# Greek Bronze Age: Overview and Sources

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## Introduction

(Slide 1) Welcome to Carl Seaquist's overview lecture on the Greek Bronze Age. It is the classical period that gives us the great works of literature for which Greece is best known, and it is in the classical period that the Greeks developed political forms that provided inspiration for American democracy. But the Greeks of the classical period looked back to the Bronze Age for their own origins, and modern scholars, in a rather different way, likewise trace Greek history back to that period.

(Slide 2) Most histories of ancient Greece begin with the Bronze Age, for several reasons: first, this would appear to the era when the Greeks first entered mainland Greece, and any account of Greek history before that time is mere speculation. Second, the archaeology of the Neolithic period is pretty much the same the world over, whereas finds from the Bronze Age can be quite exciting – gold, entire suits of armor, beautiful works of art, and so on can be found from the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. This alone makes the period interesting, and makes it easy to fill up coffee table books and PBS documentaries. (OK, that last part sounds catty, I'll admit. But you'll find that while scholars love the fancy works of art that archaeologists find, just as important for understanding history are the apparently boring things that you can't really put on exhibit in a museum – spores from plants, mundane pottery fragments, bones, things like that.) Lastly, our earliest documentary sources written in Greek come from the late Bronze Age, so Greek history proper begins in the Bronze Age.

In the classical period Greek culture was found predominantly in the mainland of Greece, eastern Anatolia, most of the Aegean islands, and in Sicily and southern Italy. Other places in the eastern Aegean, like Crete and Cyprus, also had significant Greek-speaking populations, but they produced less of the intellectual culture that moderns tend to focus on when they study the ancient world. The short version of the story is the Greeks colonized many of these areas in the early historical period, so our geographic focus in the Bronze Age will be a little different than it will be subsequently. There is a longer version of the story to tell, but for now, let's just say that histories of Bronze Age Greece generally focus on three areas: the mainland, Crete, and the Cycladic islands.

(Slide 3) These areas are generally referred to with the adjectives Helladic, Minoan, and Cycladic, respectively, and mainland Greek civilization is also described as Mycenaean. The last of these terms comes from Mycenae, one of the most dominant cities during the Greek Bronze Age; the term "Minoan" comes from the name of a legendary king of Crete, king Minos. Let me talk about each of these three areas in turn.

## Cyclades

(Slide 4) The Cyclades are one of the main island chains that surround the Greek mainland. They lie to the southeast of Attica and Euboea, and north of Crete. The easiest way to sail from central Crete to Greece is to go directly north to Thera (also known as Santorini) then up the island chain to Attica. From western Crete, on the other hand, one would sail to Antikythera and then Kythera, and from there to the southern Peloponnese. During antiquity, sailors typically stayed close to shore and landed their boats for the night. Therefore it's pretty easy to identify major trade routes by simply looking at a map: sailors either followed the coast, or hopped from island to island. Of course, just because a given trade route is possible doesn't mean that it was actually used in a given period of history. Still, one might guess, just from looking at the map, that Mesopotamian and Egyptian culture came to Greece either through Asia Minor or Crete and the islands, and this is largely true. All this is to say that the early influence of Crete shouldn't be surprising. That said, contacts between Crete and the mainland can't be demonstrated before the Middle Bronze Age, and it wasn't until MH III, perhaps, that these contacts increased substantially. Around this period the inhabitants of the Greek mainland probably increased their interactions with western Anatolia, Sicily, and southern Italy, though these latter contacts were not as crucial as those with Crete.

The Cyclades were important to the development of Aegean culture, but since they provide almost no written evidence, the story needs to be told solely on the basis of archaeological finds. And the archaeology of the Cyclades is rich, particularly Santorini, which is kind of the Greek Pompeii. The island was home to a volcano that erupted in the seventeenth century BC, and this preserved much of the material culture at a single moment in time.

