

The mysteries of Knossos

- snake goddess
- ceramic pots
- bath tub
- WC
- stonelamp
- spiral pattern



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Different interpretation of the findings from the Cretan-Minoan culture

1. Introduction

The Bronze Age inhabitants of Crete still impress us today with their excursions across the Mediterranean on rowboats with mast and sail. Their voyages brought them into contact with the local civilizations, the trade brought them prosperity. Over one hundred years of excavations on Crete have brought to light a wealth of finds from this period. The findings proved to be pieces of a puzzle with large gaps that were filled only by later discoveries. Therefore previous interpretations require a review.

2. Location

The island of Crete in the eastern Mediterranean Sea lies on the southern edge of the Eurasian tectonic plate facing the African plate. The movement of the two plates against one another causes earthquakes, which from a certain strength can cause the flooding of the Cretan coast.

3. History

According to present knowledge Crete was settled between 6000-4000 BC. Initially this was due to coastal fishing, later to agriculture on the alluvial land of the rivers. Since 2000 BC there had been seafaring rowing boats with mast and sail. With these the commercial shipping began to the islands of the Aegean, the Greek mainland, the copper island Cyprus and to Ugarit (today: Syria) on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean as well as to Anatolia and Egypt. Crete became the naval power of the eastern Mediterranean. Trade led to the prosperity of the coastal region with a rapidly growing population. Since 1900 BC commercial centers could be found near palatial buildings.

3.1 Downfall

Earthquakes at intervals of over a hundred years repeatedly caused severe damage to towns and Palaces. The earthquake in 1450 BC devastated the coastal region and wiped out its inhabitants. The old Cretan civilization thus spans only 450 years. Until recently it was assumed that the volcanic eruption of Thera on Santorini island 120 km north of Crete had been the cause. Meanwhile, an earthquake with a magnitude of 9 and the subsequent tidal wave were considered a likely cause, similar for example to the disaster in northern Japan in March 2011.

What remained of the Cretan population kept within the heartland. The coastal area was reinhabited again by people from the Greek mainland. The immigrating Achaeans took over the Cretan merchant shipping and rebuilt the palaces. This new civilization ended in 1100 BC due to the takeover by the Dorians.

3.2 Time Scale

The excavators assumed that their findings could be explained by the tales and poems of ancient Greece. The heroes depicted therein were assumed as contemporaries of the Mycenaean civilization on mainland Greece or the Minoan civilization on Crete. Heinrich Schliemann found at Mycenae what he believed to be the "Treasury of Atreus," a hero of the Iliad. However, Mycenae is estimated to have happened around 1400 BC and Homer's Iliad around 700 BC, this would mean that there are 700 years that lie between the two. Similarly, Arthur Evans believed that he has found in the Cretan Knossos the palace of King Minos, known from the legend of the Minotaur, furthermore the grandson of King Minos also appears in the Iliad. If we imagine the origin of the legend in 900 BC and the ruin of the Cretan-Minoan civilization in 1450 BC, there are well over 500 years in between, which would mean that the ancient Greeks cannot have been eyewitnesses.

4. Cult of the dead

This describes the worship of deceased loved ones by their families. During that period in Egypt well-off families would have their dead made into lifelike mummies. The mummies were placed in dead towns on the west bank of the Nile and thus separated from the world of the living. At intervals wine or animal blood was cast to the mummy. The mummy was erected regularly and honored with funeral rites. In Syria, however, commemorations were celebrated with a dinner near the mummy. Then after a longer period of time the mummy was placed in a sarcophagus. As a seafaring and trading people, the Cretans came in contact with the cultures of their trading partners. They were able to take over their practices.

5. Testimonies

The British scientist Sir Arthur Evans recognized seal stones for marking and protecting goods, found in Crete, as evidence of early Cretan civilization. Some seal stones bear careful engraved pictures of rowing boats with sails. The dwellings of the ancient Cretans were destroyed in the downfall. However in the palace of Knossos, the excavators found pottery plates, which show such dwellings: The houses have only one door on the ground floor, windows in the two upper floors and a flat roof. In other findings, the palaces are a crucial source of information. The palaces are five huge buildings from between 1100 and 1900 BC, they can be found inland from the population centers on Crete. These are

Knossos near Iraklion on the North Coast
 Malia 30 km east of Knossos
 Kato Zakros on the east coast
 Phaistos and nearby Agia Triada on the south coast.

