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.

ONE

CRETE

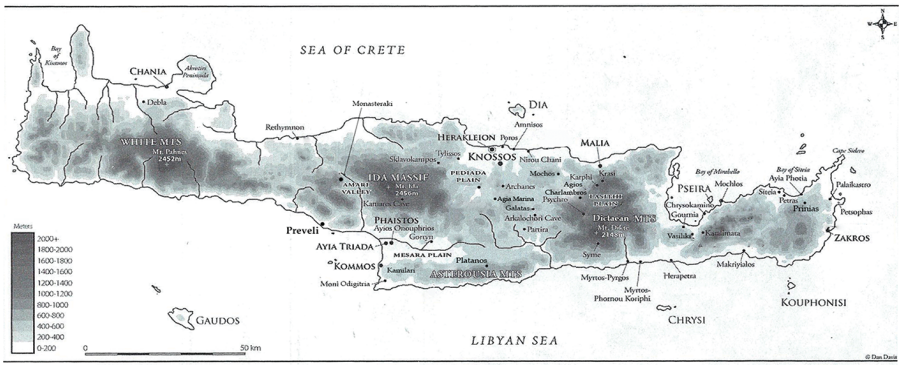
The Island and Traditional Life

Mountains come first.
F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*

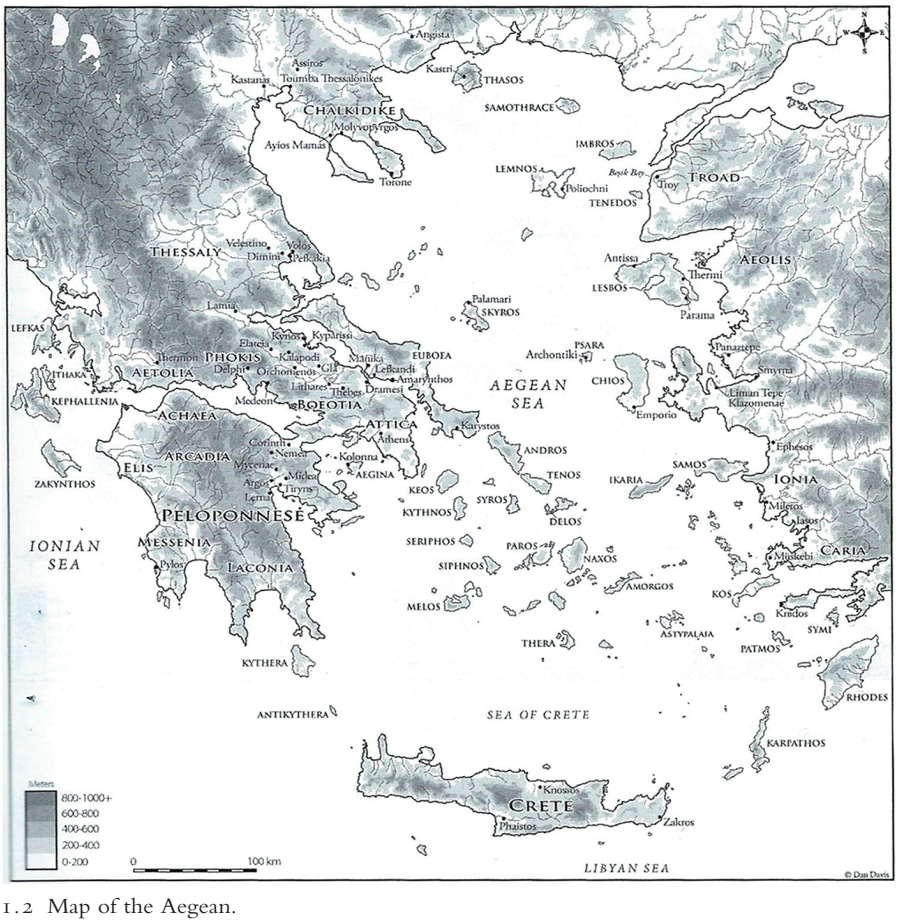
THE ISLAND AND THE ENVIRONMENT

A visitor arriving on Crete first notices the majestic mountains that form the backbone of the island. They create an intense three-dimensional landscape that surrounds those living there. I can remember the first time I arrived on Crete – as the ferry neared Heraklion, I came out on the deck. The sun had just begun to rise, and I could see the peak of Mount Jouktas on the horizon where Zeus was worshiped. I felt as if I were entering a new world of myth and legend.

