

Aegean art and architecture notes



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Several closely related but distinct cultures developed on islands and peninsular adjacent to the Aegean in the third and second millennia BCE. The Cycladic culture was named for the islands forming an irregular circle north of Crete. The culture on the mainland is called Helladic. Together these separate cultures forms the civilization known as Aegean. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, much of the civilization was known from the Iliad and the Odyssey, but much of the evidence has contradicted Homer's tales.

The Early phase corresponds roughly to the predynastic and old kingdom period of Egypt, and Sumerian and Akkadian culture in Mesopotamia. The Middle phase is contemporaneous with the Middle Kingdom in Egypt and the rise of the Babylon in Mesopotamia. And the Late phase occurs at the same time as the Second Intermediate period and the start of the New Kingdom in Egypt. These cultures each produced distinct art forms. Stylized marble representations of the human figure and frescoes are paramount in the Cyclades. Large palaces with elaborate adornments on their walls dominate on Crete. Citadels and grave goods remain from the Greek mainland.

Cycladic Figures, c. 2700-2300 BCE, Cycladic [4. 2, 4. 3]

Figures included in Cycladic burials. The figure is nude, with arms folded across the waist, and toes extended. The flat body is straight backed, while a long thick neck supports a shieldlike face at a slight angle. Long triangle-like nose, small pointed breasts, triangular pubic area. Some even appear pregnant. Thought them to be idols, and were pictured to have central roles in religion focusing on a mother goddess. Could have been made for funerary purposes. May have functioned in Cycladic daily life within household

shrines. The largest figures may have been statues. Some have signs of repair, so they were used.

“ Palace” Complex at Knossos (Crete), c. 1600-1400 BCE, Minoan [4. 4, 4. 5, 4. 6, 4. 8] (plan; reconstruction; staircase; “ Queen’s Megaron”) The chief source of information for Minoan architecture. May have been the most powerful Cretan center of the Middle and Late Bronze Age. Much of the palace was reconceived and reconstructed in concrete. Consisted of courts, halls, workshops, storerooms ect. Lit and ventilated by frequent light wells. Clay pipes for drainage. Walls were framed with timbers and constructed of rubble masonry or mud brick. Columns had a smooth shaft tapered downward from a generous cushionlike capital. The palace has a mazelike quality, but underlying logic. Its core is a large central court, onto which important rooms opened. The court divides the plan on an approx north south axis. On the west side, a corridor running north-south separates long, narrow store rooms. The palace appears to grow outwards from the court. The richly decorated walls give an idea about what hasn’t survived.

Toreador Fresco, from the Palace Complex at Knossos, c. 1550-1450 BCE, Minoan [4. 16] The decorative motifs were generally bordered scenes: people, mythological creatures, real animals, rocks, vegetation, and marine life. found in the residential wing of the palace shows a contest between a young man and woman and a bull. The scene vividly depicts the Minoan sport of bull leaping, with the participants grasping the horns of the animal as they leap over it. Scholars have interpreted this bull leaping scene as a ritual game in which performers vaulted over a bull’s back. Against a blue background, white figures clad in a kilt clasps to the horns of a huge bull.

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The figures have long limbs and small waists, yet they are painted in true profile.

Spring Fresco (Akrotiri), c. 1600-1500 BCE, Minoan [4. 9] Located on the small ground floor room. Occupies almost the entire wall surface. The terrain undulates dramatically, its dark outline filled with rich washes of red, blue and ocher. Swirling black lines adding texture within Lilies flower, and swallows dart between them. Within houses dating from the Middle Minoan III phase, and preserved up to a height of two stories.

Flotilla Fresco (Akrotiri), c. 1600-1500 BCE, Minoan [4. 10] In other examples, humans are inserted into the landscape, often life size, and sometimes smaller. The scene reflects the town's role as a harbor: a fleet of ships ferries passengers between islands, set within a sea full of leaping dolphins. The ships vary, some under sail and some rowed by oarsmen, but all are carefully painted. The same is true of the islands, each of which has a port city with detailed stone architecture. Crowds of people watch from the streets, rooftops, and windows. The painting may represent an actual event.

Snake Goddess, c. 1650 BCE, Minoan [4. 15] Although religious life on Minoan Crete centered around natural places deemed sacred, and though no temples or large cult statues were discovered, smaller scaled statuettes were found. One of these was a female figure raising a snake in each hand, while wearing a headdress topped by a feline creature. She wears a flounced skirt similar to those worn by the women in the Grandstand Fresco, and bares her breasts. Her tiny waist is another feature that appears consistently in Minoan representations of humans. In some religions, snakes are

associated with earth deities and male fertility, just as the bare breasts of this statuette represent fecundity. They were found in pits known as the Temple Repositories.

