

## History of Minoan Crete

Perhaps the most sophisticated Bronze Age civilization of the Mediterranean world was that of the Minoans. The Minoan civilization developed on and ruled the island of Crete from about 3,600 -1,400 BC. The Minoans established a great trading empire centered on Crete, which is conveniently located midway between Egypt, Greece, Anatolia, and the Middle East.

### *Background to the Minoans*

The Minoan language, written in the script known as Linear A, remains undeciphered, so there remains much that we do not know about the ancient Minoans. For example, we do not even know what they called themselves. The term “Minoan” is a modern name and comes from the legendary King Minos. According to Greek mythology, King Minos ruled the island of Crete. He supposedly kept a Minotaur in a maze on the island and sacrificed young Greeks to feed it until it was killed by the hero Theseus. There are various legends about a King of Crete named Minos, and the ancient Greeks decided that all of them could not refer to the same man; thus, they assumed that there were many kings named Minos who had ruled Crete. When the archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans rediscovered the civilization, he renamed them the Minoans, because he believed they were related to these ancient rulers of the island from Greek myth.

Still, the lack of written evidence can be somewhat compensated for through the use of archaeology. We can make up a bit for our lack of knowledge from texts with information gleaned from archaeology. The Minoan civilization was forgotten until it was rediscovered by the British archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans in the first decade of the twentieth century. Evans was intrigued by the ruins of a site that would later become known as Knossos. He bought the ruins, hired a team to excavate, and came to realize that he had found the remains of a previously unknown ancient Bronze Age civilization.

Evans kept detailed records of the excavation, and subsequently other archaeologists have excavated more Minoan sites on Crete. Based on archaeological evidence, we can construct a rough outline of the history of Minoan Crete, though some details may never be fully understood. Based on our evidence, the history of Minoan Crete is conventionally divided into four historical periods: Prepalatial (from 3000-1900 BC), Protopalatial (1900-1700 BC), Neopalatial (1700-1400 BC), and Postpalatial (1400-1150 BC). The exact dates for each period are approximate and vary from source to source, but they give us a good general idea of the history of the Minoans.

### *Neolithic and Prepalatial Crete (Beginnings-1900 BC)*

Before the great palaces were built and Minoan Civilization thrived, Crete was the home of an early Neolithic populace. The island was probably first inhabited by people around 6,000 BC. They grew wheat, olives, and grapes; herded sheep; and lived in small villages. Some of these towns, over the course of thousands of years, began to grow large and prosperous.

By the third millennium BC, some of these towns had grown into complex centers with trade and production taking place there. Craftsmen at these towns began working in silver, gold, and bronze, and already some sea trade seemed to be taking place. They traded with Egypt, Anatolia, and the Levant for copper, tin, ivory, and gold. This was the Prepalatial period of Minoan history, called such because the great palaces had not yet been built. Along with the lack of palaces, it seems like there was a lack of centralized authority. We do not know how the people governed themselves, but it seems like there was a looser social organization.

Some of the only surviving buildings from the Prepalatial period of Minoan civilization are tombs. They are usually called tholos tombs due to their round shape, and they usually have one short entrance. Rectangular tombs have also been found, and the Minoans also used caves as tombs in this period. The evidence suggests that the tombs were built to house the bodies of entire villages or clans, not for specific important people, thus supporting the view of a less hierarchical society in the Prepalatial period.

### *Protopalatial Crete (1900-1700 BC)*

In the Protopalatial (or Old Palatial) period, the first palaces were built on Crete. They were built all roughly around same time and all very close to the sea. Outside the palaces grew smaller settlements, and these were connected with early paved roads. This period probably saw the emergence of kings as rulers of various areas on Crete and perhaps the beginnings of what would become complex bureaucracies.

During this period, the Minoans began to expand their trade networks. It seems that there was close contact with Middle Kingdom Egypt. The Minoans also established some of their first trading colonies on other islands, mostly in the Aegean seas. In this period, the first signs of the Minoan written language appeared. Linear A was written mostly on clay tablets and probably evolved from hieroglyphic writing. Modern scholars have failed in all attempts at deciphering the language, so we do not know what the Minoans wrote about, or what this writing could tell us about daily life on ancient Crete. We do have some insights into Linear A, because later on the Greeks adopted this writing system to write in Greek (before they used the alphabet). Linear B is Greek written in Minoan characters, and Linear B was deciphered in the 1950s. Thus, we have some idea of what sounds of the Minoan characters represent, we just do not know the Minoan language, so we do not know what any of the words mean. It seems that most of the examples of Linear A writing we have are probably receipts or accounting texts, used to keep track of trade goods. It is unknown if any Minoan literature existed or survives.

