# Lost World of the Aegean

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# Lost World of the Aegean

by Maitland A. Edey
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*The Consultants:* COLIN RENFREW, Professor of Archaeology at the University of Southampton, England, has excavated several prehistoric sites in Greece, and in his book, *The Emergence of Civilisation,* analyzed the developments of culture in the Cyclades, Crete and Greece during the Third Millennium B.C. He is an expert on radiocarbon dating, and has written a definitive work on the subject: *Before Civilization.* He is also a specialist in the origins of society in Western Europe and in the beginnings of trade there. JOSEPH WINTERBOTHAM SHAW is Associate Professor of Fine Art at the University of Toronto and is Research Associate in the Greek and Roman Department of the Royal Ontario Museum. He has been archeologically active for years in Greece and elsewhere in the Mediterranean. His main interest lies in Minoan Crete, where he has worked primarily at Kato Zakro and Knossos. His recently published book, *Minoan Architecture: Materials and Techniques,* is the first complete study of the methods of construction and the building materials utilized in Minoan architecture.

*The Cover:* Lounging at the light well by the grand staircase of the palace at Knossos, two ladies of the Minoan royal court idle with a pet monkey imported from North Africa. The scene—set at the peak of Minoan civilization, between 1600 and 1500 B.C.—was painted true to life by artist Michael A. Hampshire. He superimposed the ladies on a photograph of the eastern wing of the palace as it looks today, some 70 years after it was restored by archeologist Arthur Evans.


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# Contents

# Introduction

As recently as a century ago, the history of the Western world began with Classical Greece and ancient Rome. No one dreamed that, a thousand years before the poetry of Homer or the philosophy of Plato, there flourished in Greece and on Crete a brilliant civilization, a world of citadels and palaces, of warriors and scribes, of painters and goldsmiths, which the new science of archeology in a series of dramatic discoveries would soon recover and restore. The impressive palaces of Crete—with their spacious courts and labyrinthine passages, centers of a culture we now call Minoan—still lay unsuspected beneath the earth. The golden treasures, still buried after more than 3,000 years in the warrior graves of Mycenae, had yet to give their name to the Mycenaean civilization, which today we regard as the direct ancestor of the Classical Greek world.

This book tells with clarity and vividness how a century of excavation and research has re-created that vanished world of the Cycladic islands, Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece. Archeology has reconstructed a way of life that even in Homer's time, less than 500 years later, was only a shadowy recollection. Indeed today we can look on the very bronze swords and daggers and those same golden drinking cups that Homer, relying on tradition, de-

scribed—although he probably never actually saw one himself. We can walk into the citadel at Mycenae and enter the great, stone, vaulted tombs where its princes were laid to rest. We can stroll across the spacious central court at the palace of King Minos on Crete, count the storage jars in his palace magazines and admire the décor in his throne room. Most remarkable of all, we can walk the streets of volcanic Thera, the island destroyed in a colossal eruption around 1500 B.C., and see the pottery and the frescoes —unearthed in just the past few years—whose lively themes make real a world that for millennia had lain forgotten.

Forgotten, but not dead, for in a sense many of its technical achievements persisted into Classical Greek times. And we in the West—the inheritors of the Greek tradition—are still affected by them. That is why our interest in the lost world of the Aegean goes beyond the normal fascination with man's evolution and assumes a sharper, personal focus, centering on the origins and ancestry of our own culture and way of life.

Today, however, we cannot discuss the beginnings or the needs of any early civilization without stumbling upon more general and fundamental questions. How and why does a complex, highly organized society emerge at a particular time and place where formerly life and culture were very much simpler? What hidden processes lead to achievements so striking that they continue to impress us more than 3,000 years later? And why are civilizations fated to decline and collapse? What population pressures, what problems of resources, what ecological changes or social stresses worked together to bring about the end of the brilliant age with which this volume deals? These are questions difficult to answer—for any society—even in the modern world. Yet the cultures of the past, as recovered by the techniques of modern archeology, can serve as a kind of laboratory for the study of such processes. Although this discipline is still in its infancy, there is an increasing feeling today that the deeper understanding of the past has a relevance for our own present and future, and should also clarify some of our current problems of overpopulation, pollution and ecological catastrophe. Such general questions underlie much that is written in this book, with its deliberate search to analyze the causes of change.

