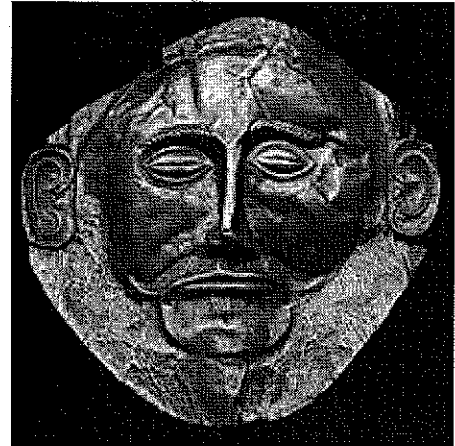


Mycenaean Culture: Warriors, Heroes, and Glory (Overview)

A famed civilization heralded in the *Iliad* and renowned for its heroic values, Mycenaean culture refers to the people who dominated the Greek mainland, the islands of the Aegean Sea, and parts of Asia Minor in the 17th–12th centuries BC. Thought to have been strictly mythological for more than two millennia, the people of Mycenae were restored to history when extraordinary remains were recovered through a series of archaeological excavations in the 19th century AD.



Legendary Mycenae

Admirers of Homer's epic had known of Mycenae for centuries as the home of the great King Agamemnon, who achieved fame and glory with his conquest of Troy. Then, when Mycenaean power and control of the region came to an end around 1200–1100 BC, Greece entered a Dark Age. Great centers of population and trade were attacked and burned, palaces were deserted, and social and military organization broke down. Even the quality of pottery design and metalworking declined for a time, and a form of written language used by the Mycenaeans was completely forgotten.



During the Dark Age, however, legends began to emerge that told of heroic exploits by brave men in the distant past—the era when the Mycenaeans were at the height of their power. Sung by poets who memorized and also embellished them, the epics were passed down for generations as part of the oral tradition, until the time of Homer when poets made the transition from the spoken word to written text. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—two of the most revered epics in the Western literary tradition—defined the cultural values and code of honor (*arete*) of late Bronze Age Greece.

For Greeks of that period, *arete* rested on the ability of men to accomplish their individual destiny, to fulfill heroic expectations, to succeed in warfare, and to see to the proper maintenance of their household (*oikos*). Individual merit was prized, yet *arete* was also measured by community honor. Failing the community was equal to failing the self and vice versa. The heroes of the *Iliad* continue to present the most coherent look at the Greek values of *arete*.

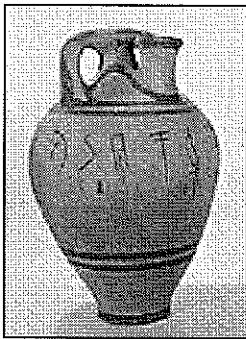
The Mycenaean Reality

For centuries, many scholars were skeptical about the existence of Mycenae and Troy. Even those who considered it a possibility were not certain of the exact location of those cities, until the German amateur archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann uncovered both Troy and Mycenae in the 1870s. From his excavations and those that followed, scholars have been able to reconstruct a variety of elements from Mycenaean culture that had been cloaked in legend up until that time.

From the extensive number of palaces, roads, irrigation systems, and wealth, it is clear that the Mycenaean period, particularly between 1400 BC and 1100 BC, was extremely prosperous. Indeed, it appears that at that time, Mycenae was the most powerful and richest city of the Peloponnese. Some aspects of Mycenaean culture appear to have been borrowed from the Minoans of Crete. For instance, the Minoan language, known as Linear A, was

adapted by the Mycenaeans to form their written language, known as Linear B. In 1952, after studying the many examples of Linear B found on clay tablets, vases, and bureaucratic records uncovered 13 years earlier, a British architect and cryptologist named Michael Ventris was able to decipher much of the language that had baffled archaeologists and linguists since the first examples of it had been found on artifacts uncovered by Arthur Evans at Knossos on the island of Crete.

Distinct Warrior Values



Although they were influenced by some aspects of Minoan culture, the Mycenaeans were innovative in developing their own new traditions. One of the most striking differences between the two societies was that the Mycenaeans had a monarchy that hoarded wealth, rather than sharing it with the populace, as the Minoans did in the form of architecture, art, infrastructure, and surplus food. Since the Mycenaean kings were leaders in warfare, they were more apt to use their wealth to finance defensive fortifications and military campaigns. They also used large portions of their wealth on lavish burials of royalty and military heroes. Mycenaean culture privileged glory in warfare as the most important signifier of masculinity.

The epics of Homer are not the only sources that reveal a love of warfare in Mycenaean culture. Hittite sources talk extensively about Mycenaean invasions of their territories, and it is also thought that the earthquake that destroyed Minoan culture led to the Mycenaean invasion and conquest of Crete. Thus, the glorification of warfare, found so entrenched in the culture of the *Iliad*, appears to ring true to the historical reality of Mycenae.

