Chapter 8: The Greek Adventure: 8-2 The Minoan and Mycenaean Civilizations
Book Title: World Civilizations
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8-2 The Minoan and Mycenaean Civilizations

Traditionally, scholars have traced the origins of Greek civilization not to the rocky mainland, but to the island of Crete. This large island supported an urbanized civilization of its own, dating back to at least 2000 B.C.E. Historians and archaeologists call the Cretan culture **Minoan (mih-NOH-an) civilization** (An ancient civilization that was centered on Crete between c. 2000 and 1400 B.C.E.) after Minos (MY-nohs), the mythical king of Crete. The Minoan towns, led by Knossos (NAW-sus) on the northern coast (see Map 8.1 inset), were masters of a wide-ranging maritime empire (including coastal Greece) by about 1600 B.C.E. Nobody knows whether the Minoans actually were Greeks—their written records have never been deciphered—but they played a part in the formation of Greek civilization.

Like the ancient Indians, these islanders established a seaborne commercial network that spanned most of the eastern Mediterranean; they became wealthy through their mastery of the sea as a highway of commercial transport. This wealth produced a socially complex society that was organized into tiny states centered on powerful, palace-dwelling kings. Some of these palaces were architectural and artistic masterpieces, as archaeologist Arthur Evans discovered more than a century ago when he excavated the most spectacular of these, the Great Palace at Knossos.

Evans unearthed a palace complex that consisted of hundreds of rooms built on three levels and arranged loosely around a series of courtyards. The original structure was constructed around 2000 B.C.E. Through the centuries, earthquakes destroyed it several times, but the Minoans rebuilt it every time, usually on an even grander scale. Around 1450, however, an Indo-European-speaking people from the mainland, the **Mycenaeans** ((my suh-NEE-yan) Referring to the history and culture of the earliest known Indo-European inhabitants of the Greek peninsula, between c. 1600 and 1100 B.C.E.) (my-suh-NEE-uns), invaded Crete and destroyed many of the island settlements, aided by either volcanic explosions or earthquakes. They subsequently settled on Crete themselves, took over most of its trading network, and rebuilt the palace at Knossos.

The Indo-European ancestors of the Mycenaeans entered the mainland peninsula around 2000 B.C.E. as stock-raising nomads from the eastern European plains. By about 1600 they had become sedentary, and some of them lived in fair-sized towns—notably Mycenae and Tiryns on the eastern side of the Peloponnesus (see Map 8.1 inset). Like the Minoans, the Mycenaean kings ruled from palaces. By the time they invaded Crete, however, the kings had strongly fortified these palaces, suggesting that theirs was a more warlike society than that of the Minoans. Walls described by some as “Cyclopean”—after Homer’s gargantuan Cyclops—surrounded royal graveyards and stone palaces that included a *megaron* (MEG-

ah-ron), or central hearth and “mead hall,” where kings and their warriors retreated to drink and feast.

Framing History

Society & Economy: Europe’s Neolithic and Bronze Ages

Although the food-producing revolution came to Europe later than many other regions of the world, it was as profoundly significant for the development of civilizations there as elsewhere. Arriving with migrants from the Fertile Crescent in the seventh millennium B.C.E., it appeared first in the Balkan Mountains and Greece. From there it spread around the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and its islands, and then reached the rest of Western Europe by 4500 B.C.E. As in the Near East, Neolithic Europeans cultivated wheat, barley, and legumes (peas and beans), and bred cattle, sheep, and goats. They grew flax for cloth. These first Europeans bred livestock exclusively for meat. By about 3500 B.C.E. they had learned to supplement their diets by milking their livestock and to shear their sheep to make heavier woollen clothing as better protection against Europe’s cold and rainy climate. By the end of the second millennium advances in irrigation and manuring greatly enabled farmers to increase production.

Regional differences in people’s lifestyles appeared early. Houses were built in many forms, but early Europeans typically adopted the longhouse style and made them out of easily obtained local materials. Stone was a common building material, especially for fortification. In addition, Neolithic Europeans used wood, sod, grass, animal hides, and even bones for construction. Burial and religious practices varied widely, as well. They piled earth into mound-shaped tombs (called *burans*) to contain the remains of important individuals and sometimes entire communities. In northwestern Europe some societies hauled and erected giant stone blocks into circles, called *henges*, for religious rites and for astronomical and astrological purposes. One very famous example is Britain’s *Stonehenge*.

Bronze appeared in Central Europe and spread throughout the rest of the continent around 2500 to 1500 B.C.E. as a replacement for stone and wood in tools and weapons. Copper also was used because it was easier to forge. Across Europe, especially in the Mediterranean islands and in southern Europe, archaeologists have unearthed numerous fortified buildings and enclosures, all suggestive of a time of increasing warfare among various petty chieftaincies and city-states. The most famous of these were those fought in Mycenaean Greece, like the one described in Homer’s *Iliad*, a war that matched the Trojan city-state against those of the Greek mainland.) Because bronze was expensive to make, few but the wealthiest could afford weapons and armor. Hence warfare at this time was almost exclusively an aristocratic endeavor. Thus the Homeric “heroes” such as Achilles, Hector, Ulysses, and others were in fact part of the wealthy few who ruled over peasant masses by force of their costly arms.

Analyze and Interpret

Considering what the Bronze Age did to European society, why do you suppose the relative poverty of Europe's Neolithic era made it more egalitarian?

Minoan Court Ladies.

The so-called "Blue Ladies," photographed in the Palace of Knossos, illustrates how aristocratic women appeared. Note the open bodices and the elaborately coifed hair, complete with strings of pearls.

