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## *Athena Review, Vol.3, no.3: Minoan Crete*

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### **Return to the Labyrinth:**

#### *A Clew to the Function of the Minoan Palaces*

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The hard truth is that one century after Sir Arthur Evans declared that he had found the Palace of Minos, we still do not know what he really found at Knossos. There is still no evidence for monarchy, let alone the legendary King Minos, until the appearance of the title wanax, identified as the Homeric term for "great king," in the Mycenaean Greek archives, written in the Linear B script of 1450 to 1300 BC, five hundred years after Knossos was built and when no new palaces were being erected.

Knossos was the first Cretan palace to be revealed by the spade, and Evans was convinced that it was not only the royal abode of Minos, whom Greek tradition tells us ruled the Aegean Sea until his demise when he took up jurisprudence in Hades, but also the Daedalian Labyrinth where Theseus slew the Minotaur. Since then, archaeologists have revealed six other buildings erected around rectangular open "Central Courts," as Evans dubbed them, roughly twice as long as they are wide. These are at Phaistos, Malia, Gournia, Galatas, Petras, and Kato Zakros. There are also other candidates with palatial features, such as archives and fine architecture at Khania, Kommos, Arkhanes, Agia Triadha, and Monastiraki, but these are unable to claim royal status because their central courts remain undiscovered. Were these all the seats of kingdoms spread across the island? If so, why have we not found any evidence for royal burials? And why is Minoan art void of the political propaganda, such as, for example, ruler portraits and commemorations of kings smiting their enemies, which we see in neighboring states to the east? Knossos was the only palace re-occupied in the final palace period and the only one with a built throne, which was installed at that time. From this, we infer that the Mycenaean wanax moved into the shell of a very old building, which was probably built for a different purpose. But what was that original purpose? A clue may lie in the ancient Greek memory of the Daedalian Labyrinth and Chorus.

To the ancient Greeks, the labyrinth was a metaphor for life. It was a complexity of twists and turns, deceptive dead-ends, double-backs and long meandering diversions, through which the explorer, having entered, had to find his way in order to confront the monster, half-human/half-divine, which lurked there. Success depended upon another equally profound metaphor: Ariadne's clew. In Greek myth, this clew is the mitos, the ball of thread which Ariadne gave to Theseus, the Athenian hero. By unwinding, the mitos guided him through the Cretan labyrinth that Daedalus, upon seeing the Egyptian original, had made for King Minos at Knossos. But the mitos is also the life-line, spun and rolled into a ball by the Fates at birth and unraveled throughout one's life. In both senses, it is a guide through life's perplexities; the key is to find your clew and to learn how to follow it, for otherwise you are lost in the maze.

When Ariadne gave Theseus the clew, she showed him how to discover his true path through the labyrinth. There he confronted the most powerful metaphor of all: the Minotaur. The monstrous progeny of the Greek god Zeus and Minos' Queen Pasiphae, the Minotaur combines human flesh with godly spirit (see Box 4, p.25, this issue). Both are important aspects of our being, but one is beastly and grounded in this world, the other divine. To access the latter, we must reconcile and master the former. The object of the maze, then, is not so much to get through it as to defeat what it holds for you, and learn about yourself along the way. When we possess the clew, we no longer fear the outcome of our decisions; we know that we are on the right path. Ariadne gave that clew to Theseus and he used it well: he emerged from the labyrinth with a new awareness; then he left her.

The labyrinth, the mitos, and the Minotaur ceased to be fanciful myths early in the fifth century BC when the Athenians promoted Theseus from legendary hero to historical figure. We see him slaying the bull-headed man dragged from the world of meander patterns in late Archaic art (fig.2), but by the fifth century BC, the intricate pattern became a building (fig.3). The city of Knossos began to mint coins around this time, and the earliest shows the Minotaur on the obverse and a labyrinthine swastika with a star or sun motif in the center on the reverse (fig.6). Over time, the swastika gave way to the maze pattern (figs.7 and 8) and a human or bovine head replaced the central star.

