Worksheet: Minoans and Mycenaeans

Name: ___________________________ Date: ________________________________

Using a video or *Echoes from the Past*, answer the following questions. (P. 99-110)

1. Why was Sir Arthur Evans important?

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2. Identify Knossos by giving its location and a brief description.

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3. Who were the Mycenaeans?

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4. Why is Linear B significant?

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5. How does the story of Theseus and the Minotaur relate to the design of Knossos and the paintings found there?

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6. What evidence is there that Mycenae was influenced by the Minoans?

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7. What happened to the Mycenaeans?

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Crete is a land of abundant agricultural wealth. The people of ancient Crete, whom we call Minoans, were highly proficient navigators. This navigational skill in combination with the island’s agricultural bounty led the Minoans to become the first Europeans to acquire some of the facets of civilization. By about 1900 BCE, the Minoans had developed a form of writing, a palace-led social organization, advanced metal-working skills, and sophisticated artistic expression.

Crete is an island about 200 km long and divided into regions by tall mountain ranges. It enjoys a very pleasant, semi-tropical climate. When the first settlers made their way to the island from Asia Minor in the seventh millennium (7000–6000 BCE), they found a fertile, inviting home. Over the centuries, the settlers spread across the island, building small villages, growing grain, raising sheep and goats, hunting and fishing, and occasionally trading with neighbours on their own and nearby islands.

**Innovations: The Introduction of Bronze**

After more than 3000 years of this Neolithic farming life, several new elements were introduced to the culture. One of the most important was the use of metal to make better tools and weapons. The metal of greatest importance was bronze, an alloy of about nine parts copper to one part tin. Its introduction had as profound an impact on Crete as it did elsewhere in the ancient world, and the arrival of bronze on the island marks the Early Minoan period (ca. 3000–2100 BCE).

The copper used on Crete may have come first from the small island of Kythnos to the north, but it was especially plentiful at Lavrion near Athens on the mainland. On the eastern island of Cyprus, copper was plentiful, but tin was much rarer and therefore more expensive, perhaps coming from the mountains of southern Turkey. Separately, tools made of these metals were not much better than tools made of stone, but combined, they produced a tough but malleable metal with a reasonably low melting point, ideal for producing sharp knives and spear points, tough saws, hard chisels and many other implements.

How did the Minoans pay for bronze? Crete had no other valuable products to exchange except agricultural goods. It is likely that a new market developed, even if only on a small scale, involving surplus production of food or linen and wool clothing. Sailors, traders, merchants, and metal workers reaped profits for their work in the exchange system. There is certainly evidence of a great increase in the population of the island, and of better use of the land for agriculture: ploughing heavier soils, making cheese from milk, and planting grape vines. The farmers of Crete also planted olive trees to produce one of the most important staples of Mediterranean life: olive oil.

The process was slow, but over a thousand years, these changes brought about a society with more diverse skills and occupations, some accumulation of wealth, and greater contacts with peoples outside Crete. However, this development was interrupted toward the end of the third millennium (ca. 2300–2100 BCE), perhaps because of problems elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean. It is not yet understood why settlements were abandoned and trading contacts severed.
Cross-cultural Influences and the Minoans

At the beginning of the Middle Minoan period, ca. 2100 BCE, a recovery occurred, with new population growth helped in part by immigration. Very quickly, life on Crete began to flourish in completely new ways. Foreign trade with the Near East increased as it stabilized following a period of turmoil. There were new burial customs, impressive buildings, higher levels of artisanship, and a system of writing. There were now sacred grounds called sanctuaries built on hilltops. This was where temples, sacrificial altars and other forms or architecture were built in honour of the gods. Very clearly, some families on the island were accumulating substantial wealth. Archaeological evidence shows that these newly wealthy people found ways to enjoy their riches. They built bigger and finer houses — some on the scale of palaces — where possessions could be stored and administered. They had fine jewelry and clothing and enjoyed works of art and luxury imported products, many of which came from Egypt or elsewhere in the Middle East. To keep track of their property, the wealthy first developed a method of marking ownership with seals, then a system of record keeping using hieroglyphic characters, perhaps borrowed from Egypt. Eventually the Minoans developed a script of their own, which we call Linear A. By about 1900 BCE, civilization had appeared on the threshold of Europe.

