Mycenaean Religion

The tangible traces of Mycenaean worship and religious belief that we find in the archaeological record are tantalizingly fragmentary, but they do give us some of the most evocative artefacts and wall paintings to have survived from Mycenaean Greece. What we find in the ground are not the beliefs themselves, of course, but rather what has been left behind as a consequence of those beliefs. This may include images of deities and their worshippers, cult buildings and other places of worship, and objects used in the rituals involved, such as altars and rhyta (ritual sprinkling vessels). Having written records ought to fill out this picture, but Linear B tablets are not inscribed with anything like myths or religious writing. They do, however, give us names of deities, places where they were worshipped and the kinds of offerings made to them. From these three main sources of evidence (archaeological excavations of cult areas and sanctuaries, representations in art and the written texts on Linear B tablets) we will recreate what we can of Mycenaean religion.

Early studies of religion in the Bronze Age Aegean spoke of Minoan–Mycenaean religion, conflating the two into one whole. This is because the religious iconography of the Mycenaeans, particularly in the Shaft Grave Era (1600–1450 BCE), looks very Minoan in character, focusing as it does on a predominant goddess or goddesses. Furthermore, the only shrine of the Shaft Grave Era excavated so far on the Greek mainland, that of Apollo Maleatas at Epidaurus, has an open-altar, conical cups and bronze double-axes, all of which have clear affinities with the ritual observances of the Minoans. This was a time of heavy borrowing, though, of Minoan iconography in general by the Mycenaeans, and it may well be that they were adopting Minoan symbolism rather than Minoan beliefs. Both archaeology and Linear B tablets have clearly demonstrated that Mycenaean religion in fact had a clearly recognizable character of its own.

SHRINES OF THE MYCENAEANS

The places where the Mycenaeans worshipped their gods ranged from formal areas set aside within the palaces to special religious centres.
simple open-air shrines.\textsuperscript{2} Some sites may have been for official or
town religion and others for popular or rural worship: ostentatious
rituals as opposed to day-to-day observances. Few open-air shrines
have been found, perhaps because they left little to mark where they
had been, though that of Apollo Maleatas near Epidauros continued in
use in subsequent centuries, and two others of later date have been
found near Tiryns.

The tangible remains of cult centres in the Mycenaean world have
been excavated in some of the palaces, for instance at Mycenae and
Tiryns, and in urban centres at non-palatial sites, notably at Methana,
Phylakopi on Melos and Aya Irini on Kea. They are identified as such
by the frescoes that decorated their walls, by the paraphernalia of cult
found in them and by figurines, some of them worshippers, others per-
haps representing the deities themselves. Linear B tablets also reveal
that there were important religious centres outside the palaces, to
which offerings were sent from the palace elites. Who then were the
deities worshipped by the Mycenaeans and what forms did this wor-
sship take?

The Cult Centre at Mycenae
Perhaps our best chance of beginning to answer such a question comes
from a study of the Cult Centre at the palace of Mycenae, which is
96. Above: Two clay bull-head rhyta (ritual sprinkling vessels), thirteenth century BC, the one on the left from Karpathos and the one on the right from Sikinos.

97. Above: Terracotta bulls and a goat vase (which appears empty until poured) with a bull-head spout, thirteenth century BC.

98. Above: Terracotta goddess seated on a throne with her legs curled up and a group of three women performing a sacred dance, thirteenth century BC.

99. Pottery kalathos (bowl) with three female figures standing on its rim, twelfth century BC.
built on land within the walls of the fortified acropolis, on terraces on the lower slopes close to the wall. It consists of five building complexes, dating from the late fourteenth to mid-thirteenth centuries, perhaps built successively, with Shrine Gamma appearing to be the earliest. Earthquake damage in the middle of the thirteenth century led to extensive rebuilding of the complex and the shrine as it is today dates mainly to the second half of the thirteenth century, though some of the sacred objects and figurines found in it are of the early fourteenth century. Presumably highly prized items had been moved from an earlier sacred area elsewhere and incorporated into the rituals taking place within the new Cult Centre.

From the Cult Centre at Mycenae comes the most clearly identifiable of all Mycenaean deities – a warrior goddess (fig. 104). Found in the debris between Tsountas’ House and the South-west Building were the remains of a fresco executed in miniature against a blue ground. One fragment preserves an exquisite depiction of the upper part of a white-skinned figure, her warlike nature indicated by the ornate boar’s-tusk helmet she wears on her head. She carries in her arms a small winged griffin, which turns its head back to look at her face. Griffins were imaginary creatures, winged and with the head of an eagle and the body of a lion, and are often found accompanying a deity in both Minoan and Mycenaean art. Near to her was found another fragment, also in miniature and against the same blue ground, depicting three donkey-headed daemons carrying a long pole or pulling a
rope on their shoulders (fig. 105). Such daemons are also seen making offerings to a seated goddess on a large gold signet ring discovered in a hoard at Tiryns. The daemon derives ultimately from the Egyptian hippopotamus goddess Taweret (Tawert), whose iconography was adopted by the Minoans and thence transmitted to the Mycenaeans. The warrior goddess and the daemons are probably both surviving fragments from the same scene. Perhaps the same warrior goddess is painted on a stucco tablet from Tsountas' House: two women, their arms held forwards in a gesture of adoration, flank a goddess, whose entire body except her arms, head and possibly her feet is covered by a figure-of-eight shield. A frieze of large figure-of-eight shields used as a decorative motif was also painted on the walls of the South-west Building.
Within the Cult Centre there are several distinct areas, defined as such both by their architecture and by the cult images and ritual paraphernalia found in them. They may have been set apart for the worship of different deities, though they have elements in common. The two areas which give us the greatest insight into the deities worshipped there by the people of Mycenae are the complexes of the Room of the Frescoes and the place known as the ‘Temple’. The first of these two complexes was reached via an anteroom, which led into the Room of the Frescoes, to one side of which was a storeroom and to the other the Room of the Ivories. The Room of the Frescoes was the main chamber of the complex, decorated with frescoes as its name implies, and lying on an east-west axis. A large oval hearth lay in the centre of the room, to the north of which was a terracotta lamax or bathtub, perhaps for some form of bathing ritual. Along the east wall was a stuccoed bench, with ash in some indentations at one end, which was probably used as an altar. It was decorated in fresco technique with ‘horns of consecration’ (stylized bulls’ horns); the only really Mycenaean feature of the entire Mycenaean Cult Centre. Lying on the floor in front of the altar was found an exceptionally fine male head carved in ivory.

The wall behind the altar was decorated with a fresco: a woman and an animal are partially preserved (possibly a goddess with a griffin) and in the register above them are two robed female figures (perhaps again warrior goddesses), one carrying a large sword and the other a staff, whilst between them two small male figures (maybe worshippers) appear to float in the air. The adjacent Room of the Ivories, part of this complex, was L-shaped. At its southern end was a platform on which stood a small decorated female figurine (perhaps a goddess) with ornaments in front of her. These included a pile of glass beads, which were presumably the remains of a necklace given as an offering. Other areas of the room appear to have been used for storage; the presence there of significant quantities of ivory has given the room its name.

