



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF GREECE

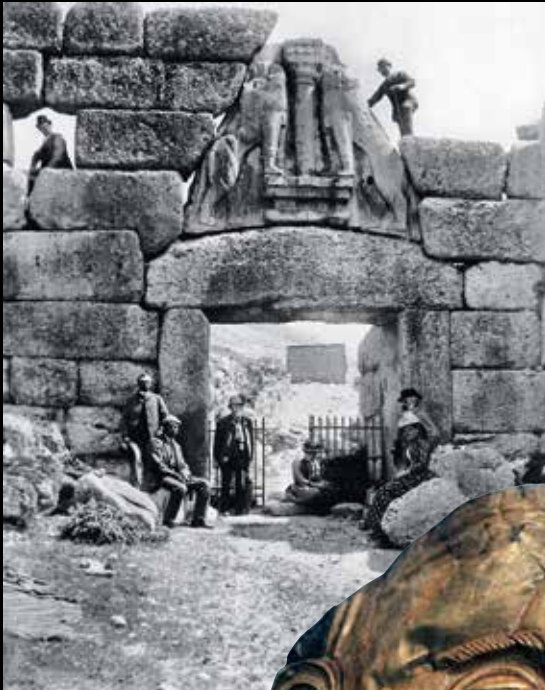
ANCIENT GREECE



MYCENAE

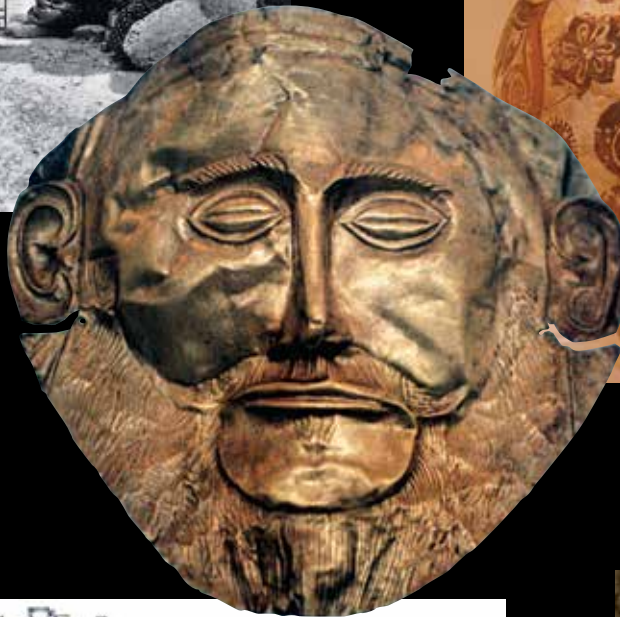
- MONUMENTS AND ARTIFACTS
- HISTORY
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GREECE



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Mycenae and Mycenaean civilization

The acropolis or citadel of Mycenae is located northeast of the Argos plain, between the Profitis Ilias and Sara peaks. This strategic site may have been one of the reasons Mycenae emerged as a powerful palatial and commercial center.

TASSOS VENETSANOPOULOS

Mycenae has been inhabited since the Neolithic Era and Proto-Helladic Period (3000-2000 B.C.) based on a few but telling archaeological finds. In the Meso-Helladic Era (2000-1600 B.C.), a large cemetery was built on the western foothills, while traces dating from the second millennium B.C. have also been found of a small settlement on the hilltop as well as a cemetery with simple burials to its northwest.



Mycenaean civilization took its name from Mycenae, the small rocky hill in the Argolid, in the northeastern Peloponnese, located between the 805-meter high Profitis Ilias hill on its north and the 660-meter-high Sara on its south. According to mythology, the city was founded by Perseus, a son of Zeus with Danae.

Mycenaean civilization's influence was felt in the Aegean as well as further afield in the Mediterranean basin from 1600 B.C. to 1100 B.C., the definitive date of the fall of the Mycenaean acropolises.

Mycenae commanded an important geographic position at the hub between Corinth and the Argolid bay which offered direct access to the Aegean. The first settlement at the site has been to the Neolithic Era. In 2000 B.C., when the first Greek tribes settled the site, its population grew impressively.

Aside from Mycenae, the most important Mycenaean centers in central and mainland Greece, are Tiryns, Pylos, Boeotia, Thebes, Gla, Orchomenos, and Iolkos.

Social hierarchy

The tribal king or Anax—wanax in the Mycenaean language, as transcribed from tablets written in Linear B. The post was hereditary and handed down from father to son. The Anax owned large tracts of land and concentrated legislative, administrative, and religious power.

The tribal king's court was on the next rung of power. Its officers included the military chief, or lawagetas according to Homer, and the ruler's military aides, horsemen (hippeis or equeta). Below them were the religious officials, telestai or telestas, who lived in the worship center or pakijane. Their ranks included priests and priestesses who led the worship rituals and administered the priests' affairs.

The administrators of the demoi, or damo, were also hierarchically organized under the king, qasireu, who ruled the local eparchy or province. Below him were the local archons or koretai and the officials appointed by the king, damokoro. On the lowest rung were the slaves or doera who worked for the palace or private citizens.

Mycenaean society showed evident Minoan influences in a number of areas, most notably worship, the arts, and the economy. Nonetheless, the Mycenaeans suffered from constant attacks and sieges as evident from their cyclopean fortifications and thus developed a more austere, absolute, and conservative culture.

