

## History of Minoan Crete

The Minoan civilization developed on and ruled the island of Crete from about 3600 to 1400 BC. The Minoans established a great trading empire centered on Crete, which is conveniently located midway between Egypt, Greece, Anatolia, and the Middle East. We know surprisingly little about this Minoan civilization, which flourished for nearly two thousand years. Indeed, we do not even know what these people called themselves. The term *Minoan* is a modern name, and comes from the legendary King Minos, who, according to Greek mythology, ruled the island of Crete. One of the main problems in understanding Minoan civilization is that, though we have Minoan writing, no one has deciphered it, so we do not know what it says. We can make up a bit for our lack of knowledge from texts with information gleaned from archaeology.

### Discovery of the Minoans

The ancient Greeks had a number of legends about ancient Crete. The most famous tells of the Cretean king named Minos, who kept a Minotaur (part man and part bull) in a maze on the island, and sacrificed young Greeks to feed it. There are various legends about King Minos, and the ancient Greeks decided that all of them could not refer to the same man, so they assumed that there were many kings named Minos who had ruled Crete.

Other than these ancient myths, however, the Minoan civilization had been long forgotten, until the British archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans rediscovered it in the first decade of the twentieth century. Evans found the ruins of the once mighty Minoan palace of Knossos after he had simply bought the ruins and hired a team to excavate. Evans at first believed that this was that palace of the mythological king Minos, but in reality it was a complex structure made up of government centers, temples, workshops, and storage facilities. 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 to 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 6000 BC. They grew wheat, olives, and grapes, herded sheep, and lived in small villages. Some of these settlements, over the course of thousands of years, began to grow large.

By the third millennium BC, some of these settlements had grown into larger towns, with trade and production taking place there. Craftsmen at these towns began working in silver, gold, and bronze, and already some sea trade seems to have been taking place. They traded with Egypt, Anatolia, and the Levant, for copper, tin, ivory, and gold. This was the Prepalatial period of Minoan history, so named 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 they seem to have had somewhat loose social organization.

Some of the only surviving buildings from the Prepalatial period 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. All of them were built around the same time, and all very close to the sea. Outside the palaces were smaller settlements, which were connected with early paved roads. This period probably saw the emergence of kings as rulers of various areas on Crete, as well as a hierarchical society, with nobles, peasants, and slaves.

During this period, the Minoans began to expand their trade networks. It seems they had close contacts with Middle Kingdom Egypt. The Minoans also established some of their first trading colonies on other islands, mostly in the Aegean Sea. It is also in this period that the first signs of Linear A, the Minoan written language, appear. Written mostly on clay tablets, it probably evolved from hieroglyphic writing. Modern scholars have failed in all attempts at deciphering the language, so we do not know what the writing is about, or what it might tell us about daily life on ancient Crete. We do have *some* insights into Linear A, because later, the Greeks adopted this writing system to write Greek (before they used the alphabet). Greek written in Minoan characters is called Linear B, which 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 higher, and 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. Water from aqueducts was distributed through pipes that ran to fountains and spigots throughout the palaces. Each palace had many rooms, which were used as workshops, storage rooms, shrines, temples, court and throne rooms, and living areas. These palaces were mazelike, 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 mazelike way so that they supported each other better in case of earthquakes. Large towns also grew up around the palaces, and the various towns of Crete were connected by an extensive network of paved roads. It seems like a powerful elite emerged in this period, which ruled from the palaces and oversaw massive building projects.

The largest of the palaces was the palace of Knossos. 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 is the first site that Sir Arthur Evans began excavating, and 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 an enormous amount of 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 these women represent priestesses, while 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 such close trade contacts with Egypt that Minoans are depicted in Egyptian paintings. They also seem to have 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 of 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 appear 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.

From the modern perspective, life in the Neopalatial Minoan world might seem rather idyllic. An ancient civilization rich in trade goods of every sort, with access to amenities—such as plumbing, paved roads, and well-planned towns—that would not be seen again for several centuries, the Minoans had little need of weapons, and life revolved around grand palace complexes. But the Minoan world crumbled over the next few centuries and disappeared permanently. The reasons for this precipitous decline continue to be debated.

### 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.
  - People first inhabited Crete around 6000 BC, and by the third millennium BC significant towns, with craftsmen and maritime trade, had grown up. This was the Prepalatial period of Minoan history.
  - In the Protopalatial Period, the first palaces were built. These were destroyed, however, 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 become the golden age of Minoan civilization.
  - The Neopalatial palaces, such as the largest one at Knossos, were mazelike complexes of workshops, storage rooms, shrines, temples, court and throne rooms, and living areas, 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, that women commonly acted as priestesses, and that some female figures may have been worshipped as goddesses.
  - 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.
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