The palaces are aligned north to south with a rotation of about 15 degrees clockwise. The buildings surround a large rectangular space of about 30x60 m². Together, the palaces have massive protecting walls, but the rooms are surprisingly small-scaled. One would think of it more like a beehive than a palace. Therefore, the assumption that the palaces had been the headquarter of a local ruler, requires critical consideration. In the repeatedly severe earthquakes during the time of ancient Crete, palaces were heavily damaged, but then built up even more magnificently. The palaces had already been robbed in ancient times, thus, what the archaeologists

found in the palaces was mostly liturgical objects for which the robbers had no use for. Objects found are therefore only a remainder, which can lead to misinterpretations. Most of these finds are now in the Archaeological Museum of Iraklion accessible to experts and the public.

6. Knossos

The palace of Knossos was excavated by Arthur Evans. His life work was to explore its system. Of the five palaces found on Crete, Knossos is the largest, most magnificent and best preserved. It consists of a main building of several storeys on a low hill and some free-standing houses. The interior walls are lined with panels of natural gypsum (alabaster). So the rooms are brightened, moreover, in contrast to pure stone, the climate in the room is compensated. The walls are painted with many well-preserved frescoes.

6.1 Ceramic jugs

Knossos, like the other palaces, contains hundreds of man-sized ceramic jugs (pithoi), all empty, situated partly in inaccessible places. Jugs of this size, found in an antique farmhouse on an olive press, were identified as oil jugs. As a decoration they have simple circular lines. Similar large jars found in graves of this period still contained human bones. These and the jugs in the palaces show snake motifs or spiral pattern. The opinion that the jugs in the palaces are food containers, is to be questioned. They are more likely mummy sarcophagi or memorial shrines for empty graves.

6.2 King Thrones

At Knossos, the excavators found two limestone bases with seat backs, that Evans believed to be the thrones of King Minos. One throne is placed between two stone benches in a ground floor area of 6x7 m, near the square courtyard. The other throne is sandwiched by two columns in the Hall of the Double Axes. Both thrones have the dimensions of a chair, though with a depression of the seat. The thrones, however, could also be funeral chairs for the mummy, sitting on the depression and attached with straps on the back side.

6.3 Double Axe

Recurring images of a double axe led Evans to believe that this was the realm of the double axe. From the Greek "labrys" meaning double axe, he derived the name "labyrinth" meaning maze, known from the legend of the Minotaur. On the other hand, the double axe was found too on a sarcophagus from the palace of Agia Triada. This shows the sacrifice of a bull, whose blood is being prepared for a libation. Which means, in this case, it would be a symbol of the cult of the dead.

6.4 Figure of the bull

The same applies for the representation of bulls in the frescos in Knossos and the shape of the roof ledge as a series of stone bull horns. Here, a special bull cult was adopted. Another interpretation would be respect for the animal to be sacrificed, the stone ledge being a replica of earlier real bull horns.

6.5 Theater-fresco

Among the debris parts of a large-scale fresco were found: Beautifully decorated dancing women, with men recognizing them. This apparently depicts a theatre show in the square courtyard. It could also be a marriage market. What is missing is the representation of a king or priest and his entourage. Either there was none in Knossos, or it is not on the representation of the process, whether for religious reasons, or that it is not represented on the preserved parts of the fresco.

6.6 Bath tub

In a low-lying room at Knossos, Evans found a ceramic tub, about 1.5 meters long with an opening at the bottom. Evans assumed that this was a bath tub, the apartment containing it magnificently painted with a spiral pattern he named "Queens bathroom". However, the room has no water outlet. It seems obvious that the tub was a mummy sarcophagus. Evans maintained his interpretation, though he recognized the similarity with proven sarcophagi.

6.7 Water Closet

A room adjacent to the chamber where the ceramic tub was found contains an open channel leading to the outside. In accordance with the interpretation of the ceramic vessel as a bathtub, Evans believed the channel to be a toilet, including a flush, an early WC. In an installation of the cult of the dead, however, the channel would likely have been used during the preparation of a mummy to guide the excess liquid outside and during the cleaning of the room and equipment after use.

6.8 Drink dispensers

As an offering to a dead person, animal blood or wine is poured before his grave. This was done for example in Egypt on knee-high stone pillars, sometimes directly into a gutter in front of the sarcophagus. The libation is poured from a can, but often from a special drink dispenser (Rhyton). Frescoes at Knossos show young men, wearing a Rhyton in the form of a pointed cone. The offering flows out through the tip when the lower opening is released. Furthermore, drink dispensers in size and shape of bull heads as carefully hollowed-out stones have been found at Knossos, as well as in the other palaces,. If they are held vertically, according to the filling of wine or blood, the liquid flows out between the stone teeth of the bull's head. Therefore, it is to be assumed, they would not be used as drink dispensers, for example, at a banquet.

6.9 Stone lamp

In the "Inner Sanctuary" at Knossos, a small stone pillar was found, 50cm high and 10cm in diameter, above and below thickened to roughly 20cm. The top of the column is engraved about 2cm deep. It was regarded as an oil lamp. However, like in Egypt, it may be a stand with drip tray for libations.

