

CHAPTER 3

“ THE PALACE OF KNOSSOS AND THUCYDIDES

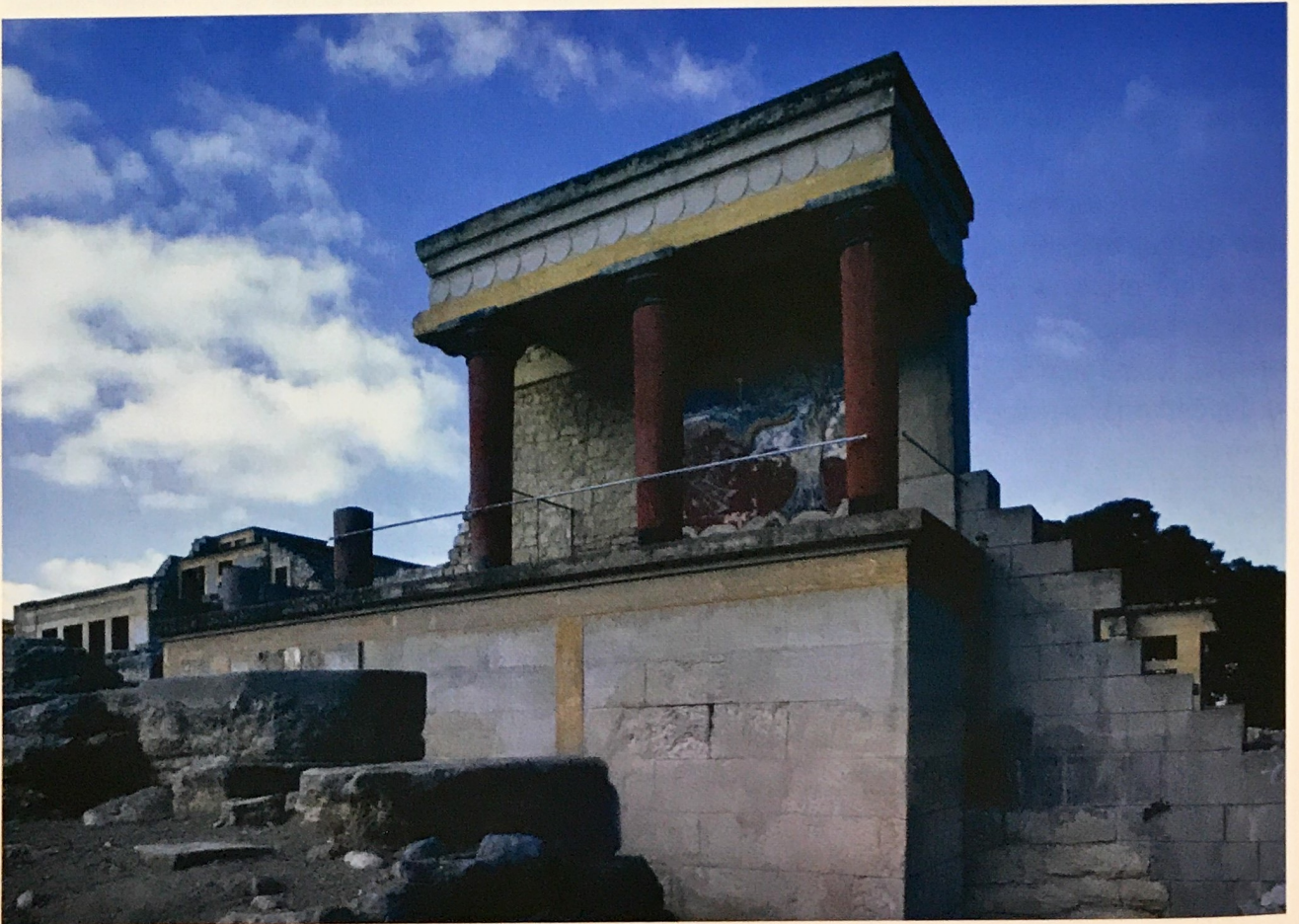
MYSTERIOUS MINOANS THE EARLIEST GREEKS

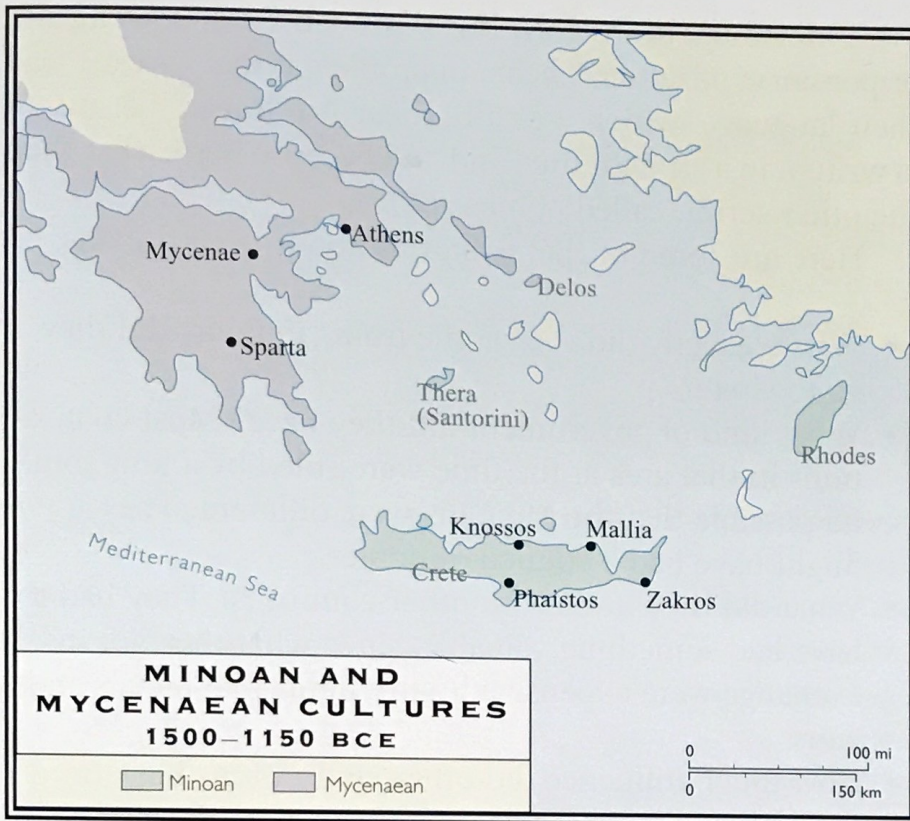
“ The Palace of Knossos at Crete,
about 1450 BCE

*This huge structure spans 5.5 acres
and is called the palace of Knossos,
although scholars disagree about what
its main purpose was.*

Some of the early people who lived in the area that is now Greece weren't actually Greek. They were people we now call Minoans.

The Minoans appeared on the island of Crete about 8,000 years ago. They raised sheep and goats and grew wheat, none of which was found on Crete before the Minoans arrived. So we can figure that they probably came from someplace in the Near East, where farmers had been





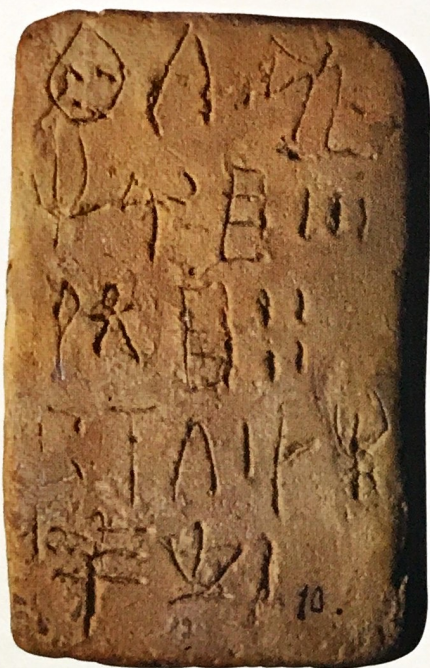
raising sheep and goats and growing wheat for some time, and that they brought animals and seeds with them.

The Minoan villages grew into cities, and their civilization became strong. In the third millennium BCE, they started building palaces. The palaces were probably originally built to store valuable grain and to house powerful people. Many of the palaces were destroyed in some huge **catastrophe**—probably an earthquake around 1700 BCE, although nobody knows for sure.

When the palaces were rebuilt, they were even more splendid and complex than they had been before the disaster. The most beautiful palace was in the city of Knossos, near Crete's northern shore.

The Minoans were great sailors and traders. They developed a written language and had a religion that might have included worship of both a fertility goddess and a bull-god. At some point in the second millennium BCE, they suffered two disasters: a flood and a huge fire, and their civilization never recovered.

kata + *strophe* =
 “down” + “turn”
 “Catastrophe” originally
 meant “an overturning,” like
 knocking something over so
 that everything spills out.
 Later it came to mean a
 turning point, such as the
 part of a story when every-
 thing changes. Now it means
 “a disaster.”



