

In 1876, Heinrich Schliemann announced to King George of Greece the success of his excavations at Mycenae, claiming the discovery of the burials of Agamemnon and his companions. He went on to describe the golden treasures of the Shaft Graves as "enough to fill a large museum, which will become the most marvelous in the world." Indeed, Schliemann's finds now hold pride of place in the central hall of the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, where explanatory texts emphasize continuity with the Homeric world and the early accomplishment of "our European civilization." Despite the apparent fruition of Schliemann's vision, the country's central museum did not provide an immediate home for the Mycenae artifacts, nor were the masses of gold and bronze artifacts easily adopted as the early expression of Greek genius. The tensions surrounding the initial presentations of the Shaft Grave reveal the difficulty of inserting a Mycenaean chapter in the story of Greek origins and nationhood.

The initial assembly and display of the national collection in Athens followed an uncertain progress that mirrored that of the nation struggling for geographical, political, and ideological consolidation. Ancient monuments and archaeological discoveries were frequently invoked in the formation of a modern Greek identity, and museums played a key role in the creation of shared culture and history. The evolving design and exhibitions of Greece's National Museum canonized a portion of the country's archaeological heritage as a source of national identity and pride. From the physical form of the building and style of its décor to the organization of the collections, European notions of art and Hellenism shaped the museum and its displays. Yet the motivating forces were those of the Greek nation.

When the Shaft Grave artifacts were first brought to Athens, they were presented as Schliemann's discovery, rather than the nation's possession. The "Central Museum" literally had no room to house them, and they were first displayed in the National Bank and then the Technical University. Schliemann's grandiose account of his excavations, followed by his catalogue of the "Treasures from Mycenae" exhibit, connected these objects with Homeric myth and society. Criticism that the barbaric and exotic splendor of the Shaft Graves was irreconcilable with later Greek styles evoked defenses that linked Mycenaean art even more closely with Classical accomplishment and Hellenic identity. Public presentations, most of all, asserted the Hellenic genius in the Shaft Grave arts, and the ethnic origins of the Greek people in a Mycenaean stock. Amid such assertions the Shaft Grave objects were transferred in 1891 to an expanded Central Museum, securing their position as part of Greek heritage. Now operating under the official title of the "National Archaeological Museum," the institution presented the Mycenaean artifacts as the starting point in its history of cultural continuity.

In the central hall of the newly remodeled building, visibly and axially aligned through the main entrance, the Mycenae artifacts indeed played a prominent role. Despite the presence of significantly earlier prehistoric material, the museum's chronological sequence of select Greek art began with the Shaft Graves. The Mycenaean Hall was marked as a special place with walls elaborately painted in the hues and patterns of Bronze Age frescoes, distinct from the structure's neoclassical façade and simply decorated halls of sculpture. As debates about the nature of Greek identity and nationhood continued into the twentieth century, and nationalist sentiments were constructed through geography, language, and history, the arts recovered from Greek soil were on display as relevant evidence. Yet within the museum's constructed environment, the Mycenae artifacts were present as more than another phase of cultural production: they were displayed as the starting point of ancient and modern Greek achievement.