

Life in Minoan Crete

Civilization began in Europe around 2200 B.C. with the development of city life on the Mediterranean island of Crete. This large island may have been inhabited as early as 6000 B.C. by settlers from Anatolia (modern-day Turkey). For thousands of years, Cretan life centered around villages and other small settlements.

By 2200 B.C., however, the people living on Crete, known as Minoans, made significant advancements. They created an agricultural system which relied on the production of two crops: olives and grapes. Although they also grew grain, this two-crop system changed Cretan life dramatically.

The abundance of food created surpluses, causing the island's population to grow. Fewer farmers were required to maintain the food supply, leaving others to pursue tasks such as metalworking, weaving, and pottery. Great storage jars were formed by potters and used to store vast quantities of olive oil and wine. Such products were traded throughout the Mediterranean by Minoan sailors.

In exchange for their olive oil and wine, the Minoans imported materials they did not have on their island, such as Egyptian gold, Persian tin, and Syrian ivory.

Early Minoan ships were drawn through the sea by as many as 30 oarsmen. By 2000 B.C., the Minoans were sailing on ships featuring several masts bearing great squarish sails. Such vessels were steered from the stern by large rudders or oars. These seafaring mariners not only traded, but fished the waters of the Mediterranean using trident-headed (three-pronged) harpoons, as well as weighted nets.

The world created by the Minoans was generally a peaceful one. Far removed from interference by outsiders on their remote island, the Minoans did not erect defensive walls around their cities. As skilled sailors, the Minoans developed, perhaps, the first navy in history. This force protected the islanders from pirates and marauders.

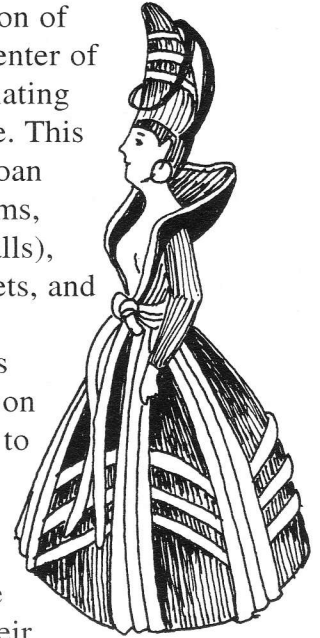
Life in Minoan Crete centered around cities such as Knossos. As the largest city on the island,

Knossos boasted a population of 20,000 people. It was the center of government as well. Dominating Knossos was a grand palace. This five-story home of the Minoan ruler featured over 250 rooms, colorful murals (painted walls), indoor plumbing, flush toilets, and running water.

Paintings in the Knossos palace reveal scenes of life on Crete. The Minoans appear to have been a joyful people who loved games and sports. Their religion was a happy one. Their gods were mostly women who, like their female priests, were depicted in stunning and elaborate costumes. Such dresses included flared skirts, exposed necklines, bright colors, and bold, zigzag patterns.

The Minoans worshiped their goddesses by dancing, wrestling, and performing acrobatics, including the dangerous ritual of bull-leaping.

This activity involved brave men and women who, wearing only loincloths, somersaulted over charging bulls. Such bullfighters, as well as wrestlers and boxers, competed in games to honor their Minoan deities.



*Minoan woman
shown in elaborate
costume, dating from
1900 B.C.*

Review and Write

1. On a separate sheet of paper, note the differences and similarities between the Minoan civilization and other early civilizations you have studied.
2. What factors made the Minoan civilization of 2200 B.C. more advanced than earlier peoples living on the island of Crete?

The Mycenaeans

While the Minoans enjoyed dominance of the eastern Mediterranean Sea after 2000 B.C., another civilization was developing on land to the north, known today as the Peloponnesus—a great southern peninsula of modern-day Greece.

A people called the Mycenaeans moved onto the Peloponnesus around 2200 B.C. They were an Indo-European people who, at that time, were primitive and nomadic. After 1600 B.C. their villages began developing into small cities. (In fact, the name “Mycenaean” came from the leading city on the Greek Peloponnesus, Mycenae.) The Mycenaeans’ culture was expanding its influence into the Mediterranean through trade.

This trade put the Mycenaeans into direct contact and conflict with the Minoans to the south. Through this contact, the Mycenaeans took on some aspects of Minoan culture. The combination of Mycenaean and Minoan influences resulted in a new civilization which came to dominate the eastern Mediterranean region. This region, called the Aegean world, (the Aegean Sea is the northeastern part of the Mediterranean) became dominated by the Mycenaeans after 1500 B.C.

