

This Golden Age, kept alive by Homer's poetry, tells the story of an advanced society during a period in history adorned by wealth and legends, believed to have been circa 1450 to 1100 BC. Assembling the limited evidence reveals the art and architecture of the Mycenaean World. The remains of the palaces show evidence of a rich civilisation. The later Greeks referred to this period as a Golden Age when "men were bigger and stronger than they are now" (Homer's Iliad). This is a fascinating era glorified with heroes and victory, which almost three millennia later, still captures the curiosity of so many.

The evidence used to reconstruct this period is questionable. There are archaeological finds, which include the sites and the artefacts. It is difficult to draw accurate conclusions from these due to their age. Then there are literary sources such as Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. The problem with using these sources is that many people believe that Homer lived around 700BC, which means the stories he tells will have been greatly adapted to his period. Additionally, others argue that there is little evidence proving that the books are not purely fictional.

Architecture and construction proves wealth and culture. Increasingly influenced by Crete, the Mycenaeans began to build palaces of their own. Initially they modelled them on Minoan architecture. This implies that they sailed across the sea. Later they began to develop huge fortifications. Palaces were built throughout Hellas. The most famous Greek palace of the Mycenaean period was found at Mycenae, the city of the legendary Agamemnon who was anax of the expedition against Troy. Others were found in Pylos, Thebes, Athens and Iolkos.

They were logically constructed and shared the same features, which proves there was a link between them. They were obviously not isolated from one another. One may assume Mycenae was the main palace and possibly had a primitive infrastructure connecting it to the other sites.

The centre of the palace was a columned porch called a megaron (figure 1). A throne would have also been found on one side. This implies they had a King who held an important role in society. The first floor appeared to have been used for storage and the second floor was where the women lived. The materials used to construct these buildings include stone blocks, mud brick, bonding timber and plaster, which proves the Mycenaeans were a resourceful, organised society. Their building technique is known as corbelling, where each successive row of stones in a wall is laid further out than the previous one below it.

The palace of Pylos was the only one not to be fortified by huge walls, one of the main features of Mycenaean palaces. There were three types of citadels: polygonal (various shaped blocks neatly fitted together), ashlar (squared blocks neatly fitted

Figure 1: The megaron at Mycenae
The 4 people standing on the stubs are there to recreate the effect of the 4 pillars in the palace.

Figure 2: Plan and reconstruction of the archaeological site at Mycenae
1 → Cyclopean walls 2 → The Lions' Gate

together) and finally the famous cyclopean walls (huge, irregular stones yielding massive walls) called so because they were so large that it was believed only a Cyclops could have built them (figure 3).

The walls at the palace of Mycenae, where The Lions' Gate was uncovered in 1841, are 1100 meters long, protecting the dominating power of the Peloponnese (figure 4).

These massive defences also show that the Mycenaeans felt the need to protect themselves from external threats.

Houses were built below the citadel, which implies a close community. They were generally self-sufficient homes with a kitchen, altar and hearth. Their furniture was varied and frequently included a plaster bench, tables, foot-stoles and even bathtubs. Their homes appear to have been comfortable.

More isolated homes were also uncovered in the hills (i.e. Mouriata, on the west coast). The constructions were smaller and did not use such high quality masonry but did include a megaron and private houses. One may deduce from this that wealth peaked in and around the palaces.

Water supplies were an equally important construction to ensure survival and well-being. The palace of Athens had a well, built within the walls, making it accessible, even if they were threatened by a siege.

The cistern built at Mycenae at the end of the 13th century, extended underground beyond the walls, making it more vulnerable (figure 5).

The Mycenaeans learned from the Minoans, in crafts, in efficient organisation and in writing. This is concluded from the similar architecture, tablets and pottery found. The wave of palace destructions on Crete around 1450 and the eventual fall of Knossos around 1375 marked the start of the most flourishing period for the Mycenaeans.

New pottery shapes and styles began. They produced three handled jars, kraters (large bowls) and kylikes (goblets with long stems). Backgrounds were being painted red or black as opposed to light, matt tones. Forms appeared more natural, like the Minoan art. They began to use floral decorations.

