

## Minoan Culture and the Mycenaeans

On the island of Crete between 2000 and 1700 B.C. the Minoans developed the first civilization to arise in Europe. It began as an imitation of Egyptian culture. However, it took on a flavor all its own. Minoan civilization was first unearthed by **Sir Arthur Evans** in the early 1900s. He was a wealthy British archeologist who restored much of the palace complex he dug up at a site called Knossos.

### The Effects of Geography on the Minoans

In **political geography** we come to understand that the locality in which a people lives can greatly influence the way those people develop. The Island of Crete has a very moderate climate and the soil is fertile. This spurred a growing and relatively affluent population. Yet the people out-grew the limited resources of their island; to maintain their standard of living they had to reach out. It was natural, like other subsequent **island nations**, that they should become heavily engaged in trade overseas. Thus, they became a mercantile people. Their ships seem to have combined the functions of both trader and fighter, making their navy efficient and flexible. The navy itself became the walls of the nation. Therefore little time or treasure was spent in fortification.



Trade with great powers had ancillary effect. The island could not bully great states such as Egypt or Mesopotamia so the Cretans relied heavily on diplomacy. The land was fertile and well-watered. It was a great place to grow olives and grapes, commodities which were easily exportable. Their craftsmen became experts in jewelry and pottery. Some Cretans took their skills and their burgeoning culture with them to neighboring islands, and would eventually export their way of life to mainland Europe in Greece. Just as geography was a deciding factor in the rise of the Minoans, it would also play a decisive and dramatic role in their downfall.

### Origins of the Minoans

It is not known from where the Minoans first came to settle on the Island of Crete. Most historians presume that they made their way from Asia Minor. Their language was not Indo-European so they likely had not come from the north or north-west. They may have seen something of civilization before landing on Crete. Even so, the island is situated fairly close to Egypt, and their trading activities certainly would have exposed them to Egyptian culture.

### Minoan Writing

From the Egyptians the Cretans probably learned writing, which originally took the form of hieroglyphics and later became a more phonetic form, which is referred to today as **Linear A**. Because the language is

so unfamiliar, Linear A has proved to be difficult to translate. Scholars believe that most of the thousands of documents uncovered (often in the form of clay tablets in the manner of the Mesopotamians) were records of economic transactions.

What is known about Linear A is due to a comparison with a later script called **Linear B** which was used after the Mycenaean invasion and referred to a language more easily deciphered that was similar to Greek. It is believed that the writing was read left to right across the page and referred to syllables, usually a consonant followed by a vowel. Possession of writing was absolutely essential for enforcing contracts and keeping track of property.

### **Life on Crete**

Of all the societies of the ancient world, the Minoans were probably the **most affluent**. This can be largely attributed to their trading ethos and the fact that massive resources were not used by the military, which may have been largely paid for by the trading activities of the naval vessels themselves. The Cretan form of government is not known, but it was probably kingship. Even so, it is thought that the government was run more as a huge corporation than as the hereditary possession of a few families. The profundity of documents and the intricacy of palace complexes indicates that the government probably had a strong bureaucratic component.

Economic activity and limited size of the military brought rich rewards to every level of society.<sup>1</sup> Even the poorest appears to have lived in multi-roomed dwellings. Palaces were filled with hundreds of rooms. Spectator sports were highly popular, especially boxing and a curious gymnastic we call **bull-jumping**. These aspects of Minoan culture were so powerful that they are reflected in curious Greek myths, including that of the **Labyrinth and the Minotaur**.

There is much debate about the role of females in Minoan culture. There have been many ruins uncovered on the Island of Crete. Many of the paintings, sculptures, and pottery have been found intact. Depictions of women show them on a **par with men** rather than subservient, and to even have engaged in some of the more dangerous sports to which the Minoans seemed devoted. They worked in the bureaucracy. They also worked in the crafts and as entrepreneurs. Speculation about Minoan religion indicates the gods were mainly female. Most depictions of supposed supreme beings show a woman handling snakes or standing on a mountain. This equality of females and males in society makes the Minoans unique among ancient civilizations.

Minoan art was remarkable because, for the most part, it did not seem to have religious or practical significance. It seems not to have commemorated historical events, like battles or treaties. It seems to have been **created simply for the sake of pleasure** and adding beauty to a home or palace. Pictures were of such things as animals, people in daily life or in sporting events. This is different than art in Egypt or Mesopotamia where rulers were set on memorializing themselves through art and statuary, and priests of depicting gods and ceremonies.

Unfortunately, there is little concrete known about individual people or events on Crete. References to the people as a group have been found in Egyptian documents especially regarding trade, but nothing regarding specific leaders. This is mainly because of the difficulty in translating Minoan texts, but may also stem from a relative equality among individuals and classes that may have discouraged monuments to specific great figures. Even the burial sites indicate a relatively egalitarian society. Burial mounds or **tholos** were generally not dedicated to an individual, but to groups, perhaps families or clans, but possibly a community.

### **The Mycenaean**

Minoan culture became a powerful force in the region. The Mycenaean (Greek people) on islands and the mainland of Europe to the north had seen the grandeur of Crete. They imitated the Minoans, especially in their trading activities. Yet the Mycenaean went one step further, engaging frequently in piracy. They built citadels and fortresses centered on the city of Mycenae on the Peloponesian Peninsula. Their activities and raiding were wide ranging. Some of their movements were even recorded by the Hittites. Perhaps the most famous record of the Mycenaean was their siege of the city of Troy, recorded by **Homer** in his two great epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

### **Destruction of Minoan Civilization**

As long as the Minoans produced their trade goods and maintained their ports and palaces they remained affluent. However, about 1500 B.C. a cataclysmic volcanic explosion occurred on the island of Strongphyle

(Thera) north of Crete. Now known as the **Thera Eruption**, it was so great that earthquakes destroyed buildings and structures in much of the surrounding region. A tidal wave was launched that destroyed much of the northern coast of Crete that may have included the governing structure at Knossos.

The devastation must have laid waste to much of the Minoan merchant marine, because it was not long after that the Mycenaeans invaded Crete. They took over the government and imposed some of their own forms, which were far more militaristic than the old Minoans. However, they adopted much of the culture of the resident Minoans, even using the bureaucracy to do their record keeping in the form of Linear B.

But another invasion, this time of a more barbaric people known as the **Dorians** made their own invasion, first of Mycenae and then of Crete. These people wiped out all the advances of the Minoans and ushered in a dark age which would last for half a millennium.