

MYCENAE

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THE LANDSCAPE

More than any other factor, location must have determined the fortunes of Mycenae: located at the northeastern termination of the ever-fertile plain of Argos, it abutted the sea on the south, was protected by the mountain ranges of Arachnaion on the east and Artemision on the west, and lay atop a low elevation which the opening of the mountains to its north. Homer (*Od.* 3.263) placed the kingdom of Agamemnon “in the heart of Argos” (“μυχῶ Ἄργεος ἱπποβότοιο”), and it was as if he saw it in the shadow of the steep hills of Prophetes Elias and Zara, which like horns of consecration protected it to north and south, while the two deep ravines of Kokoretsa and Havos made it impregnable. Before the Cyclopes crowned it with its emblematic walls, this isolated piece of land, which rose 278 meters above sea level and was accessible only from the west, would have been almost invisible, appearing only to those passersby who approached it.

From the summit of the acropolis, there was an unobstructed view only in the direction of Argos and the southwestern part of the plain. However, if one climbed up to the natural observatory on Prophetes Elias, they had a clear view in every direction and could mark out their kingdom at sight.

Man’s choice of this location was not only dictated by its location near the main land passage from Korinthia to the Argolic plain and sea. Another decisive role must have been played by the fact that there, where mountain and plain met, one could cultivate the fertile land and graze herds in the mountain region. A natural source of water only 360 meters to the east on the slopes of the hill of Prophetes Elias ensured the most valuable resource for the population’s viability.

Similar locations—rocky extrusions in the western foothills of Arachnaion towards the sea (Heraion, Midea, and finally, Tiryns) were used, and naturally not by chance, for important human settlements during prehistoric and historical times.

A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME

Men first settled this highly-strategic corner of the Argolic plain controlling passage to and from Korinthia and the rest of the mainland, and which overlooked the entire living space of the region stretching from the mountains down to the sea in the **Neolithic Age** (7th – 4th millennium BC). From this early activity and from the ensuing age, the Early **Helladic** (3rd millennium BC), a few meager finds, chiefly pottery, have survived atop the hill and its western slope. These finds do not allow us to detect the size and type of settlement or determine continuity or discontinuity in habitation. However, the poverty of finds must be due to the fact that there was no settlement or installations at Mycenae comparable to the large early urban centers in the Argolid such as Lerna and Tiryns.

This picture would change in the late 3rd millennium BC during the final phase of the Early Bronze Age, Early Helladic III (2200-1900 BC). From this moment until the construction of the royal grave circles (B, A) (1650-1600 BC), it appears that habitation at Mycenae gradually acquired both extent and organization overlooking the extensive cemetery on the western slope.

The so-called Prehistoric cemetery occupied the entire hillside and was used throughout the Middle Helladic period (1900-1600 BC) exclusively for burials, leaving over 100 graves of simple construction (pit or built cist graves) intended to serve for single burials as indisputable testimony to the gradual increase in population and creation of a hegemonic power which in the late 17th century BC would assume rule and control over the entire region, leaving Argos—the Middle Helladic's most important center in the Argolid—by the wayside.

The economic and social supremacy of these rulers would be deliberately displayed with the construction of the two royal grave circles B and A at the edge of the Prehistoric cemetery. These would signal the beginning of a new age conventionally called the “**age of the Shaft Graves**” (17th-16th c. BC).

But who were these intrepid rulers and above all, how did they acquire the surplus wealth which allowed them to withdraw it from circulation and take it with them on their journey to the other world, including among other priceless objects more than 14 kilograms of gold in the form of superb works of art, many of them probably made by Minoan craftsmen in accordance with royal commissions to express the ideology of the emerging new class?

Their profile emerges clearly from the archaeological finds as having primarily martial traits, as attested by the splendid armor found in their graves. However, we also know that they were daring travelers who went in search of noble and precious metals in central and northern Europe, promoting their rich agricultural and animal husbandry products such as wine, oil, and possibly woven textiles and becoming closely connected with the Minoans. Again, they were very familiar with the sea routes to Egypt, and it is possible they led them to the flourishing Middle Kingdom. It may have been there that the early Mycenaeans grew wealthy, placing their martial virtues at the disposal of the foreign dynasty in Egypt the Hyksos, who seized power in the mid-17th century BC. And since nothing in human history happens suddenly or by chance, we must accept that over the course of three centuries in the Middle Bronze Age, the Mycenaeans slowly but surely built the power reflected by the funerary gifts in the royal grave circles and ensured their clans a leading position not only in the Argolid but in the entire Peloponnese, giving their name to the whole of the great civilization of the Late Bronze Age.

During the following century (15th c. BC), the Mycenaeans scaled the display of their hegemonic status, constructing six (6) monumental tholos tombs for the members of their royal clans, having probably adopted a form of display which the rulers of Messenia had been the first to establish. At the same time, they chose another type of tomb for other members of the ruling class: chamber tombs, which have been found at 27 locations around the hill of Mycenae's acropolis. The large number, extent, and dispersion of both chamber tombs as well as groups of tholos tombs is indicative of the prosperity of the ruling class, which in establishing the cemetery for its clan, enshrined and demarcated its land ownership.

This age was also characterized as the **Early Palatial Period**, since we conclude from the meager building remains preserved buried beneath later

building complexes and interventions belonging to the Palatial Period that a central building was constructed at the summit of the acropolis. Oriented N-S, it was decorated with frescoes, served for official gatherings, and may lay claim to having occupied the role of the ruler's seat.