Mycenaean worship

The earliest information about Mycenaean worship is from the period of the pit graves, 1750-1500 B.C. Worship rituals were consistent, however, from 1400 to 1060 B.C.



This ceramic idol, shaped like the Greek letter Φ, is among the finds exhibited at the Mycenae Archaeological Museum.

DENNIS ROWE

Cult buildings have not survived, with the exception of the religious center at Mycenae itself. Rituals –sacrifices, processions, worship– took place outdoors in makeshift structures.

According to tablet inscriptions, the deities worshipped by the Mycenaean were Zeus (di-we), Hera, (e-ra), Hermes (e-ma-a), Ares (a-re), Poseidon (pose-da-o-ne), Dionysus (di-wo-nuso), and Apollo (a-pe-ro) –all from the Greek dodekathen as the twelve Olympian gods were known. Mycenaean art also features a female figure associated with Potnia, the “mother-god of the Minoans” who is depicted in various guises as Potnia Theron or Potnia Athena (a-ta-na-po-ti-na-ja).

Archaeological excavations have also yielded considerable information on burial rituals, especially grave architecture. The three main types of burials were pit graves, shaft graves, and the tholos or beehive tomb. Grave goods –that is, jewelry, weapons, vessels, tools, and worship items– were placed with the burials.

Economy

Mycenaean enjoyed a flourishing economy, which rose steadily from the era of the pit graves when commerce began to spread. In the fourteenth century B.C., it became more centralized as economic power was concentrated in the hands of the palaces.

Mycenaean trade extended from Palestine and Egypt to Lower Italy and Sicily as Mycenae gradually edged out the Minoans. Imports included ivory from Egypt and Syria, copper from Cyprus, tin from Britain or Afghanistan, and rock crystal from Cyprus. Its main exports were olive oil, aromatic oils,



Infant's gold funerary suit
found by Schliemann in Grave
Circle A.

JAMES L. STANFIELD

Mycenaean Kings

Perseus	14th century B.C.
Electryon	14th century B.C.
Ἀμφιτρύων	14th century B.C.
Sthenelus	14th century B.C.
Eurystheus	13th century B.C.
Atreus	13th century B.C.
Thyestes	13th century B.C.
Agamemnon	12 century B.C.
Aegisthus	12 century B.C.
Aletes or Menelaus	12 century B.C.
Orestes	12 century B.C.
Tisamenus	12 century B.C.

wine, timber, manufactured items such as weapons and mercenaries who were often sent to foreign lands in exchange for slaves.

Arts and writing

Minoan art was a strong influence on Mycenaean art through 1400 B.C. when Mycenae began developing its art according to its own cultural characteristics. Wall murals used the same techniques as the frescoes, that is, scenes were painted on damp mortar. Other arts evolved in Mycenaean workshops include pottery, weaving, tusk work (carving or chiseling items from elephant tusks or hippopotamus teeth), stonework, seal making, metallurgy, and sculpture.

The official Mycenaean script in which most surviving tablets are written is Linear B. The script was deciphered in 1952 by Michael Ventris and John Chadwick who were quite surprised to find that the syllable script formed words with close resemblance to Greek words. The texts found on tablets were mostly warehouse or supply records.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE EXCAVATIONS

Renewed interest in Mycenae during the 17th and 18th centuries was the result of reports by foreign travelers whose sojourns recorded the treasures and monuments of Greece. Most of the Mycenaean acropolises featured impregnable fortifications which were dubbed cyclopean as these walls, constructed with huge blocks of stone, created the impression that only a giant like Cyclops could have built them.

Conditions during Ottoman rule allowed Lord Elgin, Veli Pasha of Nafplio, and Lord Sligo to loot the vaulted grave containing the Treasure of

Mycenaean finds do not include any large sculptures. Finds to date are mainly small ceramic idols and vessels, samples of which have been found in excavations of all Mycenaean sites.

DENNIS ROWE





Wall painted of the Mycenaean Woman that survived the city's mysterious collapse circa 1200 B.C.

JAMES L. STANFIELD

Flight of 99 steps leading to an underground cistern in the Mycenae citadel.

JERRY MARKWELL



Atreus. Following the founding of the Modern Greek State in 1830, the site of Mycenae was placed under the control of the Archaeological Society (1837) and in 1841 exploratory excavations were begun under K. Pittakis. From 1874 to 1977, the excavations at the site were led by Heinrich Schliemann, while from 1884 to 1957, excavations continued intermittently under C. Tsountas (1884-1902), D. Evangelidis (1909), Roosevelt (1911), and A. Keramopoulos (197). Schliemann's and Tsountas's work was continued by Alan Wace, director of the British Archaeological School at Athens. Able heirs to this scholarly legacy were William Taylor, I. Papadimitriou, and Y. Mylonas, while S. Iacovides's contributions were also significant.

The Late Mycenaean Age

Shortly after the mid-thirteenth century B.C., the Mycenae acropolis and its environs were tested by a destructive earthquake that caused several local fires. Repair and reconstruction work is evident, especially on the palace compound. In the late thirteenth century and in the early twelfth century B.C., random fires erupted that were followed by more restorations. In the twelfth century B.C., most facilities palatial and non continued to operate. But the upheavals in Asia Minor and the eastern Mediterranean in 1200 B.C., which was followed by the destruction of their merchandise by the maritime raiders known as the Sea Peoples, forced Mycenae to cut off relations with its biggest trade partners. This, in turn, led to economic decline that gradually undermined the

centralized authority. The twelfth and eleventh centuries B.C. are also of period of recession for the Mycenaean economy and political decline, albeit without general or extensive destruction. The acropolis did not fall violently.

