

# Mycenae

**S**ITUATED IN the Argolid, in the northeastern Peloponnese, Mycenae is the type site for the Mycenaean culture of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1600–1100 B.C.). There is evidence for habitation at the site from Neolithic times (French 2002; Shelton 2010). At the peak of the Mycenaean period in the thirteenth century B.C. (late Helladic IIIB period), a complex set of buildings, courtyards, roads, and a massive fortification wall had been constructed on the site, and the palace itself stood at the highest point of the rocky hilltop within the citadel.

Mycenaean palaces were administrative centers, serving a number of functions, including residential, religious, ceremonial, storage, and industrial. The palace at Mycenae (French 2002; Schofield 2007) was approached from the terrace below by a grand staircase leading to an open court, beyond which was the standard megaron complex (porch, vestibule, hall). The main hall, or “throne-room” (a throne is envisaged against the wall to the right of the entrance on the basis of better-preserved palatial sites), was outfitted with a painted stucco floor bordered with gypsum slabs; a large, central, circular ceremonial hearth under an opening in the roof that was once supported by four wooden (possibly bronze-plated) columns on four surviving stone bases; and walls lavishly painted with frescoes that included a battle scene showing a warrior falling from walls and women looking out of windows. To the north and east of the palace proper were residential spaces, storerooms, and workshop areas interpreted as the artisans’ quarters. On the west slope was the cult center, consisting of five structures possibly serving different deities and their cult personnel, clustered around an open court. Conveying the splendor and awe of the precinct, the temple included an enormous collection of idols (anthropomorphic figures, representing deities or mortals, or both), while the room with the fresco complex included a fresco showing two high-status women (mortal or divine?) facing each other, and a woman holding a sheaf of wheat in each hand below them, who may be the “Mistress of the Grains” mentioned on Linear B text MY Oi 701 (Aura Jorro 1993, 299). There are signs here of ivory working, reflecting the well-established connection between shrines and workshops.

The Linear B tablets found in various spots within the citadel (e.g. in the palace, the storerooms and workspaces, and near the cult center) attest to the palace's bureaucratic monitoring of the activities being carried out here.

The Cyclopean masonry of the fortification wall of this and other Mycenaean citadels derives its name from the mythical giant Cyclopes from Anatolia (Lycia) who were thought to have constructed the massive walls (Strabo 8.6.11). These walls were of huge, unworked boulders fitted together, whereas ashlar (finely cut) blocks were used in and around gateways.

The citadel was entered through the imposing Lion Gate. A unique example of monumental relief sculpture in the Mycenaean world, its relieving triangle features two lions (their heads are now missing) in a heraldic pose flanking a column, with their front legs resting on two Minoan-like incurved altars, potentially signaling that the king or *wanax's* power rested upon religious authority. Lions also guarded an entry to the contemporary Hittite capital of Hattusa-Boghazkoy in Anatolia. Interestingly, a reinvestigation of the Lion Gate relief (Blackwell 2014) has identified tool marks and stoneworking techniques of the Anatolian tradition, supporting the Hittite connection by suggesting that the relief's builders may have included skilled craftsmen moving between rulers in the region, possibly as part of a royal gift-exchange network.

During the last phase of the Mycenaean palace, the site was damaged by an earthquake, and repairs and rebuilding followed. At this time (ca. 1250 B.C.), the fortification wall was extended to bring Grave Circle A, which contained the rich burials of the shaft graves (dating to the LH I–II period; ca. 1600–1500 B.C.), within the citadel area, thereby monumentalizing the rulers' link with the earlier ancestors buried in Grave Circle A, most likely as a means of legitimizing their own rule (Wright 1987, 179; Dabney and Wright 1990), and possibly as part of an ancestor cult devoted to the founding *wanax* (Lupack 2014). This link with the past was highlighted to all who entered the citadel: a visitor's first encounter after the Lion Gate (which was also built at this time) would have been with Grave Circle A (Wright 1987, 181; Boyd 2015).

