

Figure 2.18 An example of the range of building materials used by Minoan architects

- Sun-dried bricks held in timber frames and plastered over were used for upper storeys because they were lighter.
- Timber was used for tapering columns, as bracing for walls, for horizontal beams and vertical posts, for flooring on upper floors and windows and doors.

The advanced technology of the Minoans

can be seen particularly in the drainage and sanitary engineering:

- Storm water from roofs and paved courts was carried away by an elaborate system of clay pipes and curved drains that slowed the run-off.
- Water was kept off staircases by deep runnels that paralleled the fall of the steps and emptied into small settling tanks.
- Toilets comprised a wooden seat suspended over channels and sewage was flushed away with run-off water.

TASK

- 1 What is:
 - a *pithos*
 - a thalassocracy
 - saffron?
- 2 What do Figures 2.16 and 2.17 reveal about the importance of the textile industry to the Minoan palace economy?
- 3 Describe Minoan trade with Egypt.
- 4 Draw a diagram or mind map showing the tools and technologies used by Minoans in their various crafts and industries.

RELIGION, DEATH AND BURIAL

The lack of written sources and the fragmentary nature of the archaeological remains make it difficult to really understand the Minoans' religious beliefs. It appears that:

- they had a rich and vibrant religious life
- they were polytheistic, although a female goddess was central to their religion
- they saw supernatural forces all around them that controlled the natural world such as weather and fertility
- they believed that the human soul survived death
- priestesses played a vital role in religious life
- their gods and practices changed over the millennia
- at different times there were deities associated with various areas and communities.

However, just how they saw their

supernatural world and a possible afterlife, and the exact identity of their gods, is not clear.

Nature and identity of deities

N. Marinatos in *Minoan Religion: Ritual Image and Symbol* suggests that the Minoans worshipped a small pantheon that comprised a Great Goddess, daughter goddesses, a son or male consort and a male deity represented by a bull. Some scholars believe, however, that the various goddesses, such as the so-called 'snake goddess', 'tree goddess' and 'mistress of animals', were just different forms of the Great Goddess. Others think that over time, as in Egypt, goddesses blended together adopting each other's attributes. If this were the case, it is difficult to identify the various deities.

The Great Goddess (Mother Goddess) mentioned in the later archives was referred



to as Potnia or Lady of the Labyrinth whose symbols were the double-axe, the pillar and the snake.

There are gold signet rings depicting a woman who is shown larger than the figures of others. For example:

- 1 A large woman sits under a tree with two females bringing her poppies, and a tiny male figure in the background is dressed as a warrior. This young inferior male deity might have taken the role of son or consort to the goddess. He might have been the one called Velchanos.
- 2 Two large males dance on either side of an even larger woman.

Female goddess representations

One of the earliest representations of a goddess, found at Myrtos on the south coast of Crete and dated to c. 2500–2300 BC, was in the form of a pregnant woman. This was possibly a local fertility goddess.

The so-called Snake Goddess was depicted in faience and ivory statuettes. The most famous of these, with snakes coiled around her arms and body, is dated to c. 1600 BC.

Inscribed on a sealstone is an image of a goddess on a mountain flanked by lions or lionesses and referred to as the Mistress of the Animals. Perhaps this is the goddess referred to as Britomartis who had a subordinate male companion (son, brother or consort) shown as a master of animals. This goddess, referred to as a hunter and protector of wild things that lived in the mountains, is shown with spear and shield. She and her consort might have been associated with peak sanctuaries.

A number of stylised figurines known as ‘Goddess with upraised arms’, and dated to c. 1400, were found around Knossos. Unlike the naturalism of the snake goddesses, these were rigid cylinders, crudely painted, with raised arms, exaggerated hands and necks and harsh and ugly faces.¹² The common feature was the upraised arms that appear to be a form of blessing, but they wore different headdresses: a poppy, a dove, a snake and flowers. The so-called Poppy Goddess, found at the mountaintop sanctuary of Karphi, was 79 centimetres tall with slashed poppies on her head (as if the opium had already been released). Was this associated with some drug-induced ritual? Another had a dove on her head, possibly a symbol of her control over the realm of the sky.



In the Post Palace Period there was a goddess of the caves, associated with childbirth and the Underworld, known as Eleuthia. Her sanctuary was the cave at Amnisos, south of Knossos.

