

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

ACCORDING TO ARTHUR EVANS, AND MANY SINCE, THE NEOPALATIAL period is the ‘Golden Age’ of the Minoan civilization of the Cretan Bronze Age.¹ Palaces carpeted the island, and highly skilled workers crafted exquisite artefacts. Lacking in fortifications, the island was cloaked with ritual symbolism, forming a powerful ideology. An elaborate bureaucracy logged transactions, while massive storage areas enabled redistribution. While we cannot read the Linear A script, the libation formulae suggest an island-wide koine. Within this cultural identity, considerable variation appears in how people – notably the elites – organized themselves on an intra-site and regional basis. This book explores and celebrates this rich, diverse, and dynamic culture through site analyses and the key control networks of administration, writing, the economy, and ritual. Key themes include the role of Knossos in wider Minoan culture and politics, the variable modes of centralization and power relations detectable across the island, and the role of ritual and cult in defining and articulating elite control.

This book investigates the social strategies of the Neopalatial period, mainly through the distribution of a wide range of elite features and, by extension, practices. ‘Social strategies’ is a deliberately vague term, in recognition that such practices may incorporate a variety of aspirations and intentions, depending on the make-up of the social groups involved and the situations they are participating in. Exploring strategies of social differentiation will produce insights into the power relations of elites, both established and aspiring.² It also negotiates

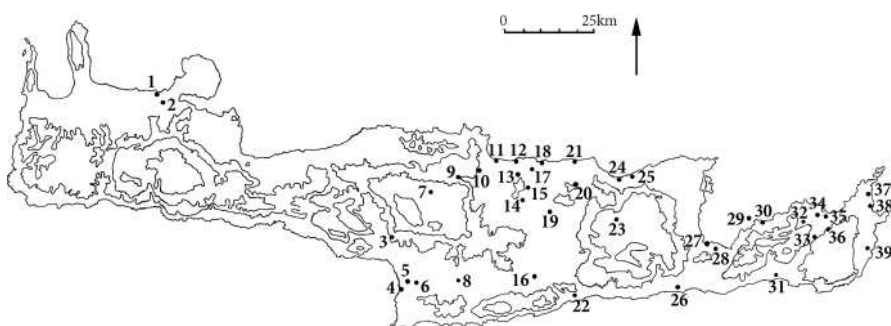
the ‘spatial dynamics’ of the age, acknowledging the considerable regional and temporal variations across Crete during this period. Therefore, not only are the distribution patterns of elite features and functions through the landscape analysed, but diachronic changes are also taken into account where possible, in order to map the aspirations, successes, and failures of strategies of social differentiation.

The nature and degree of the centralization of certain elite features and functions are analysed on the site and regional levels. At the site level, we will consider whether the owners and users of central buildings (where present in sites) monopolized certain practices, or simply engaged in them on a greater scale than others. On the regional level, we will examine whether these settlements fall into well-defined categories, which might reflect a site hierarchy. While settlement hierarchies do not necessarily reflect political ones, the categorization of sites can shed light on how the regions and island functioned as a whole. Central to this issue is the role of Knossos on an island-wide level, and the extent and nature of its control beyond its immediate hinterland. The role of ceremony is a key factor in understanding these power relations, and the organization of ceremony and the economy are compared. The role of ritual in the Minoan world is one of the most hotly debated problems for the period, and therefore takes a central place in this book.

NEOPALATIAL CRETE

In ceramic terms, the Neopalatial period is MM (Middle Minoan) III to LM (Late Minoan) I; in absolute terms, it is ca. 1700–1450 BC. This section introduces the chronological frameworks and key aspects of the material and visual culture. It outlines the various temporal resolutions applicable to the different types of evidence, and the challenges faced in drawing them together. Neopalatial Crete has one of the most finely tuned ceramic structures developed in prehistory, but the problems with tagging this onto architectural, artefactual, and iconographical material are considerable. We will also overview the characteristic elements of Neopalatial elite culture, which stand as markers for ‘Minoan’ identity.