Next, the Mycenaean Age adopted geometric patterns and abstract forms on its pottery. They made stirrup jars, yet another indication of Minoan influence.

As the civilisation reached its height, so did the art. Vases were mass-produced for export as well as for use on the main land. Evidence of objects from afar were found at the Palace of Knossos, in Crete, which shows signs of huge wealth, probably due to the position of the island, the cross road of the Mediterranean in circa 1400 BC. The Mycenaeans were equally as good tradesmen as the Minoans. Their pottery was found in Sicily, Rhodes, Cyprus, Italy, Asia Minor, Northern Syria and Miletus, which suggests they were good sailors and traded with the east Mediterranean and Europe. In some places their influence seems so strong that one could think that they had permanent strongholds there, what we may consider today a colonisation. However, they were not able to enter Asia Minor because of the Hittites, described as a strong, troublesome civilisation.

Clockwise:

Figure 3: The Cyclopean Walls

Figure 5: The cistern at Mycenae

Figure 4: The Lions' Gate at Mycenae

As seen on frescos, human forms were illustrated on pots (figure 6). Many of the sculpture discovered were small figures, often terra cotta or carefully carved ivory. An example of larger Mycenaean sculpture is The Lions' Gate at Mycenae. Frescoes were like the Minoans' but with added colour (green outlines) and the images were war-orientated with rigid soldier profiles, repeated groups and stiff landscape motifs.

"Civilisation by definition in ancient history means a literate society" (Lord William Taylour).

The Mycenaeans proved to be. Evidence of an early form of Greek was found on small pieces of clay called Linear B tablets (figure 7).

The inscriptions reveal the Mycenaeans' hierarchical system. The title "wanax" used to say "king" is also the Homeric term (except the 'w' is omitted). The "leader of the people" was the "Lawagetas". His estate was considerably smaller than the king's but he appeared to be fairly significant. Among the rest of the nobles there were the "hequetai" ("followers"), described with their chariots, smart distinctive clothes and their own slaves. The Mycenaeans and the Minoans both shared the same type of government: monarchy. They were based on wide spread feudal system of lords. One can deduce from the sites that the administration took place in the palaces, building a strongly centralised and bureaucratic palace-economy.

The most tablets were found at Knossos in Crete, around 4000, though many were fragmented. Pylos has the next largest number, over 1200. More tablets were found at Phaistos, Hagia, Triadha and Mallia.

The basis of later Greek religious beliefs had started to form. Both the Minoans and Mycenaeans believed in a mother goddess and a divine son, although their roles varied in each civilisation. The divine son became known as Zeus. There was also evidence of separate goddesses (e.g. Demeter, Artemis, Athena). Hera and Poseidon were also evident.

The Myceneans had very few temples, which either suggests that the latter were not preserved or that these people did not worship the Gods in the same way as later Greeks. Another explanation is that temples were not an area for meeting and for worship but the palaces were. Some historians suggest that the megaron had some religious significance. It is also believed that they sacrificed animals, which can reasonably be interpreted as a religious practice.

The shaft graves mark the beginning of the Mycenaean Age. They were a more developed version of the cist graves. Shaft graves were three to four meters deep with a layer of pebbles on the bottom, rubble walls and a wooden roof. It was then covered up with earth and marked with a large stone.

Tholos (beehive) tombs succeeded the shaft graves. These were chambers cut into hills and then covered after burial (figure 8). The most prestigious tholos tombs found at Mycenae consisted of dromos lined with ashlar cut masonry, interior walls of coursed and cut masonry and ashlar dressed doorways. These took a lot of skill and construction and presumably used a lot of labour and were planned in advance for kings and heroes. I assume tholos tombs were for the aristocratic people because the skeletons were either adorned by jewellery positioned at the neck and wrists, or they had weapons at their side.

Figure 6: The “Warrior Vase” from Mycenae (middle of the 12th c. B.C.), rigid soldier profiles

Figure 7: Linear B tablets from Knossos
a) three swords, b) a chariot, a pair of horses and a tunic for Opilimnios, c) a list of handleless vessels, d) jars of honey, e) linen and bronze, f) wool.

