

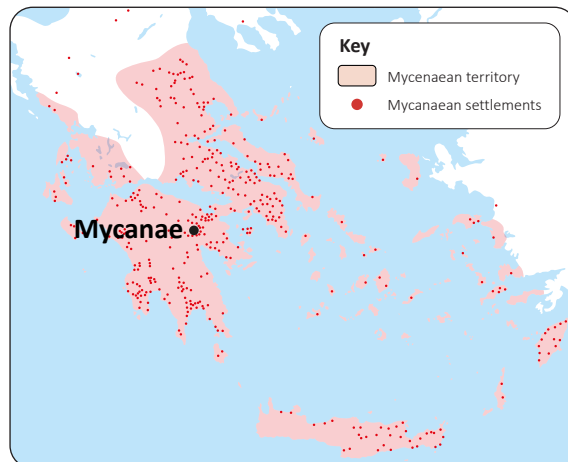
Mycenaeans

Name meaning and origin

The Mycenaeans ruled a large area of Greece, including many Greek islands, from c1600–c1100 BC. Their largest city was called Mycenae, which gives the civilisation its name. In Greek mythology, the city was founded by Perseus, who was a son of Zeus, king of the gods.

Location

The Mycenaean civilisation began in mainland Greece. As their power grew, the Mycenaeans expanded their territory, taking over more of mainland Greece and many Greek islands, including Crete. Their biggest city, Mycenae, was fortified and located between two hills. Other major cities included Thebes and Athens.

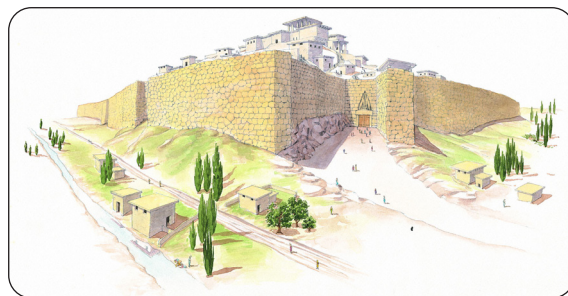


Map of the Mycenaean civilisation

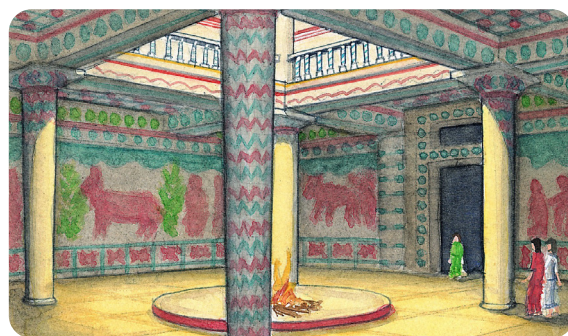
Buildings

Most Mycenaeans lived in mudbrick houses with stone foundations, built outside the citadel. The citadel was a fortified part of the city containing the palace, built on a hilltop. Unlike the Minoans, the Mycenaeans were not surrounded by the sea and were more likely to be invaded. Huge defensive walls surrounded the citadel and protected the king and his army from enemies. These walls were up to eight metres thick. Later Greeks called these Cyclopean walls because they thought that only a giant, such as a cyclops, could have lifted the stones to build them.

Mycenaean palaces had lots of rooms that were used as offices, workshops and stores, as well as to house the ruler. The palace walls were covered in frescoes. All palaces had a *megaron*, which consisted of an open porch supported by two columns, leading to a large hall with a central fire and a throne on which the ruler could sit. A circular opening in the roof, called an *oculus*, let smoke from the fire out.



Artist's impression of the citadel at Mycenae



Reconstruction of the *megaron* from the palace of Nestor, at Pylos

Work and social class

A hierarchy of power was firmly in place for the Mycenaeans. Each city had a ruler, called a *wanax*. Typically, the *wanax* made laws, controlled his army and decided how much tax his people should pay. Military leaders, important landowners and religious figures were also at the top of the hierarchy. Most other free men were either soldiers or labourers, but some were traders or artisans. Farmers, hunters and fishermen provided food, including grains, deer and boar, which was stored in the palaces of Mycenaean cities. Construction workers worked tirelessly to build the fortified walls of the citadel or more basic structures.