It was these early kings who expanded their trading activities eastward and westward, carrying their own products and the precious metals they had acquired either directly or through third parties and exchanging them for the exotic materials required to construct the prestige items demanded by their high social position. Identifying trading stations extending from the shores of south Italy to the Halkidike and Hellespont, and arriving at Egypt, Cyprus and the Syro-Palestinian coast via the Cyclades and Crete, they laid the foundations for the trading network of the ensuing Palatial Period.

Particularly valuing the importance of Crete in this network of wide-ranging commercial exchange, they were not intimidated by the good relations they had developed with the Minoans. They exploited the recession following upon the devastation to the island after the volcanic explosion on Thera and established a Mycenaean dynasty at Knossos in the mid-15th century BC, essentially controlling the entire island.

Having solidified their position in mainland Greece and with enormous influence abroad, the Mycenaean reached their apogee, which is recorded in the impressive reconfiguration of the entire acropolis and its greater environs. During the so-called Palatial **Period** (14th-13th c. BC), the "Cyclopaean walls" were built with the assistance of the knowledge of royal partners from the Hittite empire, the magnificent palace with all its annexes involving the control of secular and religious power (palace workshops and storerooms, religious center) was built, and all those functions which could not be accommodated within the fortification walls were installed outside and surrounding the acropolis in building complexes clearly dependent upon the palace. The ruling class continued to be buried with rich grave goods in chamber tombs or impressive monumental tholos tombs, which reached a total of nine by the end of this period. Mycenaean merchants inundated Mediterranean markets with their goods, while the rulers continued to practice ostentatious display through objects now of a purely Mycenaean style made of precious or exotic materials which the specialist craftsmen in the palace workshops made

prominent. Lavish production was subject to centralized management control which was mastered with the recording of accounting data on clay tablets written in the early Greek Linear B script.

The high point of these two centuries, omnipotence and the preeminent place held by the rulers of Mycenae throughout the Mycenaean world, was personified in historical memory with the commander of the Greeks in the Trojan War, the mythical king Agamemnon. Myth—which always conceals within it historical truth—would select this fearless *wanax* as leader, while it would record Nestor, king of Pylos as the wise councilor to the expedition, reflecting the importance of the region in the first stages of the creation of Mycenaean civilization under the influence of Minoan Crete. The cunning king and splendid seafarer Odysseus would have his seat on Ithaca, the small island at the edge of the Mycenaean kingdoms but at the beginning of the sea route that brought the Mycenaeans in contact with the West and Europe north of the Alps.

At the end of the 13th century BC, Mycenae—in common with the other kingdoms in the Peloponnese—would be struck by a series of natural disasters. Earthquakes and ensuing fires caused large-scale destruction to all the building complexes both inside and outside the fortified acropolis. Repairs and more general efforts to recover during the 12th century BC, the so-called **Post-Palatial period**, would not manage to keep the palace system of governance alive, and collapsed under the pressure of other factors which brought decisive blows to the mighty empire.

During the centuries that ensued, Mycenae would follow a declining course. Abandoned by its many inhabitants, poor and dark, it would hide in the shadow of the emerging power of Argos, which in the early 7th century would found one of the most powerful city-states in Greece during **historical times**, exercising an expansionist policy at the expense of the once-strong centers in the Argolid. One of its victims was Mycenae, which had maintained its autonomy as confirmed by its participation in the Persian Wars and the inclusion of its name on the bronze tripod which supported the trophy of the Greek victors at the oracle of Delphi. The Argives finally occupied Mycenae in 468 BC, destroying key points along its fortification walls and enslaving its inhabitants. In the early 3rd century BC they would found a small town (*komē*)

here which would flourish until the mid-2nd century BC and be abandoned following the Roman conquest of the Argolid. The testimony of Strabo (*Geography* H 372) that in his own era (64 BC - 25 AD) “not a trace was to be found of the city of Mycenae” seems a bit excessive, given that the traveler Pausanias, who arrived in the region in the mid-2nd century AD, mentions that the walls built by the Cyclopes, the Lion Gate, and tombs both within and outside the fortifications were still visible. However, in addition to these—which in Pausanias’s age lay in ruins and were considered monuments—he mentions the «Perseia» fountain house near the Lion Gate, which appears to have still been in operation and perhaps served the few farmers and herdsmen who had remained in the area.

THE MONUMENTS

Grave Circle A

Heinrich Schliemann’s sole discovery brought to light in 1876 both impressive grave goods and a previously-unknown civilization, that of the Mycenaeans. Grave Circle A lay at the center of the eastern boundary of the Prehistoric cemetery. There in the soft rock of the slope, six pits were opened in the early 16th century BC in order to construct the large vertical shaft graves that would hold the members of Mycenae’s most powerful family. Five of the six graves were used for more than one burial, while the total number of those buried was 19, including 9 men, 8 women, and 2 children. To delimit the area, a low circular enclosure wall of large, unworked stones was used. Stone grave stelai marked the graves, underscoring with their relief representations the identity of these new rulers. The chariots speak to their martial temperament, and the age-old spiral ornament to their locale, while the priceless objects they took to their graves were the true witnesses to their absolute primacy. The five gold funeral masks, the elaborate weapons, the many pieces of gold jewelry as well as the objects and utensils of precious metals and exotic materials appear to have created the enormous fame of the royal clan which Homer preserved in his unique characterization “Mycenae, rich in gold” (*Il.* 11.28: *βασιλῆα πολυχρύσιοι Μυκῆνης*)