Economic Supremacy and Decline



With their mighty war machine and successes on the battlefield, the Mycenaeans came to dominate Mediterranean trade during their era of supremacy. Archaeological excavations reveal that the Mycenaeans were well known for their excellent olive oil, a valued item of trade throughout the region. They were also famous for well-tanned animal skins, distinctive textiles, and various foodstuffs, including wine (which they traded for cash to build their military might), as well as jewelry, fish, and other products.

Despite many centuries of success, by the 12th century BC, Mycenaean culture suffered a steep decline. There is much debate about why. In ancient Greece, the prevailing theory was that the people of Mycenae were conquered by the Dorians, who destroyed the Mycenaean cities. Modern-day historians consider the Dorian invasion a likely possibility, while also considering civil war, economic ruin, and even climate change as causes. Whatever the reasons, Mycenae ceased to be a mighty political and economic force by around 1100 BC.

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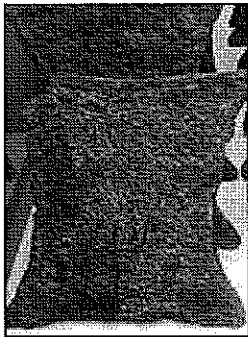
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The Minoans of Crete (Overview)

One of the most famous myths of antiquity is the story of the Minotaur—half man, half bull. According to legend, the Minotaur was hidden in a labyrinth, or maze of passages, in the palace of King Minos at Knossos on the island of Crete. Youths from the city of Athens were sacrificed to the Minotaur until the hero Theseus killed it.

But what is the truth behind the legend? Was Crete actually the home of an ancient civilization? Modern archaeology has discovered a great deal about ancient Crete and the people who lived there.

Early Civilization on Crete



Archaeologists have found evidence of humans on Crete as early as 6500–6000 BC. The first large settlement, probably from Asia Minor, occurred around 3000 BC at the very end of the Neolithic Age (late Stone Age). Historians have limited knowledge of those early times. However, much is known about Crete during the Bronze Age (about 2600–1150 BC) due to the work of archaeologists. Their discoveries have shed light on Crete's Minoan civilization (named for the legendary king Minos).

By 2600 BC, both Crete and mainland Greece (referred to as Mycenae by archaeologists studying this period) had entered the Bronze Age. Bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, changed people's lives by providing metal tools both for agriculture and for fighting. The ingredients to make bronze were scarce. Therefore, some historians have argued that those who could afford bronze—that is, the aristocracy—became increasingly powerful in Bronze Age societies.

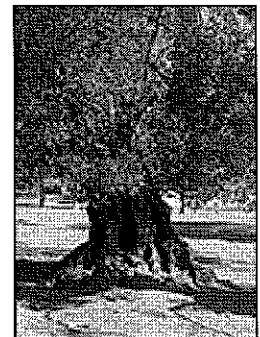
On the mainland, bronze technology was used largely for warfare. However, Crete was an island, out of sight of the other islands of Greece and largely safe from outside attackers. Unlike most other ancient cities, the cities of Crete had no large walls around them for defense. Based on that and other evidence, many archaeologists have argued that armed conflict was less prevalent on Crete than on the mainland. The rarity of warfare would have made more resources available for peaceful pursuits.

Life on the Island

As in most Bronze Age cultures, most Minoans made their living from agriculture. Crete is largely mountainous, with sloping hillsides that are unsuitable for field crops, though the Minoans did grow barley. The island is better suited to goat and sheep herding and such orchard crops as olives and grapes.

Crete is also ideally situated for commerce, as it lies less than 200 miles from both Asia Minor and northern Africa. The Minoans were great seafarers and sailed all over the eastern Mediterranean Sea. They traded olive oil, scented fragrances, metalwork, pottery, and cloth in Mycenae, Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt. In return, they imported both raw materials—wood, metals, ivory, and more—and finished products, like beads and amulets from Egypt.

Tomb paintings in Egypt show Minoan textile patterns and Minoans bearing vases and gold. Some archaeologists have speculated that the legends of the powerful king Minos—including the Minotaur and the sacrifice of Athenian youths—may reflect a time when Crete was politically and/or economically dominant in the eastern Mediterranean.



Art and Craftsmanship

High levels of art and craftsmanship are evident everywhere in the remains of Minoan civilization, particularly in the Palace of Knossos—one of several Minoan palaces that have been excavated in various parts of Crete.

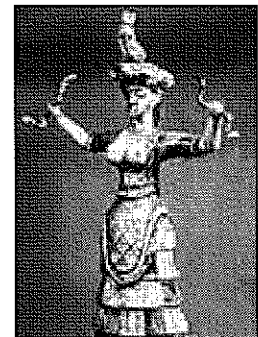
The palace was originally built in about 2000 BC and ultimately covered five-and-a-half acres. It was rebuilt and enlarged around 1700 BC after an earthquake and was later remodeled after a devastating fire. According to the archaeological evidence, the palace was two or three stories high, with flat tiled roofs; plaster, wood, or flagstone floors; and large wooden pillars to hold up the roofs and balconies. Those who lived there had access to plumbing through the use of terra-cotta pipes, tapered to improve their efficiency. The palace was laid out in a complex pattern of rooms, corridors, and storage areas around a central courtyard—the real-life inspiration, maybe, for the legendary labyrinth that held the Minotaur.