Politics and the Palaces

The largest and most important palace on Crete was always at Knossos. It was also the earliest, along with the palaces of Phaestus and Mallia. These were certainly centres of political power. Knossos must have been home to the most powerful monarch on the island, king or queen, with other royal families ruling from other palaces. Power was partly exercised by controlling certain goods and products, so the palaces were also centres of exchange for the Minoan economy. The large storerooms for agricultural produce and for items of prestige created in the palace workshops are evidence of the role of the palace in the local economy.

The palaces were the most impressive buildings constructed by the Minoans. Dozens of interconnecting rectangular rooms on two, three, or more
storeys were grouped around a large open courtyard in the centre of the palace. There were areas for administration, residences, religious purposes, storage, and workshops. The finest rooms were decorated with colourful wall frescoes depicting processions of gift bearers, scenes of nature, lively ceremonies, or charging bulls. Fine building skills can be seen in the masonry reinforced by wooden beams to protect it from earthquakes, in the deep light wells (like elevator shafts) to bring air and light to the lower storeys, and in the advanced plumbing.

All these palaces were destroyed around 1750 BCE, possibly as a result of a massive earthquake. Earthquakes and volcanoes are common in the Aegean region, but are rarely strong enough to cause such widespread destruction. Nevertheless, a little more than a century later, the volcano on the tiny island of Thera, to the north of Crete, erupted with cataclysmic results.

The Eruption of Thera

The beautiful island of Thera exploded in a tremendous eruption, dated by tree rings to around 1628 BCE. This explosion enlarged an existing caldera from earlier volcanic activity. The sea poured in and caused even more turmoil when it met the red-hot lava. A small, thriving town was buried by the ash that rained down on the south coast of the island. In 1967, the Greek archaeologist Spyridon Marinatos came upon this town, which had been wonderfully preserved. Unlike the later volcanic eruption at Pompeii, the people of Thera had had sufficient time to save themselves, but had to leave behind many of their possessions. The vibrant wall paintings are only the most famous legacy left to us by this culture. Remarkably, this devastating eruption seems to have had little long-term effect on Minoan culture on Crete, only about 120 km away.

EXTERNAL FORCES

The new palaces were rebuilt almost immediately after their destruction in 1750 BCE. They were virtually identical to those that had been destroyed, with no sign of major changes to their structure or decoration, and were as large and as fine as ever. Minoan life continued for another 250 years, reaching new heights of wealth and vigour. Then, around 1490 BCE, the palaces were destroyed again — except for the one at Knossos. This time, the cause was probably not a natural disaster. It might have had something to do with the Mycenaean warriors who began to arrive on Crete.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that Mycenaean lords took over the rule of Crete, with Knossos as their administrative centre, ca. 1500 BCE. The most convincing evidence for this is the use of a new language, which we call Linear B, that was being written on clay tablets to keep track of palace goods. This form of writing was derived from Linear A (the Minoan script), but recorded the language of the early Greek-speaking Mycenaeans, not the
non-Greek language of the Minoans. This discovery was made when a young Englishman, Michael Ventris, deciphered Linear B in 1952.

How and why the Mycenaean invaders of Crete is impossible to say. The Minoans might have been weakened by fighting among themselves, or perhaps by natural disasters. Whatever the cause, they could not hold back the newcomers. The palace at Knossos seems to have been taken intact and for about 80 years served as a main administrative centre. Many distinctive features of Minoan culture disappeared, such as buildings with central courts, art forms depicting scenes from nature, finely carved stone vases, and the Linear A script. Graves near Knossos contain the bodies and weapons of some of these new overlords. Eventually, the palace at Knossos was also destroyed, this time by a great fire. Whether the fire was an accident or was caused by an attack is not known, but the Mycenaean lords did not rebuild Knossos. Life on the island began reverting to its simpler past, and the finest accomplishments of the Minoans quietly disappeared.

**The Myth of the Minotaur**

Later Greeks had several myths about the Minoans, some of which may hold a kernel of truth. The most famous is the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. The wife of King Minos of Knossos gave birth to a monster called the Minotaur, who was half man and half bull. The bloodthirsty Minotaur was imprisoned in a maze-like structure built by Daedalus, the court inventor. The Greeks called this the Labyrinth. Since the Minotaur’s diet included young unmarried men and women, every year King Minos forced the people of Athens to select 14 of its finest youth as a sacrifice. This horrific practice would have continued annually but for the young hero, Theseus, who volunteered to go to Knossos as part of the sacrifice. With the help of King Minos’s daughter, Ariadne, Theseus killed the Minotaur, found his way out of the Labyrinth by following a string he trailed behind himself, and saved the youth of Athens.