Mycenae's decline has been attributed to several factors. The destruction of the Hittite state, as the Hittites were the only people who had developed a method for working with steel. The loss of the Egypt markets also took its toll. Another severe blow was dealt by the Heraclids; after Aegisthus murdered Agamemnon, the Atreid state ceased to exist and the Dorians, the Peloponnese's new conquerors, had not trouble taking the Mycenaean capital in 1100 B.C. Natural disasters also forced the Mycenaean's flight and the hill on which their palace stood remained uninhabited through Classical times.

Historic times

After these domiciles were abandoned, the backfill rose to about three meters. Around 620 B.C., a rather unattractive podium was built over it to serve as the foundations of a Doric temple with a north-south orientation that was likely dedicated to Hera.

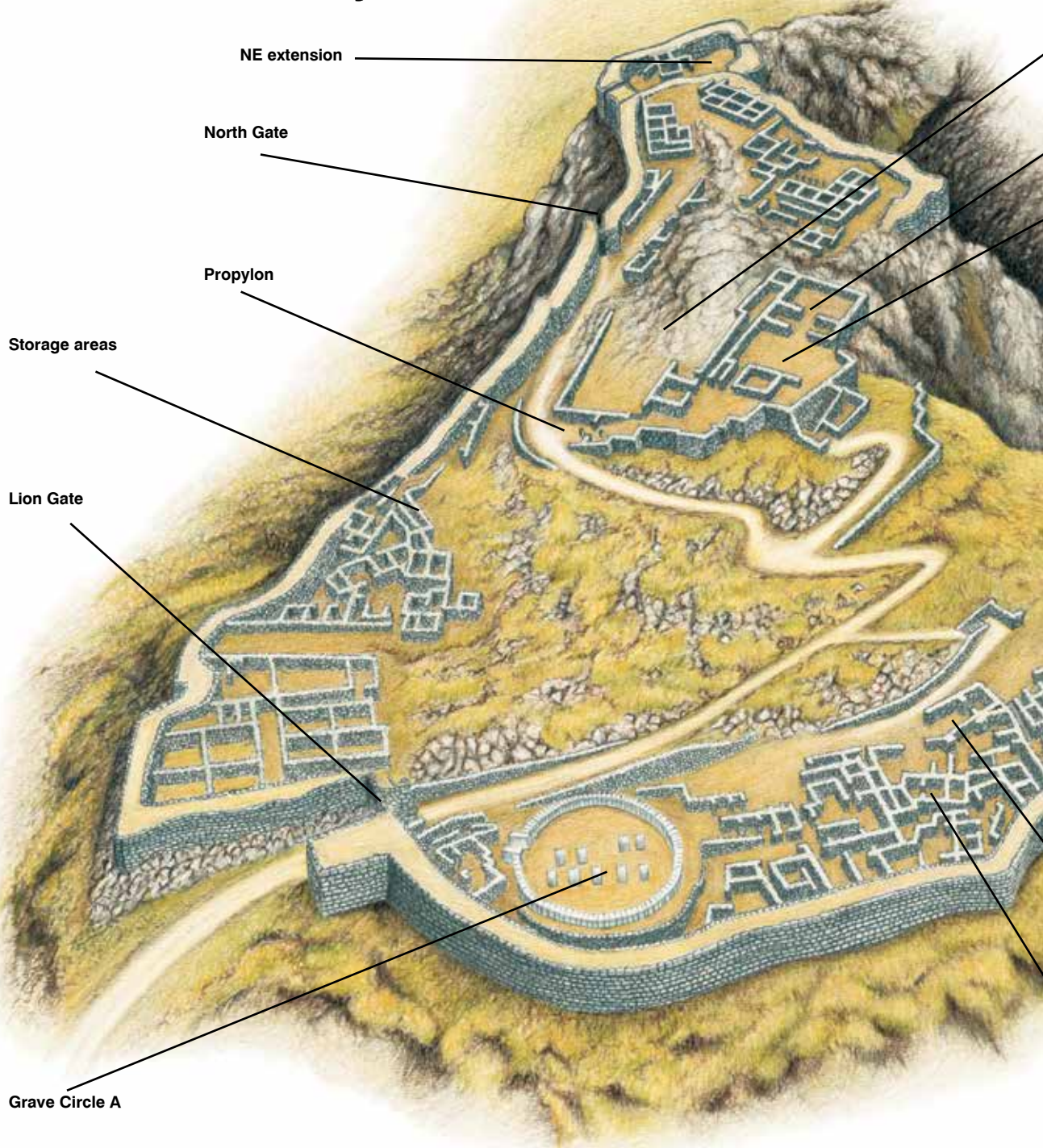
Through the Geometric, Archaic, and early historical periods, Mycenae remained a small settlement and was not incorporated into the newly-founded urban center at Argos.

The tholos tomb known as the Treasury of Atreus is one of the oldest examples of burial architecture.

