

The Court Compounds of Minoan Crete:

Royal Palaces or Ceremonial Centers?

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The Palace of Minos? Even before the monumental court complex at Knossos was actually excavated, Kalokairinos, Schliemann and indeed, Evans himself, had already identified the visible ruins as a “palace,” the abode of a king. The unearthing of a fine gypsum throne (fig.1) in the West Wing of the building during the first year’s campaign, in 1900, reinforced this view, and mythical Minos rapidly acquired historical status as the Great King of Crete, as reflected in the title of Evans’ monumental publication, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos* (1918-1935). Based on his findings at Knossos, with the legend of Minos at its interpretative core, Evans attempted a reconstruction of the prehistoric Cretan political landscape as a kingdom based on a hereditary monarchy. The uniformity in material culture, and especially the widespread



Fig.2: Map of Crete showing location of sites mentioned in the text. Includes major Late Minoan I settlements (red dots) and secondary settlements (orange) (J. Driessen).

diffusion of Linear A - the as yet undeciphered Minoan script used at the time - suggested to him some central organization and administration and a unified state covering the entire island during the Neopalatial period, especially in Late Minoan I (around 1600-1450 BC, according to the traditional chronology).

The discovery of similar court complexes, first at Phaistos (1901), and later at Gournia (1907), Malia (1915), and Zakros (1963) imposed some modifications on this way of thinking about palace functions - were these summer residences for the Knossian Minos or the seats of dependent provincial governors? Further advances in material culture studies seemed to indicate that during the Middle Minoan or Protopalatial period (ca. 2000-1750 BC) Knossos was more at an economic par with the other centers. This suggested a politi-

cal landscape of more or less equally independent polities until the Neopalatial period, when Knossos would have annexed, by force or goodwill, the other regions of the island. This remained the historical framework up to the end of the eighties. The nineties, however, witnessed the discovery of yet another series of court complexes, varying in size but all of clearly monumental character, at Kommos, Petras, and Galatas, with the strong possibility of many others existing at Khania, Arkhanes, Stavromenos, Palaikastro, and Protopia, to name just a few. A quick glance at the map of Crete (fig.2) highlights the proximity and density of such public buildings, making it more than obvious that the time is ripe to reconsider the evidence for the Minoan political situation on the one hand, and the interpretation of the function of these “palaces” on the other hand.

What kind of state did the Minoans develop and cherish before mainland Mycenaeans established themselves on the island after about 1500 BC, bringing with them a hereditary kingship known as the “wanaks” - a word still used by Homer some 750 years later? From the start, Evans believed that Knossos was governed by a Priest-King. In the first volume of *The Palace of Minos*, he drew attention to the relief figure in the south wing of the palace (fig.3), and imagined the ruler seated in the Throne Room flanked by the fresco of griffins (fig.1).

Minos, like Pharaoh, would have been a dynastic and divine title, referred to by Evans as the “son of Zeus by Europa, herself, perhaps, an Earth-Goddess” (*Palace of Minos* i. 3). Crete itself he assumed to have been ruled by the “beneficent dominion” of a Minoan dynasty. From the first year of excavations at Knossos, when frescoes were found in which women played a preponderant role, other hypotheses circulated about the palace’s form of government, such as that of a matriarchy or a society ruled by a chief priestess. This hypothesis has



Fig.1: The so-called “Throne Room” in the West Wing of the Palace of Knossos (photo: J. Driessen).



Fig.3: Evans' Priest-King, a relief fresco found in the South Wing of the Palace of Knossos (photo: S. Sheratt, Oxford, Asmolean Museum).

proven to be quite attractive for New Age followers, but has gained less credence among scholars.

The truth is that we still do not know who was physically in charge of Minoan society. Iconography and texts should be of help, but resist straightforward interpretation. What is clear is that no figural representations of, or textual references to, specific rulers exist, nor are there any explicit references to ruling dynasties. Granted, the bull has been regarded as a symbol for Knossian power, whereas the so-called Minoan Genius - a modified version of the Egyptian Tawaret figure (fig.4) - occurs more frequently at Malia. "Possibly" human figures - often male - are much more prominently represented in Minoan iconography during the mature Neopalatial period, after the Santorini eruption (around 1530 BC according to traditional chronology) had affected the core of Minoan society (Driessen and Macdonald 1997).

And so it seems possible that, alongside other societal changes that occurred on the island as a reaction to this natural catastrophe,

certain individuals with considerable charisma, and personal, political, and/or religious power, placed themselves in the foreground, foreshadowing the introduction of real royalty in the Late Minoan II period, backed by Mycenaeans.

