

MYCENAE

While not mentioned in the Bible, Mycenae was an important city historically for the ancient Greeks, being the center of the ancient Mycenaean civilization. (Other Mycenaean cities included Tiryns, Sparta, Pylos, Athens, Thebes, Gla, Orchomenos, and Iolkos.) Surrounded by fertile farmland, Mycenae was a densely populated city located in the Argolis region of the Peloponnese. The city may have originally been influenced by the Minoan civilization both artistically and architecturally; however, the Mycenaeans eventually influenced the Minoans on the island of Crete linguistically with Linear B. Some scholars think the Mycenaeans controlled or supplanted the Minoans, but this is uncertain.

Near the end of the Mycenaean period (which spanned about 1600 to 1100 B.C.), many cities of the Peloponnese were abandoned, as the inhabitants migrated to other places around the eastern Mediterranean. While many hypotheses exist, no scholarly consensus has been reached regarding the cause of the Mycenaean downfall. The Mycenaean period was followed by the “Greek Dark Ages” (c. 1100-750 B.C.). In addition to the sharp decline in the Greek population, the archaeological record suggests that the people did not build new palaces or engage in creative works of art during this time.

Heinrich Schliemann, a German businessman and pioneering archaeologist (1822-1890), had been inspired by reading Homer’s works as a boy to discover the ancient cities of Troy (in Turkey) and Mycenae (in Greece). His excavations lend weight to the view that Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* reflect at least some historical events. At Mycenae, Schliemann discovered shaft graves with skeletons and various burial items made of gold. While his discoveries are significant to understanding Greek history, he is often criticized by modern archaeologists for reckless digging, misdating finds, and misrepresenting the facts.

Schliemann was heavily influenced by Pausanias’ *Description of Greece*, which was written in the second century A.D. Pausanias had described Mycenae as still having “parts of the city wall” and “the gate, upon which stand lions” (*Description of Greece* 2.16.5). Having been cleared by Kyriakos Pittakis in 1841, the Lion Gate was visible when Schliemann investigated Mycenae, making the identification of the site relatively easy. Schliemann’s reading of Pausanias compelled him to look for gravesites *within* the fortifications of the citadel. He would search for the graves of Agamemnon, Eurymedon the charioteer, and others, which Pausanias claimed were inside the city (*Description of Greece* 2.16.6-7). While Schliemann had sunk some experimental shafts in 1874, upon authorization by the Greek government he launched a full scale investigation of the site in 1876. He published his work entitled *Mycenae* in 1878. Following Schliemann, many other archaeologists have excavated at Mycenae.

Grave Circle A—containing six shaft graves in which many people had been buried—was excavated by Schliemann inside the wall south of the Lion Gate. In this area, he uncovered

many items made of gold, including death masks, weaponry, jewelry, and cups. Subsequent excavators discovered Grave Circle B outside the wall, but the amount of gold found was less impressive. In a later period of Mycenae, *tholos* (“domed”) tombs were used for burial; yet, the treasures from these tombs were looted long ago. Within the citadel, the ruins of a palace were discovered. A water tunnel leading to a cistern was also found there; it had been fed by a nearby spring through an underground clay pipe.