JAMES L. STANFIELD



The citadel of Mycenae





Aerial photograph of the archaeological site of Mycenae.

Model of the Mycenae acropolis with its thick cyclopean fortifications.

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

The imposing palace of Mycenae is also known as the House of the Atreids, the royal dynasty founded by Atreus, the son of Pelops. Visible today are ruins of royal quarters, lustral basins, a large reception hall, and a throne room or domos.

JERRY MARKWELL



Sculpture in Florence's Piazza della Signoria depicting Perseus, the founder of Mycenae, holding the head of Medusa.

T. RUSSO



In Hellenistic times, a new temple was built in the upper section of the acropolis. In 480 B.C., Mycenae sent 400 men into battle against the Persians at Thermopylae and Mycenaeans also fought at the Battle of Plataea in 479 B.C. Nonetheless, in 470 B.C., neighboring Argos lay siege to Mycenae, which was destroyed in 468 B.C. The Argives conquered the city, tore down sections of the fortifications, and distributed the land to the poor citizens of Argos. Mycenae's former inhabitants were scattered throughout Greece, reaching as far as Macedonia. Later, during the Hellenistic period, the Argives founded a town on the hill; they repaired the prehistoric walls and Archaic temple, then also built a small theater over the dromos leading into the Tomb of Clytemnestra. In the third century B.C., Mycenae experienced a resurgence as a densely-populated Hellenistic town over the ruins of the Mycenaean Age, many of which were destroyed.

In 235 B.C., Aristippos, the tyrant of Argos, was killed there and the town walls were restored. By Strabo's time, 64 B.C. to A.D. 25, there were no traces of the city. When Pausanias visited the site in A.D. 160, he found nothing but ruins.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

The archaeological monuments at Mycenae date from the period spanning 1350 to 1200 B.C. Between 1200 B.C. and 1100 B.C., the Mycenaean palace was destroyed, first by a strong earthquake and later again by fire. The city included the acropolis, or citadel, which was fortified with cyclopean walls. The settlement and cemetery were outside the walls, to the west. Also west of the acropolis was Grave Circle B, which contained fourteen shaft graves that yielded a trove of grave goods and funerary columns or stelai. Four monumental tholos



Interior view of the tholos or beehive tomb highlights the Mycenaean building technique that allowed the structure to survive through the centuries.

MICHAEL AVORY/SHUTTERSTOCK

tombs were also found in the area, including the so-called Treasury of Atreus and Tomb of Clytemnestra. Grave Circle A was uncovered west of the interior walls and included six royal shaft graves. The worship center was to the south. The main entrance to the acropolis was from the northwest through the Lion Gate. Access to the palace, which was set on the hill's highest point, was up a ramped terrace. The palace featured a large courtyard, guesthouse, and the main residence as well as storage areas and workshops.

The construction of an underground spring in the northeastern section is of particular interest as it is enclosed by cyclopean walls. Since 1999, Mycenae has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a list aimed at highlighting and preserving monuments of global significance.

Visiting the archaeological site

Thousands of tourists from around the world visit Mycenae each year, underscoring its fame and importance. The archaeological site is located two kilometers from modern Mycenae, a village in the Argolida province just off the main highway linking Argos and Athens.

Most of the monuments visible today such as the Lion Gate and Treasury of Atreus date from the Late Bronze Age, between 1350 B.C. to 1200 B.C., when the city was at its peak. The walls encircle and protect the acropolis, except on its southern side where a gorge forms a natural fortification. The palace, Lion Gate, cult center, and Grave Circle A which contains the royal burials are located on the acropolis summit. Excavations outside the walls have uncovered a settlement, large tholos tombs, and Grave Circle B.

The imposing Mycenaean palace was also known as the home of the Atreids, the royal dynasty founded by Atreus, the son of Pelops. A number of ancient Greek dramas are rooted in events stemming from the curse on the House of Atreid. After Atreus's wife cheated on the king with his brother, Thyestes, Atreus sought revenge. He thus killed both of his nephews and after roasting them served them to their father. Thyestes. He then showed Thyestes their heads to help him realize he had just devoured his own sons. From that day forth, the gods placed a curse on Atreus and all his descendants.

The palace is built at the site's highest point and is built on several levels. The entrance is on the northwest, at the end of an uphill road. The megaron features a stoa, antechamber, and throne room or domos and opens off the courtyard's west side. The chamber facing the megaron was likely the guest quarters used to host visitors. The forecourt connected directly to the second and grand entrance to the palace, the Great Stairwell. Traces of the foundations of Archaic and Hellenistic shrines are visible just north of the palace alongside traces of an artist's workshop, a crafts shop, and the porticoed building. Worth noting is an underground reservoir built in the thirteenth century B.C. that is accessible through a narrow passage.

East of the palace and just inside the southeastern end of the cyclopean

Female figurine exhibited at the Archaeological Museum of Mycenae.

DENNIS ROWE





The description of the citadel's walls as "Cyclopean" is justified by the sheer bulk of their stone blocks used.

AFOTOSHOP/SHUTTERSTOCK

fortifications is a second royal residence known as the House of Columns. Its entrance is on the north and a corridor leads to an interior peristyle courtyard. The "small megaron" is north of this colonnade. All structures east of the megaron were two stories. This residence has storage areas and residential quarters; it is a fine example of a Mycenaean residence with auxiliary spaces and a good sewage network. In 1965, excavations revealed a second building next to the western wall of the House of Columns. This was named the Artisans' Quarter and is a complex of rows of chambers along a length of thirty meters. It was linked to the closer of the two palaces and is believed to have housed craftsmen and artisans working for the royals.

