



... GUIDE TO ...

ANCIENT AEGEAN ART

Smarthistory guide to Ancient Aegean Art

**THE ART OF THE CYCLADIC ISLANDS, THE MINOANS
(ON CRETE), AND THE MYCENAEANS (ON THE GREEK
MAINLAND).**

DR. SENTA GERMAN, DR. BETH HARRIS, AND DR. STEVEN ZUCKER



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Map



In the region of the Aegean Sea during the bronze age there were three distinct but interacting cultures: Cycladic (in the chain of islands called the Cyclades), Minoan (on the island of Crete), and Mycenaen (on the Greek mainland).

PART I

Cycladic

1. Male Harp Player from Keros

A CONVERSATION

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens.



Male Harp Player from Keros, c. 2600-2300 B.C.E., Early Cycladic period, marble, 22.5 cm high (National Archaeological Museum, Athens) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: We're in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, and we're looking at a small sculpture of a man seated on a chair, playing a harp. But what makes this a remarkable object is that it's probably about 5,000 years old.

Beth: There are only about 10 of these that have been discovered in the Cycladic Islands in the South Aegean.

Steven: Mostly what we've found are tall, thin, highly abstracted female figures, and these have mostly been found in graves.

Beth: They were produced over hundreds and hundreds of years, of various sizes.

Steven: We don't know a lot about these sculptures, and the reason for that is that perhaps only 10% of these figures have been recovered by modern archaeologists, in controlled conditions. The vast majority of these sculptures, male and female, have come to light on the art market. That is, somebody has gone in and unearthed them in order to sell them. The result is we have no scientific archaeological records

of where they were found, at what level they were found, so the chronology, etc., is almost impossible.

Beth: Right. We don't know what they were found with. We don't know anything about the context of the find, and in fact we'll never know, because that knowledge is just permanently lost. So not only do we have a problem with the archaeological record, but we also have a problem because these were so popular in the early twentieth century. They were discovered by modern artists, and therefore we think many of them may have been created as forgeries.

Steven: So the art market, we think, is awash with authentic objects that have been unearthed illegally, as well as forgeries, that is, objects that have been produced in the modern world, in order to look as if they were ancient. When we look at these objects, we can see why the modern artists fell in love with these. There's a kind of simplicity. We know that Brancusi responded to these. We know that Modigliani responded to these. We know that Picasso loved these objects.



Male Harp Player from Keros, c. 2600-2300 B.C.E., Early Cycladic period, marble, 22.5 cm high (National Archaeological Museum, Athens) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: They're highly abstract, and they look that way to us in a way that is not really true to what they originally looked like. We know that areas of the sculptures were painted with very bright colors, and so this pristine white marble abstract form, that we so appreciate in the modern era, is not what the people of Crete were producing.



Male Harp Player from Keros, c. 2600-2300 B.C.E., Early Cycladic period, marble, 22.5 cm high (National Archaeological Museum, Athens) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: And look at the differences between the male and female figures. The male figures are rounded. The furniture is rounded. It's tubular. The figure's head is back, as if perhaps he's singing, but of course we don't know. There is a little projection from that harp, which we think may be the head of a bird, perhaps a swan. Again, we really don't know. Whereas, the female figures are more frontal, more planar, and they are incised in a way that accentuates the geometry of their bodies.

Beth: Not only are the female figures abstract, but they're also very compact. The limbs are folded in. There's no space between the arms and the torso. There's no space between the legs. The knees are just slightly bent. There's no real sense of movement.

Steven: It is a closed composition that emphasizes the overall contour of the figures. Look at the shield-like shape of the face and the way that the nose projects. They're beautiful without eyes, but there were painted eyes. There was a painted mouth. We initially see these as flat, but when we spend a moment looking at them, we see that the head is at one angle, the neck at another. Then we have the more complicated

surface of the torso. Then it seems as if the thighs project outward, and the shins inward again, and then of course, we have the reverse with the feet, and so there is this almost slight accordion-like folding of the body.

Beth: With later Greek sculptures, we might think about kouroi figures from the seventh century, much later and on the Greek mainland; there, we see male figures nude and female figures clothed. And here, these female figures are all nude. That has led some art historians and archaeologists to speculate that maybe these are somehow related to neolithic fertility goddesses.

Steven: But the key word here is speculate, because we have no written records. All we have is the object itself. They have been stripped of all of their original cultural meaning, and in some ways that is also a very modernist idea, that we can appreciate the aesthetics, the object itself, unencumbered by what their real meaning was.

[Watch the video.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7C7do85sfXA) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7C7do85sfXA>>

2. Frescoes from Akrotiri, Thera

A CONVERSATION

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Frescoes from Akrotiri, on the Cycladic island Thera (Santorini), Greece, 16th century B.C.E., Aegean Bronze Age (National Archaeological Museum, Athens) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

Steven: The Aegean Bronze Age is made up of three cultures. On the mainland and slightly later, the Mycenaean. On the large island of Crete to the east, you have the Minoan culture. And then, you have

a chain of islands called the Cyclades. And on an island that in the ancient world was called Thera, we found what seems to be an entire city frozen in time.

Beth: Today the island is known as Santorini. We might be better off saying what's left of the island because in the seventeenth century,

most archaeologists agree, there was a volcanic eruption that basically blew open the middle of the island.

Steven: Some geologists think that this eruption was perhaps the largest volcanic eruption on the entire earth in the last 5,000 years.

Beth: As a result, just like in Pompeii, a town on the island of Santorini or ancient Thera, Akrotiri, was preserved under layers of volcanic ash and pumice.

Steven: But unlike Pompeii, the site was not discovered before modern archaeological techniques had developed and so whereas in Pompeii there was extensive damage by people who were removing art as trophies, the site at Thera is in the process of being systematically studied and uncovered. It's interesting because archaeologists think that the earliest people in Akrotiri did not have much relationship with either Mycenae or with the Minoans on Crete. But that seems to have changed later so much so that some art historians think that Akrotiri became a settlement that was directly related and perhaps directly under the control of the Minoans.



Detail of Spring, Frescoes from Akrotiri, on the Cycladic island Thera (Santorini), Greece, 16th century B.C.E., Aegean Bronze Age (National Archaeological Museum, Athens) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: And we also know that they traded with the Mycenaeans. So we shouldn't imagine these as very separate cultures.

Steven: What we found are a series of houses of prosperous inhabitants. We haven't found palaces but we have found structures that have more than one story. And we've also found walls covered with fresco.

Beth: We're looking at a series of frescoes. All of them unusual in their subject matter.

Steven: Probably the most outstanding feature of the frescoes that we've found, and these are true frescoes, that is, this is wet painting over a fine layer of plaster over a rougher layer of plaster, over straw. But probably the most interesting feature is that these provide for us the very earliest examples of landscape painting.

Beth: It's hard to call them landscape painting in the way that we might think about it, with fields and trees and sky, because it's very abstracted, very stylized. We see a lot of curvilinear forms standing for the rocks. We see blues and reds and yellows. These are colors that were very commonly used in their fresco painting.

Steven: And then we see again abstracted renderings of lilies, of flowering plants, that decorate the tops of those rocks as well as representations of swallows cavorting around the flowers.

Beth: There's a shelf and above that the room is painted red and so, we don't have a sense of a blue sky. The backgrounds were consistently white. Now it's important as we look at this to distinguish between the in-painting that the museum has done for us to give us a sense of the whole room, versus the ancient fresco.

Steven: Modern conservation techniques seek to stabilize and to give us a sense of what the image would have looked like without trying to restore the object to its original state. This is probably most clear, not in this so-called Spring Room, but rather in another fresco known as The Boxing Boys.

Beth: And in the same room we see a pair of antelopes.



Boxing Boys, Building Beta, Beta room 1, south wall from Akrotiri, Thera (Santorini), Greece, 16th century B.C.E. (National Archaeological Museum, Athens) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Antelopes, Building Beta, Beta room 1, west wall from Akrotiri, Thera (Santorini), Greece, 16th century B.C.E. (National Archaeological Museum, Athens) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: The antelopes are almost calligraphic. There is this beautiful serpentine line. I'm not seeing any straight lines throughout this entire wall. And there's this feeling of grace in the representation of these animals.

Beth: We have to be cautious about reading into it too much because to us there's a sense of almost the pleasure of nature in the scene of animals and also in the Spring fresco, where we can almost sense a warm day, of flowers blowing in the wind, a sense of colors being intensified by the sunlight, of birds in the air, the pleasures of a spring day. But maybe this had some kind of ritual significance. Maybe it just is a beautiful spring day. It's impossible for us to know.

Steven: To our modern eyes, it feels whimsical, it feels like it is all about pleasure. It's about bringing the exterior world inside. But those are to eyes that have grown up in the twenty-first century, not eyes that grew up in 1700 B.C.E.

Beth: With the Boxing Boys, we can clearly see that very little remained from the ancient fresco, but enough to give us a sense of

a very unusual composition of two boys who have boxing mitts on, whose heads are shaven except for pony tails in the front and back of their heads.

Steven: You can see that they're wearing belts. They seem to be nude otherwise, except for their boxing gloves, and I see some traces of jewelry around the upper arm and the neck of the figure on the left.

Beth: A lot of the frescoes that were found at Akrotiri seem to have ritual function. Many seem to be related to religious rituals or rites related to cults around goddesses. But it's impossible for us to understand the iconography and the meaning of those frescoes.

Steven: We have almost no written records from the Bronze Age and the Aegean and absolutely none from the Cyclades. And so, what we're forced to look at are simply the physical remains of the architecture, of the vessels that have been found as well as these extraordinary frescoes.

[Watch the video.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gb7g9w6fxo) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gb7g9w6fxo>>



Boxing Boys, Building Beta, Beta room 1, south wall from Akrotiri, Thera (Santorini), Greece, 16th century B.C.E. (National Archaeological Museum, Athens) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

PART II

Minoan

3. The Palace at Knossos (Crete)

Dr. Senta German



The archaeological site at Knossos, with restored rooms in the background, Crete (photo: Jebulon, public domain)

Restoration versus conservation

What happens to an archaeological site after the archaeologist's work is completed? Should the site (or parts of it) be restored to what we believe (based on evidence) it once looked like? Or should the site be protected through conservation and left as is? (There's a key difference between the terms 'restoration' and 'conservation.' Restoration generally involves returning a site, or an object, to an earlier state, often through the use of non-original material. Ideally, all added material is detectable and treatments are reversible. Conservation, on the other hand, is a scientific discipline that seeks to preserve cultural heritage for the future and can involve cleaning and repairing. Here, again ideally, repairs are visible, but not distracting to the viewer.) A visit to an unrestored archaeological site can be uninspiring—even the most lavish ancient sites can appear to be piles of unorganized stones framed by broken columns and other fragments. And while modern conservation principles insist on the reversibility of any treatment (in case better treatments are discovered in the future), in the past, conservators didn't have the resources or science that is available today.

Knossos

The archaeological site of Knossos (on the island of Crete)—traditionally called a palace—is the second most popular tourist attraction in all of Greece (after the Acropolis in Athens), hosting hundreds of thousands of tourists a year. But its primary attraction is

not so much the authentic Bronze Age remains (which are more than three thousand years old) but rather the extensive early twentieth-century restorations installed by the site's excavator, Sir Arthur Evans, in the early twentieth century.