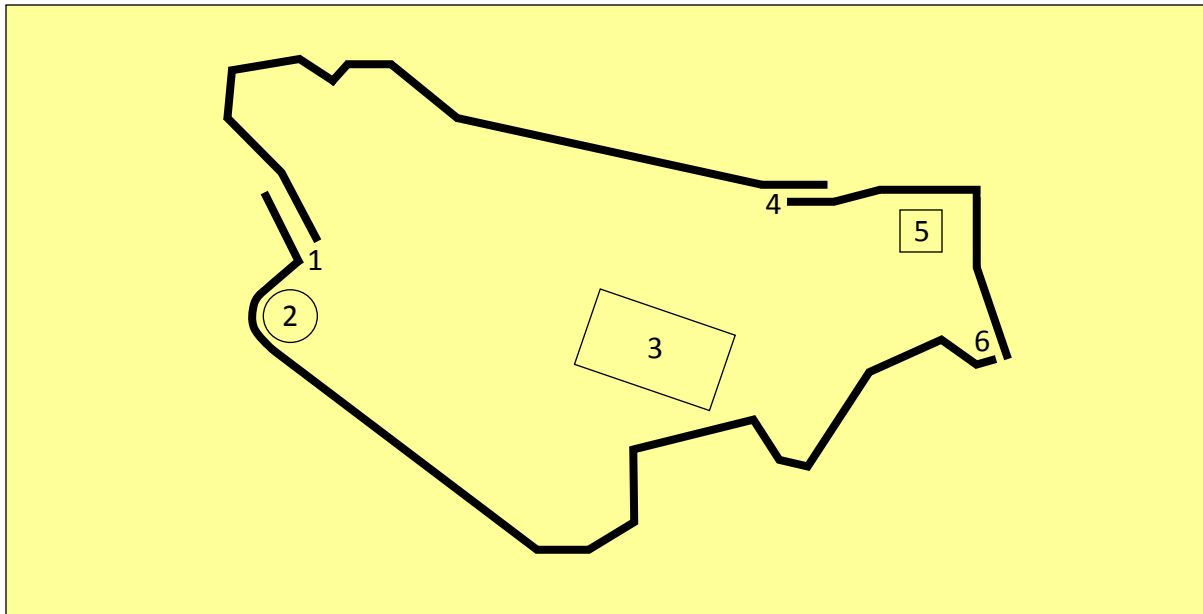
The discoveries at Mycenae indicate that these people were developed in the areas of engineering and architecture. They were also involved in war and trade along the Mediterranean coast. Their syllabic writing, known as Linear B, is considered an early form of the Greek language. It was deciphered by Michael Ventris in 1952. While deciphering this language was a monumental breakthrough, the clay tablets left behind by the Mycenaeans have been somewhat disappointing. They typically relate to lists of animals, food, and weapons. Scholars had hoped to learn more about the history and religion of the Mycenaeans.

Following the “Greek Dark Ages,” Mycenae was reoccupied during the Classical period, in the eighth century B.C. Diodorus Siculus related the fall of the city in the “Seventy-eighth Olympiad” (468 B.C.), when they were defeated by the Argives (*Library of History* 11.65). Due to their proud history, the Mycenaeans refused to submit to the Argives, as the rest of the cities in their region had done. A series of conflicts prompted a strong force from Argos, along with others in their alliance, to come against Mycenae and besiege it. Ultimately, the people were made slaves, and their city was razed to the ground. In the first century B.C., Diodorus stated that the city remained desolate. Even so, the Hellenistic theater built above the so-called “Tomb of Clytemnestra” suggests at least some occupation of the site in the Greco-Roman period.



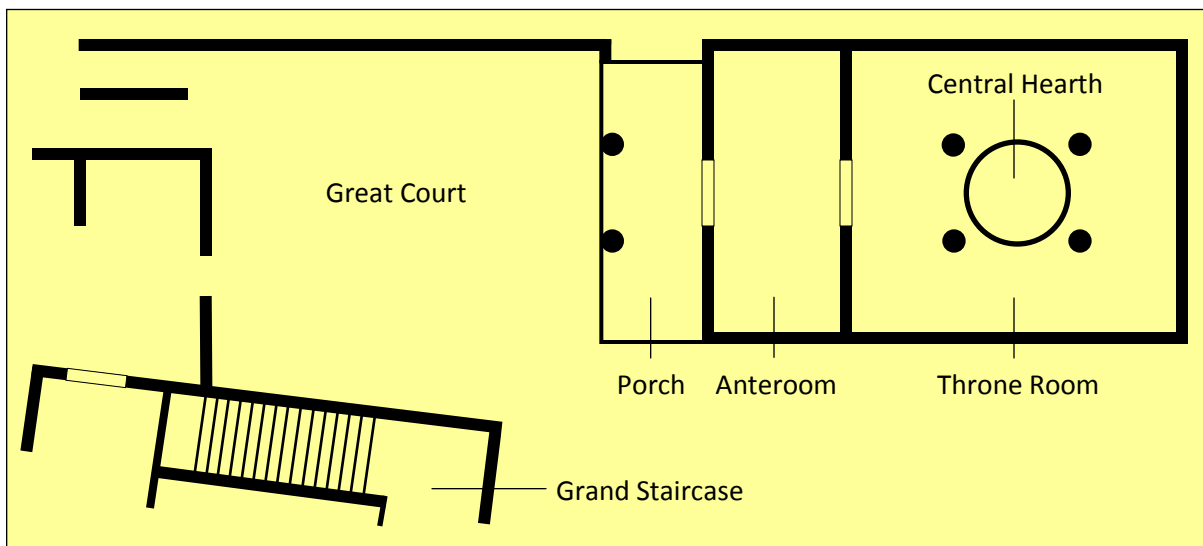
The Ramp Leading to the Lion Gate (West Side of the Citadel)