The Treasury of Atreus is located off the left of the entrance to the archaeological site. It is a grand tholos tomb and was apparently built without a trace of mud being used. Dated around the same time as the Lion Gate, this beehive tomb has a 36-meter corridor and massive tholos, which scholars believe was lavishly decorated. It has been dated to 1250 B.C.

A long passage leads into the main chamber with its impressive acoustics. The conical domed roof of this grave monument is itself a work of art as it is composed of 33 concentric rows of perfectly assembled stone blocks. The architrave, formed by two granite blocks, is eight meters long and weighs nearly 120 tons.

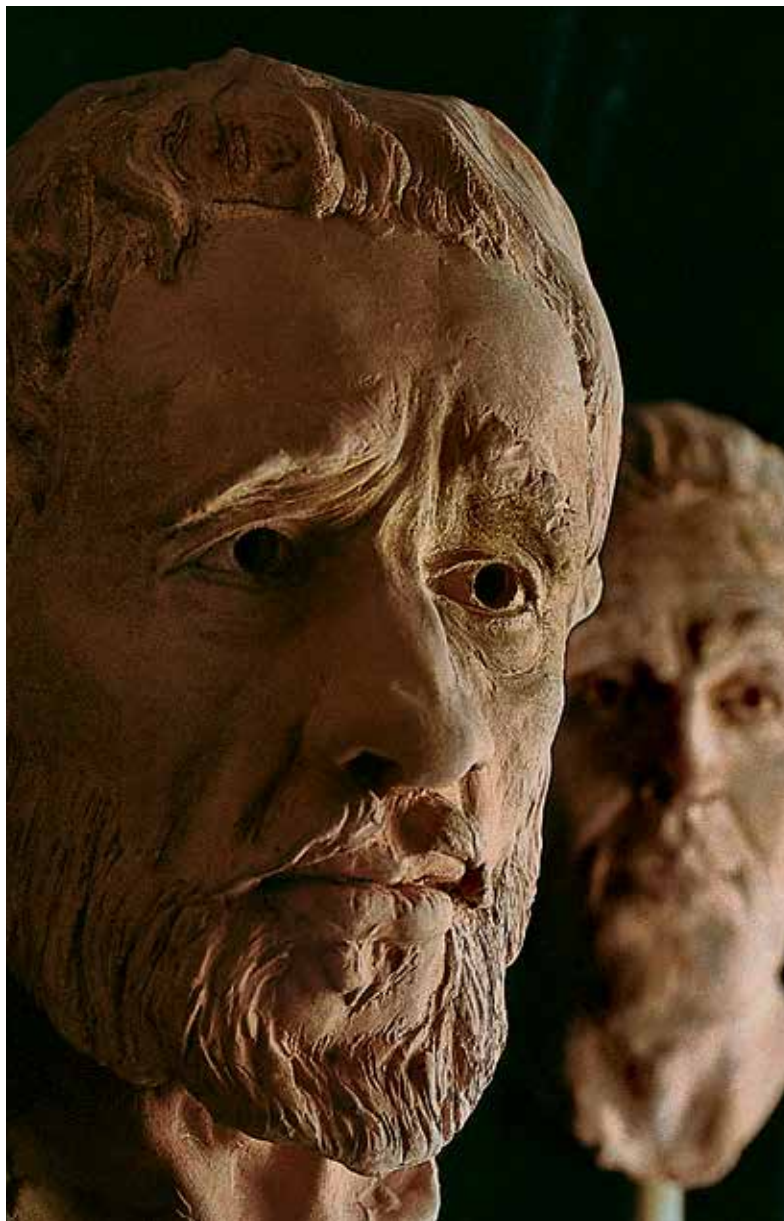
The Lion Gate was the main entrance to the citadel and one of the finest surviving examples of a fortified tower. Its size is imposing, measuring 3.75 meters across at its base and rising to a height of 3.5 meters. It was built in the thirteenth century B.C. and it is believed that lions may have been the Mycenaean royal family's crest.

In 1876, Schliemann uncovered several graves inside the acropolis containing

Christos Tsountas (below) continued Schliemann's work and, in 1888, brought to light the palace at the citadel's summit. The excavations continued under Alan Wace, director of the British Archaeological School from 1919 to 1955.

AMERICAN SCHOOL OF CLASSICAL STUDIES
ARCHIVE





Likenesses of Mycenaeans created by researchers at the University of Manchester based on human skulls dated to the 16th century B.C.

JAMES L. STANFIELD

numerous pieces of jewelry, gold masks, and other items placed next to human remains. These finds suggest these were the graves of the Mycenaean royals.