![A bronze figure of the mythical Minotaur, half man, half bull, and said to have lived in the Labyrinth at the palace of King Minos at Knossos.](image)

This tale of human sacrifice seems out of character for the Minoans, who loved to show peaceful scenes of nature in their art. Nevertheless, in a few of the wall paintings and seal stones preserved at Knossos there are depictions of what looks like a very dangerous sport or ritual. Young men and women are shown leaping over the backs and long, pointed horns of charging bulls.
Sometimes these acrobats are successful but some are gored and severely injured. Perhaps there is an echo of the Minotaur myth in these scenes. This idea is strengthened by the fact that the palace of Knossos itself could well be compared to a maze, given its complex plan of rooms and corridors.

**Review...Recall...Reflect**

1. How did the introduction of bronze change Minoan society?

2. Describe the Middle Minoan period.

3. What explanations have been suggested to account for the decline of the Minoan civilization?

**THE EARLIEST GREEKS: THE MYCENAEANS**

Mainland Greece developed in the same way as Crete, and at about the same pace, down to around 2000 BCE. Neolithic farming villages were scattered in the narrow valleys of Greece from ca. 6500 BCE to 3000 BCE. Then, as elsewhere around the Aegean, bronze came into common use, people learned to exploit natural resources more effectively, contacts with other regions increased, and life slowly changed. A new era began, now called the Early Helladic period, to distinguish this culture from the Early Minoan. Archaeologists have excavated several large, carefully planned houses that show the increased wealth of the Early Helladic people at this time. Then, toward the end
of the third millennium, development was interrupted by episodes of destruction and signs of depopulation, a pattern widely found around the eastern Mediterranean, including Crete. Why this happened is not well known, but in mainland Greece, one cause might have been invasions of various peoples that began some time after ca. 2300 BCE. By ca. 2000 BCE, most vestiges of the prosperous Early Helladic culture were gone and a simpler, less wealthy farming-herding culture (called Middle Helladic) had taken its place. Meanwhile, in sharp contrast to mainland Greece, the Minoans on Crete had recovered from their late third-millennium disasters and begun reaching new heights of prosperity, including the construction of huge palaces for their monarchs.

There is no evidence that the invaders of mainland Greece at the end of the third millennium spoke Greek. The Greek language might have developed after their arrival as the language of the invaders mixed with that of the indigenous peoples. What we do know is that the Mycenaean, the descendants of these Middle Helladic peoples, did speak an early form of Greek.

**TIME FRAMES**

**THE BRONZE AGE IN MAINLAND GREECE**

- Early Helladic ca. 3000–2000 BCE
- Middle Helladic ca. 2000–1680 BCE
- Mycenaean ca. 1680–1060 BCE
- Sub-Mycenaean ca. 1060–1025 BCE

During the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries BCE (1700–1500 BCE), a surprising change occurred in Greece, or so it seems from the evidence first revealed by archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann (1822–1890). Powerful and wealthy chieftoms sprang up and consolidated control of the small farming villages of the previous few centuries. What caused this rapid and important transformation is still not well understood. Most archaeologists now call this new culture Mycenaean, after its largest political centre, Mycenae. By the fourteenth century BCE, these chieftoms had been further transformed into well-defined states ruled by kings with administrative centres (in palaces), a writing system for record keeping, and state institutions including a state religion.

The Mycenaean were remarkable builders. To construct these burial places, called tholos tombs, stones weighing as much as 100 t had to be moved into place. Later Greeks believed that only the legendary one-eyed giants called the Cyclopes could have lifted these stones.
Schliemann did not know what he had found when he uncovered the fabulously wealthy graves at Mycenae in the fall of 1876. He thought he had discovered the burials of King Agamemnon and his family. He then declared that the epic poems of Homer, the Iliad and the Odyssey, were based in history. The two poems describe the adventures of Greek heroes who fought in the Trojan War around 1200 BCE, about 450 years before Homer’s own time. Agamemnon of Mycenae, the leader of the Greek army at Troy, returned home from the war successfully, only to be murdered by his wife Clytemnestra.

Go to the site above to find out more about Mycenaean civilization. Click on History Resources, then Echoes from the Past: World History to the 16th Century, to see where to go next.

The Legend of the Trojan War

Sing of the building of the horse of wood, which Epeius made with Athena’s help, the horse which once Odysseus led up into the citadel as a thing of guile, when he had filled it with the men who sacked Troy.

