

The Minoan and

Across the southern end of the Aegean Sea lies the largest of the Greek islands, Crete. Here an elegant civilization flourished from about 2000 to 1400 B.C. Scholars call it Minoan (muh-NOH-uhn), after Minos, a legendary king of Crete.

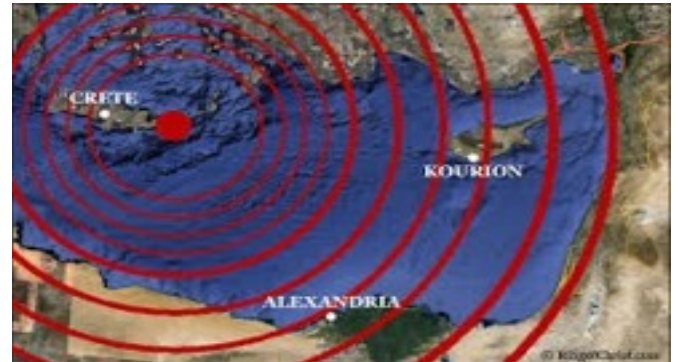
Cretan civilization The Minoans were a seafaring people with great power in the Mediterranean world. They carried on a thriving trade with other Aegean lands. Safe on their island, they built beautiful palaces without fortified walls.



Life for the Minoans appears to have been very pleasant. Wall paintings in the king's palace-city at Knossos show a lively people with a zest for athletic contests, festivals, and stylish dress. Clad in ruffled gowns, women of the court wore delicate gold jewelry and styled their hair into long, graceful coils. They took part in activities ranging from dancing to strenuous sports. This evidence suggests that Minoan women enjoyed a level of social equality rarely found in the ancient world.



The joys of Crete appear to have ended abruptly some time between 1400 and 1200 B.C. Historians do not know whether the cause was a natural disaster or human conquest. Did a nearby volcanic eruption, with an earthquake and tidal wave, destroy the Minoans' world? Were they overrun by invaders? Evidence shows that the Minoans attempted to rebuild but soon fell to invaders from mainland Greece.



Mainland Greece in the Bronze Age Around 2000 B.C., groups of Greek-speaking people moved into mainland Greece and began to settle there. They were part of the large wave of migrations that swept lands from India to the Fertile Crescent and beyond around that time. The mainland Greeks of the Bronze Age are often known as Mycenaeans (MY-suh-NEE-uhn-z), from the name of their leading city, Mycenae (my-SEE-nee).

Mycenae was built to withstand almost any attack. It was located on a steep, rocky ridge and was surrounded by a protective wall up to 20 feet thick. From the citadel of Mycenae, a warrior-king ruled the surrounding villages and farms.



Similar palace-forts dotted the southern part of Greece. In each lived a proud, warlike ruler. These kings dominated Greece from about 1600 to 1200 B.C.

Bronze Age society The nobles who lived within the fortresses enjoyed a life of surprising splendor. They feasted in great halls 35 feet wide and 50 feet long. In the center of the hall, a fire blazed on the circular hearth that was ten feet across. During banquets, the firelight glittered from a dazzling variety of gold and silver pitchers, bowls, and cups. When the royal Mycenaeans died, they were buried with their richest treasures. The body of one child was completely covered with a golden suit.



This enormous wealth was won by warrior-kings who led their armies in search of plunder. Trade was also a source of wealth, but Bronze Age trade often was close to piracy.

The warrior kings were only a tiny group at the top of Bronze Age society. The kings had weapons of bronze and jewelry of gold, but ordinary people still used tools of stone and wood. Most people lived as farmers, but there were also weavers, goatherds, shepherds, stonemasons, bakers, metalworkers, nurses, and more.



The Trojan War War was the main business of Greece's Bronze Age kings. Their most famous war was the siege of the great seaport of Troy in Asia Minor. Stories from this war were told hundreds of years later by the Greek poet Homer.

According to Homer, a Greek army besieged and destroyed Troy because a Trojan youth had stolen Helen, the beautiful wife of a Greek king.

For many years, historians thought that Homer's stories were imaginary. However, a German archaeologist named Heinrich Schliemann (SHLEE-muhn) thought otherwise. As a boy, Schliemann read Homer's poems over and over. He became determined to find Troy. In 1871, using clues from Homer, Schliemann began to dig for Troy at a site in northwestern Asia Minor. He and his crew unearthed nine layers of city life as well as 8,700 pieces of gold jewelry.

Schliemann's discoveries at Troy, together with the ruins of Mycenae and other cities, showed that Homer's poems had some basis in fact. The Trojan War was probably a great Mycenaean raid against a rival trading city. It took place sometime around 1200 B.C., and it was the last of the Bronze Age Greeks' triumphs.



Dark Ages interrupted civilization.

Not long after the Trojan War, Mycenaean civilization collapsed. Around 1200 B.C., palace after palace was attacked and burned. At Mycenae, a layer of ashes covered the entire palace site, the silent remains of a terrible fire. These were the same years that the Egyptians and Hittites suffered under the attacks of the mysterious "Peoples of the Sea." A tablet from one Mycenaean citadel says, "The watchers are guarding the coast." But guards could not save Mycenaean civilization from destruction.

The Dorian migrations Into this war-torn countryside moved a new group of people, the Dorians (DAWR-ee-uhnz). The Dorians spoke a dialect of Greek and were distant relatives of the Bronze Age Greeks.



The Dorians were far less advanced than the Mycenaean Greeks. Dorian pottery and tools show little skill. The Dorians were not good traders either, and trade came to a standstill with their arrival. Most important to historians, the skill of writing was lost in this time of destruction. There is a 400-year gap in written Greek history from 1150 to 750 B.C. This period is known as Greece's Dark Ages. Without written records, little is known of the Dark Ages, but important events took place during these years.