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Source: *British School at Athens Studies*, Vol. 12, KNOSSOS: PALACE, CITY, STATE (2004), pp. 393-398

Published by: [British School at Athens](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40960796>

Accessed: 09-02-2016 10:20 UTC

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When Minos ruled the waves: Knossian power overseas

Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier

In his closing address at the end of the Third Thera Congress, Vassos Karageorghis (1990) reported a dream which he had the night before: a Thera who had died in the great eruption came to the conference hall for attending the closing session of the conference. Various groups of participants welcomed him in different ways. The first group headed by Christos Doulas was holding banners saying: "Long live the united islands of the Cyclades!", "Down with the imperialists!" and "Minoans go home!" A few metres behind them, Sinclair Hood, Gerald Cadogan and others who excavate in Crete were holding a banner with the slogan "Minoans of the world unite!" — and, one could add, "Long live the Minoan empire!" (Hood 1984).

This is a humorous vision of the two schools of thought about the relations between Crete and the rest of the Aegean during the period of the Cretan palaces. One school believes that the tradition of the thalassocracy of Minos is based on historical facts and that Knossos ruled an empire covering a greater part of the Aegean Sea (Cadogan 1984; Hood 1984; Niemeier 1984, 1986; Wiener 1984, 1990). According to the other school, the Aegean islands enjoyed political autonomy from Crete, and Minoan influence had merely an economic and cultural character even if, admittedly, there may have been some kind of diplomatic control and some groups of Minoans living within indigenous settlements in "community colonies" (Branigan 1981, 1984; Doulas 1982, 1983, 129–31; Melas 1988a, 1988b, 1991).

In this paper, I discuss the following issues: 1) the political structure of Crete in the palace periods and the question if there is evidence for a central role of Knossos; 2) the military means of palatial Crete; 3) the character of Minoan influence and presence in the Aegean as it can be conjectured from the archaeological evidence; 4) the contemporary sources and later traditions about the position of Bronze Age Crete in the Aegean.

CRETAN POLITICS AND THE CENTRAL ROLE OF KNOSSOS

During the palace periods, several polities with territories centred on ceremonial, political and economic centres, the so-called "palaces", existed in the island (Cherry 1986, 20–3, fig. 2.2; Poursat 1987, 1989, 213–

14; Cadogan 1994; Kanta 1999; Warren in this volume). The palaces of Knossos (MacGillivray 1994), Phaistos (Levi 1976) and Malia (Pelon 1983) existed from the Old Palace period. There may have been more palaces at Chania (Hiller 1976, 146–8; Cherry 1986, 21, fig. 2.2) and Chamalevri/Stavromenos to the east of Rethymno (Schiering *et al.* 1982, 17–47). Eastern Crete to the east of the Bay of Mirabello appears not to have been a unified area centring on the Palace at Zakros as suggested by Cherry (1986, 21, fig. 2.2). According to L. Platon (in this volume), that palace was founded not earlier than LM I by Knossos. Tsipopoulou and Papacostoulou (1997, 205–6, fig. 2) have argued that eastern Crete was divided into three territories: that of the bay of Siteia with Petras as central place, the area of the south coast with Makrygialos or Diaskari as central place, and the Zakros-Palaikastro area.

If there was a Minoan empire in the Aegean, one would expect a centralised political system in the island. Was Knossos the power centre of the entire island and in rank above the other polities? Knossos was the extremely ancient and established centre of Crete in all spheres and probably the cosmological centre of the island (Soles 1995; Manning 1999; MacGillivray in this volume). The Minoan road and watch tower system of the Old Palace period, which has been investigated in east Crete (Tzedakis *et al.* 1989, 1990; Chrysosoulaki 1999) but is recognisable elsewhere as well, has been interpreted as an military building programme of Knossos to take control over different areas of Crete (Wiener 1991, 336–7; MacGillivray 1997, 23).

In the New Palace period, Knossos was by far the largest of the known Minoan palaces, almost double the size of that at Malia and two and a half times that at Phaistos (Graham 1987, pl. 7; Wiener 1987, 266). In the architecture of the New Palace period, the other palaces as well as a series of elaborate buildings in Crete and beyond at different sites in the Aegean followed the "School of Knossos" (Wiener 1990, 140–1). The same is true with fresco paintings of ceremonial/ritual character (Rehak 1997; Shaw 1997). The fine LM IB pottery of the "Special Palatial Tradition" probably was exclusively produced at Knossos (Betancourt 1985, 140–8; Müller 1997, 304–6, fig. 155). The imitation of Knossian architecture and frescoes as well as the imports of Knossian fine pottery do not necessarily indicate Knossian dominance over the entire island but

could also mean that local elites were imitating Knossos in a "Versailles effect" (Wiener 1984, 17, 1987, 266).