The particular importance of this tomb complex also results from the fact that all those who came after it accorded it enormous respect. None of the graves

was violated, while in the mid-13th century BC when there was a need to expand the fortification wall towards the southwest slope, it was designed with a curved outline to include the grave enclosure inside the fortifications. With the construction of a retaining wall on the west side, they raised the ground level and configured a flat surface a little lower than the monumental gate and entrance, while they enclosed the site with an impressive circular parapet consisting of a double row of well-finished sandstone slabs and conglomerate with comparable covering. The new boundary of the royal graves had a diameter of 26 meters and an entrance on the northwest side, so that it could be visited immediately after entering the acropolis. It is obvious that the Mycenaeans of the Palatial Period treated these important burials as a monument to their glorious ancestors and used it to legitimize their own authority, pointing it out to whoever passed through the imposing Lion Gate into the fortified acropolis. The special nature of this site was preserved throughout antiquity, and it was no accident that Pausanias conveys this ancient memory, recording it in the information on the burial of Agamemnon inside the walls. This was the mythical ruler whom Heinrich Schliemann had been in search of; when he encountered him behind his gold burial mask, Schliemann considered that his mission was complete and departed from Mycenae, leaving Panagiotis Stamatakis, the supervisor for the Greek state, to continue excavating in a tried-and-tested manner and to find the sixth royal grave.

The absence of a systematic excavation method and inadequate documentation of Schliemann's investigation led all later researchers who were scientifically active at Mycenae to return both for excavation and for reasons of documentation, study, and publication to the site of these unique finds. After the mapping of the enclosure by the pioneer B. Steffen (1884), systematic investigations by Christos Tsountas (1887-1910), supplementary investigation by A. Keramopoulos (1913) and the first complete scholarly presentation of the shaft graves by Georg Karo (1915/1930), excavation was assumed by Alan J.B. Wace (1920-1923), to whom we also owe the first documented reconstruction drawing of Grave Circle A. Finally, decisive contributions were made by Ioannis Papadimitriou (1955) and Georgios E. Mylonas (1962), who returned for supplementary research and study of the new evidence.

The funerary gifts from Grave Circle A, unique in terms both of wealth and artistic value, are on exhibit in the National Archaeological Museum. Exact replicas of some of them are presented in the second gallery of the Archaeological Museum of Mycenae in a prominent prismatic display case. These copies are owed to the astonishing virtuoso Louis Emile Emmanuel Gilliéron, called Emile Gilliéron père (1851-1924).

Grave Circle B

In 1951, seventy-five years following Heinrich Schliemann's discovery of Grave Circle A, another grave circle was identified by chance on the western boundary of the prehistoric cemetery during a restoration project on the tholos of the Tomb of Clytemnestra. Its systematic excavation under the direction of I. Papadimitriou and G. E. Mylonas and its exemplary publication led to secure scientific conclusions regarding the unanswered questions following Schliemann's improvised presentation of the finds from Grave Circle A.

Grave Circle B, built of low Cyclopean masonry, had a diameter of 28 meters and included 26 tombs, 14 of which were vertical shaft graves while the others were simple, shallow pits. Tomb Rho constitutes a special case; it was built in the 15th century BC inside the pit of an earlier shaft grave. It was a built, quadrangular tomb with a *dromos* (entrance passage), chamber, and corbeled roof. The plastered wall courses of the chamber were covered in red and black bands. This tomb type finds parallels in Ugarit, on the Syrian coast, and at Trachonas in Cyprus; it may be compared to the "Temple Tomb" of Knossos.

The tombs of Grave Circle B, which held between one and four dead (for a total of 35 persons), are partly earlier (1650-1600 BC) and partly contemporary (1600-1550 BC) with those of Grave Circle A. The richer ones were marked by stone grave stelai, five of which were found *in situ*. Some carried relief or incised decoration, thus providing an idea of the art of Mycenaean monumental sculpture.

The funerary gifts, although not as rich as those from Grave Circle A, highlight the upper class and prosperity of the deceased. Bronze weapons recall their

martial nature, while the gold, silver, and bronze utensils as well as jewelry fashioned of precious metals and semi-precious stones in combination with the electrum mask and portrait of the bearded ruler on an amethyst seal stone identify the deceased as having belonged to one of Mycenae's ruling clans. An amber necklace links them with South England, while the tiny rock crystal *kymbe* (a spouted bowl) concluding in a duck's head is a Minoan imitation of an Egyptian prototype.

However, the commonest grave goods were pottery vases. The Middle Helladic tradition is represented by the stout Minyan Ware vases, a category of pottery imitating silver and gold models which took its name from Minyas, the mythical king of Orchomenos. Their yellow or greyish surface with its high burnish, angular outlines and incisions give these cups a primitive and simultaneously robust form directly recalling the image of the first rulers as illustrated by the other types of funerary gifts in Grave Circle B.

Another characteristic category of the "Shaft Grave Period" was the renowned matt painted pottery. Linear—primarily, decorative—elements were adapted to a burnished, light-colored surface. These added elements have a dull color, thanks to the use of manganese in the paint mixture. In addition to dark brown and dull black paint, more vibrant colors were also chosen, including red, creating the so-called "polychrome" variant which was strongly influenced by contemporary Cycladic pottery. It was not unusual for these vases to depict birds, a popular Cycladic iconographic motif.

During the transition from the Middle Helladic to Mycenaean period, Mycenaean potters discovered the lustrous paint that would mark the beginnings of purely Mycenaean pottery. During these early stages, vase shapes and the repertoire were strongly or nearly exclusively influenced by Minoan Crete. Linear and iconographic motifs would be combined with exceptionally fine results on the splendid vessels of the Early Mycenaean period.

The tholos tombs

In the early 15th century BC, the Mycenaean rulers who were still burying their dead in vertical shaft graves adopted—apparently, from Messenia—a new type of tomb, the tholos. With dimensions more than twice those of the largest shaft graves, and of exceptionally costly construction, chamber tombs were the emblematic burial monuments *par excellence* of the royal clans, something also reflected in the conventional names of some of them as preserved in historical memory: the “Treasury” of Atreus and the royal tombs of Agamemnon, his adulterous wife Clytemnestra, and the sworn rival to Agamemnon’s throne, Aegisthus.