**COLIN RENFREW**
Professor of Archaeology
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# Chapter One: Long Before Homer

In the spring flowers carpet the meadows by the Aegean Sea. They burst out of cracks in the rocks. They flame in the narrow island valleys, and their perfume rolls down the hills and out across the water. Fishermen, kept ashore during the winter storms, launch their boats and go to sea again, just as they were doing 5,000 years ago.

Five thousand years ago. The mysterious yeast that occasionally works to form a civilization from small scattered groups of people with a low level of culture was just beginning to ferment on the Greek mainland and its adjacent islands. A great civilization already existed in Egypt and an even older one in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley. Now a third civilization was about to bloom in the Aegean. This book is about that blooming. It covers the period of the so-called Bronze Age in the Aegean, which ran from approximately 3000 B.C. to 1100 B.C. Then, though the Aegean peoples themselves lived on, their culture vanished as mysteriously as it started, some 400 years before the birth of what most of us recognize today as "ancient"—or Classical—Greece.

Modern knowledge of the Bronze Age Aegean is bafflingly incomplete and surprisingly recent. The antiquity of the Egyptian civilization has long been known, together with the splendor of its art and architecture. By contrast, the Bronze Age in the Aegean was a blank until about a century ago. Filling it in is not unlike assembling the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle —pieces that are handed out sparingly as archeologists dig them, one by one, out of the ground. As a result, the picture has not fallen into place smoothly and evenly. Many false assumptions have had to be corrected as new pieces were found. That process is still going on. In fact, during the past couple of decades it has accelerated.

As a starter, all ideas about the Bronze Age Aegean had to be fitted to the references to it that have survived from Classical literature and history. It was generally accepted that the forebears of the Classical Greeks had lived for a long time on the Greek mainland, on Crete and on the other islands of the Aegean. But who these people were or how they lived was not known. That they were the creators of a brilliant —and later lost—civilization was not suspected, not even by the Classical Greeks themselves. Their knowledge of the past—of their own origins—was derived from myth, most of it embalmed in two great epic poems by Homer: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

In fact the Classical Greeks, though they believed implicitly in Homer and regarded him as their principal historical source, did not really know who he was, where he came from or exactly when he lived. Nor do we today. Modern scholarship recognizes him as a bard (his work that of perhaps two, perhaps several bards), probably illiterate, a teller of ancestral tales inherited from other bards. These he memorized, then reworked to his own taste and sang to his royal patrons. The *Iliad* is an account of a large-scale Greek naval expedition and siege against the fortified city of Troy (Ilios to the Greeks). The *Odyssey* deals with the adventures of one of the Greek warriors, Odysseus, during his attempts to get home again after the sack of Troy.

*Much of the Cretan coast, like this northeast section with the island of Mochlos in the background, is steep and rocky. In early Minoan times Mochlos was attached to the shore, and ships anchored on its far side were sheltered from the prevailing northwest winds. The enterprising sea traders from there journeyed as far away as Palestine and Egypt.*

Homer lived before 700 B.C., but the events that he recited were from an even earlier age, mistily remembered. By the time they were orally handed down to him, they were already heavily glamorized and distorted, having passed through the brains and the mouths of other bards during a period of several hundred years. Thus—and despite the high regard the Classical Greeks had for him—using Homer as a source for real historical events is tricky. The characters in his poems have become mythic creatures —the grandsons of gods, the lovers of goddesses. They are heroes, supermen in magnificently worked armor who fight great battles for great treasure and storm turreted cities. They walk in a world populated by giants, by water nymphs and enchantresses.

Was there any truth at all in Homer's poems? If so, where were his heroes buried? Where were their cities, their armor, their gold? Where did the great Greek leaders—Agamemnon, Menelaus, Odysseus, Nestor —come from? Was there really such a place as Troy?

No one knew. The Greek Achilles and the Trojan Hector danced on the far rim of a dream world, as elusive and as unreal as the giants and nymphs and gods who danced there with them. So it is not surprising that, with the birth of archeology as a scientific tool in unraveling the past, scholars should have come to regard Homer with increasing skepticism as a mere yarn spinner. His stories were fascinating but, though believed by his contemporaries and descendants, they could not be expected to survive unquestioned into modern times. They could no more be taken seriously than Zeus himself—who in Greek myth appeared one minute as a bull, another as a cuckoo, another as a swan, to ravish whatever beautiful woman caught his eye. (Why, one wonders, did Zeus bother? After all, he *was* Zeus, carrying a fistful of thunderbolts, the most powerful and magnificent male symbol that the human fancy could create. He was overwhelming, unstoppable. Why did he not have his way simply by appearing out of a puff of smoke as—Zeus?)

