

# This 3,500-year-old tomb held the treasures of Greece's 'Griffin Warrior'

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## History Magazine

Discovered in 2015, the warrior's intact tomb not only contained his remains but also weapons, gold, and jewels that all gave new insights into the trade and culture of the ancient Mediterranean.

### The fight and the fallen

Found among the Griffin Warrior's many grave goods, the Combat Agate depicts a scene among three warriors. Two are locked in deadly combat and one has fallen to the ground.

J. Vanderpool/Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati

An olive grove in Southern Greece was the scene of a spectacular discovery in May 2015 when archaeologists discovered the tomb of a man they dubbed the "Griffin Warrior." Crammed with artifacts, the grave offers up new insights into the origins of the Mycenaean culture whose mythical heroes starred in the Trojan War.

The Griffin Warrior's tomb is located near Pylos in the Peloponnesian peninsula in southern Greece. The area had been well excavated in the 20th century, leading many to believe there was little left to discover. When the intact warrior's tomb was uncovered in 2015, experts were surprised and delighted with the discovery. It surely promised to deliver new insights into ancient Greece.

[About this map](#)

## **Facts and fictions**

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A land of mountains and rugged coasts, the Peloponnese is a place where history and legend are sometimes difficult to separate. The names of its cities and regions—Arcadia, Olympia, Argolis, Corinth—ring out in great myths, legends, poems, and plays. The peninsula was home to Sparta, a key player in the defeat of the Persian Empire in the fifth century B.C., which then took up arms against its former ally, Athens. The grueling Peloponnesian War ended Athens's brief golden age and profoundly shaped its great tragedians and thinkers.



#### Epic shoreline

The Palace of Nestor and the Griffin Warrior's tomb lie several miles to the north of Voidokilia beach near the modern city of Pylos, Greece. According to tradition, this beach is where in "The Odyssey," Telemachus meets Nestor while searching for his father, Odysseus.

Shutterstock

A millennium before those events, the Peloponnese was the heartland of the Mycenaean civilization, one of the oldest of ancient Greece's cultures. It is named for the Bronze Age site of Mycenae in the northeast of the Peloponnese. Peaking in circa 1300 B.C., Mycenaean culture used a script now known to be the precursor to ancient Greek writing.

*(How the Greeks changed the idea of the afterlife.)*

It is nearly impossible to study ruins in this region without thinking of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Second-century geographer Pausanias believed Mycenae was home to Agamemnon, leader of the Greeks against the Trojans, an interpretation that has lingered on into modernity. Historians have disproved this old notion, yet even as modern archaeologists reveal more and more of Mycenaean history, the romance of the epics still colors the imagination.

Homeric parallels are inescapable when it comes to Pylos, located on the Peloponnese's western shore. In *The Iliad* "sandy Pylos" was the palatial home of Nestor, a Greek warrior-king. An old man when he took part in the Trojan War, Nestor was one of the luckier Greeks, who managed to return home and resume his life. In *The Odyssey* Nestor welcomes to Pylos

the son of Odysseus, who is looking for his father, missing since the Greek victory over Troy.

In 1939 a team led by Carl Blegen of the University of Cincinnati uncovered the ruins of a palace northeast of modern Pylos. It soon emerged that the ruins were Mycenaean, and in honor of Pylos's Homeric associations, the site was named the Palace of Nestor.

World War II halted work on the site, which did not resume until 1952. The excavation continued for 15 consecutive seasons and brought to light the best-preserved palace from the entire Aegean Bronze Age. A throne room, baths, and warehouses were revealed, reflecting the multifunctional nature of Mycenaean palaces: a royal mansion combined with a religious center and storehouses to distribute harvests from the region it controlled. The archaeologists confirmed that the Palace of Nestor coincided with the flourishing of the Mycenaean age, around 1300 B.C.



Nestor, the king of Pylos, is portrayed on a fifth-century B.C. amphora.  
RMN-Grand Palais

*(Greece's fires caused choking smoke and threatened heritage sites.)*

Close to the palace on the hillsides, other discoveries indicated evidence of an older phase. Northeast of the palace, a beehive-shaped tomb, known as a tholos, had been found in the 1930s. It predated the construction of the palace by about 200 years. Historians anticipated additional finds to reveal more about this earlier Mycenaean phase, but no major discoveries were made for decades.





### Royal tomb

Discovered in the 1930s, Tholos IV dates to before the time of the Griffin Warrior in the 15th century B.C. This distinctive beehive-shaped tomb is believed to be one of the oldest of its kind in Greece.

