

## INTRODUCTION

### *Minoan Crete*

THIS BOOK IS AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CULTURE OF MINOAN CRETE through its archaeology and art. It explores the island's stark natural beauty, its mythical past, and its artistic and archaeological remains. Most books on Minoan Crete over the years have either been popularizing accounts or specialized treatments aimed at scholars. *Minoan Crete: An Introduction* was written to transcend this divide. It presents a broad cultural history of Minoan Crete and an up-to-date discussion of Minoan art and archaeology for the general reader and enough detail to interest the student/scholar. Crete is unique in the Aegean for its close connections with the civilizations of the Near East. For this reason, the text often discusses Minoan Crete in the light of Egypt and the Levant with the goal of making clear the unique features of Minoan civilization.

The format of the book is an outgrowth of the present state of our knowledge about Minoan Crete. The book draws on the immense amount of new information that has accumulated over the past two generations on the Minoan economy, settlements, society, foreign relations, sanctuaries, architecture, seals, pottery, and fresco painting. New technological studies have helped us to date and locate the origin of objects, and identify the interaction of people with their environment. Theoretical studies have become popular in Aegean archaeology. Many recent studies of the Aegean are thematically organized and more interested in adhering to a particular theory than in examining the archaeological evidence from a broad cultural perspective.

As a result of these developments, much recent Minoan scholarship has become quite complex and specialized, written largely for other scholars. In contrast, this book is a cultural history – its goal is a broad understanding of the cultural identity of Minoan Crete.

This book examines Minoan Crete in its eastern Mediterranean context. It documents types of foreign evidence on Crete, and attempts to explain how many of the innovative political and ideological decisions made by Minoans were stimulated in response to foreign ideas they had learned from abroad. This is the approach adopted by recent Aegean studies following the anthropological publication by Mary Helms, *Ulysses' Sail: An Ethnographic Odyssey of Power, Knowledge, and Geographic Distance* (Princeton, 1988). Far from showing that Minoan Crete developed in a derivative fashion – *ex oriente lux* – from older, more developed Eastern cultures, this approach will demonstrate the cultural distinctiveness of Minoan culture. The evidence consistently suggests that the Minoans drew upon their knowledge of the Near East which they creatively adapted to their own local needs. Most often, we can see that a foreign idea was adopted but significantly changed in the process. Footnotes cite recent publications where earlier bibliographies can be found. The people of Bronze Age Crete are referred to as “Minoans” for sake of simplicity, rather than as any claim of an ethnic or linguistic unity. Additionally, the basic term “palace” is used here for the same reason, without intending the term to be understood in its conventional sense, that is, as the monumental residence of a powerful ruler. The nature of a Minoan “palace” is discussed in Chapter 4.

The Minoans have left us no historical written documents. Therefore, in order to understand their society, it is necessary to examine the archaeological remains. Each class of artifact has its own distinct story to tell and is particularly sensitive to certain aspects of ancient life. Architecture, for instance, reflects the social organization of society and displays its identity. Pottery is essential for chronology and the activities of daily life. Its distribution reveals cultural and commercial patterns, such as trade. Art and iconography, the study of the symbolic meaning of images, play a particularly important role in this book, since it is a window into the intellectual life of a culture. Visual imagery, its choice of subject and style, in wall painting, seal scenes, vase painting, jewelry, and sculpture expresses the attitudes and religious beliefs of the Minoans. Metal and ivory objects, stone vases, and clay loomweights offer evidence of Minoan craft production, including textiles. Since the interpretation of artifacts is often complex, the text will attempt to explain why archaeological finds are understood in the way they are.

This book is also a narrative, in that it traces and interprets the development of Minoan civilization over time. Egyptian and the Near Eastern societies were dominated by powerful kings and priests, a pervasive religious system, and a concern for an elaborate afterlife. These social aspects are, for the most part,

absent in Minoan Crete. The island's nobility and middle class seem to have played the most important social role.

In *Minoan Crete: An Introduction*, Chapters 1 and 2 are introductory. Chapter 1 provides a sketch of the natural environment of Crete and the ways it has deeply shaped the traditional life of its inhabitants who depend on this environment. Chapter 2 presents the ancient myths of Minoan Crete – of Minos, the Minotaur, and Daedalus, and the subsequent development of archaeological research since 1878, undertaken by Arthur Evans, Spyridon Marinatos, and others on Crete. Chapters 3–5 focus diachronically on the archaeology of Crete during the Paleolithic – the Early Minoan, early Middle Minoan periods, and the Neopalatial period. Chapter 3 describes the earliest archaeological evidence for architecture, diet and agriculture, crafts, tombs and burial practices, and trade at this time. Chapter 4 traces and explains the radical transformations of Minoan society just before and after 2000 BC, changes recognizable in the establishment of the first palaces and mountain peak sanctuaries on the island. Chapter 5 describes Minoan Neopalatial society and its organization into states, classes, and professions, focusing on the palace at Knossos as well as life in outlying towns and villages. Chapter 6 presents the evidence for Minoan overseas relations during the Neopalatial period. Chapter 7 discusses Minoan religion and cult practices at peak sanctuaries, caves, urban shrines, tombs, festivals, and the Minoan pantheon of gods. In Chapter 8, the various types of Minoan art are presented and interpreted. Chapter 9 focuses on the Mycenaean kingdoms of Crete and the evidence from the Linear B tablets during the Late Minoan III period 1450–1200 BC.