected, gives the strong impression that warfare and wild-beast hunts dominated the life of the Mycenaean Greeks. This impression is further strengthened by the contrast with the apparently peaceable character of Minoan art. For, while scenes of conflict, both human and animal, do appear in the art of the Minoan Period, Minoan art is overwhelmingly concerned to depict what appear to be scenes of religious ritual, lively representations of marine life (figure 9), and athletic activity, including the ubiquitous bull-leaping scenes, with acrobatic young men gracefully somersaulting over the backs of charging bulls.

This contrast between peace-loving Minoans and warlike Mycenaean appears to be confirmed by the fact that, by the middle of the fifteenth century BC, the Greek-speaking Mycenaean came to be in control of the Cretan palaces, as is proved by the replacement of Minoan Linear A by Linear B for administrative purposes. The picture that we want to construct from all this evidence is one of violent



overthrow of Minoan society by less civilized invading Greek speakers, who assumed control of the Cretan palace society and were in turn strongly influenced by the culturally and artistically advanced civilization that they had come to rule. This is a satisfying picture, and is consistent with most of the evidence that we have. It is, therefore, likely to be a reasonably accurate picture.

Yet it is interesting to note (and fruitful to think about) how we form these pictures. As we have seen, the incentive to excavate at sites like Mycenae and Troy was provided by the desire to find tangible evidence that might validate an already existing account, namely the Homeric poems. Since that time archeologists have made great advances, not only in the basic techniques of their discipline, such as developing more sophisticated and accurate methods of dating, but also in their conception of the role of the discipline. It is no longer felt, as it was in Schliemann's day, that the archeologist's agenda is set by the narrative provided by the more well-established literary and historical approaches that dominated the study of ancient Greece in the nineteenth century. Rather, the archeologist makes use of the available physical evidence to construct an account that is often more detailed and complex than the narrative preferred by others. And archeologists have exercised considerable ingenuity both in interpreting the available evidence and in making new evidence available even in the most unpromising situations. For example, virtually all perishable items have, understandably, perished, so that many of the most commonly used objects of everyday life, like food and fabrics and wooden furniture, have not survived for us to consider. But it is sometimes possible to detect impressions made by fabric on ceramics before they were fired, or the shape of wooden structural elements can sometimes be inferred from the indentations they have left in plastered walls. Even the presence of fruits and other plants can be deduced from the painstaking analysis of the remains of seeds and pollen.

Still, the evidence available to us is necessarily partial, and often it is the specific cultural practices of a particular ancient society that help determine what evidence, and what types of evidence, are likely to survive. Mention was made above of the survival of great quantities of grave goods, particularly metal items, in the grave circles of sixteenth-century Mycenae. One of the reasons these items survived for Schliemann and other, later researchers to find was precisely the fact that they were buried along with the deceased. Metal in the ancient world is of great value, both for its decorative qualities and for its practical usefulness. Objects of metal that were not buried could be used and reused in antiquity. Sometimes this reuse took the form of melting down an object in order to create a new object of an entirely different nature or of beating swords into plowshares (or vice versa), thus obscuring for us the nature of the original object. Therefore a culture that, like the Mycenaean, adheres to the practice of placing lavish grave goods in its burials will ensure that those goods survive for archeologists (or tomb robbers) to retrieve, while a culture like the Minoan, which engages in more modest burial practices, will allow chance to play a much greater role in determining what is likely to survive.