One way the Mycenaeans were able to expand their influence in the Aegean world was through their military. The Mycenaeans were a warlike people ruled by warrior-kings who invaded Crete around 1500 B.C. By 1350, another Mycenaean invasion resulted in the destruction of the city and palace of Knossos and ended advanced civilization on Crete.

Between 1400 and 1200 B.C., Mycenae reached the height of its power and prosperity. Trade flourished, and Mycenaean merchants and sailors could be found throughout the Mediterranean, as far away as modern-day England.

Despite the importance of trade, the Mycenaeans relied on farming as an important part of the economy. Pastoralists raised sheep on meadows scattered throughout the hills of the Peloponnesus. Farmers cultivated wheat, barley, and other grains in

the fields. Bread was the basis of their diet.

In the city of Mycenae, the people were ruled by a warrior-king (as were the people in other Mycenaean cities) who ruled autonomously.

Today, on the site of ancient Mycenae, stand the ruins of the city and its palace. The city was surrounded by a fortress wall. People gained entrance to the city through the imposing Lion Gate, named after the two stone carvings of lions which stand over the gate.

Inside the palace, the king enjoyed the company of servants, bodyguards, slaves, and beautiful women, as well as his Followers—noblemen who were the king’s favorites. Such loyal subjects were given land, chariots, slaves, and servants by the king.

The kings of the Mycenaeans were immortalized in ancient Greek literature. A Greek poet named

Homer, who lived around 850 B.C., gave the world his famous work, *Iliad*. The epic poem describes the Mycenaeans around 1200 B.C. who were ruled by a great king named Agamemnon. According to Homer, Agamemnon captured the city of Troy (in modern-day Turkey) after a 10-year siege.

The siege of Troy was the last great adventure of the Mycenaean age. Between 1300 and 1200 B.C., the Mycenaean world was destroyed by mysterious raiders called the *Sea Peoples* and by land invasion of the Dorians, another Greek people.

The Dorians dominated the Peloponnesus between 1100 and 800 B.C. This period is known as the Dark Age of Greece. The Dorians destroyed Mycenaean culture, but did not replace it with anything as grand. The Dark Age saw an end to palace-centered monarchs on the Peloponnesus.

