

Millennium warning: Caution, sharp turn

Fall of advanced Mycenaeans a lesson for computer society?

By Catherine Mitchell
Staff Reporter

MATERIALISTIC, WAR-LIKE and masters of technology — the hallmarks of a civilization that appeared invincible.

But the Greeks who lived to defeat Troy with the fabled hollow horse didn't know what they were in for, as they approached the first millennium BC.

The story of the fall of the Greeks is a lesson of history that Western civilization would do well to heed, particularly as we also enter a new millennium, warns archeology Prof. Michael Cosmopoulos.

Affluent and technologically advanced, the Mycenaeans of great Greek mythology lived from about 1600 BC to 1100 BC and were the first to establish a federal political system with provincial representation, explains the University of Manitoba classics professor.

Reliance on conquest

They also refined the smelting of bronze, which allowed a superior quality for better swords, spears and shields. The Mycenaeans were war-like and their reliance on conquest would signal the civilization's destruction shortly before the millennium turned over.

"Its economy and social life was based on war and expansion," Cosmopoulos says.

"They come across as very arrogant and very harsh. There's very little humanity."

Around 1180 BC, faced with the collapse of trade, a desperate King Agamemnon launched the Trojan war. After years of stalemate, the sagas say, the Mycenaeans pushed the wooden horse stuffed with soldiers to the gates. Welcomed as a gift, it was ushered behind the walls and the rest is, as they say, history.

Yet in triumph, the victors, too, were vanquished. The war had taken too long and the exhausted army and homeland were vulnerable to outside invaders as well as internal revolt.

By 1100 BC, the economic and political structures were in ruin, and 75 per cent of their population disappeared, Cosmopoulos says.

"It's a tremendous destruction," he says. "Today that would mean of 30

The 24K gold death mask (top) of one of the affluent and technologically advanced Mycenaeans who lived from about 1600 BC to 1100 BC; Prof. Michael Cosmopoulos with replicas of artifacts from a people lacking in humanity but abundant in wealth and power; the fresco battle scene depicts the war-like culture that was the basis for the Mycenaean economy and social life. Cosmopoulos sees many parallels between our culture and that of the Mycenaeans.



WAYNE GLOWACKI/WINNIPEG FREE PRESS



turbing similarities in the way we of the computer age live.

Our political system now is based on democracy rather than royalty, as was that of the Mycenaeans. Their driven society traded internationally, as does ours and, most importantly, they saw technology as a means to acquire wealth and property rather than being for the pursuit of happiness.

That's not so unlike what computers have done for us, he says.

"The only real danger is not from destruction, because we could survive destruction," he explains. "I think the only fear that we have is from losing our humanity."

Computers have made life easier in

itself, we have lost sight of the idea that computers were supposed to free up time to enjoy life.

People now use computers at work, in their cars, to run their homes and to entertain themselves.

"Technology has developed so rapidly that we really haven't had time to catch our breath, we're really dazzled and amazed by it."

With so much focus on the cyber-world, human interaction at work and at play is getting lost, Cosmopoulos says.

Computers can not teach morality and humanity, and are a poor substitutes for finding true love and joy in life.

He finds this particularly evident

see this in my class; they have this emptiness in a sense."

The Mycenaeans flourished for 500 years and were true superpowers, but having a well-stocked coffer is not the same as having a rich life.

"Even their art is beautiful but it is lifeless, very strict, symmetrical. There's no joy in their art. It's kind of gloomy, actually."

'Time'

Cosmopoulos says people have a natural fear of the great change of "time," the physical act of turning the calendar at the advent of a new millennium.

From the story of the Mycenaeans, he hopes people see a cautionary tale but also realize that despite what comes, there is hope.

After 700 BC, the Greeks began to build their classical civilization, the high point of which is known as the Golden Ages, with the emergence of philosophy, literature, poetry and drama.

"Despite the size of this destruction, humankind survived, progressed and created something new and even more beautiful than before."

Prof. Michael Cosmopoulos is arranging a dig in Iklaina, Greece, open to students and the general public, between May 28 and June 10. The course cost of \$850 covers accommodation, meals and transportation on