The Cretan landscape is dry, rugged, and primal – mountains, sky, and sea. Caves are part of this landscape, several of which were famous shrines in antiquity, such as the Dictaean Cave where Zeus was said to have been born, and the Amnissos Cave, with its shrine to Eileithyia, goddess of childbirth, mentioned by Odysseus (*Odyssey*, XIX 188). In size, Crete dwarfs all other Aegean islands (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2). It is some 260 km long east–west and 8,261 sq. km in area. In width the island is relatively narrow, ranging from 12 to 57 km north to south. Peaks rise to great heights: from east to west, Thryphti (1,476 m), Mount Dicte (2,148 m), Mount Ida (2,456 m) and the White Mountains (2,453 m). This mountainous landscape has created today a patchwork of small, separate valleys and plains, each with its main town or city.



1.1 Map of Minoan Crete.
Shelmerdine (2008), xxxxiii, map 4.



1.2 Map of the Aegean.
Shelmerdine (2008), xxxi, map 2. Redrawn by Amanda Killian.

During the Minoan era, Crete was similarly occupied by a large number of small independent states located in these inland and coastal valleys, a situation comparable to the rival city-states of early Renaissance Italy. In the Classical period we know the island was divided into at least fourteen major city-states and an additional thirty towns.[1]

The island's environment has had two important consequences for Cretan culture. First, these areas created small, peer communities where everyone knew each other. This is the antithesis of the large kingdoms of the Near East whose society was headed by a distant ruler, elite officials, and a huge peasant class. Second, all of these local regions on Crete were and are natural rivals and competitors with one another. During the Minoan and Classical periods, settlements on the island repeatedly suffered destructions at the hands of their neighbors. Today local village jokes about other parts of Crete abound.

Crete's location in the Mediterranean is also significant for its history. Situated at the southern edge of the Aegean (Fig. 1.2), the island has always had close connections with the Aegean islands and the Greek mainland. Odysseus, for example, posed as a Cretan during his far-flung travels (*Odyssey*, XIII, 256–86; XIV, 199–359). From Karphi in the Dictaean mountains one can actually see the Cycladic island of Santorini (ancient Thera). The Greek mainland is also visible from the White Mountains in western Crete. Most importantly, Crete has always been a stepping-stone between the Aegean and the Near East. Several of the most important sea routes in the Mediterranean pass along the north and south coasts of the island. According to the ancient Greek geographer Strabo (*Geographia*, 10.475), Crete was only a two-day sail from Cyrene in Libya. This location has been both a blessing and a curse. Crete was open to ideas traveling between the Near East and the Aegean and far enough away to reinterpret these ideas to form its own distinctive culture. Crete produced the first literate high civilization in Europe, but has been repeatedly invaded during its history.

We will begin with a short description of the physical environment of the island. We can recognize four major areas on the island: west Crete (with Chania/ancient Kydonia as its capital) and the plain of Rethymnon, north central Crete dominated by Knossos, the Mesara Plain in the south with Phaistos its Minoan capital, and eastern Crete with many smaller plains and valleys, each with their own town (Malia, Herapetra, Siteia). Like most present-day travelers to Crete, we will begin at Heraklion, the current capital, in the center of the island. Just south of Heraklion is the famous archaeological site of Knossos, which attracts over a million visitors a year. Rising south of the palace at Knossos is Mount Jouktas, the Minoan peak sanctuary for Knossos. Standing on Mount Jouktas, one can see the north center of the island, the territory of ancient Knossos. To the south, the landscape rises to the spine of

the island that runs east–west between Mount Ida and the Dictaean mountains. This central elevated plain (400 m), called the Pediada today, had its own Minoan palace, at Galatas (Chapter 5) that was uncovered in 1987 by Georgios Rethemiotakis.