Homer Odyssey VIII.492-493

The Trojan War itself, despite Homer’s long descriptions, is still a vaguely understood event in Mycenaean history, if it was an event at all, and not pure legend. Excavations at Troy show that a city there was destroyed in a battle ca. 1240 BCE. At that time, the city was really just a fortified town, only 2 ha in area, with a rather poor standard of living. No wonder some scholars have suggested that the Trojan War was merely a dispute over fishing rights or control over shipping, and not the great conflict of West versus East, as later Greeks believed.

Schliemann could not have known that the graves he had found actually belonged to a royal family of Mycenae, which predated the legendary Trojan War by 300–400 years. The wonderful gold funeral masks, inlaid bronze daggers, and other exquisite objects of gold, silver, ivory, and faience are stunning testimony of a wealthy and powerful royalty or nobility living in Greece ca. 1650–1550 BCE.

Mycenaean rulers were similar to feudal lords, each governing his own wide area of central or southern Greece from a well-fortified palace. All of them might have owed some allegiance to the king of Mycenae. Indications from the tombs and the walls at Mycenae certainly point to it being the most powerful of the Mycenaean states. The wealth of these kings probably came from trade, particularly in metals like gold or tin. We know from the Linear

Scripts – Symbols

The Mycenaeans developed their script, Linear B, by borrowing from the Minoan Linear A, and making changes so that the two scripts could be distinguished. Of the 89 syllabograms (signs representing syllables composed of a consonant and a vowel) used in Linear B, 73 of them have predecessors in the Linear A script. The syllabograms in Linear B, however, were simplified and made more regular in writing. The Mycenaeans also adopted a different system for expressing numbers.
The tablets that the palaces acted as redistribution centres, taking in commodities from the areas under their control, storing them, and then sending them (or products made at the palace workshops — pottery, weapons, etc.) to places within the kingdom and beyond.

Minoan Influence on Mycenae

In their first two centuries, the Mycenaens were very strongly influenced by the older Minoan civilization to the south. Minoan culture is reflected in Mycenaen wall painting, styles of dress, certain types of vases, seal carving, and even in some religious ideas. Both Minoans and Mycenaens left clay figurines representing worshippers and human-shaped gods in their sanctuaries. Both cultures seemed to have practised animal sacrifice and the pouring of libations (small quantities of wine) into the ground, and both kept cult areas (smaller sacred areas) within the palace. The names of some of the Mycenaen gods are known from the Linear B tablets, and are the same as later Classical Greek gods, including Poseidon, Athena, and Dionysos. Zeus, the most powerful of the Greek gods, was actually thought to have been raised on the island of Crete. After the Minoan palaces were destroyed and Mycenaens apparently took control of Crete, Minoan influence on Mycenaen culture diminished significantly.

The End of the Mycenaen World

The archaeological evidence shows that the first widespread destruction of Mycenae occurred around 1250 BCE. In order to protect water supplies, workshops, and storage areas from further destruction, the rulers extended the fortification walls. But around 1200 BCE, another series of disasters brought an end to the centralized administration, including the use of writing, and caused great depopulation in some areas. People continued to live at Mycenae, Tiryns, and Athens, but the monumental palaces fell into disuse. There was certainly a long process of decline, when the political and economic structure was weakened. Scholars continue to debate the causes of this decline, focusing on three main reasons: natural catastrophes (probably earthquakes), foreign attacks, and internal strife, or a combination of these factors. Clearly, the Mycenaen world had come to an end, leaving many impressive ruins and a deep-seated memory of a glorious past.

The Dark Ages

There was a period of recuperation lasting about 350 years, during which various groups of Greek-speaking peoples from the north settled in the Peloponnese (the Greek peninsula), established new homes, built new sanctuaries for their gods, farmed their new land, and built secure communities. But beyond vague notions of what life was like based on sparse archaeological finds, or what political changes were occurring, we know very little about this period. The collapse of the Mycenaen civilization took with it both the wealth and the writing used to keep track of that wealth. There are absolutely no written documents from this 350-year period and later Greeks did not preserve anything about this part of the past in their collective memory. For this reason, the period is called the Dark Ages of Greece. The Greeks did remember their distant, Mycenaean past as an age of heroes and supermen, like Herakles, Hector, Jason, and Achilles. Minstrels wandered from village to village, finding the houses of local nobles and singing their tales of past glory and brave adventures. In return, they would get a bed for the