Crete is the fifth largest Mediterranean island, strategically placed as a stepping-stone between the central and eastern Mediterranean. While an island, it was by no means insular during this period, and enjoyed wide-ranging external relations. Its shape – 245 km long and only 50 km wide at the most – means that, as the crow flies, no part was far from the sea (Figure 1.1). However, it is a very mountainous island, with fifteen mountain ranges, three of them more than 2,000 m high.³ Such division enabled the creation of islands within the island, and the articulation of regional identities. The White Mountains on the west of the island are presumed to explain the lack of



1.1 Map of Crete with main Neopalatial settlements (ritual sites in Figure 6.1). 1) Chania; 2) Nerokourou; 3) Apodoulou; 4) Kommos; 5) Ayia Triada; 6) Phaistos; 7) Zominthos; 8) Mitropolis-Kannia; 9) Sklavokambos; 10) Tylissos; 11) Gazi; 12) Poros; 13) Knossos; 14) Vathypetro; 15) Archanes; 16) Protoria; 17) Prassos; 18) Amnissos; 19) Galatas; 20) Kastelli; 21) Nirou Chani; 22) Chondros; 23) Plati; 24) Malia; 25) Sissi; 26) Myrtos-Pyrgos; 27) Priniatikos Pyrgos; 28) Gournia; 29) Pseira; 30) Mochlos; 31) Makrygialos; 32) Achladia-Riza; 33) Ayios Georgios/Tourtouloi; 34) Klimataria; 35) Petras; 36) Zou; 37) Vai; 38) Palaikastro; 39) Zakros.

archaeological sites in the region (with due exceptions, especially on the north coast). The Psiloritis, Dictaeon, and Thryphti Mountains also serve as formidable landmarks that shape and restrict the communication routes across the island. Despite such internal divisions, and the vital role of the sea in communication, Crete's coast offers a useful boundary for this study. As we shall see, many aspects of Minoan culture are unique to the island, or have a limited distribution further afield.

With crucial exceptions, such as the plethora of conical cups,⁴ the distinctive elements of Neopalatial culture tend to be drawn from elite culture. The concentration on elite culture is not only necessary because of the traditional focus on the upper echelons of society, but it also includes the most striking and distinctive elements of the period. It is not the case that this characteristic material and visual culture can be mapped onto a clear, geographically well-defined, collective identity, and further exploration of the variation within indicates local responses to this *koine*.

The palatial form itself is uniquely Minoan, with the large rectangular Central Court and West Court (see Chapter 3 for more detailed analyses of elite features). Ashlar masonry was often used in the construction of elite buildings, with the addition of gypsum, and/or wall paintings. Elite architectural forms include Lustral Basins, sunken rooms entered by a dog-legged or L-shaped series of steps, and Minoan Halls, units provided with light-wells and polythera (multi-door) systems that allow great flexibility in terms of the movement of people, light, and air. Prestige and ritual objects are often made from imported raw materials such as gold or ivory, and are of exquisite craftsmanship. The economic basis to this appears to have been agricultural,

visible by the presence of storage rooms (notably magazines) and large ceramic storage jars, or *pithoi* (singular *pithos*: see also 4.8B). Flourishing harbour sites indicate intensive trade, combined with considerable manufacturing. All was organized with a complex administrative system, which deployed the (undeciphered) Linear A script to write down the Minoan language. There is, in contrast to the rich settlement evidence, an unfortunate lack of burial data for Neopalatial Crete.