South of the Pediada, the land drops off sharply, down to the largest (362 sq. km) arable area in Crete, the Mesara Plain. This broad plain runs westward between Mount Ida on the north and the Asterousia mountain range (elev. 1,231 m) along the south coast, and opens out onto the Libyan Sea to the west. Southbound travelers today come to the summit of the Pediada and catch their first glimpse of the Mesara Plain. In the nineteenth century, travelers made the journey with pack animals between the Mesara and Candia (the Venetian name for Heraklion) in two days. These distances, however, can be deceptive to modern eyes. Some forty years ago, I sat with an elderly gentleman at a *kapheneion* in the tiny mountain village of Miamou on the south slope of the Asterousia Mountains. He told me, as a youth, he used to take his mule in the morning darkness from the village 5 km down to the south coast, arriving there at dawn when the fishermen were returning from the sea. He bought their fish, loaded his mule, and ascended the Asterousia Mountains. By midday he had walked (24 km) to the market town of Moires in the center of the Mesara Plain and was selling fresh fish. Today, the visitor from the busy north coast coming into the Mesara can feel as if they have entered a different world. Europe is left behind. In the African climatic zone, the region is bathed in a warm and mellow light and enjoys a quiet, slower pace of life. Phaistos, the Minoan center of the western Mesara, sits on a ridge top (Fig. 1.3) near the coast overlooking the surrounding plain. The Minoan harbor of Phaistos is visible on the shore, at Kommos. Large Minoan *tholos* tombs dot the Mesara Plain. To the north of the Mesara, the Idaean massif separates the Mesara from the northern coast of Crete.

Moving eastward from Heraklion along the north coast of Crete, one passes the palatial settlement at Malia on the coast, and then on to the town of Agios Nikolaos. To the south, the Isthmus of Herapetra, a north–south corridor 12 km long, runs between the Aegean and Libyan seas. The palace town of Gournia on the north coast of the Isthmus was an administrative center for this area during the Minoan period. The eastern end of the island beyond the Isthmus is formed by many valleys running down to the coast, separated by low mountains. The present-day towns and villages of Siteia, Palaikastro (Fig. 1.4), and Zakros, are each situated in their own coastal valley. During the Minoan period they were independent palace states with their own urban settlement. They have been excavated and are visible to visitors today.

West of Heraklion lies the coastal valley of Rethymnon, another independent state in Minoan and Classical times. Chania (Classical Kydonia) was the

1.3 Eastward view of Phaistos Palace.
Photo by the author

1.4 View of Palaikastro Bay.
Photo by the author

center of the westernmost region of the island. In this area the pine- and cypress-covered slopes of the White Mountains run down to a tree-filled, lush coastal plain. Coming from the east, the modern visitor will notice the unusually fertile nature of western Crete, an effect of the western rain-bearing winds. Under less economic and social pressure than central and eastern Crete, this area developed relatively slowly during the Early and Middle Bronze Ages.

Crete straddles the Mediterranean and African climatic zones, a cross-fertilization that has produced an intense profusion of wildlife on the island. Crete has some 140 species of flora, among the highest in Europe. Wild animals are numerous: wolves, foxes, rabbits, deer, boars, goats, badgers, weasels, bees, and birds (e.g., hoopoe, pigeons, quail, pheasants, and partridges). Swallows remain on the island all year, rather than migrate to North Africa. In the winter, when a south wind blows, the snow-capped mountains turn red, dyed by Libyan sand. Winters are moderately cool and wet and summers are warm and dry. Rainfall is concentrated between the months of November and February. During the summer the prevailing northwest winds (called *meltemia* in modern Greek) bring dry, sunny days. Temperatures differ with elevation. Higher elevations are cooler and receive more rainfall. In the spring one can swelter in the Mesara Plain and look up to the snow-covered peaks of Mount Ida. The western portions of Crete receive significantly more rainfall than the rest of the island. Chania in the west has an average of 70 cm, while Herapetra in the east gets on average 52 cm a year.[2]