## Crete

(Slide 5) Crete was probably settled in the Neolithic from Anatolia, but for several thousand years it was relatively isolated, with the bulk of the population living in the area around Knossos (i.e., the north-central portion of the island) and then initially spreading to the south-central portion. The first "international era," as it were, in the eastern Mediterranean occurred during EB II, and it was during this period that we start to see signs of foreign cultural influences in Crete. In this period there is no evidence that any Greek speakers were in Crete, so we are not yet dealing with Greek history per se.

About Crete: it is very mountainous, and its population has mostly settled around the coast, where the land is lower and there is easy access to the sea. Three large mountain ranges dominate the island, and divide it into five main regions. This map is a dramatic simplification, which shows the highest mountain ranges but ignores the fact that little of the island is truly lowland: the major mountains shade into high, hilly regions in much of the island. One population area lay west of the White Mountains. Another lay east of the White Mountains and west of the Idean Mountains, mostly to the north. The central portion of the island, between Idean Mountains and the Lasithi Mountains (also known as Diktaean) is best divided into two, one to the north and one to the south. Finally, the eastern portion of the island had a number of small settlements right along the coast.

Notable archaeological sites were Knossos with its port Heraklion, and Malia in north-central Crete and Phaistos in south-central Crete. In the eastern portion of the island were Zakros and Palaikastro along the coast. There were no major population centers to the west of Knossos.

## Palaces

(Slide 6) When I mention "notable population centers," what I really mean are structures known as "palaces." We don't yet have a good idea of how population densities varied across the landscape of Crete or the Greek mainland because the dwellings of common people have left so few remains more than three millenia later. The archaeological sites that are easiest to find are the monumental ones, which are big and also made of durable materials like stone, and consequently much of what we know about the Aegean Bronze Age comes from excavations at palaces. This isn't to say we only know about the palaces. But early archaeologists focused primarily on the larger structures, and in any case those tend to be more durable, so they necessarily color our understanding of the period.

A Minoan palace was typically built around a large, paved, outdoor court. The court at Knossos was about 150 feet long and 85 feet wide. This is just over a quarter of the playing field of an American football field, which is 300 feet long and just over 150 feet wide. To carry the image a bit further, a football field is aboutzero point nine acres, whereas the entire palace (just the main building itself) at Knossos occupied about three acres, and the entire site covered twice that.

(Slide 7) Around that central court was a large structure of at least one, and in places two or more, stories, built with a combination of dressed stone, rubble, mud brick, and wooden beams. These included residential spaces, some of which were outfitted with toilets (at Knossos excavators even found a wooden toilet seat – the palace was outfitted with a complex set of drains that carried waste water and runoff away from the structure). In addition, there were massive storerooms and work areas for craftsmen. Several features lead scholars to believe that some rooms served religious functions: sometimes figurines (dolls) have been found, and these are generally assumed to be religious icons rather than toys, though I am inclined to be less sanguine about our ability to understand the function these images served. In any case, one room in the palace at Knossos, known among scholars as the “throne room,” is provided with a large, stone seat and, in front of it, a so-called “lustral basin.,” Given the way the room is outfitted, it appears unlikely that the latter is a bathtub, although bathtubs do appear to exist in strictly residential areas. It would seem that the lustral basin in the throne room served ritual purposes – perhaps religious, perhaps political, likely both.

(Slide 8) Minoan palaces had narrow corridors throughout, light wells, and openings in the walls to let in light and air. They were, for the most part, not fortified, and this has led scholars, in combination with comments made by the classical historian Thucydides, who believed that the early Cretans had a great navy that protected the island, to believe that Crete was politically unified. Mycenaean palaces on the mainland, in contrast, were (in certain periods particularly) highly fortified citadels.