These crude-looking marks, formed by scratching in wet clay, are in Linear A, a script used by Minoans. Unfortunately, nobody has deciphered the script to know what the markings mean.

Unfortunately, we don't know a lot about this strong and important civilization. The main problem is that we can't read their language, which we call Linear A ("linear" because it is written in a straight line, and "A" because it is earlier than the other script, called "Linear B").

Here are some of the mysteries about the Minoans:

- Where exactly did they come from, and why did they go to Crete?
- What kind of government did they have? Most civilizations in that area at the time were ruled by a king, but it's possible that the Minoans were different. They might have had a council of nobles.
- What did they trade with other countries? They had to have had something valuable, since what they got in exchange were expensive luxury items like metals and ivory.
- How much influence did other civilizations have on them? Egypt was so powerful at this time that Egypt and the Minoans must have worked together sometimes and traded with each other.
- Were men and women treated about the same? That would be very unusual, but the artwork shows both sexes together and doing about the same things. On the other hand, people often show things in art that don't happen in real life.
- Those buildings we call "palaces"—what were they used for? People usually assume they were the homes of the kings. But we don't even know if there were kings in Crete. The palaces look more like huge storage buildings for grain. Why would they need to store so much grain?
- What destroyed the palaces around 1450 BCE?

The Greeks who came after the Minoans were as interested in them as we are. They said that the Minoans' most well-known king was a powerful man named Minos. He was incredibly rich, and a judge and lawgiver. The poet Homer called him "companion of mighty Zeus." The historian

Thucydides was convinced that Minos was a great military leader. He wrote in *The History of the Peloponnesian War* that

Greeks have learned from their parents that Minos was the earliest man to build a navy, and he controlled most of what is now the Aegean Sea. He also ruled the Cyclades Islands and was the first to colonize most of the [nearby] islands, and he set up his own sons in power. It is likely that he did this to get rid of pirates so that they wouldn't interfere with his making money by trading.

Minos had one problem, though. He had a monstrous son (or perhaps stepson) who was half human and half bull. The two words “Minos” and *tauros* (“bull”) make up the name of this monster: the Minotaur. He was so ferocious that he ate only human flesh. It's unclear why Minos kept him alive. Maybe he was fond of the Minotaur even though he was a monster. Maybe he was afraid that he would get in trouble if he killed him—a half human, half bull must have some connection with the gods, after all.

Minos kept the monster under the palace in a big maze called the labyrinth. Minos ordered the Athenians (his enemies) to send him their own children so the monster would have enough to eat. Minos was so powerful that the Athenians obeyed for a long time.

Finally, an Athenian prince named Theseus made up his mind that he was going to put an end to this slaughter. Luckily for the prince, he didn't have to work alone. Minos's daughter Ariadne fell in love with him. She gave him a sword and a ball of yarn and told him to unwind it behind him as he went to the center of the labyrinth where the Minotaur lived. When he had killed the Minotaur, all he had to do was follow the yarn back out.

It worked. The Minotaur was killed, and Ariadne ran away with Theseus. (He left her for another woman almost right away, but that's another story.)

Who would ever believe such a weird tale? Oddly enough, many people. Some people in recent times have thought that some of it might be based on fact. There certainly was

“ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 431 BCE

A SWEET SOLUTION

According to mythology, the labyrinth where Minos kept the Minotaur was constructed by Daedalus, a great architect. Among his feats was learning how to fly by making wings out of birds' feathers and wax. Daedalus also figured out how to get a thread up the winding passages of a seashell and out a hole bored in the top.

His solution was to tie the thread (which must have been very, very thin) to the leg of an ant (which must have been very, very large). He put a drop of honey at the hole in the top of the shell and the ant at the opening at the bottom. The ant, attracted by the sweet smell, walked through the whole shell, around all its turns, dragging the thread behind, and came out at the other end.

Some people, including Sir Arthur Evans, have thought the center chair—with its graceful carvings and the high back—was a throne. But there is no evidence to support that theory.



a powerful civilization on the island of Crete. Maybe its rulers demanded that other people in the area pay taxes or send them something precious—perhaps even children. Child sacrifice wasn't unheard of in the Mediterranean, after all. It could be that the Cretans worshiped a bull-god (many religions had gods that looked like animals), and it might make sense for its priest to wear some kind of costume, making him look half human and half bull.

An Englishman named Sir Arthur Evans was fascinated with the stories about ancient Crete. In 1894, he bought some land near Knossos and started to dig. Almost immediately, he hit pay dirt: the remains of a huge palace, with a floor plan so elaborate that it looked like a maze. And painted on the walls were the symbols of power of the ruler: a double-headed axe.