Our first description of the original labyrinth at Hawara in the Fayum near the Middle Kingdom capital of Lisht in Egypt (figs.4 and 5) also comes from the fifth century BC: "The Pyramids were bigger than words can tell," Herodotus marveled, "and each of them equivalent to many Greek buildings, even big ones: but the Labyrinth surpasses even the Pyramids" (2.148). His guides told him that this greatest of Egyptian buildings contained twelve courts and 3,000 chambers (1,500 above, and 1,500 below ground), all surrounded by a single wall. Current estimates, based on excavations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, give us a single structure 1000 m long by 800 m wide: nearly a square kilometer - the size of a very large modern shopping mall. This labyrinth was the funerary temple for the pyramid of the Twelfth Dynasty's richest pharaoh, Amenemhat III, whose praenomen Labaris is the likely Egyptian origin of the Graecized word labyrinth, which incorporates the foreign name with the suffix -nthos, a common feature of "pre-Hellenic" toponyms and botanical labels adopted by the Greeks when they arrived in the Aegean. But the stone structure, which survived intact for nearly two millennia, was still used in Cleopatra I's day, ca. 193 BC. It was in the process of crumbling when, in the first century AD, Pliny the Elder, the Roman soldier best-known for his *Natural History*, reported that it had been a temple to the Sun (NH 36, 13).

Callimachus, the third century BC poet and scholar from Cyrene in modern Libya, explicitly refers to the Cretan labyrinth in his Hymn to Delos, the island also known as Asteria at the center of the Greek Cyclades. This lyricist was famed for his outburst that "Cretans always lie," (Hymn 1.8) because they built a tomb for Zeus whom, according to Callimachus, was immortal. Here, he sings of the ancient and sacred image of Cypris (Aphrodite, but probably Ariadne here) established by Theseus in Delos on his return to Athens from Crete, where he escaped the wild son of Pasiphae and the winding ways of the labyrinth (Hymn 4.1.311).

Diodorus of Sicily (i.61), in his exhaustive history of the inhabited world covering the earliest times down to his own day in 60 BC, describes the geography and ethnography (including mythology) of the eastern lands. He tells us that King Mendes of Egypt, yet another name for Amenemhat III and Labaris, built himself a tomb known as the Labyrinth, which was not only remarkable for its size but for its ingenious design: "for a man who enters it cannot easily find his

way out, unless he gets a guide who is thoroughly acquainted with the structure." Some say, according to Diodorus, that Daedalus, having visited Egypt and admired the structure, built a version of the labyrinth for King Minos in Crete, where the latter kept the "beast called Minotaur." Diodorus leaves us in no doubt that he is relating a myth about Crete and points out that, while no trace of the Cretan building remained in his day, the Egyptian original was intact.

But there are even earlier mentions of the labyrinth, and they come from the Knossian building itself. On three separate clay tablets baked during the conflagration that consumed the Knossos palace in the fourteenth century BC, we find the phrase *da-pu-ri-to-jo po-ti-ni-ja* in the Mycenaean Greek language. *Potnia* is likely derived from the Indo-European root *pot-* (relating to power), and most scholars accept it to mean "mistress" or "queen." She could be one great goddess with many attributes, such as "of the grains" or "of the sacred pillar," and worshipped in a variety of places, including Athens, or there could be a variety of goddesses, each venerated as "mistress." As the word labyrinth preceding *potnia* is used here, we understand it to be a place name as opposed to an epithet or adjective. So we translate the phrase as Lady, or Mistress, of the Labyrinth. Was there ever a Lord of the Labyrinth before the arrival of the *Wanax*?

What if the Knossian building, erected during the Egyptian Middle Kingdom, really was a miniature (Pliny says one one-hundredth) of the Egyptian original of the same period? And what if the other Cretan court-centered buildings were imitations of Knossos, built to perform a similar function in their local communities? We would then expect these to be the homes of gods and not men, for the two rarely shared the same roof. We would also expect them to have some connection to the Sun.