Archaeological restorations offer important information about the history of a site and Knossos doesn't disappoint—one can see the earliest throne room in Europe, walk through the monumental Northern entrance to the palace, marvel at colorful wall paintings and enjoy the elegance of a queen's apartments. All these spaces, however, are the result of extensive, contentious and, in some cases, damaging restoration. Knossos asks us to consider how we can preserve an archaeological site, while at the same time providing a valuable, educational experience for visitors that nonetheless remains true to the remains.



Sir Arthur Evans, 1911



Throne Room, Knossos (photo: [Olaf Bausch](#), CC BY 3.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Knossos_Thronsaal_01.jpg>

Considering Evans' reconstructions

The Evans restoration at Knossos are important for several reasons:

1. If Evans hadn't worked to preserve and restore so much of Knossos beginning in 1901, it would have undoubtedly been largely lost.
2. The restoration of the site undertaken by Evans, with its elegantly painted Throne Room (below) makes very real our historical understanding, originally revealed by Homer, of the power and prestige of the kings of Crete.
3. The beautiful, although sometimes inaccurate, restorations of architecture and wall paintings by Evans evoke the elegance and skill of Minoan architects and painters.

These are the undeniable benefits of Evans's restorations and among the aspects of a visit to Knossos that everyone values. It is the smooth corniced walls, bright paintings, and whole passages stepped with balustrades at Knossos that the post cards, camera snaps, and human memory preserve, and that has translated into important support for the site—intellectually, politically, and financially.

At the same time, the Evans restorations are problematic. In some cases, what is restored does not accurately reflect what was found.

Instead, a grander, and more complete, experience is presented. For example, when you visit Knossos, because of the way it is reconstructed, it is very easy to believe that all that was ever found there was a Late Bronze Age palace.



Throne Room excavations at Knossos, from the title page of a brochure appealing for support issued by the Cretan Exploration Fund (1900)

Evans's restoration of the Throne Room (and much else at the site) privileges the Late Bronze Age period of its history. The typical visitor likely won't grasp that the Throne Room dates to the *latest* phase of Knossos—the end of the second millennium B.C.E., though the site was occupied nearly continuously from the Neolithic to the Roman era (from the eighth millennium B.C.E. to at least the fifth century C.E.).

The power of Evans's interpretation and reconstruction of the site as purely Minoan—the product of the indigenous culture of that island—is very much still with us despite the fact that much has changed about how art historians and archaeologists understand the different periods of construction at Knossos. Today, much of its final plan and form, which Evans reconstructed (including the Throne Room and most of the frescos), are understood as being of Mycenaean construction (not Minoan). Although this information is noted in texts mounted at the site, it is too often overlooked by visitors.



Contemporary view of Knossos looking southwest from the Monumental North Entrance (photo: Theofanis Ampatzidis, CC BY-SA 4.0) <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=User:Theampatz&action=edit&redlink=1>>

What is archaeological restoration?

When archaeological remains are revealed through excavation, they are often delicate and cannot survive long unprotected. Some archaeologists backfill their trenches (refill the excavated holes with the material that was removed) to help preserve remains. In other instances, architecture, graves, or the impressions left from ephemeral building materials (such as wood) are sometimes left exposed, and when this happens some sort of conservation should occur. By definition, any sort of conservation is restoration when the modern materials are layered on the ancient and made to look harmonious in form, color and/or texture. As a result, restorations are sometimes nearly indistinguishable from authentic materials, and this is where things get tricky—such as the situation at Knossos.

Before making an archaeological restoration, three essential issues must be examined:

1. **What specific point in a site or monument's history will be the subject of the restoration?** Many (most!) archaeological sites reflect a long occupation or use, and within that timeframe things change, are repaired, or rebuilt. What era of the site will be privileged by the restoration—and in turn, which eras of the site's history will become harder to see and understand?
2. **How will future changes in the interpretation and**

knowledge about a site or monument be accommodated by restorations? Archaeological interpretations of sites evolve all the time, often through new discoveries elsewhere. Restorations, in order to remain accurate, need to take into account potential new scholarship that can change the history or meaning of a site or monument.

3. **Lastly and most importantly, restorations must be non-destructive and reversible.** The first role of restoration is conservation. Therefore, the original remains must be entirely safe and not harmed in any way by restoration methods and materials. The reversibility of restorations not only has to do with the accommodation of changes in interpretation made above, but also with the need to leave the way open for less invasive, more gentle restoration methods in the future.

Restoration at Knossos

Aside from some gaps (for instance, during the First World War) Evans excavated at the site of Knossos each year from 1900 to 1930. Restoration of the architectural finds began almost immediately and can be divided into three phases, each characterized by the architect Evans hired to do the work. These three men, Theodore Fyfe, Christian Doll, and Piet De Jong, each had very different restoration philosophies.

Phase 1: Theodore Fyfe

From 1901 to 1904, a young architect by the name of Theodore Fyfe was charged with the restorations at Knossos. It is likely that Evans hired him because the winter of 1900/01 had damaged the newly exposed Throne Room—the most important space excavated during that first season at the site.

Fyfe's work at Knossos can be characterized by two things. First of all, he was devoted to the concept of minimal intervention. Second, when intervention was necessary, he made great efforts to use materials authentic to the Bronze Age structure (wood, limestone, rubble masonry) and even to use Bronze Age construction techniques, which he was able to glean from his onsite work. Clearly Fyfe was highly concerned about the truthfulness of his interventions and reconstructions; the only exception to this was his construction of modern-style pitched roofs to protect the Throne Room and the Shrine of the Double Axes.

Phase 2: Christian Doll

The second phase of restoration work at Knossos dates from 1905 to 1910, and was directed by Christian Doll. The first conservation work to which Doll had to attend to in 1905 was that of Fyfe's. Essentially, Fyfe's zeal to use authentic materials resulted in failure: he neglected in many cases to treat timbers before their use and he tended to use softwoods rather than hardwoods (all of which lead to rot). Also, rain was a destructive force in the winters, especially when it ran through newly exposed parts of the site. Doll's first and most important project was to stabilize and reconstruct the Grand Staircase to its original four story height. This was an extremely difficult job as the exact nature of the ancient design eluded both him and Fyfe, so a certain amount of improvisation was needed. And, because the weight of the structure was so great, Doll used iron girders (imported from England at great expense) covered in cement to make them look like ancient wooden beams.



Piet de Jong, reconstruction of the "Dolphin Fresco," Queen's Megaron, Knossos (public domain)

Doll's approach to conservation was still anchored in preserving the excavated remains. However, Doll was no fan of the authentic materials used by Fyfe, as he saw how they had failed to preserve the many areas where they had been employed. Instead, Doll constructed structural systems based on techniques used in London at the time. Moreover, he employed contemporary architectural materials, such as the iron girders mentioned above, as well as concrete (the first use of this material at Knossos).

Phase 3: Piet De Jong

The third phase of conservation work was executed over a longer period of time, from 1922 to 1952, by Piet De Jong. The vast majority of what Knossos looks like today, with large passages of reconstructed walls and rooms, is his work.

Three main elements characterize De Jong's work at Knossos. The most prominent was his use of iron reinforced concrete. In the twelve years between Doll's and De Jong's work, the use of reinforced concrete had grown in popularity because of its speedy construction, its relative cheapness, and its ability to be molded into nearly any shape. It was also thought to be nearly indestructible.

Another essential characteristic of De Jong's work at Knossos was his use of reinforced concrete to construct parts of the palace beyond

what had been found—some passages were based on archaeological evidence, some were not (the bases of these reconstructions came from Evans himself).

De Jong often did not merely end walls at the height of their discovery but would either finish them off with a flat roof and cornice, often decorated with double white horns (what some contemporary wall paintings of Bronze Age houses looked like), or would leave the top edge of walls with irregular stones, evoking a picturesque, antique view. When a complete vision of ancient Knossos could not be reconstituted, a romantic one was built instead.

The reconstruction of the interior decoration of the throne room was executed during this period and similarly exhibits a combination of the truthful reflection of archaeological remains and Evans's creativity.

Lastly, an important characteristic of De Jong's restorations was the placement of reproductions of wall paintings around his newly built spaces. Some paintings were placed very close to their findspots and therefore aimed at a more authentic reconstruction, while other paintings were reconstructed at some distance from where they had been discovered.

The question remains: why did Evans encourage De Jong's radical



South Propylaeum, Knossos (photo: [Stegop](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Knossos-stegop-48.jpg), CC BY-SA 4.0) <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Knossos-stegop-48.jpg>>

approach to conservation, especially after two more conservative predecessors? Several reasons are at play, no doubt. The first, and possibly the most important, is the condition of Knossos after almost eight years of abandonment during the First World War. Aside from the wild overgrowth of weeds, there was much weather-related and other damage. However, the parts of the site that had been roofed (such as the Throne Room and the Shrine of the Double Axes) and sections that were more intact (such as the Grand Staircase), were in excellent shape and this no doubt convinced Evans of the importance of aggressive conservation work. Second, the iron-reinforced concrete which De Jong proposed to use was inexpensive and could be employed quickly. Third, Evans, in a masterful anticipation of the desires of future tourism, aimed to make a site that would vividly conjure the culture he had discovered, as much evocative and picturesque as historically accurate.

Conservation at Knossos after Evans

It is only fair to reflect upon the restorations of Knossos within their historical framework. The aims, methods, and materials used in restoration at the site over a period of some sixty years changed, reflecting a long list of crises, constraints, theories, and desires. Perhaps most significant, however, was Evans's overriding conviction that the conservation of Knossos was an obligation born out of its great antiquity and unique importance. He knew this from his own Edwardian education, British colonial outlook, and his twenty-four year directorship of the Ashmolean Museum at the University of Oxford. Evans was keenly aware of how intimately connected the

teaching of Knossos's history was with how it was presented on site. He made Knossos into a museum and a showcase for the newly discovered Aegean Bronze Age chapter of ancient history and the earliest example of cultural tourism, today a mainstay of public historical education—not to mention local economies. Evans did it first at Knossos.

Conservation at Knossos has continued since De Jong's work, although with new challenges. The most recent conservation work on the site has been focused largely on repairing Evans's reconstructions. Despite a belief that reinforced concrete would last indefinitely, it has proven to be susceptible to the wet Cretan winters, crumbling and allowing for rust on the interior ironwork. In other areas the reinforced concrete proved to be structurally unsound.

In addition, the steady increase of tourist traffic since the 1950s has meant growing stress on both the original architecture of Knossos as well as its reconstructions. Sustained foot fall, increasing weight load as well as touching and sitting, is increasingly destructive. To combat this, the Greek Archaeological Service, under the Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports, has closed off large sections of Knossos and generally restricted circulation on the site. In the 1990s it conducted extensive conservation of both ancient and modern structures as well as building new corrugated plastic roofing. At present the Service is working on a visitor management plan for the site and the Greek government has applied to UNESCO for World Heritage Status for Knossos as well as four other Minoan palatial sites which would afford much needed support for ongoing conservation efforts.