Evans knew that a Greek word for “axe” was *labrus*. He was ecstatic! He was convinced he had found the labyrinth. He and his crew kept digging. They found room after room, with brightly-colored frescoes showing scenes of nature, beautiful women and handsome men, and geometric patterns. He found a large open area that he called “Ariadne’s dancing floor.” And in one room, he found two large and impressive chairs that reminded him of thrones. That was enough for him; he declared that this was Minoan’s palace and called the people who lived on Crete in the Bronze Age “Minoans.”

BRONZE AGE

Bronze is an alloy, or mixture, of copper and tin. It is hard and holds a sharp edge better than any other metal that had been used before it was invented (or discovered). The Bronze Age (about 3000 BCE to 1000 BCE) refers to a period of time when this important metal helped shape trade, war, and art.

One of the frescoes shows a strange game or ritual. Huge bulls run at groups of athletes, both men and women, who run to meet the charging bull, grab it by the horns, and somersault onto its back before leaping off.

Could this be what Theseus and the other young Greek people were doing in Crete? Taking part in some kind of bull-leaping, either as a sport or as a sign of worship of a bull-god?

Evans thought so. He had walls built where he assumed they originally stood, and had artists fill in the blanks in damaged frescoes. Much of what he did was probably pretty accurate, but modern archaeologists know he made some mistakes. In any case, Evans's reconstructed palace at Knossos is spectacular and it is one of Greece's major tourist attractions today.

Some people aren't so sure that what Evans found has anything to do with a legendary king and a half-human monster who lived in a labyrinth. A beautiful large building certainly exists, however, and its basement is full of complicated passageways and grain-storage rooms. And the pictures do show people jumping over bulls.

The finds at Knossos raise even more questions than they answer. For instance, until the palace was excavated, most historians assumed that a king ruled over ancient Crete. But if there was a single leader, there ought to be some way of telling him apart from all the other people: a crown, a special robe, something. But all the people in the frescoes look about equal to each other. And then questions about the position of women in the society, the actual function of



In the Bronze Age, sporting events not only amused the onlookers but also tested the strength of warriors and often marked important ceremonies, such as funerals and victory celebrations. These boxers from the island of Thera don't look like serious athletes.



THE MYSTERY OF THE PHAISTOS DISK

In 1903, scholars were excited to find out about the discovery of a clay disk at Phaistos, the second-largest city of ancient Crete. This clay disk has symbols spiraling out from the center. Many efforts have been made to decipher it, without success. Oddly, the signs on the disk were made with stamps instead of being written. Some scholars find the object so strange that they have suggested that it might be a modern forgery. It could also be an import, and not Minoan at all. Another possibility is that the designs are not writing, but decoration.

the palace, and other questions started being raised. Archaeologists and historians are still working on finding out the answers.

Even when they get some answers, they might change their minds when new evidence is found and new archaeological techniques are invented. In fact, theories get changed all the time. One of them has to do with the island of Thera.

Sometime between 1700 and 1450 BCE, a minor Minoan outpost, the island of Thera (now called Santorini), blew up. Like the rest of the nearby islands, Thera was formed by a volcano. The earthquake produced by the eruption rocked the land for thousands of miles. Volcanic ash covered the sky, and perhaps blotted out the sun completely for days, and partially, for years. Tidal waves as high as 60 feet tall may have smashed into the coasts of nearby areas, including Crete.

Did the people of the area understand that a volcanic eruption is a natural event? Probably not. They probably thought that the gods were angry with them. This could have led to all sorts of religious, political, and social changes.

In 1939, an archaeologist named Spyridon Marinatos theorized that the eruption of Santorini caused Minoan civilization to fall, either because the economy couldn't survive the damage caused by the ash and the lack of sun, or because the people's confidence in their leaders was shaken.

Some archaeologists and historians did not accept that theory because the Minoan civilization continued for 150 years after the eruption. More recently, however, geologists have learned that the explosion was even bigger than had previously been thought. It was so enormous that it might have disrupted trade through the entire Mediterranean region. A geologist named William Ryan suggested in 2003 that a ripple effect caused by the effect of the ash on different parts of the Mediterranean world could eventually have led to the fall of the Minoan civilization.

Whether it was the fault of the volcano, some other as yet unknown factor, or a combination the power of the Minoans declined, until by the 15th century BCE, a new force was ready to take control of the Mediterranean. These people were the mighty Mycenaeans.