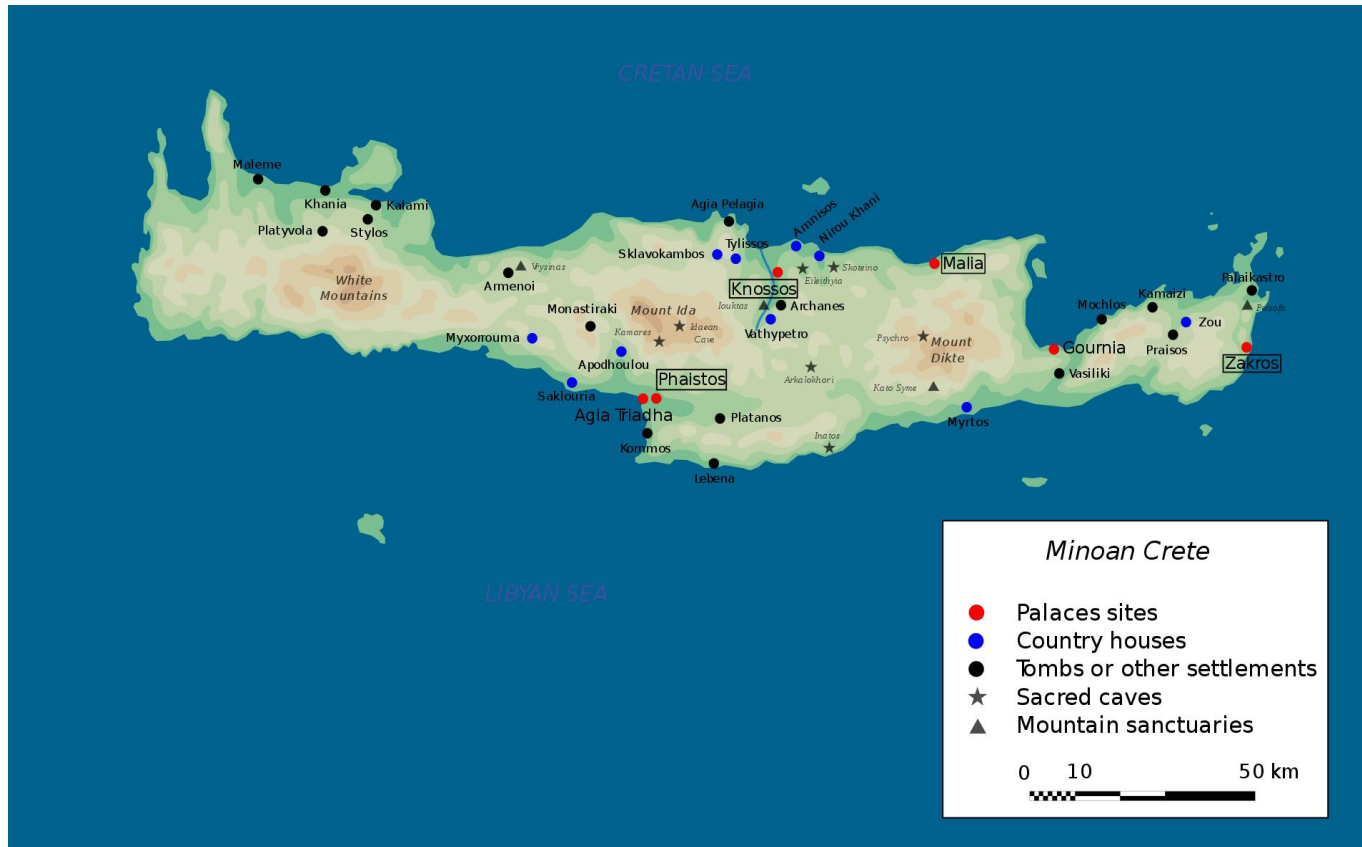


# Minoans, Mycenaeans, And the Foundation of Archaic Greece

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Academus Easter Crash Course 2021

# Who were the Minoans?



The **Minoans** were a Bronze Age civilization centred on the island of **Crete** and other Aegean Islands.

**Minoan** society prospered between c. 3000 - c. 1450 BCE and is considered one of the earliest predecessors of ancient Greek society.