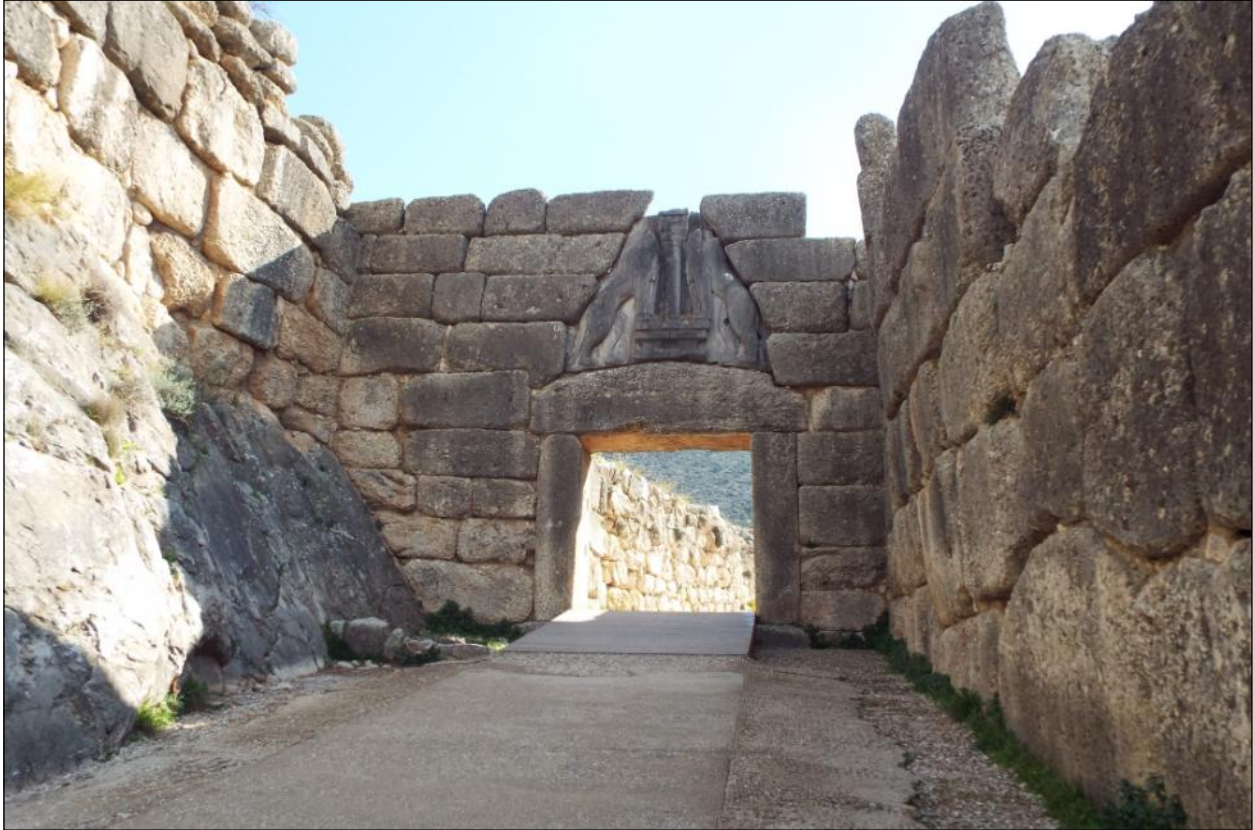
Mycenae Citadel



- | | | | |
|---|----------------|---|---------------|
| 1 | Lion Gate | 4 | Postern Gate |
| 2 | Circle Grave A | 5 | Water Cistern |
| 3 | Palace | 6 | Sally Port |

Mycenae Palace





The Lion Gate



“Cyclopean” walls about forty feet high surrounded the fortified citadel, which was accessed by the Lion Gate on the west. The name “Cyclopean” originated from later Greeks thinking that Cyclopes (mythical one-eyed giants) were used to move the large stones (Pausanias *Description of Greece* 2.16.5).

A lighter carved stone was used over the lintel of the Lion Gate in a “relieving triangle” to reduce the weight. Two lions or lionesses stand on opposite sides of a column, which may symbolize the palace or authority. The lions are missing their heads, which likely faced outward.

The doors of the gate would have swung inward, moving on pivots. Rectangular sockets in the doorjamb were made for securing the cross bar. The gate has been dated to about 1250 B.C.

In addition, a postern gate and a sally port allowed secret exiting and entering of the city.



Citadel Walls (*above*) and Grave Circle A (*below*) Inside the Lion Gate





“The Mask of Agamemnon” (National Archaeological Museum, Athens)

The so-called “Mask of Agamemnon” was discovered in 1876 by Heinrich Schliemann. The Mycenaean gold death-mask was originally named after King Agamemnon, who reportedly led Greek forces into battle against Troy. However, it is now believed to come from the sixteenth century B.C., predating the Trojan War by a few hundred years. The mask, which features the face of a bearded man, would have been attached to a deceased person’s head, being tied with twine through the small hole near each earlobe. The features of the mask were most likely modeled after the appearance of the dead man. The death-mask was discovered in Grave Circle A, along with additional masks, breastplates, and other items made of gold.



