

Minoan Civilization at the Palace of Knossos

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Who ruled Greece before classical times? Heinrich Schliemann found the Greek Bronze Age at Mycenae, uncovering a civilization of warriors and traders who lived long before the Homeric epics were set down in writing. But it was left to another archaeologist, Arthur Evans, to find evidence of an earlier civilization on Crete.

Sir Arthur Evans (1851–1941) was exposed to the thrill of discovery at an early age through the work of his father, the distinguished antiquary Sir John Evans, famous for his role in the establishment of the antiquity of humankind. Arthur's studies in classical history and particularly his interest in ancient coins and seals drew his attention to the island of Crete, where he would eventually uncover the Minoan civilization. But before settling into his career as an archaeologist, the young Evans was an accomplished journalist and political activist. While visiting the Dalmatian coast in the early 1880s, Evans sympathized with the Slavs and Albanians of Bosnia and Herzegovina who were struggling for their independence from Turkey and wrote a book about their plight. He later became a news correspondent for the Manchester Guardian in the Balkans. His vociferous criticism of the Austrian occupation of Bosnia led to his imprisonment and subsequent banishment from the country.

In 1884, Evans became keeper of the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford University, a moribund institution that he revived against almost insurmountable odds. Shortly before, Evans had met Heinrich Schliemann, fresh from his triumphs at Mycenae and Troy, an encounter that rekindled his interest in ancient Greek scripts. Blessed with microscopic eyesight, Evans pored over tiny prehistoric seals that he purchased in the Athens flea market and was told they came from Crete. He soon decided to dig at Knossos, but the Cretan revolution interrupted his plans. None other than Schliemann had attempted to purchase Knossos and dig there, but the same political unrest deterred him. Characteristically, Evans threw his support to the rebels, and then began excavating in 1900 when Crete won its independence from Turkey. His research, which would span three and a half decades, yielded most of what we know about Minoan civilization and brought to light the palace of the fabled King Minos.

How old were the Minoans? Evans was able to cross-date the Knossos palace with Egypt using Minoan vessels found in Egyptian deposits of known age to do so. He found that the Minoan civilization flourished before 1500 B.C. He also established that the Minoan civilization was older than the Mycenaean state of the Greek mainland unearthed by Schliemann a quarter century earlier. Evans's pioneering but unsuccessful work on the mysterious Minoan written scripts, inscribed on clay tablets, laid the groundwork for the eventual decipherment of the "Linear B" script in 1952. Linear B was used to record Mycenaean Greek, which was used at Knossos in the Late Bronze Age. It derives from earlier Linear A, which is still undeciphered.

Between 1921 and 1935, Evans published his life's work in his monumental four-volume *Palace of Minos at Knossos*. This selection comes not from this monograph, but from an early article on the preliminary discoveries at Knossos published in the *Monthly Review* (1901). Evans's account of the events that led him to the ancient palace highlights the political realities that constrained his research early on. It also has an immediacy resulting from recent discovery, which sets it apart from Evans's later writings. His early journalistic experience also shows through here.

Less than a generation back the origin of Greek civilization, and with it the sources of all great culture that has ever been, were wrapped in an impenetrable mist. That ancient world was still girt round within its narrow confines by the circling "Stream of Ocean." Was there anything beyond? The fabled kings and heroes of the Homeric age, with their palaces and strongholds, were they aught, after all, but more or less humanized sun myths?

One had had faith, accompanied by works, and in Dr. Schliemann the science of classical antiquity found its Columbus. Armed with the spade, he brought to light from beneath the mounds of ages a real Troy; at Tiryns and Mycenae he laid bare the palace and the tombs and treasures of Homeric kings. A new world opened to investigation, and the discoveries of its first explorer were followed up successfully by Dr. Tsountas and others on Greek soil. The eyes of observers were opened, and the traces of this prehistoric civilization began to make their appearance far beyond the limits of Greece itself. From Cyprus and Palestine to Sicily and southern Italy, and even to the coasts of Spain, the colonial and industrial enterprise of the "Mycenaeans" has left its mark throughout the Mediterranean basin. Professor Petrie's researches in Egypt have conclusively shown that as early at least as the close of the Middle Kingdom, or, approximately speaking, the beginning of the second millennium B.C., imported Aegean vases were finding their way into the Nile Valley. By the great days of the Eighteenth Dynasty, in the sixteenth and succeeding centuries B.C., this intercourse was of such a kind that Mycenaean art, now in its full maturity of bloom, was reacting on that of the contemporary Pharaohs and infusing a living European element into the old conventional style of the land of the Pyramids and the Sphinx.

