

The Minoan Civilization

The Minoan Civilization was a Bronze Age civilization that arose on the island of Crete and flourished from approximately the 27th century BC to the 15th century BC. It was rediscovered at the beginning of the 20th century through the work of the British archaeologist Arthur Evans. Will Durant referred to it as “the first link in the European chain”. The early inhabitants of Crete settled as early as 128,000 BC, during the Middle Paleolithic age. However, it was not until 5000 BC that the first signs of advanced agriculture appeared.

What the Minoans called themselves is unknown. The term "Minoan" was coined by Arthur Evans after the mythic "king" Minos. Minos was associated in Greek myth with the labyrinth, which Evans identified with the site at Knossos. In the *Odyssey*, composed centuries after the destruction of the Minoan civilization, Homer calls the natives of Crete Eteocretans ("true Cretans"); these may have been descendants of the Minoans.

Minoan palaces (anaktora) are the best known building types to have been excavated on the island. They are monumental buildings serving administrative purposes as evidenced by the large archives unearthed by archaeologists. Each of the palaces excavated to date has its own unique features, but they also share features which set them apart from other structures. The palaces were often multi-storied, with interior and exterior staircases, light wells, massive columns, storage magazines and courtyards.

It seems that the Minoan people were not Indo-European, and that they were even related to the pre-Greek dwellers of the Greek mainland and Western Anatolia, the so-called Pelasgians. However the Minoan civilization was much more advanced and sophisticated than the contemporary Helladic civilization during the bronze-age. The Minoan script (Linear A) has not yet been deciphered, but it seems that it represented an Aegean language, unrelated to any Indo-European language. From the Neolithic ages Crete stood in the middle of two cultural-streams leading to the west: The forward-Asiatic and the north-African cultural streams. It seems that for many centuries Minoan Crete remained free from any invaders and managed to develop a distinct self-based civilization which was probably the most advanced in the Mediterranean area during the bronze-age.

The collection of Minoan art is in the museum at Heraklion, near Knossos on the north shore of Crete. Minoan art, with other remains of material culture, especially the sequence of ceramic styles, has allowed archaeologists to define the three phases of Minoan culture (EM, MM, LM) discussed above.

Since wood and textiles have vanished through decomposition, the best preserved, and so most easily learned from, surviving examples of Minoan art are Minoan pottery, the palace architecture with its frescos that include landscapes, stone carvings, and intricately carved seal stones.

Knossos Palace

Knossos, also known as Labyrinth, or *Knossos Palace*, is the largest Bronze Age archaeological site on Crete and probably the ceremonial and political centre of the Minoan civilization and culture. The palace appears as a maze of workrooms, living spaces, and store rooms close to a central square. Detailed images of Cretan life in the late Bronze Age are provided by images on the walls of this palace. It is also a tourist destination today, as it is near the main city of Heraklion and has been substantially restored by archaeologist Arthur Evans.

The city of Knossos remained important through the classical and Roman periods, but its population shifted to the new town of Chandax (modern Heraklion) during the 9th century AD. By the 13th century, it was called Makryteikhos 'Long Wall'; the bishops of Gortyn continued to call themselves Bishops of Knossos until the 19th century. Today, the name is used only for the archaeological site situated in the suburbs of Heraklion.

The ruins at Knossos were discovered in 1878 by Minos Kalokairinos, a Cretan merchant and antiquarian. He conducted the first excavations at Kephala Hill, which brought to light part of the storage magazines in the west wing and a section of the west facade. After Kalokairinos, several people attempted to continue the work, and Heinrich Schliemann had previously showed an interest but it was not until March 16, 1900 that archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans, an English gentleman of independent means, was able to purchase the entire site and conduct massive excavations. The excavation and restoration of Knossos, and the discovery of the culture that he labeled Minoan, is inseparable from Evans. Assisted by Dr. Duncan Mackenzie, who had already distinguished himself by his excavations on the island of Melos, and Mr. Fyfe, the British School at Athens architect, Evans employed a large staff of local laborers as excavators and within a few months had uncovered a substantial portion of what he named the Palace of Minos. The term 'palace' may be misleading: in modern English, it usually refers to an elegant building used to house a head of state or similar. Knossos was an intricate collection of over 1,000 interlocking rooms, some of which served as artisans' workrooms and food-processing centers (e.g. wine presses). It served as a central storage point, and a religious and administrative center. The throne room that was discovered was repainted by a father-and-son team of artists, both named Émile Gilliéron, at Arthur Evans' command. Evans based the recreations on archaeological evidence, but drew criticism from some quarters, because some of the best-known frescoes from the throne room are believed to be inventions of the Gilliérons.

The site has had a very long history of human habitation, beginning with the founding of the first Neolithic settlement circa 7,000 BC. Over time and during several different phases that had their own social dynamic, Knossos grew until, by the 19th to 16th centuries BC (during the 'Old Palace' and the succeeding 'Neo-palatial' periods), the settlement possessed not only a monumental administrative and religious center (i.e., the Palace), but also a city with a population of up to 100,000. The site was destroyed by fire but has been reconstructed.

The palace is about 130 meters on a side and since the Roman period has been suggested as the source of the myth of the Labyrinth, an elaborate mazelike structure built for King Minos of Crete and designed by the legendary artificer Daedalus to hold the Minotaur, a creature that was half man and half bull and was eventually killed by the Athenian hero Theseus.

