

In Greek Warrior's Grave, Rings of Power (and a Mirror and Combs)

By **NICHOLAS WADE** OCT. 3, 2016 [The New York Times](#)

A trove of beautifully engraved gold rings and gemstones, found in the untouched grave of an ancient Greek warrior last year, were possessions from his culture, not loot from the nearby island of Crete, archaeologists now believe.

The gold rings, they say, were rings of power. These items served as insignia of the elite who ruled the local inhabitants of [Pylos](#), the town on the southwestern coast of Greece where the warrior's grave was found.

The grave throws light on a dramatic historical process, the extension of the [Minoan](#) culture of Crete to southern Greece, where it formed the basis of [Mycenaean](#) civilization, the first in mainland Europe. Mycenaean rulers such as [Achilles](#), [Agamemnon](#) and [Odysseus](#) were the heroes of Homer's epics, and Mycenaean civilization, even though it collapsed shortly after 1200 B.C., was the forerunner of the classical Greek era that arose some 700 years later.

The grave was [discovered last year](#) by Jack L. Davis and Sharon R. Stocker, a husband-and-wife team at the University of Cincinnati, and is judged by other archaeologists to be one of the richest tombs to have been found in Greece in the last half-century. The warrior was buried around 1450 B.C., a date derived from pottery found around the grave. His facial appearance has been reconstructed from his skull by Lynne Schepartz and Tobias Houlton of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

The gold rings, engraved gemstones and many other items in the grave bear Minoan themes, so they could have been plunder from a raid on Crete. But Dr. Davis and Dr. Stocker believe otherwise, noting that objects in the grave are echoed in the iconography of the gold rings, they write in an article to be published in the journal [Hesperia](#).

The grave contained a bronze mirror and six ivory combs, accessories the archaeologists were surprised to find in a warrior's tomb. But Greek warriors wore their hair long, and Spartan warriors are known to have combed their hair before battle. And the mirror may have had a ritual significance: One of the gold rings depicts a goddess holding a similar mirror.

Another object both in the grave and shown on the rings is a staff. A twisted piece of metal found in the grave appeared at first to be a meat hook. But when untwisted it turned out to be the head of a horned animal, probably a bull, with a socket and nail hole as if to be mounted on a staff. A goddess is holding just such a staff on one of the gold rings.

The staff almost certainly indicates that the warrior held authority of some kind, religious or civil.

The archaeologists do not yet know if the warrior and those who buried him were Minoans or Mycenaeans steeped in Minoan culture.



A ring found at the tomb of the Griffin Warrior in Greece. Credit Jennifer Stephens/University of Cincinnati

“Whoever they are, they are the people introducing Minoan ways to the mainland and forging Mycenaean culture,” Dr. Davis said. “They were probably dressing like Minoans and building their houses according to styles used on Crete, using Minoan building techniques.”

The warrior’s grave “is telling us that right from the beginning there were people on the mainland who knew what Minoan culture meant and were bringing it to the mainland for a specific reason, that of establishing themselves in positions of power,” he said.



Archaeologists say the gold rings, recovered from the grave were rings of power. Credit Chronis Papanikolopoulos/University of Cincinnati

By 1400 B.C., half a century after the warrior's death, that power had been extended to the province of [Messenia](#) and 20 district capitals, all paying taxes to their Mycenaean overlords, who ruled in Pylos from the so-called [Palace of Nestor](#), named after the [Homeric hero](#).

Cynthia W. Shelmerdine, an expert on the [Aegean Bronze Age](#) at the University of Texas, said she agreed that the rings and gemstone seals in the warrior's grave represented administrative and political power. "These things clearly have a power connection," she said, whether or not the rings were used in the Minoan way for sealing objects.

The grave, whether dug by Minoans or Mycenaeans, "fits with other evidence that the elites on the mainland are increasingly closely connected to the elites on Crete," Dr. Shelmerdine said.

The Mycenaeans continued to use Minoan themes, such as gymnasts leaping over bulls, in their art and administration until the end of the palatial period. But by classical times the memory of

Minoan culture had faded, and survived mostly in the myth of [Ariadne](#), the daughter of [King Minos](#), who showed [Theseus](#) how to kill the dreaded [Minotaur](#) and escape from the labyrinth at [Knossos](#).



A gold chain and a bronze cup were also recovered from the site. Credit Department of Classics/University of Cincinnati