But the picture was still very incomplete. Nay, it might even be said that its central figure was not yet filled in. In all these excavations and researches the

very land to which ancient tradition unanimously pointed as the cradle of Greek civilization had been left out of count. To adapt the words applied by Gelon to slighted Sicily and Syracuse, "The spring was wanting from the year" of that earlier Hellas. Yet Crete, the central island—a halfway house between three continents—flanked by the great Libyan promontory and linked by smaller island steppingstones to the Peloponnese and the mainland of Anatolia, was called upon by Nature to play a leading part in the development of the early Aegean culture.

Here, in his royal city of Knossos, ruled Minos, or whatever historic personage is covered by that name, and founded the first sea empire of Greece, extending his dominion far and wide over the Aegean isles and coastlands. Athens paid to him its human tribute of youths and maidens. His colonial plantations extended east and west along the Mediterranean basin till Gaza worshipped the Cretan Zeus and a Minoan city rose in western Sicily. But it is as the first lawgiver of Greece that he achieved his greatest renown, and the Code of Minos became the source of all later legislation. As the wise ruler and inspired lawgiver there is something altogether biblical in his legendary character. He is the Cretan Moses, who every nine years repaired to the Cave of Zeus, whether on the Cretan Ida or on Dicta, and received from the God of the Mountain the laws for his people. Like Abraham, he is described as the "friend of God." Nay, in some accounts, the mythical being of Minos has a tendency to blend with that of his native Zeus.

This Cretan Zeus, the God of the Mountain, whose animal figure was the bull and whose symbol was the double axe, had indeed himself a human side which distinguishes him from his more ethereal namesake of classical Greece. In the great Cave of Mount Dicta, whose inmost shrine, adorned with natural pillars of gleaming stalactite, leads deep down to the waters of an unnavigated pool, Zeus himself was said to have been born and fed with honey and goat's milk by the nymph Amaltheia. On the conical height immediately above the site of Minos' City—now known as Mount Juktas—and still surrounded by a Cyclopean enclosure, was pointed out his tomb. Classical Greece scoffed at this primitive legend, and for this particular reason, first gave currency to the proverb that "the Cretans are always liars." . . .

If Minos was the first lawgiver, his craftsman Daedalus was the first traditional founder of what may be called a "school of art." Many were the fabled works wrought by them for King Minos, some gruesome, like the brass man Talos. In Knossos, the royal city, he built the dancing ground, or "Choros," of Ariadne, and the famous Labyrinth. In its inmost maze dwelt the Minotaur, or "Bull of Minos," fed daily with human victims, till such time as Theseus, guided by Ariadne's ball of thread, penetrated to its lair, and, after slaying the monster, rescued the captive youths and maidens. Such, at least, was the Athenian tale. A more prosaic tradition saw in the Labyrinth a building of many passages, the idea of which Daedalus had taken from the great Egyptian mortuary temple on the shores of Lake Moeris, to which the Greeks gave the same name; and recent

philological research has derived the name itself from the *labrys*, or double ax, the emblem of the Cretan and Carian Zeus. . . .

When one calls to mind these converging lines of ancient tradition it becomes impossible not to feel that, without Crete, "the spring is taken away" indeed from the Mycenaean world. Great as were the results obtained by exploration on the sites of this ancient culture on the Greek mainland and elsewhere, there was still a sense of incompleteness. In nothing was this more striking than in the absence of any written document. A few signs had, indeed, been found on a vase handle, but these were set aside as mere ignorant copies of Hittite or Egyptian hieroglyphs. In the volume of his monumental work which deals with Mycenaean art, M. Perrot was reduced to the conclusion that "as at present advised, we can continue to affirm that, for the whole of this period, neither in Peloponnese nor in Central Greece, no more upon the buildings nor upon the thousand-and-one objects of domestic use and luxury that have come forth from the tombs, has anything been discovered that resembles any form of writing."