Visitors to Knossos, 2016 (photo: [Neil Howard](https://flic.kr/p/MyQpkF), CC BY-NC 2.0) <<https://flic.kr/p/MyQpkF>>

Additional resources:

[Knossos at UNESCO](http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5860/) <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5860/>>

[Minoan Crete from The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Helbrunn Timeline of Art History](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mino/hd_mino.htm) <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mino/hd_mino.htm>

[Arthur Evans archive \(Oxford University\)](http://www2.odl.ox.ac.uk/gsdll/cgi-bin/librarysite=localhost&a=p&p=about&c=sackle02&ct=0&l=en&w=iso-8859-1) <<http://www2.odl.ox.ac.uk/gsdll/cgi-bin/librarysite=localhost&a=p&p=about&c=sackle02&ct=0&l=en&w=iso-8859-1>>

4. Kamares Ware Jug — a classic example

Dr. Senta German

Look closely at the jug on the top shelf at the far left in the photograph below. Can you almost see a bird looking up to the sky?

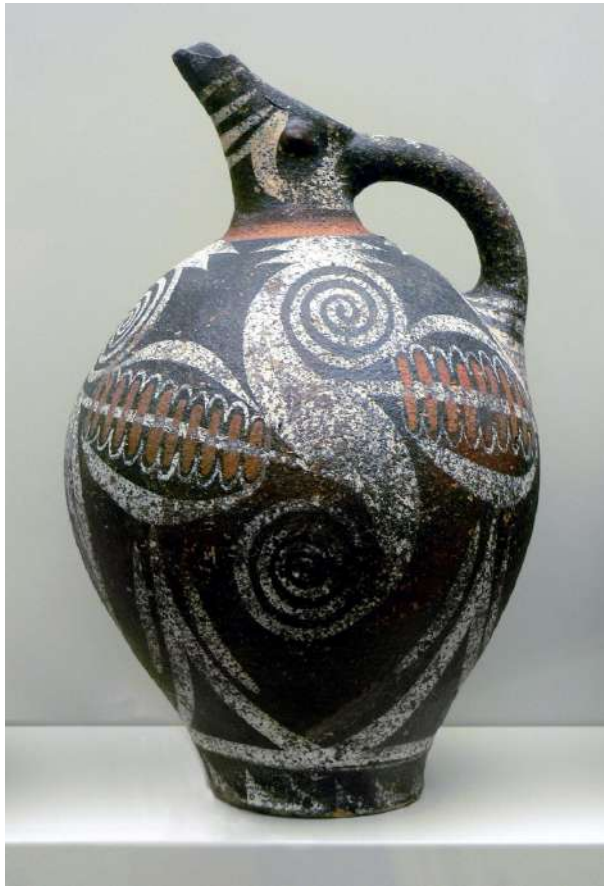


Kamares wares, Archaeological Museum, Heraklion (photo: [B. Gagnon](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kamares_vases_Heraklion.jpg), CC BY-SA 3.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kamares_vases_Heraklion.jpg>

The pottery we see in this photograph is called Kamares Ware, and it was the first fine, mass-produced and widely-traded pottery produced on Minoan Crete, dating to the Middle Minoan era (1900-1700 B.C.E.). It was Sir Arthur Evans, the archaeologist who first uncovered the Minoan palace at Knossos, who divided Minoan chronology into different periods and it was Evans who was also responsible for using the name “Minoan” to refer to the Bronze Age culture of Crete (after the legendary King Minos). Minoan culture flourished between c. 2600 and c. 1600 B.C.E. The Kamares cave, discovered in 1864, is the location of a Minoan archaeological site on Crete, and some of the best examples of Middle Minoan pottery have been found

there—hence the name Kamares ware. Kamares ware is characterized by light-on-dark abstract and floral patterns and elegant shapes. The crafting of these shapes was executed on a fast-spinning potter’s wheel, a new invention during the Middle Minoan era, and its painted decoration is particularly labor intensive, requiring a dark background color, usually black, on which white and sometimes red and orange colors were added. This was a departure from earlier Early Minoan pottery which merely added dark abstract designs to the buff background color of the clay. Perhaps the most remarkable type of Kamares ware is referred to as eggshell ware, named for the extreme thinness of the vessel walls. The overall effect of Kamares ware is not

just a pretty pot but an object which is a wonder to behold—at once inventive, delicate, and full of movement and charm.



Kamares ware jug from Phaistos, c. 2000-1900 B.C.E., 27 cm, Archaeological Museum of Heraklion (photo: [Wolfgang Sauber](#), CC BY-SA 3.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AMI_Kamaresvase_1.jpg>

This Kamares ware jug is a classic example of the type. It was found at the Minoan palace of Phaistos, which is in south central Crete. Phaistos and its sister palace Knossos to the north were the two main manufacturing centers for Kamares-ware pottery in the middle Bronze Age.

The vessel is painted with a black background and most of the abstract decoration is painted in either white or red. The belly of the jug, its broadest circumference, is where the main action of the design takes place: two abstract shapes, an “S” shaped double spiral and a

striped oval shape alternate like beads on a string. Each is connected to the other by a white line which seems to expand and contract with the pull of the double spiral. The oval shapes are grounded in the composition with white triangles, under which is a succession of smaller triangles angled to the left. A red stripe separates the neck of the jug from its body and the spout and handle are striped.

At first glance, the shape of the jug is simple but when you begin to understand the painting, you realize that it is a zoomorphic shape, meant to imitate an animal, in this case, a bird with its beak in the air and a striped plume emerging from the top of its head (the handle). With this, the jug has a dual reading: it can be seen as a bulbous sphere with alternating swirling spheres, or a proud bird, looking up to the sky and contemplating flight.

Probably the most important thing about Kamares ware is how it helps us map the trading relationships of the Minoans with the Mediterranean at large. Kamares ware pottery has been found in Egypt, the Levant, the Cycladic islands, mainland Greece, and southern Italy. In this, it is the first true marker of Bronze Age Crete’s economic reach.



Map of Crete showing the location of Phaistos (map data © Google)

Additional resources:

[Minoan Crete on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mino/hd_mino.htm) <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mino/hd_mino.htm>

Gisela Walberg, “The Role and Individuality of Kamares Ware” in *Aegean Archaeology*, vol. 5 (2001), pp. 9-18 <<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/49e2/1e3e2a1b39f10aed01c5f490dfa7689e8eb7.pdf>>

5. Snake Goddess from the palace at Knossos

Dr. Senta German



Snake Goddess from the palace at Knossos, c. 1600 B.C.E., faience, 29.5 cm high (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, photo: Zde, CC BY-SA 4.0)
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Snake_Goddess%2C_Knossos%2C_1650-1550_BC%2C_AMH%2C_145150.jpg>

It has been said that the Snake Goddess, discovered at Knossos on Crete, is one of the most frequently reproduced sculptures from antiquity. (It was unearthed by Sir Arthur Evans, an English archaeologist who was the first to excavate the ruins at Knossos, beginning in 1900.) Whether or not this is true, it is certainly the case that she is a powerful and evocative image. What she meant to the Minoans who made her, however, is not very well understood.

The “Temple Repositories”

Evans found the sculpture of the Snake Goddess in a secondary exploration of the complex he called a “palace” at Knossos. After digging out the entire western wing, he decided to check under the paving stones. Most covered nothing but earth, but just south of the Throne Room, he discovered two stone-lined pits containing a wide variety of precious things, mostly broken: scraps of gold, ivory, the largest deposit of faience (a type of ceramic with a glass-like surface) on Crete, stone inlay, unworked horn, ceramic vessels, seal stones, sealings, shells, the vertebrae of large fish, and the broken pieces of at least three figurines, of which the Snake Goddess was one.

Because of the fragmentary nature of these valuable objects, Evans assumed what he had found were damaged pieces that had been cleaned out from a temple. He named the pits the “Temple Repositories” and immediately set upon the reconstruction of as much as he could, with special interest in the figurines, which he assumed were of goddesses.

The hat and the cat

The Snake Goddess, as originally excavated, lacked a head and half of her left arm. The complete right arm held a short wavy striped stick, which Evans interpreted as a snake. This was, in some measure, to match the other nearly complete figurine found in the Temple Repositories, which clearly had snakes slithering up both of her arms. The restoration of the Snake Goddess was done by the Danish artist Halvor Bagge together with Evans. Their contribution to the figurine was the creation of a matching arm and stripy snake, the head of the goddess, and the placement of the hat and cat (separate faience pieces found in the Temple Repositories) on her head.

In her restored state, the Snake Goddess is 29.5 cm (about 11.5 inches) high, a youthful woman wearing a full skirt made of seven flounced (strips of cloth sewn horizontally) layers of multicolored cloth. This is likely not a representation of striped cloth, but rather flounces made from multiple colorful bands of cloth, the weaving of which was a Minoan specialty. Over the skirt she wears a front and back apron decorated with a geometric diamond design. The top of the skirt and apron has a wide, vertically-striped band that wraps tightly around the figure’s waist. On top, she wears a short-sleeved, striped shirt tied with an elaborate knot at the waist, with a low-cut front that exposes her large, bare breasts. The Snake Goddess’s head, restored by Bagge and Evans, stares straight forward, topped by the spherical object that Bagge and Evans believed would make a good crown, and, finally, a



*The Snake Goddess prior to restoration by Evans, from Angelo Mosso, *The Palaces of Crete and Their Builders* (London: Unwin, 1907), p. 137 ([University of Toronto Libraries](https://archive.org/details/palacesofcreteth00mosso)) <<https://archive.org/details/palacesofcreteth00mosso>>*

small sitting cat. Her long black hair hangs down her back and curls down around her breasts.

Really a goddess?

The Snake Goddess is a provocative image, but its restoration and interpretation are problematic. The crown and cat have no parallel in any image of a Bronze Age woman, so these should be discounted. The interpretation of this figure as a goddess is also difficult, since there is no evidence of what a Minoan goddess might have looked like. Many images of elite Minoan women, perhaps priestesses, look very much like this figurine. If it is the action of snake-wrangling that makes her a goddess, this is also a problem. The image of a woman taming one or more snakes is entirely unique to the Temple Repositories. Therefore, If she is a snake goddess, she is not a particularly popular one.

Certainly, Evans was interested in finding a goddess at Knossos. Even before he excavated at the site, he had argued that there was a great mother goddess who was worshiped in the pre-Classical Greek world. With the Snake Goddess, Evans found—or fashioned—what he had anticipated. Its authenticity and meaning, however, leave many questions today.

Additional resources:

[This work at the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion](https://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=7884)

<http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=7884>

6. Bull's Head Rhyton from the palace at Knossos

Dr. Senta German



Bull's head rhyton from the palace at Knossos, c. 1550-1500 B.C.E., black steatite, jasper, and mother-of-pearl, 26 cm high (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, photo: Zde, CC BY-SA 4.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bull's-head_rhyton_stone_Knossos_1600-1450_BC_AMH_145160.jpg>

Ritual vessels

Images of bulls are among the most important in Minoan art and as many as eleven bull's head come from the site of Knossos.

A rhyton, pluralized as rhyta, is a type of conical drinking vessel commonly found in the ancient world. Used for pouring liquids, such ritual vessels had holes at the top and the bottom. This rhyton was found in a structure called the Little Palace (it is called a “palace” because of its size and elite architectural elements, not because there was a throne in it), about 200 meters northwest of the palace at Knossos. The rhyton dates to the original Neopalatial period (what is sometimes abbreviated as MM III, spanning 1600-1450 B.C.E.), when the building was constructed, and was likely purposefully broken before it was discarded. It is heavily damaged—the left side of the bull's head and left ear, as well as its golden horns, were restored by Sir Arthur Evans (the English archaeologist who first uncovered the ruins at Knossos, Crete, in 1900).

