

= Grave Circle A , Mycenae =

Grave Circle A in Mycenae is a 16th @-@ century BC royal cemetery situated to the south of the Lion Gate , the main entrance of the Bronze Age citadel of Mycenae , southern Greece . This burial complex was initially constructed outside the fortification walls of Mycenae , but was ultimately enclosed in the acropolis when the fortifications were extended during the 13th century BC . Grave Circle A and Grave Circle B , the latter found outside the walls of Mycenae , represent one of the major characteristics of the early phase of the Mycenaean civilization .

The circle has a diameter of 27 @.@ 5 m (90 ft) and contains six shaft graves , where a total of nineteen bodies were buried . It has been suggested that a mound was constructed over each grave , and funeral stelae were erected . Among the objects found were a series of gold death masks , additionally beside the deceased were full sets of weapons , ornate staffs as well as gold and silver cups . The site was excavated by the archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann in 1876 , following the descriptions of Homer and Pausanias . One of the gold masks he unearthed became known as the " The Death Mask of Agamemnon " , ruler of Mycenae according to Greek mythology . However , it has been proved that the burials date circa three centuries earlier , before Agamemnon is supposed to have lived .

= = Background = =

During the end of the 3rd millennium BC (circa 2200 BC) , the indigenous inhabitants of mainland Greece underwent a cultural transformation attributed to climate change , local events and developments (i.e. destruction of the " House of Tiles ") , as well as to continuous contacts with various areas such as western Asia Minor , the Cyclades , Albania , and Dalmatia . These Bronze Age people were equipped with horses , surrounded themselves with luxury goods , and constructed elaborate shaft graves . The acropolis of Mycenae , one of the main centers of Mycenaean culture , located in Argolis , northeast Peloponnese , was built on a defensive hill at an elevation of 128 m (420 ft) and covers an area of 30 @.@ 000 m² (320 @.@ 000 sq ft) . The Shaft Graves found in Mycenae signified the elevation of a new Greek @-@ speaking royal dynasty whose economic power depended on long @-@ distance sea trade . Grave Circles A and B , the latter found outside the walls of Mycenae , represent one of the major characteristics of the early phase of the Mycenaean civilization .

= = History = =

Mycenaean shaft graves are essentially an Argive variant of the rudimentary Middle Helladic funerary tradition with features derived from Early Bronze Age traditions developed locally in mainland Greece . Grave Circle A , formed circa 1600 BC as a new elite burial place , was probably first restricted to men and seems to be a continuation of the earlier Grave Circle B and correlates with the general social trend of higher burial investment taking place throughout entire Greece that time . The Grave Circle A site was part of a larger funeral place from the Middle Helladic period . At the time it was built , during the Late Helladic I (1600 BC) , there was probably a small unfortified palace on Mycenae , while the graves of the Mycenaean ruling family remained outside of the city walls . There is no evidence of a circular wall around the site during the period of the burials . The last interment took place circa 1500 BC .

Immediately after the last interment , the local rulers abandoned the shaft graves in favour of a new and more imposing form of tomb already developing in Messenia , south Peloponessus , the tholos . Around 1250 BC , when the fortifications of Mycenae were extended , the Grave Circle was included inside the new wall . A double ring peribolos wall was also built around the area . It appears that the site became a temenos (sacred precinct) , while a circular construction , possibly an altar was found above one grave . The burial site had been replanned as a monument , an attempt by the 13th century BC Mycenean rulers to appropriate the possible heroic past of the older ruling dynasty . Under this context , the land surface was built up to make a level precinct for ceremonies , with the

stelae over the graves being re-erected . A new entrance , the Lion Gate , was constructed near the site .

= = Findings = =

Grave Circle A , with a diameter of 27 @ 5 m (90 ft) , is situated on the acropolis of Mycenae southeast of the Lion Gate . The site is surrounded by two rows of slabs , while the space between the rows was filled with earth and roofed with slabs . The Grave Circle contains six shaft graves , the smallest of which is measured at 3 @ 0 m by 3 @ 5 m and the largest measured at 4 @ 50 m by 6 @ 40 m (the depth of each shaft grave ranges from 1 @ 0 m to 4 @ 0 m) . Over each grave a mound was constructed and stelae were erected . These stelae had been probably erected in memory of the Mycenaean rulers buried there ; three of them depict chariot scenes .

A total of nineteen bodies ? eight men , nine women and two children ? were found in the shafts , which contained two to five bodies each (with the exception of Grave II , which was a single burial) . Among the findings , boars ' tusks were found in Grave IV , as well as five golden masks in Graves IV and V. One of them , the supposed Mask of Agamemnon , was found in Grave V. Additionally , gold and silver cups , including Nestor 's Cup and the Silver Siege Rhyton , were found by the side of the deceased . A number of gold rings , buttons and bracelets were also found . Most of the graves were equipped with full sets of weapons , especially swords , and the figural depictions of the objects show fighting and hunting scenes .

Many objects were designed to signify the social rank of the deceased , for instance , decorated daggers , which were objects d 'art and cannot be considered real weapons . Ornate staffs as well as a scepter from Grave IV clearly indicate a very significant status of the deceased . Items such as bulls ' heads with a double axe display clear Minoan influences . At the time that the Grave Circle was built , the Mycenaeans had not yet conquered Minoan Crete . Although it seems that they recognized the Minoans as the providers of the finest in design and craftsmanship , most of the objects decorated in Minoan style and buried in Grave Circle A are not of Minoan but of indigenous craftsmanship . On the other hand , certain motifs such as fighting and hunting scenes are clearly of Mycenaean style .

= = Excavations = =

The site of Mycenae was the first in Greece to be subjected to modern archaeological excavation . It was excavated by the German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann in 1876 . Schliemann , inspired by Homer 's descriptions in the Iliad , in which Mycenae is termed " abounding in gold " , began digging there . He was also following the accounts of the ancient geographer Pausanias who , during the 2nd century AD , described the once prosperous site and mentioned that according to a local tradition , the graves of Agamemnon and his followers , including his charioteer Eurymedon and the two children of Cassandra , were buried within the citadel . What Schliemann discovered in his excavation satisfied both his opinion of Homer 's historical accuracy and his craving for valuable treasures . Among the objects he unearthed in Grave Circle A was a series of gold death masks , including one he proclaimed " The Death Mask of Agamemnon " . Schliemann cleared five shafts and recognized them as the graves mentioned by Pausanias . He stopped his exploration after the fifth grave was explored , believing that he had finished excavating the Grave Circle , however a year later Panagiotis Stamatakis found a sixth shaft grave .

It has since been proven that the burials in Grave Circle A date from 16th century BC , before the traditional time of the Trojan War (13th @ 12th century BC) , in which Agamemnon is supposed to have participated .

= = Historical inferences = =

The valuable objects found in the graves suggest that powerful rulers were buried in this site . Although Agamemnon was supposed to have lived centuries later , these graves might have

belonged to the former ruling dynasty of Mycenae ? according to Greek mythology , the Perseides .

In the 2006 History Channel documentary , The Exodus Decoded , it was suggested that some of the objects are related to the events of the Exodus , the departure of the Israelites from ancient Egypt . It was argued that the Tribe of Dan is linked with the Danaans of the Greek mythology , though this view is not widely supported .