But was this indeed, the last word of scientific exploration? Was it possible that a people so advanced in other respects—standing in such intimate relations with Egypt and the Syrian lands where some form of writing had been an almost immemorial possession—should have been absolutely wanting in this most essential element of civilization? I could not believe it. Once more one's thoughts turned to the land of Minos, and the question irresistibly suggested itself—was that early heritage of fixed laws compatible with a complete ignorance of the art of writing? An abiding tradition of the Cretans themselves, preserved by Diodorus, shows that they were better informed. The Phoenicians, they said, had not invented letters, they had simply changed their forms—in other words, they had only improved on an existing system.

It is now seven years since a piece of evidence came into my hands which went far to show that long before the days of the introduction of the Phoenician alphabet, as adopted by the later Greeks, the Cretans were, in fact, possessed of a system of writing. While hunting out ancient engraved stones at Athens I came upon some three- and four-sided seals showing on each of their faces groups of hieroglyphic and linear signs distinct from the Egyptian and Hittite, but evidently representing some form of script. On inquiry I learnt that these seals had been found in Crete. A clue was in my hands, and like Theseus, I resolved to follow it, if possible to the inmost recesses of the Labyrinth. That the source and centre of the great Mycenaean civilization remained to be unearthed on Cretan soil I had never doubted, but the prospect now opened of finally discovering its written records.

From 1894 onwards I undertook a series of campaigns of exploration chiefly in central and eastern Crete. In all directions fresh evidence continually came to light. Cyclopean ruins of cities and strongholds, beehive tombs, vases, votive bronzes, exquisitely engraved gems, amply demonstrating that in fact the great days of that "island story" lay far behind the historic period. From the Mycenaean sites of Crete I obtained a whole series of inscribed seals, such as I had

first noticed at Athens, showing the existence of an entire system of hieroglyphic or quasi-pictorial writing, with here and there signs of the co-existence of more linear forms. From the great Cave of Mount Dicta—the birthplace of Zeus—the votive deposits of which have now been thoroughly explored by Mr. Hogarth, I procured a stone libation table inscribed with a dedication of several characters in the early Cretan script. But for more exhaustive excavation my eyes were fixed on some ruined walls, the great gypsum blocks of which were engraved with curious symbolic characters, that crowned the southern slope of a hill known as Kephala, overlooking the ancient site of Knossos, the city of Minos. They were evidently part of a large prehistoric building. Might one not uncover here the palace of King Minos, perhaps even the mysterious Labyrinth itself?

These blocks had already arrested the attention of Schliemann and others, but the difficulties raised by the native proprietors had defeated all efforts at scientific exploration. In 1895 I succeeded in acquiring a quarter of the site from one of the joint owners. But the obstruction continued, and I was beset by difficulties of a more serious kind. The circumstances of the time were not favourable. The insurrection had broken out, half the villages in Crete were in ashes, and in the neighbouring town of Candia the most fanatical part of the Mahomedan population were collected together from the whole of the island. The Faithful Herakles, who was at that time my “guide, philosopher and muleteer,” was seized by the Turks and thrown into a loathsome dungeon, from which he was with difficulty rescued. Soon afterwards the inevitable massacre took place, of which the nominal British “occupants” of Candia were in part themselves the victims. Then at last the sleeping lion was aroused. Under the guns of Admiral Noel the Turkish commander evacuated the government buildings at ten minutes’ notice and shipped off the sultan’s troops. Crete once more was free.

At the beginning of this year I was at last able to secure the remaining part of the site of Kephala, and with the consent of Prince George’s government at once set about the work of excavation. I received some pecuniary help from the recently started Cretan Exploration Fund, and was fortunate in securing the services of Mr. Duncan Mackenzie, who had done good work for the British School in Melos, to assist me in directing the works. From about 80 to 150 men were employed in the excavation which continued till the heat and fevers of June put an end to it for this season.