Take Homer literally? Who could?

One who could was an eccentric German business tycoon and lifelong Homer buff named Heinrich Schliemann. He had made all the money he thought he would ever need and, in 1868, foot-loose and approaching 50, he decided that he would invest some of his wealth in trying to prove a theory he had become seized with: that Homer was talking about things that actually happened. In short, that there was a Troy somewhere. He would find it, and possibly the tombs, the ashes, the armor, the marble palaces and the gold—especially the gold—of its builders. He would search along the northern Aegean coast of modern Turkey just south of the Dardanelles, where long tradition said Troy had been located.

People had wondered about Troy, of course, and some of them had even gone looking for it. Forgetting all the Homeric rubbish about Paris and Helen, they sensibly decided that it was probably a stronghold located near the entrance to the Hellespont, where its rulers could grow rich on the tribute they exacted from traders going back and forth between the Aegean and the Black Sea. In the area there were a couple of tells—earth mounds—each one several acres in size, marking the sites of ancient cities. One tell, named Hissarlik, had caught the interest of an English scholar early in the 19th Century, but he was dead and his ideas had been buried with him. By the time Schliemann became interested in Hissarlik, half

of it was owned by another Englishman living in Constantinople. But that gentleman was too busy acting as a consular official to do anything of consequence with it. The other owners were Turks who thought nothing about Homer and cared less. So Hissarlik slumbered in the sun as it had for centuries, its spring flowers nibbled by goats. If there was a Troy anywhere thereabouts, said the experts, it was probably at Bunarbashi—another tell about five miles away from Hissarlik, and farther inland.

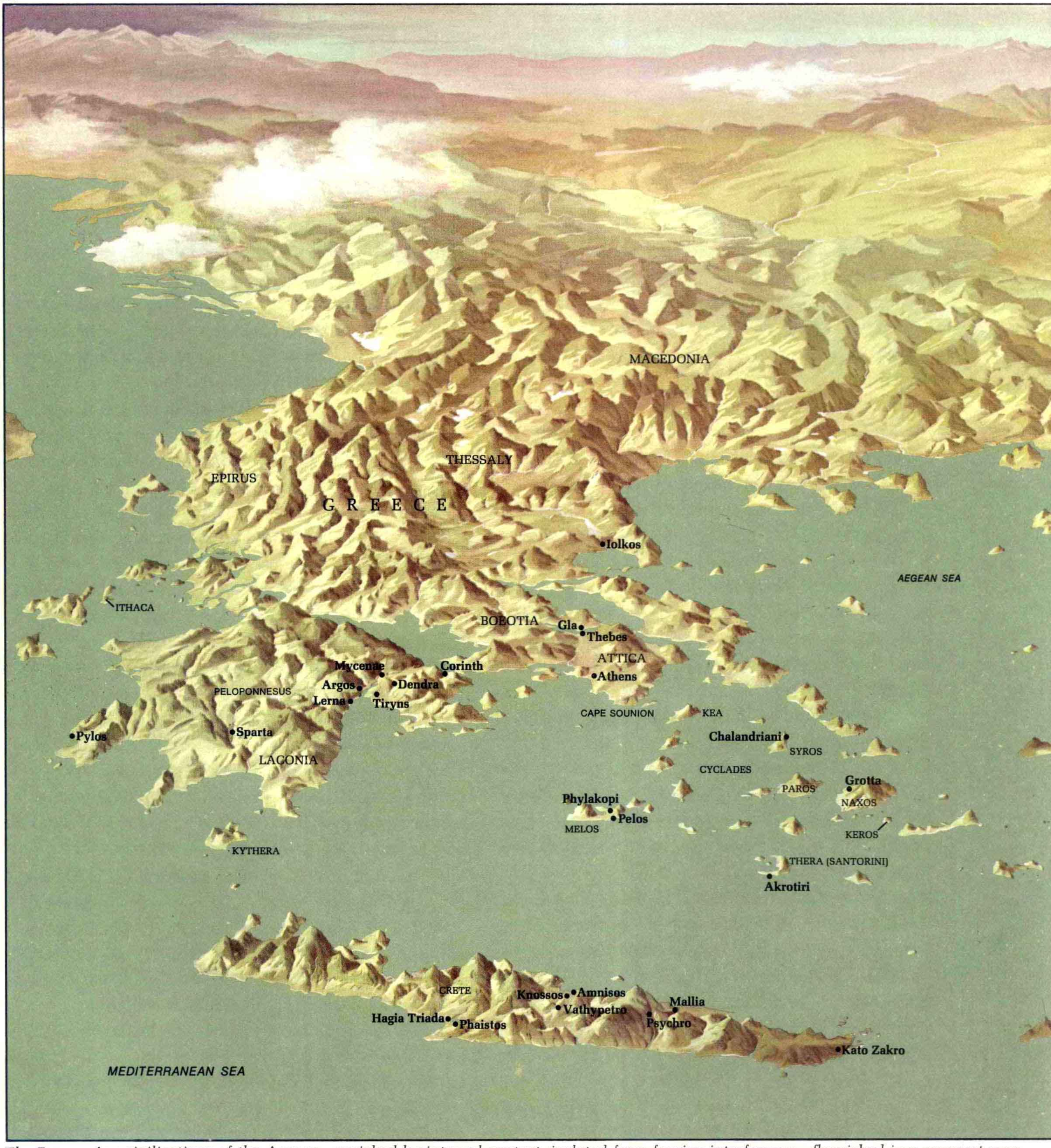
Schliemann did not agree. He carried a tattered copy of the *Iliad* with him wherever he went, and read it constantly. He reasoned that if, as the *Iliad* said, the Greek invaders were forever trotting back and forth between Troy and their camp on the seashore, making several trips a day, Troy had to be nearer the water than Bunarbashi. He made contact with the British gentleman in Constantinople. Then, organizing a force of local workmen and not bothering to inform the Turkish owners of the other half of the site, he began to dig at Hissarlik.