The ‘Neopalatial period’ is an architectural or cultural term describing the construction of the second Palaces at Knossos, Malia, and Phaistos, and first Palaces elsewhere. It therefore also provides a chronological unit, traditionally set ca. 1700–1450 BC. Important critiques of this term have been raised given our increased understanding of the chronological variation in the use of the Palaces during this period – there was no neat construction and destruction horizons marking the beginning and end (see following section). Furthermore, the term ‘Palace’ itself has been reconsidered – it can mean either the architectural form of a particular building that is set around a Central Court, or the institution that the building housed and represented. Or, it can stand for ‘elite’; in this book, the term ‘palatial’ is reserved for sites that possess a building with a recognized Central Court. Concerns have been raised about assumptions projected back from the modern use of the word (see Chapter 3). It is sensible to capitalize the term ‘Palace’ in order to signal the specificity of this term, both historiographically (following Evans’ view of a Palace–Temple around a courted residence) and culturally (as set during this period of the Cretan Bronze Age).⁵ Similarly, the decision has been taken to capitalize the label ‘Villa’.

CHRONOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

Several chronological frameworks are in use for the Cretan Bronze Age, depending mainly on the material under study. The structure deployed has a profound effect on the narrative created. Clarke stated: ‘Archaeological data are not historical data, and consequently archaeology is not history.’⁶ This has not been the view widely held in Minoan studies, where many have striven to create a historical narrative. The wide range of sources, combined with the lack of decipherable written evidence, means that several different chronological resolutions (and therefore histories) are available.

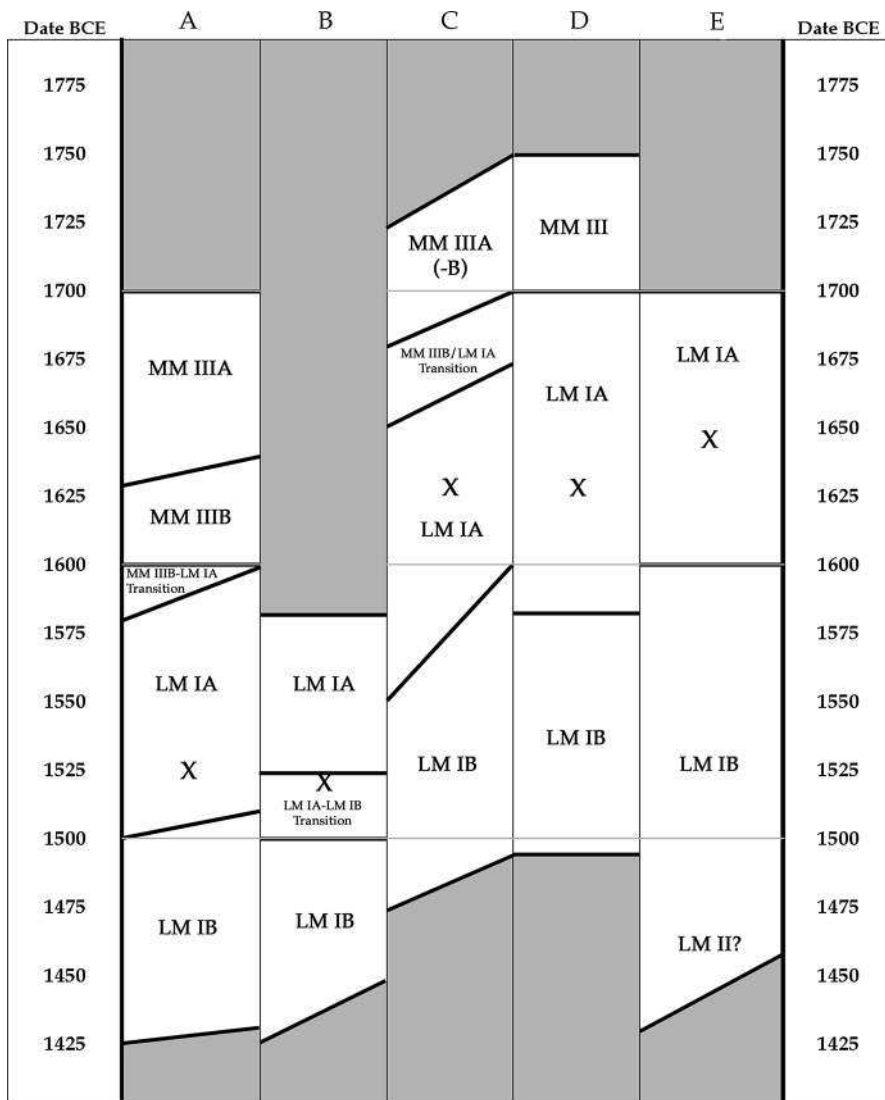
Platon set up the Prepalatial, Protopalatial, Neopalatial, and Postpalatial divisions in response to the ceramic phases, which, although more precise in resolution, did not invite a broader, cultural narrative.⁷ However, not all ‘new’ Palaces were built at the beginning of the Neopalatial period; some of these Palaces, such as Galatas, did not replace an ‘old’ (Protopalatial) version, and not all Palaces were in use throughout the entire epoch. Such is the

