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Introduction:

Courtyard Complexes and the Labyrinth of Minoan Culture

Michele A. Miller

Editor of Old World Archaeology, Athena Review

Ancient cultures are often characterized by their most impressive monuments. Those who seek to understand the Bronze Age civilization of Crete - known as the "Minoans" after the legendary King Minos - have looked to a series of complex structures, each centered around a large courtyard, for clues to understanding Minoan society. The best-known of such structures, [Knossos](#), was excavated over 100 years ago by the British archaeologist [Sir Arthur Evans](#), who began work just one year before the American archaeologist [Harriet Boyd](#) started excavating at Gournia. Evans' discoveries at Knossos, and moreover, his interpretation of the site as a "palace" inhabited



by a powerful king, Minos, formed the first dominant paradigm of Minoan culture.

Evans' initial vision of Bronze Age Crete, an island ruled by a single powerful king at Knossos, had to be somewhat modified upon the rapid discovery of similar structures in other regions of the island: Phaistos in 1901 (fig.1), Gournia in 1907, Malia in 1915, and, much later, Zakros (fig.3) in 1963. According to Evans' paradigm, these other

palaces served as the seats of regional governors, or perhaps of rival rulers in the earlier "Old Palace" period, who might have been subjugated by the king of Knossos at a later period. More recently, however, the discovery of additional palaces at [Petras](#) and Galatas, as well as at Kommos and [Khania](#) - although the courtyards themselves have not yet been found at either site - has challenged this long-standing, Knossos-centered view of Minoan society. Other palace sites may also exist at Arkhanes, Stavromenos, Palaikastro, and Protoria.

[**Fig.1:** Part of the Central Court at Phaistos (*photo: Athena Review*)].

In light of this new evidence, over the last few years a number of Aegean scholars have formed a range of new theories on the function of these enigmatic structures. Some researchers have proposed that, rather than primarily serving as palaces or royal residences, they may have actually been built as temples, sanctuaries, communal ritual and festival areas, or even as large necropoli

(literally, cities of the dead, or cemeteries).

History of Research: In other areas of Greece, the majority of archaeological research has focused on the Classical and Roman periods, while earlier remains from the Neolithic through Bronze Age have received much less attention. On Crete, however, this focus is reversed. There are more excavations of prehistoric (or more accurately, considering the decipherment of the Mycenaean script, [Linear B](#), proto-historic and prehistoric) sites on Crete than in any other part of the Aegean. To a large extent, this early focus is due to the density of prehistoric remains on the island. But it also results from the unique and intriguing character of these remains, which include large, sprawling, asymmetrical or "labyrinthian" complexes with multiple rooms, workshops and extensive storage areas, finely wrought arts and crafts, as well as substantial assemblages of seals, sealings, and archives in at least two distinct scripts - all the hallmarks of a state society. Here also, on this elongated, relatively isolated island, many researchers (Evans chief among them) have sought an early "European" civilization on a par with those known further to the east in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Others have been drawn to the Minoans as providing an earlier stratum to the more familiar Classical Greek culture.

One cannot discuss the archaeology of prehistoric Crete without addressing the work of Sir Arthur Evans. Although his methods and theories have become increasingly criticized as new evidence has accumulated, they nevertheless provide the basic backbone of Minoan archaeology. Evans' interest in Crete was piqued by his



acquisition of various Minoan artifacts, especially sealstones, and the still undeciphered scripts they contained. Evans' interest also seems to have been fueled by a related desire to discover an early Western culture - particularly one with an [early writing system](#) comparable to those in the East. Thus, it is not surprising that he not only compared the Minoans with the early Near Eastern civilizations, but also adopted many of the same techniques for excavation used in the East.