Much of Crete's landscape, even before the introduction of mechanically drilled deep wells in the 1960s, was well watered by springs and good for agriculture. The mountains of Crete, formed of limestone, absorb the winter rainfall, which reappears, gushing out along their base in the form of natural springs. Many villages today are situated at these springs. This water also dissolves the mountains, creating hundreds of caves. These caverns, with their eerie stalagmitic formations, became sacred spots venerated by the Minoans. Crete sits astride a north–south geological faultline that divides the two tectonic plates in the Aegean. The grinding of these two plates causes frequent, mostly minor, earthquakes on the island. North of Crete these plates have caused volcanic eruptions, most famously on the Cycladic island of Santorini, ancient Thera (Chapter 8). During the Bronze Age, quakes damaged or destroyed Minoan towns on several occasions. In terms of valuable metals – copper, tin, silver, and gold – Crete is poorly provided, a fact that motivated Minoan seafaring abroad (Chapter 6).

Crete's mountainous landscape has created a vertical ladder of environmental zones – sea, low and high plains, and finally mountains. The diversity of wildlife existing between these different zones is immediately noticeable. Cretans have lived by exploiting these different environments, primarily through a combination of fishing, farming, and shepherding. In its most

extreme form, villagers practice a transhumant way of life, maintaining separate summer and winter residences, growing crops at both locations, and driving their herds between them. The lowest of these zones is the sea itself. Encircling the island, the sea provides the Cretan people with many edible species. During the summer months, the sea is a source of small fish, mullet, tunny, crab, octopus, and squid (*kalamari*), the last two delicious when grilled and nibbled and accompanied by *raki* (the Cretan equivalent of tequila, or grappa). Along the north coast grow tamarisk, sea-juniper, mastic (*Pistacia lentiscus*), myrtle, yellow horned poppies, lilies, and many other species. The south coast is dotted by date palms and banana trees. The Minoans also depicted local marine life, such as flying fish, dolphins, octopus, the sea squill and triton on their *seals* and frescoes (Chapter 8).

Ascending from the sea, we come to the coastal plains, the best agricultural land on the island. They are relatively narrow and are mostly found along the north coast, or in the southern Mesara Plain. The Mediterranean quartet of crops – cereals, grapes, legumes, and olives – flourish in this environment. Low valleys and plains teem with life. At night, owls call back and forth to each other, "beep . . . boop." Dry, rugged shrubby grasslands are particularly rich in crocus, broom/crop, cyclamen, the Cretan iris, and many types of orchids and hyacinth. Pungent herbs, such as thyme, sage, oregano, and fennel, used as spices and scents, are common. The spectacular and menacing-looking purple snake lily (*Dracunculus vulgaris*) omits the smell of rotting flesh; it is depicted on Minoan sarcophagi. Many of these wild plants are, and probably were in Minoan times, used for a variety of purposes, including food or fodder, seasoning, incense, medicine, and fuel. The island has a total of more than 1,700 plant species, and more endemic plants (some 180 species) than any island in Europe. Grassy plains are dotted with trees – the dark green olive, lighter colored almond and pear. Cicadas in trees fill the air with their noise. Hares, hedgehogs, and many birds, such as swallows, harriers, falcons, hawks, doves, bee-eaters, and other species make their home here. Several were inspirations for Minoan art (Chapter 8). Streambeds, lined with pink oleanders, watercress, rushes, fig, willow, and poplars, provide hiding spots for herons, egrets, and cranes.

Above the plains are the foothills and elevated plains (elevation 300–800 m), such as the Lasithi Plain (Fig. 1.5). Cereals, grapes, and cherries are grown there. Climbing into the foothills and higher plains, one can see many flowers and trees, such as asphodel, the pink-flowered rock rose (*Cistus creticus*), and maple. Olives are conspicuous by their absence; they are unable to survive the winter cold at this elevation. *Ebenus creticus*, a heather-like shrub, covers hillsides with bright purple in the spring. White cyclamen carpet the hills during the month of May. Like the coastal plains, this environmental zone was thickly settled in antiquity.