situation that it has been suggested that the traditional Protopalatial and Neopalatial periods should be united into a single ‘palatial’ period, with various rebuilds occurring across the island at different times.⁸ Linking structures and ceramics remains a fine balancing act, although most scholars use both systems concurrently.⁹

Crete offers one of the best defined chronological frameworks in prehistory, due to painstaking analyses by ceramic experts for more than a century. Where possible, the chronology will follow ceramic phases, namely MM III (A and B), LM IA and LM IB. Absolute (calendar) dates are of less importance in this study, and are heavily debated, particularly concerning the eruption of the island of Thera,¹⁰ which, in ceramic terms, occurred in late LM IA.¹¹ Figure 1.2 indicates the discrepancies between the more traditional (low) chronology based on the Egyptian calendar and imports,¹² and the more recent (high) chronology based on scientific techniques such as dendrochronology and radiocarbon dating.¹³ For the purpose of this book, we will focus on the relative framework. It would, however, be useful to establish the duration of each phase, for which absolute dates are required.¹⁴ The higher chronology suggests that LM IB in particular was a longer period than indicated by the lower chronology (around seventy to ninety years).¹⁵ Even if this were clarified, many of the types of evidence we are exploring, such as frescoes and seals, cannot be easily attached to a specific phase.¹⁶ While the remainder of this section explores some of the issues raised by pottery specialists, most of the data considered in this book are non-ceramic.

The ceramic framework has been set in place since Arthur Evans and his right-hand man, Duncan Mackenzie,¹⁷ defined it over the course of their excavations at Knossos. Scholars have come to differentiate between ceramic *styles* and ceramic *periods*,¹⁸ and Evans himself understood the limitations of a ceramic framework: ‘All such stratigraphical demarcations are of their nature somewhat arbitrary and any idea of Minoan civilization as divided into so many distinct compartments must be dismissed from the minds of students. All is, in fact, transition.’¹⁹ In other words, societies do not ‘switch’ from one era to another overnight, and our tidy categories provide a basic guide to a much fuzzier reality.²⁰ Two recent works have provided essential surveys of the early and late parts of the Neopalatial period, one on MM III, and one on LM IB.²¹ They have both produced vital information concerning the comparative developments of sites across the island. At the same time, they highlight the need to separate stylistic and chronological labels, due to site and regional variations.²² At some sites, subdivisions within these phases are discernible, but it remains a great challenge to cross-reference these across the island.

Evans originally divided this earlier period into MM IIIA and MM IIIB. However, Betancourt has argued that it is too difficult to distinguish MM IIIA



1.2 Chronologies: ceramic, absolute, and the Theran eruption. Adams 2007a, figure 2, reprinted with permission, courtesy *American Journal of Archaeology* and Archaeological Institute of America. A) traditional low chronology (Warren and Hankey 1989); B) updated traditional low chronology (Warren 1998; 2010); C) high chronology (Manning 1995); D) modified high chronology and low Egyptian chronology (Rehak and Younger 2001, 391); E) simplified recent high chronology (Manning et al. 2002; Manning and Brock Ramsey 2003; see also Hammer et al. 2003; Hammer 2005).