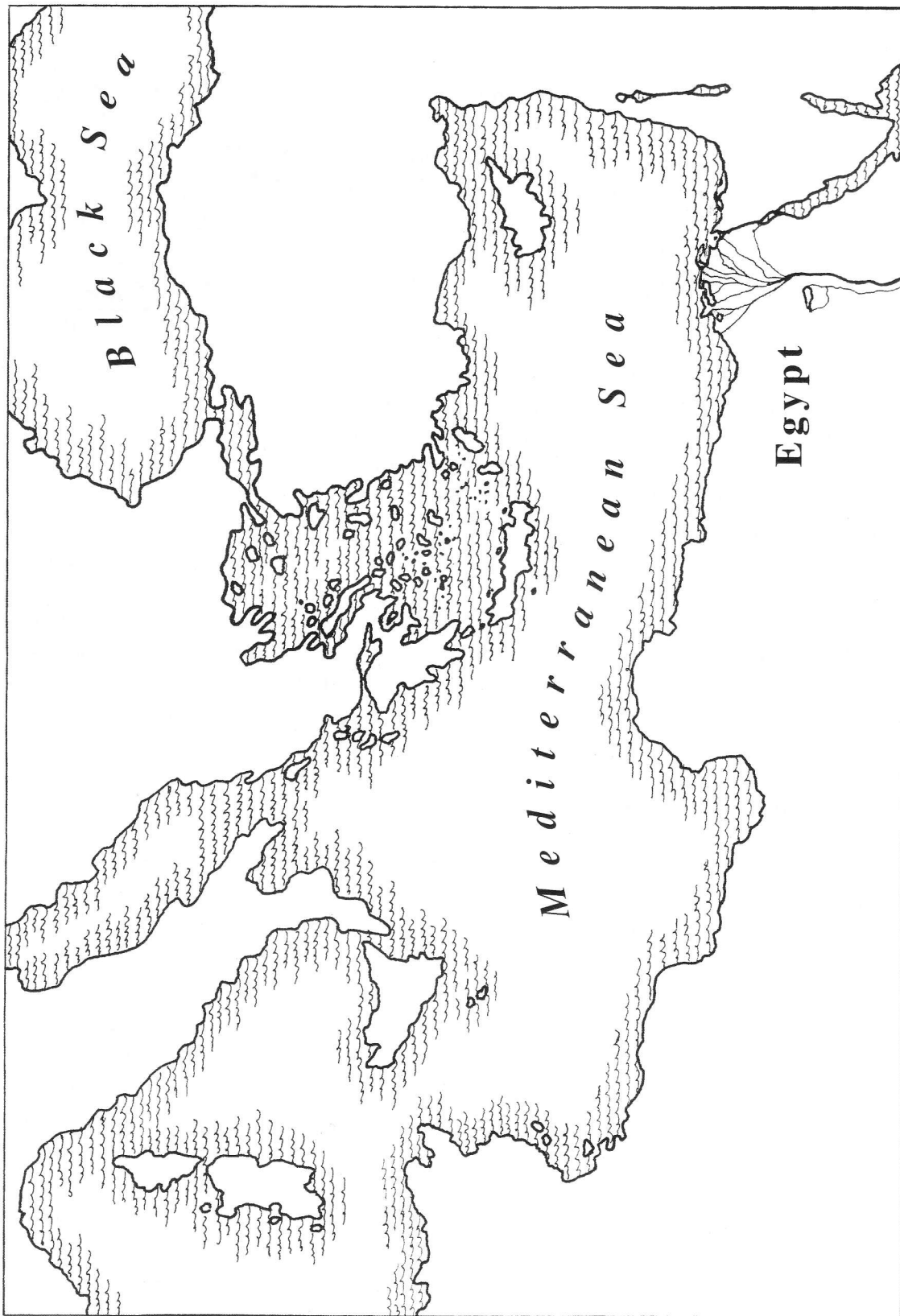


Death mask of a Mycenaean king

Review and Write

How did the Mycenaeans influence the Aegean World between 1500 and 1200 B.C.?

Mediterranean Map



Map Exercise

Using other sources, locate the following sites on the above map: Crete, Knossos, Mycenae, the Peloponnese, Greece, Troy, Anatolia, Macedonia, and the Aegean Sea. Also, locate the Mycenaean cities of Tiryns and Pylos. The island of Crete is the fifth largest island in the Mediterranean Sea. Name and locate the other four larger islands of the Mediterranean.

Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

Although the period between 1100 and 800 B.C. is known as the Dark Age of Greece—a time when writing almost disappeared, it was a time of great storytelling. Part of the oral tradition which comes down to us today may be found in the works of a poet traditionally known only as Homer.

While Homer lived (some historians doubt he ever existed) in the 800s B.C., he created two great epic poems set during the period of Mycenaean rule in the Aegean region around 1200 B.C. Four hundred years after the events, Homer is thought to have recorded the ancient stories which now comprise his classic works, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

The events related in both works are said to have taken place during and after the Trojan War which was fought in the 1200s B.C. during the reign of the Mycenaean king, Agamemnon (see page 2).

Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are part of the heroic element in early Greek literature. The heroes of each work are very different. The hero of the *Iliad*, Achilles, is a man of great military skill and prowess. Odysseus, the hero of the *Odyssey* (in Latin his name is Ulysses), works through a variety of challenges using cleverness and his wits, rather than sheer physical force. Despite their differences, these heroes nevertheless represent the best and most glorious of Greek heroic figures of the day.

The story of the *Iliad* is set during the final year of the Trojan War, which was fought between Greece and the city of Troy. The cause of the war was a woman named Helen, the beautiful wife of the Spartan king, Menelaus. His brother, Agamemnon, leads a heroic Greek army to Troy to recapture Helen, who was kidnapped by the Trojan king's son, Paris.

In Agamemnon's ranks was a soldier named Achilles. The two quarrel and Achilles refuses to fight. Without the skill of Achilles, the Greeks are beaten back by the Trojans, and Achilles' closest friend, Patroclus, is killed during the fighting by Hector, another son of the Trojan king. When Achilles hears of Patroclus's death, he is angered and seeks revenge. Achilles then engages Hector outside the city of Troy and kills him.

Similarly, the *Odyssey* is a story of epic heroism. The hero, Odysseus, has been imprisoned for seven years by a sea nymph. During a council of the Greek gods, Zeus allows Odysseus to gain his freedom and return home to his wife, Penelope. For most of the poem,



The Greek epic poet Homer was, according to legend, blind.

Odysseus is intent on returning to Penelope, who is being pressed to give up hope of her husband ever returning and to marry one of several suitors.

Odysseus's journey brings him great adventure as he faces shipwreck (caused by the god Poseidon), the wrath of a one-eyed giant called Cyclops, sea monsters, a trip to the underworld, visions of ghosts, temptations from the enchantress Circe, and beautiful sea nymphs who lure sailors to their rocky deaths with songs. In time, Odysseus makes his way home, kills those who want Penelope for themselves, and is reunited with his wife.

Review and Write

1. *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are two works which feature great heroes. What other stories have you read which featured a hero or heroine as the main character? Why do you think people like reading about heroes? What kind of persons do you think may be called *heroic*?
2. In just three sentences, explain the basic story line of the *Iliad*.