

Aegean Civilizations: Minoans and Mycenaeans

Lecture Summary: The following lecture will cover what we know of the ancient Mediterranean civilizations during the Bronze Age before the rise of Greece as an empire in the region. This story takes us to Greek myths, remote islands and into the 19th century again with those who discovered the civilizations using Homer as their inspiration to look for ancient cities and found them.

I. Minoans and Mycenaeans

A. Heinrich Schliemann and the ancient Greeks

1. Homer and Troy
2. The citadel at Mycenae

B. Sir Arthur Evans and the great palace at Knossos

Greek poets like Hesiod wrote epic poems about a time before Greece emerged as a state where gods and people co-mingled and powerful kingdoms vied for wealth.

Tales of Theseus and the Minotaur

The Trojan War and Odysseus

All these stories were all dismissed as unfounded by modern historians as not having any historical reality and simply fables. Greek history started when the first recorded Olympic Games occurred in 776 B.C.

The Bronze Age was considered the uncivilized beginning before Greece with nothing much to report, and no large human settlements worth studying.

Then in the late 19th century a amateur archaeologist named Heinrich Schlimann went looking for the real sites of the fables of Greek myths. He used Homer as his source and believe it or not found the site of Troy (Ilium) on the coast of modern day Turkey.

He also found the sites of former fortress cities that belonged to the legendary King Agamemnon at Mycenae.

Then the a professional archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans announced that he had discovered remains on the island of Crete that pre-dated any of the cities that Schlimann found on the mainland. Evans named this new culture = Minoan – or the people of the legendary King Minos.

These discoveries, although many details were false, forced modern historians to re-write the history of the Mediterranean and Greece in general to see that it was a flourishing civilizations during the second millennium B.C.

So let's take a look at the Minoans and Mycenaens.

C. The Minoan thalassocracy

1. High degree of material and architectural sophistication (the Palace Age)
2. Redistributive economy

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3. Knossos
4. Overseas trade
5. Powerful navy
6. The bull cult and human sacrifice
7. Written language: Linear A and Linear B
8. Contacts with the Mycenaeans

D. The Mycenaeans

1. Intermingling between various Greek and non-Greek-speaking groups
2. Mycenaean citadels
 - i. Warrior culture
 - ii. Trade and piracy
 - iii. Centers of government
 - iv. Redistributive economy
3. Mycenaean imitation of Near Eastern examples
4. Warriors and mercenaries
5. Linear B tablets and economic and political rights
6. Greek gods

II. The Sea Peoples and the end of the Bronze Age

- A. Waves of destruction—obscure origins
- B. Disruption of northern trade networks
- C. The Greek “Dark Age”
- D. The survival of Egypt
- E. Assyrian effects
- F. New traditions and new cultural experiments
- G. Mycenaean collapse