The Character of Mycenaean Civilization

The Mycenaean Greeks were determined to leave little to chance, at least when it came to the burial of their rulers. Toward the end of the sixteenth century BC, the rulers of Mycenae began to be buried in a new style of tomb that allowed them to display their power and influence even more impressively than had been the case with the earlier grave circles. At this time, both at Mycenae and elsewhere in Mycenaean Greece, a tomb shaped like a beehive came to be used. This type of tomb is referred to by archeologists as a “*tholos*” tomb, from the Greek word for “dome” or “vault.” Like the grave circles, these *tholos* tombs were intended to serve as the repositories for the dead along with exceptionally lavish burial goods. At the same time, the size and appearance of the *tholos* tombs alone were enough to make a statement of overwhelming power and magnificence. Constructed, like the fortification walls of the citadel, of massive blocks of stone, these *tholos* tombs represent the largest space enclosed by a single span before the Pantheon was built by the Romans in the second century after Christ. The largest of the *tholos* tombs, the so-called Treasury of Atreus at Mycenae, dating probably from the thirteenth century BC, is nearly 15 meters in diameter and about the same size in height (figure 10). The tomb had a magnificent facade and was approached by a long and impressive passageway. The entire structure was built into the side of a hill (figure 11), so that the monument to this deceased king of Mycenae gives the impression of being at the same time a part of the natural world and an awesome display of one individual’s authority.

But at whom is this display directed? Who is expected to feel awe at the sight of so impressive a monument? In the case of the massive fortifications of Mycenae and other mainland cities it is easy to imagine that the inhabitants intended to impress outsiders and to discourage, if not actually to thwart, their attempts at attack. Such an explanation is not so readily available in the case of lavish and monumental burials (which, on the contrary, only invite and entice tomb robbers), and it seems more likely that these splendid tombs were designed to inspire awe among the local inhabitants. One of the features of Mycenaean society, which is most clearly visible in its burial customs, is the competitive, almost obsessive, display of wealth in the form of material goods, especially metal objects. These goods are clearly a mark of status, and even the meanest burials among the Mycenaean Greeks are provided with some grave goods, if only a small ceramic vessel or two. But no one was able to compete with those who were buried in the largest and most magnificent of the *tholos* tombs. That, in fact, would seem to be the point. These tombs, and perhaps the citadel-like palaces as well, are conspicuous markers of social and economic superiority within Mycenaean society. This insistence upon the clear demarcation of levels of status is one of the features that serves to distinguish Mycenaean from Minoan civilization. That is not to say that Minoan society was somehow more egalitarian than Mycenaean, or that material resources were more evenly distributed.



Figure 10 Interior of *tholos* tomb at Mycenae, called the “Treasury of Atreus,” thirteenth century BC. Photo: Hirmer Fotoarchiv (Archiv-Nr. 592.0226).

In fact we have very little evidence for the nature of Minoan society. Nevertheless, it is clear from the burial practices of the Mycenaean Greeks that those at the upper levels of Mycenaean society went to extraordinary lengths to distinguish themselves from the rest.

Thanks to the evidence of the Mycenaean Linear B tablets, we are even in a position to identify some of the terminology used to distinguish various levels of Mycenaean administration. It should be remembered, however, that since the tablets do not provide any kind of narrative, we are very much in the dark as to the details of the relationships among the various holders of these titles. The individual most