"Labyrinth" may have come from *labrys*, a word that refers to a double, or two-bladed, axe. Its representation had religious and probably magical significance. It was used throughout the Mycenaean world as an apotropaic symbol: the presence of the symbol on an object would prevent it from being "killed". Axes were scratched on many of the stones of the palace. It appears in pottery decoration and is a motif of the Shrine of the Double Axes at the palace, as well as of many shrines throughout Crete and the Aegean. The first written attestation of the word 'labyrinth' is believed by many linguists to feature on a Linear B tablet as *da-pu₂-ri-to-jo po-ti-ni-ja*, 'lady of the Labyrinth', which makes the etymology connecting it to *labrys* less likely. Whatever the word's ultimate origin, it must have been borrowed by the Greeks, as the suffix *labyr-inthos* uses a suffix generally considered to be pre-Greek.

The location of the labyrinth of legend has long been a question for Minoan studies. It might have been the name of the palace or of some portion of the palace. Throughout most of the 20th century the intimations of human sacrifice in the myth puzzled Bronze Age scholars, because evidence for human sacrifice on Crete had never been discovered and so it was vigorously denied. The practice was finally confirmed archaeologically (see under Minoan civilization). It is possible that the palace was a great sacrificial center and could have been named the Labyrinth. Its layout certainly is labyrinthine in the sense that it is intricate and confusing.

Many other possibilities have been suggested. The modern meaning of *labyrinth* as a twisting maze is based on the myth.

Several out-of-epoch advances in the construction of the palace are thought to have generated the myth of Atlantis.

The great palace was gradually built between 1700 and 1400 BC, with periodic rebuildings after destruction. Structures preceded it on Kephala hill. The features currently most visible date mainly to the last period of habitation, which Evans termed Late Minoan. The palace has an interesting layout – the original plan can no longer be seen due to the subsequent modifications. The 1,300 rooms are connected with corridors of varying sizes and direction, which differ from other contemporaneous palaces that connected the rooms via several main hallways. The 6 acres (24,000 m²) of the palace included a theater, a main entrance on each of its four cardinal faces, and extensive storerooms (also called magazines). Within the storerooms were large clay containers (*pithoi*) that held oil, grains, dried fish, beans, and olives. Many of the items were processed at the palace, which had grain mills, oil presses, and wine presses. Beneath the *pithoi* were stone holes that were used to store more valuable objects, such as gold. The palace used advanced architectural techniques: for example, part of it was built up to five storeys high.

Phaistos Palace

Phaistos is an ancient city on the island of Crete. Phaistos was located in the south-central portion of the island, about 5.6 kilometers from the Mediterranean Sea. It was inhabited from about 4000 BC. A palace, dating from the Middle Bronze Age, was destroyed by an earthquake during the Late Bronze Age. Knossos along with other Minoan sites was destroyed at that time. The palace was rebuilt toward the end of the Late Bronze Age.

The reference of Phaistos to the ancient Greek literature is quite frequent. Phaistos is first referenced by Homer as "well populated", and the Homeric epics indicate its participation in the Trojan War. The historian Diodorus Siculus indicates that Phaistos, together with Knossos and Kydonia, are the three towns that were founded by the king Minos on Crete. Instead, Pausanias and Stephanus of Byzantium supported in their texts that the founder of the city was Phaestos, son of Hercules or Ropalus. Especially the city of Phaistos is associated with the mythical king of Crete Rhadamanthys.

Phaistos had its own currency and had created an alliance with other autonomous Cretan cities, and with the king of Pergamon Eumenes II. Around the end of the 3rd century BC, Phaistos was destroyed by the Gortynians and since then ceased to exist in the history of Crete. Scotia Aphrodite and goddess Leto (was called and Phytia also) worshiped there. People of Phaistos were distinguished for their funny adages. Phaistian in his descent was Epimenides who was the wise man who had been invited by the Athenians to clean the city from the Cylonian affair (Cyloneio agos) at the 6th cent. BC.

The palace of Malia

The palace of Malia, dating from the Middle Bronze Age, was destroyed by an earthquake during the Late Bronze Age;^[2] Knossos and other sites were also destroyed at that time. The palace was later rebuilt toward the end of the Late Bronze Age. Most of the ruins visible today date from this second period of construction. The palace features a giant central courtyard, 48m x 23m in size. On the south side are two sets of steps leading upwards and a maze of tiny rooms. Also here is a strange carved stone called a kernos stone, which looks like a millstone with a cup attached to the side of it. On the north side of the courtyard were storage rooms with giant earthenware pithos jars, up to two meters tall. These were used for holding grain, olive oil and other liquids; the floor of these rooms has a complex drainage system for carrying away spilled liquids.

The palace of Malia was discovered in 1915 by Hadzidakis, a Greek archaeologist. It was fully excavated from 1922 onwards by the French School at Athens in collaboration with Greek scholars. Importantly, the palace was surrounded by a Minoan town which has only recently been uncovered. Excavation is ongoing. Important parts of the old and new excavations are covered by a series of large semi-transparent roofs, which protect them from the elements. In places tourists are allowed to wander among the ruins; in others, walkways allow passage above. There are rooms which have been identified as metal workshops, ceramic workshops and meeting rooms; there is also a large residential dwelling with on-suite bath, which is similar to a design at Phaistos, both taking advantage of expansive views.

The Palace of Zakros

Zakros is a site on the eastern coast of the island of Crete, Greece, containing ruins from the Minoan civilization. The site is often known to archaeologists as Zakro or Kato Zakro. It is believed to have been one of the four main administrative centers of the Minoans, and its protected harbor and strategic location made it an important commercial hub for trade to the east.

The town was dominated by the Palace of Zakro, originally built around 1900 BC, rebuilt around 1600 BC, and destroyed around 1450 BC along with the other major centers of Minoan civilization. Extensive ruins of the palace remain.