The tholos tombs consisted of a circular mortuary chamber, in the floor of which the pits to contain the burials were opened. A long passageway led to the chamber. To build them, two corresponding pits were opening in the soft stone of a hillside, within which the new circular chamber was built as a dome (tholos) in the shape of a beehive, while the passageway (*dromos*) was built with vertical walls. The entire construction was covered by a mass of earth that formed an enormous mound (tumulus). Their dimensions, which were monumental, varied in ascending order from earliest to latest between 8 and 14.60 meters (diameter and height of the domed burial chamber), between 5 and 6 meters (width), and between 22 and 37 meters (length of entrance passageway).

Despite the fact that tholos tombs have been found at all the large Mycenaean centers, only Mycenae, as the most powerful kingdom, had a total of 9 tholos tombs, classified by A.J.B. Wace chronologically into three groups. The following tombs belong to the first group (1510-1460 BC): the tomb of the Cyclops or the Cyclopean Tomb, that of Epano Phournos, and the tomb of “Aegisthus”. The second group (1460-1400 BC) consists of the Panagia Tomb, Kato Phournos Tomb, and the Lion Tomb. The tomb of the Daemons (Genii) or “Orestes”, the “Treasury of Atreus”, and the tomb of “Clytemnestra”, considered the most brilliant examples of this tomb type, belong to the third group (1400-1250 BC). Characteristic of the technical expertise of the early Mycenaean is the fact that at least seven of Mycenae’s nine tholos tombs were built before the first fortification phase (1350 BC).

Without doubt, the most splendid funerary monument of Mycenaean culture was—and remains today—the enormous tholos tomb built at the apogee of Palatial Period prosperity on the hill of the Panagia near what was at the time a densely-inhabited region west of the main road leading to the acropolis. A work of inconceivable financial and construction demands, it achieved its perfection of form both with its corbelled domed chamber, which numbered 33 horizontal rings of finished conglomerate as well as its monumental entrance, which was covered by a lintel weighing 120 tons and which, like the courses of the dome, had been hewn into a curved shape on its inner face. An equally-imposing impression would have been caused by the revetment of the long entrance passageway with its enormous, nearly-isodomic stones. And since this achievement was not enough for the Mycenaean kings, leading artists from the palace workshops were called upon to fit the interior of the tholos with bronze ornaments, the façade with green relief half-columns, and to cover the upper part of the façade and the relieving triangle with horizontal relief compositions done in red. A side chamber cut into the rock with monumental entrance, central support column, and probably a revetment on its walls of relief-decorated gypsum slabs supplemented the complex as a unique appendage among Mycenae's chamber tombs. Today, the worldwide influence enjoyed by this monument competes only with that of the contemporary Lion Tomb. As a means of expressing the omnipotence of the Mycenaean royal house, these remarkable artistic and technical achievements were built at the moment when the palace system of governance was feeling its first tremors. The goal of the kings was to maintain their authority beyond question, employing yet again the power of impressing their subjects and royal partners as well as those conspiring against their mighty regime. The choice of location for monuments at key points before the entrance to the fortified palace, as well as their extremely ostentatious form belongs to the tactic of manipulation with which the Mycenaean kings were very familiar, and which they effectively employed for around four centuries.

The impact of their exterior form was complemented by the untold wealth of funerary gifts that accompanied the royal deceased to their monumental tombs. This fame, which was reflected in their being characterized by the

traveler Pausanias as the “Treasury of Atreus and his sons”, in combination with the fact that due to their construction their location was always clearly visible, led to their total desecration between antiquity and the period of Ottoman rule. The meager examples which escaped the notice of past and more recent antiquities looters such as a large piriform jar from the tomb of “Aegisthus” (today in the Museum of Mycenae) as well as the relief decoration on the façade of the “Treasury of Atreus” in the National Archaeological Museum and the British Museum, are not enough for us to imaginatively reconstruct the overall grandeur of the tholos tombs.

The chamber tomb cemeteries

Most Mycenaeans who belonged to the upper classes but probably not to the royal family and possibly, some ordinary people were buried in a very widely-disseminated tomb type, the chamber tomb. It was an imitation of the royal tholos tomb with a simpler form of construction and smaller dimensions.

The chamber tomb had a rock-cut underground burial chamber to which an open, descending passageway led, beginning from ground level and concluding at the depth at which the composition of the rock allowed construction of the chamber. Access from the *dromos* to the burial chamber was through an opening sealed with dry wall each time there was a new burial. Inside the burial chamber, which was normally quadrangular, circular, elliptical, or irregular depending on the ease of carving afforded by the geological substrate, pits or niches were opened for burials and benches were for depositing offerings to the dead. Some chamber tombs had decorated facades or even side chambers for the deposition of additional dead.

To construct chamber tombs, the Mycenaeans chose hillsides or the sides of a ravine with relatively hard rock such as conglomerate, limestone, and poros stone which on the one hand allowed the stone to be cut away, but on the other ensured the burial chamber against future collapse. Such tombs, organized in smaller or larger groups, have been found at 27 sites scattered among the hills around Mycenae’s acropolis and at a distance from the inhabited area outside it. They were widely disseminated, and some probably belonged to neighboring settlements controlled by the acropolis of Mycenae,

in the modern-day areas of Fichtia to the west and Monastiraki and Vraserka to the south near the ancient Heraion.

