

KNOSSOS

Legend tells of a King Minos who lived on the island of Crete in the Aegean Sea. In his palace at Knossos he had a labyrinth (maze) where a mythical beast, called the Minotaur, lived. This beast had the head of a bull and the body of a human. Annually, the king of Athens had to send seven young men and seven young maidens to King Minos as food for the Minotaur. One year, Theseus, son of the king of Athens, accompanied the young victims to Crete. After arriving at Knossos, Theseus and his companions were helped by Ariadne, King Minos's daughter, who gave him a dagger to kill the Minotaur and some thread to find his way out of the labyrinth. And so Theseus killed the beast, found his way safely out of the labyrinth, and freed Athens from the annual obligation of sending fourteen youths to Crete.

In A.D. 1900 a famous British archaeologist named Arthur Evans discovered a large palace at Knossos in north-central Crete. This palace belonged to a civilization that Evans called the Minoan civilization, named after the legendary King Minos of the labyrinth. This civilization flourished on Crete between 2000 and 1450 B.C. (See map on page 87.)

The Minoan civilization consisted of a number of palaces, the largest of which is located at Knossos. The palace had several purposes. It served as the residence of the king, who was the supreme ruler, along with his family and attendants. It was also a place where attendants and higher officials carried out the daily business of the palace and the area it controlled. Finally, food and trade items were stored there and redistributed to the common people of the countryside.

The Minoan people lived in towns and villages. Some cultivated primarily olives and grapes. Others were craftsmen and artisans. They manufactured luxury items, such as finely-painted pottery, elaborately-carved stone vessels, and jewelry. These items were traded as far away as Egypt and the Near East. Trade was an important part of Minoan life. This civilization was prosperous and technologically advanced. The palaces had an advanced drainage system complete with baths. Frescoes, or wall paintings, decorated the walls of the palaces with scenes of animals, games, and religious festivals. This indicates that the Minoans were a peaceful and fun-loving people. The Minoans loved games, such as boxing and bull-leaping. Bull-leaping involved jumping onto a bull by grabbing its horns, doing a somersault, and landing back on the ground.

About 1450 B.C. the Minoan civilization came to an end. The palaces and towns were destroyed. Archaeologists can only guess as to the cause of this destruction. About fifty years before, a volcano on the nearby island of Thera had erupted violently. It brought large amounts of ash and tidal waves to Crete. As a result, it is believed that the Aegean trading system, as well as Minoan food production, was disrupted. Today, only the ancient ruins of this once wealthy and advanced civilization remain.



This fresco depicts the sport of bull-leaping, which was popular with the people of Crete.

Name _____ Date _____

POINTS TO PONDER

1. What would you see and experience if you were to visit the palace of Knossos during its finest period?

2. What kind of evidence, or lack of evidence, indicates that the Minoans can be considered a peaceful and fun-loving people?

3. What is believed to be the cause of the end of the Minoan civilization? Why?

4. What characterizes the Minoan civilization? Why do you think we know much about the Minoan way of life but nothing of Minoan history?

MYCENAE

Homer, the first known Greek poet, who lived about 700 B.C., wrote of another civilization that arose after the fall of the Minoan civilization. It was called the Mycenaean civilization. In his epic, the *Iliad*, Homer described the wealthy palaces where heroic kings, such as Agamemnon of Mycenae, lived. These kings waged war against the people of Troy, a walled city located on the coast of northern Turkey, on the east side of the Aegean. According to the story, the Mycenaeans defeated the Trojans in a battle inside the city walls after hiding inside a large, wooden horse (the Trojan Horse), which the Trojans were tricked into bringing inside the city gates.



The Lion Gate at Mycenae

This civilization was named after an important palace, Mycenae, located in the Peloponnese on mainland Greece (the southern region of Greece connected to the rest of the country by the Isthmus of Corinth). (See map on page 87.) It was discovered by a famous German archaeologist, Heinrich Schliemann, in A.D. 1876. The Mycenaeans were Greeks who came to the Greek mainland about 2000 B.C. By about 1500 B.C., there emerged a civilization as prosperous and wealthy as that of Minoan Crete.

The archaeological remains in the Peloponnese consist of large palaces that served the same purposes as those found on Crete. Unlike the Minoans, however, the Mycenaeans were a warlike people. The palaces were surrounded by well-built walls for defense. The frescoes on the walls show many scenes of hunting and warfare. Bronze weapons and body armor and helmets made of ivory tusks were also found among the artifacts. For survival in case of siege, the Mycenaeans built underground tunnels leading to a water well outside the palace gates. Like the Minoans, the Mycenaeans cultivated olives and grapes and traded jars of oil and wine, as well as painted pottery, throughout the Mediterranean region.

Mycenaeans buried their dead in monumental family tombs. The burial chamber of the tomb was dug into a hillside and was approached by a long tunnel-like entrance (called a *dromos*). The dead were buried with their belongings (painted pottery, gold jewelry and cups, and weapons) on the floor or in a pit of the chamber.

The Mycenaeans had a written language, which was written on rectangular clay tablets. The script is called "Linear B" because its characters consisted of lines. The tablets contain lists of food and other products made, stored, and distributed by the palace officials. They contain no historical information that can tell us of any wars or the reason for the end of this civilization. Disaster struck the palaces between about 1200 and 1100 B.C. They were destroyed by fire, and the people abandoned their homes. Many causes could have contributed to the fall of this civilization: drought, civil war, or outside invaders from the north called the Dorians. There is no evidence, however, to tell us exactly what happened.

Name _____ Date _____

POINTS TO PONDER

1. What evidence exists to indicate that the Mycenaeans were a warlike people?

2. What are the differences between the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations?

3. What similarities do you find between the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations?