However, the finds of a series of Neopalatial clay sealings made of apparently local clays and impressed by the same or nearly identical Knossian gold rings, many of them with the representation of bull leaping scenes, at sites in central, western, southern and eastern Crete appear to indicate that administrators were sent out from the Palace at Knossos to manage economic activities in different parts of the islands (Betts 1967; Hallager 1997, *contra* Weingarten 1986, 296–7, n. 25). The motif of the bull was closely connected to Knossos. Large-scale bull scenes adorned the entrances to the Palace as well as official halls (Marinatos 1993, 51, fig. 40). In the convincing interpretation of the Hallagers (1995), the bull was the symbol of power of Knossos. Thus they confirm Betts's conclusion that the Knossian rulers used signet rings with bull leaping as their chief insignia.

All this corresponds to an Egyptian inscription of the time of Thutmoses III mentioning the king of Keftiu (Crete), together with the kings of other countries (Vercoutter 1956, 64) and forming evidence for central rule in Bronze Age Crete as well as to the legendary tradition of an overlordship by the rulers of Knossos with dynasties in other parts of the island owing allegiance to them (Huxley 1968, 14, n. 65).

THE MILITARY POWER OF MINOAN CRETE

A series of recent studies has challenged the anachronistic vision of the unwarlike "Minoan flower lovers" (Starr 1984; Hiller 1984; Evely 1996; Peatfield 1999). In the Aegean, Minoan smiths were leading in bronze weapon technology (Hiller 1984, 27–8). Important new weapons such as long swords (Sandars 1961, 17–22; Branigan 1968, 195–8; Pelon 1982) and spearheads of different types (Höckmann 1980) were first developed in Crete. Minoan weapons were exported to the Mycenaean Mainland (Mylonas 1973, 314–17; Catling and Catling 1974, 252; Hood 1980), Mari on the Euphrates (Cline 1994, 126–7. D. 5) and Egypt (Vercoutter 1956, 359–61; Wachsmann 1987, 71–2). And the Minoans used the weapons they produced. There are battle scenes in Minoan art (*CMS* 2.6. 15–17, 21, 2.7. 20, 230; Hiller 1999) as well as "warrior burials" (Kilian-Dirlmeier 1985, 209; Muhly 1992, 129–31; Dimopoulou 1999) before any Mycenaean conquest of Crete. The representations of sailing ships on Minoan seals from about the beginning of the Old Palace period onwards demonstrate a new interest in seafaring (Yule 1981, 165–6; Basch 1987, 93–114; Wedde 2000). This interest necessarily did not have only an economic character but — closely connected with this — also a military one. "Peace at sea is essential to any political entity whose economy is based on maritime trade and communications. ... The seas must be free of pirates who have plagued the sea routes since the earliest mari-

time commercial ventures, looking for the easy prey of isolated and unprotected merchantmen" (Linder 1981, 38). During the palace periods, Minoan Crete was dependent on the overseas imports of metals, above all copper and tin (Niemeier 1986, 247, 250–1, 1998, 36–8; Wiener 1987, 262–4, 1990, 145–50, 1991, 327–8). Undoubtedly, the sea routes around Crete had to be protected against pirates (on piracy in the Bronze Age Aegean, see Renfrew 1972, 262–4, 398–9).

MINOAN INFLUENCE AND PRESENCE IN THE AEGEAN ACCORDING TO THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

There was a series of Minoan outposts in the Aegean, as the almost exclusively Minoan character of their material culture demonstrates. The first one of these was founded in EM II on the island of Kythera as a foothold on the route between western Crete and the southern Peloponnese (Coldstream and Huxley 1972, 1984). During the Old Palace period a series of footholds in the eastern Aegean followed connecting, via the "Eastern String", Crete with the coast of Asia Minor: Kasos, Karpathos, Trianda/Ialysos on Rhodes, Tigani on Samos, Miletus and possibly Iasos and Knidos (Niemeier 1998 with references; Niemeier and Niemeier 1999). All these settlements continued into the New Palace period, when others were added. Their Minoan character is almost unanimously accepted (with the exception of Melas 1991, but see Niemeier 1996, 88, 94).

The Cycladic settlements of Akrotiri on Thera, Phylakopi on Melos and Ayia Irini on Keos all suffered destructions at the end of the Middle Bronze Age. When rebuilt at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age they show strong Minoan influence "with a consequent decline in local invention and originality" (Barber 1987, 159–64) in architecture, fresco painting, religion and cult as well as in pottery, not only in decorated wares but also in the domestic pottery as tripod cooking pots, conical cups and disc shaped loomweights (Niemeier 1986, 248–9, figs. 7, 10–11; Wiener 1990, 134–45). These phenomena do not necessarily indicate Minoan political supremacy but could be explained by cultural influence and the presence of Minoan community colonies as defined by Branigan (1981, 1984). The occurrence of balance weights of the Minoan weight system at Akrotiri, Phylakopi, Ayia Irini and other Aegean sites, among them most recently Miletus (Niemeier 1986, 248–9, fig. 9, 1999, 553; Petruso 1992), as well as of Linear A inscriptions on often locally produced clay vessels at the three Cycladic sites as well as Kythera and Miletus (Palaima 1982; Niemeier 1996) form evidence for an economic predominance of Minoan Crete in the Aegean. The evidence for the existence of administrations using Linear A clay tablets at Akrotiri, Phylakopi and Ayia Irini (Palaima 1982; Doumas *et al.* 2000, 32, 34, fig. 24) may indicate political control by

Minoans. At Phylakopi III, a Linear A tablet was found next to the ruins of a "Mansion" which was likely to have been the administrative centre of the settlement (Renfrew 1982, 39) and possibly a Minoan "governor's residence", as anticipated by Branigan (1981, 25), in a "governed colony".