From the area of the Cult Centre that included the Room of the Platforms and the Room of the Idois (sometimes called the Temple of
In total, nineteen large figures were found (c. 60 cm [some 2 ft] tall), along with four smaller ones (about half the height), decorated and more benevolent in appearance, and a few terracotta figurines of more usual type, together with seventeen coiled snakes. The large-scale figurines were all different from each other: some were recognizably female with breasts and tresses of hair; while others were bald and had no breasts, perhaps to be interpreted as males. They did not all belong to the same era, with some being of the early fourteenth century and others of the thirteenth, contemporary with the building. Some of the figures have upraised arms and others were apparently holding objects, perhaps cult objects, the handles of some of which remain. One large figure of indeterminate gender is still holding a hammer-axe. These attributes may have been signifiers by which the specific deities were recognized. We cannot be so specific as to link any of them with the named deities in Linear B, but they at least show that the Mycenaean did have a conception of a multiplicity of deities.

The South-west Building, otherwise known as ‘The House of the High Priest’, may also have formed part of the Mycenaean Cult Centre. From this building comes an important procession fresco of women, with most standing but at least two sitting. The figures on this fresco include the so-called ‘Lady of Mycenae’: a life-size woman, shown with her body turned to the front and her face in profile. She is wearing a short-sleeved yellow bodice and a blue blouse. She wears one necklace and holds another in her hand. She may be either a goddess who has just been given the necklace as an offering, or is perhaps a worshipper, making a gift (as we saw in the gift of a glass head necklace on an altar in the Room of the Ivories). On another wall in the same room were a seated figure and an interesting fragment showing a pair of hands holding a small female figure, which may represent the offering of a child to the goddess, or the gift of a votive figurine.

The overwhelming impression gained from the Mycenaean Cult Centre is that the Mycenaean mainly worshipped female deities. However, some of the large terracottas from the ‘Temple’ might well be male, and the ivory head from the Room of the Frescoes could be that of a male deity. Furthermore, fragmentary male figurines from Tiryns and Athens and more complete examples from Phylakopi on Melos show that male deities were also worshipped, a suggestion born out by the evidence of Linear B, which reveals for us a world in which the Mycenaean were clearly worshipping a number of both male and female deities.

**Tiryns**

From nearby Tiryns comes further evidence for cult practice in the Mycenaean palaces. Pockets of cult activity from the second half of the thirteenth century have been excavated on the upper and lower citadel, but the best-preserved remains of ritual activity are those of...
the post-palatial, twelfth-century phase of the settlement, found within the walls of the lower citadel. These consist of a sequence of freestanding shrines associated with mainly female figurines with upraised arms and figures of animals. However, a phallos broken off from what must have been a large male clay figure, has also been found here, and represents the remains of one of only two such figurines known from the mainland; the other came from the acropolis at Athens. The other male deities are sitting gods (bronze figures of deities of a type known from Cyprus and Syro-Palestine) found at Mycenae and Tiryns, which are clearly imported from the East.

**Ayios Konstantinos on Methana**

From the site of Ayios Konstantinos, on the volcanic peninsula of Methana in the Saronic Gulf comes further evidence for the possible worship of a male deity. A three-chambered shrine has been excavated here, with pottery (including tripods, *rhyton* and *kylikes*) dating to the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries. In the main room were found a stepped stone bench, a platform and a hearth, together with pottery vessels associated with libation rituals (a *kylix*, cup and dipper) in one corner. Associated with the bench were around one hundred and fifty clay figurines, some of which were of rare types, such as helmeted figures riding horses and people driving or riding oxen. It might be reasonable to suppose that these are male, given their activities; only one female figurine of *pithos* type (named after its similarity in shape to the letter of the Greek alphabet) has been found.

**Phylakopi on Melos**

Identifiably male figurines are known on Crete in thirteenth-century contexts at Khania and the Unexplored Mansion at Knossos, and in one of the twelfth century at Ayia Triadha. The best evidence though for worship of a male god in the Aegean comes from the shrine excavated at Phylakopi on Melos, dating to the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries, at a time when the island was either under Mycenaean control or had at least a strongly Mycenaean character. It presents us with a very different picture to that of the Mycenaean temple cult centres of the mainland world. There were two shrines: the East Shrine and the larger West Shrine. The West Shrine was constructed first (around 1360 BC), with a second phase dating to the building of the defensive wall at the site; the East Shrine was then added around 1270 BC. In front of the doorway of the West Shrine stood a large rounded stone or *baxi* - a sacred stone like those seen in cult scenes depicted in Aegean iconography: for instance on a gold ring found in Selianpolou Tomb 4 on Crete.

Worship of both gods and goddesses in this shrine was clearly indicated, and they seem to have been worshipped at different altars according to their gender. In the north-west corner of the West Shrine was an altar from which had toppled a female *pithos* figurine and a series of extraordinary terracotta figurines clearly defined as male by their genitals. It therefore appears that this altar was dedicated to the worship of one or more male deities. In the south-west corner stood another altar, again with a *pithos* figurine but this time accompanied by a second female figurine, perhaps for the worship of female deities. To the west of the West Shrine, in a small room, were found yet more figurines, including the headless body of a large female figurine known as the Lady of Phylakopi, her head subsequently found nearby, together with parts of two other figures. In a niche on the east wall were found four terracotta wheel-made bulls and a grotesque head. Outside the area of the two shrines, but clearly belonging with what was found within them, was a bronze figurine of a sitting god. Around 1150 BC the whole shrine complex collapsed, suffering severe damage, but it was repaired and re-used, and the earlier cult images continued to be worshipped until it finally went out of use around 1090 BC.

**Ayia Irini on Kea**

Another island shrine, even earlier in date, was found at Ayia Irini on the island of Kea, dating from c.1500 BC. The finds from this shrine, very distinct in character include several very large, almost life-size, terracotta female figurines.

The iconography of both Minoan religion and Mycenaean religion appears overwhelmingly to point to the pre-eminence of the worship of a goddess. The complex of shrines and altars at the Mycenaean Cult Centre seem to imply pluralism, with a multiplicity of deities being worshipped, but again the impression gained is of goddesses as opposed to gods. Only at Phylakopi, and perhaps at Methana, do we at last have in the archaeological record a clear reflection of what we see on the Linear B tablets - namely that the Myceneans worshipped male and female deities.

**RELIGION AND LINEAR B**

Linear B tablets give us no religious texts, no myths and no hymns to deities. What they do give us is a picture of the palace regulating the official religion of the kingdom, thus providing three main classes of information: the names of gods and goddesses, the offerings made to them and sometimes the names of religious centres. The texts inscribed on the Linear B tablets confirm what has tentatively begun to emerge from the archaeological record. They show us that the Myceneans were already worshipping a whole pantheon of deities, both male and female, as we can see that the Greeks did from the eighth century onwards, when we again have written records. The
multiplicity of deities seen in the eighth-century works of Homer and Hesiod reflects a system of belief that goes back to the Bronze Age. Some of the gods and goddesses from the eighth century are identifiable by name in the Linear B tablets, though there is no guarantee, of course, that their nature or function remained the same.

