

The Minoan Civilization: An Empire of Unknowns

What language did the Minoans speak? *Unknown*. How did Minoans worship? *Unknown*. Were the Minoans even a unified empire? *Unknown*. How did the Minoan civilization come to an end? *Unknown*. The Minoan civilization of the Bronze Age Aegean is dominated by unknowns. People were completely oblivious to their existence outside of Greek myths until Sir Arthur Evans began excavating the palace of Knossos in Crete in 1900. There have been many breakthroughs during the past century in our understanding of these people, but it is only the tip of the iceberg. The Minoans were one of the most impressive empires of their time, but because of the sheer lack of written and physical evidence, much of this empire remains a mystery.

The Minoans were undoubtedly one of the most impressive Bronze Age civilizations due to their dominance in the eastern Mediterranean, great technological advances, and progressive society. The Minoans' ancestors were likely neolithic farmers who arrived from Europe or Anatolia during the fourth millennium BCE.¹ These first Cretan settlers created coastal towns between 3000 and 1800 BCE; a class of professional craftsmen grew, making goods such as pottery.² They also became extremely skilled sailors known for their control of the sea and traded as far as Greece, Egypt, Cyprus, and the Levant. They exported goods such as olive oil, pottery, and timber, and in return received materials such as gold and ivory. Around 1800 BCE, they began forging bronze, and in turn became experts at metalwork and stone masonry. They began constructing large palaces at Knossos, Phaistos, and Malia, among others; these appear to have been administrative and religious centers and were somewhat unified, though different

¹ Jarrett A. Lobell, 2015, "The Minoans of Crete," *Archaeology* 68 (3): 28–35.

² Leonard Cottrell, 1971, *The Mystery of the Minoan Civilization*, (New York and Cleveland: The World Publishing Company), 69.

regions likely retained a sense of autonomy.³ They also made great technological advances: they created the world's first indoor plumbing system, which was lost after their collapse; they constructed buildings in a way that made them much more resistant to earthquakes; they even created the first known writing systems in the Aegean.⁴ Along with being technologically advanced for their time, the Minoans' society was much more progressive than those succeeding it. Women appear to have been equals to men and they worshipped a female goddess. Artifacts and paintings mainly depict scenes from nature, and the fact that palaces lacked defensive walls implies they were a peaceful society.⁵ All of this paints a picture of a very unique society; however, so much is still unknown.

Although the Minoans created some of the earliest known forms of writing, the fact that there are so few surviving samples and researchers are unable to decipher the ones they do have has ultimately led to more questions than answers. There are three known forms of writing found from the Minoan Period in Crete: Cretan Hieroglyphs, Linear A, and Linear B, with Linear B being the only one currently understood. Cretan Hieroglyphs are by far the most elusive, with only 300 surviving inscriptions. Some scholars have theorized that the language is ornamental and much less about conveying information, but there are too few samples to know.⁶ There are more samples of Linear A, but still a very limited amount; according to Dr. Phillipa Steele, "if we fill a 8 1/2 × 11 inch sheet of paper with 1 inch margins, all extant Linear A would take up [a little over 2] pages."⁷ It appears to have been the Minoans' primary writing system and has been

³ Lobell.

⁴ John F. Wilson, 2020, "Flowering of Minoan Civilization," *Salem Press Encyclopedia*.

⁵ Wilson

⁶ Philippa M Steele, 2017, *Understanding Relations Between Scripts : The Aegean Writing Systems*, (Oxford: Oxbow Books).

⁷Steele, 96.

found throughout the Aegean. Linear B was a form of Linear A adopted by the Mycenaeans; in fact, “sometimes the relationship is so close that in short or fragmentary texts it is very difficult to decide, on the basis of the sign shapes alone, whether we are dealing with a Linear A or Linear B document.”⁸ The biggest difference between the two is that Linear B has been deciphered, mostly because it was written in an early form of Greek. Linear A, however, is written in an unknown “Minoan” language, meaning even if the meaning of every symbol was known, it still could not be read. All known tablets also record purely administrative information, implying that writing was not used by common people and gives little insight into everyday life. Even with the limited sample size, though, it is very lucky that this many survived in the first place: the Linear Scripts were meant for writing on papyrus or soft clay, but never meant to last; the few samples that are around today were accidentally baked in fires and survived for only this reason.⁹

Along with a lack of written accounts, much of the physical evidence has been lost either to natural causes or other unknown factors. One big problem encountered by archaeologists is that the Minoans sometimes used gypsum for building, which dissolves when exposed to rain. Consequently, many ruins have greatly deteriorated.¹⁰ It appears that the palaces on Crete were destroyed by an earthquake in 1700 BCE and were then rebuilt to an even grander scale. In 1400 BCE, though, they were destroyed again and never rebuilt. There is evidence of fires, but the cause of the destruction is still unknown. It is possible that the Mycenaeans invaded, but there is no evidence of fighting. The Mycenaeans also appear to have been peacefully occupying Knossos since 1450 BCE.¹¹ There could have been civil unrest and a revolution, but this is also

⁸ Steele, 94.

