

The Fall of Minoan Civilization

Just as an unknown cataclysm struck Crete at the end of the Protopalatial period (1700 BC), destroying the palaces and prompting the Minoans to rebuild, another catastrophe occurred at the end of the Neopalatial period (1425 BC). Once again, we do not know what caused the destruction, but unlike the previous catastrophe, the Minoans did not rebuild or recover. Instead, their civilization slowly petered out.

The End of the Palace Period on Crete

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, and in 2006, scientists discovered that the eruption was much larger than previously estimated. The eruption certainly destroyed the Minoan settlement of Akrotiri on Mount Thera (Santorini). 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.

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 seems 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 1987, studies conducted at the Greenland ice cap revealed a rather precise dating of the Mount Thera eruption, moving it to the year 1645 BC, a century and a half before the final destruction of the Minoan palaces. Knossos and the other great palaces continued to be populated after the eruption, though Minoan wealth seems to have declined somewhat.

Soon, a new threat apparently appeared. The Mycenaeans, the Greeks of the mainland, seem to have invaded Crete around 1450 BC. Perhaps the eruption in 1645 had weakened the Minoans to the point that they were easy targets for the Mycenaeans when they arrived about 200 years later. On the other hand, the Mycenaeans may have conquered them even if the volcano had not erupted. After all, the eruption would have affected the Mycenaeans just as much as the Minoans. It may just be that the Mycenaeans were a more warlike people, while the Minoans had little military expertise.

We should not see the end of the Minoans as a clean break, as the sudden and complete demise of a civilization. Even after the Mycenaeans conquered Crete, important sites such as Knossos continued to be occupied, perhaps now by the new Mycenaean rulers.

Postpalatial Crete (1400–1150 BC)

While a number of Minoan palaces seem to have been destroyed in the fifteenth century BC, some survived. Until about 1380 BC, the great palace of Knossos continued to be occupied, but by the new Mycenaean rulers of the island. Around this time, military themes appear in painting and pottery from Crete, and weapons appear 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 seems to have suffered some sort of instability, and the Mycenaeans no longer occupied the old palaces. Still, 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 had 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. In the *Odyssey*, centuries after the last evidence of Minoan civilization, Homer still wrote of ethnic Minoans on Crete, calling them the “Eteocretans,” that is, the “true Cretans.”

Summary

- It has long been believed that the eruption of Mount Thera destroyed the Minoan civilization. While recent science reveals that this eruption was even larger than previously believed, it also suggests that Minoan civilization was not quickly destroyed by the eruption.
- Minoan civilization appears to have 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. Soon the remaining palaces were destroyed, too. This period is known as the Postpalatial period of Minoan civilization.

- Still, Minoan culture remained, influenced the Mycenaeans, and the first writing system used by the Greeks, Linear B, was adopted from the writing system the Minoans used to record their own language, Linear A.
- There was much influence back and forth between the Mycenaeans and Minoans, but the Minoans slowly assimilated into the Greek civilization first brought to Crete by the Mycenaeans.