ANCIENT GREEKS: LEGACIES, MINOANS & MYCENEANS

Why Should we Study Ancient Greek History?

Why do we study Ancient Greek History? For centuries Greece has exerted a particular enchantment over the West. Scholars call Greece one of the classical civilizations together with Ancient Rome. Even contemporary ancient Greeks like the long-time ruler of Athens, Pericles, held this view of his own civilization: “Future ages will wonder at us as the present age wonders at us now.”¹ The West has inherited many legacies from Ancient Greece: philosophy, democracy, theater, mythology, architecture, art, science, medicine, the love of war, and misogyny. Many of these areas will be further discussed. It must also be remembered that the Ancient Romans were the great transformers of Greek culture and society. Included in this historical reconstruction will be the Ancient Minoans, Ancient Mycenaean, Archaic Greece, and Classical Greece.

Ancient Greek geography and topography

Geography and topography have been instrumental in determining the course of Greek history. For the Greeks, their mainland was surrounded by numerous islands.² Every area in Greece was separated from the next place by mountains or the seas of the Aegean and Mediterranean. These waters were treacherous in the winters, and as the Aegean was not a tidal or

¹ Taken from the famous Funeral Oration speech during the Peloponnesian War
² The total square miles of ancient Greece is about the equivalent of the state of Florida in America.
current sea, the winds were the important factors. Thus, communication between the Greeks was not easy. Different valleys and islands usually meant separate political states with their own economic and political unity, so there was no national government. The Greeks fought each other, but if another nation attacked one of them, then the Greeks banded together. Even though they were separate city-states, the Greeks had the idea that they were all Greeks, and thus superior to other races. They spoke the same language, shared their mythology and religion, and general culture.

Men were forced to be masters of a whole range of crafts and accomplishments. Again Pericles speaks “each single one of our citizens in all . . . aspects of life is able to show himself the rightful lord and owner of his own person and do this moreover with exceptional grace, and exceptional versatility.”

19th Century C.E. excavations of Troy and Mycenae

Before 1870 C.E. no one guessed great civilizations had flourished in the Greek area before the rise of Athens, circa 7th c. B.C.E. Heinrich Schliemann, a wealthy German businessman who had a Ph.D. and supposedly knew twenty-two languages had been fascinated from his youth by The Iliad. He was determined to prove his hunch that substantial truth was in Homer’s writings. Be began excavating in Asia Minor and in Greece, using quotes from The Iliad about Achilles chasing Hector around the Walls of Troy. After trying many sites he began excavating at the site of Hissarlik,
when he hit upon a grave site containing gold jewelry and vessels in staggering quantities that he determined was the ancient city of Troy. ³

Next, he began excavating the city of Mycenae, and again was successful.

**The Finding of the Ancient Minoans on the Island of Crete**

When word of Schliemann’s discoveries became known, Sir Arthur Evans, an Englishman, began excavating the Greek island of Crete looking for the ancient Minoans, with its mythology of King Minos building a labyrinth to pen in the Minotaur, who was part man and part bull and was part of the Greek mythological heritage handed down for generations.

**Life on Ancient Crete**

“Out in the dark blue sea there lies a land called Crete, a rich and lovely land, washed by waves on every side, densely peopled and boasting ninety cities. . . . One of the ninety towns is a great city called Knossos, and there for nine years, King Minos ruled and enjoyed the friendship of almighty Zeus.” Thus in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus described to his wife Penelope the largest of the Greek islands. It is 150 miles wide by about twenty miles deep, south of the Greek Mainland. Modern Crete is still a rich and lovely land, but one hundred years ago no one believed the rest of Homer’s description about “densely populated and ninety cities,” yet today we know that Crete was the center of the earliest known European civilization,

³ There are lots of fascinating stories about his discoveries and his new found wealth.
equaling those of Mesopotamia and Egypt. Around 1100 B.C.E. this brilliant world came to a sudden end struck down by nature or man. By the time Homer was writing circa 700 B.C.E. and later writings of Greek historians in the 5th c. B.C.E., memories of this early Greek civilization were dim. Stories about it were more like fairy tales than factual history. By about 3000 B.C.E. there were settlers on Crete, and by 2000 B.C.E. until 1100 B.C.E. it was the first important center of Greek civilization. As one of the most progressive societies of early history, their culture was devoted to pleasure not war. Knossos and other cities on Crete coexisted so harmoniously that protective walls were not necessary. Their language has not been deciphered yet by scholars, but it is referred to as Linear A compared with Greek called Linear B. It is a non-Greek language. With the damper climate on Crete, it meant that everyday objects have not survived as in the dry air of Egypt and Mesopotamia. It is assumed that royalty lived in palaces of several stories, large airy rooms, grouped around a central court. The Minoans were extremely advanced in plumbing as they had piped water, drainage, and the world’s first flush toilet. Terracotta bathtubs were shaped like ours. Their plastered walls were decorated with colorful frescoes of birds, flowers, and fish. The wealthy inhabited luxurious country mansions that were smaller versions of the palaces. How the poor lived we do not know as their houses have not survived. The Palace of Knossos as the presumed capitol city had hundreds of rooms, a swimming pool, parquet
floors, and was the seat of government and the religious center. There were workshops, warehouses for food, and enormous barrel-shaped pottery jars as high as a man to keep olive oil and grain in. Their tradition of making these vessels still persists today in Crete. Paved roads were built eleven feet wide to aid the Minoans in their daily activities. Sir Arthur Evans reconstructed several of the rooms, including the throne room, where the surrounding benches are nearly at the same level as the throne, indicating a more egalitarian society.