⁹ H. E. L. Mellersh, 1994, *The Destruction of Knossos: The Rise and Fall of Minoan Crete*, (New York: Weybright and Talley), 127.

¹⁰ Cottrell, 73.

¹¹ Thomas T. Lewis, 2020, “Mycenaean Greece,” *Salem Press Encyclopedia*.

unlikely considering the society seemed peaceful and prosperous based on what has been discovered. It is possible another earthquake destroyed the palaces, but an earthquake would not cause massive fires to break out.¹² The destruction of the palaces in Crete may be a mystery, but the cause of another Minoan disaster is not: a massive volcanic eruption.

The Thera eruption was responsible for the destruction of an important Minoan trading center, and possibly led directly to the end of the Minoan civilization. The city of Akrotiri on the island of Thera (now Santorini) was a profitable coastal colony; however, it was sitting on an active volcano. When Thera erupted, Akrotiri was hit with pyroclastic flows and boulders up to 3 meters in diameter, and subsequently buried in ash up to 55 meters deep.¹³ The eruption likely caused tidal waves, ash, and earthquakes to hit Crete. The volcano itself was three times larger than Krakatoa, which caused 100 foot tall tidal waves when it exploded in 1883. It was so extreme that it was possibly the inspiration for Plato's description of Atlantis, the "powerful island state...swallowed up by the sea."¹⁴ The issue with the Thera eruption, though, is the date. It was originally placed at around 1525 BCE using archaeological evidence from Egypt, but more recent dating techniques using tree rings and ice cores have placed it between 1645 and 1615 BCE. If the true date is closer to 1500 BCE, it may have played a major role in weakening the Minoans enough for the Mycenaeans to take control of their empire. If it was earlier, though, it was likely much less consequential.¹⁵ Archaeologists and scientists are still split over the date, and it remains yet another mystery that holds clues to the true nature of the Minoan civilization.

¹² Mellersh, 121.

¹³ Klairē Palyvou, 2005, *Akrotiri, Thera : An Architecture of Affluence 3,500 Years Old*, Philadelphia: INSTAP Academic Press [Institute for Aegean Prehistory], 9.

¹⁴ Cottrell, 112.

¹⁵ Palyvou, 10.

Researchers can continue to make educated guesses, but without significant further discoveries the Minoan civilization will likely remain shrouded in mystery. From the lack of surviving writing to the physical destruction of so many important archaeological sites, it almost seems like the Minoans want their secrets to stay hidden. Many people, even today, are unaware of their existence. What is known, though, is that the Minoans were one of the most influential empires of their time: they gave the Mycenaeans the ideas for their writing and architecture, created a vast trade network, and repeatedly appeared in Greek mythology. The true nature of the Minoans may never be understood, but at the very least they should be recognized for their foundational role in shaping the civilizations of the Bronze Age.

Bibliography

- Cottrell, Leonard. *The Mystery of the Minoan Civilization*. New York and Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1971.
- Gary A. Rendsburg. 1996. "“Someone Will Succeed in Deciphering Minoan’: Cyrus H. Gordon and Minoan Linear A.” *The Biblical Archaeologist* Vol. 59, No. 1 (Mar., 1996). JStor.
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.10.2307.3210534&site=eds-live&custid=s8826645>.
- Lewis, Thomas T. 2020. "Mycenaean Greece." *Salem Press Encyclopedia*.
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=ers&AN=96411510&site=eds-live&custid=s8826645>.
- Lobell, Jarrett A. 2015. "The Minoans of Crete." *Archaeology* Vol. 68, Issue 3.
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=khh&AN=102813922&site=eds-live&custid=s8826645>.
- Mellersh, H. E. L. *The Destruction of Knossos: The Rise and Fall of Minoan Crete*. New York: Weybright and Talley, 1994.
- Palyvou, Klairē. *Akrotiri, Thera : An Architecture of Affluence 3,500 Years Old. Prehistory Monographs*. Philadelphia: INSTAP Academic Press [Institute for Aegean Prehistory]. 2005.
http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=nlebk&AN=603383&site=ehost-live&custid=s8826645&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_14.
- Steele, Philippa M. 2017. "Understanding Relations Between Scripts : The Aegean Writing Systems." *Oxford: Oxbow Books*.
http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=nlebk&AN=1554900&site=eds-live&custid=s8826645&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_v.
- Wilson, John F. 2020. "Flowering of Minoan Civilization." *Salem Press Encyclopedia*.
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=ers&AN=87323768&site=eds-live&custid=s8826645>.