One of the most prominent sites of the **Minoan** civilisation is the palace at **Knossos**, Crete.

# Discovery and Definition

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Sir Arthur John Evans  
(1851 –1941)

Studied at Oxford University and eventually became Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum.

Began his archaeological career in Britain, with excavations of an Iron Age cemetery in Kent, in 1886.

Intrigued by recent discoveries and tensions in the area, [Evans](#) travelled to [Crete](#) in the late 1890's and excavations began in March 1900.

The main site of excavation was the palace at Knossos, which revealed a civilisation that predated the [Mycenaean](#) civilisation that had been discovered earlier by [Heinrich Schliemann](#).

The complex architecture of the palace at Knossos reminded Evans of the mythical labyrinth of [King Minos](#) and the [Minotaur](#), and so [Evans](#) called this civilisation the [Minoans](#).

# Ancient Evidence: Linear A

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Cretulae with Linear A script from Archanes, Crete, Greece. Minoan civilization, 15th century BC

[Linear A](#) was a writing system used by the [Minoans](#) in ancient [Crete](#) between 1900 - 1450 BCE. One of two writing systems, the other being a system using symbols closer to hieroglyphs. [Linear A](#) is one of the earlier forms of syllabary: a style of writing that uses characters to represent syllables rather than pictograms which represent full words or ideas.

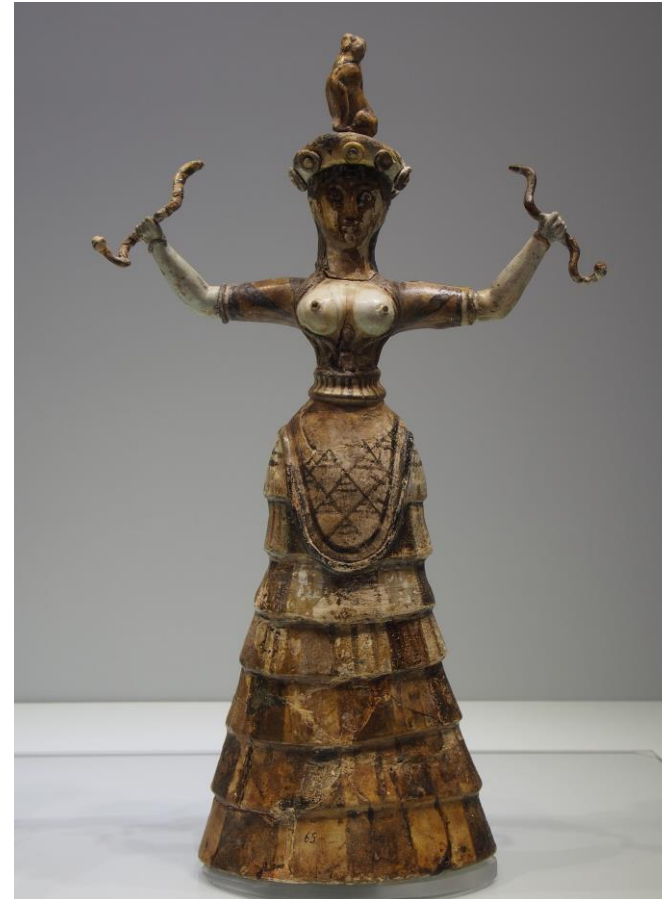
[Linear A](#) disappeared from use with the fall of [Minoan](#) civilisation. [Linear A](#) has yet to be deciphered and remains untranslated.

# Ancient Evidence: Material Culture



The 'Bull-leaping Fresco' from the palace at Knossos, Crete. c. 1450 BCE.

The recurrence of bull imagery suggests these animals may have had a sacred or important role in [Minoan](#) society.



The 'Snake Goddess' from Knossos, Crete. c.1600.

Some interpretations suggest this represents a [goddess of fertility](#), due to her bare breasts and the symbolism of the snakes.

# What was Minoan society like?

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The North Portico of the palace at Knossos, Crete. Partially restored.

The Minoans were a [mercantile](#) people: they traded extensively with neighbouring civilisations. Manufactured goods found at these sites suggest sophisticated trade networks with ancient [Egypt](#), [Syria](#), [Mesopotamia](#), and as far west as the [Iberian peninsula](#).

