

MINOANS

Life in Bronze Age Crete



ROUTLEDGE

Rodney Castleden

**Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details**

MINOANS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Wilmington Giant
The quest for a lost myth

The Knossos Labyrinth
A new view of the 'Palace of Minos' at Knossos

The Stonehenge People
An exploration of life in neolithic Britain 4700–2000 BC

Neolithic Britain
New Stone Age sites in England, Scotland and Wales

The Making of Stonehenge

MINOANS

Life in Bronze Age Crete



RODNEY CASTLEDEN

Illustrated by the author



London and New York

First published 1990 by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001
First published in paperback 1993

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001.

© 1990, 1993 Rodney Castleden

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Castleden, Rodney

Minoans: life in bronze age crete.

1. Minoan civilisation

I. Title

939'.18

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Castleden, Rodney

Minoans: life in Bronze Age Crete/by Rodney Castleden.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Minoans—Social life and customs. 2. Crete (Greece)—Social life and customs. I. Title.

DF220.3.C37 1991 90-32407

ISBN 0-415-08833-X (Print Edition)

ISBN 0-203-13581-4 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-17591-3 (Glassbook Format)

For Michael Tippett

Thou buildest upon the bosom of darkness, out of the fantastic imagery of the brain, cities and temples beyond the art of Phidias and Praxiteles – beyond the splendour of Babylon and Hekatompylos: and from the anarchy of dreaming sleep, callest into sunny light the faces of long-buried beauties.

(Thomas de Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, 1821)

Contents

List of illustrations	ix
Acknowledgements	xiii
1 Introduction	1
2 The people	9
<i>Appearance and dress</i>	9
<i>Arms and armour</i>	18
<i>Social structure</i>	21
<i>Minoan 'history'</i>	29
3 Life in the countryside	38
<i>Rural settlement</i>	38
<i>Agriculture and food production</i>	43
<i>Rural shrines</i>	53
<i>The peak sanctuaries</i>	53
<i>The cave sanctuaries</i>	59
<i>The rural system</i>	63
4 Life in the towns	67
<i>The development of towns in Crete</i>	67
<i>Urbanization in the First Temple Period</i>	75
<i>Towns in the Second (New) Temple Period</i>	79
<i>Craft workers in the towns</i>	87
<i>Makers of stone vases</i>	88
<i>Workers in metal</i>	90
<i>Makers of faience</i>	94
<i>Shell and ivory workers</i>	95
<i>Sculptors of statues</i>	96
<i>Seal makers</i>	97
<i>Scribes</i>	99
<i>Potters</i>	103
<i>Style and the urban craft worker</i>	107
<i>The urban system</i>	109

5	Life in the harbour towns and overseas	111
	<i>The ports of bronze age Crete</i>	111
	<i>Fishing</i>	113
	<i>Ships</i>	114
	<i>The development of a Minoan trading empire</i>	116
6	The religious life	123
	<i>The Minoan belief-system</i>	123
	<i>Sacred enclosures</i>	137
	<i>Sacral robes</i>	139
	<i>Dancing and daemons</i>	142
	<i>The temples</i>	145
	<i>Burial customs</i>	152
7	The Minoan personality	158
	<i>The idea of a corporate personality</i>	158
	<i>The traditional view</i>	160
	<i>Testing the tradition</i>	162
	<i>The New Minoans</i>	168
	Appendix A: List of cave sanctuaries	179
	Appendix B: List of peak sanctuaries	181
	Appendix C: List of sacred enclosures	182
	Appendix D: Chronology	183
	Notes on the illustrations	185
	References	195
	Index	201

List of illustrations

PLATES

- 1 Oil or wine press at Vathypetro
- 2 The Minoan village at Tylissos
- 3 The Mount Juktas peak sanctuary
- 4 The Skotino cave sanctuary
- 5 The Square of the Altars at Amnisos
- 6 The entrance to the Diktaian Cave
- 7 Tylissos, House A, showing slots for tie-beams
- 8 Minoan mudbrick wall at Mallia
- 9 A stone drain at Knossos
- 10 Mallia. The temple ruins in the foreground, peak sanctuary in the middle distance, and the mountains of Lasithi on the skyline
- 11 Mallia. Part of the east front of the West Wing, with stairs leading into area VI and up to the first floor
- 12 The Royal Road at Knossos, terminating in the Theatral Area and the northern entrances of the Labyrinth
- 13 Tylissos. The Minoan village street passing along the west side of House C
- 14 The Villa of the Lilies at Amnisos
- 15 Minoan buildings on the beach at Agii Theodhori
- 16 Kolymba, the Minoan dock at Agii Theodhori
- 17 The Diktaian Cave
- 18 Pillar Crypt at the Balustrade Sanctuary (Evans' Royal Villa)
- 19 Phourni. The Minoan cemetery in the foreground: the town of Arkhanes in the background
- 20 The Tomb of the Lady of Arkhanes