The oldest are dated to the 15th c. BC, and most of them continued in use throughout the Palatial Period (14th-13th c. BC). In the Post-Palatial Period (12th c. BC), some were abandoned, but others—chiefly, those in the larger clusters—remained in use and demonstrate the continued habitation of the acropolis and greater area after the critical turning-point in the late 13th century BC. Furthermore, during this period some new cemeteries were founded; these have mostly been found in regions possessing natural resources such as stone for quarrying and clay for making ceramics, but which were also located near natural water sources. These tombs, however, were smaller and less well-made than the earlier ones of the Palatial Period.

The diversity of number and quality of funerary gifts in each cemetery reflects the different financial status and social position of those buried there, who apparently belonged to the same family and were laid to rest near the land the rulers allowed them to control.

THE ACROPOLIS

The consolidation of the supremacy of the Mycenaean rulers during the 14th century BC was primarily expressed by the idea of creating a fortified seat that included all the buildings on which their power was based and dependent. The centralized system of governance exercised by the supreme ruler was applied to every human activity at both the secular and supernatural level. For this regime to function, religious control was necessary, as was control of all activities whether in peace or war. These rules also determined the uses of the building complexes which were crammed into Mycenae's fortified area. In an age when the omnipotent ruler did not require physical protection, the palace complex and the palace workshops it controlled, together with storage spaces, the residences of the ruling class and sanctuaries were enclosed within its Cyclopean fortifications. The reasons for creating a fortified acropolis with all the buildings of vital importance for the ruling power were not related to fear or the need for protection, but with a disposition for imposition by means of centralized control and for making a

show of power. The tremendously wealthy and all-powerful rulers employed costly constructions as a means of impressing their subjects and legitimating the power they exercised, which also led them to include and embellish the most brilliant monument of their ancestors, Grave Circle A, in the fortified area.

The fortifications

The naturally-fortified hill of Mycenae was reinforced during the Palatial Period (14th-13th c. BC) with impressive walls. Even in antiquity their imposingly large stone blocks called forth the wonder and admiration of people who attributed their construction to the Cyclops, mythical giants from Lycia. The “Cyclopean” wall of Mycenae followed the natural terrain. Triangular in shape, it occupied an area of 30,000 square meters, with a total length amounting to 900 meters. Its construction dates to three building phases. The oldest fortification, dated to 1350 BC (LH IIIA2) included the upper part of the hill. During the second phase around 1250 BC (LH IIIB), the Lion Gate and western extension were built so that Grave Circle A and the southwest slope of the hill could be integrated into the fortified area. This was followed by the North Gate, a miniature of the Lion Gate on the north side of the wall. During the final phase in 1230/1220 BC, the fortification was expanded towards the northeast to ensure access to the underground cistern north and outside the acropolis. The walls were mostly constructed of local limestone. At their most prominent and key points near the gates and bastions, stone blocks of well-dressed and squared-off conglomerate were used, lending the construction particular grandeur.

The average width of the wall is 6 meters, though in some sections it approaches 8-10 meters, incorporating building complexes—chiefly, storage areas—within the fortifications. We do not however know the original height of the wall, since its termination is not preserved at any point of the surviving fortifications. The height of the Hellenistic tower preserved on the southeast side, which reaches 18 meters from its foundation on the bedrock, is considered an indication of the maximum original height of the Mycenaean fortifications. On the west side, on the interior and near the “Granary”, the wall

is preserved to a height of 8.25 meters from its bedrock foundations. This must have been its minimum height.

In 468 BC, the Argives took Mycenae and destroyed key points of its fortifications. During the Hellenistic age (3rd c. BC), the walls were repaired using the polygonal masonry characteristic of the time.

The underground cistern

The need to ensure the essential element of drinking water led the Mycenaean to construct an underground cistern to which the water from a natural spring located 360 meters east of the acropolis was channeled. By providing a corbelled passage in the wall of the northeast extension and a well cut into the natural bedrock, they ensured access from the interior of the acropolis to the cistern.

The underground cistern, a work of exceptional conception and execution, attests to the Mycenaean's high level of expertise in specialized fields of technical works such as hydraulics and mechanics.

The requirements for design and implementation as well as the costliness of construction may suggest that it was a work of the late Palatial Period and not of the end of the omnipotence of the palace governance system. In this case, we must accept that the cistern predated the northeast extension, which was constructed exclusively to include protected access to it as well as Buildings A and B, which were connected with water management.

The Lion Gate

During the second building phase of the wall in the mid-13th century BC, the Acropolis of Mycenae acquired a new, monumental entrance. Built of four giant conglomerate stones, it is one of the most impressive constructions of all times. The gate, which is nearly square, measures 3.10 x 2.90/3.10 meters. The threshold and lintel each weigh around 20 tons; the jambs are lighter. A wooden double-leaf door which opened inward turned on vertical elements and was secured with a horizontal post.

The gate's apical element was the limestone relief slab that covers the "relieving triangle". Two rampant facing lions, resting their front legs on two small altars, atop which rose a column of Minoan type supporting the entablature of a building. The lions' heads have not survived, but it is probable they were depicted frontally facing visitors, and that they were of some other material such as steatite, on which it would have been easier to depict their features.

The heraldic scene is strongly symbolic, given that the column refers to the palace and royal house of Mycenae, which was protected by the all-powerful king of animals. The "crest" of the Mycenaean *wanakes* employs a well-known theme from the iconography of earlier small-scale works like seals and seal rings. However, the uniqueness of this emblem of the palace dynasty lies in its enormous size. Although competent artisans in miniature sculpture, the Mycenaean could not boast of many large-scale sculptures.