Women usually worked as weavers or textile makers. At the bottom of the hierarchy were slaves, who were owned by the *wanax* or Mycenaean elite.

Society was not peaceful for the Mycenaeans, so they had an excellent army. Warriors fought with bronze spears, swords and daggers, and used shields, helmets and bronze armour to protect themselves. Mycenaean warriors, according to legend, famously rescued Helen of Sparta from the Trojans by cunningly hiding inside a giant wooden horse during the Trojan War.

Religion

Mycenaean religion influenced the ancient Greeks greatly, including their worship of a pantheon, which is a group of gods and goddesses. The Mycenaeans worshipped Poseidon, the god of earthquakes and the sea, as their chief deity. They also believed in an underworld full of the spirits of the dead.

Mycenaean religion was inspired by the ancient Egyptians and the Minoans. Bull-shaped drinking containers, called *rhytons*, show that the bull was a sacred symbol. The snake goddess was also important to the Mycenaeans and has been found on surviving pottery from the time.

Fashion

The Mycenaeans inherited the styles of their clothing, hairstyles and jewellery from the Minoans. Men wore loincloths, but also tunics. Women wore long, layered skirts with colourful patterns and open-fronted shirts, sometimes with another shirt on top. The Mycenaeans used fashion to represent age and social class. For example, anklets and armllets were worn by the lower classes, while the higher classes wore necklaces and bracelets.

Crafts

The Mycenaeans were skilled potters, who frequently used spirals and pictures of marine life in their work. They developed *kraters*, which were containers used for mixing wine and water; *alabastrons*, which were short and sturdy jars for holding perfumes; and tall goblets. They also produced *rhytons* and terracotta figurines, which were often used for worship.

Gold jewellery, similar to that of the Minoans, was created by the Mycenaeans, using filigree and granulated work. Some weapons were also decorated with gold. Lavish funeral masks and diadems (crowns made of connecting golden plates) were made to place on the faces and foreheads of the dead social elite during their burials.



Bronze armour and helmet



Gilded, bronze *rhyton*



Fresco of Mycenaean woman



Mask of Agamemnon



Language

The Mycenaeans adapted the Linear A script of the Minoans into Linear B script. It was mainly used in religious and palace writings by a small group of people, probably professional scribes. Thousands of clay tablets and some vases have been found inscribed with the many signs that make up the Linear B script. A stylus was used to carve the signs into each tablet.

Linear B was deciphered by a British architect, Michael Ventris, in 1952. He found that Linear B is written in Mycenaean Greek dialect, which means it is written to reflect how the Mycenaeans spoke. They were the first people to use the Greek language, so they are sometimes referred to as the first Greeks. However, when the Dark Age began, the Linear B script was forgotten, and nothing was written down for hundreds of years.



Linear B script

Trade and influence

The Minoans greatly influenced the Mycenaeans. Both civilisations traded with the same countries and had similar exports, such as olive oil, wine and pottery. Additionally, the Mycenaeans also traded perfume and wool. Mycenaean items have been found in Sicily, Cyprus, Syria, Turkey and Egypt. They mainly imported copper, tin and gold.

The Mycenaeans invaded many places to gain political control. Mycenaean soldiers took over many areas in and around Greece. Their influence grew with each new region they took over. The Mycenaeans settled in many more places than the Minoans.



Mycenaean warriors shown on pottery

Timeline of significant events

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| c1600 BC | The Mycenaean civilisation begins. |
| c1450 BC | The Mycenaeans sail to Crete and take control of the island. The Linear B script appears. |
| c1550 BC | The first gold death masks are made at Mycenae. |
| c1200 BC | Trojan War begins. |
| c1100 BC | The Mycenaean civilisation comes to an end due to invaders or natural disasters. The Dark Age begins. |