FIGURES

- | | |
|--|----|
| 1 The Aegina Treasure Pendant | 6 |
| 2 A Minoan worshipper | 10 |
| 3 A woman's head-dress, about 1900 BC | 13 |
| 4 Heads from female figurines, showing hair-styles | 14 |
| 5 Cosmetic implements | 16 |
| 6 Minoan fabric designs | 17 |
| 7 Minoan helmets | 19 |

8	Bronze dagger hilts	20
9	Chariots	22
10	Design on the Lion Hunt Dagger	27
11	The Minoan world map	31
12	Vathypetro: plan	39
13	Tylissos: plan	42
14	Terracotta bull	49
15	A Minoan worshipper leaves offerings at a peak sanctuary	55
16	The Cave of Eileithyia: plan and section	61
17	Fournou Korifi: plan of Early Minoan village	64
18	Gournia: plan of a small Minoan town	69
19	The Tripartite Shrine in the Knossos Labyrinth	71
20	Water-closets in the Knossos Labyrinth	72
21	Detail of water-closet in the Labyrinth	73
22	Map of Minoan Crete	76
23	Major territories centred on urban temples	77
24	Mallia	80
25	The Minoan temple at Knossos: reconstruction of 'ground-floor' plan	82
26	A stone vase from the temple at Zakro	89
27	Bronze objects from a tomb at Zafer Papoura	91
28	The Bee or Wasp Pendant from Mallia	92
29	Acrobat on a gold sword hilt from the temple at Mallia	92
30	Bronze worshipper from Tylissos	93
31	Three Minoan scripts	101
32	Early pottery styles	103
33	Marine and Floral Style vases	105
34	Clay goddesses from Karfi	107
35	Fisherman carrying an octopus and a skaros fish	113
36	Fishing	114
37	Minoan ships	115
38	The Minoan trading empire	120
39	The lost Ring of Minos	126
40	The Master of Animals	128
41	Poseidon-Poteidan commanding the sea from a coastal temple or town	130
42	Priestess in a swing	131
43	A scene of sacrifice on a gold ring	132
44	Two lions attendant on a sun-disc	133
45	An elaborate ritual double-axe from the Zakro temple	135
46	Head of a priestess, showing facial make-up and sacral knot	136
47	Two images of sacred trees	139
48	The Poppy Goddess	142
49	Procession of animal-headed daemons	144

List of illustrations

xi

50	Bull-grapplers immobilize a bull	146
51	A man captures a wild bull	148
52	Procession at a temple	150
53	Minoan tomb plans	154
54	Plan of the Chrysolakkos tomb	156
55	The leader of the people?	161
56	Two figures from the Chieftain Cup	166
57	The Cupbearer	170
58	Young god with sacral horns attended by daemons	174

CHAPTER TITLE ILLUSTRATIONS

1	Sun-wheel symbol	1
2	Priestess blowing triton shell horn	9
3	Priestess or goddess with sacred tree and altars on a ship	38
4	Priestesses with ceremonial double-axe and sacral robe	67
5	Ship with fish and quadrident	111
6	Two men and two women worshipping a goddess	123
7	A human sacrifice to a seated goddess	158

Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Mr Brian McGregor, the Librarian at the Ashmolean Library in Oxford, for allowing me access to the books and journals in his care, and John and Celia Clarke for their hospitality during my visits to Oxford. Joan Newey offered useful advice on translations from the Greek, and conversations with Eileen Smith gave me some ideas on the lack of Minoan literature.

Doreena and Keith of John Proctor Travel expertly organized specially-tailored transport and accommodation arrangements for both the 1988 and 1989 visits to Crete, which enabled me to cover a lot of ground. I am especially indebted to Kit, who came with me on both occasions, and was keen to explore even the most inaccessible and elusive Minoan sites.