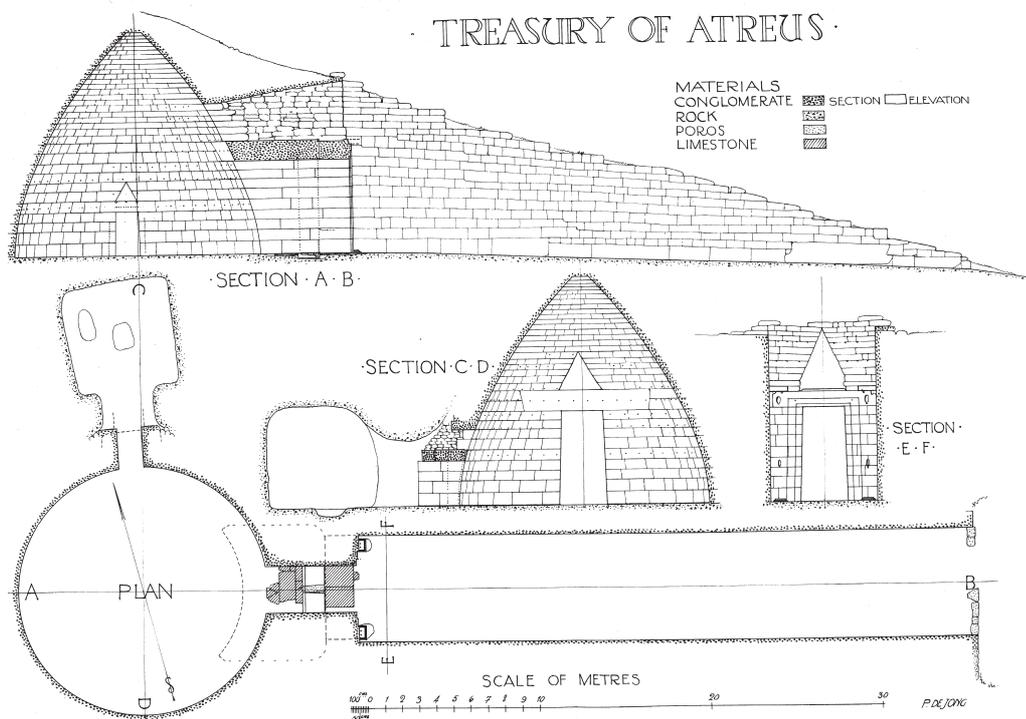


Figure 11 “Treasury of Atreus,” plan and sections, drawn by Piet de Jong. Reproduced from A. J. B. Wace, *Mycenae: An Archaeological History and Guide* (Princeton 1949), ill. 5.

to be envied, apparently, in the hierarchy of Mycenaean society is the person identified in the tablets from Cnossus and Pylos as *wa-na-ka*, a title corresponding to the word *anax* (originally *wanax*) in Classical Greek. *Anax* is a word meaning “lord,” and is applied in Homer, for example, to kings and gods. Mycenaean *wa-na-ka* is found in the tablets as a title, without the name of the person to whom the title is applied, and presumably refers to the king. There is one king at Pylos and one king at Cnossus, and each Mycenaean palace appears to have been ruled by its own king. Another title that is attested in the Linear B tablets, in this case at Thebes as well as at Pylos and Cnossus, is *qa-si-re-u*, which corresponds to later Greek *BASILEUS*. Those designated as *qa-si-re-u* are named, and there is more than one such person in each location. This implies that they are of lesser status than the *wa-na-ka*, and this is confirmed by the number of material goods that the tablets record for them. Other titles or designations appear in the tablets, including those of the lowest status, namely those designated *do-e-ro* or, in the feminine form, *do-e-ra*, “slave.” These slaves (the later Greek word is *doulos*, feminine *doule*) are sometimes the personal property of other members of the Mycenaean society and sometimes the property of one or another of the Mycenaean deities, whose names



also are recorded in the Linear B tablets. Among the gods and goddesses whose names appear on the tablets are some of those whom we have already met in connection with the judgment of Paris, namely Athena, Hera, Hermes, and Zeus (but not Aphrodite).

What we see, then, in the civilization of Mycenaean Greece is a culture that shares a number of features (social, linguistic, and religious) with that of Classical Greece but which is also heavily influenced by the non-Greek civilization of Minoan Crete. Mycenaean Greeks moved into an area that already had a flourishing and advanced culture. They absorbed that culture and, eventually, superseded it. Power in Minoan Greece had been concentrated on the island of Crete, but as Mycenaean influence increased, the focus of power and wealth gradually shifted to the cities of the mainland. In the area of the visual arts it is very clear that the Mycenaeans were the borrowers, and the story of Mycenaean art is one of gradual but fairly steady decline, from a high point that was reached quite early, under Minoan influence. The one exception to that picture of steady decline is in the area of architecture, in which Mycenaean civilization developed quite independently of Minoan and, as we have seen, in the direction of monumental construction. The powerful fortresses of the Mycenaean kings were products of the remarkable increase in prosperity that characterized mainland Greece during the Mycenaean Period. This increase in prosperity was accompanied by substantial population growth, and Greece in the thirteenth century seems to have been more heavily populated than at any previous time. But, for reasons that are not at all clear, with the beginning of the twelfth century a period of decline in both population and prosperity sets in that is so severe that historians generally refer to the period that begins around 1200 BC as the “Dark Age.”

