

## ABOUT THE AEGEAN BRONZE AGE

Here I provide an outline of later Greek prehistory for those unfamiliar with it. We who study the Greek Bronze Age always use shorthand, like most scientists. In the following pages I try to break down some of our in-house jargon so that general readers can follow my arguments more easily in subsequent chapters.

We generally do not use absolute dates, but instead employ a *relative* chronological scheme that describes the sequence in which events happened, rather than when they occurred in years before Christ (see figure 5). A century ago, Aegean prehistorians (field archaeologists, art historians, and others who professionally consume information produced by archaeologists in order to study human history prior to written documentation) divided the entire Bronze Age of Greece into three phases: Early, Middle, and Late. On the Greek mainland we call these Early Helladic (EH), Middle Helladic (MH), and Late Helladic (LH), so that they can be distinguished from the chronologically parallel Early Minoan (EM), Middle Minoan (MM), and Late Minoan (LM) on Crete, and Early Cycladic (EC), Middle Cycladic (MC), and Late Cycladic (LC) in the Cycladic islands. These broad phases have themselves been divided into sub-phases, each defined by characteristic styles of pottery.

We can, if we want, attach approximate dates B.C. to each phase, which I do here, since prehistoric Greek pottery has been found in Egypt and the Middle East, where literate societies recorded lists of kings and the length of their reigns. These reigns can in turn be dated, absolutely with some exceptions, since we sometimes know that an astronomical event occurred in the regnal year of a particular king. Carbon-14 dates can also be useful for absolute dating, if calibrated with reference to tree rings of a known date, but as yet we lack an uninterrupted series of rings reaching from the present back to the Bronze Age. Aegean prehistorians generally

	GREECE	CYCLADES	CRETE	EGYPT
3100	EH I	EC I	EM I	1st - 2nd Dynasty
2700	EH IIA	EC II	EM IIA	Old Kingdom
2400	EH IIB		EM IIB	
2200	EH III	EC III	EM III	1st Intermediate Period
2000	MH I	MCI	MM IA	Middle Kingdom
1900		MC II	MM IB	
1800	MH II - c.1800-1700		MM II 1800 - c.1700	2nd Intermediate Period
1700	MH III - c.1630/10	MC III	MM III - c.1630/10	
1600	LH 1 - c.1520/10	LC I	LM IA - c.1520	New Kingdom
1500	LH IIA - c.1450/40 LH IIB - c.1410/00	LC II	LM IB - c.1440 LM II - c.1410/00	
1400	LH IIIA1 - c.1360	LC III	LM IIIA1 - c.1355/45	
1300	LH IIIA2 - c.1295		LM IIIA2 - c.1295	
1200	LH IIIB1 - c.1240 LH IIIB2 - c.1200/1190		LM IIIB - c.1200	
1100	LH IIIC - c.1070		LM IIIC - c.1070	

FIGURE 5. Relative and absolute chronology of the Aegean area. Rosemary Robertson after data from Shelmerdine, *Aegean Bronze Age*, fig. 1.1, revised with information from Malcolm H. Wiener. Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati. All rights reserved.

use absolute dates B.C. among themselves only when trying to relate events in Greece to those in Egypt or the Middle East.

The Bronze Age in Greece began around 3100 B.C. with the first bronze working for the manufacture of tools and weapons (see map 1). Already in the Neolithic, there had been limited use of copper, the essential ingredient of bronze, while stone tools were still essential for some purposes in the Bronze Age. Copper typically was alloyed with tin to produce bronze, but so was arsenic, which continued to be used into late stages of the Bronze Age on Crete.



MAP 1. Greece with principal Bronze Age sites. Rosemary Robertson. Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati. All rights reserved.

It was not until the second stage of the Early Bronze Age, ca. 2700 B.C., that archaeological evidence points to the concentration of power in the hands of a few individuals. On the mainland, this phenomenon manifested itself in the construction of large buildings called “corridor houses”—two-storied, with central rooms flanked by narrow annexes. Such monumental structures were characteristic of the Early Helladic II phase in southern parts of the Greek mainland and on the island of Aegina. During Early Helladic II, material culture was broadly homogenous, and interregional exchange of goods, especially pottery, was frequent. The Greek islands, even Crete, were part of this “international spirit,” as Renfrew called it in his *Emergence of Civilisation*.<sup>1</sup> Seals were used to secure parcels and boxes in the corridor house at Lerna, the so-called House of Tiles, and some have assumed that a centralized administrative system was in operation there (see figure 6a and figure 6b).<sup>2</sup>

On Crete a palace-centered society, which we call the Minoan civilization, emerged around 1900 B.C. and extended its economic (and perhaps political) reach into the Aegean Sea in the Middle Minoan period. There we speak of the Old Palaces, followed, after a destruction, by the establishment of New Palaces later in the