I am grateful to Chris Pearce and Andrew Wheatcroft at Routledge for making the publication process so smooth and straightforward, and to Countess Anne Romanov for proof-reading the text and for her invaluable help with the library research.

The book functions as a sequel and companion volume to *The Knossos Labyrinth*: whereas the latter focuses on the single most important monument produced by the culture, *Minoans* provides the background on the people, an account of the culture itself. The large bronze age building known as the 'Palace of Minos' at Knossos is generally acknowledged as the principal 'marker' for the Minoan civilization. A radical re-interpretation of that building's function necessitates nothing less than a re-evaluation of the civilization: hence the need for this book. A good deal of the material for *Minoans* was gathered, almost by the way, during the research for the earlier book. As a result, all the people who helped me in the preparation of *The Knossos Labyrinth* must be acknowledged here too: Dr Tzedakis, the Director of Heraklion Museum, Karambinis Emanolis, Custodian of Knossos, John and Trudy Urmson, Angelika Schönborn, Ann Brown, Diana Cooke, and Professor Peter Warren of the Department of Ancient History and Classical Archaeology at Bristol.

R. C.
Brighton

1

Introduction



Hail, son of Kronos,
Welcome, greatest Kouros,
Mighty of brightness,
Here now present, leading your spirits,
Come for the year to Dikte
And rejoice in this ode,
Which we strike on the strings, as we
Blend it with the sound of pipes, as we
Chant our song, standing round
This your well-walled altar.

(Hymn of the Kouretes to Diktaian Zeus. From Palaikastro,
c. 250 AD, but representing a much earlier tradition)

In the short time that has elapsed since Sir Arthur Evans effectively rediscovered the Minoans in the early 1900s, the people of bronze age Crete have become familiar figures in our mental landscape of European prehistory. We have come to accept as established and defined a whole string of cultural traits that go to make up the ‘Minoan personality’. The Minoans were elegant, graceful people who took an innocent pleasure in displaying their own physical beauty; they were lithe, athletic and enjoyed boxing, wrestling, and bull-leaping; they were intensely refined aesthetes, surrounding themselves with sophisticated architecture and beautiful objects; they were nature-lovers, commissioning frescoes of landscapes full of flowers, birds, and butterflies; they were collectively strong, too, with fleets controlling the seas surrounding Crete, so minimizing the danger of attack by would-be invaders; they were lovers of peace, the inhabitants of each city-state living in harmony with their neighbours; they were ruled by a great and powerful king of Knossos called Minos.

But how far does the work of subsequent archaeologists in Crete support this widely held view of the Minoans? It is appropriate, as we approach the centenary of

Evans' historic 1900 excavation, to take stock of the evidence. It may well be that we need to revise our image of the Minoans in the light of that evidence.

Until about a hundred years ago, it was customary to see the history of the Aegean world as beginning with the First Olympiad of 776 BC. Although it was recognized that the region was inhabited before that date, all the events of that earlier period were regarded as lost beyond retrieval and any references to them treated as pure legend. The heroes and heroines of Greek folklore and myth were tossed aside by scholars: they were as unhistorical as the gods and goddesses.

In the wake of Schliemann's and Evans' discoveries at Troy, Mycenae, Tiryns and Knossos, there was a tendency for historians to swing to the opposite extreme. The historical reality of Troy seemed to prove the existence of Priam, that of Mycenae Agamemnon, that of Knossos Minos. Bury (1951), for instance, accepted such figures as Perseus, Minos, Jason, Theseus, and even Heracles as historically real people, pointing out in support of this position that the Greeks themselves believed in their reality and that (in Homer, for example) they were given fairly consistent biographies and pedigrees. But this extreme position is fraught with difficulties. The Greeks not only believed in Theseus and Jason: they believed in Prometheus too – Prometheus, the creator of mankind – and put the time of his existence at around 1600 BC. Since we know that the Minoans built the *second* temple at Knossos some one hundred years before this date and we also know that the Minoan civilization had been developing for a thousand years, there is no possibility that the Greek idea of Prometheus could have been historically correct.