Peter Eastland/Alamy

## **New discovery**

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In spring 2015 the University of Cincinnati resumed its program at Pylos, directed by professors Sharon “Shari” Stocker and Jack Davis. They focused their efforts on an olive grove northeast of the Nestor Palace site. The team was thrilled when masonry was discovered just below the surface. Portions of a rectangular structure nearly eight feet long were exposed, which the team realized was a shaft tomb, a burial method practiced early in Mycenaean history.

## **Lucky intuition**

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Stocker, on the left, and Davis are pictured on site at the Griffin Warrior's tomb near Pylos, Greece.

Palace of Nestor Excavations/Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati  
Jack Davis and Sharon "Shari" Stocker, a husband-and-wife team of professors at the University of Cincinnati, expanded the research beyond the Palace of Nestor site at Pylos. In 2015 their detective work was rewarded by the discovery of the Griffin Warrior's tomb.

To the team's great surprise, the grave was intact. Covered by a broken slab (that most likely collapsed due to an earthquake), the chamber still contained human remains and grave goods, including weapons, vessels, and jewels. One of the most distinctive—an ivory plaque adorned with a griffin—gave the occupant a name: the Griffin Warrior. Earth had gradually covered up the grave's entrance and provided a natural protection from looters that lasted millennia.

On removing the slab, the team found the quantity and quality of the grave goods far exceeded all expectations. Numerous bronze weapons were found by his side: a dagger, a long sword, what appears to be the remains of very deteriorated armor, a helmet made of boar tusks, and a large sword more than three feet long with a gold-plated hilt.

### **The sword of a warrior**

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The sword as it was discovered in the Griffin Warrior's tomb in Pylos.

Palace of Nestor Excavations/Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati

Among all the weapons laid next to the warrior's corpse, the bronze sword stands out for its size—nearly three and a half feet long—and costly workmanship. The hilt, overlaid with gold, is as richly wrought as the best grave goods found in tombs across the Mycenaean world.

Although the investigation is far from complete, initial analyses have determined that the Griffin Warrior was a man in his early 30s who stood somewhere between five and six feet tall. The causes of his death are unclear because of the poor state of the body. Wrapped in a shroud, the body was laid inside a wooden sarcophagus. The burial reveals that, contrary to descriptions of funeral rites in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Mycenaean funerary practices in that period consisted of burial, not cremation.

*(Want to know about the arms and armor of ancient Greece? It's in The Iliad.)*

The team set about trying to place as precise a date as possible on the grave and its contents. Normally, ceramics found in such burials help archaeologists calculate its age, but this burial contained no ceramic material at all. Soil analysis around the tomb, however, confirmed that

the grave dated to the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, making it older than the Palace of Nestor. Stocker and Davis believe the Griffin Warrior's tomb was probably built sometime between 1500 B.C. and 1450 B.C.

## **Weapons and jewels**

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An illustration of the soldier's burial shows good surrounding the body.

Illustration by D. Nenova/Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati

The Griffin Warrior's body and grave goods appear to have been placed with deliberation. In the burial certain objects were grouped together, organized according to the material from which they were made. Bronze items included a sword, and other weapons, gold items and jewelry included a necklace and signet rings, silver objects included cups, and gems included beads of carnelian, amethyst, and amber.

## **Cretan connection**

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Around 1,400 objects have been recovered from the grave. Many are being restored for display in the nearby Chora Archaeological Museum. Hundreds of gems including amethyst, jasper, amber, carnelian, and agate have been recovered. Especially intriguing is a braided necklace that shows signs of damage and repair in antiquity. A faience bead hangs from the necklace of Egyptian manufacture. According to archaeologists, it may have been a spoil of war torn from its owner's neck and subsequently mended before being buried with the warrior. Six silver cups and several bronze containers for dining purposes were also found, as well as several ivory combs and a mirror.

These exquisite artifacts are more than just beautiful; they are evidence of Mycenaean interaction with another culture, the Minoans. Many of the artifacts are from Crete, a large island some 100 miles south of Pylos, which was home to the Minoan civilization. Among these items are gold signet rings bearing engravings of

ritual scenes that are typically Cretan. Around 50 gems in the burial are also ornamented with common Minoan motifs, such as bulls.



Horns and hooves

More than 50 sealstones, like this carnelian one featuring three bulls, were found in the Griffin Warrior's tomb.