He found Troy. In fact, he found nine Troys, a layer cake of cities stacked one over another. During several separate expeditions he found ruined walls of immense stone blocks. He found broken pottery, he found spear tips, stone weapons, huge clay jars as tall as a man, much evidence of fire and destruction. He found King Priam's palace (he thought) and finally (he thought) Priam's treasure: a hoard of silver vases and knives, gold diadems, earrings, and more than 8,000 gold rings and buttons. This treasure he smuggled out of Turkey and, in time, turned over to the German government. Some 70 years later, during the occupation of Nazi Germany by Soviet troops in World War II, the collection disappeared from Berlin. Whether it is still intact somewhere or whether it was melted down and disposed of by ignorant looters is not known. Each passing year makes the latter possibility more probable—a tragedy, for Priam's diadems are among the rarest and most precious artifacts in the entire world.

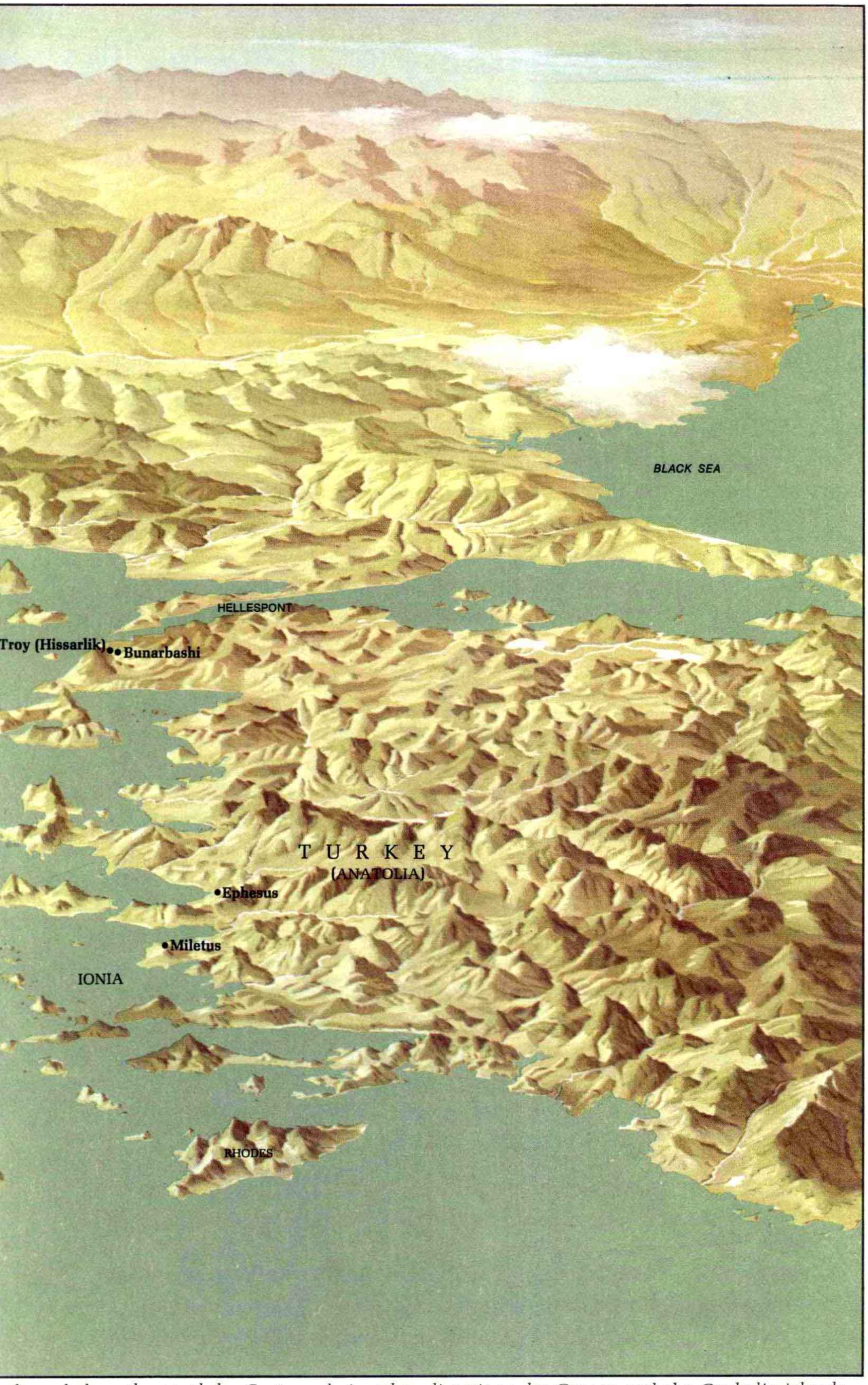
Schliemann was a secretive man, convinced that others were out to cheat him and therefore not above cheating them. Controversy followed him wherever he went—arguments with governments, with scholars. The experts laughed at him for his windy claims about Priam—and, as it turned out, with justification. In later years, when they got around to investigating Hissarlik themselves, they found that Schliemann had it all wrong. Of the nine layers, the layer he thought was Homeric—Troy II, next to the bottom—turned out to be