This exceptional contrast and the uniqueness of this work, which has rightly been characterized as the earliest example of monumental architectural sculpture in European civilization, is interpreted by the prominent position occupied by the "Zeus-born" (*diogeneis*) kings of Mycenae in the brilliant palatial environment of the greater Mycenaean dominion.

The palace complex

As the supreme symbol of the power of the *wanax* and expression of the centralized system of governance, the palace complex was built at the summit of Mycenae's acropolis. During the early periods (15th-14th c. BC), the central palace building, the Megaron, had, according to G. E. Mylonas, a north-south orientation. With the construction of wide terraces and artificial level crossings, an ambitious building program began in LH IIIA2 (1350-1300 BC). The Megaron was oriented east-west, and reception areas, storerooms, and workshops were organized around it. In the middle of LHIIIB (1250 BC), following a catastrophic earthquake and fire, the complex assumed its final form. The palace and its annexes were destroyed by fire at the end of LH IIIB2 (1180 BC), though the area was likely also used during LH IIIC (1180-1050 BC).

From the meagre remains preserved, it is nearly impossible for us to imagine the actual form of this building, which must have been elaborately decorated. Painted plaster covered the walls and floors, and the remaining elements not preserved today like the wooden beams and columns supporting the roof must have been polychrome and glittering. The first in a series of rooms, the Homeric great “ceremonial hall”, had a floor of gypsum, a stone they had brought from Crete. The same material was also used as a border for the floor in two other rooms decorated by painted squares with a red outline and geometric shapes painted yellow, red, and dark blue on the interior. The circular hearth of the great “ceremonial hall” was covered by plaster with painted spirals and a flame-shaped ornament. From the rich painted decoration on the walls, only small pieces depicting scenes from the preparation and conducting of a battle have survived. Women at the windows of the palace are watching the outcome of the dramatic events. It is possible that the scene selected by the ruler to adorn his palace told the story of one of his own heroic adventures, like those narrated by the Homeric bards in praise of bravery, the supreme virtue of the warlike Mycenaeans.

The east wing of the Palace

Particularly important buildings directly connected with the operation of the palace were built in the second half of the 13th century (LH IIIB2) to the east and at a lower level than the palace complex. The two-storey **House of Columns**, organized around a peristyle courtyard, had a megaron-shaped room and basement storage areas where pithoi, commercial stirrup jars, and a Linear B tablet were found. The large building complex differed from normal residences in terms of its size, ground plan, and the fact that it incorporated elements of palatial architecture. The **Artisans’ Quarter** to its west included a series of rooms around an elongated courtyard in which unfinished objects, unworked raw materials, precious and semi-precious stones were found, thus confirming its use as a palace workshop for processing ivory and making jewelry. A triangular courtyard separated these complexes from **Buildings C** and **D**, which were adapted to the walls of the north and south sides. Their use is unclear although it is possible they belonged to the east wing of the

palace and served functions associated with processing and storing. All these buildings were destroyed by fire in the late 13th century BC (LH IIIB2-IIIC).

The north storerooms

An oblong, two-storey building with five rooms on its ground floor was built during LH IIIB2 (1250-1200 BC) facing the street leading from the north gate to the northeast expansion and House of Columns. On its ground floor, pithoi for the storage of dry food and other vases were found. Objects made of ivory, lead, bronze and semi-precious stones were stored on the second floor together with two fragments of a Linear B table which collapsed when the building was destroyed by fire in late LH IIIB2 (1200 BC) and abandoned. The finds presented in the Mycenae Museum recall the administrative control exercised by the palace's central administration.

The Northwest Quarter and North Slope

At the northwest bend in the wall above the Lion Gate, Buildings N, I, and II forming the Northwest Quarter were built after the mid-13th century BC. Their basement rooms must have been used for storage. These buildings were destroyed by fire in the late 13th century BC and abandoned. Two hoards of bronze objects (weapons, a bronze talent and two violin-bow fibulae) were concealed in their ruins. To the east, Building M and around it, rooms which served as storage spaces were built on the North Slope of the Acropolis during the same era. The three rooms built in the wall on the north side were also intended for storage; beside them a fourth room had a corbelled roof like the famous galleries of Tiryns. These spaces were used until late in LH IIIC (12th c. BC).

The discovery in the wider area of bronze and stone tools, raw materials, cult objects, and dry food as well as the presence of hundreds of glass and amber beads and two faience plaques with the cartouche of Pharaoh Amenhotep III may point to a mixed use for these building complexes, which would have housed workshops and storerooms like corresponding complexes on the Lower Acropolis of Tiryns.

The Southwest Quarter

South of the Tsountas House on the southwest slope of the Acropolis, around 11 houses separated by corridors and steps were built on successive terraces in the mid-13th century BC (LH IIIB2). Most of the buildings had a purely residential use, while some which were adorned with wall paintings or had an altar and benches apparently housed cult activities. After the destructive earthquake at the end of the 13th century BC, some residences were abandoned, while others were repaired and also remained in use during the 12th century BC (LH IIIC).

The Cult Center

The **Cult** Center on the Acropolis of Mycenae, a complex of temples, shrines, and their annexes, was built on the southwest slope of the acropolis in the center of the residential area and at a lower level than the palace. The buildings composing it were built in the period from the late 14th to the mid-13th century BC (LH IIIB1); some must have predated the fortification wall. The main means of accessing the sanctuaries was via the processional road which led to the large staircase and palace. However, one could also enter the site from the area of the South House as well as the courtyard to the west. Access to the religious center from the processional road was through a monumental entrance leading to a courtyard with an altar, which was flanked by two buildings, the so-called Megaron (on the west) and Shrine Γ (on the east).