as a separate period,²³ while Warren and Hankey suggest that MM III as a whole may have been a relatively short period anyway. They developed a MM IIIB-LM IA ‘transitional’ phase;²⁴ generally, however, scholars prefer to keep MM IIIB as a distinct period.²⁵ The more detailed our understanding of MM III becomes, the clearer it is that there was no single, sudden ‘start’ to

the architectural Neopalatial period.²⁶ Even within the same site, even within the same *building* (such as the Palace at Knossos), there is not necessarily a single destruction and rebuilding that marks the divide between the Proto- and Neopalatial eras, as has been traditionally assumed.²⁷ Macdonald and Knappett advocate a realistically vague definition for the beginning of the Neopalatial period as ‘either at the start of or somewhere in the earlier part of MM III’.²⁸ It remains a major challenge to apply the finely tuned ceramic phases to these architectural structures.

Macdonald and Knappett suggest three main (architectural) trajectories experienced by sites during MM III.²⁹ As always, Knossos stands in a category of its own, continuing to develop and prosper at a rate not matched by others. Phaistos and Malia, and other semi-palatial sites with important central buildings, such as Petras, Myrtos-Pyrgos, and Gournia, experienced a setback. Some sites, however, established new palatial or high-status buildings, including Galatas and Chania, along with other harbour towns, such as Palaikastro and Mochlos. Sites responded to the broad ‘Protopalatial’ destruction horizon in different ways.

The technical innovations in the slip and firing that marks LM I came in gradually, beginning in MM III.³⁰ The relative prosperity of LM IA and LM IB has been much discussed since the publication of Driessen and Macdonald’s (1997) work *The Troubled Island*. They argued that the Theran eruption brought about a period of recession, if not depression, in Minoan culture. LM IA was, therefore, the Golden Age for the Minoan world, rather than LM IB. However, many sites were clearly flourishing during LM IB, and sites experienced very different trajectories.³¹ The physical impact of the Theran eruption on Crete is heavily debated, from minimalist positions to more weighted – links between environmental events and cultural change are problematic to establish.³² The initial physical damage was probably not that substantial, although we should not discount additional psychological impact.³³ While harbour sites in the north-central area of Crete appear to have suffered (but were not completely destroyed),³⁴ we know that the palatial site of Zakros, on the eastern coast, prospered precisely in the LM IB period. It is plausible that trade disruptions resulted in fluctuations in economic prosperity across the island.

Identification of a deposit as LM IB as opposed to LM IA is dependent on the presence of particular styles, such as the Marine Style, although LM IA motifs continue.³⁵ Marine Style ceramics are disproportionately selected for publication, a practice that has led to the misleading impression that they were common. In fact, the style is ‘quite rare’,³⁶ outside Knossos at least (and Archanes and Poros).³⁷ The recent volume on LM IB ceramics highlights well the tension between the desire to link various sites into a homogenous, Cretan narrative, and the recognition that, stratigraphically, certain sites present