far older, dating from before 2000 B.C. Troy II had been smashed and consumed in a great fire that Schliemann took to be proof of the wrath of the invading Greeks. In his feverish search for gold, Schliemann had dug helter-skelter right down through what is now conceded to have been Homeric Troy, Troy VII, dating from about 1250 B.C.—without paying any attention to it at all.

For more than 10 years Schliemann worked off and on at Hissarlik, crisscrossing it with trenches. Although he made subsequent smaller finds, he never matched his first great strike of Priam's treasure. Meanwhile he had transferred the focus of his interest to Mycenae on the Greek mainland.

At Mycenae, the situation was somewhat different. Myth and fact seemed to support each other better. There was a ruined citadel at Mycenae, the remains of a fortified city from the remote past, its walls built of huge Cyclopean stones even larger than




*The Bronze Age civilizations of the Aegean—enriched by internal contact, isolated from foreign interference—flourished in a compact area*




*bounded on the south by Crete and, in other directions, by Greece and the Cycladic islands.*

# The Sea-girt World of the Minoans and Mycenaeans

The Aegean basin is a mountainous region that has not settled down geologically. There is an active volcano on Thera. More than once in recent decades earthquakes have devastated Turkey and northern Greece. Crete was so quake-prone throughout the Bronze Age that builders of the day made allowances for earth tremors in their construction techniques.