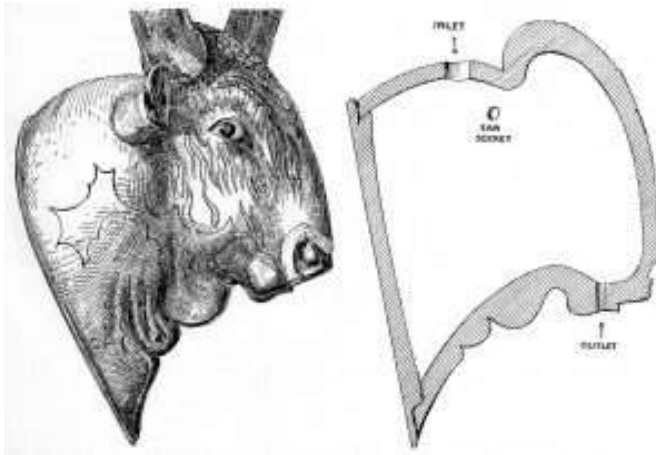
This bull's head rhyton was carved from a single block of black steatite (a type of rock, also known as soapstone, which is mainly composed of talc) and is 26 cm (about 10 inches) in height, as restored. It is hollow, as a rhyton must be, with the hole at the top behind the bull's horns and the hole at the bottom at its muzzle. The back of the rhyton is flat so that it could be laid down on a surface.

Both realistic and stylized

The carving of the bull's head is remarkable for its combination of vivid realism and stylization. For instance, the eyes of the bull were made of inlaid rock crystal lenses, painted on their flat back with a black iris and red pupil, surrounded in white. The rim of the eye was inlaid with red jasper, giving the bull a wild, frightening, bloodshot look.



Bull's head rhyton from the palace at Knossos (detail), c. 1550-1500 B.C.E., black steatite, jasper, and mother-of-pearl, 26 cm high ([Archaeological Museum of Heraklion](#), photo: [Camille Gévaudan](#), CC BY-SA 4.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:T%C3%A4te_de_taureau_st%C3%A9atite_Knossos_oeil.JPG>



Profile and section of the bull's head rhyton from the palace at Knossos, from Sir Arthur Evans, *Town-Houses in Knossos of the New Era and Restored West Palace Section, with Its State Approach* (London: Macmillan, 1928), p. 529 ([Universitäts-Bibliothek Heidelberg](#)) <<http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/evans1928a/0155/image>>



Bull's head rhyton from the palace at Knossos, c. 1550-1500 B.C.E., black steatite, jasper, and mother-of-pearl, 26 cm high ([Archaeological Museum of Heraklion](#), photo: [Carole Raddato](#), CC BY-SA 4.0) <<https://flic.kr/p/NncVuk>>

The bull is shaggy, with naturalistic locks hanging down its face, carved with very shallow incisions in the soft stone and filled with ground white stone (perhaps gypsum, a white mineral powder that is often used to make hard materials such as plaster) for contrast against the black steatite. Also very realistically carved are the rolls of skin at the neck of the bull. However, other parts of the representation of the bull are rather stylized. For instance, the hair whorl at the center of the bull's forehead looks more like a spiral than a swirled tuft of hair, and this is topped by a patch of stylized fur with curls arranged in rows. Lastly, the patch of white hair around the snout of the bull, rendered with shell inlay (a type of ornamentation where objects or materials are embedded into a surface), looks graphic in its straight borders.

Treasured gifts

Bull's head rhyta such as this one were some of the most valued treasures of Minoan Crete. Images of them appear in 18th dynasty Egyptian wall paintings, where they are shown as pharaonic gifts from visiting Cretans. Many examples of rhyta have been archaeologically recovered; some twenty-three of them have been found at archaeological sites on Crete and the Greek mainland. What is remarkable is that all have been found purposefully destroyed. This has led archaeologists to believe that after the utility of a bull's head rhyton had expired, it was ritually destroyed.

Additional resources:

[This work at the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion](#) <http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=7883>

Beth Ann Judas, "Keftiu and Griffins: An Exploration of the Liminal in the Egyptian Worldview," in *Current Research in Egyptology 2014* (Oxbow, 2015).



Example of a bull's head rhyton in Egyptian wall painting (visible lower center). "Gifts from the Keftiu (Minoans)," from the Tomb of Rekhmire, Thebes, 18th dynasty, c. 1479–1425 B.C.E., drawing by Nina de Garis Davies, tempera on paper, 45 x 65 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

7. Harvester Vase from Hagia Triada

Dr. Senta German



Harvester Vase from Hagia Triada, c. 1550-1500 B.C.E., black steatite, diameter 4.5 inches (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion)

Small but powerful

Found at Hagia Triada, an elite site associated with Minoan palaces and dating to the Neopalatial period, (1600-1450 B.C.E.) the Harvester Vase displays a detailed and fascinating scene of men marching and singing in what appears to be a harvest celebration. Although it is not a grand artistic monument, this small vessel (about 4.5 inches in diameter), communicates a grace and vitality typical of Aegean Bronze Age art.

Imitating an eggshell

The Harvester Vase is actually not a vase but rather a rhyton, a ritual vessel used for pouring liquids. It has a hole at the top and would have had a hole at the bottom before it was damaged. It is made of black steatite and is shaped to look like a similar vessel made of an even more valuable material: an ostrich egg. Ostrich egg

rhyta were some of the most luxurious and exotic ritual goods in the Aegean Bronze Age. This type of object was made by drilling holes at either end of an ostrich egg (imported from Egypt), drawing out the contents, and affixing a decorative rim on the top and at the bottom. However, what the Harvester Vase lacks in imported luxury, it makes up for in sheer sculptural power.



Ostrich egg rhyton from the tholos tomb at Dendra, Greece, Mycenaean, 15th-14th c. B.C.E., ostrich egg, silver, gold, and copper (National Archaeological Museum, Athens, photo: Schuppi, CC BY-SA 3.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ostrich_egg_rhyton_from_Dendra.JPG>



Harvester Vase from Hagia Triada (detail), c. 1550-1500 B.C.E., black steatite, diameter 4.5 inches (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, photo: [Zde](#), CC BY-SA 4.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Harvester_Vase%2C_steatite%2C_Agia_Triada_%2C_1450_BC%2C_AMH%2C_145141.jpg>

A rhythmic procession

The miniature scene, carved in relief, illustrates some twenty-seven men in a procession. Most of these men are depicted in pairs, legs stepping high and right arms bent at the elbow, hands held close to the chest, and wearing identical costumes: loincloths, flat caps, carrying bags or pads on the left thigh, and on the left shoulder, a pole with a short curved blade and a three pronged fork. These men are all young, slim, and muscular, with angular faces turned up to the sky. Their paired, lock-step procession evokes marching or rhythmic movement. There is one exception to this rhythm: near the back of the group, one man turns to look behind him, perhaps because, it would appear, another has fallen just at his back.

This marching group is led by an apparently older man, wearing long shaggy hair and a fringed robe with a scallop pattern (above). He carries a long staff, crooked at the bottom and tapering at the top. In the middle of the group of men behind him is another single figure, a man who looks perhaps not as young and lean as those in the group, who is shaking a sistrum (a musical instrument used in religious rituals). These were common in ancient Egypt as well as in ancient Greece and Rome; examples have been found on Bronze Age Crete as

well. This man appears to be shouting or singing with his mouth wide open and he is followed close behind by a rank of four men who also have wide open mouths and wear cloaks around their shoulders.

Reaping or sowing?

As the name of this vessel indicates, it is generally thought that its decoration refers to harvesting, the key evidence being the long implement each of the younger men is carrying over his shoulder. What is not clear is exactly what the implement is. If it is a winnowing fork, these men are harvesting, collecting mature cereal crops; they will use the fork to separate the grain from its husk. If the implement is a hoe, festooned with branches, then the men are off to plant seeds—perhaps to be found in each of the men's bags. Which it is—harvesting or planting—we may never know, but what is clear is the masculine, communal, and celebratory nature of the activity depicted on this beautiful vessel.



Harvester Vase from Hagia Triada (detail), c. 1550-1500 B.C.E., black steatite, diameter 4.5 inches (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, photo: [Zde](#), CC BY-SA 4.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Harvester_Vase,_steatite,_Agia_Triada,_1450_BC,_AMH,_145139.jpg>

8. Octopus Vase from Palaikastro

Dr. Senta German



Octopus vase from Palaikastro, c. 1500 B.C.E., 27 cm high (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, photo: [Wolfgang Sauber](#), CC BY-SA 3.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AMI_-_Oktopusvase.jpg>

Ceramics for the wealthy

One of the most important aspects of Minoan culture was its ceramics. Pottery today may not seem particularly interesting or important, but in the second millennium B.C.E., it was a high art form and its manufacture was often closely associated with centers of power. Much like the production of porcelain for European royal houses in the 18th century, the production of pottery on Crete tells us about elite tastes, how the powerful met and shared meals, and with whom they traded.

This vase, found at Palaikastro, a wealthy site on the far eastern coast of Crete, is the perfect example of elite Minoan ceramic manufacture.

It is 27 cm (about 10.5 inches) high, wheel-made (clay is spun on a horizontal surface and the potter uses his or her hands to shape it, usually into a hollow form), hand-painted, and meant to hold a valuable liquid—perhaps oil of some kind. Its shape is somewhat unusual, constructed by slipping together, while still leather-hard (not quite dry), two shallow plates which had been made on a fast spinning potter's wheel and with highly refined clay. (Slip is a liquid mixture of thinned clay used to join or decorate pottery.) The circular bases of these shallow plates are still visible in the center of both sides of the flask. A spout and stirrup-style handles (which would allow the user to carefully control the flow of the liquid out of the container) were added by hand, as well as a base, to facilitate the standing upright of the vessel.



Octopus vase from Palaikastro (detail), c. 1500 B.C.E., 27 cm high (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, photo: [Olaf Tausch](#), CC BY 3.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pilgerflasche_04.jpg>

Inspired by the sea

Lastly, the Marine Style decoration would have been added. Using dark slip on the surface of the clay, the Minoan painter of this vessel



The ruins at Palaikastro (photo: [Panegyrics of Granovetter](https://flic.kr/p/7nrTTb), CC BY-SA 2.0) <<https://flic.kr/p/7nrTTb>>

filled the center with a charming octopus, swimming diagonally, with tentacles extended out to the full perimeter of the flask and wide eyes that stare out at the viewer with an almost cartoon-like friendliness. Around this creature's limbs we find sea urchins, coral, and triton shells; no empty space is left unfilled, lending a sense of writhing energy to the overall composition.