6.10 Spiral pattern

Such patterns are found repeatedly on the walls at Knossos. For a maritime nation, it is obvious that spiral patterns represent the wave crests of the sea. But for an interpretation, it is important to consider the location of the spiral patterns directly on

the wall next to a sarcophagus. If we follow a band, we see it is ending in a small vortex.

At the core of the vortex a new band starts, which ends in the next vortex. Apparently this represents the generations: the young adult leaves his parents' house and starts a family. The resulting children then grow up there under the protection of their parents. When they are grown, they leave the parental home and in turn found a new family. The parents stay behind. The core of the vortex would be birth of children and subsequent death of their parents. This central area is often covered by a rosette.

6.11 Snake Goddess

In Knossos, Evans found two 30 cm ceramic statues that both carry snakes. The slightly smaller one holds in her hands two small writhing snakes. The figure was missing the front torso and face, both were replaced. I.e. The bare breasts and expressive face are from the restorer. In addition to the statues, a small ceramic cat was found in the rubble. It was mounted on top of the head of the smaller statue. The other statue holds snakes as thick as arms in her hands that wrap themselves around her arms and belt. Similar snake motives are also found as colored reliefs on the large jugs. Meaning that they were formed on the surface of the container during its production.

During this time in Egypt, we also find snake representations: Statues and reliefs of Pharaohs wear headbands of a cobra with its hood expanded. Here snakes are signs of a deterrent force: Do not touch! So instead of assuming a particular snake cult in Knossos, a different interpretation presents itself: The snakes admonish the quiet of the dead. "We have gathered here to lay our father to rest in his new existence ... May he be undisturbed by humans and animals. No sinner may lay a hand upon him, no rodents trouble him!". This is where the cat fits into the picture.

6.12 Syllable Scripts

Evans found ceramic tablets at Knossos covered with the characters of a syllabary. The earlier work he called "Linear A", the younger "Linear B". As was later revealed, "Linear B" is written in Greek. "Linear B" tablets were also found in the other three palaces excluded Kato Zakros. They were also found in the centers of the Mycenaean civilization on the Greek mainland. The final decoding was completed just about 10 years ago. The tablets contain lists of duties, personnel and inventory of each palace. They all were engraved after the occupation of Crete by the Achaeans. In the inventory ritual objects predominate. In contrast to this the tablets with "Linear A" to the time are not translated. They are probably written in the language of the ancient Cretans, presumably with the same content as the "Linear B" tablets.

7. Malia

The palace of Malia was excavated by a French archaeological team. The layout corresponds to that of Knossos. Unlike Knossos, Malia was not restored, making it more accessible for research. Well preserved are only walls, mainly knee high.

7.1 Round shafts

In the western part of the Palace of Malia walled round shafts were found, several meters in diameter and often with a central pillar. The circular shafts were interpreted either as a grain silo or a cistern. However, grain storage above ground is to be preferred. The grain is better protected against mice, it remains dry and does not germinate. In interpretations that they are cisterns, it is to be noticed that they are now dry and there is no mark from a former water level. On the Greek mainland, such shafts contained sometimes preciously decorated human skeletons. In Greek they are interpreted as circular tombs.

8. Kato Zakros

After its destruction in 1450 BC, Kato Zakros was not rebuilt. Therefore it has survived in its original state of the Minoan Crete. The Kato Zakros palace was the last to be discovered. Nikolaos Platon first began the systematic excavations with a team of archaeologists 50 years ago.

8.1 Round Shaft

In Kato Zakros, like in Malia is a large circular shaft, which is filled to the top with water. The shaft is therefore seen as ritualistic bath. This is true only with no change in sea level in respect to the shaft since its construction around 1500 BC. However, the bottom of the Mediterranean sea at this time had raised in some places and lowered in others. Then there is Ostia Antica, the port of Rome during the Empire which now lies inland. In the eastern Mediterranean, the sea floor lowered in some places on the north coast of Crete, as well as west of Alexandria. Pedestrian areas in the harbor from that time are now several meters underwater. If this is the case in the area of Kato Zakros, the pit would have been dry when it was built. Similar circular pits on the Greek mainland are interpreted as a circular tombs.

8.2 Linear A Tablets

Unlike to Knossos, in Kato Zakros the archeologists found only tablets in Linear A. This fits to the original state of the palace.

9. Phaistos

This palace on the south coast was destroyed in 1650 BC, a new construction abandoned, unfinished. It was rebuilt in Agia Triada with a paved path between the two constructions. A group of Italian archaeologists supervised the excavation.