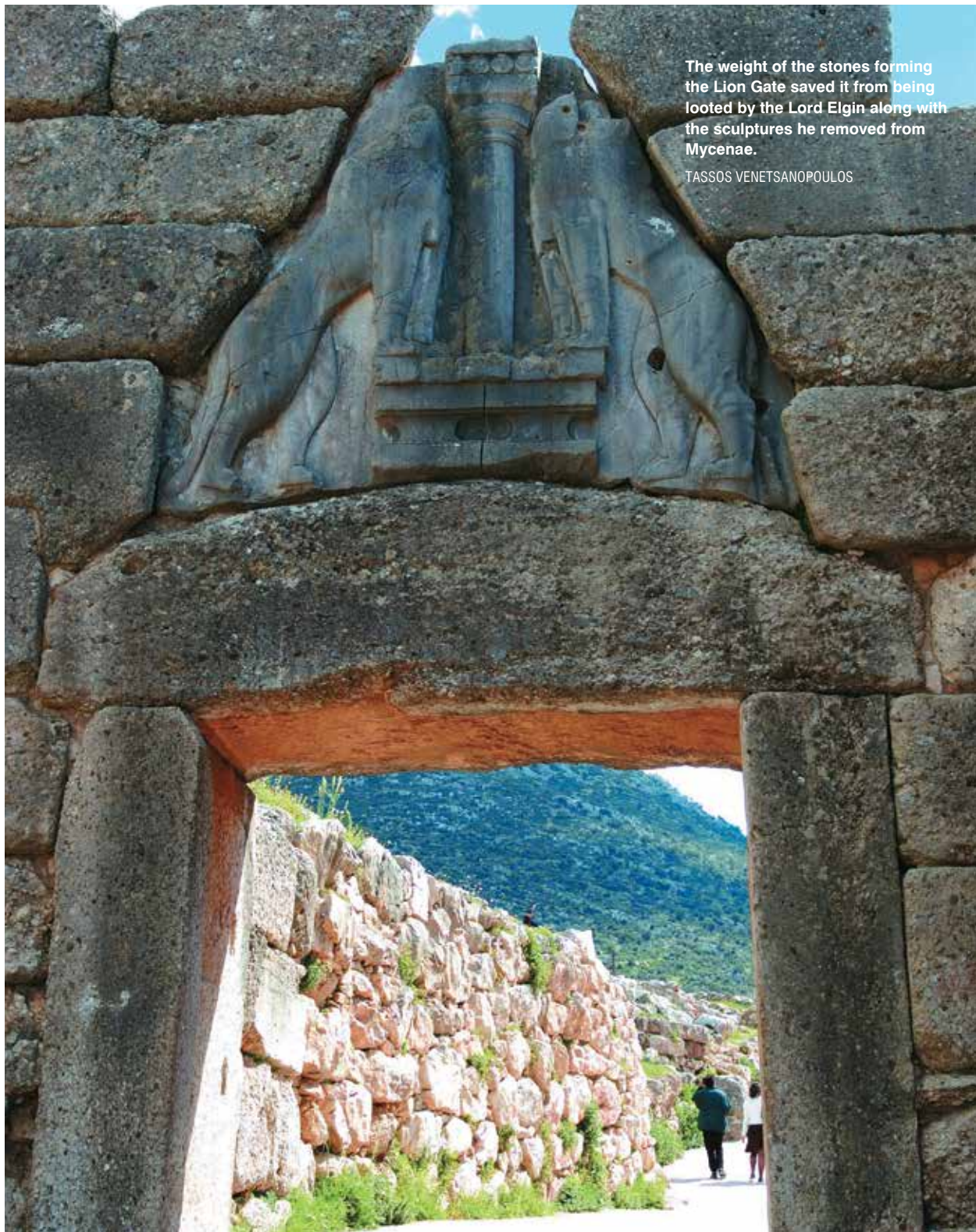
Ruins of a circular peribolos embracing the royal graves can be seen just past the entrance. Grave Circle A, as it is called, includes six rectangular royal shaft graves containing seventeen burials. Although now within the citadel walls, these graves were likely part of a large cemetery outside the acropolis, but enclosed within its walls in the thirteenth century B.C. as part of restoration work at the palace. Schliemann's excavations unearthed a gold mask which is believed to be the face of Agamemnon. Masks, jewelry, crowns, and other gold items weighing a total of fourteen kilos were found at this location; many of these are exhibited at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens.

Schliemann unearthed several graves inside the acropolis at a complex of five buildings just south of Grave Circle A and west of the sloped road. The "House of the Warrior Vase" owes its name to the shards from a large krater decorated with depictions of warriors he found at the location.

When the building was explored anew in 1950, sixteen more prehistoric graves were found that likely belonged to the early Meso-Helladic cemetery.

The "Ramp House" is next to the road that leads to the palace and was at least two stories high. Fragments of vessels from an earlier period and sections of wall paintings were found under its floor. The "South House", so named because it is south of the House of the Warrior Vase, was built in the early thirteenth century B.C. and excavations of its northeastern corner in 1954 revealed a storehouse with ten large jars or pithoi.

Next is the House with the Idols, which was clearly used for cult worship. A shrine with a central hearth and columns was uncovered in the building's



The weight of the stones forming the Lion Gate saved it from being looted by the Lord Elgin along with the sculptures he removed from Mycenae.