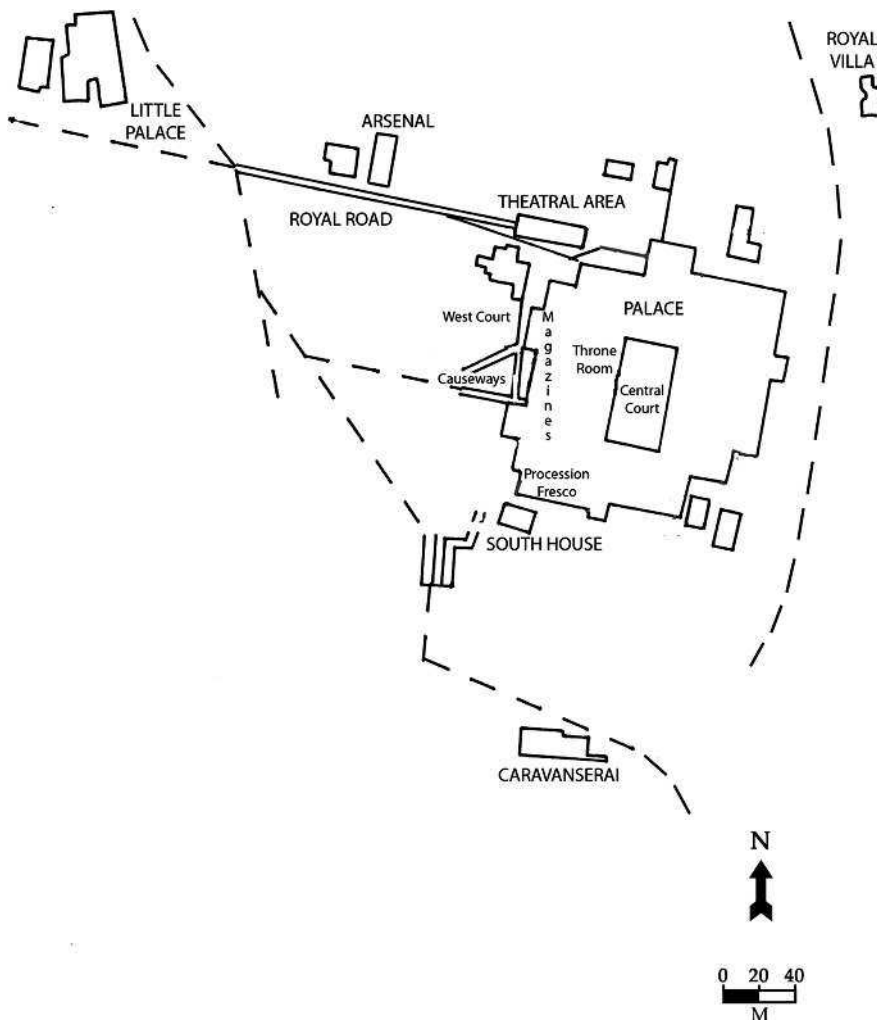
an idiosyncratic picture.³⁸ These surveys have clarified both the evidence for subdivisions within the period on a site-by-site basis, and the evidence for a single destruction horizon at the end of it across the island. Of the sites most closely analysed in this book, several have revealed no evidence for LM IB subdivisions, including Nerokourou, Phaistos town, Ayia Triada, Sklavokambos, Tylissos, certain areas of Knossos, Archanes, Vathypetro, Nirou Chani, Galatas town, Kastelli Pediada, Malia town, Myrtos-Pyrgos, Gournia, Pseira, Makrygialos, Petras, and Epano Zakros Villa.³⁹ Other sites that have some evidence for subdivisions within LM IB include: Chania Kastelli hill, Phaistos Palace, Kommos, Mochlos, Palaikastro (two destruction levels, with no diagnostic differences between the assemblages), and Zakros.⁴⁰ Even if one recognizes separate phases of LM IB at some sites, we are not in a position to confirm correlations between sites across the island.⁴¹

Perhaps more importantly, the traditional picture of a single destruction horizon at the end of LM IB (brought about by Mycenaean warriors, initially through Knossos) has been brought into question. Excavators have suggested that the final destructions at Chania, Malia, Kommos, Mochlos, and Palaikastro occurred later than those at Knossos and north-central Crete, while the one at Petras may have occurred earlier, although this has been questioned and modified.⁴² Stylistic elements continue from LM IB to LM II, so, for example, LM II coarse wares from the Unexplored Mansion at Knossos resemble those of LM IB Nirou Chani.⁴³

Ceramics offer the finest resolution, and this is ultimately based on Evans' and Mackenzie's work at Knossos. Finley, writing from outside the discipline, made the link between this ceramic framework and Knossocentricism as long ago as 1968, stating that how the former 'is too neatly symmetrical is almost self-evident. It also has an empire-building note to it, for the scheme, worked out from the ruins at Knossos, was imperiously extended to the whole of Crete, though it is now certain that at least some of it will not work at all for other sites, such as Phaistos. And why should it? That the whole of Crete was monolithic in its culture and politics is a gratuitous (and now demonstrably false) assumption.'⁴⁴ Evans' technical, and apparently objective, method of organizing his material into temporal phases enabled a coherent narrative that has had significant implications regarding the role of Knossos and the island's socio-political homogeneity.