Which gods and goddesses then can we see as far back as the Bronze Age? If we search the tablets for early forms of the names of the twelve Olympian deities of Classical Greece (Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Hermes, Demeter, Hephaisitos, Aphrodite, Ares and Dionysos) we find that many of them are recognizable. Unfortunately, Linear B does not indicate in any way that a named individual is a deity. Only names on the tablets that appear in a clearly religious context can be definitely identified as deities, both familiar and unfamiliar.

One name for a goddess (or goddesses), who appears relatively frequently on tablets from both Pylos and Knossos, is Potnia. Occasionally it appears as a name on its own, but it is usually qualified by epithets, and it is hard to tell whether these references refer to different goddesses or to different aspects of the same goddess. On one tablet from Knossos she has the title a-ta-na po-ti-mi-ja (Athana Pothia) which means 'Mistress Athena', a term for the goddess Athena known to us from Homeric epic. Another tablet from the same palace refers to 'Potnia of the Labyrinth' and from Pylos we have a reference to 'Potnia of the Horses'. In Classical Greek, Demeter and Persephone were known as the Potniai, and it may be that the Mycenaean goddess Potnia was the name for an earth or mother goddess.

From the Knossos tablet which gave us the name Athana Potnia comes the names of three other deities who are familiar to us from later Greek written sources: e-nu- wa-rijo is Enalios, an alternative name for Ares, god of war; pa-ja-wo resembles the Homeric Peiron, later Peian, an alternative name for Apollo; and po-se-da (o), Poseidon. Thus within these two brief lines on one tablet we have the early forms of names of Athena, Ares, Apollo and Poseidon. It is clear from tablets from the palace of Pylos that Poseidon was the pre-eminent deity worshipped there. Homer may retain a memory of this in his mention of a festival to Poseidon at Pylos (Odyssey, iii, 43).

The god Diwionios has also been tentatively identified on the tablets. His name, in the form Diwionios, appears twice at Pylos, but both tablets are too fragmentary to make it certain the name is referring to a god. Until his name was found on the tablets it was believed that his worship only began in Greece after the end of the Dark Age. Similarly the name Hephaisitos appears at Knossos, perhaps an indication that thesmith-god Hephaisitos was already worshipped in Mycenaean times. Another tablet from Pylos bore the names Zeus, Hera and Hermes. Female names derived from the names of Zeus and Poseidon are also listed on the tablets. Other deities, who have a minor role in later Greek literature but were not amongst the Olympians, are also found, such as Iphimelea, who is known from Homer's Odyssey to have had two sons by the god Poseidon.

Although the names of some deities are found on tablets from the mainland and from Crete, others are found only on those from Knossos and probably record deities specific to the island. Diiktaios Zeus (named after the Diiktai Mountain on Crete) and Ellytheia (the Cretan goddess of childbirth) appear, as one might expect, only on the tablets from Knossos. Homer, in the Odyssey, talks of the cave of Ellytheia at Atminsos, and the cave has been found and excavated. The term 'all the gods' again appears only at Knossos and may perhaps be a reference to a group of Minoan deities. Similarly at Knossos, but not Pylos, we have the term 'Priestess of the Winds'. Several names on the Knossos tablets have not been identified and this may be because they are Minoan deities, notably the goddess pi-ja-po, whose name has the same non-Greek ending as that of the more familiar Cretan goddess Dictynta. It was probably expedient for the new Mycenaean rulers of the palace of Knossos to incorporate worship of the established Minoan deities as well as introducing their own from the mainland.

The Linear B texts provide no real clues as to the nature of the deities listed, and we cannot assume that simply because they have the same name as one of the Olympians they already had the same character in Mycenaean times. That one of the Mycenaean deities was a god of healing is perhaps indicated by a Hittite divination text from the capital Hattusa, dating to c.1350–320 BC. It reports that King Mursili was cured with the help of a cult statue of the god of Ahhiyawa, a term believed to be the Hittite name for Mycenaean Greece. It may perhaps have been Painen, identified by name on the tablets and known from the time of Homer as a god of healing, who cured the Hittite king.

OFFERINGS AND CULT PRACTICE

The tablets listing named deities were often written by palace officials in order to record the offerings that were to be made to those deities, sometimes at a named place of worship outside the confines of the palace. It is therefore clear that official rituals of the Mycenaean deities were not only performed within cult centres in palaces, but also at designated sacred places elsewhere. Offerings, for instance, were sent from the palace at Knossos to deities some distance away at Atminsos. Atminsos was clearly an important and prestigious religious centre for the worship of the goddess Ellytheia as well as other deities.

A wide variety of goods were considered suitable offerings for the gods and goddesses of the Mycenaeans: these include gold vessels, wool, perfumed oil, barley, figs, flour, wine, olive oil and honey. Processions of people (usually women) painted on the walls of the palaces may well be a pictorial expression of such gift offering. The women are
Animals such as cows, pigs, goats, sheep and wild boar were also offered to the Mycenaean deities and were presumably intended to be sacrificed. Such a sacrifice is depicted on one side of the Aylia Triadha sarcophagus, dating to the period of Mycenaean rule on Crete. It shows a bull lying trussed on an altar and the blood pouring from his gashed throat being collected in a vessel. Deposits of ash and animal bone found at shrines like Phylakopi, Asine and Apollo Maleatas at Epidaurus are the tangible remains of sacrifices. Such rituals may have been accompanied by ritual feasting and drinking in honour of the gods. A study of the vessels found in the Room of the Frescoes at the Mycenae Cult Centre has revealed that they contained the residues of meals which, given the context, were presumably ritual feasts or offerings to a deity: one large tripod cooking pot had once contained a meal of meat and lentils cooked in olive oil, while another had been used to cook fish in olive oil and wine. Such feasts are also seen in the Linear B tablets as taking place in honour of the wanax. These may be simply state banquets, but they could also reflect an aspect of the wanax as divine, much as the pharaoh of the Egyptians was both secular ruler and deity. A fresco from the wall of the megaron at Pylos, which incorporates a bard seated on a rock, men sitting engaged in a drinking ritual and the trussed figure of a bull, presumably reflects ritual feasting.

That the gods and goddesses of the Mycenaeans should have received animal sacrifice in their honour is not controversial; that they may also have received human sacrifice certainly is. Indications that this may indeed be the case are to be found on a few of the Linear B tablets. A large tablet from Pylos seems to be listing offerings to be made at a religious festival that took place during the month of pa-pa-wi-tejo. As part of the ceremony, offerings were made to deities at Pylos itself and at a place called ra-kri-tejo, apparently an important religious centre dedicated to Poseidon. The goddess Potoia and other named individuals, probably to be identified as deities, are each offered a man or woman and a gold vessel. It has been suggested that this refers to figurines, which we see held on the frescoes as offerings, but the language used shows that they were to be led rather than carried and should therefore be a real human not just a representation of one. It may be that the offering of a human being simply refers to the gift of a servant to the deity, or it may reflect a human sacrifice.