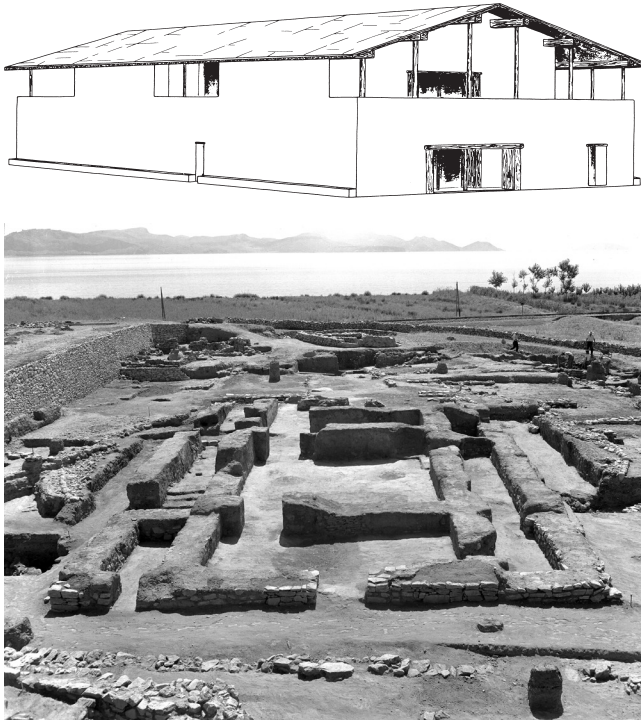


FIGURE 6a and 6b. The House of Tiles at Lerna in the north-eastern Peloponnese of Greece. 6a. Reconstruction after M. H. Wiencke, *The Architecture, Stratification, and Pottery of Lerna III* (Lerna IV) (Princeton: ASCSA, 2000), fig. 107a. Joseph Shaw. Courtesy of the Trustees of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. 6b. Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Archives, Lerna Excavation Records. All rights reserved.

Middle Bronze Age.<sup>3</sup> There was no cultural break between the Early and Middle Minoan periods. On the mainland, however, toward the end of the Early Helladic period, there was, in contrast, a significant wave of destructions and abandonments of settlements that many, following Jack Caskey, think bears witness to the arrival of newcomers to the Greek peninsula. Both he and Blegen imagined that this disjuncture marked the “Coming of the Greeks.” Others more recently have argued that climate change was the culprit. Whatever the case, the ensuing Middle Helladic period marked a setback along the road to state formation on the mainland.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE SHAFT GRAVES OF MYCENAE

Mainland communities in the earlier Middle Helladic period continued to trade with each other and with some Cycladic islands, but there is little evidence for direct contact between the Peloponnese and Crete. From burial customs, we can deduce that there were mechanisms emphasizing group identities (such as the family), and that these restrained the concentration of power in the hands of any one individual. The loosening of such constraints on centralized personal power would, of course, have been a prerequisite for the creation of states, when we would expect to see the development of a system based on inherited rank.<sup>5</sup>

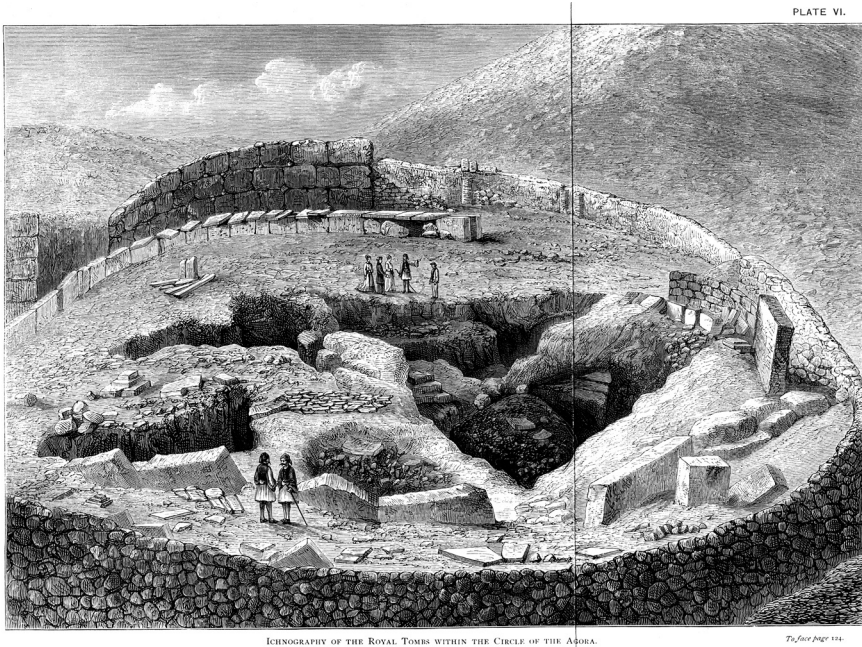


FIGURE 7. Heinrich and Sophia Schliemann's grave circle at Mycenae. After Heinrich Schliemann, *Mycenae: A Narrative of Researches at Mycenae and Tiryns* (London: John Murray, 1878), facing p. 124.

A hierarchical society of that sort is what we find emerging near the end of the Middle Helladic period. That has been obvious since the 1880s when German-American businessman Heinrich Schliemann and his Greek wife, Sophia, excavated the first shaft graves at Mycenae, in a “Grave Circle” just inside the Lion Gate in the Cyclopean walls that surround its acropolis (see figure 7).<sup>6</sup> The graves contained such incredible wealth that at first many reputable scholars refused to believe that the burials were of prehistoric date.

The finds from the shaft graves of Mycenae have, since their discovery, been jewels in the crown of the prehistoric galleries of the National Archaeological Museum of Athens. The quantity of gold (about 15 kg) alone is impressive, but even more important is evidence that at Mycenae the egalitarian ethos of Middle Helladic society had been replaced by one permitting individuals or groups of individuals (women and children included) to be singled out for special treatment in death—behavior that presumably reflected an elevated status in life. The graves excavated by the Schliemanns were joined in the 1950s by a second grave circle with shaft graves, a bit earlier in date. Both groups of graves belonged to an extensive cemetery on the western slope of the Mycenae acropolis, which also included humbly appointed burials.<sup>7</sup> What was the engine that spurred such dramatic changes at Mycenae and resulted in the emergence of greater social complexity in southern Greece?