In spite of this physical instability, elaborate cultures developed first on the Cycladic islands, then on Crete and finally on the Greek mainland. The accompanying map demonstrates how easy it was—once reliable ships were developed—to populate the islands, and how easily the cultures of the Cyclades could have been swamped after about 1700 B.C. by more powerful influences from larger Crete. The crowding of archeological sites in the Peloponnesus and in Attica has revealed where the main Mycenaean upthrust was centered. From there the Mycenaean Greeks —shortly after 1600 B.C.—encroached on the islands, occupied Crete and finally penetrated eastward to Rhodes, Miletus and Ephesus. By 1250 B.C. there were Greeks throughout the Aegean. They traded and fought with small local kings along the Ionian coast, even got as far as Troy, and succeeded in breaching that stout citadel before their society collapsed, turning the Aegean into a world of darkness and ignorance for 400 years.

those Schliemann had found at Troy. Throughout Greek Classical literature, and down to modern times, Mycenae had been associated with the Greek side of the Trojan legend—with the heroes who had sailed off to fight at Troy under Agamemnon's leadership. The King of Mycenae at that time, according to Classical lore, was Agamemnon, the richest and most powerful ruler in Greece. It was Agamemnon's brother, Menelaus, King of Sparta, who had suffered the humiliation of having his wife Helen stolen by a young seducer from Troy, King Priam's son Paris. That humiliation, according to Homer, had sent the Greeks off in their warships to Troy.

If one believed Homer, and no one did more fervently than Schliemann, then should not one dig at Mycenae for traces of Agamemnon, and for Agamemnon's reputedly immense treasure?

Schliemann dug again and, unbelievably, again struck gold. Within the walls of Mycenae, underneath what appeared to be a circular meeting place or council area paved with stone slabs, he found five royal grave sites containing a number of skeletons and stuffed with an incredible hoard of gold and bronze objects. There were buttons, ornaments, earrings, goblets, vases, sword handles, diadems, necklaces, hundreds and hundreds of thin gold sheets cut into fantastic shapes: leaves, flowers, butterflies, octopuses, stars. And there were masks: masks of gold, some of them stylized, others apparently portraits of dead kings. One mask, Schliemann claimed, was in place on the face of a man in a golden breastplate—a face whose flesh had not yet entirely disappeared.

Bursting with excitement, Schliemann persuaded himself that he recognized the features of this decaying corpse. He notified the Greek government that he had found the grave, the body and the death mask of Agamemnon, together with the remains of Clytemnestra, his wife.

According to Homer and the Greek tragedians, Clytemnestra had taken a lover while her husband was off fighting at Troy. When Agamemnon came home, the lover, Aegisthus, murdered the King and took his throne. Then Clytemnestra's son also returned and avenged his father's death by killing his faithless mother and her paramour.

Schliemann insisted that his excavations had proved the truth of that legend. There was Agamemnon, laid out in all his finery, his body sprinkled with delicate leaves of hammered gold. And there, according to Schliemann, were Clytemnestra and the members of her court, slaughtered on the spot and buried in their turn.

While there is no denying Schliemann's perspicacity—and luck—in making this second fantastic gold strike, his conclusions about it again must be disputed. There was no way of identifying any of the royal remains he unearthed. Almost certainly none was Agamemnon, for the things Schliemann found at Mycenae, just as at Hissarlik, were far older than he thought. Thanks to modern archeology, it is now known that his discoveries belonged to an earlier age, perhaps hundreds of years before Agamemnon was born. Nevertheless, for the second time Schliemann had followed Homer with the blind faith of a true believer and come in a winner.

Schliemann went on. He investigated Crete, where there were reputed to be ruins of palaces even larger than at Mycenae. He dickered with the owner of one such ruin at Knossos on Crete's north coast, and was

# Schliemann: He Uncovered a Layer Cake of Troys

HEINRICH SCHLIEMANN: 1822-1890

SOPHIA SCHLIEMANN: 1852-1938

If the events of Heinrich Schliemann's life were set in a novel, the story would be tossed aside as too bizarre to be believed. Born to abject poverty, Schliemann worked as a helper in a tiny general store in rural Germany. But driven by ambition he soon realized that he was locked into a backbreaking routine that would get him nowhere, so he signed on as a ship's boy for a passage to Venezuela. The voyage was just begun when the ship was wrecked and he was cast up, naked and nearly frozen to death, on the shore of Holland. A few years and several jobs later, he was doing important work for a Dutch dealer in commodities. At age 25, Schliemann had a sufficient mastery of the trading business to set up on his own. By the time he was 40—taking big risks, working and scheming around the clock—he had become an international trader with fluency in many languages and a large personal fortune.

A brilliant loner, pathologically shy and suspicious, he filled the barren hours of his life by reading voraciously. In the course of that pursuit he concluded that Homer's *Iliad* was a literal historical document. In 1868 that conviction led him to give up his compulsive drive for yet more wealth and to turn toward Troy.