**Ancient Minoan Religious Practices**

Based on the archaeological evidence, and ancient literary references, it is believed that their religion was based on a mother or earth goddess that was worshipped in the palaces, sanctuaries in private homes and outdoor shrines. No temples or formal religious organization is apparent. Minoan rites and rituals were administered by priestesses instead of priests. The Mother goddess had a crown of poppies or of a lion. In her hands she had either snakes or double-headed axes that may have been the instruments used to sacrifice bulls to the goddess. In some of the Knossos’ paintings is shown either an athletic contest or a religious ritual where young men and women grasped a live bull by his horns and leaped over his body. No attempt to kill the bull is shown as in modern bullfights. A group of curious scholars have asked the typical American cowboy how this feat might have been done, and they were told “it could not be done.” Yet these bull-leaping
scenes abound in Minoan Art, and perhaps these were superbly trained athletes and an obliging bull. On the Eastern Coast of Crete has been found a great statue of “Zeus” with obvious veins, tendons, and other bodily parts. This has led some scholars to conclude that maybe this is where the Goddess’s consort was conceived as part of the ancient Greek mythology. This incredible rendering of “Zeus” was not seen again for 1000 years.

**Mycenaean Culture and the Epics: Iliad and the Odyssey**

Another early Greek civilization was the Mycenaean circa 1650-1100 B.C.E. It is suggested that sometime after 2000 B.C.E. the first Greek-speaking people arrived in Southern Greece. Eventually they came under the cultural influence of the Minoan Civilization, utilizing the Minoans art, architecture, dress, and religion. They were called the Mycenaeans by the Archeologist Heinrich Schliemann. Over time the Mycenaeans built fortress cities that dominated the countryside mainly in the Peloponnesian area, but the City of Mycenae reigned supreme, and was the leading Greek City from 1600-1300 B.C.E. Our knowledge of the Mycenaean Culture comes from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Schliemann’s 1876 dig located their capital city with what he called Agamemnon’s Palace. They became a strong warrior culture taking over the trading business of the Minoans. Based on archaeological evidence, the Mycenaeans became very rich and around 1250 B.C.E. attacked Troy that was located on land adjacent to the Hellespont, the channel leading to the Black Sea, according to Homer’s *Iliad* and
Odyssey. In 1952 a young Englishman, Michael Ventris, deciphered this early Greek language, which is also known as Linear B (the Minoan language is known as Linear A). Our knowledge of Mycenaean and Greek life comes from these two valuable sources. These became the common heritage of all Greeks, a bible for them regarding religious, ethical, and practical tenets. Along with another writer contemporary with Homer, Hesiod, their writings became the chief source of the Greeks’ religious beliefs. Both of Homer’s epics were based on a long oral tradition probably going back five centuries, but Homer wrote them down circa 700 B.C.E. He described Greek society in which folk recollections of Mycenaean civilization merged with life in the Poet’s own time, somewhat similar to the Arthurian Legends of the English. The setting for the Iliad is the last year of a ten-year war between the Trojans and the Greeks (Achaeans). It illustrates the tragic consequences of a quarrel between two sensitive and passionate Greek leaders, Agamemnon and Achilles. Chief protagonists for the Trojan side were Hector and Priam. The Greek gods and goddesses align themselves either on the Trojan or Greek side. The cause of the war was not the kidnapping of Helen, but the strategic location of Troy, but then most all historical societies, past and present, usually relate a non-economic rationale for why they go to war. Part of this epic poem was the famous ruse of the Trojan Horse used by the Greeks, and there is currently a replica on the archaeological site.

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4 Schliemann supposedly found a gold mask in his excavations, and claims it was the Death Mask of Agamemnon.
The *Odyssey* was a story of the ten-year wanderings of Odysseus trying to go back home after the successful Greek victory of the Trojan War to Ithaca his kingdom, and his patient wife Penelope, but he is detained time and again by some of the most famous icons in world history: sirens, harpies, Cyclops the one-eyed giant, sea monsters (Scylla and Charybdis = rocks and whirlpools), and the constant contest between the Goddess Athena and the God Poseidon to either detain or help Odysseus.  Calypso also was a sea nymph who kept Odysseus captive for nine years and who, in hope of making him her husband, offered him immortality. More information on the various deities and the Greek religious practices will be discussed later.

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5 It is thought that this is where we get the popular idiom “between a rock and a hard place.” Charybdis was a nymph and daughter of the deities Poseidon and Gaia.