This development could be illustrated by several objects that depict male figures receiving some kind of investiture, often from a prominent female figure that has been identified as the Mother Goddess. Examples are the impressions of two gold rings, one known as the "Master Impression" from Khania (fig.5), showing a man with an outstretched arm above a fortified coastal city, the other known as the "Mother of the Mountain" impression from the palace of Knossos, showing a man with a gesture of devotion in front of a woman standing on a mountain top, again with an outstretched arm. She is heraldically flanked by two lions and stands in front of a façade with sacred symbols. There is also a stone goblet, astutely called the Chieftain's Cup, from Hagia Triada, close to Phaistos, again showing a man with an outstretched arm in front of another man. In addition, a gold ring

found in a tomb at Poros, the harbor town of Knossos, shows similar iconographical elements. So, in view of later developments it remains a possibility that some kind of divine or divinely inspired kingship was introduced in the period between the Santorini disaster and the arrival of the Mycenaeans two generations later.

There is, however, no iconographical evidence that such a kingship already existed earlier on, when the first so-called palaces were built, around the middle of the third millennium. I will come back to these first buildings later, but here want to add two other arguments for why I do not think the complexes we call "palaces" served as the residences of kings or chiefs (Driessen 2002). The first argument concerns the absence of royal or princely graves, while the second is the plan itself of the Minoan "palace." We have such "royal" tombs where the Greek

Mainland, the Near East, and Mycenaean Crete are concerned, but we lack them on Minoan Crete until after the Santorini eruption. Many scholars have looked for supporting evidence in the so-called "royal necropolis" of Chrysólakkos ("the gold pit") at Malia, a large funerary building with surrounding stoa (fig.8). While this has been heavily robbed, from it comes a beautiful gold pendant of two wasps (fig.7) and perhaps even, as some conjecture, the famous Aegina Treasure now on display in the British Museum. Although its location and the discovery of some skeletal remains clearly indicate a funerary function for the Chrysólakkos complex, there is nothing to connect it with a single individual. Given the evidence from cemeteries all over the island, it seems that, from Early Minoan times onwards, group burial was the common practice, and even if an individual received more attention through coffin burial or offerings, this happened within the confines of the group. This, of course, does not imply that Minoan society was egalitarian, far from it, but it may have been organized into corporate groups. I believe, however, that the absence of princely burials is very difficult to reconcile with the presence of a conjectured powerful ruler.

The second argument against such a ruler is given by the plan of the "palace" itself. Mycenaean, Near Eastern, and Pharaonic palace architecture were all clearly intended to



Fig.4: Stone rhyton shaped like a triton found at the Palace of Malia, showing a Minoan Genius performing libations (Ecole Française d'Athènes, Philippe Colet).

Inset: Rendering of a portion of the design on rhyton (Ecole Française d'Athènes, Iro Athanasiadis).



Fig.5: Seal from a gold ring from Khania, known as the "Master Impression" (E. Hallager, used by permission).

serve a human ruler, with an access pattern in which all possible efforts were made to direct traffic towards the core of the complex: the throne room or chamber of audience and the target of any official visitor to the complex. This is not the case in the Minoan "palaces," where the circulation pattern obviously leads to the Central Court, and we look in vain to find a specific room or feature that would inevitably draw the official visitor. Then what about the famous Knossian throne room? First, the room and its furniture most likely date to the time of the Mycenaean takeover after 1450 BC when, as mentioned, political conditions were entirely

different - as also indicated by the concurrent appearance of elite tombs and individual burials. Secondly, the throne itself may have actually had more religious than political significance, functioning in the re-enactment of epiphany rituals involving a High Priestess, as suggested by the iconography of griffins, palms, and altars in the wall-paintings (Hägg 1983). Recently, its link to equinox or solstice observations has also been clarified by Goodison (2001), who suggested that the room was only used at dawn at certain times of the year for specific ceremonies.

The Origin of the Minoan "Palace": So if no king, what then? I think the answer lies in the building itself. I suggest that from the middle of the third millennium onwards, enclosed courts were constructed to manipulate the performance of certain rituals and that these courts formed the origin of what is now known as the Minoan "palace." Minoan archaeology usually distinguishes between the Old and New Palaces, the Protopalatial and Neopalatial periods, respectively. This distinction is especially based on the evidence found at Phaistos, where the Neopalatial building was physically placed on top of the earlier, Middle Minoan complex (fig.6). At Knossos, the distinction is not so easily discerned, for the palace seems to have developed gradually, expanding organically from its earliest Middle Minoan core to its Late Bronze Age form. As it grew, walls seem to have been razed, modified, or newly constructed. The Middle Minoan IB period, around 2000 BC, is usually regarded as the period when the first palaces were being built, approximately at the same time that writing (Linear A and Cretan Hieroglyphic), polychrome, wheel-made pottery, and other features were introduced (perhaps owing to the influence of increased contacts with the Near East).

