

The island of Crete has had a long and varied history. Today it is part of the Greek nation, but, long ago, in the Aegean Bronze Age, it had an independent splendour all its own as the home of the advanced Minoan civilization. This civilization was only rediscovered in 1900, but the years since then have seen such intensive study of this culture that we can now piece together a very good picture of what was one of the most sophisticated civilizations of its time.

The Minoan presence on Crete began around 3000 B.C. For a thousand years the Minoans lived a simple life, but around 2000 B.C. a cultural explosion took place, an explosion marked archaeologically by the construction of large palaces at several sites on the island. From this point on, Minoan life was to be "palace-centered", with each palace serving as a political, economic and social centre for its surrounding town and countryside.

By far the most impressive palace was that at Knossos in the northern part of the island. Here, on a small hill, a palace gradually took shape that today, even in ruined condition, still evokes awe from visitors. At its peak of wealth and power in the 1500s B.C., the palace at Knossos was a multi-storeyed structure of at least 1000 rooms, spreading over an area of close to five acres. Its focal point was a large Central Courtyard, around which blocks of rooms were arranged in a rather haphazard fashion.

But Knossos did not stand alone: there were also palaces at Phaestos, Mallia and Zakros, and although these structures were smaller, they nonetheless bear witness to the general prosperity of the entire island. It is now believed that each of these palaces was the home of a "priest-king", that is, a ruler whose secular power was matched by his religious authority as high priest. However, given the unusual prominence of women in Minoan society (as witnessed by wall paintings and other artifacts) some scholars now suggest that we ought to revise our thinking to include the concept of a "priestess-queen". In any event, it seems clear that each palace was the headquarters of a very powerful ruler and his/her advisers. The relationship of these rulers to each other remains problematical, although some historians are convinced that the ruler at Knossos was in some way supreme.

The level of sophistication this culture as a whole achieved is amply attested by the artifacts uncovered in excavations: elaborate wall paintings, colourfully decorated vases (including some storage jars over seven feet tall), gold jewelry, ivory and faience statuettes, and numerous bronze implements. Even the plumbing found in the palaces was without rival in the ancient world, or indeed in the modern world until the 19th century!

Why this prosperous civilization went into a sudden decline around 1450 B.C. is still not clear. Two theories have emerged in recent years: the first argues that Mycenaean Greeks from the mainland invaded the island, destroying the palaces; the second maintains that the eruption of the volcano of Thera to the north of Crete caused an abrupt collapse. Whichever is the case (and in fact both may be correct--i.e., an eruption followed by an invasion), the Minoan world crumbled, and the glories of Crete began their long descent into oblivion.