Classical Greek literature is littered with references to human sacrifice, and bones found in the doorways of some Mycenaean tombs have been thought to be sacrificial victims. Actual sacrifice of a human being to a deity (as opposed to being part of funerary ritual) would only leave traces in the archaeological record under exceptional circumstances, such as those which preserved the sacrifice of a youth on an altar that took place at Archanes-Anemospilia on Crete around 1700 BC when an earthquake caused the roof to collapse in on the shrine as the act took place.
FUNERARY RITUAL AND THE AFTERLIFE

Rituals for the benefit of the living were accompanied in Mycenaean society by those for the dead, and a question we might reasonably try to ask of the archaeological record is whether the Mycenaeans believed in some form of life after death.1 There is no doubt that they invested a great deal of wealth in funerary display. This was particularly evident in the Shaft Grave Era and continued to be the case throughout the later centuries of the Mycenaean period. At Mycenae itself the three latest and most elaborate of the great tholos tombs outside the citadel walls, namely the Tomb of Clytemnestra, the Tomb of the Geometric and the Treasury of Atreus, all built during the latter half of the fourteenth century, reached great heights of architectural sophistication. The Treasury of Atreus, also known as the Tomb of Agamemnon, was a particularly fine monument, with a façade decorated with coloured marble, carved in relief. A pair of half-columns of green marble, carved with zigzags and spirals, flanked the doorway, and slabs of red and green marble with spirals and a semi-rosette frieze covered the relieving triangle over the lintel of the doorway. Two slabs of gypsum perhaps came from the small side chamber of this tomb; one carved with the head of a bull, the other with the forelegs of another bull.

Although the tholos tombs at Mycenae had been very thoroughly robbed, and we can only guess at their contents, those of some rich chamber tombs from the site, and indeed from elsewhere in the Mycenaean world, demonstrate that the Mycenaeans of the palatial era continued to bury rich grave goods with their dead. That such efforts should have been gone to in the building of monumental tombs and in the provision of rich grave offerings shows the importance of death and its associated rituals to the Mycenaeans. However, this emphasis on funerary display was quite possibly to impress the living rather than to provide comfort for the dead.

109. Gypsum slab carved with the foreparts of a charging bull, said to be from the Treasury of Atreus at Mycenae, set into a hypothetical computerized reconstruction.

110. Decorative carved-stone façade of the Treasury of Atreus (hypothetical computerized reconstruction).
Some items of a humble and personal nature, though, were also placed in tombs. They contributed little to the funerary display and must surely have been intended for the use of the dead: simple knives and tools, spindle-whorls, and toilet articles like ear-picks, mirrors and razors are commonly found. Small terracotta figurines were placed in graves, perhaps intended to care for or to accompany the dead in some way. Many were figures of women and came in three main forms, each named after letters of the Greek alphabet which they resemble — phi, psi and tau. Other terracottas placed in tombs were of animals, horse-drawn chariots and boats. Children were often buried with miniature vases and with feeding bottles (see fig. 88).

Animals such as dogs and horses have been found sacrificed at Mycenaean tombs. Horses were symbols of status, and those found in pairs perhaps pulled the funerary chariot or cart that carried the dead to the tomb. Sacrificed dogs, often buried in a doorway, were probably a favoured animal, placed there to guard their owner in death and perhaps to accompany them into the afterlife. The occasional finds of human bones at the doorways of tombs may represent a slave or servant burial, intended to serve their master or mistress in the afterlife.

Rituals that took place at funerals often leave their trace in the archaeological record, and we see smashed kylises and animal bones in the dromos — evidence for ritual funerary feasting. A series of clay kylises (coffins) from the Mycenaean chamber tomb cemetery at Tanagra in Boiotia (about 20 km [12 miles] from Thebes) throw further light on the funerary rituals of the Mycenaeans (see figs 114 and 115). The cemetery was in use from the late fourteenth through to the mid-thirteenth century BC and the coffins were painted with brightly coloured depictions of funerals and their accompanying rituals. These
scenes are our most complete and detailed iconographical record of Mycenaean burial ritual. They include the prothesis, the lying in state of the dead, and the ekphora, the carrying of the body to the grave, as well as mourning and lamenting women. The pouring of libations and a possible animal sacrifice are also shown. Warriors fighting duels and racing each other in chariots are probably, given their context, taking part in funeral games. One larnax is decorated with many of these elements. The figures are drawn in red and black and appear in silhouette. On each short side is a row of mourning women set above a scene of the body of the deceased placed in a larnax. On one long side we have on the upper register a row of lamenting women, with their hands raised to their heads in a gesture of mourning, and on the lower, a chariot race and two warriors fighting a duel. The other long side carries on the upper register a man with a sword, surrounded by goats and striking the throat of one of them; below him is a rather disembodied rite of bull-leaping, in which the leaper appears to float above the back of the bull.
The Decline and Fall of the Mycenaeans

Shortly before 1200 BC there were signs that all was not well in the Mediterranean. Apparent interruptions to trading routes with the East, hints of problems of supply and demand from the Linear B tablets and the building of secure water supplies at several of the fortified palaces all point to a time of unrest and unease. The Mycenaeans clearly felt under threat and they were right — a terrible wave of destructions was to engulf their world and bring the Bronze Age to an end. But was it what they feared that actually destroyed them?

The peace and prosperity that had characterized the region for much of the previous two hundred years began to show signs of dislocation. The first signs had come with the localized destructions of some buildings that had taken place at some of the major sites just after the middle of the thirteenth century BC. But it was towards the end of this century that the picture became much more widespread. Although some ships were still trading (as is indicated by the Cape Gelidonya and Pont Iria wrecks of around 1200 BC), the disruption to sea routes and thus to sea-borne trade is evident. The inhabitants of Cyprus — so important in contacts between east and west — appear to have experienced difficulties in importing the Mycenaean Pictorial Style vases they liked so much, and they began instead to make their own imitations (known as ‘Rude’ or ‘Pastoral Style’) in the last quarter of the thirteenth century.

Hints of problems with supply and demand in the Mediterranean are perhaps also to be seen in the Pylos Linear B tablets. The amounts of metals sent to various bronzesmiths in the kingdom appear to have been carefully rationed, which may indicate a shortage of such metals in Messenia in the final year of the life of the palace. It is, however, difficult to assess whether this was indeed the case as we have only the records from the one year and thus cannot compare the situation with that prevalent in other years; such rationing may have been standard practice. Furthermore, a limited supply of bronze was not necessarily the result of a disruption to sea trade: if the Mycenaeans were relying principally on copper from Laurion, shortages could have occurred through problems in the Argolid and Attica affecting exploitation of the mines there.

The clearest sign of threat to the established order, though, is the provision of secure water supplies to Mycenae, Teyn and Athens. The rebuilding and expansion of fortress walls at Mycenae and Teyn around the middle of the thirteenth century had greatly increased the fortified area and the power of both citadels. It is possible that these expansions were a visible flexing of their muscle — symbolic of great strength and owing more to inter-kingdom rivalries than to any threat from outside. However, additions to these fortifications towards the closing years of the century are entirely different in character and must surely have been in response to fears of prolonged attack or siege.

This final extension to the walls of Mycenae, around 1200 BC, added a small but highly significant and strategically important dog-leg to the north-east section of the citadel. Into the walls of the extension were built two galleries: the south gallery led to a small sally port giving access onto a low terrace with a view over the Khavos ravine; the north gallery led steeply down under the walls via a corbelled subterranean passageway to an underground cistern, ingeniously built in a
natural fold of the bedrock and fed by clay pipes bringing water from natural springs. This construction assured a secure water supply to the fortress if attack or siege made access to springs outside the walls too dangerous.

