

The Minoans and Myceneans

Adapted from articles on Ancient History Encyclopedia

Minoans – Important Periods

- 3000 – 2000 BC: Minoans Prepalatial
- 2000 – 1700 BC: Minoans Protopalatial
- 1700 – 1470 BC: Minoans Neopalatial
- 1470 – 1100 BC: Minoans Postpalatial

The Minoans

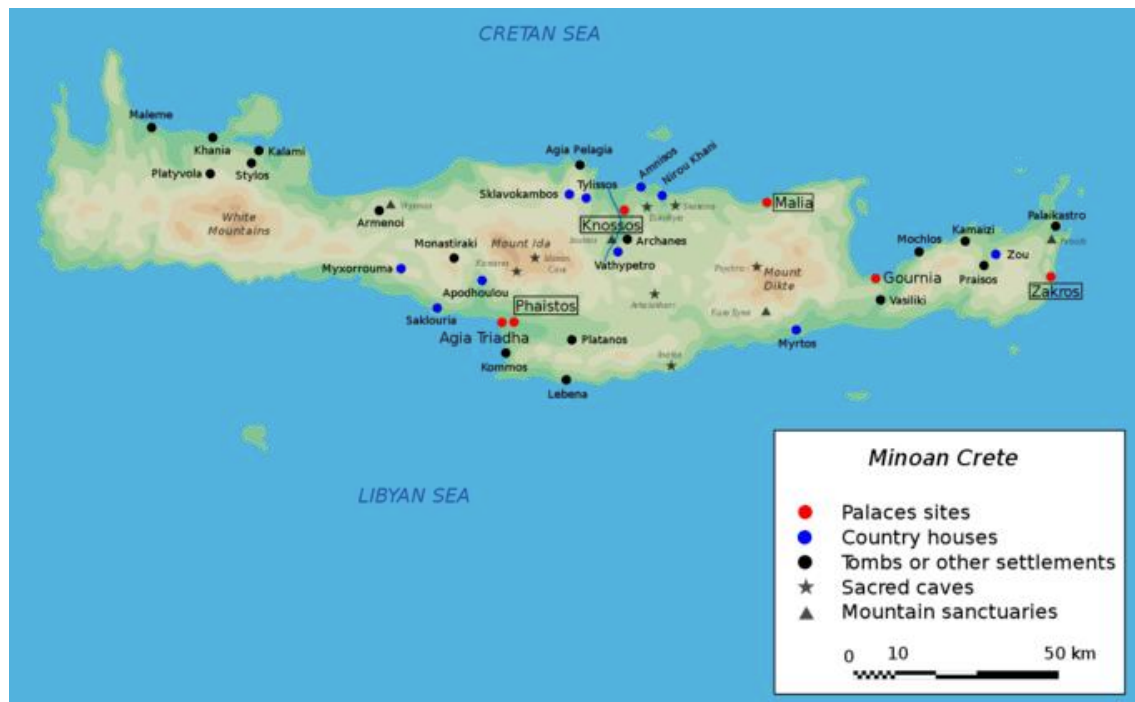
The Minoan civilization flourished on the island of **Crete** located in the eastern Mediterranean from c. 2000 BC until c. 1500 BC. With their unique art and architecture, and the spread of their ideas through contact with other cultures across the **Aegean**, the Minoans made a significant contribution to the development of Western civilization as it is known today. Labyrinth-like **palace complexes**, vivid **frescoes** depicting scenes such as bull-leaping and processions, fine gold jewelry, elegant stone vases, and pottery with vibrant decorations of marine life are all unique artifacts of the Minoans.



Arthur Evans and Discovery

The archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans was first alerted to the possible presence of an ancient civilization on Crete in the early 1900's with the discovery of carved seal stones that may have been worn as charms by native Cretans. Excavating at the site **Knossos** began from 1900 to 1905 AD, Evans discovered extensive ruins which confirmed written and mythological accounts of a sophisticated Cretan culture and possible site of the legendary labyrinth and palace of **King Minos**. Evans coined the term Minoan in reference to this legendary king.

The organization of dates for the Minoan civilization focuses on the events occurring in and around the major Minoan "palaces". There are four periods, as noted above. This scheme and others have since been challenged by more modern archaeology and approaches to history and anthropology in general.

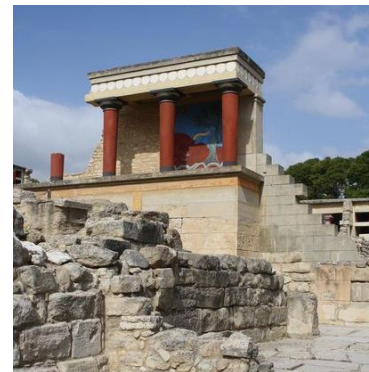


Map of Minoan archeological sites

Minoan Palaces

Minoan settlements, palaces tombs, and cemeteries have been found all over Crete. The largest and most widely known palace is in Knossos (below).

