Mycenaean Civilization: The Culture of Bronze Age Greece

The Mycenaean period in Greece lasted from 1600 to 1100 BC, the late Helladic period, which represents the height of Bronze Age Greek culture and the pinnacle of Greek culture before the onset of the Greek Dark Ages. The name “Mycenaean” comes from the site of Mycenae in the Peloponnese, the ruins of what was once a massive Bronze Age fortified palace. The site was named by the archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, who in the 1870s excavated the area in search of the traces of the Greeks depicted in the poetry of Homer. He identified the site with the seat of power of King Agamemnon (the leader of the Greeks in the Trojan War), which Homer called Mycenae.

Mycenae

The palace of Mycenae was built to express the power of the king that ruled from it. The walls of the palace were built of massive stone blocks in a style known as Cyclopean construction, so-called because later people who viewed such ruins believed only giant creatures such as Cyclops could have built on such a scale. Archaeology has shown that Mycenae was home to a group of wealthy elites, confirming Homer’s description of “gold-rich Mycenae.” A great deal of what we know about the residents of Mycenae comes from the graves around the palaces. Shaft graves from around 1550 BC include goods such as luxury items and gold funeral masks, implying the wealth of the dead, and engraved and jeweled weapons, which link the high status of the dead with military power.

Later, tholos tombs, sometimes called beehive tombs because of their domed structure, replaced shaft graves for the burial of elites. The Treasury of Atreus and the Tomb of Clytemnestra, both tholos tombs at Mycenae, attest to the magnificent effort devoted to their construction. They would have been filled with grave goods made out of gold, silver, and other precious items, but because of the visibility of these tombs they were robbed in antiquity.

Other Sites

Though Mycenae was the largest palace, similar strongholds existed at the same time at Tiryns, Thebes, Athens, and other locations. These were part of the greater Mycenaean culture, mostly centered on the Peloponnesus but with sites throughout Greece, and their rulers were probably subject to the king at Mycenae. The best-preserved palace is at Pylos, and has provided archaeologists with many clues about Mycenaean society. These sites seem to have been home to a warrior aristocracy, the values and culture of which have been preserved in Homer’s Iliad, in which bravery and honor in battle, as well as piety toward the gods, were held as important virtues. The highest member of these societies, the warrior king, called a wanax or anax, ruled from seats of power in fortified palaces. The system over which they governed can be described as proto-feudal—peasants worked the land around the palace and supported the lifestyle of the elites. These peasants likely supplied the majority of the military
manpower as well, led by their lords, who had access to complex weaponry, armor, and chariots.

**Mycenaean Culture**

The Mycenaean culture was militaristic, and war and conquest played an important part in Mycenaean life. Soldiers and military scenes are quite common in Mycenaean art. Nonetheless, they were also great traders who took part in the wider Mediterranean-wide web of commerce. Mycenaean goods have been found from Spain to the Levant, and as far north as Germany and even Ireland. They produced jewelry, vases, glass and metal products, and especially pottery. Such pottery would have carried food, wine, oil, and other goods that the Mycenaeans traded.

The Mycenaeans invaded Crete and conquered the Minoan civilization around 1450 BC. They learned much from the Minoans. They adopted Minoan artistic styles, especially fresco painting techniques, which spread from Crete to the palaces of mainland Greece. Also, while the Mycenaeans spoke an early form of Greek, they adopted the system of writing used by the Minoans, and this writing used by the Mycenaeans is known as Linear B. The linguist Michael Ventris deciphered Linear B in the 1950s, so we are now able to read the writing of the Mycenaeans. Most of what they wrote were receipts or extensive records of property or local production; virtually nothing that would constitute literature survives. While writing was probably not yet a form of entertainment, it was used by scribes of the kings, who formed an important and influential bureaucracy and used it to control and track production and labor.

Mycenaean writing tells us very little about their religion. The only indications we have are dedications inscribed on objects given as offerings to the gods. The Mycenaeans worshipped a variety of gods, some of which evolved over time into the gods of classical Greek mythology. The Mycenaeans may have also been influenced by the Minoans in their religious practices, but this is uncertain.

**The End of the Mycenaeans**

Around 1100 BC all the Mycenaean palaces, including the great palace of Mycenae, were burned and abandoned. The traditional explanation for this sudden decline is the invasion of Dories from the north. Ancient Greek legend held that the exiled descendants of Hercules returned to claim the Peloponnes after the Trojan War. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars interpreted the Dories as a new ethnic group that moved into Greece, destroyed the great palaces, and ended the proto-feudalistic palace culture that had dominated the region.

There are major problems with the Dorian invasion theory, however. There is little evidence that such an invasion took place, since the earliest solid evidence of post-Mycenaean settlement in Greece dates to around 950 BC, which suggests that the newcomers arrived after the Mycenaean civilization collapsed. Recently, scholars have suggested that the Sea People, who destroyed the Hittite Empire and nearly brought down the 19th and 20th Dynasties of Egypt, may have caused the Mycenaean collapse. Indeed, Mycenaean civilization fell in the same period when many other civilizations in...
the Mediterranean crumbled, called the Bronze Age collapse. Other possibilities, like natural disasters such as earthquakes, have also been put forth as explanations for the Mycenaean collapse.

With the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization, many of its people seem to have fled to Cyprus and the coast of Asia Minor. They continued to speak their language, which evolved into the Ionian dialect of Greek (as opposed to the Doric dialect that spread in the Peloponnese). In the meantime, writing and inscription disappeared in Greece for the next four hundred years, which are known as the Greek Dark Ages. By the time Greek civilization reemerged around the year 800 BC, Linear B had been abandoned in favor of a new writing system adopted from the Phoenicians: the alphabet. In the meantime, the stories of Mycenaean heroes and battles would be immortalized by subsequent generations of Greeks who recited the poems of Homer.

**Summary**

- Mycenaean civilization dominated Greece from 1600 to 1100 BC, and is named after the great palace of Mycenae in the Peloponnese.
- Mycenae was the largest and most imposing palace, built for the king of the Mycenaean civilization. The graves outside the palace reveal the enormous wealth of its rulers.
- Other palaces, such as Tiryns, Thebes, and Athens, are smaller but have similar layouts and purposes.
- Mycenaean culture was militaristic, but it also depended on trade. The Mycenaeans traded extensively in the Mediterranean and beyond.
- The Mycenaeans conquered the Minoans and took many things from them, including artistic styles and writing, which was used to keep extensive records and is called Linear B.
- Mycenaean culture collapsed around 1100 BC, and all the palaces were burned and abandoned. While the Dorian invasion was long held to be the cause of this, other theories, such as raids by the Sea People or natural disasters, have also been put forward.