Skilled potters, the Minoans produced ceramics of a variety of styles, including the famed, delicate Kamares ware. Their pottery was decorated with scenes of nature and of everyday human life. That same lifelike, naturalistic style shows up in the colorful frescoes (wall paintings) that decorated much of the palace. The Minoans also made complex, colorful textile patterns of dyed wool, elegant bronze statues and figurines, and much more.

Government, Religion, and Sports

Not much is known of the Minoan government, although the numerous seal-stones (stones with an engraved pattern, used to mark ownership) and inventories on clay tablets suggest a strong record-keeping system. It seems clear that there was a king, and there may have been some kind of centralized coordination of commerce.

Based on frescoes and pottery, many archaeologists have argued that the society worshipped the Minoan mother goddess, whose symbols included the bull, the dove, and the snake. Perhaps for that reason, there seems to have been some degree of equality between Minoan women and men—much more, for example, than among the Mycenaeans.



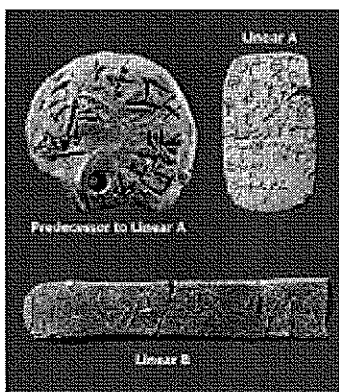
Frescoes and vases frequently show athletic events, which may be religious in origin but which seem to have been enjoyed for their own sake as well. One sport that frequently appears is bull-jumping, in which a man or woman grabbed a bull by the horns, somersaulted onto the bull's back, and then jumped off and was caught by a partner. It's hard not to see another possible connection to the legend of the Minotaur in that activity.

Minoan Writing

In Crete, three ancient scripts have been discovered: a script of hieroglyphics found inscribed on seal-stones and other items; a syllable-based script known as Linear A; and a separate syllable-based script known as Linear B.

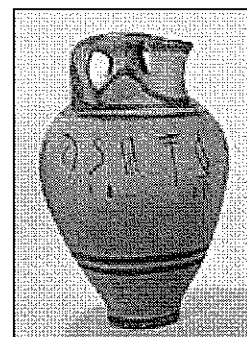
Archaeologists have determined that the hieroglyphic script was used for approximately 300–400 years, starting in about 2000 BC. More than 100 symbols have been identified, but aside from numerals, characters in the script have not been successfully translated.

By 1850 BC, the script known as Linear A was being used. It included about 85 symbols. Archaeologists have not



been able to decipher this script, either. Evidently, it represents a written form of the Minoan language. What this language was is unknown, although it is generally believed not to be a form of Greek.

Linear B was originally estimated to have been used in Crete from about 1450 BC, though many archaeologists now believe the script could not have been created any earlier than 1350–1300 BC. This script of 89 symbols apparently borrowed and/or adapted many symbols from Linear A. It was used on the Mycenaean mainland as well. The clay tablets on which most of the samples of Linear B text survive were used largely for keeping account-type records.

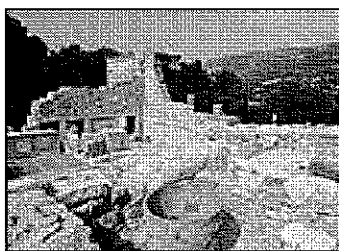


Most scholars now accept that Linear B represents an ancient written form of Greek that dates from several hundred years before any other known Greek texts. It is unclear how a written form of Greek came to be used on Crete, as the earlier writing systems do not seem to be related to Greek. One explanation may lie in possible invasions of Crete by the Mycenaeans. Such invaders might have decided to adapt the writing system of the people they had conquered to represent the sounds of their own language.

The Fall of Knossos

Sometime in the 1400s BC, the Palace of Knossos was burned and not rebuilt. That event marks what archaeologists refer to as the "fall" of the Minoan civilization.

It is unclear exactly what caused the Minoan civilization to fall. Scholars point out the possibility of invasion by the Mycenaeans or some other group. The evidence of Linear B and its links to Greek help support such ideas.



Archaeologists have also speculated about other possible causes. For example, sometime between 1627 and 1600 BC, the Greek island of Thera exploded in an immense volcanic eruption that blew away much of the island. The earthquake and accompanying tsunamis may have caused much damage and may have weakened the Minoans. In all likelihood, a combination of factors contributed to the decline of the Minoan civilization.

Further research will likely uncover more information—and raise more questions—about the ancient people called the Minoans.

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