Modern historians and prehistorians take the more moderate view that these emblematic figures were folk-heroes, symbolically representing remote but powerfully significant events all but lost to the Aegean folk-memory. Impressive events in the communal past, such as changes of dynasty, the arrival of waves of foreign settlers, wars, invasions, migrations, were summarized in the epic life events of the folk-heroes. Some may turn out to have been real people, and finding their homes by means of archaeological excavation may persuade us that we have discovered the people themselves, but they may well not have been the figures presented to us by the Greeks. Discovering the Knossos Labyrinth implied to Sir Arthur Evans and many who followed his line of thinking that King Minos too had been traced, though this is not the case. Even if a kingly burial had been discovered by archaeologists at Knossos, which significantly it has not, we could still not be sure that the corpse was that of the majestic and tyrannical ruler of the Minoan sea-empire presented to us in Greek legend. Eratosthenes' dating puts the Trojan War at 1183 BC and King Minos into the third generation before that. Minos' floruit was thus, in the Greek view, around 1260 BC – about a hundred years after the date generally agreed by archaeologists for the abandonment of his alleged palace at Knossos. As Thomson

(1949) says, it may be better to accept the general substance of the Greek stories, or at any rate to bear them in mind, and let the dates go; certainly the Greeks foreshortened the time-scale for the early events in Aegean prehistory.

Archaeology has added a new dimension to our view of the Aegean. Instead of beginning with the First Olympiad, we now have a much longer perspective revealing a complex cultural evolution stretching back two thousand years further. We have a picture of a prehistoric preamble which is finely detailed and becomes increasingly so with each new archaeological dig. The most startling result of Aegean archaeology during the last hundred years has been the discovery of a complete, original, and previously unsuspected civilization which existed before the Homeric age. The Minoan civilization had all kinds of repercussions on the development of the Greek culture which developed later, yet, extraordinarily, the historians of the fifth century BC, Herodotus and Thucydides, had comparatively little to say about the culture or history of Crete. Why was it that the glittering originality of Minoan Crete vanished from the Greek consciousness within a few centuries of its demise? Was it that the Greeks were too proud of their own civilization to acknowledge the existence of an earlier civilization, one that rivalled or surpassed their own? Or was it that the Minoan civilization had been so totally destroyed that they were unaware of its character?

Certainly the Greeks inherited some strange tales and a large amount of cult activity from the Minoans, but they seem to have been unconscious of their true origins. It may be, as Thomson suggests, that the post-Minoan invasion of Crete and Greece by Dorians from the north cut Crete off from mainland Greece and that when the eastern Mediterranean recovered from this trauma the Greeks resumed trade with Egypt and the Levant direct, without landing on Crete. Whatever the explanation, there is a strange discontinuity at the end of the Minoan civilization; it was as if a door closed on it, only to be opened again after three thousand years.

Minoan Crete may be seen as a cradle of civilization on a level with the Nile, Indus, Tigris, and Euphrates valleys. Arguments are sometimes advanced that the Minoans borrowed much of their culture from Egypt, Syria, or Anatolia, but theirs was a very distinctive culture, however it was assembled or generated, and certainly distinctive enough for us to treat it as an original creation. It could be argued that the Minoan art of fresco painting was borrowed from Egypt, and it may be so, but the artistic effects and even the subject matter are very different; it is clear that the Minoans developed the art in a way that was strongly characteristic of their own personality, making it an integral part of their own culture. So it was with many other cultural elements, and to such an extent that we get, even from fragments of artefacts, a strong sense of the Minoans' personality. After reviewing all the many elements of the culture in the opening chapters, we will come to a discussion of this Minoan personality, utilizing the latest archaeological evidence from Crete in order to achieve the clearest picture.

It is possible to gain access to the everyday life of the Minoans and also, to a surprising extent, to their emotional and spiritual world too.

The Cretan bronze age was an extended period of cultural growth, beginning in about 3000 BC and ending in about 1000 BC. During this long period there were many changes and we need to be aware that when we identify particular traits as 'Minoan' we are often thinking of the culture as it was at its peak, in the three centuries preceding the abandonment of the Knossos Labyrinth in 1380 BC. But this pinnacle was reached after a millennium of evolution. From the outset there was an ambitious pattern of trade by land and sea, and complex bartering negotiations with numerous foreign neighbours as far afield as Egypt. Civilization in Egypt was at that stage in advance of the Cretan culture and it may well be that contacts with a more advanced culture stimulated the Cretans. Contacts with Anatolia gave the Cretans access to crafts, artefacts, materials and ideas that had come from Mesopotamia, and these too had their effect in stimulating development; the idea of using sealstones, for instance, seems to have been developed from a few samples imported from the east.