Mycenaean imitation of Minoan Marine ware, 15th century B.C.E. Tomb 2, Argive Prosymna

Marine-Style pottery, of which this vessel is a prime example, is regarded as the pinnacle of Minoan palatial pottery production, specifically of the LM I period (the first part of the Late Minoan, around 1400 B.C.E.). Those who believe “hands” (that is, specific artists) can be identified in the painting of Bronze Age pottery have identified this vessel as the work of the Marine Style Master, who worked at the site of Palaikastro. The era of Marine Style pottery coincided with a period during which the Minoans’ trade networks spanned widely across the Mediterranean, from Crete to Cyprus, the Levant (the eastern Mediterranean region, especially the area around Syria), mainland Greece, and Egypt. Some have connected this seafaring skill to the popularity of Marine Style pottery. The style was imitated by potters on the Greek mainland as well as the islands of Melos, and Aegina, but none could match the charm and grace of the Minoan inventors of the style.



Map of Crete showing Palaikastro (map data © Google)

9. Statuette of a Male Figure (The Palaikastro Kouros)

Dr. Senta German



Statuette of a Male Figure (Palaikastro Kouros), 1480-1425 B.C.E., serpentine, hippopotamus ivory, and gold, 54 x 18.5 cm (Archaeological Museum of Sitia) (photo: Olaf Tausch, CC BY 3.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palaikastro_Kouros_05.jpg>

One of the most spectacular recent finds from Crete is this statuette of a youthful male figure made of gold, ivory, serpentine (a type of green stone), and rock crystal. It is one of only a small handful of Minoan sculptures in the round (statues that stand freely and can be viewed from all sides), and the largest ever found. Although it is not complete, much of it is in excellent shape and its naturalistic style is striking. It is often called the Palaikastro Kouros (the Greek word for a male youth), as it is similar to the later Archaic Greek statues of idealized youthful elite males.

The figure was found in the excavations at the town of Palaikastro, a large archaeological site on the East coast of Crete known for, among other things, the creation of especially fine Marine Style pottery which was traded all over the island as well as throughout the Mediterranean. The statue was discovered smashed into hundreds of pieces, spread over two areas 10 meters apart, the result of the looting and burning during the town's destruction at the end of the LM (Late Minoan) Ib period (1450 B.C.E.).

After painstaking efforts, the figurine was reconstructed to show an athletic young man standing with one foot slightly before the other, knees locked, both arms bent, hands in fists held up to the chest. The figure's head is turned very slightly to the left, with hair cropped short except for one lock running down the middle of the scalp from front to back.

The figurine was constructed of eight separate pieces of hippopotamus ivory and was fitted together using wooden dowels.

The hair was carved from a piece of serpentine stone and the eyes were inlaid with rock crystal. Sadly, the face of the figure as well as his middle section is lost; much of the surviving ivory was burned black, although still in remarkably good condition. There is evidence that the figurine was partially covered in hammered gold: specifically, the feet and part of the lower leg, the lower arms (possibly in the form of bracelets), as well as the lost middle section, likely to look like a loincloth.

Although it is hard to guess where this piece would have originally been viewed, it is clear that it was inserted into a base, which would have allowed it to stand up straight. Careful analysis has shown that the base itself was as opulent as the figurine, made from a combination of Egyptian blue (a blue pigment used to color materials such as wood, plaster, and ceramics) and gold.

The attention to naturalistic human anatomy in the statue is extraordinary. The smooth shape and musculature of the chest, legs, and arms is highly accurate. In the feet and hands, the details of veining and even the cuticles of the fingers and toes are breathtaking to behold. However, this singular anatomical detail is not, in fact, accurate. For instance, the veins on the foot do not reflect real human vascular systems. Similarly, the thumbs of each hand are rendered too long, and curl over the knuckles of the remaining fingers too far. This uneven realism is actually a hallmark of Minoan art.

Whom does this statue represent? There is no way to know exactly. Surely it was an important figure, given the precious materials and refined skill used to create it. The archaeologists who excavated the statue at Palaikastro believe that it represents the Bronze Age forerunner of the later Classical youthful male god of the underworld, come to herald the beginning of the harvest in the fall: Diktaian Zeus.

What does this extraordinary statue tell us about the Minoans? At least two things. First of all, it tells us about a special relationship with Egypt. The two most valuable materials that make up the statue are hippopotamus ivory and gold, and both of these materials came from Egypt. Moreover, the stance of the figure (one foot in front of the other with locked knees) imitates the classic stance of Egyptian statuary. Lastly, art historians believe that the figurine employs a variant of an early Egyptian proportional canon (a set of rules that govern the representation of human proportions). Therefore, much of how this figurine was conceived and produced is owed to Egypt. We might view this as evidence of a close trading relationship and likely some sort of cultural affinity as well.

The second thing the Palaikastro Kouros can tell us about the Minoans is that they were the first to create chryselephantine (overlaid with gold and ivory) statuary. Chryselephantine statuary is best known from the Classical Greek era, the most famous examples being the statues of Athena and Zeus at Athens and Olympia, respectively, both created by Phidias in the fifth century B.C.E. Early examples on a much smaller scale have been found at Delphi, but this figurine from Palaikastro is the earliest known example of this important sculptural type.

Additional resources:

At the [Archaeological Museum of Sitia](http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=4748) <http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=4748>

Mark Moak, "The Palaikastro Kouros," in *British School at Athens Studies*, vol. 6 (2000), pp. 65-83 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40916617>>



Statuette of a Male Figure (Palaikastro Kouros), 1480-1425 B.C.E., serpentine, hippopotamus ivory, and gold, 54 x 18.5 cm (Archaeological Museum of Sitia) (photo: Olaf Tausch, CC BY 3.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palaikastro_Kouros_05.jpg>

10. Hagia Triada sarcophagus

Dr. Senta German



The Hagia Triada sarcophagus (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion) (photo: [C messier](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sarcophagi_AMH_350.jpg), CC BY-SA 3.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sarcophagi_AMH_350.jpg>

A coffin for royalty?

Many images of Minoan rituals are fragmentary and therefore difficult to interpret. There are very few complete, narrative-style representations of religious topics, and the Hagia Triada (also sometimes spelled “Agia Triada”) is the best among them. This sarcophagus was found in 1903 by the Italian archaeologist Roberto Paribeni in Tomb 4 of the hilltop cemetery north of the site of Hagia Triada, a large and wealthy ancient Minoan settlement in south central Crete. Tomb 4 was a family tomb containing the sarcophagus (a stone coffin), constructed of limestone, and another large ceramic coffin. The tomb was disturbed in antiquity, but some small burial goods were left behind by the looters: a carved stone bowl, a triton

shell, and a fragment of a female terracotta figurine. These remaining grave goods and the elaborate nature of the Hagia Triada sarcophagus has led to the identification of Tomb 4 as that of royalty.

A story in fresco

The Hagia Triada sarcophagus is the only Minoan sarcophagus known to be entirely painted. It was created using fresco, like contemporaneous wall painting, and illustrates a complex narrative scene, apparently of burial and sacrifice. The object itself is substantial, measuring 1.375 meters (about 4.5 feet) long, .45 meters (about 1.5 feet) wide and .985 meters (about 3 feet) high.



Hagia Triada sarcophagus, c. 1400 B.C.E., limestone and fresco, 1.375 x .45 x .985 m (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion) (photo: [Carole Raddato](#), CC BY-SA 2.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Heraklion_Archaeological_Museum_%2830341780550%29.jpg>

One of the long sides is the most complete and shows a funeral procession of offering bearers and a libation (a drink, generally one poured out as an offering to a deity) ceremony that features seven figures—two women and five men. From the far left, we see a female in profile facing left, dressed in an elaborate hide skirt and open short-sleeved shirt, holding a vessel in both hands while pouring the contents into a larger vessel which is resting on a stone platform between two poles. The poles are set on richly-veined stone bases and are topped with double axes surmounted by birds. Behind the woman pouring is another woman, and behind her, a man. The second woman, who is elaborately robed and wears a crown of lilies, carries on her shoulders a pole that supports two vessels identical to the one being used for pouring by the first female. The man behind her plays a lyre and is also elaborately robed.



Hagia Triada sarcophagus (detail), c. 1400 B.C.E., limestone and fresco (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, photo: [Zde](#), CC BY-SA 2.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Agia_Triada%2C_sarcophagus%2C_long_side_%2C_limestone%2C_frescoes%2C_1370-1320_BC%2C_AMH%2C_145310.jpg>

The next three people from the left are young men, each bare-chested and wearing a hide skirt. The first two hold bovine statues, one spotted brown, one black; the third man holds a model of a boat. These three men are in composite profile, with shoulders frontal but legs and head in profile, a common Egyptian painting convention. They are also set against a blue background, which is different from the rest of the scene on this side of the sarcophagus. Another man faces these three. He has no feet and looks posed like a sculpture, and it is thought this represents the deceased person. He wears a long hide robe with gold trim.



Hagia Triada sarcophagus (detail), c. 1400 B.C.E., limestone and fresco (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion) (photo: [Olaf Tausch](#), CC BY 3.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sarkophag_von_Agia_Triada_11.jpg>

Between the three men and the deceased is a set of three steps, perhaps an altar, which has some damage at the top. There is a tree above the altar, and it is possible (based on other images of similar altars) that it is supposed to be growing out from the altar itself. Behind the deceased is another structure, elaborately painted with running spirals and inlaid with veined stone. This is thought to be the tomb of the deceased.

Offerings and altars

On the opposite side of the sarcophagus, there are another seven figures—six female and one male. Beginning again from the left, we are met with a large patch of damage which only leaves the legs and feet of two pairs of women, all with elaborate long robes, moving to the right.



Hagia Triada sarcophagus (detail), c. 1400 B.C.E., limestone and fresco (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion) (photo: [Olaf Tausch](#), CC BY 3.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sarkophag_von_Agia_Triada_03.jpg>



Hagia Triada sarcophagus, c. 1400 B.C.E., limestone and fresco, 1.375 x .45 x .985 m (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion) (photo: [Carole Raddato](#), CC BY-SA 2.0) <<https://flic.kr/p/NFFWe6>>

A fifth female figure, fully visible, leads them, also well-dressed and wearing a lily crown. She is in full profile, with yellow hair, her arms stretched down towards to the ground. She and the four women behind her are all set in a bright yellow background. Moving to the left, the background color changes to white and against this is a male double-flute player wearing a short blue robe and long curls. He stands behind an offering table on which lies a trussed (tied up, usually in reference to an animal made for cooking) bull on its side, facing the viewer. Red streaks of blood can be seen coming from the bull's neck and pouring into a vessel that sits at the foot of the table. Beneath the table are two small goats, possibly awaiting a similar fate.

To the right of this large altar the background color changes to blue; a woman stands before another low altar wearing a hide skirt. This altar is decorated with a red and white running spiral design and on top sits a shallow grey bowl, possibly silver, above which floats in the field a painted beaked pitcher and a two-handled bowl with what appears to be round fruit—possibly all offerings. To the right of this altar is another pole, this one set in a red and white checked base, with a double axe and bird at the top. Lastly, in the field is an architectural structure, also with red and white running spirals and four pairs of horns on top and from which grows a great green tree.

No surface left undecorated

One of the short sides of the Hagia Triada sarcophagus has two scenes situated one on top of the other, while the opposite short side has only one scene. On the side with two scenes, the top one is almost entirely lost from damage but enough remains to indicate a procession of men in short pointed kilts of richly woven textiles. Beneath this scene is a horse-drawn chariot with an ox-hide carriage in which two women ride, both dressed in elaborate robes and one holding a whip.