Having once been married, disastrously, to a Russian—and being uncomfortable with women generally—Schliemann wrote the Archbishop of Athens, who was an old friend, and asked for a favor. He set out the qualifications he thought a good wife should have, and requested that one be found for him. The archbishop came up with a striking-looking 17-year-old Greek village girl, Sophia Engastromenos. Schliemann married her and, surprisingly, the union was a great success. He worshiped Sophia. He trusted her completely, the only human being—other than himself—he did trust. He took her on his archeological trips, and she was with him on June 14, 1873, that broiling day at Troy when he turned up his first pre-Classical gold artifacts.

The site was crawling with workers—each, in Schliemann's eyes, a potential thief. Even though a Turkish overseer was on hand to see that nothing of real value was taken away, Schliemann whispered to Sophia that she should announce it was his birthday and that everybody at the site could take the rest of the day off—with pay—to celebrate. After they left, Schliemann proceeded personally to scrape out a fortune in gold, piece by piece. They wrapped it up in Sophia's big shawl and carried it away.

The prize piece found that day was a diadem of intricately worked chains and bangles. In all, it contained 16,353 pieces of gold. Sophia is wearing it in the photograph at top right.

In his later years after other explorations and discoveries on the Greek mainland, Schliemann built himself a fine house in Athens and filled it with treasures from his various archeological forays. What to do with the gold from Troy remained something of a problem, since the Turkish government was suing to get it back. He finally decided to donate it to the German government and in return managed to wangle the decorations and honors that his fatherland had denied him for so many years. By that time he was a well-known figure in the archeological world. He mellowed, and his wild interpretations of the origins of the gold artifacts were forgiven him in the general recognition of his colossal achievement: the discovery of Mycenaean civilization.

on the point of closing a deal to purchase the site when he thought to count the olive trees, since they were an important part of what he had agreed to buy. Finding that the site contained only 889 trees instead of the 2,500 he was supposed to be getting, he broke off the arrangement in a rage.

After that, Schliemann found no more gold. He did continue his interest in the Bronze Age world, and —though never a professional archeologist—by the time he died in 1890 he had finally begun to comprehend the true nature of the lost world he had stumbled into, something that no one before him had even imagined. When all is said and done, Schliemann must be credited with the discovery of Mycenaean civilization.

Had he been younger, less suspicious, a little less sharp and conniving, Schliemann might have persevered in Crete and found even more spectacular things. As it turned out, success there was reserved for an Englishman named Arthur Evans, who was totally different from Schliemann.

The son of a rich man, Evans found his way into archeology, became the keeper of the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, traveled extensively in the Balkans and in Greece, searching for antiquities. He became interested in the small carved gemlike seals that were turning up in Greece and on the Aegean Islands in increasing numbers and that could still be bought for ridiculously small sums.

Evans was extremely nearsighted. To examine those seals, which were very small—only an inch or so long—he had to put them close to his eyes. This magnified their detail so much that he was able to appreciate better than others the extraordinary delicacy and originality of their carving. Some seals had hunting scenes on them, some had people, some had ships, some had dolphins. A good many of them appeared to have short inscriptions in an unknown writing that baffled and intrigued him.

He began collecting the seals and quickly realized that some of the most interesting specimens were being found on Crete. He went there in 1894, still more interested in inscriptions than in anything else. But as he became aware of the dimensions of the extensive buried ruin at Knossos, he gradually shifted his interest from carved seals to this larger relic of the past. He decided to excavate it. Endless negotiations followed, complicated by international politics involving Crete's drive for independence from Turkey. Finally, in 1900, the way was cleared and Evans began digging at Knossos. As his half sister, who wrote his biography, later put it, Evans started out by trying to find a seal impression or a clay tablet, and ended up by discovering an entire civilization.

Evans spent the rest of his life and much of a large fortune at Knossos. The ruins there turned out to be an immense palace, with a maze of courtyards, public reception rooms, corridors, private apartments, colonnades, storage vaults, staircases, bathrooms and shrines. Parts of the structure had been several stories high, but were tumbled down by a terrible catastrophe of some kind. It must have been an earthquake, he tentatively decided.

Blackened walls gave evidence of a destructive fire, a fire that had hardened and preserved a great quantity of clay tablets inscribed in the same cryptic writing that had first drawn Evans to Crete when he had detected it on gem seals. Rows of huge clay storage jars, or *pithoi,* stood unbroken in ground-floor storage rooms. Scattered everywhere was an array

*Text continued on page 20*