The Megaron consisted of two rooms, the inner one of which had a hearth. Shrine Γ was also two-roomed, with a stone for sacrifices and a horseshoe-shaped hearth in the first, and a blind second room which has been considered the sanctuary's *adyton* (inner shrine). This was followed at a lower level by the so-called "Tsountas' House", a two-storey building which may have served as a priests' residence. Next to it was the central courtyard of the Cult Center complex with its circular stone altar. The two most important buildings in the complex, the Temple and the Room with the Fresco Complex, faced onto this courtyard.

The Temple or “Room of the Idols”

The Temple was one of the most interesting buildings in the Cult Center, mostly because of its important and numerous finds, among which the anthropomorphic idols hold pride of place. The main room (18) included a central hearth and a series of stepped benches along its north wall. One of the idols was found nearly intact in its original position on the east bench together with a portable clay hearth. A staircase attached to the room's east wall led to an elevated room (19) where numerous broken objects associated with cult rituals had been deposited. The idols with human features, snakes, portable hearths, vases, and a hoard of valuable items were sealed in this room as well as in an alcove in the building's northwest corner following a catastrophe in the late 13th century BC.

The Room with the Fresco Complex

At an even lower level and towards the wall there was another building whose main room was decorated by a fresco. The central hearth, the fresco, the altar and other valuable finds make it one of Mycenae's most important discoveries. A small storage area behind the wall with the fresco contained many vases, fragments of ivory objects, and jewelry. An individual female figurine with raised arms which had been placed on a low bench at a point not visible from the door must have been used as a cult object.

The buildings of the Cult Center, which suffered serious damage in the late 13th century BC (LH IIIB2) from a powerful earthquake, were repaired and reused on a smaller scale. Shortly after this, they were destroyed by a local fire and abandoned. In the 12th century BC (LH IIIC) during the gradual decline of the acropolis, the area was taken over by houses which were in use until the end of the Mycenaean age.

The South House and Annex

The South House, which lies directly northwest of the Cult Center, was built on an artificial terrace with strong foundations. Its construction dates in the 13th century BC, and it probably predated the western expansion of the fortification enclosure. The ground level's masonry was of stonework with a timber frame, while the walls of the two upper floors were built of mud brick and similar wooden framework. The entrance to the complex was on the west across from Grave Circle A. Like many other buildings in the wider region, the South House was destroyed by fire in the late 13th century BC, leaving very few finds that could clarify the building's use. Among these, the most notable is the amphora, an import from Canaan, indicating the extent of Mycenaean trade.

The House of the Warrior Vase and the Ramp House

The two buildings between Grave Circle A and the South House were probably erected after the expansion of the fortification enclosure. The famous krater with a scene of warriors dated to the mid-12th century BC was found in the ruins of the former.

The second had a megaron-shaped room and three smaller rooms that may have served as storerooms. The fresco with the scene of "Women at the Window" was found here, while the unique female head of colored limestone interpreted as a depiction of a deity or sphinx comes from the wider area. Today, all three objects adorn the National Archaeological Museum.

The Granary

A peculiar two-storey building was constructed after the second building phase of the wall (1250 BC). Carbonized remains of grain (barley, wheat, and vetch) were found in its two basement rooms in storage containers. They gave their name to the building and simultaneously provided an interpretation of its use, though according to another version it was a billet for the garrison. This name also characterized the category of pottery (Granary Class) which came from the building's destruction level (Middle LH IIIC:1150-1100 BC).

BUILDING COMPLEXES OUTSIDE THE ACROPOLIS

On the north and northwest slope outside the Acropolis of Mycenae, spacious building complexes were constructed to house a series of functions above and beyond their strictly residential use. As their rich finds attest, these houses hosted workshops for processing exotic materials, storage areas for key exports such as wine, oil, and wool, as well as spaces connected with the management of products and goods. The decoration of some of them with frescos, the discovery of Linear B tablets, the great value of the stored products as well as the possibility of producing prestige items from imported raw materials attest to the direct relationship between the buildings' owners and the palace. It is quite probable that these complexes were annexes which operated outside the Acropolis both due to a shortage of living space inside the fortification as well as to facilitate trade carried out on behalf of the palace.

The House at Plakes

North of the Acropolis and beside the Kokoretsa ravine, a house on two terraces with painted floors and walls was built in the second half of the 13th century (LH IIIB2). The scene of helmeted, unarmed men offering gifts from the House at Plakes is an exceptional example of miniature fresco painting. The skeletons of three adults and a child who were crushed during an earthquake that destroyed the house in the late 13th century BC were found in the basement rooms.

Houses in the vicinity of the Museum

An extensive building complex, the House of the Tripods, erected on the north slope of the Acropolis, was in use from LH IIIB until early LHIIIC (1300-1150 BC). Subsequently, the site was used for burials. One of the seven graves excavated had rich grave goods and probably belonged to a metallurgist who had been buried together with the inventory from his workshop. Northwest of the House of the Tripods, a building used as a workshop was found with a lifespan identical to that of the House of the Tripods.

The House of the Wine Merchant and the Cyclopean Terrace Building

The House of the Wine Merchant was built northwest of the Acropolis in the second half of the 14th century (LH IIIA2). The building acquired its name from the 50 stirrup jars found there which were probably used for exporting wine.

In early LH IIIB (early 13th c. BC), the Cyclopean Terrace Building was constructed atop the ruins of the house. The later building consisted of the North and South Megaron. Built as terraces, with strong Cyclopean masonry, they were destroyed by fire, probably at the end of the same period.

