

Who were the Greeks? Where did they come from? When did they arrive in Greece? Such questions have long troubled historians, philologists, and archaeologists, but gradually answers are being supplied.

It now seems clear that groups of peoples speaking an Indo-European language (ancestral to ancient Greek) entered mainland Greece from the north around 2100 B.C. But there were already inhabitants there, peoples of an Aegean type who did not speak an Indo-European language, and a gradual process of intermingling began. For centuries the two peoples seem to have intermarried, creating a single people now known as Achaeans or more commonly, Mycenaeans. These Mycenaeans were in fact the first true Greeks, speaking a language that would directly develop into classical Greek.

The great age of the Mycenaeans dawned around 1600 B.C. From this time on, great centres of Mycenaean culture gradually spring up on the mainland: citadels with massive walls and elaborate royal palaces, the most famous of which, that at Mycenae, gives its name to the entire civilization. The great age of citadel construction came around 1300 B.C., when we find huge fortified structures not only at Mycenae, but also at Tiryns, only a few miles from Mycenae, and at Pylos in the southwestern Peloponnese. Mycenaean civilization, however, was not confined only to the Peloponnese: there were also important centres and citadels at Athens, Thebes, and Gla.

Most of what we know about this civilization comes from the recent discoveries of archaeologists. Simple graves and massive tombs have been excavated, revealing numerous swords, helmets, gold artifacts, pottery--and even a complete suit of bronze armour. Even more important have been the clay tablets discovered: baked by the destruction which befell the citadels around 1100 B.C., these tablets were written in the so-called Linear B script. It was the decipherment of this script by Michael Ventris in 1952 that showed the Mycenaeans to be Greek-speaking.

The tablets and artifacts also reveal much more about the Mycenaeans to us. Their social system seems to have been feudal in nature, each citadel being ruled by a warrior-king with the advice of his warrior aristocracy. Bureaucracy was rampant: numerous clerks and petty officials looked after the day to day business of the citadel, counting goats, issuing food, repairing weapons. Indeed weapons must have needed frequent repairing, as these independent citadels seem often to have been in conflict with each other. A pacifist society this was not! In fact, these Mycenaeans were the Greeks recorded by Homer as sacking the city of Troy (either to retrieve Helen or to begin a series of imperialistic ventures in Asia Minor).

Decline, however, set in around 1200 B.C., when several citadels were burned and social order apparently began to collapse. What the reason for this decline was is still not certain: perhaps population got out of hand and there was a food shortage, or perhaps other Greek-speaking peoples invaded the mainland from the north. What is certain is that with the end of the Mycenaean world, a dark age falls upon Greece about which very little is now known. Greece apparently began a long sleep, from which she would not emerge until 800 B.C.