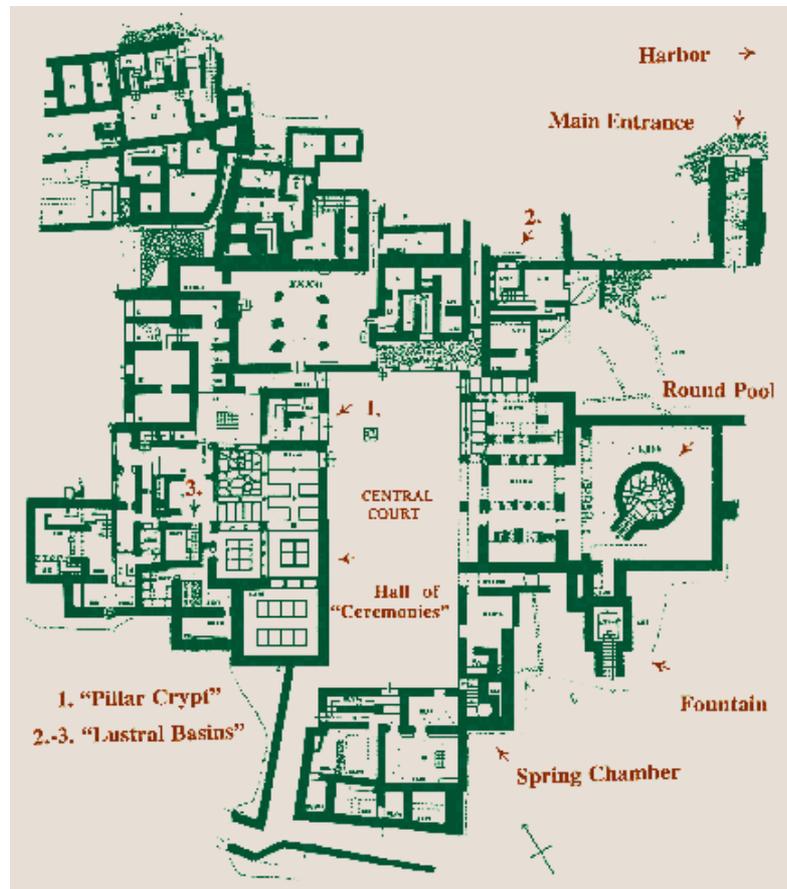
[**Fig.2:** Central Court at Knossos (*photo: Athena Review*)].

Along with the maturing of a field of study that is now over 100 years old, there appears to be a distinct trend toward the re-evaluation of earlier ideas and evidence. Many Minoan scholars are returning to Evans' idea that Minoan "palace" society was influenced by the civilizations of the East. Related to this, there has been an increase in attention to examining Minoan interactions within the wider sphere of the Bronze Age world. Scholars are also restudying many earlier excavations in order to clarify previous evidence, while also examining the lives of their scholastic predecessors (e.g., MacGillivray 2000).

Chronology and Controversy: The Minoan civilization flourished during the period known as the Bronze Age. By the early 20th century, researchers had divided the Bronze Age into early, middle, and late periods. In turn, these were subdivided into three more parts by early investigators including Evans, who used the terms Early, Middle, and Late Minoan for the Bronze Age of Crete.

Although the term "Minoans" has come to mean the Bronze Age culture of Crete (particularly the Middle and Late Bronze Age), the roots of this culture can be found in earlier habitation on the island. Whether the earliest Minoan settlements were the direct antecedents of the palaces is still a subject of some debate (see Origins of the Palaces below), but by consensus Minoan "palatial" society is determined to have begun roughly around the beginning of the second millennium BC (ca. 1900 BC), with the construction of the first palace at Knossos.

Minoan chronology is based on a tripartite system divided into relative phases of Early, Middle and Late. Such phases are determined by the relative position of cultural material - particularly pottery - found at Minoan sites. Thus, as Minoan excavation and research has continued, these phases have become increasingly refined. Archaeologists also often employ another chronological system based on fundamental changes in Minoan society, which can be observed in the building, rebuilding, and abandonment of the major palaces. This has given rise to terms such as Pre-palatial, Protopalatial (sometimes referred to as the Old Palace period), Neopalatial (or New Palace period), and Post-palatial periods. Most scholars agree that the palaces were first built at the beginning of MMIB, with a period of rebuilding beginning in MMIIA. Ash layers and other evidence point to the powerful eruption of the volcano on the island of Thera occurring at the end of the LMIA period; use of the palaces, however, seems to have continued through the end of LMIB. At that point, all the palaces except the one at Knossos were destroyed and abandoned, with a related break in other cultural material. Knossos, however, was modified and remained in use, despite at least two additional destructions in early LMIIIA2 and LMIIIB, before finally being abandoned for good at the end of the Bronze Age. Many scholars agree that during this last phase Knossos was occupied (or controlled) by an intruding people, probably the Mycenaeans, a Bronze Age civilization from mainland Greece. It is from this last phase of occupation at Knossos that we find tablets written in the Linear B script, deciphered as an early form of Greek.



The Palaces: While the palaces are certainly not the only intriguing aspect of a culture also known for its achievements in the arts, enigmatic scripts, and long-distance trade relations, they are a good place to begin to understand Minoan society. For much of what we know has been based on the excavation and study of these large structures, which, while sharing certain characteristics with buildings known in other Bronze Age cultures, remain distinctly "Minoan" in character.