Clockwise:

Figure 8: Tholos tomb at Mycenae
The Treasury of Atreus.

Figure 9: Grave Circle A at Mycenae

At Mycenae, Grave Circle A was discovered first, inside the walls, and dates from 1550-1500 BC (figure 9). There are six shaft graves, all containing more than one burial, presumably from the same family. They were accompanied by gold masks and crowns and silver vases and rings; evidence that they were wealthy travellers. Others contained daggers, swords and a large silver shield, which shows they were also wealthy warriors.

It was originally discovered by Heinrich Schliemann (1822-1890), a German businessman, who, once he had earned his fortune, began searching for evidence of the Homeric stories. His approach was primitive but he was first to discover the golden mask, wrongly identified as Agamemnon's (figure 10). He also discovered the remains of ancient Troy, in his obsessive desire to prove the accuracy of the Homeric legend.

Outside the walls, Grave Circle B was discovered later, but dates from 1650-1550 BC. This one includes fourteen royal tombs, from the period just before the ones of Grave Circle A. They obviously were not yet as rich because little gold was found, simply bronze weaponry.

Figure 10: Golden mask,
which Schliemann believed
to be Agamemnon's
from the acropolis at Mycenae
(middle of the 16th c. BC)

There is a contradiction over burial techniques throughout this period. Archaeology suggests people were buried in graves, whilst literary sources like Homer's Iliad state that they were cremated. The shaft graves show that the corpses of rich heroes were buried along with their possessions, but books XXII and XXIII describe funerals differently.

Book XXII, line 512, Hektor's death:

"But all of these I will burn up in the fire's blazing,"

This suggests the body was cremated. Patroclus' funeral was described in great detail in book XXIII. They cremated the body and made sacrifices.

Book XXIII, lines 163 onwards.

"piled up the timber, and built a pyre a hundred feet long this way and that way, and on the peak of the pyre they laid the body, sorrowful at heart, and in front of it skinned and set in order numbers of fat sheep and shambling horn-curved cattle; and from all great hearted Achilles took the fat and wrapped the corpse in it ..."

The reason why Homer describes a burial technique that was very rarely used during this period could be because he lived and wrote circa 700BC. Cremation was a common practice in the Dark Ages. There is further evidence that has convinced many historians that Homer was from this later period. The Mycenaean Age was the Bronze Age but the Iliad mentions iron, which requires massive temperatures and technology and was popular in the Dark Ages. The other possibility is that the book was written during the Trojan War but was later updated.

Bronze was used for making tools, ceremonial objects and weapons, such as swords, spearheads, axes and knives. They were made by casting. Shields were made by hammering sheets of metal into shape. The amount of bronze objects found suggests there were large mining complexes. Evidence that bronze tools, gold and silver jewellery and copper ingots were transported through trade was found in 1982. A ship that sunk just off the coast of southern Turkey during this period has been excavated. It contained such a large amount of copper that we can only assume it came from Cyprus (the Greeks called the island "copper").

In book XXII of the Iliad we gain an idea of how these metals may have been used at the time:

"stood leaning on his bronze-barbed ash spear"

As Hektor and Achilles fight we learn about the weapons they used:

"Hektor... swinging his sharp sword, and Achilles...in front of his chest the beautiful elaborate great shield covered him, and with the glittering helm with four horns he nodded; the lovely golden fringes were shaken about which Hephaistos had driven close along the horn of the helmet"

Helmets like these have been uncovered and illustrations have been seen on vases.

According to what was found in the tombs, the type of weaponry used at the time appears to have been swords, spears, shields, protective clothing and helmets. Homer carefully describes Achilles' shield in book XVIII of the Iliad:

"First of all he forged a shield that was huge and heavy, elaborating it about, and threw around it a shining triple rim that glittered, and the shield strap was cast of silver. There were five folds composing the shield itself, and upon it he elaborated many things..."