Recent excavations by the French School within the "palace" of Malia have now seriously modified this traditional view. It is now clear that parts of the building and the Central Court already go back to the middle of the third millennium BC, to a phase called Early Minoan IIB, and that their

establishment presented a sudden decision to modify entirely an existing settlement. A reconsideration of the evidence at Knossos and Phaistos provides less compelling evidence, but it is clear that the site of the "palace" was in both cases used for normal domestic habitation until at least the end of the Neolithic period (if not later) when it was decided to install the Central Court (Driessen, in press).

It is interesting to observe that even at minor sites, such as at Vasiliki located on the Hierapetra Isthmus, a large court was incorporated within the settlement at precisely this moment, and that paved, sometimes enclosed areas were also added to some of the older Messara *tholoi*



Fig.7: Gold bee pendant from necropolis of Chrysólakkos near Malia, showing two wasps on a honeycomb (Ecole Française d'Athènes, Philippe Collet).

(round, vaulted tombs) in Early Minoan IIB. There is no evidence that the central courts of the palatial centers had continuous architecture around them during the Early Bronze Age (nor even during the Middle Bronze Age). Indeed, there seems to be a clear tendency over a course of time to enclose the central courts of the "palaces," so that the rituals enacted there were screened off and made accessible to only a select segment of the population. "Palace" sites, in fact, developed over time, some growing bigger, others smaller, but the size of the court remains more or less identical within the respective centers. In any case, the impressive continuity between the Early Minoan and the later buildings at Knossos and Malia, implies that certain rituals involved in the original layout of the court and surroundings were still being followed at specific moments when the respective buildings needed remodeling and repair in their later life. We may even go so far as to assume that, even

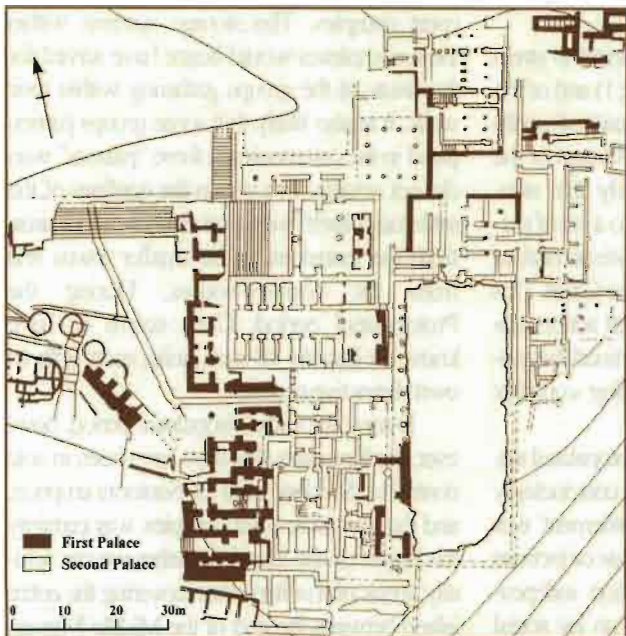


Fig.6: Plan of the "Palace" at Phaistos with, in black, the first, Middle Bronze Age, building and in outline, the second, Late Bronze Age, complex (R. Tivniel et alii, Nouvelle Klío).

when the surrounding building was in ruins - as happened quite regularly on an island plagued by the "Earth-Shaker" - the Central Court was kept operational at all times.

If we can agree upon this, perhaps we can further suggest that ritual, integrative actions essential to Minoan society were, at a specific moment, at the very end of Early Minoan IIA, not only anchored in space and in time, but also that at some early point an effort was made to screen off these rituals from the public through the construction of walls and buildings at these specific places. These places all have long occupational histories and formed nodes of fertile, coastal agricultural regions. The institutionalization of ritual should correspond with social changes, and it is perhaps no coincidence that the mature EMII period also presents important modifications on other levels. For instance, at this time, the house tombs at Mochlos started to show increased hierarchical differences, and several of the Peak Sanctuaries were inaugurated. The manipulation of the rituals through constructed space implies that they were spatially and temporally controlled by a particular social group, henceforth allowing participation only by selection, as indicated by the access system. In any case, this process of institutionalization of ritual forms the origin of what we know as the Minoan "palaces." At the same time, it implies, of course, that the structures surrounding the Central Court largely served in secondary functions and as screens.