Religious symbols

Double-axe – labrys

The double-axe, like the bull, is the symbol most associated with Minoan religion. Although its significance is uncertain, it is likely to have been associated with the sacrifice of a bull. Double-axes are sometimes shown painted on pottery above a bull’s head, and are prominent on the Aghia Triada sarcophagus associated with a bull sacrifice. They were made in all sizes and materials – bronze, gold, lead and stone – as well as painted in frescoes, on pottery and inscribed on stone walls at Knossos. Large ones are often shown mounted in special holders in sacred places. The oldest double-axe so far excavated was found at Mochlos and dated to c. 2500 BC. A fresco at Knossos shows axes stuck into a wooden column, suggesting the act of placing them in stalactite crevices in cave sanctuaries. A mould found at Palaikastro shows a goddess or priestess holding aloft double-axes in each hand, perhaps indicating that it was a symbol of a powerful female deity.

Bulls and Horns of Consecration

There is no doubt that the bull was important in Minoan myth (the story of the half-man, half-bull Minotaur) and religion (the most important of the sacrificial animals). It was also a potent symbol of strength and associated with earthquakes and tsunamis. Depictions of bulls have been found everywhere throughout

Figure 2.19 The snake goddess

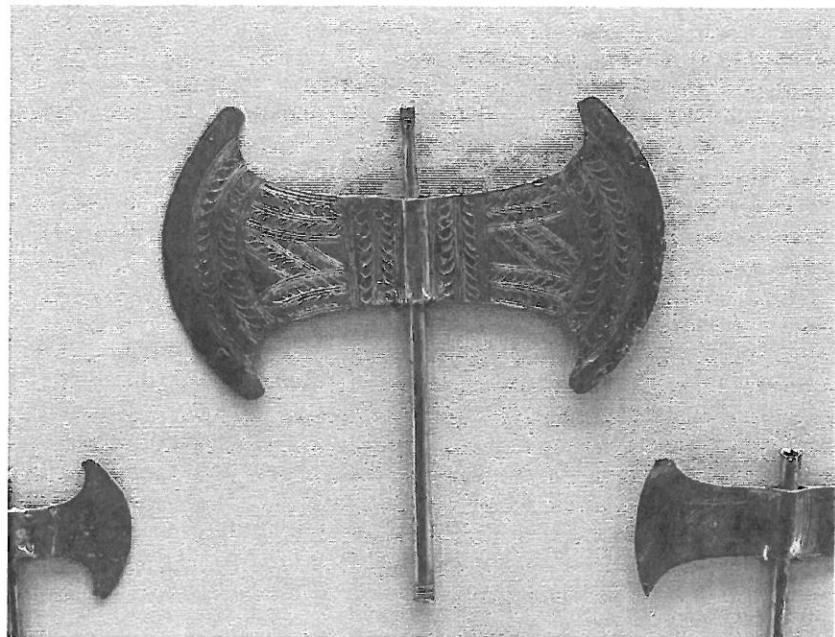


Figure 2.20 A labrys

Minoan Crete: representations of bull leaping and bull wrestling, votive figurines of bulls and *rhytons* in the shape of bulls.

Stone and plaster Horns of Consecration, believed to represent the horns of the bull, were found throughout Knossos. The largest, measuring 2.2 metres high, is believed to have once been on the western façade of the palace. If the 'Grandstand Fresco' is to be believed, these symbols decorated the roof of the palace. They also marked sacred spaces such as the 'theatrical area' of Knossos. Often a double-axe was inserted between the horns.

Snakes

In ancient agricultural societies, snakes were regarded as the protectors of the grain supply

and were also placated to prevent their bite. Because they lived in crevices, they were seen as the natural symbol of the earth and Underworld deities and – because they shed and regrew their skin – they were symbols of renewal and fertility. Goddesses and their devotees are shown with snakes encircling their arms and bodies. In Late Minoan times snake tubes were produced as domestic dwelling places for snakes.

Birds

Birds of all kinds, particularly doves, are represented in frescoes. It is unlikely that these birds are purely decorative as frescoes are predominantly ritualistic. Birds are thought to be epiphanies of deities. They are found as votive offerings, on the heads of goddess figurines, between Horns of Consecration and sitting on top of double-axes such as in the painting on the Aghia Triada sarcophagus.

Trees

Trees appear to have been symbols of life, renewal, rebirth and fertility, as well as having an association as 'divine birds' (incarnations of a goddess) who alighted in their branches. They are found depicted everywhere from frescoes and seals to gemstones. Often, a priestess is shown performing a ritual in front of a tree, and torn branches are shown laid on altars and planted between Horns of Consecration. The missing Mochlos Ring depicts a sacred tree growing from a shrine being ferried on the afterdeck of a boat.