Gradually, during the Early Minoan period (3000–2200 BC), the Cretans evolved all the characteristics that we think of as being distinctively Minoan. Only the 'palaces' remained unbuilt. The 'palace' society (c. 2000–1380 BC) was clearly very advanced in its orderly and bureaucratic organization, showing a strongly rational and practical side with highly developed craft technologies, and yet it also possessed all the imaginative power and childlike freshness of a very young culture. This combination of skill, power, and freshness is exemplified in the frescoes and crafted cult objects, many of which seem to spring from a pervasive religious feeling. Towards the end of the Late Minoan Period (the end of the second millennium BC), religion seems to have dwindled to a rigid and sterile formula for appeasing the deities of what must have seemed an increasingly hostile cosmos. Nevertheless, at the zenith, during the heyday of the so-called 'palaces', the religious life of the Minoans was rich and vibrant. There were moments, quite frequent to judge from the artwork, when gods and men and, more importantly, goddesses and priestesses, were brought together in astonishing unions. In epiphanies of startling drama, men, women, birds, and even pillars and boulders were transformed into deities; gods and goddesses appeared and walked among worshipping mortals, exalted but humanized and accessible.

This religious zeal, amounting to intoxication and possibly actually enhanced by alcohol and opium, is expressed in a wide range of art objects; the frescoes decorating shrines and sanctuaries, the cult vessels, the religious scenes on the sealstones are all executed to the very highest technical and artistic standards. Again and again when we look at objects such as the Mallia bee-pendant or the Boston Goddess, we sense that the Minoan craftsmen were over-achieving, extending their crafts almost beyond the technical limits of the age. In the virtuosic handling of clay, bronze, and

many kinds of stone, they surpassed themselves and we may sometimes feel that the spirit of the age was adventurously romantic rather than pre-classical. The proud figures of the men in the frescoes may look to us like overreachers, vain and perhaps vainglorious; perhaps the idea of *hubris*, vanity in the face of the gods, had not yet evolved and this was still an age of innocent self-pride.

The images of men and women, warriors, worshippers and priestesses give us evidence of their appearance and also of the way they saw themselves, which is every bit as important. Assembling a picture of the Minoans is complicated a little by uncertainty about the authenticity of some of the art objects, especially those not found in modern excavations. No one knows for certain where the beautiful ivory statuette known as the Boston Goddess came from; it seems likely that it was robbed from a surface layer in the ruins of the East Wing of the Knossos Labyrinth, and in terms of materials, shape, and the techniques used in making it, it is characteristically Minoan, and therefore probably genuine. The Ring of Minos, given its known findspot at the site where the Temple Tomb was later unearthed, and given its style and content, is also taken here to be an authentic Minoan ring (see Chapter 6 and Figure 39). Nilsson's objection (1949) that the picture on it is derivative and that it could have been composed from a knowledge of three or four other cult scenes is unconvincing. Significantly, the scene on the Ring of Minos is consistent with what we are learning of Minoan cult activities, and is therefore likely to be genuine.

The Ring of Nestor is another matter. Although many of the elements in its composition appear to be Minoan, they have been assembled in a peculiar way, as four scenes quartered by a 'Tree of Life'. It shows, according to the Evans interpretation, a couple being initiated into the mysteries of the otherworld, where the Tree of Life has its roots: the two people appear before a goddess and an enthroned griffin. The initiation is followed by resurrection and the couple's return to the world of the living. In this case, Nilsson's reasons for doubting the ring's authenticity are well founded. Nowhere else, for instance, is a griffin shown enthroned. Often a griffin or a pair of griffins are attendant on a standing or seated goddess, but it is inexplicable for the roles to be reversed. Another scene shows a lion enthroned on a sacrificial table; this too is incongruous, and suggests that the craftsman who made the ring did not know what the table was for. Although the vocabulary is Minoan, the syntax is not. The Ring of Nestor is therefore treated as a fake and consequently not referred to in later chapters as evidence of the Minoan belief-system.