The End of Mycenaean Civilization

It is reasonable to consider the time around 1200 BC as the end of the Mycenaean Period, but there is no way of knowing why the Mycenaean civilization came to an end. There is evidence of physical destruction and fire at many of the centers of Mycenaean life at about this time, including Mycenae, Tiryns, and Pylos. Archeologists have also found evidence that the inhabitants of Mycenae, Tiryns, and Athens were engaged in strengthening their fortifications and improving the means of supplying their citadels with fresh water, as though they were expecting an invasion and were preparing for a siege. And the Linear B tablets from Pylos (which survive because they were baked in the fire that destroyed the palace) talk about “the watchers guarding the coast” and appear to name locations on the coast at which guards are to be posted. The widespread instances of destruction, then, seem to have been foreseen. But who were the invaders? Were they non-Greeks or were they Greeks from other Mycenaean cities? Or were they, indeed, *non*-Mycenaean Greeks, that is, a new group of Greek-speaking people who were entering Greece for the



first time? We simply do not know the answer to this question. We do know, however, that some of the Mycenaean palaces were immediately reoccupied after the destruction and some rebuilding was undertaken, although the level of activity and prosperity was very much lower than before. Some of the palaces, like that at Pylos, were not rebuilt.

Still, historians are fascinated with the question of why civilizations decline and, as in the case of the decline of the Roman Empire and the setting of the sun on the British Empire, a large number of theories have been developed to account for the darkness that fell upon the Mycenaean Greeks. These theories are based variously on social, technological, economic, and climatological causes. It is becoming increasingly clear that no one factor can be singled out as being “the cause” of the end of Mycenaean civilization. Almost certainly it was a combination of factors that brought Mycenaean society to an end, as it was a combination of factors that caused Mycenaean civilization to come into existence in the first place. A single, identifiable cause of an event is acceptable in a fictional narrative – the Trojan War, for example, was caused by the abduction of Helen by Paris – but historical occurrences are the result of more complex circumstances. Whatever the causes of the decline of Mycenaean civilization, other civilizations as well in the Mediterranean region suffered a similar fate at about the same time. The Hittite Empire, which controlled much of Asia Minor, was invaded and its central power destroyed around 1200 BC, just at the time when records of the Egyptian New Kingdom speak of threatening inroads by the otherwise unidentified “sea peoples,” whose attacks coincided with an irreversible decline in the prestige and power of the Egyptian kingdom.

It is possible that the Mycenaean Greeks were among these “sea peoples.” In any event, the character of Greek civilization was transformed in the period following the start of the twelfth century BC. It does not appear that Mycenaean Greece was invaded by people who introduced a new culture; rather, we find a continuation of Mycenaean cultural forms, but in a greatly attenuated state. For example, the tradition of decorating ceramic vessels with human and animal figures, and of creating figurines in human and animal form, virtually disappears from the Greek world after about 1200 BC. An exception to this is the island of Crete, where human figurines continue to be made, but this very isolation of Crete is also characteristic of the period in question. During the Minoan and Mycenaean Periods the very frequent contact among various areas of Greece and the Aegean meant that there was relatively little stylistic variation between one area and another, but in the following period there is an increasing tendency toward the development of isolated regional styles. This would seem to indicate a severe reduction in the frequency of trade and commerce between parts of the Greek world, and the reduction in the amount of imported bronze and other metals found by archeologists suggests a decline in trade with the wider world. Since trade in those metals had been in the hands of the Mycenaean rulers, it appears that the central administration of the palaces was now lacking. There was no longer a driving force behind the construction of palaces or of any buildings on a large scale. The practice of ostentatiously burying warriors with



their weapons and armor is not attested during the hundred and fifty years following 1200 BC.