Around the year 1700 BC, a terrible cataclysm struck Crete and disrupted life there. The palaces of the Protopalatial period were destroyed. We do not know what event caused this destruction, though it may have been an earthquake or an invasion from Anatolia. However, we do know that once the wave of destruction passed, the Minoans devoted themselves to rebuilding.

## *Neopalatial Crete (1700-1425 BC)*

With the rebuilding of their palaces, the Minoans entered the Neopalatial (or New Palatial) period, the golden age of their civilization. The palaces were rebuilt on a larger scale with grander construction and more amenities. Some were three stories tall or more and were elaborately painted. The palaces had complex sanitation systems, including toilets (wooden seats over drain pipes that flowed out of the palace), while aqueducts brought fresh water from springs to the palaces. Pipes that ran to fountains and spigots throughout the palaces distributed water from aqueducts. Each palace had many rooms, which were used as workshops, storage rooms, shrines, temples, courts, throne rooms, and living areas. These palaces were maze-like with rooms of varying shapes and sizes that do not line up with one another. This may have been at the root of Greek mythological stories about the Minotaur kept in a labyrinth on Crete. In reality, the buildings were structured in this maze-like way so that they supported each other better in case of earthquakes. Large towns surrounded the palaces, and the various towns of Crete were connected by an extensive network of paved roads. A powerful elite, which ruled from the palaces and oversaw massive building projects, emerged in this period.

The palace of Knossos was the largest of the palaces. It was nearly three times larger than the other major palaces. It is unknown if it was the capital of Minoan civilization, or if it was simply the largest of several independent palace towns. Whatever the case, it was the first site that Sir Arthur Evans began excavating. Also, it is one of our greatest sources of evidence about Minoan civilization. Fresco paintings and small statues throughout the palace show scenes of daily life that provide enormous information about the Minoans. Some of the scenes include Minoans jumping over bulls, which may have been a sport or religious ritual, and many images of what appear to have been important women. Some scholars believe that these are priestesses, while some others have speculated that the Minoan civilization may have been a matriarchy, a society ruled by women. While there is little evidence of matriarchy, it does seem that men and women were treated more or less as equals. Women commonly acted as priestesses, and female deities were revered as goddesses. Bulls also seem to have been very important to Minoan religion, and the horns of bulls are common symbols in Minoan art and architecture. Perhaps this was a later influence on the Greek legend of the Minotaur on Crete.

During the Neopalatial period, Minoan trade networks grew even larger, and it can be said that they developed an early maritime trade empire. They settled more overseas colonies and established close trade contacts with Egypt. Minoans were depicted in Egyptian art. They also traded for amber from northern Europe and precious stones from the Far East. Minoan influence became very strong in Greece, and elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean. In 2009, a city with strong signs of Minoan influence was excavated in modern-day Israel, revealing just how far Minoan culture spread.

Despite this, there is almost no evidence that the Minoans conquered foreign lands or engaged in warfare during this period. The palaces on Crete had no walls and were not very well protected, nor have there been any weapons found in Minoan

graves. There is no evidence for a Minoan military. While there are boxing scenes in Minoan art, there are no clear scenes of real uncontrolled violence or warfare. Arthur Evans went so far as to speak of a “pax Minoica,” a Minoan peace. This idea may be going too far, and we cannot say that Minoan life was always peaceful. We simply do not have evidence of how often they went to war, and whether they had major wars, minor ritualized fighting, or none of these. There appears to have been watchtowers on the coast of Crete in this period, so the threat of invasion does not seem to have been entirely foreign to the Minoans. It is reasonable, however, to assume that during this period the Minoans were more interested in trade than warfare, and their massive fleet of ships discouraged anyone from attacking Crete.

### *Postpalatial Crete (1400-1150 BC)*

Nonetheless, a new wave of destruction afflicted the Minoans around 1425-1400 BC. The event traditionally associated with the fall of the Minoans was the eruption of a nearby volcanic island, Mount Thera (modern-day Santorini). This was one of the largest volcanic eruptions in earth's history. The eruption certainly destroyed the Minoan settlement on Mount Thera (Santorini), called Akrotiri. No human remains have been found at Akrotiri, indicating that the settlement was either evacuated when the volcano showed its first signs of eruption, or the bodies simply have not been found yet. If it was evacuated, it means that the Minoans had some forewarning about what was about to happen.