The result has been to uncover a large part of a vast prehistoric building—a palace with its numerous dependencies, but a palace on a far larger scale than those of Tiryns and Mycenae. About two acres of this has been unearthed, for by an extraordinary piece of good fortune the remains of walls began to appear only a foot or so, often only a few inches, below the surface. This dwelling of prehistoric kings had been overwhelmed by a great catastrophe. Everywhere on the hilltop were traces of a mighty conflagration; burnt beams and charred wooden columns lay within the rooms and corridors. There was here no gradual decay. The civilization represented on this spot had been cut short in the fulness of its bloom. Nothing later than remains of the good Mycenaean period was

found over the whole site. Nothing even so late as the last period illustrated by the remains of Mycenae itself. From the day of destruction to this the site has been left entirely desolate. For three thousand years or more not a tree seems to have been planted here; over a part of the area not even a ploughshare had passed. At the time of the great overthrow, no doubt, the place had been methodically plundered for metal objects, and the fallen debris in the rooms and passages turned over and ransacked for precious booty. Here and there a local bey or peasant had grubbed for stone slabs to supply his yard or threshing floor. But the party walls of clay and plaster still stood intact, with the fresco painting on them, still in many cases perfectly preserved at a few inches' depth from the surface, a clear proof of how severely the site had been let alone for these long centuries.

Who were the destroyers? Perhaps the Dorian invaders who seem to have overrun the island about the eleventh or twelfth century before our era. More probably, still earlier invading swarms from the mainland of Greece. The palace itself had a long antecedent history and there are frequent traces of remodelling. Its early elements may go back to a thousand years before its final overthrow, since, in the great Eastern Court, was found the lower part of an Egyptian seated figure of diorite, with a triple inscription, showing that it dates back to the close of the Twelfth or the beginning of the Thirteenth Dynasty of Egypt; in other words approximately to 2000 B.C. But below the foundation of the later building, and covering the whole hill, are the remains of a primitive settlement of still greater antiquity, belonging to the insular Stone Age. In parts this "Neolithic" deposit was over twenty-four feet thick, everywhere full of stone axes, knives of volcanic glass, dark polished and incised pottery, and primitive images such as those found by Schliemann in the lowest strata of Troy.

The outer walls of the palace were supported on huge gypsum blocks, but there was no sign of an elaborate system of fortification such as at Tiryns and Mycenae. The reason of this is not far to seek. Why is Paris strongly fortified, while London is practically an open town? The city of Minos, it must be remembered, was the centre of a great sea power, and it was in "wooden walls" that its rulers must have put their trust. The mighty blocks of the palace show, indeed, that it was not for want of engineering power that the acropolis of Knossos remained unfortified. But in truth Mycenaean might was here at home. At Tiryns and Mycenae itself it felt itself threatened by warlike continental neighbors. It was not till the mainland foes were masters of the sea that they could have forced an entry into the House of Minos. Then, indeed, it was an easy task. In the Cave of Zeus on Mount Ida was found a large brooch (or *fibula*) belonging to the race of northern invaders, on one side of which a war galley is significantly engraved.

The palace was entered on the southwest side by a portico and double doorway opening from a spacious paved court. Flanking the portico were remains of a great fresco of a bull, and on the walls of the corridor leading from it were still preserved the lower part of a procession of painted life-size figures, in the centre of which was a female personage, probably a queen, in magnificent ap-

parel. This corridor seems to have led round to a great southern porch or *Propylaeum* with double columns, the walls of which were originally decorated with figures in the same style. Along nearly the whole length of the building ran a spacious paved corridor, lined by a long row of fine stone doorways, giving access to a succession of magazines. On the floor of these magazines huge store jars were still standing, large enough to have contained the "forty thieves." One of these jars, contained in a small separate chamber, was nearly five feet in height.

Here occurred one of the most curious discoveries of the whole excavation. Under the closely compacted pavement of one of these magazines, upon which the huge jars stood, there were built in, between solid piles of masonry, double tiers of stone cists lined with lead. Only a few were opened and they proved to be empty, but there can be little doubt that they were constructed for the deposit of treasure. Whoever destroyed and plundered the palace had failed to discover these receptacles, so that when more come to be explored there is some real hope of finding buried hoards.