On the other short side there is a griffin-drawn chariot with another pair of women riding in an ox-hide carriage also richly dressed and wearing pointed hats. The griffins (mythical animals that combine the physical aspects of a lion and an eagle) are multicolored and spread their wings, as if in flight; above them flies a bird in profile, moving in the opposite direction.



Hagia Triada sarcophagus (detail), c. 1400 B.C.E., limestone and fresco (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion) (photo: [Wolfgang Sauber](#), CC BY-SA 3.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AML_-_Sarg_von_Agia_Triada_5.jpg>

Surrounding all five of these scenes on the Hagia Triada sarcophagus are framing elements: rows of rosettes, bands of colors to imitate richly veined stone, running spirals with central rosettes, and colorful striped bands. It is colorfully painted from top to bottom.

Simple story, complex questions

In some ways what we see on the Hagia Triada sarcophagus is simple to understand: women and men in elite dress are busy making sacrifices and preparing the deceased for burial before his tomb. However, looking more deeply, many questions remain. How is it to be read? Is there a prescribed order to the images? What does the change in background color mean? Who exactly are these people—are they all priestesses and priests? Are they mythological characters? Who was the deceased? Was this a special sort of burial, or did everybody get this treatment? These are questions that have yet to be answered with confidence.

Additional resources:

[This work at the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion](http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=7913) <http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=7913>

11. Bull-leaping fresco from the palace of Knossos

Dr. Senta German



Bull-leaping fresco from the east wing of the palace of Knossos (reconstructed), c. 1400 B.C.E., fresco, 78 cm high (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion) (photo: Jebulon, CC0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bull_leaping_minoan_fresco_archmus_Heraklion.jpg>

Taking the bull by the horns

Bull sports—including leaping over them, fighting them, running from them, or riding them—have been practiced all around the globe for millennia. Perhaps the best-loved ancient illustration of this, called the bull-leaping or Toreador fresco, comes from the site of Knossos on the island of Crete. The wall painting, as it is now reconstructed, shows three people leaping over a bull: one person at its front, another over its back, and a third at its rear.

The image is a composite of at least seven panels, each .78 meters (about 2.5 feet) high. Fragments of this extensive wall painting were found very badly damaged in the fill above the walls in the Court of the Stone Spout, on the east side of the Central Court at Knossos. The fact that the paintings were found in fill indicates that this wall painting was destroyed as part of a renovation. The pottery which was found together with the fragments gives us its date, likely LM II (around 1400 B.C.E.).

Reconstructed but still incomplete

When Sir Arthur Evans, the first archaeologist to work at Knossos, found the fragments, he recognized them as illustrating an early example of bull sports, and he was eager to create a complete image that he could share with the world. He hired a well-known archaeological restorer, Émile Gilliéron, to create the image we know today from the largest bits of the seven panels. Unfortunately, it is impossible to reconstruct all of the original panels and to get a sense of the painting at all, we are left with Gilliéron's reconstruction.

Visual gymnastics

What we see is a freeze-frame of a very fast moving scene. The central image of the fresco as reconstructed is a bull charging with such force that its front and back legs are in midair. In front of the bull is a person grasping its horns, seemingly about to vault over it. The next person is in mid-vault, upside down, over the back of the bull, and the final person is facing the rear of the animal, arms out, apparently just having dismounted—“sticking the landing,” as they say in gymnastics.



*The Court of the Stone Spout, where the pieces of the fresco were found, from Sir Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos* (London, 1930), p. 270 (Universitäts-Bibliothek Heidelberg) <<http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/evans1930/0316>>*



Bull-leaping fresco from the east wing of the palace of Knossos (reconstructed), c. 1400 B.C.E., fresco, 78 cm high (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion) (photo: Andy Montgomery, CC BY-SA 2.0) <<https://flic.kr/p/29py4WQ>>

The people on either side of the bull, as reconstructed, bear markers of both male and female gender: they are painted white, which indicates a female figure according to ancient Egyptian gender-color conventions, which we know the Minoans also used. But both characters wear merely a loincloth, which is male dress. The hairstyle (curls at the top with locks falling down the back) is not uncommon in representations of both youthful males and females. Many interpretations of this gender crossing are possible, but there is little evidence to support one over another, unfortunately. At the very least, we can say that the representation of gender in the Late Aegean Bronze Age was fluid.



Bull-leaping fresco (detail) from the east wing of the palace of Knossos (reconstructed), c. 1400 B.C.E., fresco, 78 cm high (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion) (photo: Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0) <<https://flic.kr/p/MCMwXu>>

The person at the center of the action, vaulting over the bull's back, is painted brown, which indicates male gender according to ancient Egyptian gender-color conventions, and this makes sense considering his loincloth. It is interesting to note that the muscles of all three of the bull leapers, at their thighs and chests, have been very delicately articulated, accentuating their athletic build.



Bull-leaping fresco (detail) from the east wing of the palace of Knossos (reconstructed), c. 1400 B.C.E., fresco, 78 cm high (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion) (photo: Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0) <<https://flic.kr/p/NxowPJ>>



Bull-leaping fresco (detail) from the east wing of the palace of Knossos (reconstructed), c. 1400 B.C.E., fresco, 78 cm high (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion) (photo: Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0) <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/carolemage/30467261162>>

The background of the scene is blue, white, or yellow monochrome, and indicate no architectural context for the activity. Moreover, the seven panels and Gilliéron's composite reconstruction all show a

border of painted richly variegated stones overlapping in patches. So, it seems we are meant to see these scenes as abstracted action within frames, not part of a wider visual field or narrative.

A rite of passage?

The most interesting question about the bull leaping paintings from Knossos is what they might mean. We cannot understand the whole bull-leaping cycle in detail as it is so fragmentary, but we know that it covered a lot of wall space and a considerable amount of resources must have been expended to create it.

As mentioned above, many cultures across space and time have engaged in bull sports, and they all have a few things in common. First, these sports are life-threatening. To race, dance with, leap over, or kill a bull might very well get you killed. Second, these activities are usually performed before a crowd: they are a civic event, publicly presented and recorded in memory. Third, those who participate in these bull activities are often youths at an age when they are passing from childhood into adulthood and the achievement of the bull sport contributes to that passage. Anthropologists refer this sort of activity

as a “rite of passage,” which, when witnessed by one’s community, establishes the participant as an adult.

Therefore, we might surmise that the bull leaping scenes from Knossos refer to such a rite of passage ceremony. Many have identified the Central Court (Theatral area) just beyond the west façade of the palace at Knossos as locations where bull-leaping ceremonies might have taken place. We may never know the exact meaning of these paintings, but they continue to resonate with us today—not only because of their beauty and dynamism, but because they represent an activity that is still an important part of many cultures around the world.

Additional resources:

At the [Archaeological Museum of Heraklion](http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=7915) <http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=7915>

[Bulls and Bull-leaping in the Minoan World](https://www.penn.museum/documents/publications/expedition/PDFs/53-3/mcinerney.pdf) <<https://www.penn.museum/documents/publications/expedition/PDFs/53-3/mcinerney.pdf>>

12. Minoan woman or goddess from the palace of Knossos ("La Parisienne")

Dr. Senta German



Woman or goddess ("La Parisienne") from the Camp-Stool fresco, c.1350 B.C.E., western wing of the palace at Knossos, buon fresco, 20 cm high (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion)

"Parisian" from ancient Crete

This image of a young woman with a bright dress and curly hair is among the best known images in Minoan art. It is also one of the few representations of Minoan people rendered in color and detail, and it is a beautiful example of Minoan wall painting. Shortly after

it was first discovered at Knossos by Sir Arthur Evans (an English archaeologist who was the first to unearth the ruins at Knossos beginning in 1900), it was seen by Edmond Pottier, a famous art historian of Greek pottery, who likened her charming look to the contemporary women of Paris. She has been known as "La Parisienne" ever since.



Woman or goddess ("La Parisienne") from the Camp-Stool fresco, c.1350 B.C.E., western wing of the palace at Knossos, buon fresco, 20 cm high ([Archaeological Museum of Heraklion](http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=7916)) <http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=7916>

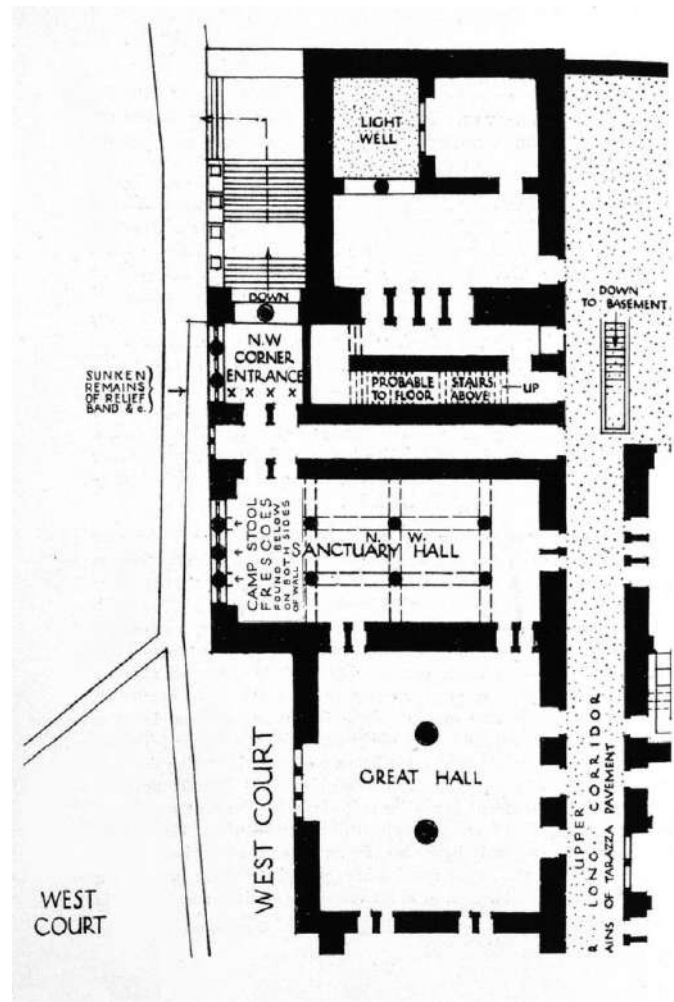
The sacred knot

Only La Parisienne's head and upper body are preserved. Her hair is black and curly, with one curl springing down onto her forehead and others cascading down her neck and upper back. Her skin is white, which is in imitation of the ancient Egyptian color convention (women painted white, men brown), and her large, darkly outlined eye also reminds us of Egyptian style, but her bright red lips are unique. She wears an elaborately woven blue and red striped dress, with a blue banded edge attached with red flecked loops. Tied to the back of the dress is a "sacred knot," as Evans first called it. This is a loop of long cloth tied with another loop at the nape of the neck, leaving a length of the cloth trailing down the back.

This is one of only two representations of a woman actually wearing a sacred knot, although the knots themselves are found on seals, painted on pottery, in other frescos, and rendered in ivory or faience. This knot is thought to designate the wearer as a holy person, so this Minoan woman may be a priestess.