Minoan society operated in a [palace economy](#): the economy revolved around the collection of crops and other goods by centralized government or religious institutions, centred in palatial structures, for redistribution to the population.

# Who was in charge?

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The 'Ladies in Blue' fresco from Knossos, Crete. c. 1500BCE.

Unlike other contemporaneous ancient societies, the [Minoan](#) society had no singular discernible king. There may have been several prominent ruling families corresponding with the palaces across ancient [Crete](#), of which [Knossos](#) became the most important.

Artistic evidence has been interpreted as suggesting that women held a prominent role in [Minoan](#) society. [Minoan](#) religion apparently focused on female deities, with women officiants. The predominance of female figures in authoritative roles over male ones seems to indicate that [Minoan](#) society held elite women in high regard.

# What happened to the Minoans?



The Hagia Triada Sarcophagus. c. 1400.  
Dated from when Crete was under Mycenaean rule, it combines features of Minoan and Mycenaean style and subject matter.

Minoan society collapsed some time c. 1400 BCE. One proposed theory suggests that a volcanic eruption on the island of Thera, only 62 miles from Crete, in 1550-1500 BCE severely disrupted life in Minoan Crete. The eruption resulted in ash covering the area and triggered a tsunami, devastating local coastal areas. Although this event did not result in the immediate destruction of Minoan society, it led to a period of decline which led the Minoans vulnerable to invasion.

Ultimately its end came through conquest, as the Mycenaean civilisation conquered the Minoans around c. 1450 BCE.



# Who were the Mycenaeans?

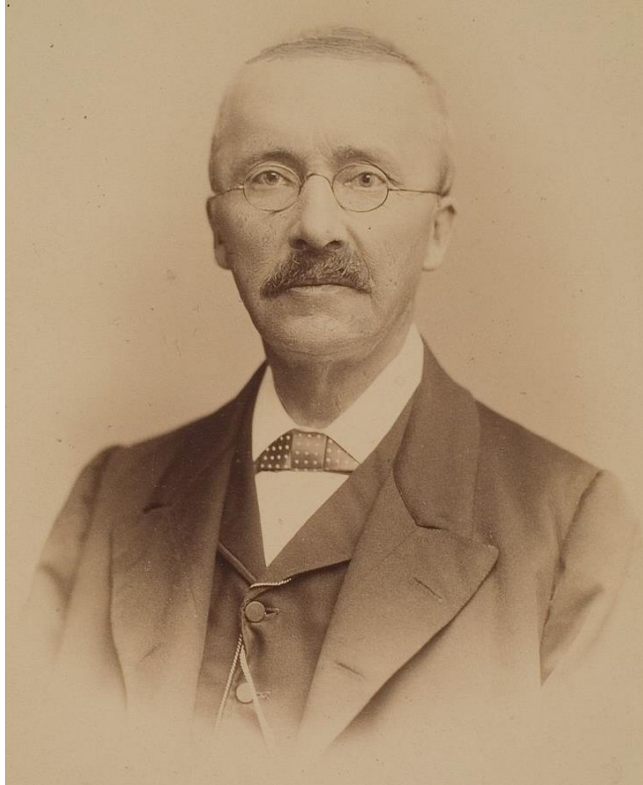


The [Mycenaean](#) period was last phase of the [Bronze Age](#) in Ancient Greece, flourishing in the years c. 1600 – c. 1100 BCE. It is considered the first distinctively Greek civilization in mainland Greece with its palatial states, urban organization, works of art, and writing system.

Prominent sites were [Mycenae](#), after which the culture of this era is named, and [Pylos](#), [Tiryns](#), [Midea](#) in the Peloponnese, [Orchomenos](#), [Thebes](#), [Athens](#) in Central Greece and [Iolcos](#) in Thessaly.

# Discovery and Damage

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Heinrich Schliemann  
(1822–1890)

[Mycenaean](#) civilisation had long been known as the ‘[Age of Homer](#)’ as this period, prior to the [Greek Dark Ages](#), was known as the era when most Classical Greek mythology, including the stories of the [Trojan War](#), originated.