At Tiryns similar precautions were taken at the same time. Towards the end of the thirteenth century the people of Tiryns doubled the size of the fortified area of the citadel, taking the lower hill to the north within its protective orbit. To the south, the extended wall was so wide that a whole series of storage rooms could be built within its thickness, together with galleries with corbelled roofs. To the east, an extra wall was built to strengthen that area, and to the west, a bastion protected a stepped passageway down to the plain. Secure access to a secret supply of water was also ensured as part of this expansion: in the lower citadel two openings in the inner face of the north-east part of the wall led to two parallel passages cut underground beneath the fortifications and thence to subterranean water cisterns.

Perhaps the same fears lay behind the abandonment of some of the buildings outside the walls at Mycenae at this time and the moving of workshops and storage facilities within the protective orbit of the fortifications at both Mycenae and Tiryns.

The palace on the acropolis at Athens had apparently first been fortified around the middle of the thirteenth century by rulers imitating the fortification systems of the Argolid citadels. At the end of the thirteenth century it too secured a water supply that was accessible from within its walls. As at Tiryns and Mycenae, the defences were modified to give access to an underground spring in a chamber shaped like a beehive and reached by a flight of steps dug down beneath the fortification walls.

A further piece of Mycenaean building may indicate that the Mycenaeans knew themselves to be in danger. Stretches of a great wall have been found, beginning on the shores of the Saronic Gulf and continuing westwards. This has been thought to be a massive defensive wall, built right across the Isthmus of Corinth to protect against a land attack from the north, and perhaps never completed. However, it is equally possible that it was not a defensive wall at all, but rather a retaining wall for a road, leading from the coast of the Saronic Gulf across to the main plateau of the Rachi and thence inland.

Some believe that a striking and very different indication of threat comes from the palace of Pylos. Lying on a low hill near the coast, it was particularly vulnerable. Any approach by land was difficult, as the palace was protected to the east and to the north by mountain ranges. An enemy could approach by land from the north along the west coast, but an easily defensible pass offered protection there. The greatest threat to the security of Pylos would be from the sea, a fact well recognized by the Pylians. Dramatic documentary evidence of their precautionary measures comes in a set of five Linear B tablets from the palace headed ‘Thus the watchmen are guarding the coastal regions’. A total of 800 men are sent to the coast, which is divided into ten sections reaching from the Nedha river to the north and then down to Cape Akrita before heading north again into the gulf of Messenia. Given the length of the coastline to be covered, 800 men would not be a sufficient defensive force but could provide an effective early warning system to alert the palace of an enemy approaching by sea. As we only have tablets from the last year of the palace we have no way of knowing if these watchmen were sent out on a regular basis, or whether they were in response to a specific threat at the time. What we do know, however, is that it was ultimately to no avail.
DESTRUCTIONS

Whatever the precautions taken by the Mycenaeans, nothing could save them from their fate. Around 1200 BC one after another of the mighty centres of Mycenaean Greece fell and were consumed by terrible fires which twisted and melted the very walls of the palaces. This same picture is seen elsewhere in the years around 1200 BC as great havoc was wrought across the lands of the eastern Mediterranean. Just as the palaces and citadels of the Mycenaeans fell, so did those of the empire of the Hittites in Anatolia and many urban centres of the Levant. This destruction horizon, which also brought to a close the New Kingdom in Egypt, heralded the end of the Bronze Age itself, ushering in a new age— that of Iron.¹

At Mycenae and Tiryns the pattern of destruction was a complex one, confined not to one episode but perhaps to as many as three, occurring in the mid-thirteenth century, the end of the century and again in the early twelfth century. At Midea it is apparently evidence so far for a single episode at the end of the century, with a deposit of ash and burnt mudbrick walls showing intense fire. At all three sites there was clearly rebuilding and reoccupation in the twelfth century. But it was not only these three great fortresses that were to suffer in the Argolid: smaller sites such as Zygouries and Iera were also destroyed around 1200 BC and elsewhere in the same region it appears that some places were simply abandoned, such as Berbati and Prosymna. Conversely, settlements like Asine, relatively unimportant in the thirteenth century, escaped unscathed and went on to flourish into the twelfth century.

Pylus, close to the sea and thus so vulnerable to attack, was sacked, burned and largely abandoned shortly after 1190 BC. As far as can be ascertained from the Linear B tablets found at the palace, it was in the early spring that this dreadful calamity befell the Pylians. Their attackers may well have come from the sea, despite the efforts of the watchtowers on the coast. The excavations at the site have found no bodies of its former inhabitants, suggesting they had perhaps been warned in time by the watchtowers and had been able to flee their palace before the enemy arrived. Two towns north-east of the palace, Malathi and Mouriathal, were burned. The destruction of the palace at Pylus seems to have been accompanied by the desertion of many neighbouring sites, some of which were then reoccupied, albeit on a smaller scale, in the twelfth century. In the south-east of the Peloponnese, in Laconia, the site of the Mentawon was destroyed by fire around 1200 BC and not reoccupied, though some Laconian settlements continued to flourish, notably at Monemvassia, where a large necropolis of chamber tombs has been discovered.

Further north the picture of widespread destruction continues. In Boeotia the Kadmeion in Thebes was burnt down c.1200 BC and then reoccupied, and the end came also to Orchomenos and Gla, though at the latter at least this appears to have happened some thirty to forty years earlier. At Athens the acropolis has been so overbuilt by later structures that little remains of the Mycenaean era on which to evaluate the evidence for a possible destruction. However, what evidence there is shows no sign of a catastrophe and the site seems to have continued to prosper in the twelfth century. Athens, therefore, may have been one Mycenaean fortress that escaped the ravages of the end of the thirteenth century. Other lesser sites in the region also show continuity, such as that of Lefkandi (Xeropolis) on the island of Euboea. As at Athens, it appears that the Mycenaean palatial centre at Volos (Velas) survived the 1200 BC destructions, but was then burned down early in the twelfth century.

What caused the end of so many of the great centres of Mycenaean culture? This was no gradual decline, but a sudden, violent destruction. The causes must be sought, but the question is a complex one and there are no easy answers.

There are four main categories of argument: foreign invasion, internal strife, natural disasters and systems collapse. It is perfectly understandable that scholars have looked for a foreign invader. It seems clear from the great fortifications of the Argolid citadels themselves, expanded and strengthened in the middle of the thirteenth century and provided with a secure water supply at the end of it, that the Mycenaeans were prepared for attack.

A DORIAN INVASION

The so-called 'Dorian Invasion' is a persistently recurring theory, and one that is still repeated today in general books long after it has been recognized as untenable by the very great majority of Aegean scholars. The most extreme version envisages hordes of marauding northern tribes—often thought to have come from the Balkans—sweeping down in an invasive wave, conquering the Mycenaeans and establishing themselves in their stead, forming the bloodstock that gave us the Greeks of the Classical world. The decipherment of Linear B, showing that Greek speakers were already established in the area during the Mycenaean age, has negated some of these extremes, but why does the idea still persist?

