Prehistoric Aegean

Minoan

Mycenaean

Cycladic
Aegean Art

• The Cyclades
• Crete (Minoan)
• Helladic (Mycenaean)

• Timeline: 3000-1200 BCE

• Pre-Hellenic (Classical) Greece was a culmination of these cultures
What do we know?

• The cultures of the Aegean islands were based on trading and fishing as well as farming.
• They were never as populated as their mainland contemporaries.
• Historians have divided the cultures of the eastern Mediterranean into three contemporary, parallel sets:
  – Minoan on Crete
  – Helladic on Greek mainland (Mycenaean)
  – Cycladic (the tiny islands in between)
The Cyclades

• Made up of 6 islands in the Aegean Sea
• Art that survives is mainly from tombs, mostly pottery and small figurines; vary in size from inches to feet
• Gender is (almost) always identified
  – Female figures tend to be abstract and geometric
  – Male figures tend to be seated and playing an instrument (flute or lyre)
Figurine of a woman, from Syros (Cyclades), Greece, ca. 2500–2300 BCE. Marble, 1’ 6” high. National Archaeological Museum, Athens.
Male lyre player, from Keros (Cyclades), Greece, ca. 2700–2500 BCE. Marble, 9” high. National Archaeological Museum, Athens.
Meaning of the figurines

- We don’t know what they were used for.
- In general it is supposed that they were funerary, marking graves, but that is not for sure.
- We don’t really know if these are figures of the deceased or of gods or someone/thing else.
  - The majority being found in intact burials and cemeteries, seem to have a connection with death.
  - But different ones could have different meanings, depending on \textit{how they were used (function)}. 

Minoan Civilization

- Minoan civilization is where we get the myths about the minotaur (half man, half bull) of King Minos and the labyrinth originated.
- Rather than focus on death, they focused on building lavish palaces for their royalty.
- 3 Periods:
  - Early Minoan (pre-Palace Period)
  - Middle Minoan Period (period of the old palaces)
  - Late Minoan Period (palaces are reconstructed)

Gold ring with a depiction of a bull-jumping scene, before 2000 BC.
Middle Minoan

• Began around 2000 B.C. and may have been destroyed by an earthquake. End date varies, 1800-1600 B.C.
• Most noticeable works of art are the great palaces that were constructed
• Linear A was developed, a type of writing based on pictographs

Linear A - 2000-ca. 1600 BCE not yet deciphered
Ancient Writing

Cuneiform
3100-2900 BCE

Hieroglyphs (bottom) and hieratic (right)
3100 BCE – 3rd c AD

Linear B – ca. 1340 to 1190 BCE. Deciphered 1952; discovered 1903

Linear A – 2000-ca. 1600 BCE
not yet deciphered
Late Minoan

• 1400-1200/1100 B.C.; Golden Age of Crete
• Linear B writing was developed.
• Famous Palace of Knossos was built ca. 1700-1400 B.C.
• Most palaces made were 3 stories high with many rooms and a magazine (storage facility for wine and grain). Large, comfortable; suites for the King, his family; courtyard for pageants, games.
• Acted as administrative, commercial and religious centers of Minoan life.
Palace of Knossos (1700-1400 B.C.)

Ceremonial and political center of Minoan civilization.

Sir Arthur Evans purchased the site in 1900 and financed excavations.

He restored the palace and the discovery of the culture, he himself labeled them Minoan.

The palace and the Minoan civilization are inseparable from his name.
Compare + Contrast

palace at Knossos (Crete), Greece, ca. 1700–1400 BCE

citadel of Sargon II (modern Khorsabad), Iraq, ca. 720 BCE
Mural paintings liberally adorned palaces and are usually the most striking aspects.

Minoan woman or goddess (*La Parisienne*), from the palace at Knossos (Crete), Greece, ca. 1450–1400 BCE. Fragment of a fresco, 10” high.
Bull-leaping, from the palace at Knossos (Crete), Greece, ca. 1450–1400 BCE. Fresco, 2’ 8” high, including border. Archaeological Museum, Herakleion

Women have light skin, men darker skin. This is an ancient technique to differentiate men from women. Bull leaping was a major festive or ritual celebration on Knossos, found in sculpture as well as fresco. This is a uniquely Minoan ceremony.

The actual activity and its meaning are lost to us.
Minoan Pottery

Marine Style octopus jar, from Palaikastro (Crete), Greece, ca. 1500 BCE. 11” high. Archaeological Museum, Herakleion.

Kamares-ware jar, from Phaistos (Crete), Greece, ca. 1800–1700 BCE. 1’ 8” high. Archaeological Museum, Herakleion

Subject: Sea Life

Flat base
The Minoans seem to have worshipped primarily goddesses, which has sometimes been described as a *matriarchal religion*.