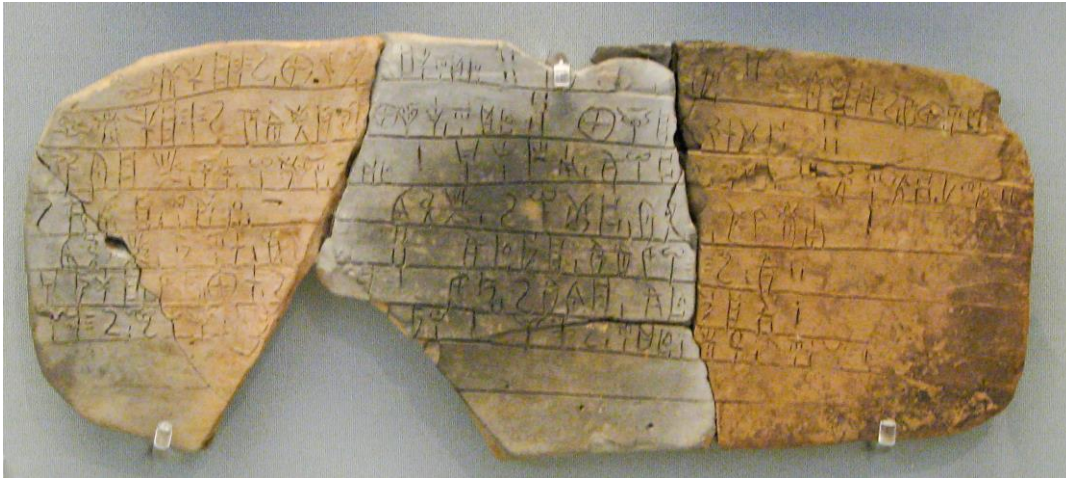
[Schliemann](#) believed that the events of Homer’s [Iliad](#) were historical, and that archaeological evidence could be found. [Schliemann](#) was involved in excavations of several [Mycenaean](#) sites, including [Mycenae](#) and [Tiryns](#) in the 1870’s.

[Schliemann](#) attributed many of the discoveries he made to the figures from the [Iliad](#) directly, an approach which he was directly criticised for as he did not separate ‘fact from interpretation.’

[Schliemann’s](#) archaeological method was also responsible for the destruction of the sites which he excavated, sacrificing many important layers of evidence in his search for [Troy](#).

# Ancient Evidence: Linear B

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Clay tablet inscribed with Linear B script, from the Mycenaean palace of Pylos, c. 1200. This piece contains information on the distribution of bovine, pig and deer hides to shoe and saddle-makers. Currently in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens.

[Linear B](#) is descended from the earlier script, [Linear A](#), and is also a syllabic script which is the earliest form of Greek which predates the Greek alphabet by several centuries. [Linear B](#) was in use between c. 1450 to c. 1100 BCE.

[Linear B](#), mainly found in palace archives at [Knossos](#), [Pylos](#), [Thebes](#), and [Mycenae](#), has been deciphered. The use of [Linear B](#) was confined mainly to administrative contexts, there is no evidence of creative literature or poetry written down in this period. Of all the surviving [Linear B](#) tablets, only a small number of writers can be identified, suggesting [Mycenaeans](#) mostly employed professional scribes who wrote for administrative purposes.

# Ancient Evidence: Material Culture

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Death mask, known as the Mask of Agamemnon, Grave Circle A, Mycenae. 16th century BCE.



Fresco depicting a female figure in the Acropolis of Mycenae, c. 13th century BCE.

# What was Mycenaean society like?

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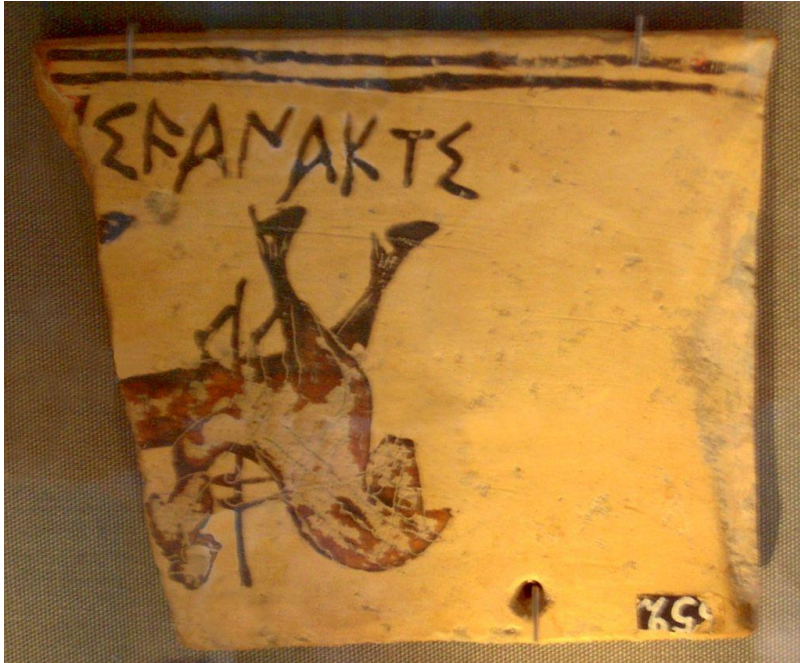