Goran Bogicevic/Shutterstock.com

Our knowledge of this period comes largely from archaeological excavations and from the **Iliad** (The first of the two epics supposedly written by Homer in eighth-century Greece.) (IH-lee-ad) and the **Odyssey** ((AH-dehs-see) Second of the two Homeric epic poems, detailing the adventures of the homeward-bound Ulysses coming from the siege of Troy; see also *Iliad*.) (AH-dehs-see), two epics of ancient Greece written by the magnificent poet **Homer** (Legendary author of the two epic poems of ancient Greece, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.) in the eighth century B.C.E. The *Iliad* deals with the Mycenaeans' war against the powerful city-state of Troy, and the *Odyssey* tells of the adventures of the hero Odysseus (Ulysses) after the war. For a long time historians believed that the Trojan War was simply a fiction created by a great poet about his ancestors. But thanks to archaeology, we know that there actually was a Troy and that it was destroyed about the time that Homer indicates—around 1300

B.C.E. Whether it was destroyed by the Greeks we do not know, but there is no reason not to believe so. Ancient Troy, now a great pile of rubble, was situated on a hill commanding the entrance into the *Hellespont* strait (now called the Dardanelles strait). Much evidence indicates that the Greek towns, led by Mycenae, were engaged in commercial rivalry with Troy throughout this period and may well have made war on their nearby enemy.

The Historian's Craft

Oral Traditions in the Historian's Toolbox

All societies have oral traditions. Stated simply, "oral traditions" are stories about the past that people pass down by word of mouth, sometimes for many generations. These stories serve many purposes and appear as fables, popular sayings, children's stories, myths, songs, legends, epics, and simple narratives. They provide diversion, serve as origin myths and genealogies, act as a medium to preserve history, impart wisdom, and dispense answers concerning the basic questions of life. When recited they include a performer—or narrator—and an audience.

Naturally, not all oral traditions are useful to historians because only some concern the past or have their origins in bygone events. Many are useful, however, and the task of the historian is to decipher the coded language in which they are expressed to extract their meaning. For example, consider the account of the Trojan War in Homer's *Iliad*. A historian might want to know its "truth": is it literally—or only partly—true? Or is it rooted in, and symbolic of, something else—perhaps other wars or other heroes? Or is it purely a myth, a story told for entertainment or as some kind of morality tale? The answers to these questions are not easy to come by. For a historian to use such tales to understand the past, this historian first has to understand the language in which the tale is narrated and the nature of the tale. Assuming that the historian has mastery of the language in which the tradition is expressed, his or her ability to understand it hinges on solving these additional questions:

- ***First, what is the basic story? What does it explain?*** The *Iliad* begins with the seduction and kidnapping of Helen, the queen of the Mycenaean city of Sparta, by Paris, a prince of Troy. The story then proceeds with a long series of events over a ten-year span that include the Greeks, led by King Agamemnon, invading the kingdom of Troy to avenge the kidnapping.

- ***Second, what do we know about the origins of the tale and how the story has reached us?*** Archaeologists and other scholars know that a series of wars in Asia Minor and the site of Troy occurred around 1300 B.C.E. These wars seem to be the origins of Homer's tale. The stories of these wars likely continued to be recited exclusively in oral forms through the Greek "Dark Ages," from about 1200 onward. There were probably many versions of the

story. Finally, Homer wrote down one version of the tale sometime in the eighth century B.C.E., and this version has survived in the form known to us today.

- ***Finally, what fantastic or "magical" ingredients have the storytellers included to make the story more memorable?*** Stories typically involve heroes and heroines who are "bigger than life," whose fantastic actions make the story engaging and the events and actors memorable. The *Iliad* is replete with heroes who perform heroic deeds and Olympian gods who continually intervene in human affairs. For the ancient Greeks, the *Iliad* provided entertainment and numerous examples, from its gods and heroes, of their religious beliefs and life's ideals. All Greek men were expected to die willingly for their *polis* and their families, and women were expected to be as virtuous as Ulysses' wife, Penelope.

Oral traditions often are chanted or set to specific rhythms or tunes that make the story easier to remember (for example, like nursery rhymes). Also, tellers of oral tales include many symbols in the story or as accompaniments to it, such as visual effects (for example, see the Images of History pictographs in Chapter 14), most of which are familiar to the audience. These so-called **clichés** ((klih-SHAY) A common saying, name, or stock phrase, often repeated in a society and found in oral traditions, that can symbolize past events and people.) (klih-SHAYZ) often are abstract survivals from the distant past, sometimes from the very first account of the tradition, the first verbal report on which it is based.

Analyze and Interpret

Why do you think stories about more distant events would be less trustworthy than accounts of more recent events? Despite these distortions and inaccuracies, what are some of the ways professional historians can still use oral traditions such as the *Iliad* to understand the past?

The Mycenaeans themselves seem to have engaged in extensive internal warfare among competing towns. These wars weakened them sufficiently that they fell to a new wave of nomads from the north, the *Dorians*. From about 1100 to about 800 B.C.E., the culture of the Greek peninsula declined—so much so that this period is called the *Dark Age*. Not only did arts and crafts decline, but even the ability to write seems to have been largely lost during these centuries. Were the Dorians to blame, or did the Mycenaeans simply fight one another to mutual exhaustion and destruction, as many experts think?

Ancient Mycenae

This is an artist's reconstruction of how the citadel of Mycenae looked around 1300 B.C.E. The town's aristocracy would have inhabited these buildings, but the ordinary people, whose labors supported kings like Agamemnon, Achilles, and other heroes of Homer's epics, would have lived on farms below the fortified citadel.

Reconstruction of ancient Mycenae (colour litho), Italian School / Private Collection / De Agostini Picture Library / Bridgeman Images

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