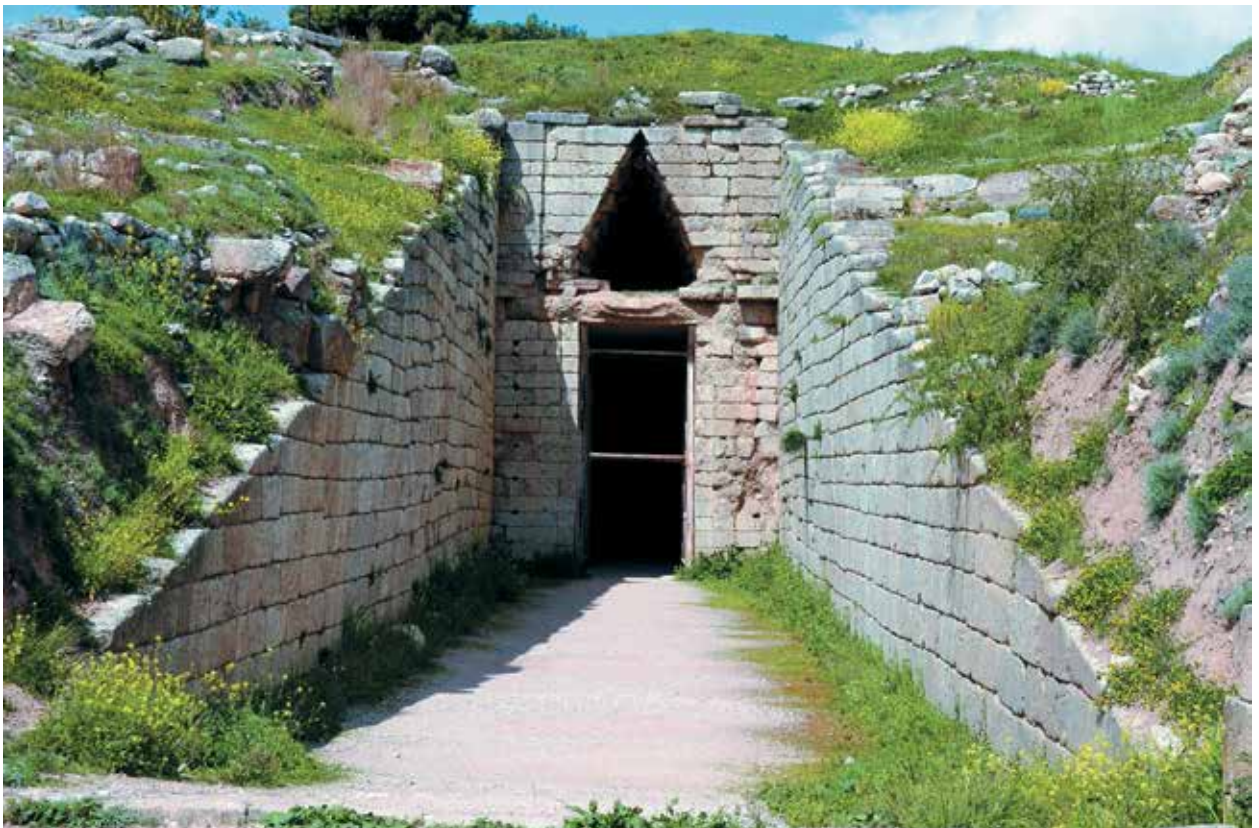
TASSOS VENETSANOPOULOS

eastern wing. A clay idol with a small altar was found on one of the columns. A staircase leads to an isolated room where many idols were found, as well as clay snakes, jewelry, and other votive offerings. West of the shrine is a large room with a hearth and wall paintings. Women engaged in a worship ritual are depicted in a segment in the northeastern corner. East of this large chamber was a small adjacent space that has also been identified as an altar. It contained idols and ivory objects. Finally, the “Tsountas House” is southeast of the House with the Idols; it was excavated in 1880 by Christos Tsountas and explored anew in the 1950s. It is comprised of two different buildings; the easternmost has an altar inside.

Painstaking excavation of Grave Circle B revealed construction details of the burial customs and answered many of the questions raised by the Schliemann excavation. The circle, with a diameter of roughly 28 meters enclosed fourteen royal shaft graves within a thick, low peribolos or wall of cyclopean stone blocks, the circle has a diameter. The graves are supported on small mounds of soil, five of which were found in their place. These graves, which were older or contemporary to the rest of the burials in Grave Circle A, contained between one and four burials and less impressive grave goods. However, among these archaeologists found a mask, a small seal stone with a male bust, a gold sword sheath, blades, and a rock crystal drinking bowl shaped like a duck’s head.

**Entrance to the Treasury of Atreus,
a tholos tomb built around 1250
B.C.**

JAMES L. STANFIELD





The Mask of Agamemnon found by Heinrich Schliemann in 1870 during the excavation of Grave Circle A. Its value is undiminished by contemporary research dating the mask to three centuries before the time in which Agamemnon is believed to have lived.

JAMES L. STANFIELD

Vessel from Mycenae, c.
1200 B.C.



The basement storerooms of three buildings are located above and to the left of the Lion Gate. All show signs of damage from the earthquake that rocked Mycenae in the late thirteenth century B.C. Their ruins were covered with soil and Hellenistic residences were built over them; of these, just a small reservoir is preserved.

Just inside the gate on the right and before the start of the ramped road to the palace are the ruins of a structure that was supported by the walls. It was likely used as a barracks for the guards but was named a wheat storeroom as clay jars with traces of burned cereals were found in its basement. The building was razed in the citadel's waning years, sometime in the twelfth century B.C.

