

Mycenaean Art

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Mycenaean architecture has many elements that are unique to this time period. These elements are much different than the architecture of the Minoans. This lesson covers:



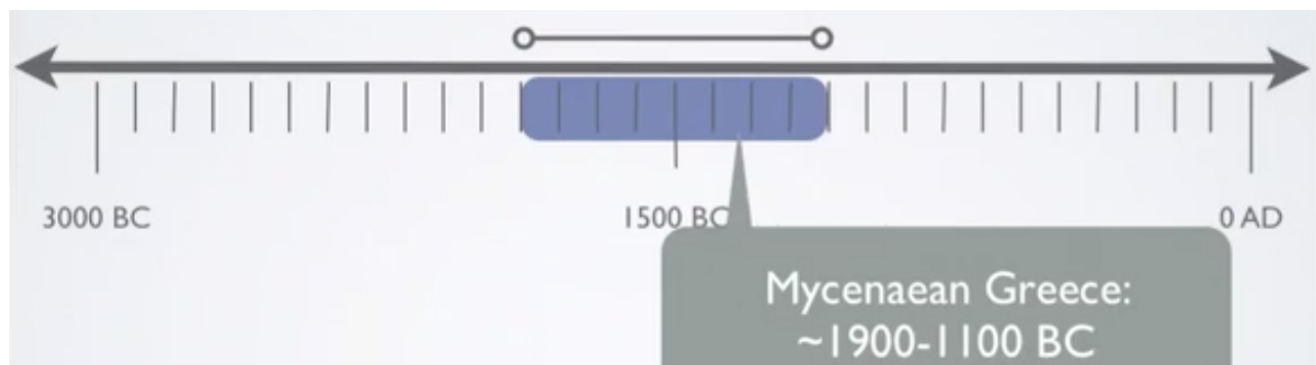
BIG IDEA

The aggressive, fortress-like qualities of Mycenaean architecture are sharply contrasted with the palatial qualities of Minoan architecture.

1. Period and Location: Mycenaean Art

This lesson covers the time from around 1900 to 1100 BC, a period of about 800 years. The ancient city of Mycenae lies southwest of Athens and northwest of the island of Crete.

The timeline shown here highlights this period.



2. Ashlar Masonry and Corbeled Vaulting

Let's start with some key terms. **Ashlar masonry** consists of large, rectangular cut stones fitted together. It's important to note that these are assembled dry, without using any kind of mortar.