The western wing of the palace at Knossos (photo: [tedbassman](https://flic.kr/p/noyfzv), CC BY 2.0) <<https://flic.kr/p/noyfzv>>



Sir Arthur J. Evans. Upper plan, northwest palace area, Knossos, from *The Palace of Minos* (London, 1935), p. 380 ([Universitäts-Bibliothek Heidelberg](http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/evans1935a)) <<http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/evans1935a>>

Found in fragments

The wall painting of which La Parisienne is a part was discovered heavily damaged and fallen from an upper story in the western wing of Knossos. It was painted in buon fresco (on wet plaster) as most



The Camp Stool fresco (reconstruction), c. 1350 B.C.E., from west wing of the palace of Knossos (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, Crete)

Minoan wall paintings were, and given its archaeological context is likely one of the last painted works of the palace, dating to LM III, the third part of the Late Minoan period (around 1350 B.C.E.). Specifically, this fragment was part of a two tiered scene that is about a half-meter (about 1.5 feet) wide, called the Camp Stool fresco (shown below as a reconstruction). Featured on both the top and bottom panels are pairs of men and women in profile sitting and standing and holding up elegant vessels. La Parisienne comes from one of the female pairs.

It has been suggested that the part of the palace of Knossos from which this painted scene fell was used for ceremonies and feasting; if this is true, subject matter depicting toasts being made would fit in

nicely. Whatever her original meaning, La Parisienne is an enduring testament to the skill of Minoan fresco painters.

Additional resources:

[At the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion](http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=7916) <http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=7916>

[Sir Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos* \(London, 1935\)](http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/evans1935a) <<http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/evans1935a>>

PART III

Mycenaean Art

Mycenaean culture flourished on the Greek mainland in the Late Bronze Age. The name comes from the site of Mycenae, where the culture was first recognized after the 1876 excavations by Heinrich Schliemann.

c. 1600 – 1100 B.C.E.

13. The "Palace" and Grave Circle A

A CONVERSATION

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



View of Mycenae, Mycenae, Greece, c. 1600-1100 B.C.E. (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the ruins of the citadel ("palace") at Mycenae, Greece.

Steven: We're on the top of a small mountain looking over a valley and the Aegean Sea.

Beth: At the citadel at Mycenae. Now, Mycenae is the name of this place, but that name also refers to the culture that dominated the Greek mainland between about 1600 and 1100 B.C.E. We have three

dominant cultures during the Bronze Age in the Mediterranean. We have Cycladic in the Cycladic Islands, Minoan on the island of Crete, and what we call Mycenaean culture here on the mainland.

Steven: This citadel was built at the height of Mycenaean power and was expanded several times.

Beth: You can see why they chose this spot. We're not only on a mountain, but we're overlooking a vast valley. They chose a site that

would allow them to view any potential enemies from very far away and be very well prepared, and there are also enormous walls here.

Steven: This was also on a direct route between the Aegean and the Gulf of Corinth, which would have been a critical spot in trade between, say, Italy and the Near East.

Beth: Mycenaen merchants traded goods all over the Mediterranean, from the Near East all the way to Spain.

Steven: We've walked up a steep hill and passed through a huge wall of enormous boulders and under the Lion Gate. To our right we passed Grave Circle A, which was enclosed when the city walls were expanded and then we walked up a steep series of pathways to the palace itself.



"Palace" entry, Mycenae, Greece, c. 1600-1100 B.C.E. (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: What we think was the palace, but here at the top we see a series of rooms and the final room is called the megaron. We think this was an audience hall for the King.

Steven: You pass into a large courtyard. At the far end we can just make out the bases of what were two substantial columns that would have supported a porch covering and if you passed under that you would walk into a vestibule.



"Palace" porch, Mycenae, Greece, c. 1600-1100 B.C.E. (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Then from there into the megaron. In the center of the megaron were four columns and a hearth.

Steven: This is an architectural arrangement that we find repeated in other Mycenaen citadels.

Beth: This was only rediscovered in the nineteenth century by a German businessman named Heinrich Schliemann. He was convinced that much of what Homer wrote had some basis in history.

Steven: And Homer associates Mycenae with gold.

Beth: So, you can imagine why Schliemann wanted to find this legendary city, and they did find Mycenae.

Steven: And they did find gold.



Bronze and gold swords and knives from Grave Circle A, Mycenae, c. 1600-1100 B.C.E. (National Archaeological Museum, Athens) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: In fact, in Grave Circle A—which we passed by—Schliemann excavated the shaft graves there and Mycenaen elite were buried with fabulously rich objects.

Steven: It turns out that this was not coincident with Homer's epics and in fact dates to a slightly earlier period. So, when we see titles like, "The Gold Mask of Agamemnon," we really need to take that with a grain of salt.

Beth: Right. They did ascribe the names from Homer to what he found.

Steven: And this became a real sensation.

Beth: Should we go down and have another look at Grave Circle A and the nearby Lion Gate?



Lion Gate, Mycenae, c. 1300-1250 B.C.E., limestone, Mycenae, Greece (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Grave Circle A, Mycenae, Greece, c. 1600-1100 B.C.E. (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Let's do it. As we walk down the hill, to our left we pass a very large grave circle. Archaeologists refer to this as Grave Circle A.

Beth: And this is one of the grave circles that had shaft graves. Most of which were excavated by Schliemann's team.

Steven: And was originally outside of the city walls, but was enclosed by the city around 1250 B.C.E. The circle itself is comprised of a series of large limestone blocks that are relatively flat and that were covered with other slabs so that you had this enclosed space that circles the graves themselves.

Beth: And so this lovely circular shape gives us an idea of how important this space was. There were perhaps ideas of honoring the ancestors that were buried here.

Steven: But for all of its former grandeur, these are ruins. All we've got left are the foundations and some of the walls. Mycenaean culture as a whole fell into a dark age, and citadels like this were destroyed.

Watch the video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=87&v=S7HJB0PtW0>



View of Mycenae, Greece, c. 1600-1100 B.C.E. (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

14. Mask of Agamemnon

A CONVERSATION

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

"I have gazed into the face of Agamemnon," boasted the man who discovered it—but is it really the Homeric hero?



Mask of Agamemnon, from shaft grave V, Grave Circle A, Mycenae, c.1550-1500 B.C.E., gold, 12" / 35 cm (National Archaeological Museum, Athens) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: We're looking at a gold mask, that Heinrich Schliemann (excavator of Troy and Mycenae) referred to as, "Agamemnon." He actually, when this was on earth, said, "I have gazed into the face of Agamemnon." Now, Agamemnon was the great Greek hero of Homer's *Iliad*.

Steven: We know now that this is not Agamemnon, but what a great publicity stunt. What we do have, is an enormous cache of gold objects, from the grave circles, where we found many bodies, surrounded by precious objects. And, in a number of cases, a figure would be wearing a gold mask.

Beth: They were found fastened to the faces of the deceased people in these graves.

Steven: And if you look closely, just next to the ear, you can see small holes, where we think there was some sort of string, that kept it fast to the face.

Beth: Now there are two grave circles at Mycenae, that Schliemann found and excavated: Grave Circle A, and then also Grave Circle B. Now Schliemann was a businessman, and a kind of amateur archaeologist, so, some art historians have questions, especially of the one very fine mask that he referred to as, "Agamemnon."

Steven: There's speculation that Schliemann may have over-restored it, and made it a little more attractive to nineteenth-century sensibilities.

Beth: But, there's also many art historians and archaeologists who find this completely authentic, so, we just want to have a little bit of caution.

Steven: What we do know, is that the vast majority of the cache that was found is authentic, and gives us our clearest understanding of this Bronze Age culture. The technique that was used here, is a hammering of the gold, so that it becomes very thin, and very flat. And then, it was probably hammered against a wooden mold, in order to create the kind of sculptural form that we see.

Beth: Schliemann worked on these two grave circles, which had many shaft graves in them, and in those shaft graves, buried with, what were obviously very important, powerful families, were enormous amounts of gold objects, not only these gold masks, but also necklaces, bracelets, cups, boxes, crowns, breast plates.



Grave Circle A, Mycenae, Greece, c. 1600-1100 B.C.E. (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Gold artifacts from Grave Circle A at Mycenae, Greece, c. 1600-1100 B.C.E. (National Archaeological Museum, Athens) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: There were also swords and daggers; the estimate is that there was some thirty pounds of gold that were found.

Beth: Well, and it's important to think about where Mycenae is; Mycenae is a citadel: fortified, palace, hilltop. and it overlooks a vast valley. The citadel of Mycenae gives its name to this entire culture on the mainland, that we call Mycenaean, because this culture dominated the mainland of Greece, and traded far and wide across the Mediterranean.

Steven: Right, Mycenae is one of the three primary cultures of Ancient Aegean culture, that is, these Bronze Age cultures that come before the ancient Greece that we all know of, of the Parthenon, of the Greek Gods, etc. This is the period that was the stuff of legend to the Greeks that we know better. What we know of Mycenaean culture comes from these physical artifacts, from the citadel itself, from their various other outposts, and from these treasures. And that's because there was so little writing that we have discovered. There was a little bit of what we call, "Linear B" script, but we do not have the kinds of records that we have from ancient Egypt, or that we have from Mesopotamia.

Beth: Some art historians and archaeologists have referred to this culture as being, "warlike," especially in opposition to Minoan culture, which is seen to be more peaceful.

Steven: Well there are reasons for this: For one thing, Mycenaeans lived in heavily-fortified cities, whereas the Minoans had great palaces that were much less fortified. We find a lot of weapons, but whether or not that was offensive or defensive, we don't know.

Beth: So it's very hard to make generalizations, I think, about the character of these people.

Steven: But one can only imagine the kind of extraordinary delight, when Schliemann unearthed these graves.

[Watch the video.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=231&v=1PKOiYY9SPA) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=231&v=1PKOiYY9SPA>



Bronze and gold swords and knives from Grave Circle A, Mycenae, c. 1600-1100 B.C.E. (National Archaeological Museum, Athens) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

15. The Treasury of Atreus

A CONVERSATION

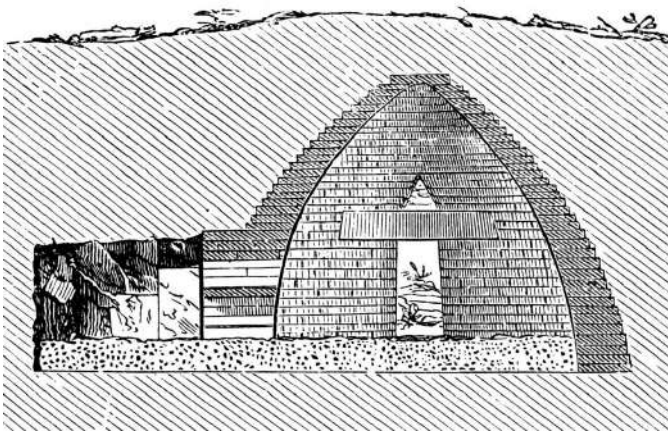
Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Treasury of Atreus amid the Mycenaean ruins in Greece.

Steven: Just down the hill from Mycenae, the great citadel or “palace” of the Mycenaeans (the Bronze Age Greek mainland people that traded as far away as Italy and north Africa), there is an enormous tomb, which is sometimes known as the Treasury of Atreus.

Beth: Or the tomb of Agamemnon.