THE ROLE OF KNOSSOS: CULTURAL TO POLITICAL

Since Evans' publication of *The Palace of Minos* (1921–35), the palatial site at Knossos has been the traditional type-site against which other Minoan sites are compared, with a stress on similarities rather than differences (Figure 1.3).⁴⁵ Evans' vision of the Minoans took its lead from Knossos and



1.3 The site of Knossos. Adams (2010, figure 3), reprinted with permission. © *Cambridge Classical Journal*.

set out a remarkably standardized world: ‘The culture as a whole is cast in the same mould and shows an essential unity . . . Throughout a space of time extending, at a moderate estimate, over two thousand years – the course of the Minoan civilization is singularly continuous and homogeneous.’⁴⁶ The ceramic framework established by Evans and Mackenzie is one reason why Knossos has become the type-site for Minoan culture, and why an implicit assumption remains that all innovations began at this site. Many scholars have emphasized the role of Knossos in the dissemination of all elite features – even though there is no evidence that Knossos invented them.⁴⁷ The first known Lustral Basin, for example, comes from a non-palatial building at Malia.⁴⁸

One of the key themes of this book is the slippage in describing elite culture as ‘Knossian’ or ‘Minoan’. Cultural influence is too often seen as political control, even by the excavators of sites who might have been expected to stress their independence. They believe that the island became Knossian over the course of the Neopalatial period, culturally, ritually, and probably economically and politically. Knossos is the most impressive and important Neopalatial site, and clearly a very influential force. Whether the Knossian elite imposed its political might via these cultural trappings needs to be demonstrated rather than assumed – local sites may have had much more agency, choosing to emulate the larger site. Most accounts highlight the ‘prestigious position’ of Knossos, even if it ‘may never have been an official “capital” of Minoan Crete’.⁴⁹ But many scholars suggest that, over the Protopalatial and Neopalatial periods, the island became increasingly centralized under Knossos,⁵⁰ and that Knossos was indeed its capital in the Neopalatial period.⁵¹ The Final Palatial situation, where Knossos did control a substantial part of the island, should not be projected back onto the earlier one.

It is still true that ‘most writing about Minoan archaeology is pitched at the level of the civilization as a whole, rather than of individual polities within it’.⁵² Cherry states that cultural imperialism need not imply political domination, and innovations may not always have come from Knossos.⁵³ The peer–polity interaction model is important, as it allows for individual polities to exist within a cultural *koine*. Bennet has argued that ‘in periods when a single [administrative] center has existed, such a system has been imposed from outside’,⁵⁴ or the system was ‘probably unstable’.⁵⁵ In other words, the ‘natural’ state for Crete is to be fragmented, unless externally administered. The location of these polities’ boundaries and the nature of inter-site relations remain poorly understood, however.

Warren has recently made an explicit search for a Knossian ‘state’, but with the subtle distinction between natural, political, social, economic, cultural, and religious borders.⁵⁶ It is useful to consider these different spheres separately.⁵⁷ For example, Knossos has been perceived as the ceremonial or cosmological centre of the island,⁵⁸ which emphasizes the non-economic and apolitical aspects of control and/or influence. The current state of affairs appears to be that most agree that Knossos had cultural, ideological, and possibly religious influence over a broad area, if not the entire island, but it is becoming increasingly questioned whether this was political.⁵⁹

Inter-site relationships have often been voiced in terms of either political dependency or autonomy. However, interdependency (rather than dependency versus independence) and a relational understanding of power are here the preferred terms and approach.⁶⁰ Power relations arise from social interaction, rather than existing as a precondition of action. Similarly, Warren speaks of a hierarchical dependency between first-order sites and