

For more than 90 years scholars have been puzzling over the still undeciphered script of the Bronze Age Minoan civilization of Crete (ca. 3000-1400 BC). This syllabic writing system, known as Linear A, seems to have been used by the Minoans from the 18th to the 15th centuries BC. Despite such a lengthy period of usage, however, only about 300 Linear A inscriptions have been found so far, and that is the main reason that decipherment has not yet been possible. Only when this enigmatic script is understood will we be in a position to understand exactly who the Minoans were, where they came to Crete from, what other people(s) they were related to, etc. What we do know of Linear A at the moment is very limited: so far just over 80 signs have been catalogued; most come from fragmentary clay tablets and potsherds inscribed with only a couple of signs each, although a few have been found scratched into stone vases. The script had its own numerical system, and seems to have functioned in general as a means of keeping bureaucratic accounts. The script was in widespread use both on Crete itself (used, for example, at Knossos, Phaestos, Hagia Triada, Mallia, Zakros and Chania—all "palatial" Minoan sites) and in neighbouring areas (some tablets have very recently come to

light on the Cycladic island of Thera, at the Bronze Age city we call Akrotiri). There is no evidence so far that Linear A was used for any kind of literature, and indeed it is likely that any songs or poetry written by the Minoans were passed on orally rather than being written down.

Not long after the first Linear A inscriptions were discovered, scholars began to argue that the language represented by Linear A was not unique, but rather somehow related to the contemporary languages of such eastern regions as Syria or Mesopotamia. In more recent years, however, a different theory has been gaining ground, namely,

that Linear A represents one of the contemporary languages of Asia Minor (the modern-day Turkey, also known as Anatolia). But, where some researchers see, for example, a form of the Hittite language, others see the less well known Luwian of Asia Minor as the language behind the signs. Costis Davaras, whose book, *Guide to Cretan Antiquities*, is an essential possession for anyone interested in the island of Crete, has argued that the language of Linear A is "an offshoot of the languages of the Lycians and other ancient peoples of Anatolia" (183). All of this interest in Asia Minor has now been reinforced by new discoveries of Linear A inscriptions at the site of Bronze Age Miletus.

Miletus has long been known to have had commercial relations with Minoan Crete, but not until 1994-1995 did fragments of Minoan Linear A turn up at the site. So far only a few small potsherds are involved, but their existence strengthens an old hypothesis, namely, that Miletus was a Minoan "colony". The crucial bit of evidence here is that these inscribed potsherds are not from vessels imported to

Miletus from Crete, but are made of local clay; this suggests that Minoans were actually present in Miletus, living and working there rather than just "passing through".

If this is so, a parallel can perhaps be found at Akrotiri on Thera. In the excavations going on at that site since 1967, much evidence of Minoan influence has come to light. Even typically "Minoan" architectural features have been identified, and Thera wall-paintings depict images that seem very "Minoan" as well. But, does such evidence convincingly point to Minoan colonization of areas outside of Crete itself? The answer, at the moment, must be "no". There can be no doubt that the highly sophisticated civilization of Minoan Crete did indeed influence neighbouring peoples in the Cycladic islands, on the Greek mainland, and in Asia Minor. Why is it not possible that such neighbours, who admired the brilliant culture of Crete, adopted and/or adapted features from that culture? Moreover, even if we accept the presence of Minoans living and working elsewhere, that alone is not sufficient evidence for Minoan colonization: merchants, for example, might well set themselves up in a nearby region in order to facilitate trade. They would indeed live and work at, say, Miletus, but they would not control the town politically. They would be something like "resident aliens" with limited rights.

Some scholars seem far too eager to paint the Minoans as ruling a far-ranging empire--a Bronze Age version of Great Britain at her imperial height. But, such visions seem premature when we don't even understand who the Minoans actually were yet! It would be far better to focus attention on Linear A and discover the linguistic origin of the Minoan language before attempting to reconstruct the extent of any Minoan "empire". Indeed, if the Minoans did come to Crete from Asia Minor, potsherds with Linear A inscriptions at Miletus might reflect simply an ongoing kinship. As excavations continue at Bronze Age sites throughout the eastern Mediterranean it is possible that additional Linear A inscriptions will be discovered. Once scholars have a "critical mass" of these inscriptions decipherment may come quickly, and one of the most enduring mysteries of the ancient world will be solved.