Steven: The type of tomb that we’re looking at is called a tholos or a beehive tomb. And this is one of two types of tombs at Mycenae. These are the larger of the two types. The other are shaft graves within a larger circle. But the tholos are truly monumental, and this is the largest of them all.



Cross section of the Treasury of Atreus, from Wilhelm Lübke / Max Semrau: *Grundriß der Kunstgeschichte*. 14. Auflage. Paul Neff Verlag, Esslingen, 1908 (public domain)

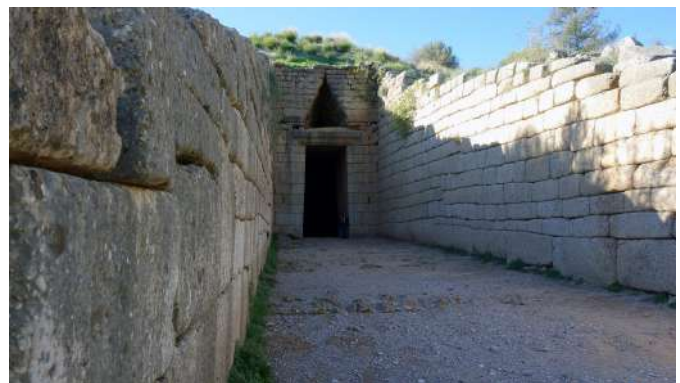
Beth: And these date to a slightly later period of Mycenaean history, and they are clearly expressions of power—the ruling elite were buried in tholos tombs.



The Treasury of Atreus, Mycenae, c. 1300-1250 B.C.E. (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: We’re going to walk in, walking along a passageway that’s built into the side of the hill with huge blocks of stone that have been cut quite finely and fit together very closely. Some of the stones are of such a large scale that it’s hard to imagine people being able to move them.

Beth: Right now, it looks very spare, but this had carvings...



The Treasury of Atreus, Mycenae, c. 1300-1250 B.C.E. (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: It may have had relief sculpture. And there were also finer kinds of more decorative stone. Okay, I can't wait. Let's go in. We're now entering the dromos, which is the entrance pathway.

Beth: The walls on either side rise above us, giving an unmistakable impression of a grand monumental space.

Steven: It's ceremonial, and it feels as if we are entering the earth. There's a slight grade upward.

Beth: The entranceway, it tapers inward as it moves up. Look at that deep and heavy lintel stone that moves back through that doorway.



Exterior lintel, Treasury of Atreus, c. 1300-1250 B.C.E., Mycenae, Greece (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: It's made out of two pieces, and we estimate that it weighs over 100 tons.

Beth: So the kind of vaulting that we see above the lintel is called corbelling—where the stones are cut and placed so that each one, as it moves up, moves slightly inward, creating this triangular space above the lintel known as the relieving triangle (relieves weight on that lintel). At the Lion Gate in Mycenae, that space is filled with a relief sculpture.



Exterior relieving triangle and lintel, Treasury of Atreus, c. 1300-1250 B.C.E., Mycenae, Greece (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: We don't think *this* was, but again, there were complex stones that would have faced this rougher masonry and we know that at least some of it was imported from Egypt.

Beth: Right. There were columns on either side that were decorated. Some of these are located now in the Archaeological Museum in Athens.

Steven: And there were very complex patterns. There were zig-zags, there were spirals ...

Beth: Chevrons.



Pilaster fragment, Treasury of Atreus, c. 1300-1250 B.C.E., Mycenae, Greece (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: It was a really ornate space. An enormous amount of treasure was expended to make this.

Beth: And we know that the Mycenaean people buried considerable treasure with their dead. These tombs, though, have been robbed.

Steven: We're now at the threshold, and we can feel the coolness of the interior space. It's empty, it's dark, and it's massive.

Beth: And it's long. This entryway is 10 or 15 feet deep.

Steven: As we enter into the domical space itself, we are in a round chamber, which beside the entranceway and the actual burial chamber to the right, is completely circular. Some architectural historians have hypothesized that there may have been carved bulls around the bottom, but it rises to an enormous height above us.



Corbelled vault, Treasury of Atreus, c. 1300-1250 B.C.E., Mycenae, Greece (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: So this is a real engineering achievement, to create a domical-vaulted space this high and this wide. This is not post and lintel architecture, but the creation of round, arched spaces.

Steven: In fact, this will be the largest domical space until the Pantheon in Rome (c.125 C.E.)



Pantheon dome, Rome, c. 125 C.E. (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: ...more than 1,000 years later.

Steven: And it is using that corbelling technique. So each of these stones pushes inward ever-so-slightly and is cut at an angle, so that you have this smooth transition up to the apex with a cap stone. The width and height of the space are almost equal, so there really is a sense of perfection here. A sense of the ideal.



Interior, Treasury of Atreus, c. 1300-1250 B.C.E., Mycenae, Greece (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: It's obvious that this circular space—this enormous vault—has symbolic meaning for the powerful person who is buried here.

[Watch the video.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cc9cLmgXp_A) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cc9cLmgXp_A>

16. Lion Gate, Mycenae

A CONVERSATION

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the citadel, or “palace,” of Mycenae, Greece.



Lion Gate, Mycenae, c. 1300-1250 B.C.E., limestone, relief panel, 9' 6" high, Mycenae, Greece, c. 1600-1100 B.C.E. (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: The approach to Mycenae is substantial, and if you were not a friend, it was going to be tough to get in. Mycenae is one the great citadels of Mycenaean culture, that is, this Bronze Age culture on mainland Greece that traded throughout the Mediterranean and became quite wealthy and quite powerful between the years of about 1600 and 1100 B.C.E.

Beth: Right, and there were several cultures that thrived in this area during the Bronze Age period. One being Cycladic, located on the Cycladic Islands. Another being Minoan culture, which was the on the island of Crete. Here, on the mainland, we refer to Mycenaean culture, named after the most powerful of the Mycenaean City States—and that is Mycenae.

Steven: Mycenae is located on the top of a small mountain. It is a very steep approach and so it is naturally defensible. In fact, there are two larger mountains on the back, a huge valley leading down to the Aegean Sea in front. Just a glorious space, but also one where enemies' approach can be seen at a very great distance.

Beth: Walking up this ramp-way, we're surrounded by enormous blocks of stones that create very high walls on either side of us.

Steven: In fact, they're so large that they were known as "Cyclopean masonry." That is, only the giant Cyclops was large enough to move stones this big.

Beth: Right. The Cyclops was a legendary giant from Homer's *Odyssey*. This became known as Cyclopean because who could imagine moving these massive stones?

Steven: I have to tell you, I can't imagine. As you said, we're surrounded by these walls on three sides, which means that we are completely unprotected. If we were an enemy approaching, it would be easy to rain arrows, spears, anything down on us.

Beth: Exactly. I would have felt very safe, I think, in the Mycenaean citadel. We're looking up at the famous so-called Lion Gate.

Steven: It is perched above a standard ancient building system of post and lintel. On both sides we have uprights—posts— and spanning it, across a horizontal, the lintel.



Lion Gate (back), Mycenae, c. 1300-1250 B.C.E., limestone, Mycenae, Greece, c. 1600-1100 B.C.E. (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Lion Gate relief, Mycenae, c. 1300-1250 B.C.E., limestone, panel: 9' 6" high, Mycenae, Greece, c. 1600-1100 B.C.E. (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: The Mycenaean architects wanted to build this wall very high, and they used a technique called corbelling. That is, they constructed the stones so that each successive higher layer moved in just slightly. That left this triangular space in the center right over the lintel.

Steven: The relief above the Lion Gate is the first monumental sculpture that we find on mainland Greece. Since we know what happens in ancient Greece and historical Greece much later, we can look back to this as art historians and say, "Here is the earliest representation that we find from Greece." This is, in a sense, the great grandfather of the extraordinary work that the Greeks will later produce at the Parthenon, and elsewhere.

Beth: In sculpture, absolutely.

Steven: Right, in sculpture and in architecture.

Beth: Here, we have two animals facing one another. Their forepaws seem to be on two altar-like tables and between them is a column that seems to get wider as it moves upward.

Steven: Now, that's opposite to the way we understand Greek architecture at a later period, but it is very similar to the way that the Minoans constructed their architecture. So archaeologists often look at this and say, "This is a Minoan style column."

Beth: We know that the Minoans really influenced Mycenaean culture, so this makes sense. That capital also is reminiscent of Minoan culture.

Steven: Now, just below the capital archaeologists have hypothesized that the two blocks that the animals have their forepaws on and that the column rest on are two altars. These are also of Minoan form we think. Of course, we have no written records. We really have no solid evidence for any kind of interpretation. But that hasn't stopped

archaeologists and art historians from making a lot of very clever guesses about what this might represent.

Beth: Well, we do have objects from Mycenae. We have objects that were found in the graves. It does help us to conjecture what these animals were and what their lost heads looked like.

Steven: We can guess that the lost heads turned outward, because of the way the dowel holes are placed in the stone.

Beth:and that they were likely of a different material, placed on to the bodies of these animals.



Lion Gate relief (detail of altars), Mycenae, c. 1300-1250 B.C.E., limestone, panel: 9' 6" high, Mycenae, Greece, c. 1600-1100 B.C.E. (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Lion Gate relief, Mycenae, c. 1300-1250 B.C.E., limestone, panel: 9' 6" high, Mycenae, Greece, c. 1600-1100 B.C.E. (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: And at least one scholar has suggested that they might have been bird heads—and that these might have been griffins and that the composite nature of the animal might also be reflected by the composite nature of the materials. Again, these are guesses.

Beth: What do the animals mean? What does the column mean? What do the altars mean? Why are they up on their forepaws? You can see all the questions that arise.

Steven: There is a tradition of having powerful animals standing guard at a gate, and so we might think of these as warding off evil. Also as a terrifying representation that might scare off and frighten enemies.

Beth: If they had that kind of supernatural power, we might also conjecture that the column has meaning as well. And we know that in some cases, columns could represent deities. Now, it also could be that the columns just represent a city or the idea of the king.

Steven: Well, the column is above the altar, so there is that sense of divinity that seems logical. The fact that there are two altars has led some scholars to suggest that perhaps this has to do with the becoming together of two cultures. Again, these are all conjectures.

Beth: These animals do have leonine bodies, or bodies like lions.

Steven: Or lionesses.

Beth: And they are sculpted with great subtlety. I get a sense of the muscles in the legs of the lions and the kind of subtle modeling of the anatomy of these animals.

Steven: There's something else that's going on here. These are not animals that are represented as animals are naturally. That is, they're not on all forepaws. They are standing upright, they are becoming human-like. There is a nobility.

Beth: It's hard not to think that these also speak to the power of the king who resided inside these Cyclopean walls.

Steven: Here, now, at the end of 2013, the sense of power and majesty is clear to me. One can only imagine how this felt to somebody in 1250 B.C.E.

Watch the video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tu5mKn3_h7Y>



Lion Gate, interior walls, Mycenae, c. 1300-1250 B.C.E., Mycenae, Greece, c. 1600-1100 B.C.E. (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Acknowledgements

Book cover design by Susan Zucker.

Special thanks Dr. Joseph Ugoretz for continuing to be our guide in academic technology and strategy, to Susan Zucker for shaping Smarthistory's design, and to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation.