NO PREP

Mycenae and the Trojan War

Where Myth Meets Archaeology

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Mycenae and the Trojan War: Where Myth Meets Archaeology

The Man Who Believed in Homer

Most nineteenth-century scholars believed that Homer's Iliad and Odyssey were myths — entertaining stories, but not history. Heinrich Schliemann disagreed. The German businessman turned archaeologist had been obsessed with Homer since childhood, and he was convinced that Troy was a real place and that the Trojan War was a real event. In 1870, using Homer's descriptions as a guide, he began digging at Hisarlik, a

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Schliemann at Mycenae: The Mask of Agamemnon

After Troy, Schliemann turned to Mycenae on the Greek mainland, the legendary home of King Agamemnon. In 1876, he excavated a shaft grave cemetery inside the citadel walls and uncovered extraordinary riches: gold death masks, bronze swords, inlaid daggers, amber beads, and the skeletal remains of warriors and women buried with enormous wealth. Schliemann found one gold mask particularly compelling, telegraphed the king of Greece to announce that he had gazed on the face of Agamemnon, and named it accordingly. The Mask of Agamemnon became one of the

most famous objects in archaeology. Schliemann was wrong again, in the best possible way. The shaft graves he excavated predate the legendary Trojan War by about three hundred years. They belong to an earlier, even more spectacular phase of Mycenaean power. The mask is almost certainly not Agamemnon's. But the graves proved something more important than confirming a myth: they demonstrated that Mycenae was genuinely one of the wealthiest and most powerful cities in the Bronze Age Aegean, a real civilization that Homer's stories had preserved a memory of. The archaeological record validated the general historical picture, even if the specific details didn't match.

The Mycenaean World

The Mycenaeans were the first Greek-speaking civilization on the European mainland. They built fortified citadels with massive stone walls. The Greeks of later centuries, unable to imagine how humans could have moved such enormous blocks, called this Cyclopean masonry, believing it must have been built by giants. At Mycenae, the Lion Gate (two lionesses carved in relief above a limestone threshold) still stands as one of the oldest surviving examples of monumental sculpture in Europe. The citadel contained a palace, treasury buildings, and residential quarters, all connected by the same Linear B administrative system that operated at Knossos. Mycenaean civilization was a warrior culture that also engaged in long-distance trade. Mycenaean pottery has been found across the Mediterranean from Egypt to Sicily. Linear B tablets from Pylos (another major Mycenaean site) record massive preparations that look like mobilization for war: inventories of bronze, troops, and rowers. Mycenaean warriors were buried with bronze armor, swords, and spears. The Linear B tablets also record the names of gods recognizable from later Greek religion: Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Dionysus. This continuity between Mycenaean religion and Classical Greek religion suggests that Greek mythology preserved real cultural memories across the Dark Age that separates them.

Did the Trojan War Happen?

The honest answer is: probably something did, but not the way Homer tells it. Troy VII at Hisarlik shows clear evidence of destruction around 1180 BCE — burned buildings, unburied bodies, weapons left in the ruins. This is consistent with a violent end, possibly caused by attackers. Linear B tablets from various Mycenaean sites show evidence of military mobilization, trade disruptions, and coastal defense

preparations in the decades around 1200 BCE, suggesting a period of widespread instability across the Bronze Age world. The Greeks had both the ships and the military organization to mount a major expedition. What archaeology cannot tell us is whether a specific ten-year siege happened as Homer describes, whether a wooden horse was used, or whether the individuals named in the Iliad actually existed. Epic poetry is not a historical record — it is a blend of real events, cultural memory, mythological elaboration, and poetic invention accumulated over centuries of oral transmission before Homer wrote it down around 750 BCE. What we can say is that the Mycenaean world that produced the stories was real, wealthy, militaristic, and capable of large-scale warfare. The legend grew from a real Bronze Age world that archaeology has spent a century and a half recovering.