Grave Circle A encompassed six large shaft graves containing a total of nineteen individuals, and several limestone stelai placed above them as markers, as well as about seven poorly excavated simpler, shallow graves (French 2002, 37, 80). Homer describes Mycenae as "rich in gold" (*Il.* 11.46), alluding to the opulence of its palatial society, and this statement is borne out archaeologically by the material found in the shaft graves. Hundreds of gold and silver vessels and other precious objects were deposited in the graves, including ornaments and jewelry, weapons, inlaid daggers and swords indicative of an elite warrior ideology, and rare, exotic items thought to have played a role in the emergence and maintenance of ruling elite power structures and exchange networks throughout the Aegean (see e.g. Nakassis et al. 2016). The magnificent finds of Mycenae's shaft graves, such as gold masks placed over the faces of deceased males, exquisite diadems worn by women, and gold leaf used to wrap the bodies of children, highlight its exceptional wealth, ushering in a new period of social complexity, growth, regional influence, and expansion, all of which led to the height of the Mycenaean period, to which the palace and the rest of the extant structures on the site belong.

In 1876, the Grave Circle's first excavator, Heinrich Schliemann, famously but erroneously attributed one of the gold death masks from Grave Circle A to Agamemnon, the

legendary king of Mycenae. If Homer's Agamemnon were real, he would have lived several centuries *later* than the individual interred in this grave (the most plausible date for a Greek expedition to Troy being in the twelfth century B.C.). The fine craftsmanship of these grave goods has encouraged the belief in a special relationship between Mycenae and a palace on Crete, whereby experienced Minoan craftsmen could cater to the needs and tastes of Mycenae's emerging leaders.

Outside the citadel, in addition to buildings of domestic and industrial character scattered throughout the surrounding countryside, several structures are especially noteworthy. There is Grave Circle B (discovered in the 1950s) whose Middle Helladic (early seventeenth century B.C.) cist graves and several shaft graves are generally smaller and contained fewer goods than those of Circle A; the latest graves of Grave Circle B overlap in time with the earliest ones (late seventeenth century B.C.) of Circle A. Nine tholos tombs, all plundered, are also situated outside the walls, along with 300 or more chamber tombs. Outside the citadel are also the residential Panagia Houses; the four Ivory Houses (=West House Group), which have an official and commercial character and yielded luxury items, such as inlaid furniture pieces; and Petsas House, a pottery and figurine workshop. The level of palatial involvement in the activities of the houses is debated: the discovery of Linear B tablets in some of them suggests palatial interest, but not necessarily palatial control; they may have been independent, or semi-independent complexes interacting with the palace and other community members in a variety of ways (see e.g. French 2002; Shelmerdine 2011; Shelton 2015).

The Argolid is unusual in that it features three palatial complexes in a concentrated area: Mycenae, Tiryns, and Midea. The relationship between them is not entirely clear; theories range from their having been distinct centers arising from clashes of kin groups or factional fighting, to the theory that Tiryns and Midea were secondary centers subjugated in some way to Mycenae. In any case, Mycenae is the grandest in terms of extent and finds: the citadel and its immediate countryside are estimated to have covered thirty-two hectares (French 2002) and the exotic items found in the shaft graves and elsewhere on site reflect direct or indirect participation in external trading networks (e.g. the nearly pure silver stag-shaped vessel of Anatolian manufacture from Shaft Grave IV, the ostrich egg rhyton and alabaster jar from Shaft Grave V, both probably from Egypt, having undergone Minoan reworking, and the heirloom Egyptian faience scarab of Queen Tiye, wife of Amenhotep III from the cult center's temple (French 2002; Burns 2010). This picture of Mycenae's having had extensive external relations is reinforced by artifacts such as the Canaanite jars found across the site of Mycenae and the perfumed oil stirrup jars (some of which were made at Berbati, in the hinterland of Mycenae), that have been found throughout the eastern Mediterranean (French 2002). Given its strategic location in the Argolid, its wealth, and its foreign links, Mycenae is a suitable candidate for the Mycenaean site known in the Hittite texts as Ahhiyawa with which Hittite kings interacted, although other sites (e.g. Thebes), and even a coalition of Mycenaean territories, are alternative possibilities (Bryce 1989).

At the end of the thirteenth century B.C. (late LH IIIB), fires (potentially arising from an earthquake), and subsequently yet another earthquake destroyed the site, after which there was minimal reoccupation on the higher levels of the citadel until the Hellenistic period. An Archaic temple built on the summit and a sherd from the Classical period (ca. 475 B.C.)

with the inscription “To the hero” found in the debris overlying Grave Circle A (French 2002), which is possibly related to ancestor worship, suggest that mighty and splendid Mycenae, whose Lion Gate was still visible when Pausanias visited the site in the second century A.D. (2.16.5), continued to be venerated as a special place by later generations.

**Stavroula Nikoloudis**