While the definition of "palace" has been hotly debated, there has been much more consensus on the essential features of these structures (at least in the Neopalatial period, for less is known about the Old Palaces, often damaged in later rebuilding). Some of the most characteristic

features of these later palaces include:

Fig.3: Plan of the Palace at Zakros (*after Platon*)]

Central Court: This is the most distinct and perhaps defining feature of the palaces, one that several scholars have argued was essential to the development of the palace form (see [Driessen](#), this issue). This court is of impressive dimensions, the largest being that at Knossos) which measures 53 x 28 m, with those at Malia and Phaistos only slightly smaller. Several of the authors in this feature (including [Hitchcock](#), and Driessen) have noted that circulation patterns within the palaces would lead visitors toward the Central Court. The Central Court, therefore, must have been essential to the function of the palace. *West Court:* This is a smaller, open, paved area to the west of the western palace façade, the main approach to the palace. Often, raised "causeways" of carefully laid limestone slabs cross over the level of the cobbled court.

Cult Rooms along the West Side of the Central Court: Small rooms directly along the west side of the Central Court in the major palaces have largely been interpreted as ritual areas, on the basis of architectural features and finds. The Pillar Crypts, also found in other positions within the palaces and at some villa complexes, have received considerable attention.

Residential Quarters/Minoan Hall: Although their function is unknown, the palaces appear to include a suite of rooms with roughly similar plans, usually known as Residential Quarters. These are largely made up of the Minoan Hall, which consists of several rectangular rooms separated by a row of columns and a set of square piers forming a pier- and-door partition, in association with a lightwell.

Lustral Basin: The function of another distinctive room frequently found associated with the Minoan Hall, the so-called Lustral Basin (fig.3), is also an open question. This is a small room sunk down a few feet below floor level and reached by a short stairwell, which turns and runs along a parapet.



Storage Facilities/Magazines:

A significant portion of the ground floor of the palaces was devoted to storage magazines containing large pottery jars (pithoi), which are often found in the west wing, as at Knossos (fig.4).

Piano Nobile/Public Apartments: Many archaeologists postulate that the Minoans built their major reception halls on the second floors of the palaces above the storage rooms of the west wing. While these upper floors are not preserved, scholars point to similar "halls of state" in other forms of architecture, such as the "piano nobile" of the palazzi in Renaissance Italy.

[Fig.4: The West Magazines at Knossos (*photo: Athena Review*)]

Theatrical Area: Areas entered on two sides by shallow steps, generally to the northwest of the palaces, have been interpreted as "theatrical areas."

Grain Silos: Large rubble-built cylindrical structures constructed partially below the ground, known as koulores, appear to have been used for the storage of grain - a proposal strengthened by the preservation of plaster on the interior walls of several of these structures. **Monumental Size and Elaboration:** In addition to their sheer size, notable in the palaces is the use of highly crafted materials, such as ashlar masonry and gypsum veneering. The palaces employed a wide variety of piers, columns, or other supports. Decorative elements in the New Palaces include plaster reliefs, gypsum veneering, and painted frescoes.

Despite the palaces' sharing many characteristics, several of the authors in this feature have remarked on the distinctiveness of each palace. The plans of no two palaces are exactly alike, each conforming to its particular topography and regional context

Origin of the Palaces: Basically, theories about how and why the palaces developed fall into two camps: those who believe that the Minoan structures were in some way influenced by palaces of the Near East, versus those who have looked to an indigenous development within Cretan society. Since most, although not all (see [Driessen](#), this issue), scholars have viewed the palaces as indicative of a "state" society - that is, a powerful, centralized, political authority with complex and hierarchical organization - what is often under debate is thus the emergence of state society on Crete.

While the debate continues to unfold, one thing remains clear - more analysis is needed of the first Old Palaces, and the possible earlier structures found beneath them. Perhaps the recent discoveries of palaces at various sites on Crete, from [Petras](#) in Siteia to [Khania](#) in the west, will provide new evidence for the origin of this distinctive Minoan structure. Whether, in the end, we determine that the Minoan palace was purely an indigenous form, or was modeled from buildings in the Near East, it is important to remember that the end product was an entirely characteristic and distinct Cretan phenomenon.

[Note: This is an abridged version of the article "**Courtyard Complexes and the Labyrinth of Minoan Culture**" by Michele A. Miller, whose full text and illustrations appear in the printed issue of Vol.3, no.3 of *Athena Review* (pp.16-26). Copyright 2003, Athena Publications, Inc.]

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