Jennifer Stephens/University of Cincinnati

*(The monstrous Minotaur fascinated ancient Greece and Rome.)*

Minoan Crete's heyday—in the 17th century B.C.—preceded that of the Mycenaeans'. The influence of Minoan culture on the Mycenaean Greeks has since been established through writing. The Mycenaeans used a system called Linear B, which was found on tablets at the Palace of Nestor at Pylos and at Mycenae. It is now known to have evolved from an older Minoan script known as Linear A. When the Palace of Nestor was being excavated in the 1950s, British archaeologists deciphered Linear B. Scholars have since established that the Pylos tablets written in Linear B recorded administrative and agricultural data.

Perhaps the most exceptional piece from the tomb, the so-called Combat Agate reveals the intertwined influences of these ancient cultures. It took roughly a year to clean and preserve the stone once it had been removed from the tomb, but the results were nothing short of amazing. It is considered to be one of the most exquisite hard stone carvings from all antiquity. Measuring slightly more than an inch long, this tiny, semi-precious stone features a finely detailed depiction of a heated clash between two warriors. A fallen comrade lies beneath their feet as one soldier is poised to pierce the neck of his opponent.

## Duel to the death

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The Combat Agate is an engraved gem sealstone found among the grave goods of the Griffin Warrior at Pylos.

Illustration by T. Ross/Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati

The Combat Agate is a masterpiece in miniature. When the agate was first uncovered, it attracted little notice as it was encrusted with lime. Only after cleaning and careful examination was a work of art revealed.

Archaeologists have noted that the weapons depicted on the Combat Agate exactly match objects exhumed in other Mycenaean tombs. The battle scene is also similar to ones depicted on other contemporary works of art, such as ceramics and frescoes in the palaces. The similarities support the idea that the Combat Agate's creator, whom archaeologists believe was likely working in Crete, was familiar with these artworks and battle scenes. The overlap suggests a degree of intermingling between Minoan and Mycenaean cultures. The astonishing, millimetric precision of the work—most likely performed with the aid of a rock crystal magnifying glass—makes this item a masterpiece.

An intact burial from this early era of Greek history is a remarkable find, and the contents of the Griffin Warrior's tomb clearly reveal the connections between mainland Greek and Cretan cultures. The exquisite weapons, gems, and works of art confirm that the Mycenaean elite had embraced Minoan artistic influences in early phases of their culture, predating even the period of palace-building at Pylos and Mycenae.



## Golden treasures

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Jewelry found in the Griffin Warrior tomb dazzles archaeologists, not only for its beauty but also for its cross-cultural significance. Solid gold signet rings bear clear signs of the Minoan culture from the island of Crete. The gold ring depicting dancing women is one of t...

J. Vanderpool

## Glory and decline

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The discovery of the Griffin Warrior also presents archaeologists with an individual who lived at a particularly interesting juncture. The Minoan civilization was beginning to wane as the Mycenaean civilization was rising. Around 1600 B.C. a massive volcanic eruption on the nearby island of Thera (also known as Santorini) disrupted the Minoan civilization. Two centuries later, around the time the Griffin Warrior likely lived, Crete suffered another natural disaster (some historians suspect another eruption or perhaps an earthquake) that further weakened it.

The island was increasingly overrun by the Mycenaean, who continued admiring and adopting aspects of Minoan culture that they took back to the Greek mainland. Researchers speculate that perhaps the Griffin Warrior took part in the conquest of the island and

returned to Pylos loaded with the same treasures found in his tomb. On the other hand, there is an intriguing possibility that he was the very opposite: a Minoan who settled in the Peloponnese and blended Minoan and Mycenaean customs.

*(Did sons and daughters get the same education in ancient Greece?)*

The Mycenaean period came to an end around 1200 B.C. Its great palaces—including that of Pylos—fell into disuse and ruin. After hundreds of years of cultural retreat, the Greek world only began to reassert itself in the eighth century B.C. The Greek alphabet emerged, and the Homeric epics were composed. Ancient Greece was on its way to its Golden Age, a period whose beginnings can now be traced to the world that enriched and exalted the Griffin Warrior of Pylos.



Off to fight  
Mycenaean warriors adorn a 12th-century B.C.  
wine krater from Mycenae.  
DEA/Album

## Golden graves

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Tholos VI, discovered in 2018, probably once held early Mycenaean rulers.

Arthur Stephens/Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati

In the course of the 2018 dig, two new beehive-shaped tombs—Tholos VI and Tholos VII—were unearthed. The distinctive rounded vaults that once covered them had long ago collapsed. Dated to the 15th century B.C., around the time when the Griffin Warrior lived, they are likely the resting places of the early princes of Pylos. Flakes found at the tombs suggest that their interior features were ornamented with gold.