The Lion Gate, the main entrance of the citadel of Mycenae. c.13th century BCE.

Similar to the [Minoans](#), [Mycenaean](#) society flourished in several prominent palace sites across the ancient [Mediterranean](#), settled as a result of a population boom c. 1600 BCE. The early [Mycenaean](#)s were dominated by an affluent and elite [warrior class](#), as indicated by rich burial sites adorned with gold and weaponry.

As the [Mycenaean](#)s spread their influence after conquering the [Minoans](#) they took advantage of new trading opportunities and these palatial sites became even more prosperous. Existing trade routes were expanded further, reaching Cyprus, Amman in the Near East, Apulia in Italy and Spain.

# Who was in charge?



Archaic inscription [...]I FANAKTI ([...]i wanakti, 'to the king' on ceramic fragment. In the Altes Musuem, Berlin.

Unlike the Minoans, Mycenaean society was led by a [wanax](#), a king figure who wielded many powers as the main landowner and as a religious and military leader. The [wanax](#) was also an entrepreneur and trader and was aided by a network of high officials.

The term [wanax](#) appears in [Linear B](#) script and was preserved in later Greek language as [anax](#). [Anax](#) is used in Homer's *Iliad* to refer to [Agamemnon](#) as a 'leader of men' and denotes him as an individual who occupies a superior role over other leaders of smaller, lesser kings. This continuation of the term suggests that the [Mycenaean wanax](#) was also a king of kings who had a degree of authority over the lesser kings from smaller, more provincial [Mycenaean](#) palace settlements.

# What happened to the Mycenaeans?

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Warrior Vase, a krater from Mycenae. c. 1200 BCE.

Although an exact cause has not been determined, archaeological evidence has determined that several prominent [Mycenaean](#) sites suffered conflict n c. 1250 BCE, with [Thebes](#) and [Orchomenos](#) showing evidence of destruction. [Pylos](#), in the southwestern [Peloponnese](#), was destroyed in c. 1180 BC. The [Linear B](#) archives found there, preserved by the heat of the fire that destroyed the palace, mention hasty defence preparations due to an imminent attack.

The exact cause of the collapse of [Mycenaean](#) society is still hotly debated. Theories suggest an invasion from [Doric](#) people, or an unknown seafaring coalition known as the '[Sea Peoples](#)'. As with the [Minoan](#) society, it may be that a series of natural disasters contributed to [Mycenaean](#) decline and collapse.

# The Greek Dark Age

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The [Greek Dark Age](#) refers to the period between the collapse of [Mycenaean](#) society c. 1100 BCE to the emergence of [Archaic Greek](#) society, c. 750 BCE. Archaeological evidence from this era suggests a widespread collapse of society where written evidence ceases to be produced and written communication would seemingly not develop for several centuries. Evidence suggests that settlements were far smaller and sparsely populated compared to earlier prosperous and populous societies of the [Minoans](#) and [Mycenaean](#)s.

Art continued to be produced in this period, often in the form of goods that could be utilised in everyday or in funerary contexts. Figures of people in this era were less sophisticated, and design was simplified in what is known as the [Geometric](#) period which used shapes and lines, as shown by the [Dipylon Amphora](#), c. mid-8th century BC, in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens.