**Tripod (1180-1050 B.C.) exhibited
at the Mycenae Archeological
Museum.**

TASSOS VENETSANOPOULOS



Towards the end of the thirteenth century B.C., a period of great turmoil, the citadel was expanded to the northeast where an underground reservoir was built aimed at ensuring continued water supplies in the event of a protracted siege. The concealed hidden terraced access to the underground cistern is a marvel of ancient construction. The entrance is vaulted and 99 steps lead down to the five-meter-deep

well. The cistern was fed with water from an underground aqueduct from a spring to the north. This underground cistern is known as the Persian spring.

In 1963, excavations here revealed two buildings. Building B has six rooms and corridors and may have been used by the officer in charge of guarding the underground cistern. In Building A, only traces of a foundations of a small basement survive; a lustral basin and fragments of six clay storage jars or pithoi were found at the site.

The rest of the archaeological site includes traces of many buildings which suggest a sprawling palatial complex with massive walls and a large population inside and outside to serve the royal court. The fortifications are fourteen meters thick in places.

The palace was destroyed by a fire in 1200 B.C., as previously mentioned. Traces of burned materials are visible on some of the foundations. A century later, the area was abandoned and gradually buried until it was uncovered by Schliemann in 1874.

THE MYCENAE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

The Mycenae Archaeological Museum is housed in a modern built on the foothills of the Mycenae hill.

The exhibition space accounts just one-fourth of its area as the museum is also used for storing archaeological finds from excavations.

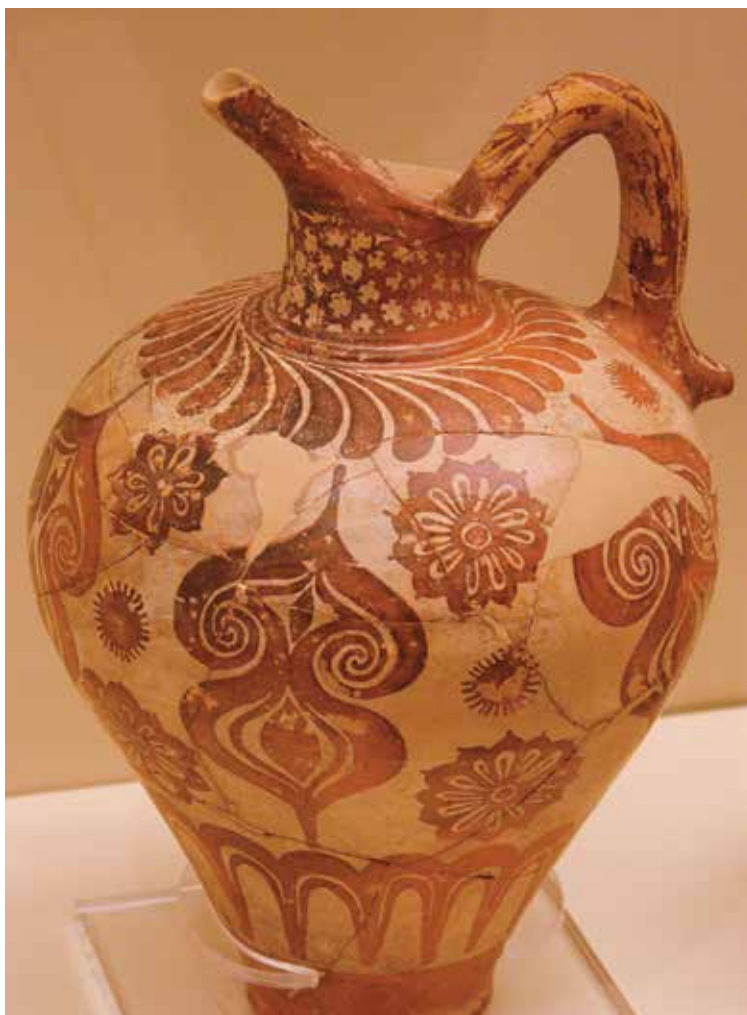
Displayed in Hall I are finds linked to day to day life in Mycenae and exhibits on how the Mycenaeans used living and working areas spanning the entire Mycenaean timeline and the evolution of pottery-making.

The inhabitants' afterlife is exhibited in Hall II, which features finds from Grave Circle B. The display cases are arranged in groups. Copies of the most important grave goods from these tombs are also displayed, in chronological order.

Hall III features finds from graves of the Sub-Mycenaean, Geometric, Archaic, and Hellenistic periods. Also exhibited are sacred relics from Archaic and Classical times as well as a collection of coins.

Mycenaean vessel (1500-1450 B.C.) found in the Calcani grave from the museum's collection.

TASSOS VENETANOPOULOS





The Palace of Ilion or Iliou Melathron in Athens where Schliemann lived as it looked in 1900.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

The Numismatic Museum is housed in Schliemann's former residence.

TILEMAHOS EFTHIMIADIS



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HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF GREECE

ANCIENT GREECE



The archaeological site of Mycenae dates from 1350-1200 B.C.. The city was enclosed within a citadel fortified by cyclopean walls, with settlements and cemeteries just west of their perimeter. The acropolis's entrance was the massive Lion Gate, the earliest example of monumental architecture in Europe. Grave Circle B west of the citadel enclosed fourteen shaft graves with a wealth of grave goods and funerary stelai. Four beehive tombs were also found in the area, including the Treasury of Atreus and the Tomb of Clytemnestra. In 1999, Mycenae was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.