The debate regarding the Trojan War remains. Many facts are questionable. Homer said it lasted ten years; this may sound poetic but does not sound realistic

because whilst attacking the peninsula they would have needed continuous amount of resources to be sailed over from Hellas. They would have been challenged by famine and disease. Another problem is that the Greeks only fought in spring and summer so they would not have stayed on the battleground for ten years. The idea of the Trojan horse is also sceptical. How could they have fitted a whole army, their weaponry and their food in a large wooden horse, constructed without any Trojan noticing? Oliver Dickinson has strong views regarding this topic:

“Nor should we let the remarkable vividness of the poems lead us into supposing that they describe a real world and even portray real persons. For comparable vividness can be found in other epics and sagas, none of which are now believed to contain faithful representations of a single historical period, let alone real persons and events”.

However many historians believe there is an element of truth in Homer’s account of the Trojan War. They believed a war took place and perhaps Helen symbolises trade: possibly the true cause to the war. This was the view of Herodotus.

Homer is a problematic source but does help bring to life the limited archaeological finds damaged by time and battles. The sites and artefacts confirm that the Mycenaeans were a rich civilisation that took part in trade and war. The population was concentrated in and around the palaces. There is undeniable reality behind the palace culture. They appeared to have a social ranking: from royals, to nobles, to ordinary people. Craftsmen produced a range of art, pottery and tools and their building constructions were outstanding. They were good sailors and warriors. Rightfully, the myths and legends prolonged their glorified memory, as it is known today as the Golden Era.

In conclusion, here is what we can reasonably deduce about these people. First, they were a rich society, because they had the time, skill, wealth and organisation to build palaces. They also produced pottery for decoration (the Warrior’s Vase, page 6), not just for carrying water, which shows their artistic skill.

Second, as the quote on page 5 says, literacy means civilisation. The tablets on page 6 prove they wrote things down: making them a civilised society.

Third, they were a feudal society with a regimented class system. Circle Grave A, page 7, shows a series of shaft graves, where families were buried together with their treasures. The tholos tomb, also on page 7, is even more prestigious and exclusive to royals and heroes.

Fourth, they seem to have been war-like people, as we have seen from the Trojan War in Homer’s Iliad and from the defensive walls built around the cities (see the Cyclopean Walls, page 4) and the cisterns built to access water during a siege (described page 3, illustrated page 4).

Fifth, they were tradesmen and therefore also sailors. We have evidence that they mined to find bronze (page 9), which was then used for weaponry and export. They also traded pots and vases, which have been discovered as far as Italy and Asia Minor (see page 3).

INTRODUCTION

- ❑ History
- ❑ Dates
- ❑ Who are they?
- ❑ Establish the difficulty with reliability of evidence
- ❑ Literature: Homer
- ❑ Archaeology (sites and artefacts)

Section 1: Architecture

- ❑ Palace sites
- ❑ Citadels
- ❑ Houses
- ❑ Water supplies
- ❑ Destruction
- ❑ Limitations

Section 2: Arts

- ❑ Pottery (colour, decoration)
- ❑ Minoan influence
- ❑ Vases
- ❑ Trade
- ❑ Frescoes
- ❑ Artistic achievements, sculpture
- ❑ Linear B tablets (names, quotes)
- ❑ Limitations
- ❑ Organised society
- ❑ Politics

Section 3: Religious Beliefs

- ❑ The role of the Gods
- ❑ Religious practices
- ❑ Shaft graves (Heinrich Schliemann's discoveries)
- ❑ Tholos tombs ⇒ heroes/aristocratic people
- ❑ Burial (Homer's Iliad XXII XXIII: Patroclus cremated: contradiction)

Section 5: Warfare

- ❑ Trojan War
- ❑ Warrior heroes
- ❑ Literature: Homer, was it true? Question reliability
- ❑ Metal work (which ones were truly used at the time? Mistake in Iliad?)
- ❑ Trade
- ❑ Crafts
- ❑ Weapons (Homer's Iliad: Achilles' shield, XVIII)
- ❑ Technology

CONCLUSION

- ❑ What we can deduce about their daily life?
- ❑ Limited archaeological evidence due to dates and destruction
- ❑ Homer: problematic source (Golden Era kept alive through myth and legend?)
- ❑ But there is reality behind palace culture

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