# The Archaic Greek Age



The [Archaic Era](#) is an essential period in ancient Greek history, considered to be the foundation of Classical culture. This era is typically bookended by the establishment of the [Olympic games](#) in 776BCE and the [Persian invasion](#) of mainland Greece in 480CE. The [Archaic Era](#) saw a boom in culture, with written language and artistic developments occurring rapidly. It was during this time that many of the most prominent city states were established and settled.

# Archaic Greek Colonisation

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Attic black-figured cup detailing boats in a contest, c. 520 BCE. From Cerveteri.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE several new settlements were created in the ancient Aegean and across the waters in Asia Minor and into the Iberian peninsula. This was motivated by a population growth which led to a higher demand of space and raw materials.

This era of colonisation was consistently organised, as 'parent' cities would send citizens to settle a new colony and often maintained symbolic ties with that emerging settlement for many generations. Some of these colonies became successful city states in their own right and went on to found colonies of their own, resulting in a Greek society that was spread across several areas and islands of the ancient Mediterranean.

# The Creation of the Polis

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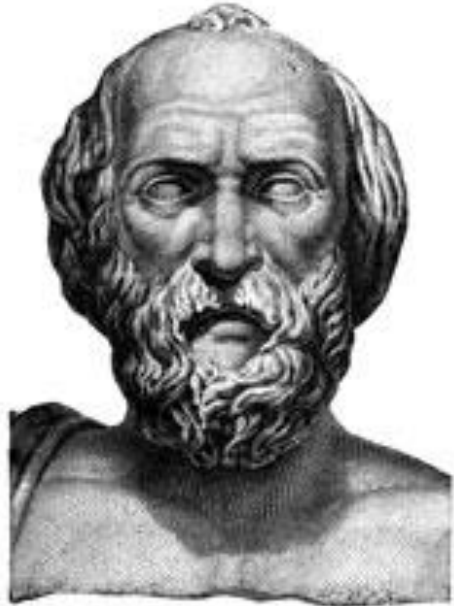
The remains of the Acropolis in Athens, one of the most prominent and prosperous city states of ancient Greece.

As populations settled, a new form of society developed during the [Archaic Era](#). These settlements developed into a [polis](#): a city state. The [polis](#) as an entity includes the citizen body and the surrounding areas. City states could be considered their own micro-nation: with their own religious nuances, political structures, cultural norms.

Often a [polis](#) developed through a process of [synoikismos](#): where overtime a number of smaller settlements amalgamated together through marriage or contract to combine resources and become one unified [polis](#).

# Prominent Polis: Sparta.

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Lycurgus, the semi-mythical lawgiver of Sparta, supposedly responsible for the reforms which governed Spartan society for many centuries.

There is evidence that Sparta had been settled since the Mycenaean era consistently through the Greek Dark Ages, but c. 900 BCE is when Sparta was developed as an emerging city state.

In the early Archaic Era, 8<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, the Spartans experienced a period of lawlessness and civil strife. As a result, they carried out a series of political and social reforms of their own society which they later attributed to Lycurgus.

These reforms structured Spartan society in the Archaic and Classical eras, establishing a ruling council of 28 elders and 2 Kings. It was also responsible for the division of land between the citizens and enforcing the custom that Spartans were forbidden from luxuries and using gold and silver as currency. Lycurgus' reforms extended to social issues and dictated how Spartan boys and girls were to be educated and married.

# Prominent Polis: Athens

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Prior to the [Archaic Era](#), [Athens](#) was ruled by a monarchy. The most famous of these kings is [Theseus](#), a prominent hero in Greek mythology who said to have ruled prior to the recorded history of the city. In the early [Archaic Era](#) [Athens](#) successfully brought several neighbouring settlements in Attica into their own through the process of [synoikismos](#), quickly becoming the most prominent polis in the area.

In the early 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the concept of democracy was proposed by [Solon's](#) reforms in 594 BCE. This attempt at democracy was short lived, as the tyrant [Peisistratus](#) seized control of [Athens](#) in 541 BCE. Tyranny was finally overthrown in Athens in 514 BCE when two citizens, [Harmodius](#) and [Aristogeiton](#) (depicted left) overthrew [Peisistratus'](#) sons, [Hippias](#) and [Hipparchus](#).

This led to the reforms of [Cleisthenes](#), a radical politician who firmly established democracy in [Athens](#) with reforms to government that would last more or less for 170 years, and began the [Classical](#) era.