At each of these sites, large, complex palace structures seem to have acted as local administrative, trade, religious, and possibly political centers. The relationship between the palaces and the power structure within them or over the island is not clear but it is believed that the palaces exerted some localized control in the gathering and storage of surplus goods like **wine, oil, grain, precious metals** and **ceramics**.



Small towns, villages, and farms were spread around the territory seemingly controlled by a single palace. Roads connected these isolated settlements to each other and palace. Historians believe the palaces were independent up to 1700 BC when they came under the influence of Knossos. Evidence for this is a greater uniformity in architecture and the use of a uniform writing system across various palace sites.

The absence of fortifications in the settlements suggests a relative peace in the region, but weapons have also been found in multiple sites.

Minoan Religion

The religion of the Minoans remains a mystery but there is a lot of evidence to suggest they had an organized religion. Many typical practices are depicted in art and writing, like offerings and festivals. Artifacts often depict bulls in various ways, including in sport called **bull-leaping** and in mythology as in the **Minotaur and the Labyrinth**.



Minoan Decline

The reasons for the demise of the Minoan civilization continue to be debated.

1. Conquest – Palaces and settlements show evidence of fire and destruction c. 1450 BC around the same time as the Mycenaeans rose on the mainland.
2. Natural Disaster – The eruption of Thera (the present-day island of Santorini) may have been particularly significant, although, the exact date of this cataclysmic eruption is disputed.
3. Competition for wealth – Conflict within the Minoan civilization may have weakened the society, making them susceptible to invasion.

Whatever the cause, most of the Minoan sites were abandoned by 1200 BC and Crete would not return to relevance until c. 800 BC when it was colonized by the Greeks.

The Mycenaeans

The Mycenaean civilization flourished from the c. 1400-1200 BC and extended its influence throughout the Peloponnese, the Aegean (especially Crete), and the Cycladic Islands. The Mycenaeans were influenced by the earlier Minoan civilization. Architecture, art and religious practices were assimilated and adapted to better express the more militaristic and **austere** Mycenaean culture.

Major Mycenaean Centers

- Mycenae
- Tiryns – perhaps the oldest center
- Pylos
- Thebes
- Argos
- Sparta
- Athens – possibly...

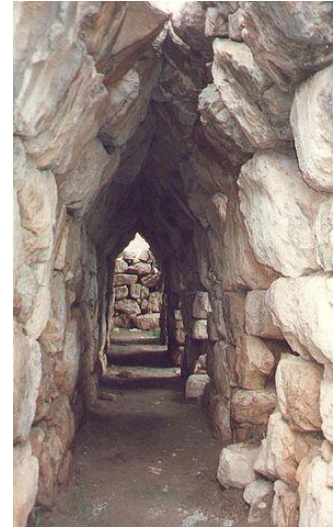
The exact political relationship between these centers is not clear. However, there were many shared cultural features resulting from close trade.

Shared culture features included architecture, frescoes, pottery, jewelry, weapons, and of course, the Greek language and writing.

Architecture

Notable architecture:

- Fortification walls of large unworked blocks (termed **Cyclopean** as it was believed that only the Cyclopes could have moved such massive stones).
- **Corbel galleries** - arched corridors created by overlapping stone blocks, circular stone tombs with corbelled roofs, and monumental doorways with massive stone lintels with relieving triangles are also common features of Mycenaean sites.
- Dams for flood management, particularly at Tiryns.
- Bridges built from large stone blocks.



Corbel Archway in Tiryns.

Trade

Evidence that the Mycenaean civilization had trading contact with other Aegean cultures can be found in:

- The presence of foreign goods in Mycenaean settlements such as gold, ivory, copper and glass
- The discovery of Mycenaean goods such as pottery in places as far afield as Egypt, Mesopotamia, the **Levant, Anatolia, Sicily** and **Cyprus**. No doubt perishable goods such as oil and wine were also significant Mycenaean **exports**.

Mycenaean Religion

Little is known for certain regarding Mycenaean religious practices beyond the importance given to animal sacrifice, **communal feasting, pouring of libations** and offerings of food. The presence of horns in art and architecture suggest strong links with the Minoan religion, although these symbols may have been adopted for other reasons.



Mycenaean Decline

With the mysterious end of the Mycenaean civilization during the Bronze Age Collapse around 1200 BC (possibly through earthquake, invasion or in-fighting) came the so-called **Dark Ages of Greece** and it would be many centuries before Greek culture would finally return to relevance.