The Function of the Central Court? The next questions, then, are: What function did these court complexes actually fulfill, and how

does this function relate to the political organization on the island in the era before the Santorini eruption? For most of us, the Central Court of the Minoan "palace" forms the distinguishing and essential ingredient of what makes a Minoan building a palace. One scholar clarified the role of the palace as reflecting a function "that was fundamental to Minoan society as a whole" (Davis 1987). Researchers discuss the precise nature of this function: did it serve as the arena for the (in)famous bull games so frequently depicted in Minoan art? Or should we imagine more peaceful ceremonies taking place in the Court: feasts, ritualized warfare (similar perhaps to the Mesoamerican ball games), dances, sacrifices, or perhaps simply astronomical observations?

All of these are possible, but I suspect that they were perhaps largely ecstatic, maybe drug-induced, and most likely involved larger groups. Indeed, it has been calculated that the Central Court at Knossos could accommodate up to 5,435 people (Gesell 1987), assuming that a person standing in a crowd needs 2 1/2 square feet. This is about a fourth of the entire population of Neopalatial Knossos, according to the most recent estimate (Whitelaw 2001: 27, 14-18,000 individuals). Thus, dancing and feasting are the most likely candidates. This scenario is clearly suggested by some of the miniature frescoes found at Knossos, which depict large groups dancing or standing in grand open places, with some architectural elaboration (figs. 10 and 11) (Davis 1987, Marinatos 1987).

In this regard, it seems important to stress the repetition of the proportions (2:1) and of the orientations (all slightly east of north) followed by the Central Courts of the different "palaces." Surely this standardization corresponds to a set of prescribed rules dictated by one or more of the rites taking place on the Court. This also implies that this ritual action was so important that it determined the general layout of the building complex from its very beginning.

In the case of the Protopalatial settlement at Malia, it has convincingly been shown that the settlement was composed of different units or factions that could largely function independently, and were made up by social grouping based on affiliation rather than class (Schoep 2002). The court

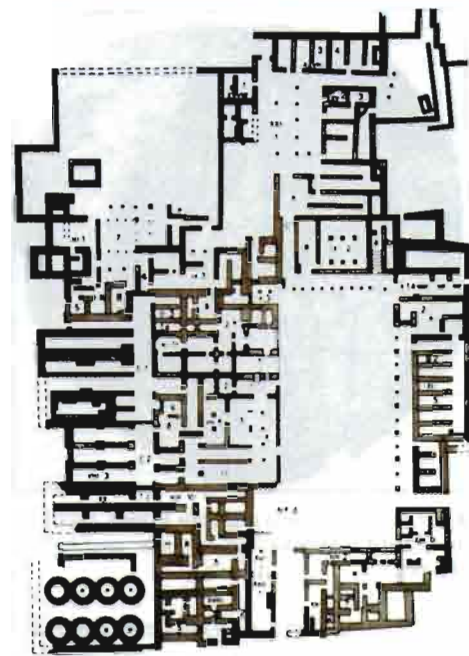


Fig.9: Plan of the palace of Malia (J. Driessen after O. Pelon, *Palais de Malia*, V).

complex served as the place where these different groups met, feasted, and performed a series of ritual, integrative actions. At Knossos, for instance, the evidence for communal feasting is especially clear for the Early Bronze Age (EMIIIB) (Day and Wilson 2002), but it may be assumed to have continued throughout the Minoan period. This implies that political power remained in the hands of the separate groups, who probably elected or designated their representatives, officials who were in charge of the court complex. The storage systems within these complexes would hence have served for the feasts of the groups gathering within their walls. It is also likely that some groups participated in the ceremonies in these "palaces" who did not actually live within the confines of the settlement itself but came from a wider area, from the mansions in the smaller towns and from the country-houses. During the Protopalatial period, Crete seems to have known a handful of such units, each with its own distinctive capital.