The Minoans and their civilization have been written about before, but there is a pressing reason for reviewing them now. In *The Knossos Labyrinth* (Castleden 1989),

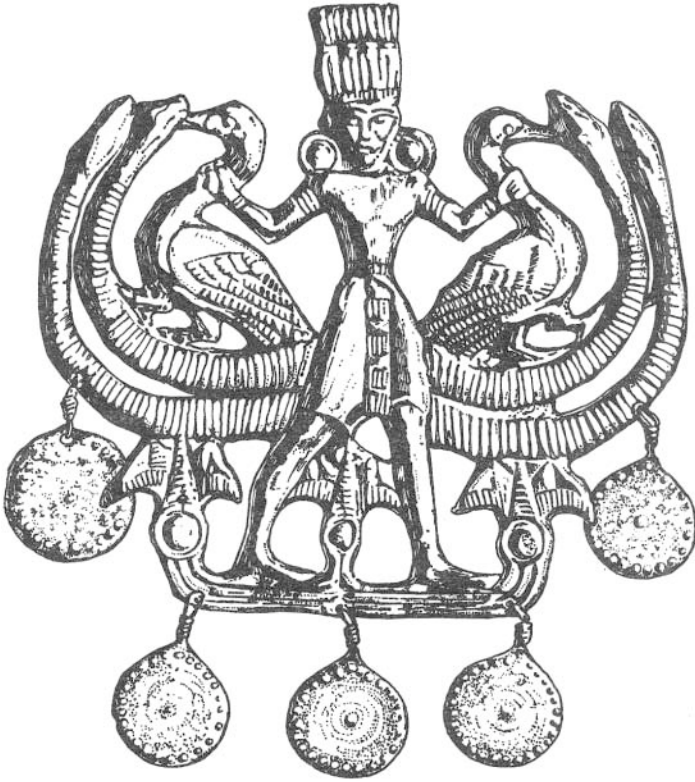


Figure 1 The Aigina Treasure Pendant. Found on Aegina, near Athens, but almost certainly a Minoan masterpiece made in Crete between 1700 and 1600 BC

the nature and purpose of the so-called ‘Palace of Minos’ at Knossos were called into question and an array of arguments was presented for treating the building as a bronze age temple-complex. It was shown, for example, that the distribution of findspots of religious cult equipment round the building indicates that a very large area of it must have been given over to cult activity.

When comparisons are made between Minoan Crete and pharaonic Egypt or Hittite Anatolia or the cultures of Mesopotamia, interpreting the ‘palace’ at Knossos as a temple – and, by implication, the other Cretan ‘palaces’ as temples too – seems quite natural. The Hittite capital, Hattusa, possessed several temples, the largest of which was in many ways similar to the contemporary Knossos Labyrinth. As Professor Alexiou has pointed out, there was a broad similarity between the social and economic conditions prevailing in Minoan Crete and those in the Mesopotamian and Anatolian

cultures. It follows that if the Hittite and Sumerian temples were large buildings, focal to the societies and economies of their cities and territories, Minoan society might have developed in a similar way. The problem seems to lie in the existence of extensive store-rooms in the Minoan palacetemples, implying a major redistribution role in the economy, but this need not preclude a fundamentally religious role for the building. In ancient Egypt it was normally the kings who dominated trade, but temple-priests were nevertheless also engaged in trade. It seems to have been particularly during periods of weak royal control that the temples engaged in large-scale trade. A priest of Ammon, for example, travelled to Byblos with gold and silver to buy timber to build a sacred ship; after some haggling, the Prince of Byblos delivered timber in return for gold, silver and raiment. There seems little room for doubt that the Knossos Labyrinth played a central role in the economic life of the surrounding central Cretan territory, and that its priests and priestesses were involved in foreign trade, the organization of public works and the allocation of rations to workers, as well as playing a central role in ceremonial and religious life – just like the temples of the east.

Trade went on at a surprisingly ambitious scale, exclusively by barter. Fourteenth-century BC correspondence regarding barter has been found at Amarna in Egypt; Pharaoh sent ‘presents’ of gold to the king of Babylon and received gifts of horses and lapis lazuli in return. The king of Alasia (= Cyprus) offered 500 bronze talents in exchange for silver, clothing, beds and war chariots. There are even records of trade with the Minoans themselves, ‘gifts from the Princes (or leaders) of the Land of Keftiu and of the isles which are in the midst of the sea’. These were probably direct exports to Egypt of manufactured goods from the Cretan temples. In return the Egyptians sent gifts of gold, ivory, cloth, stone vessels containing perfume, chariots (probably in kits) and probably monkeys and Nubian slaves.