The clay sealings of non-local clay recently found at Akrotiri, impressed by probably Knossian gold rings, among them one with the representation of a bull-leaping scene (Doulas 2000; Doulas *et al.* 2000, 34–5, figs. 30–1), once sealed parchment documents (on the type of sealing ["*Päckchenplombe*"], see Müller 1999, 349–6). These documents possibly had an administrative character and contained orders from Knossos. On the other hand, local elites could have imitated the Minoan Linear A administration, and the parchment documents could have had a commercial character and accompanied goods imported from Crete (Doulas *et al.* 2000, 34). Thus, according to the archaeological evidence alone, Minoan predominance over the Cyclades is possible but cannot be proved.

WRITTEN SOURCES ABOUT THE POSITION OF BRONZE AGE CRETE IN THE AEGEAN

The only contemporary sources about Minoan Crete exist in Egypt, where Crete is named the land of Keftiu (Vercoutter 1956, 33–123; Wachsmann 1987, 93–9). In addition or synonymously, the term "the islands in the midst of the Great Green (Sea)" is used (Sakellarakis and Sakellarakis 1984, 201–2; Wachsmann 1987, 98–9). Thus the Egyptian sources are speaking of Crete as the centre of a larger island complex (Sakellarakis and Sakellarakis 1984, 202).

Later Greek tradition is very clear about the naval power of the Cretans and the rule over the Aegean by Minos of Knossos (Poland 1932, 1907–11). This tradition has been seen as reflecting historical facts (Glotz 1925, 157–60; Pendlebury 1939, 225, 271, 285–7) until C. G. Starr, who argued (1955, 289–91) that the myth of the "thalassocracy of Minos" was a concept invented in the fifth century BC to make political capital for the justification of the supremacy of Periclean Athens in the Delian League. After the publication of Starr's article, this tradition has been mostly ignored in the discussion about the role of Minoan Crete in the Bronze Age Aegean. For instance, none of the papers of the important Swedish Symposium in 1982 on *The Minoan Thalassocracy: Myth and Reality* (Hägg and Marinatos 1984) discussed the relevant literary sources.

Indeed, the very term "thalassocracy" was probably coined in the fifth century BC (Ahly 1911, 597). However, the tradition of Cretan supremacy is much older. As early as c. 700 BC, Hesiod wrote about Minos: "He was the most royal of mortal kings and ruled over most of mankind who dwelt about, holding the sceptre of Zeus; with it he was king of the multitudes" (Huxley 1968, 2–3). Since in the Aegean paramount kingdoms

of this type did not exist at the time of Hesiod or earlier in the (so-called) Dark Ages (Starr 1961, 123–9, 324–48; Jeffery 1976), and since there is no textual and archaeological evidence that the Mycenaean kingdom of Knossos expanded beyond the island, this passage must be a reminiscence of Crete's most glorious period before the Mycenaean predominance in the Aegean. About 500 BC, Bacchylides of Keos in his first Ode reported a local tradition about Cretan supremacy: "On the third day warlike Minos came, bringing fifty ships with gleaming sterns and a company of Cretans. By the grace of Zeus who grants glory, he took the low-girded maiden, Dexithea, and left half of his contingent — soldiers. He allotted the craggy land to them and sailed away to the lovely city of Knossos" (B. 1. 113–23). There are more local traditions about Cretan conquest and/or settlement in the Aegean. Diodorus Siculus (5. 54. 4) reports that the first settlers of Karpathos were companions of Minos. According to Ephoros of Kyme, Miletus was founded by Sarpedon, a brother of king Minos, who brought settlers from Crete (Jacoby 1926, 79. F 27). Herodotos of Herakleia reports that, at the time of the foundation of Miletus, Cretans also settled on Samos (Jacoby 1923, 224. F 45). It must be more than coincidence that on Keos, Karpathos, Samos and at Miletus evidence for strong Minoan influence or even presence has been found. According to Diodorus (5. 84. 1), Minos did not only occupy most of the Cyclades but also seized no small part of the coast of Asia Minor. In this connection one thinks, besides Miletus, of Teichioussa, Iasos and Knidos.

CONCLUSION

Crete and its centre Knossos had military power. It had to secure its trade routes against pirates. The Egyptian sources speak of Crete as centre of an island complex. The later Greek tradition from Hesiod on is very clear about Cretan and Knossian supremacy in the Aegean. In this connection, Hood (1984, 33) has already quoted the well-known passage from Thucydides 5. 105: "For of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a law of their nature wherever they can rule, they will". The Minoans could rule and, with Hood, I see no reason, why they should have been different.

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