Octopus Vase, c. 1500 BCE, Minoan [4. 12] Marine motifs became even more prevalent in the slightly more recent Minoan pottery of the Late Minoan IB phase. It has two round handles flanking its narrow spout, and is decorated with a wide-eyed black octopus with swirling tentacles, contrasted against the eggshell colored clay. Clumps of algae float in the spaces between the tentacles. Naturalistic qualities are present in the painting. Its form expresses the shape of the vessel. The rounded contours emphasize the round jar.

Citadel at Mycenae, c. 1600-1200 BCE, Mycenaean [4. 17, 4. 18] Growing settlements throughout the Greek mainland centered around large structures known as citadels or palaces. Fortifications were constructed of large stone blocks laid on top of each other, creating walls that were at times 20 feet thick. It was equipped with all it needed to enable the people to withstand a siege. At its entrance was a substantial granary, ensuring that food supplies were safe from invaders and that the citizens seeking temporary shelter would have enough to eat. The citadel had its own water supply and an effective sanitation system. Drains have been discovered in the south west corner as well as cisterns used for storing water. The western part of the citadel was given over to the cult centre of Mycenae. Close to the famous shaft graves, archaeologists discovered a series of small buildings which were similar to small houses. They were in fact shrines to the Mycenaean deities.

Although ordinary homes lay outside the citadel walls, the Mycenaean aristocracy were housed within the citadel. Not far from the cult centre are the remains of several large houses built around a rectangular room with central hearth and pillared porch. These aristocratic houses also had upper stories. The palace was at the citadel's highest point, which has led to it being heavily eroded by the elements. But enough remains to gain an idea of the scale, size and opulence of the Mycenaean royal residence. The palace was entered from the northwest. A porch, flanked by guard rooms led out onto a cobbled outer courtyard.

Lioness Gate (Mycenae), c. 1250 BCE, Mycenaean [4. 22, P] A corbel arch was also used to great effect at the Lion Gate. It formed a principal entrance into the citadel at Mycenae, and was built when the city walls were enlarged to improve its defenses. Two massive stone posts support a huge lintel to form the opening. Above the lintel, a corbel arch directs the weight of the heavy wall to the strong posts below it. The corbel thus relieves the weight resting on the vast stone lintel, which itself weighs 25 tons. To seal the resulting gap, a triangular grey limestone slab was inserted above the lintel.

The lions stand in heraldic pose, mirror images of each other, with their front paws on the altars of a Minoan style, and flanking a tapering Minoan style column. Dowel holes in their necks suggest that their heads were added in wood or a different stone. The lionesses function as guardians, and their tense, muscular bodies, and symmetrical design suggest an influence from the Near East. The concept of animal guardians at the gate of a palace may have been suggested by similar structures such as the Hittite Lion Gate.

“Treasury of Atreus” (Mycenae), c. 1300-1250 BCE, Mycenaean [4. 24, 4. 25, 4. 26, P] One of the best preserved and largest of the tombs. A great pathway lined with ashlar masonry led to the entrance. The door slopes inward, in a style associated with Egyptian construction. Flanking the opening were columns of Egyptian green marble, carved with spirals and zigzags. Above the doorway, small columns framed decorative marble bands that concealed a relieving triangle over the lintel. The tomb itself consisted of a large circular chamber excavated into sloping ground and then built up from ground level with a corbel vault. When built in rings rather than parallel walls, the corbel vault results in a beehive profile for the stone roof.

Dagger Blade, c. 1600-1550 BCE, Mycenaean [4. 28] Many of the earlier shaft graves contained lavish burial goods, ranging from clothing and furniture to fine weaponry. An example of lavish weaponry is an inlaid dagger blade, which depicts a lion preying on gazelles. The lion's predatory strength is associated with the dagger's owner.

Mask of Agamemnon, c. 1600-1500 BCE, Mycenaean [4. 27] Death mask of hammered gold. It was found covering the face of a dead man. Although it is far from naturalistic, the mask displays a distinct treatment of physiognomy: some are bearded while other masks are clean shaven. This suggests that the mask was somewhat individualized to correspond to the deceased's appearance.

Vaphio Cups, c. 1500-1450, Mycenaean [4. 29] Two gold cups from a Mycenaean tomb. The cups are made of two skins of gold: the outer layer was embossed with scenes of bull catching, while the inner lining is smooth. A

cylindrical handle was riveted to one side. On one cup, bull trappers try to capture the animal with nets, while on the other, a cow set out to pasture is a lure to entice a bull into captivity. The subject matter of the cups suggests that they refer to one another, yet they are not a pair. One cup has an upper border framing the scene, but the other does not, so that they may be created by different artists.