The economic aspects of the Minoan culture have become fairly clearly established, but interpreting the largest buildings in the Minoan towns as temples rather than palaces shifts the culture’s centre of gravity very significantly. It is for this very specific reason that we need to take a fresh look at the Minoan civilization.

Most of the representational art surviving from the Minoan period has come from the temples and should be treated as religious art. In the past we have tended to assume that because women are regularly depicted bare-breasted in the ‘palace’ frescoes they were disrobed in this way in their normal everyday lives. If such representations are seen as religious art and the women are seen as priestesses, temple attendants, dancers, or even goddesses, the earlier assumption is seen to be unwarranted; it may well be that women uncovered their breasts only during acts of religious worship. The temple art of the Minoans may depict ritual, ceremonial, and mythological scenes to the exclusion of secular elements. It is hard to tell, but Minoan

temple art may be as unrelated to the realities of everyday life in bronze age Crete as Edward Burne-Jones' stained glass saints were to the East London of the Whitechapel murders.

That important reservation apart, the art of the temples can tell us a great deal about the Minoans, their view of the world and their ritual preoccupations.

Interpreting the 'palaces' as temples in no way diminishes the interest which they hold for us. It rectifies an anomaly – a sophisticated bronze age society without temples was a strange beast indeed – and it adds a new dimension in the form of a powerful and highly organized priesthood. There is also the still-unanswered question, raised in *The Knossos Labyrinth*, about the location of the real palaces. If the Minoans had kings, where did they live? Have their dwellings not been discovered, or simply not recognized?

Inevitably and rightly, the preoccupation with palace-temples will continue, but it is important to remember that it was only in the later part of Minoan history, from 1900 BC onwards, that temples dominated. There were significant periods before and after when there seem to have been no large temple centres, and we need to attend to those phases too. As with many aspects of the Minoan civilization, this is well known among archaeologists, but often overlooked by the tourist and the general reader. One purpose of this book is to rectify that and make available to the general reader some of the results of modern archaeology, so that he or she may develop a well-rounded picture of the Minoans, their way of life, their beliefs and their quite remarkable achievements.

The Minoans are credited with sensing, perhaps for the first time, that a pleasurable afterlife was to come – with, in effect, inventing or discovering Elysium. We may well come to believe, as Pindar was much later to write of those who had gone before to the Elysian Fields, that

For them the sun shines at full strength, while we here walk in night.
 The plains around their city are red with roses
 And shaded by incense trees heavy with golden fruit.
 And some enjoy horses and wrestling, or table games and the lyre,
 And near them blossoms a flower of perfect joy.
 Perfumes always hover above the land
 From the frankincense strewn in deep-shining fire of the gods' altars . . .

2

The people



My lords, we have had our fill of the good things we have shared, and of the banquet's boon companion, the harp. Let us go out of doors now and try our hands at various sports, so that when our guest has reached his house he can tell his friends that at boxing, wrestling, jumping and running there is no one who could beat us. . . . We can run fast and we are first-rate seamen. But the things in which we take a perennial delight are the feast, the lyre, the dance, clean linen in plenty, a hot bath and our beds.

(Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 8)

APPEARANCE AND DRESS

Although the Minoan civilization had its origins as long as five thousand years ago and had come to an end by 1000 BC, we nevertheless have a very clear idea of what the Minoan people looked like. There are in the region of a hundred statuettes in stone, metal and clay, showing us ordinary Minoans worshipping. There are also representations of Minoans on sealstones and decorative metalwork, as well as in the best-known medium of all, the frescoes. Among these, there is plenty of evidence of the sort of clothes they wore and of their general appearance or, to be more precise, of the way in which the Minoans liked to see themselves.

The Minoans depicted themselves as straight-nosed (often with a high bridge), and with large almond-shaped eyes. They had conspicuous eyebrows and long, wavy black hair falling in curling locks to their shoulders and sometimes to their waists. Their tanned bodies were athletic and tense with nervous energy; their arms, shoulders and thighs were strong and muscular, their waists and lower legs slim and lithe. It is above all a physically attractive type that we are shown, graceful whether in repose or engaged in energetic activity, and graceful in a rather self-conscious, theatrical way: it is the grace of a matador or a ballet dancer.