On the east side of the palace opened a still larger paved court, approached by broad steps from another principal entrance to the north. From this court access was given by an anteroom to what was certainly the most interesting chamber of the whole building, almost as perfectly preserved—though some twelve centuries older—as anything found beneath the volcanic ash of Pompeii or the lava of Herculaneum. Already a few inches below the surface freshly preserved frescoes began to appear. Walls were shortly uncovered decorated with flowering plants and running water, while on each side of the doorway of a small inner room stood guardian griffins with peacocks' plumes in the same flowery landscape. Round the walls ran low stone benches, and between these on the north side, separated by a small interval and raised on a stone base, rose a gypsum throne with a high back, and originally coloured with decorative designs. Its lower part was adorned with a curiously carved arch, with crocketed mouldings, showing an extraordinary anticipation of some most characteristic features of Gothic architecture. Opposite the throne was a finely wrought tank of gypsum slabs—a feature borrowed perhaps from an Egyptian palace—approached by a descending flight of steps, and originally surmounted by cyprian wood columns supporting a kind of *impluvium*. Here truly was the council chamber of a Mycenaean king or sovereign lady. It may be said today that the youngest of European rulers has in his dominions the oldest throne in Europe.

The frescoes discovered on the palace site constitute a new epoch in the history of painting. Little, indeed, of the kind even of classical Greek antiquity has been hitherto known earlier at least than the Pompeian series. The first find of this kind marks a red-letter day in the story of the excavation. In carefully uncovering the earth and debris in a passage at the back of the southern propylaeum there came to light two large fragments of what proved to be the upper part of a youth bearing a gold-mounted silver cup. The robe is decorated with a beautiful quatrefoil pattern; a silver ornament appears in front of the ear, and silver rings on the arms and neck. What is specially interesting among the orna-



The Throne Room in the Palace of Minos at Knossos, exposed during Arthur Evans's excavations.

ments is an agate gem on the left wrist, thus illustrating the manner of wearing the beautifully engraved signets of which many clay impressions were found in the palace. . . .

To the north of the palace, in some rooms that seem to have belonged to the women's quarter, frescoes were found in an entirely novel miniature style. Here were ladies with white complexions—due, we may fancy, to the seclusion of harem life—*décolletées*, but with fashionable puffed sleeves and flounced gowns, and their hair as elaborately curled and *frisé* as if they were fresh from a *coiffeur's* hands. "Mais," exclaimed a French savant who honoured me with a visit, "*ce sont des Parisiennes!*" . . .

Very valuable architectural details were supplied by the walls and buildings of some of the miniature frescoes. In one place rose the façade of a small temple, with triple cells containing sacred pillars, and representing in a more advanced form the arrangement of the small golden shrines, with doves perched upon them, found by Schliemann in the shaft graves at Mycenae. This temple fresco has a peculiar interest, as showing the character of a good deal of the upper structure of the palace itself, which has now perished. It must largely have consisted of clay and rubble walls, artfully concealed under brilliantly painted plas-



*Evans with the same throne and a Minoan vase displayed
at an exhibition at the Royal Academy in London, October 1936.*

ter, and contained and supported by a woodwork framing. The base of the small temple rests on the huge gypsum blocks which form so conspicuous a feature in the existing remains, and below the central opening is inserted a frieze, recalling the alabaster reliefs of the palace hall of Tiryns, with triglyphs, the prototypes of the Doric, and the half-rosettes of the "metopes" inlaid with blue enamel, the Kyanos of Homer. . . .