The Petsas House

Northeast of the House of the Wine Merchant, The Petsas House, which took its name from that of its excavator, was built in the second half of the 14th century (LH IIIA2). It had two wings, one of which had basement rooms which served as storerooms. Around 500 unused vases were found stored there, neatly arranged by shape on shelves. In addition to a large number of figurines, part of a Linear B clay tablet was found which is considered to be the oldest such tablet in mainland Greece. These houses were destroyed by fire in the late 14th century.

The House of the Oil Merchant Group

A building complex consisting of four houses was built in the early 13th century BC (LH IIIB1) on the slope west of the main road leading to the Acropolis. It operated as an annex to the central palace administration and was destroyed by fire in the mid-13th century BC.

The earliest building, the West House, probably oversaw the entire complex; in addition to its residential use, it housed administrative functions as attested by the Linear B tablets which contained information about the feeding of staff.

The House of Shields, a ground-floor building with a unique ground plan took its name from the ivory replicas and relief plaques with “figure-of-eight” shields found there. It was used as a storage place for exotic materials, a transit hub,

and a furniture workshop, as evidenced by the large number of stone vases, processed ivory fragments, and faience objects found there.

The ground floor of the two-storey House of the Oil Merchant with its monumental façade was used for the storage of oil and wool, while the houses' private apartments and the archive of Linear B tablets were located on the upper floor. The many stirrup jars of Cretan provenance confirm large-scale trade with the Minoans.

The House of the Sphinxes, which was also two-storied, had a similar use to that of the House of Shields, while simultaneously also housing administrative functions, as confirmed by the inscribed clay sealings and Linear B tablets. The building's name is owed to ivory plaques with scenes of sphinxes.

The Panagia Houses

North of the "Treasury of Atreus" on the hill of Panagia, a complex of three houses was built in the early 13th century BC (LH IIIB1) which form a typical example of simple houses in the Mycenaean age. Rooms were arrayed on either side of a corridor; on one side were rooms having a tripartite arrangement while on the other was a series of uniform storage areas. These houses were destroyed by an earthquake which crushed a middle-aged woman beneath the rubble. In contrast to House I, Houses II and III were repaired and used for a short time, until House II was destroyed by fire. House III continued in use until the end of LH IIIB2 (1200 BC). In addition to the usual clay vessels, animal figurines and miniature vases, an ivory female figurine as well as an exceptionally fine clay model of a boot were found here.

THE POST-PALATIAL PERIOD (LH IIIC: 12th c. BC)

The hypertrophied system of administration in the Palatial Period, which functioned very successfully and yielded impressive results for around two centuries, gradually collapsed in the 13th century BC as a consequence of a series of changes which disturbed the balance of the palace world and led to a period of limited economic possibilities and clear tendencies to become detached from palatial guardianship.

The period “after the palaces” has been associated with a climate of insecurity and unrest which is implicit in pictorial representations with similar content, and which probably reflect hostilities between rulers. This period is also characterized by the abandonment of a large number of settlements, the desertion of the countryside, and mass movements to the islands of the Ionian and the Aegean, to Crete, Cyprus, and to other safe regions in the eastern Mediterranean.

In addition to the fact that a new form of central authority supported and directed developments both in the former palace centers which continued to be inhabited as well as in the new centers which rose to prominence during the 12th century, a series of changes marked the exit from the palace lifestyle and centralized system of governance. Together with the nature of the *wanax*, writing, the higher art forms and building prowess declined. Religious elements and rituals as well as the prestige items of rulers became rarer and rarer, and major changes in burial customs were observed.

In the Argolid, although all the major palace centers suffered significant damage which is attributed (though not always securely) to earthquakes and subsequent fires, continued habitation has been found, even if with a completely different organization, as well as examples of reconstruction.

At Mycenae a series of disasters are attested during the 12th century BC which in most cases were due to fires possibly associated with intense and repeated periodic seismic activity. The Acropolis and surrounding area outside the walls continued to be inhabited, but nothing any longer recalled the picture afforded by the Palatial Period. The surroundings of the Religious Center were covered by the ruins of burned and collapsed buildings, but it was reused, some new buildings were constructed in the large courtyard of the palace and the area of the House of Columns, while the sturdy Granary building, which was destroyed in mid-LH IIIC (1150-1100 BC), continued in use.

The cemeteries of chamber tombs continued in use, confirming with the number of burials—now accompanied by more ceramic grave goods—the presence of a sizable population in the area during the Post-Palatial Period. In parallel, some changes are observed in burial customs. The famous “Warrior

Vase” found in the fill of the house of this name as well as an elaborately-illustrated vase from the area of the Cult Center have been considered as the markers of individual tombs probably opened in the deep and consistent debris of the destruction layers as harbingers of a type of burial which would become established in historical times. One very interesting phenomenon is the appearance of a tumulus in the area of Chania 2.5 kilometers southwest of Mycenae’s acropolis which attests for the first time to the custom of cremation in the Argolid.

The collapse of the Mycenaean palatial system of governance and the end of this brilliant civilization of Greek prehistory has at times been attributed to various causes. Natural disasters and climate changes, social unrest in Mycenaean territory as well as invasions by foreign tribes identified as the Dorians of Greek written tradition and/or the “Sea Peoples” of the Egyptian sources, the collapse of the Hittite Empire in the East and the consequent loss of trading partners for the Mycenaeans appear to have brought about cumulative blows to the over-centralized system of governance, which failed to confront the crisis effectively.

The final glimmer of glory in a few once-glorious centers and new settlements was most likely owed to the dynamics of the merchant and seamen classes, which when freed of the guardianship of the *wanax* gradually shaped a new social, political, and economic reality which led to the founding of the city-state in historical times. One testament to these developments was the almost-exclusive dispersion of new centers along the coasts and the creation of sea routes leading primarily to the region long known for obtaining raw materials in the eastern Mediterranean.