The solar connection has been demonstrated in recent studies by Lucy Goodison (2001), who shows that the pier-and-door partition at the entrance to the Knossian Throne Room was designed to illuminate specific parts of the room at sunrise on the solstices and equinox (figs.9 and 10). This would explain why the architect of Knossos went to such great pains to cut away the eastern hillside and sink two stories below the level of the Central Court: the sun's rays had to hit the Throne Room and Central Shrine each morning. This also explains why the palace courts are oriented to receive the sun's direct light at specific times of the year.

Few modern excavators in Crete would deny that the great deposits of cups and bowls we find in cupboards near the entrances to the palatial buildings point toward communal feasting on a grand scale (see Tsipopoulou, this issue, p.47, fig.9, and Vlasaki, p.54, fig.9). At Knossos, the evidence for feasting goes well back into the Early Minoan period, to roughly 2600 BC. If the Minoans were anything like most pre-industrialized societies, they observed a very full calendar of sacred feast days. The ancient Egyptians, for example, devoted more than one hundred days of each year to communal feasting. Such ritual celebrations, which included processions, dancing, and music, took place in the courtyards of their temples, and it is safe to assume that the original Labyrinth, which contained shrines to all the gods of Egypt, served this purpose well beyond the death of Amenemhat III and into the Greek and Roman period. Could the Cretan labyrinth and its offshoots have served a similar purpose?

This takes us to the second ancient Greek tradition about Crete: the famed Chorus at Knossos. In the *Iliad* (18.590), our earliest literary reference to Daedalus and Ariadne, Homer describes in glorious detail the finely crafted shield that Hephaestus made for Achilles, "In which the famed lame-one wrought a chorós like the one that Daedalus fashioned for Ariadne of the beautiful tresses in broad Knossos." The chorós, our chorus, in ancient Greece was the band of singers and dancers in the religious festivals and dramatic performances around the altar of Dionysus - the

origins of Attic Drama. But it was also a place, as we see in the *Odyssey* (8.260) when Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians, orders up a feast to celebrate Odysseus' visit. He commands that a chorós be marked out and before long the enchanted isle's young men are tapping it down well with their dance steps. To the ancient Greeks, the chorus signified both the activity itself, and the place where the community gathered to perform it (see Box 2).

Art historians have made much of the processions, singing, and dancing represented in Minoan art, which most scholars agree must be linked to sacred ritual performance (fig.14, and Driessen, this issue, figs.10 and 11). Paul Faure, when he imagined Minoan daily life, pictured the palaces as the venues for this ritual activity. Faure based his image on the temples of ancient Mesopotamia and the Levant, as well as the sanctuaries of ancient Greece.

Perhaps the later Greek tales of the chorus and labyrinth refer to the same place: a sacred district reserved for communal gatherings. These open spaces may have been designated early in the Bronze Age, but formally defined when permanent shrines, storerooms and preparation buildings were erected around them at approximately the same time as the Egyptian Labyrinth was built. The limits of the central court were marked out and the palace built as a unity, a very costly enterprise.

This line of thinking takes us a long way from the seat of powerful secular authority, as Evans proposed, for under the ritualistic model, kings would have derived much of their power from divine mandate. It takes us into the realm of divinely inspired priestly authority in a corporate society and allows us to imagine the Cretan palaces as great sanctuaries; lively places where the community gathered to celebrate the first day of each month, the phases of the sun, moon, and the five visible planets; and all of the other relevant festivals that societies devoted to the earth, and which its fruits and its seasons feel obligated to observe.

This is one theory largely based on the ancient authors and how they remembered Knossos, but which also takes the latest archaeological finds and thinking into account. I believe that the best way to understand why the Minoans built their palaces is to conduct research and excavations with a greater sensitivity toward Crete's sacred environment and how it affected its inhabitants, and move on from the economic models of the twentieth century AD.

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[Note: This is an abridged version of the interview, "Return to the Labyrinth: a Clew to the Function of the Minoan Palaces" by Joseph Alexander MacGillivray, whose full text and illustrations appear in the printed issue of Vol.3, no.3 of *Athena Review* (pp.62-66). Copyright 2003, Athena Publications, Inc.]

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