Proponents of a Dorian invasion cite the tradition, enshrined in Classical Greek literature, of the 'return of the Heraclidai'. Thucydides tells us: 'Sixty years after the fall of Troy, the modern Boeotians were driven out of Arne by the Thessalians and settled in what is now Boeotia, but used to be called Kadmeia. Twenty years later the Dorians with the descendants of Heralkes made themselves masters of the Peloponnese.' Such ancient sources do indeed write of 'Dorians' and connect them with population movements in the area, but the very
The Mycenaeans

concept of the ‘return’ of the Heraclids surely implies that these were no alien people. The traditions of such movements of peoples do seem to reflect a certain degree of pressure from the north, but certainly do not support any idea of a marauding northern enemy. Herodotus is the only writer to state that the Dorians came from the north, from Thessaly, whilst the others see the Heraclids as having originated in the Argolid and to be returning there. All the stories in the ancient sources of population movements at the end of the ‘heroic age’ show that the Classical Greeks saw them purely in terms of internal movements within Greece itself, not as foreign incursions.

The geographical distribution of different dialects of Greek, as they stood in Classical times, would seem to support the traditions of population shifts within Greece, both from west to east and from north to south, with consequent displacement of elements of the population. A study of epigraphy reveals five dialect groups that can be put into the two broad categories of East Greek and West Greek dialects. The East Greek group incorporates Attic-Ionic (Attica, Euboea, west coast of Asia Minor and the north and central islands of the Cyclades), Aeolic (Thessaly, Boiotia, Lesbos and the coast of north-west Asia Minor) and Arcado-Cypriot (Arcadia and Cyprus). The dialects of the West Greek group are Doric (spoken in the lands found on the coasts of the Peloponnese, such as the Argolid, Laconia and Messenia, and their colonies as well as on Crete and the southernmost Cyclades and the Dodecanese) and North West Greek (Phocis, Locris and Elis).

Attempts to detect dialects in the early Greek inscribed on the Linear B tablets of the Mycenaeans found elements that indicate the presence of East Greek but not West Greek. This is used by some as an argument in favour of Doric being introduced by intrusive elements after the fall of the palaces. It is, however, explained by others in terms of an East Greek related dialect being that of the palace rulers, with Doric the dialect of the lower classes, as we will see later in this chapter.

In the earlier decades of this century, the destructions of the Mycenaean palaces, so demonstrable in the archaeological record, were tied up with legends and dialect groupings to give us the theory of the Dorian Invasion. However, as archaeological exploration continues and our understanding of the Mycenaean grows ever more sophisticated, it has become steadily more apparent that such a simple correlation is untenable. If a great migratory invasion had indeed taken place, wiping out the Mycenaean world, we would have not only destructions of sites but also evidence of an intrusive alien culture. An intrusive group, which would after all have to be rather numerous to quell and vanquish the Mycenaean, would bring with it its own identifiable artefacts – pottery, for instance, and weapons – as well as leaving other traces such as new grave types. But we look in vain in the archaeological record for such invaders. When sifting through the ruins of the palaces of the Mycenaean, we don’t discover alien peoples living there after the destructions, nor do we find new settlements founded by them elsewhere.

There are, indeed, a few types of artefact thought to be new to the Mycenaean world at this time, argued by some to reflect the presence of newcomers. The Naue II type sword, for instance, is a European sword type seen as intrusive, but although prevalent in the twelfth century was in fact already carried by Mycenaean warriors in the thirteenth century bc before the destructions. They were, in addition, adopted first in the Peloponnese and on Crete, not in northern Greece, as one would expect if they had been carried in the hand of an invading army, encroaching from the north. Other weapons such as the socketed spearhead and the Peschiera dagger are foreign to Greece and do first appear at the time of the destructions, but do not appear in the Argolid and cannot, therefore, be associated with invaders sacking the palaces. Two types of large brooch, the viroid bow fibula and the arched fibula, are common in twelfth-century contexts, but they, like the Naue II type sword, appear in Greece already in the thirteenth century. To be used as arguments for invading Dorians, such types of artefacts would need to be attested in the archaeological record suddenly at the time of the destructions, to be concentrated in date and to be geographically associated with the path of the invaders. None of these applies to the artefacts in question. Such innovations could most reasonably be explained as arriving as items of trade – goods ideas and technical advances are likely to be readily adopted without needing to be imposed by an invading enemy force.

It remains now to see if there are any intrusive types of pottery that can be associated with such a force. Small amounts of pottery, both whole pots and sherds, thought to be intrusive have been identified at a few twelfth-century sites post-dating the destructions. Known as Rutter Ware, after the scholar who identified it, these pieces of hand-made and burnished ware were manufactured locally, for instance at Korakou, and were thus taken as evidence of an intrusive population element. Further excavation of twelfth-century sites, however, such as at Kalapodi in north-central Greece, have shown that this type of pottery came into use very gradually and not suddenly with an influx of invaders.

Another element very central to a culture is its own burial customs, and the cist grave, appearing around the end of the thirteenth century and into the twelfth, is sometimes seen as evidence for foreign incursions. Cists were, it is noted, current in the thirteenth century in the north, in Epirus. However, the cist is a very simple and very basic grave form. It was common in the Middle Helladic period and attested throughout the Late Bronze Age in Greece, albeit sporadically. It became popular again in Greece in the twelfth century, especially in the Argolid and Attica. This resurgence of its popularity surely has less
to do with invaders than to being a reaction to impoverishment and insecurity, especially as the grave goods found in such graves are purely Mycenaean. Communal forms of grave, such as the tholos and chamber tomb, required a great deal of effort to construct and were intended to be used for multiple burials, often spanning very many years. Under conditions of insecurity, people would be less likely to invest in this way in the future. In addition, the adoption of the cist grave in the twelfth century cannot be tied up with Dorian areas, as it was prevalent, for instance, in Athens.

In this search through the wave of destructions that hit the Mycenaean, no trace of a wave of invaders from the north can be found. In fact the archaeological record shows the exact opposite. It is Mycenaean who are living in the ruins of their palaces. It is Mycenaean pottery that we find in the pockets of reoccupation and Mycenaeans who we find buried in the tombs, identified as such by their grave goods. A final point needs to be stressed: if the Mycenaean were brought down by an archaeologically invisible invasion, where did all these invaders go? The end of Mycenaean culture was followed, in the ‘Dark Age’, by dramatic depopulation, surely evidence for a great diaspora rather than an influx of large numbers of newcomers.

THE SEA PEOPLES

If we are to explain the demise of the Mycenaean as being through enemy action, we have to find an enemy who left no trace, other than the destructions they caused. This would envisage bands of raiders overcoming and sacking Mycenaean sites and then withdrawing before they left any evidence of themselves in the archaeological record. These raider theories focus on the Sea Peoples, who were seaborne warriors, probably largely Philistines, known to have caused havoc in the late thirteenth and early twelfth centuries in Cyprus, the Levant and the coast of Anatolia, and also in Egypt until crushed by the might of the pharaoh Rameses III around 1190 BC.

Was a raid by the Sea Peoples what the Pylians feared? Despite keeping a watch over the sea, their city was sacked, burned and abandoned. Given the proximity of Pylos to the coast and the nature of the Sea Peoples as piratical raiders, one might envisage that this rich and undefended palace would present easy pickings. But the Sea Peoples are unlikely candidates for the devastation on the rest of the Greek mainland. The Mycenaean in general do not seem to have felt under threat from the sea. Many of the so-called refugee sites, whose populations were swelled by displaced Mycenaeans from other areas in the early twelfth century, lay on or very close to the coast, such as Tiryns and the site of Lefkandi on the island of Euboea.