It was previously believed that the Minoan civilization on Crete was wiped out due to massive earthquakes and large amounts of ash that fell on the island from the volcano. It was believed that the earthquakes caused the palaces to crumble and the ash choked off light and killed plants, leaving the survivors to starve. However, recent research suggests otherwise. Most of the ash from the volcano fell in the opposite direction from Crete, and Crete seemed to have suffered only a slight dusting of ash. More destructive was a massive tsunami that resulted from the eruption and devastated the Minoan settlements on the northern coast of Crete. Earthquakes associated with the volcanic eruption also likely took their toll on Minoan urban life, but there is no indication that they destroyed all Minoan urban settlements or brought an abrupt end to the Minoan way of life. In addition, this eruption took place around 1600 BC, two centuries before the collapse of Minoan civilization.

The eruption of Mt. Thera, however, may have weakened the Minoans in the face of a new threat. The Mycenaeans, the Greeks of the mainland, invaded Crete around 1450 BC. Until about 1380 BC, the great palace of Knossos continued to be occupied; however, after the invasion around 1450 BC, it became the home of the new Mycenaean leaders who established themselves as rulers of the island. Around this time, military themes appeared in art from Crete, and weapons appeared in burials on the island. On the other hand, Minoan art and architecture continued to have a strong influence on the Mycenaeans, and the Minoan alphabet (called Linear A) was adopted by the Mycenaeans for writing Greek (Linear B). Thus, the Minoans had a long and far-reaching influence on Greek civilization. The Minoans themselves probably slowly

integrated with the Mycenaeans, adopting Greek as their language and becoming part of the Greek world.

Around 1380, however, Knossos was finally destroyed, succumbing to a fire. It is not known if this was a result of warfare or an accident. Nonetheless, Crete suffered some sort of instability, and the Mycenaeans no longer occupied the old palaces. Smaller settlements survived, with mixed Minoan-Mycenaean influences, though the last remnants of the golden age of Minoan civilization were gone.

### *Sub-Minoan Crete (1150-1100 BC)*

The Mycenaean civilization itself fell during the tumultuous events at the end of the Bronze Age. New invaders, such as the Dorians or the mysterious Sea People, may have contributed to the destruction of Mycenaean civilization. Whatever the case, for the next few centuries, Greece entered its Dark Age. Writing virtually disappeared, and we have no more evidence of the use of Linear B. When Greek culture emerged from this Dark Age, it used a new writing system adopted from the Phoenicians: the alphabet. In addition, after the Dark Age passed, Crete was firmly integrated into the larger Greek world. In culture, language, and identity, the people of Crete were Greek.

Still, the Minoans certainly did not just suddenly die off, and certain people on Crete still clung to remnants of their ancient culture. Centuries after the last evidence of Minoan civilization, in the *Odyssey* Homer still wrote of ethnic Minoans on Crete, calling them the “Eteocretans,” that is, the “true Cretans.”

### Summary:

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- The Minoan civilization was long forgotten and only rediscovered by the British archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans in the first decade of the twentieth century. He named the civilization after King Minos of Crete from Greek legend; we do not know what the Minoans actually called themselves.
  - Crete was first inhabited by people around 6,000 BC, and by the third millennium BC, significant towns with craftsmen and maritime trade had developed. This was the Prepalatial period of Minoan history.
  - In the Protopalatial period, the first palaces were built. However, these were destroyed around 1700 BC.
  - The palaces were rebuilt on a larger scale at the beginning of the Neopalatial period, which would last over 300 years and became the Golden Age of Minoan civilization.
  - The Neopalatial Palaces, such as the largest one at Knossos, were maze-like complexes of workshops, storage rooms, shrines, temples, courts, throne rooms, and living areas. The palaces were supplied with advanced plumbing and drainage and connected with paved roads.
  - We know little about Minoan religion, but we can tell that bulls were important, women commonly acted as priestesses, and some female figures may have been worshipped as goddesses.
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- During the Neopalatial period, Minoan trade networks extended across the Eastern Mediterranean, and Minoan influence was widespread, especially in the Aegean Sea. This influence seems to have come from trade contacts and not warfare or conquest. While it has long been believed that the eruption of Mount Thera destroyed the Minoan civilization, Minoan civilization declined somewhat after the eruption of Mount Thera but remained largely intact.
  - Shortly after the eruption of Mount Thera, the Mycenaeans conquered Crete and took over the island from the Minoans, destroying some palaces and ruling from others, such as Knossos. This period was known as the Postpalatial period of Minoan civilization.
  - Still, Minoan culture remained and influenced the Mycenaeans. Before the use of the alphabet, the Greeks adopted their first writing system, Linear B, from the writing system that the Minoans used to record their own language, Linear A.
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