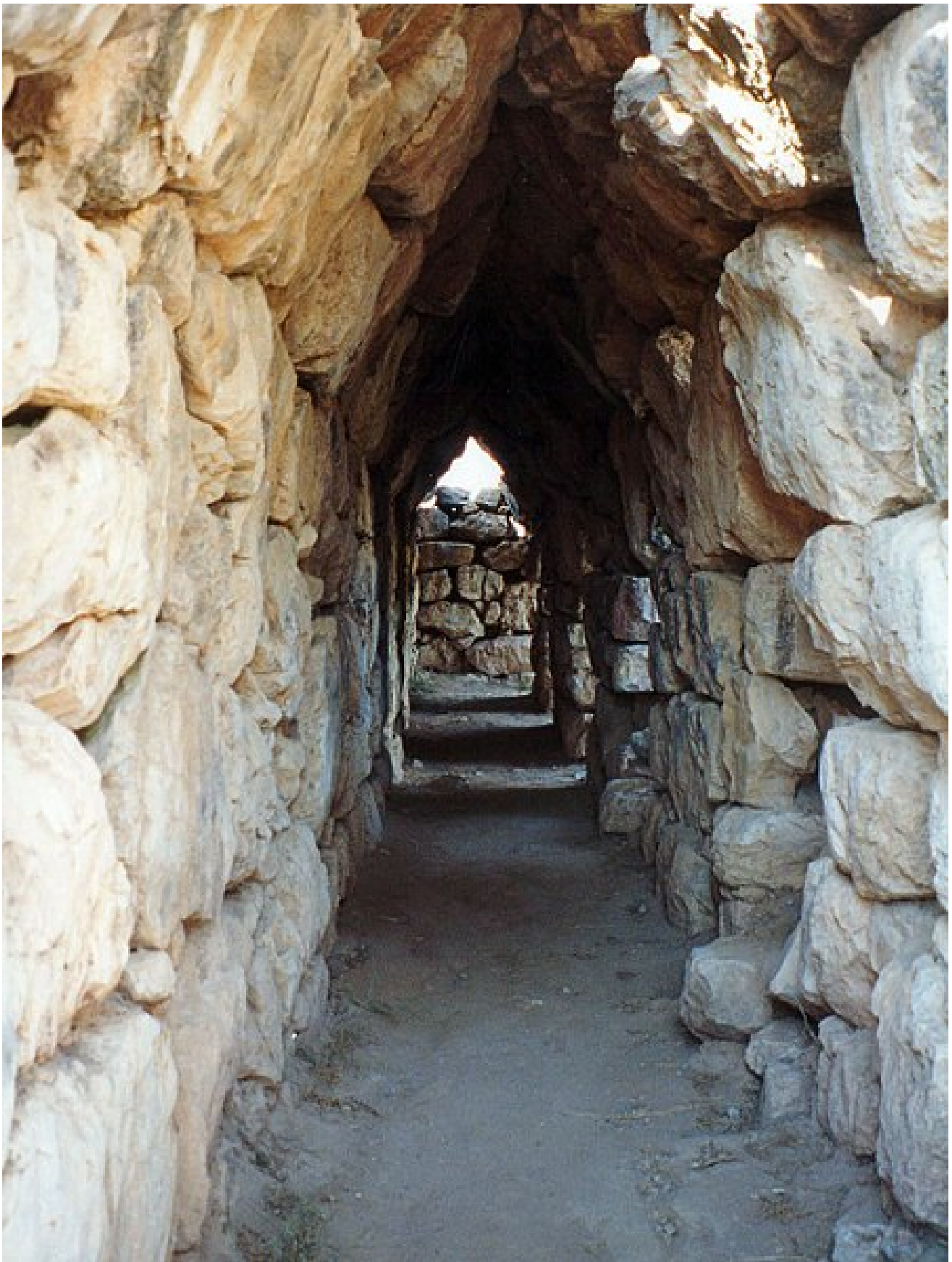


Ashlar masonry

These enormous stones were thought to be only movable by the mythical race of Cyclops, which is why this type of construction is called **cyclopean construction**.

Corbeled vaults are a progressive narrowing of step-like elements until they meet at the very top. While it's a sturdy type of construction, the large blocks are cantilevered inward as the corbeling itself isn't self-supportive like a true arch would be.

The image shown here, from a passageway in the architectural site of Tiryns near the city of Mycenae, is one of many possible variations of a corbeled vault.



Corbeled vault



TERMS TO KNOW

Ashlar Masonry

Stonework made of large, rectangular cut stones

Cyclopean Construction

Construction done with masonry consisting of blocks so large that they appeared to have been built by Cyclops (a huge, one-eyed, humanoid monster)

Corbeled Vault

The simplest type of vault, involving step support elements

3. Mycenaean Art vs. Minoan Art

Unlike the palatial architecture seen on Crete, Mycenaean architecture used very thick, sturdy, fortress-like structures, differentiating it from Minoan culture.

The Lion Gate (shown below), so-called because of the carving of the two opposed lions within the corbeled vault at the top, rests upon a large post-and-lintel opening. It was constructed for a specific purpose, as it was part of the fortification serving to funnel any attackers into the narrow space where they would be at a real disadvantage from the soldiers protecting the fortress from the top of the walls. The gate is made of cut stone and dates from around 1250 BC.



Lion Gate at complex of Mycenae

1250 BC

Ashlar masonry

Here is a closeup of the lion carving at the section where the corbeled vaulting was used:

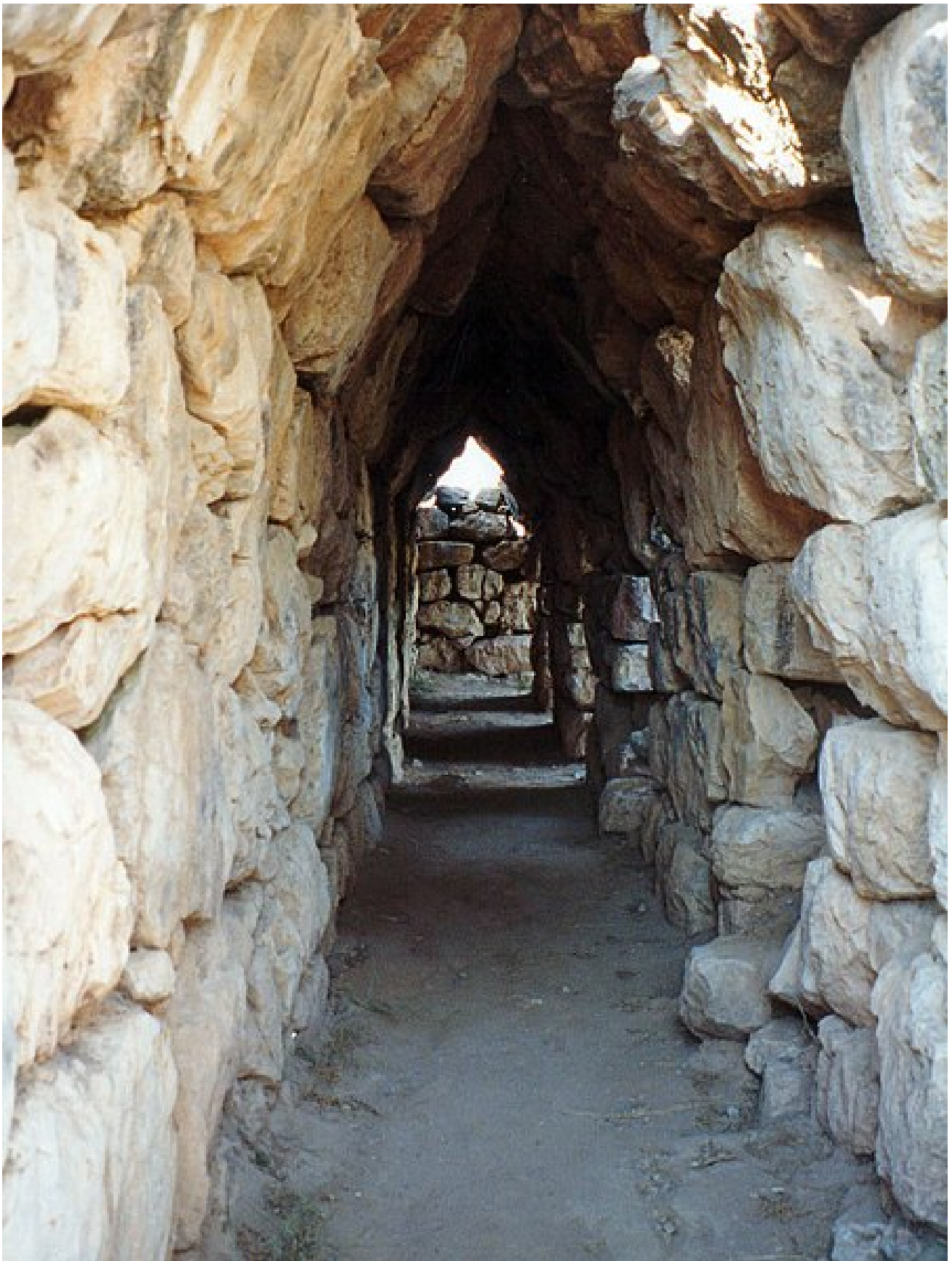


Lions Gate detail

1250 BC

Cut stone

The next image is of another corbeled vault from Tiryns, which was constructed between 1400 and 1200 BC.



Masonry tunnel at Tiryns, Mycenae

1400-1200 BC

Corbeled vault

The images you've seen of corbeled vaults are from two different Mycenaean art structures. Notice the qualities associated with Mycenaean architecture.

Now compare them with the ruins of the palace complex at Knossos, Crete, below. There's definitely a sense of airiness and delicacy that isn't evident in Mycenaean architecture. This reflects the cultural disposition of Minoans as a more peaceful civilization.



4. Mycenaean Art and Tombs

The architectural elements that we see in Mycenaean royal residences are carried over into their tombs as well. Similar in some ways to Egyptian burials, Mycenaean royals were buried in large tombs with many treasures.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Take a look at the image below of an exterior view of the doorway to a tomb, the so-called treasury of Atreus.



Entrance to the "Treasury of Atreus"

1300-1200 BC

Ashlar masonry

This structure was built between 1300 and 1200 BC, and it was mistakenly thought to house the treasury of the King Atreus, the legendary father of the kings Agamemnon and Menelaus, who were brothers.



DID YOU KNOW

According to the Greek writer Homer, the abduction of Menelaus's wife, Helen, and her supposed elopement with the Trojan prince Paris sparked the Trojan War, which Homer describes in his epic poem *The Iliad*.

Here is the interior of the treasury:



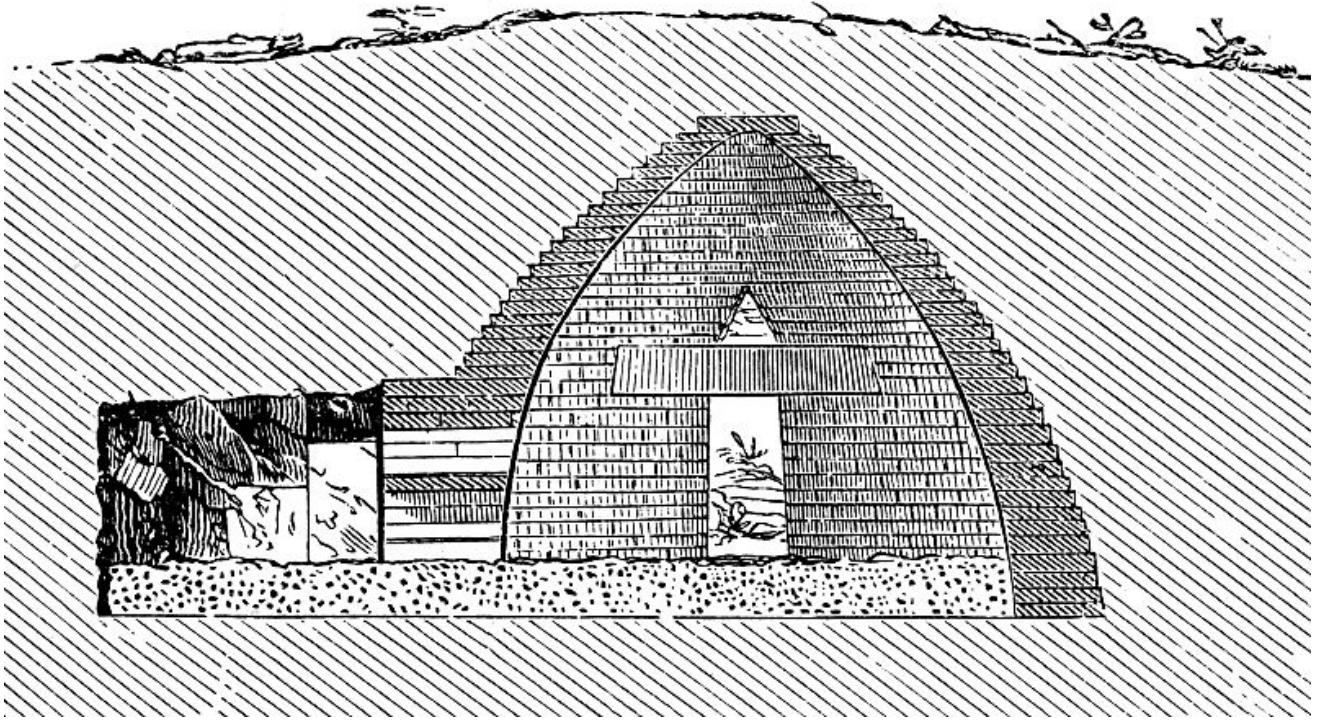
Interior of the Treasury of Atreus

1300-1200 BC

Corbeled vault

The interior of the treasury is actually a corbeled vault buried under a mound of earth. Because of their shape, tombs such as this are referred to as **beehive tombs**.

For reference, here is a cross-section drawing of the tomb:



Cross-section of interior room from "Treasury of Atreus"

13th Century BC

Beehive tomb



TERM TO KNOW

Beehive Tombs

Large, round rooms found at Mycenae

5. Mycenaean Funerary Art Work

According to Homer, the Mycenaeans were known to be rich in gold, and we know that many artists of this time began to work with gold. An example of this is the funerary mask of Agamemnon, shown here. This type of metalwork is called repoussé.



Funerary "Mask of Agamemnon"

1600-1550 BC

Gold

This gold mask, made between 1600 and 1550 BC, is an example of Mycenaean funerary artwork commonly laid over the deceased's body. Although this piece is commonly referred to as the mask of Agamemnon, who was thought to be the king of Mycenae during the Trojan War, its true owner is a mystery. It is not possible that it belongs to Agamemnon, because it dates between 1600 and 1550 BC, which predates the Trojan War by several hundred years.

The mask does, however, depict some interesting stylistic elements:

- Scroll-shaped ears
- Leaf-shaped shut eyes
- Thin lips and mustache

- Possible (highly stylized) representation of an actual person



SUMMARY

Mycenaean architecture has unique elements that differ from other periods of time, such as that of Minoan architecture. In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of Mycenaean art**.

Ashlar masonry and corbeled vaulting were two specific types of construction used during the Mycenaean period. For comparison, this lesson looked at **Mycenaean art vs. Minoan art**, and you learned about the differences in construction by exploring examples of each time period.

Finally, you learned about **Mycenaean art and tombs**, as well as **Mycenaean funerary art work**. Many artists of this time began to work with gold due to the wealth of individuals in this area. Mycenaean royals were buried in large tombs with many treasures. The artwork of the tombs, as well as other funerary artwork that was placed on the deceased, such as a mask and body pieces, were very elaborate.

Source: THIS TUTORIAL WAS AUTHORED BY IAN MCCONNELL FOR SOPHIA LEARNING. Please see our [Terms of Use](#).



TERMS TO KNOW

Ashlar Masonry

Stonework made of large, rectangular cut stones.

Beehive Tombs

Large, round rooms found at Mycenae.

Corbeled Vault

The simplest type of vault, involving step support elements.

Cyclopean Construction

Construction done with masonry consisting of blocks so large that they appeared to have been built by a Cyclops (huge, one-eyed humanoid monster).