World History Name:

Mrs. Barnes Date:

Minoa and Mycenae—Part II Block:

According to legend, the light slanting from the blue skies over Greece is brighter and more brilliant than sunlight elsewhere. The hard Greek light plays on the glittering blue-green waters of the Aegean, glares off the sandy white beaches of the countless home islands and finally falls to rest in long shadows across the tumbling, dry, highlands or the mountainous countryside.

Living on a peninsula, the Greeks came early to the sea; no man in Greece even stands more than 60 miles from the sea. Pointing southeast, the 300 mile long Greek mainland thrusts itself into the surrounding seas. On this peninsula the lives of the Greeks were shaped by their environment: on rugged mountain slopes (which make up ¾ of the land), in the dry mountains, along the sandy gulfs, and on the islands. The climate tested them: the mountain winters were bitter, the lowland summers hot and dusty.

Communities were separated vast mountain ranges and numerous seas. Because of this, the Greek palace-states, later known individually as a *polis*, developed independently from one another. The countryside separated the Greeks from ever developing as one unified people. But between the mountains were fertile pockets of land which made it easy for city-states to develop. Their soil was deep and fruitful and allowed for the growing of the “*Mediterranean Triad*”: grain, grapes (for wine), and olives (whose oil was the butter, soap, and fuel of the ancient world). In these fertile valleys grew plentiful grain and sheep grazed in peace along the Greek plains.

From the peninsula, the Greeks took to the seas. In the seas, Greeks panned for salt, then set sail in boats to catch tuna, anchovies, and mullet (a type of fish typical in tropical waters). Soon they developed trade routes to the many islands dotting the glittering blue Aegean Sea. The Greeks remained cautious seamen however; they sailed by day, never venturing far from shore at night, and always trying to keep some familiar piece of land in sight. At night, the ships were beached, and the seamen always stayed ashore during the winter.

From 2000-1600 BCE, the Minoan civilizations flourished. Named for their King, Minos, the Minoans are the oldest known civilization of Europe. Centered on the island of Crete, the Minoans were sharply contrasted from the Greek communities. Crete is a small, very mountainous island, only 150 miles long and no more than 30 miles wide. Most of the low-lying land is found in scattered patches along the north coast, and because of the cliffs that isolate one patch from another, communication between them was usually much easier by sea than by land. The Minoan navy, made up of over 300 warships, ruled the seas; in fact, the seas around Crete were under complete military control by the Minoans.

None of the Minoan palace-states were fortified. This lack of military fortifications and citadels can be explained in three ways. First, Crete is an island and the Minoans were protected from invasion by the surrounding seas and their competent navy. Second, the Minoan navy totally dominated the seas, thus eliminating the threat of piracy and invasion. Last, the Minoan palace-states were based on a production-trade economy. Therefore they were politically unified under the largest Minoan palace-state, Knossos, and made their living by either trading with each other or with distant civilizations: the Egyptians to the south, the Hittites, Canaanites, and Phoenicians, to the east. The Minoan palace-states were centered around a labyrinth. Knossos is the largest of the Minoan palace-states, and, like the rest, was clearly built not for defense by for a colorful pleasant place to live. The walls of the labyrinth and homes were covered in superb frescoes, often depicting landscapes, flowers, seascapes, or the daily lives of Minoans. Builders make frequent use of skylights and lightwells so the daylight could shine through. Floors were paved with colored glass and below the palace ran a system of running water and drainage systems.

Within each palace-state were concentrated storage facilities, workshops and offices. The Minoan frescoes and pottery reveal free-flowing lifestyles, rich in enjoyment and freedom. Scenes depict families laughing, singing, dancing, and enjoying sports, music, and freedom.

Some attest that the Minoans were in fact the lost city of Atlantis. The Minoan period of wealth and prosperity was brought to an end sometime around 1650 BCE by a volcanic explosion of a magnitude unparalleled in human history. It completely destroyed the island of Thera, 80 miles north of Crete and spawned a killer wave, or “tsunami,” which destroyed not only the Minoan navy, but their coastline, their building structures, their crops, and their faith. Starvation, plague, and civil wars followed the Thera disaster and by 1600 BCE the island of Crete was invaded by a group known as the Mycenaeans.

The Greeks living during the Bronze Age from 1600-1200 BCE were known as the *Mycenaean Greeks*. Separated by mountainous countryside, the Mycenaean Greeks built strongly fortified *citadels* (military complexes) atop outcroppings of rock or on a rocky hilltop called an “*acropolis*.” Inside of each citadel was a huge palace complex. The walls of these palaces were covered with brightly colored tiles or painted frescoes (pictures painted on the walls and ceiling while the plaster is still wet). The entire complex of a palace was built atop the acropolis and was surrounded by a citadel known as a *palace-state*.

Mycenae was the most famous of the Greek Bronze Age palace-states. Controlling an area of almost 15 square miles, the palace of Mycenae was built on a rocky acropolis surrounded by a citadel with walls 40 feet high and 15 feet thick. Massive stones weighing 10-12 tons each made up the walls. The main entrance was the Lion Gate, which was constructed of 4 massive stone slabs, each weighing over 20 tons. The gateway was closed by a set of wooden doors.

Each of the palace-states was based on a pirate-plunder economy meaning constant warfare between the palace-states was a way of life. Sending out war parties on both land and sea, the palace-states were in a state of continual warfare for finished goods, fertile land, and sea lanes allowing for trade. This condition of violent conflict explained two things: first, the reason why the palace-states never unified politically; and second, why the palace-states so heavily fortified themselves with massive citadels.

1250 BCE is the date most historians agree on for the most famous of the Mycenaean palace-state wars: The Trojan War. The war, according to ancient literature, lasted 12 years. The Greeks formed a military alliance under Mycenae to attack Troy, a city across the Aegean Sea in Persia, and capture the strategic *Hellespont*, or Dardanelles Straits, the major route for grain ships leaving the Black Sea to trade with Europe.

1200 BCE marks the fall of the Mycenaean palace-state. Armed with iron weapons (stronger than bronze), barbarian invaders from the north known as “Dorians,” swept down into Greece and destroyed all but one of the palace-states. Due to its high acropolis, Athens was the only palace-state to survive. The warlike Dorians raped, murdered, and burned their way south finally settling on the Peloponnesus Peninsula, forming their own city-state called Sparta. Many Greeks fled from the Dorians, forming Greek colonies in western Turkey, called Ionia.

What followed is known as the Dark Ages of Ancient Greece. The Dorians, an illiterate group with limited culture, sponsored a lifestyle of idleness. There is no writing from this time period. There was no craftsmanship. Trade ended, and poverty increased. Ancient Greece ceased to progress and slipped into a period of darkness, a period which would only end hundreds of years later.