The walls of the Minoan palaces were sometimes decorated with frescos – paintings on walls covered in plaster. Some of these remain, and provide information we otherwise would not have. Some depict the palace itself, and this gives us evidence of how high the palaces were. Typically all that remains on site are lower-level walls and the surface of basement floors. These might be covered with materials from the upper floors, which fell as the palace collapsed. Frescos also provide scenes from daily life, and one common motif, which shows what appear to be acrobats jumping over stampeding bulls, seems to depict a form of palatial entertainment.

Cretan palaces appear to have begun in EM I-II, and only grown to their full extent by MMIB. Linear B texts written in Greek have been found at Knossos, which indicates that Greeks at some point gained control of the palace; most people assume that the Greeks conquered Crete in the LBA, but the details are far from clear.

## Mainland Greece

(Slide 9) The Mycenaean palaces seem clearly inspired by the Minoan palaces, but nevertheless there are significant architectural differences between mainland and Cretan palaces, and these probably reflect substantial differences in the political and social roles that these structures played. A Mycenaean palace (also sometimes referred to as a “citadel”) was a complex of rooms and corridors surrounding one or two large, central halls, with smaller, outlying buildings, all surrounded by a fortification wall. Palaces were built on hills, to be more readily defensible; in later times, the center of a Greek city (or polis) was typically built on a hill, and was known as the city’s “acropolis,” or the “high point of the city.”

The central hall, or “megaron,” held a central hearth, surrounded by four columns, and a raised platform for a throne. A hole in the roof, which probably was flat like palace roofs on Crete, let smoke escape. The inside surfaces of the megaron were brightly painted, including frescos on the walls.

(Slide 10) The best preserved palaces are (from best to least preserved) at Pylos, in Messenia, and at Tiryns and Mycenae in the Argolid. There were no palaces in Laconia, the region in the southeast Peloponnese where Sparta would later grow. The heaviest concentration of palaces stretched from the western Argolid up into Attica, but the Mycenaean palace system extended into Boeotia (at Thebes) and even Thessaly, at the site of Iolkos.

(Slide 11) Here is a map of the Argolid. It shows how close Mycenae and Tiryns were; between them was a smaller palace at Midea. The map also shows the locations (in parentheses) of the classical cities of Argos and Corinth, and the Bronze Age sites of Eleusis in Attica, where there was a palace, and Lerna, where a building know to modern scholars as the “House of Tiles” was located. The House of Tiles is the best preserved of the so-called “corridor houses,” structures in the EH II period that are viewed as precursors to the later palaces.

In fact, some private houses from the Mycenaean period (the larger and fancier ones) were built on the same basic style as the palaces, with a large hall at the center, and consequently may not be a principled distinction between a palace and other sorts of structure. Nevertheless, the largest palaces were clearly orders of magnitude larger that private residences: they were built of monumental, roughly hewn stones sometimes 20 feet across, which were referred to by later Greeks as “Cyclopian” because it was believed that only giants could manage such large-scale construction.

(Slide 12) The palace at Mycenae was the first excavated, and though much of it was later removed to make way for later construction, it is often viewed as the prototype of a palace – after all, the term “Mycenaean” is applied to the entire period and culture of late Bronze Age Greece. In fact, there were relatively few palaces, and it might be better not to think of any as the prototype, but instead to view the Mycenaean palace as being defined along a range of possible forms. Still, Mycenae presents a convenient example of general processes and forms that are found at the other palaces.

The earliest fortification wall at Mycenae, built probably in LH IIIA (mid-fifteen century), enclosed a relatively small space, and the palace at this period was probably a central hall with just a few rooms surrounding it. A collection of graves (known as Grave Circle A), in which were found marvelous works of gold that made the site famous after its excavation, originally lay just outside this first fortification wall, but was brought inside the complex when later walls were built around a wider area. By LHIIIB (mid-thirteenth century BC), a stairway was cut through the wall to lead to an underground spring outside the citadel; similar efforts were made in the same period at other citadels, and this has led modern scholars to speculate that over the course of LH III warfare expanded in the Mycenaean world, requiring greater defenses and possibly more protracted sieges.

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