Even the knowledge of writing disappears after the collapse of Mycenaean society: the Linear B tablets cease being produced and, from the beginning of the twelfth century until the early eighth century BC, there is no evidence at all of literacy in Greece and the Aegean. When literacy resumes in the eighth century the form of writing employed is based upon foreign models and owes nothing to Mycenaean script. It should not be thought, however, that this loss of the ability to write was responsible for the substantial discontinuity between the Mycenaean Period and the period that follows the Dark Age. The discontinuity was brought about by the disappearance of institutions and by the break in certain technological and conceptual traditions. Other traditions, the narrative and musical traditions of story and song, which had never depended upon writing for their perpetuation, certainly did persevere. We know this because of the large body of legends and myths, preserved in the Archaic and Classical Periods, that represented the distant past as a glorious Golden Age, an age of heroes and warriors securely located precisely in those Mycenaean palaces that recent archeological discoveries have revealed to be every bit as powerful and prosperous as the myths and legends suggest. Of course, the impressive remains of the Mycenaean citadels at Mycenae, Tiryns, and other locations continued to be visible, and the later Greeks referred to their massive fortifications as “Cyclopean,” as though they must have been constructed by a race of giant Cyclopes. It would have been easy for legends to spring up regarding the ancient inhabitants of these abandoned landmarks, but legends also persisted concerning the might and wealth of Pylos and other Mycenaean sites of which no Cyclopean remains were visible. The focus of many of these legends was a mighty conflict, the Trojan War, in which forces from Mycenae, Pylos, Cnossus, and many other Mycenaean Greek cities banded together to attack and ultimately destroy the non-Mycenaean city of Troy. Excavations at the site of the city that Schliemann and others have identified as the city of Troy have indeed revealed evidence of widespread destruction there, like that which afflicted the Mycenaean cities themselves, in the period around 1200 BC. Whatever the connections between the later legends and the reality, these legends constructed the past against which all later Greek culture defined itself. In other words, the Greeks’ stories about the Mycenaean Period became what the later Greeks regarded as their history.

Further reading

- Chadwick, J. *The Decipherment of Linear B*, 2nd edition (Cambridge 1967): the fascinating story of the decipherment, told by Ventris’ friend and collaborator.
- Dickinson, O. *The Aegean Bronze Age* (Cambridge 1994): a balanced and scholarly introduction to the archeology of Bronze Age Greece, organized by topics (arts and crafts, burial customs, trade, etc.).



ANCIENT GREEK CIVILIZATION

Drews, R. *The End of the Bronze Age: Changes in Warfare and the Catastrophe ca. 1200 BC* (Princeton, NJ 1993): a survey of the various theories concerning the end of Bronze Age civilization, with a new (military) explanation.

Fitton, J. L. *The Discovery of the Greek Bronze Age* (Cambridge, MA 1996): the story of the recovery of the Bronze Age civilizations of Greece (Cycladic, Minoan, and Mycenaean) by archeologists over the past 125 years.

Hampe, R. and Simon, E. *The Birth of Greek Art: From the Mycenaean to the Archaic Period* (New York 1981): an authoritative and magnificently illustrated account of the continuity in Greek art from the Mycenaean Period to the Archaic.

Snodgrass, A. M. *The Dark Age of Greece: An Archeological Survey of the Eleventh to the Eighth Centuries BC* (Edinburgh 1971): still the best survey of the archeology of the "Dark Age."

Taylour, Lord William, *The Mycenaean*, revised edition (New York 1983): a clear introduction to Mycenaean civilization, part of the series "Ancient Peoples and Places," written by the former director of the British School's excavations at Mycenae.