During the early Neopalatial period, however, the Knossian elite may have been in sole control of the island until the Santorini eruption, and the Knossian court complex was certainly the largest on the island. Whether we can actually speak of a unitary state, covering the entire island between the end of the Middle Minoan Period and the end of Late Minoan IA (ca. 1750-1530 BC), remains in doubt because the



Fig.8: Aerial view of Chrysólakkos near the palace of Malia (J.W. Myers, E. Myers, and G. Cadogan, *Aerial Atlas of Crete*, Princeton, 1990).

main arguments in favor - the presence of single, or similar, ring impressions at different sites throughout Crete (and even on Santorini), Knossian cultural hegemony, and the absence of fortification systems, suggestive of an absence of internal and external threats - can all be interpreted differently. Fluctuations in central Cretan settlement sizes and numbers, as well as the fact that certain one-time central sites in the region lose importance whereas other secondary sites receive attention, seem indeed to suggest that Knossos was in charge of the central regions of the island, following a clear political strategy, but that elsewhere the situation was very much as in the Middle Minoan period, with largely independent, elite-controlled settlements.

In this paper, I have questioned the existence of hereditary kingship on Minoan Crete and proposed to regard the so-called "palaces" as ceremonial centers, which grew gradually around the Central Court that formed the focus of ritual activities since the Early Minoan IIB period (ca. 2500 BC). These rituals especially had integrative functions, bringing together large groups of urban and countryside folk.

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Fig.11: Knossos: Sacred Grove and Dance Fresco (D. Riccardi-Percy after PM III, Pl. XVIII).

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Fig.10: Knossos: Tripartite Fresco (D. Riccardi-Percy after PM III, Pl. XVI).

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Return to the Labyrinth: a Clew to the Function of the Minoan Palaces

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Fig.1: View of the Palace at Knossos from the east (photo: J. A. MacGillivray).

The hard truth is that one century after Sir Arthur Evans declared that he had found the Palace of Minos, we still do not know what he really found at Knossos. There is still no evidence for monarchy, let alone the legendary King Minos, until the appearance of the title *wanax*, identified as the Homeric term for “great king,” in the Mycenaean Greek archives, written in the Linear B script of 1450 to 1300 BC, five hundred years after Knossos was built and when no new palaces were being erected.

Knossos was the first Cretan palace to be revealed by the spade, and Evans was convinced that it was not only the royal abode of Minos, whom Greek tradition tells us ruled the Aegean Sea until his demise when he took up jurisprudence in Hades, but also the Daedalian Labyrinth where Theseus slew the Minotaur. Since then, archaeologists have revealed six other buildings erected around rectangular open “Central Courts,” as Evans dubbed them, roughly twice as long as they are wide. These are at Phaistos, Malia, Gournia, Galatas, Petras, and Kato Zakros. There are also other candidates with palatial features, such as archives and fine architecture at Khania, Kommos, Arkhanes, Agia Triadha, and Monastiraki, but these are unable to claim royal status because their central courts remain undiscovered. Were these all the seats of kingdoms spread across the

island? If so, why have we not found any evidence for royal burials (see Box 1)? And why is Minoan art void of the political propaganda, such as, for example, ruler portraits and commemorations of kings smiting their enemies, which we see in neighboring states to the east? Knossos was the only palace re-occupied in the final palace period and the only one with a built throne, which was installed at that time. From this, we infer that the Mycenaean *wanax* moved into the shell of a very old building, which was probably built for a different pur-

pose. But what was that original purpose? A clue may lie in the ancient Greek memory of the Daedalian Labyrinth and Chorus.

To the ancient Greeks, the labyrinth was a metaphor for life. It was a complexity of twists and turns, deceptive dead-ends, double-backs and long meandering diversions, through which the explorer, having entered, had to find his way in order to confront the monster, half-human/half-divine, which lurked there. Success depended upon another equally profound metaphor: Ariadne’s clew. In Greek myth, this clew is the *mitos*, the ball of thread which Ariadne gave to Theseus, the Athenian hero. By unwinding, the *mitos* guided him through the Cretan labyrinth that Daedalus, upon seeing the Egyptian original, had made for King Minos at Knossos. But the *mitos* is also the life-line, spun and rolled into a ball by the Fates at birth and unraveled throughout one’s life. In both senses, it is a guide through life’s perplexities; the key is to find your clew and to learn how to follow it, for otherwise you are lost in the maze.

When Ariadne gave Theseus the clew, she showed him how to discover his true path through the labyrinth. There he confronted the most powerful metaphor of all: the Minotaur. The monstrous progeny of the Greek god Zeus and Minos’ Queen Pasiphae, the Minotaur combines human flesh with godly spirit (see Box 4, p.25, this issue). Both are important aspects of our being, but one is beastly and grounded in this world, the other divine. To access the latter, we must reconcile and master the former. The object of the maze, then, is not so much to get through it as to defeat what it



Fig.2: Theseus dragging a stone-throwing Minotaur/Talos from a maze; on a Late Archaic Athenian vase (after Maria Xanthopoulou).