Gold Breastplate (National Archaeological Museum, Athens)



A Gold Mask, Breastplate, and Cup (National Archaeological Museum, Athens)



A Part of the Palace's Great Court (Center of the Citadel)



Sally Port (East Side of the Citadel)



Excavations Outside the Citadel



Short Bronze Sword (National Archaeological Museum, Athens)

This short bronze sword, discovered in a Mycenaean tomb, features reliefs of griffins—eagle-headed lions—in flying gallop. They symbolize power and dominion. Another weapon features a lion-hunting scene. Large numbers of bronze swords and daggers have been discovered in the graves of Mycenae. In addition to the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, finds from Mycenae are also displayed in the Mycenae Archaeological Museum.



“The Treasury of Atreus”

The so-called “Treasury of Atreus” near Mycenae is really a beehive-shaped tomb, also known as a *tholos* (“domed”) tomb. This style of a tomb, of which nine have been found outside the citadel walls, succeeded the earlier shaft graves. This particular structure is a royal monument built over a grave in the ground. The entrance led into a dome-shaped room, which in turn had an entrance into a burial chamber. Many valuable items would have been buried along with the body, but these were taken by raiders. The architecture of this tomb utilizes Cyclopean masonry as well as the “relieving triangle” over the door. Pausanias wrote about the “underground chambers of Atreus and his children, in which were stored their treasures” (*Description of Greece* 2.16.6). This statement may explain the misnomer “treasury.” Despite the presence of treasures, the structures functioned primarily as tombs. The original excavators associated this tomb with King Atreus, the father of King Agamemnon.



Domed Ceiling Inside
“The Treasury of Atreus”