It is a tidy theory to try and tie up the troubles in the Mediterranean with those historically documented in Egypt, but there is no tangible evidence that the Sea Peoples ever did stray over to the Aegean. Some destructions in other coastal areas of the Mediterranean have been attributed to the Sea Peoples, but the role they played, even in the eastern Mediterranean — for example, in the fall of the Hittites — may have been overestimated. It is possible that displaced Mycenaeans, driven from their homes by the wave of destructions around 1200 BC, actually joined the ranks of the Sea Peoples and themselves became piratical raider warriors.

INTERNAL STRIFE

If the Mycenaeans were not attacked by a foreign enemy, could they perhaps have attacked each other? The myths and legends of Classical Greece are full of tales of strife between, and even within, dynasties. The legends that surround the palace of Thebes, for instance, point to some kind of power struggle between the Argolid and Boeotia. Could these stories have at their heart a memory of such rivalries in the Bronze Age? And could this internal strife have brought about the demise of the Mycenaeans? It is of course possible that there were indeed fierce rivalries between the palaces, but we cannot use myth as
history, and there is no supporting evidence from the archaeological record for this theory.

Another internal strife scenario suggests an insurrection by the lower classes. Certainly, an oppressed substratum of Mycenaean society is evident in the Linear B tablets, which reveal that the people of these Mycenaean states lived under a very controlled regime, with considerable numbers of slaves forming part of the economy. Some scholars studying the Greek inscribed on Linear B tablets believe that the lack of traces of Doric dialect in Linear B Greek, and its subsequent prevalence in the Peloponnesian in the Classical period, is because Doric, or rather an early form of it, was spoken by the lower classes of Late Bronze Age Greece. Other factors pertaining to the destructions of the Mycenaean palaces make this an attractive, if still entirely speculative, theory. It would, for instance be far more feasible to bring down such heavily fortified citadels as Mycenae and Tiryns from within those great walls rather than from outside them. Also, it would explain why we do have destructions, but do not have any signs of intrusive elements.

NATURAL DISASTERS

Other explanations for the downfall of the Mycenaeans do not depend on the actions of man, but on the forces of nature. It has been argued that there was a great drought caused by climatic changes, resulting in large areas of Greece, from Messenia in the south to Epirus in the north, not getting enough rainfall. The consequent crop failure then led to famine, bringing about the collapse of the Mycenaean world. Pollen evidence, however, shows no sign of extreme climatic changes and the tablets at Pylos present a totally different picture, with many crops and numerous animals listed on them. The adoption of libation at this time – heavy brooches suitable for pinning thick woolen garments – has been cited as evidence that, if anything, it was getting colder rather than hotter. Another environmental theory blames over-exploitation of land by the centralized Mycenaean palaces, with pressure from the palace bureaucracies leading to mono-cropping of cereals and fields not left to lie fallow. This would leave the kingdoms vulnerable to even a short period of drought. Again, though, the Linear B tablets show no sign of drought or of famine.

Could some other natural catastrophe have caused such widespread destruction in the kingdoms of the Greek mainland? We know that the mainland and the islands of Greece have been bedevilled throughout their history by earthquakes, some of them so severe as, for instance, to have destroyed the Old Palace on Crete. Over recent years a consensus has begun to emerge that there was indeed a terrible earthquake in the Argolid at the end of the thirteenth century. The excavators of the three great citadel sites of Mycenae, Tiryns and Midea have all independently come to the conclusion that what destroyed their respective sites was this earthquake. At Mycenae the excavators have found what they consider to be unmistakable signs of severe earthquake damage around 1200 B.C. The quake had been strong enough to actually twist and buckle the great walls, causing enormous damage and destruction both within the citadel and to houses outside the fortified acropolis. Not only had walls above ground at Mycenae collapsed, but their very foundations were damaged.

The nearby fortress of Tiryns also suffered severely around the end of the century. Not only were the buildings within the walls of destroyed, but the vast fortifications themselves were very badly damaged. Tiryns was later to be struck by a second earthquake, but of a far more localized nature as it does not appear to have affected Mycenae. Recent excavations at the citadel of Midea, the third of the Argolid fortresses, have again uncovered clear evidence of earthquake damage, with large numbers of huge blocks of stone having tumbled down from the fortifications, and buildings within the walls having collapsed. All three sites show that they were consumed by intense fire: scorching, ash layers, and walls and pottery deformed by the strength of the blaze are proof of this.

A single large earthquake could indeed have simultaneously struck the three citadels, which lie relatively near to each other in the Argive Plain. Such an earthquake cannot, however, have destroyed all of the palaces and sites of the Mycenaeans at the end of the thirteenth century. It remains to question why, even given the ferocity of the earthquake, the Mycenaeans did not pick themselves up and start again. After all, when the Old Palace on Crete was destroyed the Minoans went on to build new and more luxurious palaces, going from strength to strength. We will see that the Mycenaeans, although patching up parts of the palaces within the walls and continuing to inhabit Mycenae, Tiryns and Midea, did not recover, and the palace system collapsed, to be followed a hundred years later by the final decline of Mycenaean culture.

SYSTEMS COLLAPSE

The centralized structure of the Mycenaean kingdom allowed it to support a far larger population than the land could normally sustain. It is clear from Linear B tablets that life in the palaces was highly regulated, and that the Mycenaean palace elites controlled the day-to-day existence of their kingdoms to a minute degree. A complex redistributive system had been established, which marked a sharp divergence from the subsistence economy that had formed the basis of society in Greece before the development of Mycenaean culture at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age. If this system broke down, then the society itself was in danger of collapsing: the people would have largely
forgotten the ways of subsistence farming. Could the very sophistication of the life led by the Mycenaeans have been their downfall? Late Bronze Age Mycenaean sites had been demonstrably more numerous, larger and wealthier than those in the Middle Bronze Age, and once the palaces fell they could not be supported and the numbers of sites in the twelfth century declined rapidly.

No one explanation will satisfactorily answer the question of what brought down the Mycenaean palaces. It seems that we need to find local answers for localized problems over a period of time at the end of the thirteenth century. Mycenae, Tiryns and Mycenae do all appear to have fallen because of a single great earthquake that shock the Argive plain around 1200 BC. Pylus, on the other hand, appears to have been vanquished by an enemy, probably attacked in a raid from the sea. Although we talk of the destructions taking place c. 1200 bc, they are dated according to the rather loose chronological guidelines of pottery found in the ruins, and thus do not have to be envisaged as occurring simultaneously. The destruction horizon in which the palaces fell probably spanned a considerable number of years. What is clear, though, is that although localized factors may have been responsible for damaging or destroying different palaces, all of them were vulnerable and were unable to recover from the various fates that befell them. A devastating earthquake in the Argolid, for instance, may have left other centres vulnerable and destabilized, perhaps disrupting trading routes on which travelled precious metals from the Laurion mines. Life for the Mycenaeans must have been very insecure and unstable in the closing years of the thirteenth century.