But manifold as were the objects of interest found within the palace walls of Knossos, the crowning discovery—or, rather, series of discoveries—remains to

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be told. On the last day of March, not far below the surface of the ground, a little to the right of the southern portico, there turned up a clay tablet of elongated shape, bearing on it incised characters in a linear script, accompanied by numeral signs. My hopes now ran high of finding entire deposits of clay archives, and they were speedily realized. Not far from the scene of the first discovery there came to light a clay receptacle containing a hoard of tablets. In other chambers occurred similar deposits, which had originally been stored in coffered boxes of wood, clay, or gypsum. The tablets themselves are of various forms, some flat, elongated bars, from about 2 to 7½ inches in length, with wedgelike ends; others, larger and squarer, ranging in size to small octavo. In one particular magazine tablets of a different kind were found—perforated bars, crescent and scallop-like “labels,” with writing in the same hieroglyphic style as that on the seals found in eastern Crete. But the great mass, amounting to over a thousand inscriptions, belonged to another and more advanced system with linear characters. It was, in short, a highly developed form of script, with regular divisions between the words, and for elegance hardly surpassed by any later form of writing.

A clue to the meaning of these clay records is in many cases supplied by the addition of pictorial illustrations representing the objects concerned. Thus we find human figures, perhaps slaves; chariots and horses; arms or implements and armor, such as axes and cuirasses; houses or barns; ears of barley or other cereal; swine; various kinds of trees; and a long-stamened flower, evidently the saffron crocus, used for dyes. On some tablets appear ingots, probably of bronze, followed by a balance (the Greek *τάλαντον*), and figures which probably indicate their value in Mycenaean gold talents. The numerals attached to many of these objects show that we have to do with accounts referring to the royal stores and arsenals.

Some tablets relate to ceramic vessels of various forms, many of them containing marks indicative of their contents. Others, still more interesting, show vases of metallic forms, and obviously relate to the royal treasures. It is a highly significant fact that the most characteristic of these, such as a beaker like the famous gold cups found in the Vapheio tomb near Sparta, a high-spouted ewer, and an object, perhaps representing a certain weight of metal, in the form of an ox's head, recur—together with the ingots with incurving sides among the gold offerings in the hands of the tributary Aegean princes—on Egyptian monuments of Thothmes III's time. These tributary chieftains, described as Kefts and People of the Isles of the Sea, who have been already recognized as the representatives of the Mycenaean culture, recall in their dress and other particulars the Cretan youths, such as the cupbearer described earlier, who take part in the processional scenes on the palace frescoes. The appearance in the records of the royal treasury at Knossos of vessels of the same form as those offered by them to Pharaoh is itself a valuable indication that some of these clay archives go back approximately to the same period—in other words, to the beginning of the fifteenth century B.C.

Other documents, in which neither ciphers nor pictorial illustrations are to

be found, may appeal even more deeply to the imagination. The analogy of the more or less contemporary tablets, written in cuneiform script, found in the palace of Tell-el-Amarna, might lead us to expect among them the letters from distant governors or diplomatic correspondence. It is probable that some are contracts of public acts, which may give some actual formulas of Minoan legislation. There is, indeed, an atmosphere of legal nicety, worthy of the House of Minos, in the way in which these clay records were secured. The knots of string which, according to the ancient fashion, stood in the place of locks for the coffers containing the tablets were rendered inviolable by the attachment of clay seals, impressed with the finely engraved signets, the types of which represent a great variety of subjects, such as ships, chariots, religious scenes, lions, bulls, and other animals. But—as if this precaution was not in itself considered sufficient—while the clay was still wet the face of the seal was countermarked by a controlling official, and the back countersigned and endorsed by an inscription in the same Mycenaean script as that inscribed on the tablets themselves.

Much study and comparison will be necessary for the elucidation of these materials, which it may be hoped will be largely supplemented by the continued exploration of the palace. If, as may well be the case, the language in which they were written was some primitive form of Greek we need not despair of the final decipherment of these Knossian archives, and the bounds of history may eventually be so enlarged as to take in the “heroic age” of Greece. In any case the weighty question, which years before I had set myself to solve on Cretan soil, has found, so far at least, an answer. That great early civilization was not dumb, and the written records of the Hellenic world are carried back some seven centuries beyond the date of the first known historic writings. But what, perhaps, is even more remarkable than this is that, when we examine in detail the linear script of these Mycenaean documents, it is impossible not to recognize that we have here a system of writing, syllabic and perhaps partly alphabetic, which stands on a distinctly higher level of development than the hieroglyphs of Egypt or the cuneiform script of contemporary Syria and Babylonia. It is not till some five centuries later that we find the first dated examples of Phoenician writing.

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