Although there is some evidence of male gods, depictions of Minoan goddesses vastly outnumber depictions of anything that could be considered a Minoan god. Evidence tends to point to a Mother Goddess.

Goddesses are usually represented with serpents, birds, poppies, and a vague animal (undeciphered) on the head.

*Snake Goddess*, from the palace at Knossos (Crete), Greece, ca. 1600 BCE. Faience, 1’ 1 1/2” high. Archaeological Museum, Herakleion
The end of the Minoans 😞

- What happened to Minoan civilization around 1500 BCE is not at all clear.
- But it is clear that at around this point its flourishing monumental culture came to an abrupt halt.
- Crete was conquered by Mycenaean's ca. 1450 to 1400 BCE.
- There is very little after 1400.
Mycenaean

• Greek speaking people who were experts in making weapons.
• The art and architecture of Mycenae is about defense.
• Their art was influenced by the Minoans.
• The peoples on the (Greek) mainland were the forerunners of the modern Greek culture.
  – They took their lead from the already existent culture on Crete

• **FYI** - Mycenae is the most famous site of the period and as such has had its name taken to identify the whole, but there were many centers of this culture spread across the mainland.
Mycenaean

Aerial view of the citadel at Tiryns, Greece, ca. 1400–1200 BCE.
Plan of the palace and southern part of the citadel, Tiryns, Greece, ca. 1400–1200 BCE.

**Citadel** – fortress protecting a palace or castle

**Megaron** - the largest room in a house built during the Mycenaean period of ancient Greek civilization
Three methods of spanning a passageway:
(a) post and lintel,
(b) corbelled arch,
(c) arch.
Lion Gate, Mycenae, Greece, ca. 1300–1250 BCE. Limestone, relief panel, 9’ 6” high.

corbelled arch? post and lintel?
Heraldic design:
Ancient Egypt,
Ancient Near East
Mycenae (Greece)

ca. 3000-2600 B.C.
The Treasury of Atreus, also referred to as the Tomb of Agamemnon, was created ca. 1250 BCE.

German archeologist Heinrich Schliemann discovered the (9) graves at Mycenae.

Now known to be royal graves, post-Mycenaeans who had forgotten the use of these tholoi-tombs named them treasuries because of the vast treasures (grave goods) found within them (which were almost immediately looted).

The tomb has no relationship with either Atreus or Agamemnon; it was named by Heinrich Schliemann and the name has been used ever since.
Why Atreus?

- Atreus was the king of Mycenae.
- He had two sons, Menelaus and Agamemnon, who married the royal Spartan sisters, Helen and Clytemnestra.
  - Helen was captured by Paris (or left willingly), and in so doing started the Trojan War.
Treasury of Atreus

- A monumental tomb with an interior quite as impressive as its exterior.
- The structure is a beehive shaped, domed interior (tholos) chamber 44’ high and 48’ in diameter at the base.
- This interior is an awe inspiring monumental space off of which is a smaller chamber intended for actual burial.
- It is the largest interior domed space in all antiquity, up to the construction of the Pantheon, 1500 years later at Rome.
Treasury of Atreus, Mycenae, Greece, ca. 1300-1250 BCE.

(below) vault, inside view, Treasury of Atreus
Grave Circle A
(just inside the Lion Gate, Mycenae)

• At the bottom of 6 shafts of Grave Circle A were bodies, whose faces were covered with gold masks.
  – The men here were buried with their weapons and cups, the women with their jewelry.

• Our text points out that the Mycenaean's would have been aware of Egyptian practices of the same period, which the gold death mask (may) resemble.

• The Greeks always saw the Egyptians as the greatest civilization of their day and traced many of their cultural developments, rightly or wrongly, to them.
Funerary mask, from Grave Circle A, Mycenae, Greece, ca. 1600–1500 BCE.

Death mask of Tutankhamen, from the innermost coffin in his tomb at Thebes, Egypt, 18th Dynasty, ca. 1323 BCE.
Hunter capturing a bull, drinking cup from Vapheio, near Sparta, Greece, ca. 1600–1500 BCE. Gold, 3 1/2” high. National Archaeological Museum, Athens.
Warriors Vase, from Mycenae, Greece, ca. 1200 BCE. 1’ 4” high. National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

The shape is a *krater*, a large bowl for mixing wine and water.
ca. 1400/1200 B.C. – ca 900 B.C. are the so called Dark Ages of Greece.

Disintegration of social order led to the disappearance of powerful kings, the loss of knowledge in masonry (i.e. how to construct citadels and tombs), painting and sculpting were forgotten – as were reading and writing.

Depopulation, poverty and loss of contact with outside civilizations led to a virtual collapse of society.

Then in 8th c B.C. conditions begin to improve, population begins to grow, trade commences once again, Olympic games are established, epic poems (i.e. Homer) were written down.

This is the beginning of Ancient and Classical Greece.