THE MYCENAEANS AFTER THE PALACES

The final century of the Late Bronze Age, around 1185 to 1065 BC, was to be the last century of the Mycenaeans, their society reeling under the series of blows that had brought down the might of its great citadels. As we saw earlier in this chapter, it is Mycenaeans and not groups of foreign peoples that we find living amongst the shattered remnants of their former glory, rebuilding parts of great sites like Mycenae and Tiryns and swelling the ranks of those living in refugee sites. It is clear that there were far fewer Mycenaeans living on mainland Greece in the twelfth century than there had been in the years of the preceding palace era. The numbers and the size of their settlements show a dramatic decline. Some Mycenaeans sought refuge elsewhere, settling, for instance, on Cyprus and on the coast of the Near East – the beginnings of a great diaspora that was to reach its height at the end of the century in the final years of the Bronze Age.

Of those who stayed at home, some lived within former palaces, albeit on a diminished scale of opulence. Some palaces were never reoccupied after their destruction, notably Pylus, but others show clear evidence of being home to large and flourishing communities in the twelfth century. All three of the devastated Argolid citadels were reoccupied. At Mycenae a vigorous community lived on in areas of the palace and at Midea the lower terraces at least were home to twelfth-century Mycenaeans. The lower town at Tiryns was very densely occupied in the years after the 1200 bc destructions, despite going on to suffer a second earthquake in the twelfth century. An area built up against the west wall of the lower town had rooms where there was evidence for the smelting of metal and a building of megaron type that contained some particularly fine terracotta figurines, probably of one of the cult areas of the citadel.

Settlements which had been small and relatively unimportant in the palace years now became flourishing centres, with a large influx of new – but still Mycenaean – people from other stricken centres. Lelkandi, Perati, Achaia, Kephallenia and Ialysos on Rhodes, all sites with good access to the sea, prospered. Access to sea trading routes must have been ever more important as traders may well have been loath to travel into the hinterland of the Greek mainland in such times of insecurity and possible danger.

The life led by these twelfth-century Mycenaeans was rather different to that of earlier centuries. Even those palace sites that were reoccupied no longer functioned as palaces; as administrative and redistributive centres controlling an area. This is clear when one looks at the change of use of various areas of the palace sites from the thirteenth to the twelfth centuries. The great storage areas no longer function, as the palaces are not taking in, storing and redistributing crops produced in the region they once controlled. No trace of writing has been found in the post-destruction phases of the palaces: Linear B had been evolved to meet the demands of a complex bureaucracy, and the demise of that bureaucracy saw the end also of the script used to regulate it. Just as the need for writing had died, so apparently had much of the demand for luxuries. Many of the arts and skills of the previous centuries, such as the working of precious materials like ivory and fine stones, stopped with the destructions of 1200 BC.

In architectural terms, projects that required a corporate effort, such as Cyclopean masonry and monumental stone-built tombs, were discontinued. The communities at the former palace sites of Tiryns and Volos did undertake quite extensive building in the early twelfth century, but neglected the great Cyclopean walls of the citadels, allowing them to fall into disuse and disrepair. No new tholos tombs were built and it appears that even the existing ones were not used for any new
burials. Architectural refinements once fostered by the palace elites were lost to the Mycenaeans of this last century of the Bronze Age. Excavations of the prosperous settlement on the lower town at Tiryns, for instance, have uncovered no trace of fresco painting which had been so much an art of the palaces.

The only hint from anywhere of a continuation of the art of fresco painting comes from a chamber tomb at Mycenae, where a stone stela was found, painted with a scene of marching warriors. The warrior ethos of the Mycenaeans thus still continued, even in these changing times, and warrior burials have been found of the early twelfth century, notably in regions to which Mycenaeans fled after the destructions of the end of the thirteenth century – Achaia, for instance, and Kephallenia. Those artefacts which were produced by these communities are still purely Mycenaean, and often of a very high standard.

Artistic expression is most clearly seen in the pottery styles of the twelfth century, which are important not simply for their artistic merit but also for the clear signs they give of a growth in regionalism. This regionalism, with different centres of the Mycenaean world producing identifiable styles, is in marked contrast to the uniform culture of the palace years. At Mycenae alone there were three distinct pottery styles – Cypriot Style, Granary Style and Pictorial Style – whilst on Crete we have Pinge Style, and on the islands of the Cyclades, Octopus Style. Lefkandi on the island of Euboea has produced some very fine Pictorial Style pottery, most notably a large straight-sided alabastron endearing covered with a pair of griffins feeding their young in a nest.

Despite widespread and clear signs of decline, there were areas of Mycenaean Greece, notably Attica, which maintained a certain sophistication of lifestyle in the twelfth century. We saw earlier in this chapter that Athens may have escaped relatively unharmed by the destruction of 1200 BC. At Perati in Attica, a large cemetery of chamber tombs has been excavated. The contents of the graves included amber from the Baltic, a knife from Syria and scarabs and glass from Egypt showing that this settlement at least was still tapping into wider trading links. Lefkandi on the island of Euboea was very prosperous, as was Ialysos on Rhodes, which shows no trace of a 1200 BC destruction and appears to have received many refugees from less secure Mycenaean areas. The story of destructions was, however, not yet over. Even these pockets of continuing Mycenaean culture were not safe. Areas of the site of Mycenae. Including the Granary, were devastated by fire towards the middle of the century and Tiryns was hit by a second earthquake. The palace at Mycenaean was destroyed by fire at the beginning of the century and Lefkandi on Euboea, Miletos on the coast of Asia Minor and Emborio on the island of Chios all fell in flames.

The hundred years that were left to the Mycenaeans were littered sporadically with such localized disasters. But the Mycenaeans were finally not to go out as they came in, in a blaze of glory. Instead they simply fizzled out. Mycenaean culture had lost its heart, and just after 1100 BC the last vestiges of this great Bronze Age people were enveloped by the encroaching mists of the ‘Dark Age’.

THE DARK AGE

With the onset of the Dark Age, the culture of the Mycenaeans came to an end. The Greeks learnt the working of iron from Cyprus, thus bringing to an end the Age of Bronze and ushering in that of Iron. Their life became very different from how it had been for much of the Mycenaean period and the picture that emerges out of the dark centuries is one of poverty and isolation. Depopulation had taken its toll and the settlements of the Dark Age Greeks were, for the most part, small and scattered, their architecture characterized by a lack of monumentality and fine materials.3

These communities were isolated from the outside world and often from each other, and the regionalism that we saw emerging in the last century of the Bronze Age became even more marked. There were notable exceptions to this picture of unremitting gloom: occasional flashes of brilliance that illuminate the years of the Dark Age. Lefkandi, on the island of Euboea, for example, continued to look outwards and for much of the Dark Age it flourished. But in general the life led in these small communities was simple, and although essential crafts, such as that of the potter, continued, the working of precious materials and the fine arts practised during the Mycenaean years were lost.

Amongst the skills lost was that of writing. Throughout the centuries of the Dark Age there is no trace anywhere in the Greek world of writing, and when the country once again becomes literate, in the latter half of the eighth century BC, an entirely different form of script is found. The syllabic script of the Mycenaeans was replaced by an alphabetic one, adapted by the Greeks from that already established by the Phoenicians. During the Dark Age, therefore, Greece was illiterate and without literacy there is no means of recording events – and thus no history.