9.1 The Phaistos Discus

In Phaistos a round clay disk was found, with hieroglyphs in the form of a spiral embossed on both sides. It is believed that hieroglyphs were older than the syllabic signs of Linear A, they are also not deciphered. A similar discus was found in Egypt with Egyptian hieroglyphs on it, which have been deciphered. It was a letter from a mother to her dead son.

9.2 Ceramic Stool

In Phaistos a round ceramic stool with a waist is shown, diameter of 40 cm, height 50 cm. It stands next to a human-sized ceramic container (Pithos, see section 6.1).

If, for example in 1500 BC a cretan palace servant stood on the stool, he could easily remove food from the container.

Only 3 kilometers from Phaistos in Kamilari, archaeologists found a grave chamber containing a postcard-sized reproduction of the grave chamber itself. In which people sit at such stools with small objects in their hand. If it is food, it shows a replica of a meal in the presence of the deceased. The stool would be a table. A liturgical purpose can be seen from its tapering side: Such tapering is generally interpreted as an indication of an altar.

10. Agia Triada

The palace was built around 1600 BC and destroyed in 1450 BC.

10.1 The Sarcophagus of Agia Triada

The sarcophagus of painted pottery shaped as a bed, shows the sacrifice of a bull with the production of the libation on one of the long sides. The other long side shows the honoring of the deceased as a mummy. Double axes, cornice with bull horns and spiral patterns are shown. The foot end shows the deceased next to a priest standing in a two wheeled cart pulled by a horse, the head end shows the cart being pulled by two mythical (Griffins) creatures.

11. Lack of evidence

The circular shafts next to the palaces were, unlike the circular tombs on the Greek mainland, empty upon discovery. The jars in the palaces, unlike the similar pitchers in Cretan grave chambers, were also empty. But differing to a local subterranean tomb, the palaces can be seen from a large distance. Here robbers expect rich booty. It is well known, that the palaces were looted in ancient times. We know from Egypt that the pyramids, with their preciously decorated grave chambers, were robbed in the Pharaonic period. Even the chamber of Tutanchamun, discovered in 1922 in the Valley of the Kings, shows signs of forced entry. A stone jar from Kato Zakros shows how zealous the robbers were in Crete. Originally the jar was covered with gold leaf. Of this, only particles remain. The rest was scraped off. Here, in the comparison of interpretations, is required a circumstantial evidence.

12. Result

Evans saw in Knossos the palace of an ancient Cretan king. In accordance, he interpreted the findings as an inventory of a residential palace. The excavators of the other palaces used the work Evans's work and his interpretations. Today, the findings can be assessed as a whole inventory, allowing a better overview. It is possible that today's scientists may result a differing interpretation.

13. Representatives of other opinions

The culture philosopher Oswald Spengler, author of "The decline of the West" wrote in 1935: "The supposed king Minos on his throne, was only a mummy."

In 1969 the geologist Hans Georg Wunderlich doubts in an essay, that the palaces were residences of livings In 1972 he writes the book "The secret of Crete". Wunderlich was criticized heavily, but none of the critics could disprove him.

The historian Tassilo Schmitt studied the "Linear B" tablets (6.12) with the duties to the respective palaces. According to his essay of 2009 "No king in the palace", at the points on the tablets where the word "king" would be expected, the word "Wanax" is used, the expression for a benevolent god of success.

14. Conclusion

In the time of the antic Crete, like today, the world of the living was separated from the world of the dead. If the cult of the dead was proven to have happened, the palace cannot have been a residence for the living. Initially this applies to the palace of Agia Triada with its sarcophagus (10.1). This applies to palaces, where a Rhyton is found, be it a depiction or a find (6.8). It is represented in Knossos on a wall painting of Rhyton carriers with a conical Rhyton. Likewise, at Knossos, a Rhyton in the form of a bull's head was found. A similar bull's head Rhyton was also found in Phaistos and Kato Zakros.

15. Function of the palaces

For a simple cemetery the palaces capacity was too low: The population centers on the coast contained about 50,000 residents each, with about 1,000 deaths per year. The palaces contained only 200-500 clay jars say: Sarcophagi. The palaces had an operating period of 200-500 years, which would mean one new life-like mummy a year with later entombment. Only a thousandth of the deceased would be destined for the palace.

The small-scale distribution of the rooms speaks for liturgical purposes in honoring the deceased. The large courtyard leaves space for other activities: Sacrificial animals, after being bled would probably have been grilled and shared out to eat. That would be a meal for 500 participants.

Commemorations and theatrical performances would speak for a cultural center. On the "Linear B" tablets from Knossos, maintenance of richly decorated chariots are listed. These chariots are not suitable for acts of war in the mountainous terrain. If we consider the representation on the Sarcophagus of Agia Triada (10.1), parades would be conceivable.