Key Information: Mycenae and the Trojan War

Detail	Information
Mycenaean Period	Approximately 1600-1100 BCE on the Greek mainland
Key Sites	Mycenae, Tiryns, Pylos, Sparta — fortified citadels across southern Greece
Excavator of Mycenae	Heinrich Schliemann, beginning in 1876
Lion Gate	Oldest surviving monumental sculpture in Europe; still stands at Mycenae
Mask of Agamemnon	Gold death mask found at Mycenae; 300 years older than the Trojan War period
Troy Location	Hisarlik, northwestern Turkey; Troy VII (~1300-1180 BCE) is the Trojan War candidate
Linear B at Mycenae	Records Greek language administration; includes names of Olympian gods
Bronze Age Collapse	~1200 BCE; destroyed Mycenaean civilization along with many others

Case Study: Sophia Schliemann's Treasure

What Heinrich Schliemann uncovered at the dig site at Hisarlik in May of 1873 was staggering. Gold diadems. Earrings. A headdress with hundreds of dangling gold links. Bracelets. A sauce boat of solid gold. Heinrich was certain — completely, unshakeably certain — that this was the treasure of Priam, King of Troy, hidden as the Greeks came over the walls. He removed everything secretly, smuggling the pieces out of Turkey before the Ottoman authorities could claim them. His wife Sophia later posed in the famous photograph wearing the headdress, which Heinrich immediately named Jewels of Helen. She looks uncomfortable, or perhaps just hot under the weight of the gold. The treasure was real and genuinely extraordinary. It was also, as later analysis confirmed, about a thousand years older than Homeric Troy. Heinrich had been so desperate to find what he was looking for that he had dug straight through the layer he actually wanted. The Turkish government sued for the artifacts' return. Heinrich kept them. They ended up in Berlin, then vanished during World War II, then reappeared in Moscow, where they remain today — still disputed, still not in Turkey.

1. Schliemann's conviction that he had found Priam's treasure led him to smuggle artifacts out of Turkey. Based on what you read in both the case study and the reading, what are the consequences of letting personal belief override scientific caution in archaeological work?

2. The reading says that while Schliemann was wrong about the Mask of Agamemnon, he was wrong 'in the best possible way.' What does this mean, and do you think being wrong but making important discoveries is valuable in archaeology? Explain your reasoning.

Multiple Choice

1. What is the most accurate summary of what archaeology can tell us about the Trojan War?

a) A real city at Hisarlik was destroyed around the right time, but the specific events Homer describes cannot be confirmed

b) Linear B tablets prove that Agamemnon led a ten-year siege of Troy

c) Troy never existed and the Iliad is entirely fictional

d) The Trojan War almost certainly happened exactly as Homer described it, including the ten-year siege and the wooden horse

2. Why did later Greeks call Mycenaean stone walls 'Cyclopean masonry'?

a) Because the walls were constructed using a technique invented by the Cycladic island peoples

b) Because a legendary one-eyed giant named Cyclops was said to have designed them

c) Because the walls were built in the shape of a circle

d) Because the stones were so enormous that later Greeks believed giants must have built them

3. What was the historical significance of the Linear B tablets found at Mycenaean sites?

a) They were written in the same undeciphered language as Minoan Linear A

b) They proved that the Trojan War lasted exactly ten years

c) They contained the names of Olympian gods, showing religious continuity between Mycenaean and Classical Greek culture

d) They showed that Mycenaeans worshipped entirely different gods and followed different religious rites than later Greeks

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Cyclopean masonry	A) A gold death mask found at Mycenae, famously misidentified by Schliemann as belonging to the legendary king
2. ___ Mask of Agamemnon	B) A type of burial pit cut into rock, used by wealthy Mycenaeans who were interred with gold and bronze goods
3. ___ Hisarlik	C) The catastrophic period around 1200 BCE that destroyed Mycenaean civilization and many other Bronze Age cultures
4. ___ shaft grave	D) A style of construction using massive stone blocks so large that later Greeks believed giants must have built them
5. ___ Bronze Age Collapse	E) The hill in northwestern Turkey identified as the site of ancient Troy through multiple layers of occupation

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Heinrich Schliemann found at least nine successive cities built on top of each other at _____, a hill in northwestern Turkey that is almost certainly the site of ancient Troy.

2. The _____, two lionesses carved above a limestone doorway, is the oldest surviving example of monumental sculpture in Europe and still stands at the citadel of Mycenae.

3. Because Linear B tablets from Mycenaean sites record the names of gods like Zeus and Hera, historians can trace a cultural _____ between Mycenaean religion and the later religion of Classical Greece.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Schliemann used Homer's Iliad as a guide to find Troy. What does this approach tell us about the relationship between mythology and archaeology? What are the risks and benefits of letting ancient texts guide excavation?

2. The reading says that epic poetry is 'not a historical record — it is a blend of real events, cultural memory, mythological elaboration, and poetic invention.' What does this mean for how historians should use Homer's works as a source about the ancient world?

3. How does the archaeological evidence from Mycenae — including the shaft graves, Linear B tablets, and Lion Gate — support the idea that Homer's stories preserved a real historical memory, even if the specific details are not accurate?