

# Citadel's ghostly secrets

The Tomb of Agamemnon  
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It is hard to know what books to recommend to people who intend to visit Mycenae, one of two Greek sites included in Profile's Wonders of the World series. Its fortified citadel is the type site for the palatial culture that flourished in Greece between 1650 and 1200BC. The Mycenaean Greeks may not have launched against Troy the 1,200 ships that Thucydides calculates from Homer's Iliad, but they never disappeared from the imaginations of later Greeks.

All sites in this series "have achieved iconic stature and are loaded with a fair amount of mythological baggage". Cathy Gere unpacks Mycenae's mythological baggage, ancient and modern, and demonstrates that the dreamlike terrors of myth do not always hide in our self-constructed cultural closets. They can hide right out in plain sight. Gere's title in fact alludes to Henry Miller's own nightmarish reactions to Mycenae, reflecting his horror at the outbreak of the Second World War. These are found in his *Colossus of Maroussi*, an all-but-forgotten book I have recommended to students for 30 years.

The citadel of Mycenae, with its massive Cyclopean walls and impressive associated tholos tombs, has always lurked in plain sight. In Miller's words, it sits in "a menacing crouch, grim, defiant, impenetrable", coiled, ready to pounce. Gere uncoils the archaeological remains and the history of their interpretation as cultural icons. She starts with the discipline-founding excavations of Heinrich Schliemann in the 1870s, and then moves through the steadily more scientific work of his Greek and British successors (Christos Tsountas, George Mylonas, Alan Wace and Elizabeth French), finishing with the interdisciplinary fieldwork and collaborative scholarship of the past two decades. Gere highlights the Pylos Regional Archaeological Project and a recent Aegaeum conference on Bronze Age warfare.

The real strength here is her insightful account of how the archaeological ruins of Mycenae have been interpreted and misinterpreted to fit contemporary cultural agenda. From Schliemann through the Second World War, the contents of Mycenae's now famous shaft graves were used to support Aryan ideological notions about the purity and superiority of an early Hellenic warrior culture. Schliemann himself exaggerated the evidence at Mycenae for the emblematic Aryan symbol, the swastika. As un-Aryan a physical specimen as Der Führer, Schliemann was nonetheless later hagiographised as an übermensch. Himmler, Goebbels and Goering all made pilgrimages to Mycenae. The Untermenschen were, at various times, eastern cultures, the matriarchal and effete Minoans and even, in Hesiod's view, the Greeks of the historical period.

For Freud and H. D., the Mycenaean were pre-Oedipal components of the European psyche. For Oswald Spengler, the Mycenaean displayed an uncorrupted Teutonic strength. For archaeologists, depending on their own experiences of war, the Mycenaean have been crass mafiosi or Bronze Age forerunners of the Eurocommunity. Even with all our science, what Miller called "the ghosts of (these) antediluvial men" still haunt us.

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## **The Tomb of Agamemnon: Mycenae and the Search for a Hero**

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