Pillars and columns

Minoans regarded some inanimate objects such as pillars and special columns as incarnations of a deity. It has been suggested that these may have represented trees as well as the limestone stalagmites and stalactites in cave sanctuaries. In many palaces and large villas special rooms were set aside as pillar crypts.

Sacral knots

A sacral knot was comprised of a piece of striped and fringed cloth knotted in a loop in the middle and worn by priestesses. The best example is that depicted on the famous fresco at Knossos known as La Parisienne (see p. 70).

Figure 2.21
The Horns of
Consecration at
Knossos





TASK

- 1 What is the meaning of:
 - a polytheistic
 - b epiphany
 - c labrys?
- 2 Suggest why Horns of Consecration were placed throughout the Palace of Knossos.
- 3 Provide evidence for the apparent predominance of Minoan goddesses.

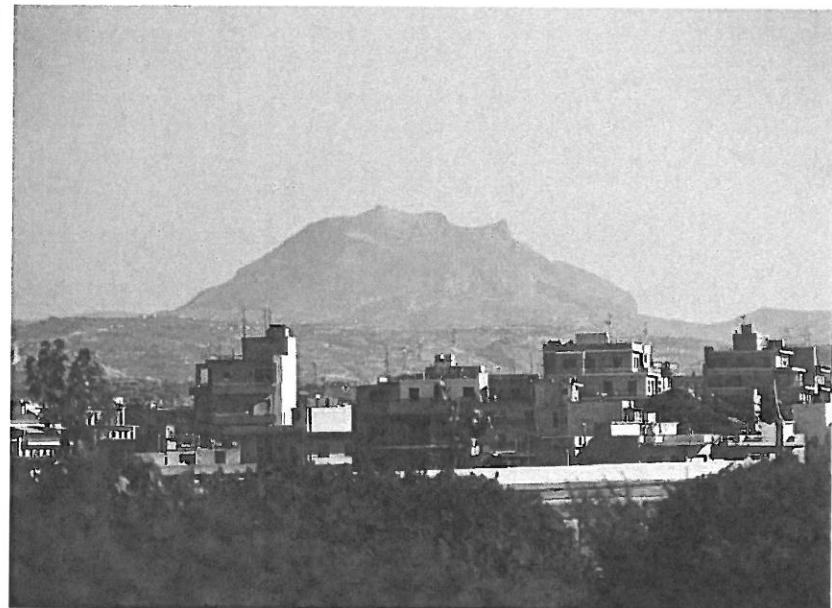
Religious places

Peak sanctuaries

Like many ancient people, especially pastoral societies, it appears that the Minoans believed that deities resided or appeared on mountaintops and were associated with the vagaries of weather that occurred on these windswept heights. These sites were propitious for meetings with the gods and were frequented regularly by nomadic pastoralists who followed their herds and flocks to the higher pastures during summer.

Long before the first temples appeared on the lowlands, the Minoans built shrines and worshipped gods on the more accessible mountains. Although these are referred to as peak sanctuaries, they were usually only at heights between 215–1200 metres above sea level (Mt Juktas at 775 metres and Mt Pyrgos at 685 metres). The highest, at 1185 metres, was at Karphi. Most peak sanctuaries were no more than an hour's walk from villages. Some were in direct line of sight from nearby palaces, the most important being the sanctuary on Mt Juktas 13 kilometres southwest of Knossos. Only Mt Juktas remained in operation at the end of the Late Palace Period.

These sacred enclosures, of which only 35 have been positively identified, varied in appearance from place to place. Some were simply open spaces surrounded by a stone wall, others comprised a number of buildings, while still others had elaborately carved or painted shrines, paved terraces, tall bracketed masts, and walls and balustrades with sacral horns. L. V. Watrous, in 'Some Observations on Minoan Peak Sanctuaries', said that 'the differences might represent different functions: healing, fertility and rites of passage'.¹³



Despite their design differences, the votive offerings were much the same: models of cattle, oxen, sheep and goats; figures of females with sacral garments; and lamps and libation vessels. There were also the remains of animal sacrifice and cultic meals.

Caves

Due to their otherworldly and mysterious atmosphere, Minoans regarded caves as the abode of the chthonic earth deities. But not all caves in Crete, of which there are approximately 2000, were religious sites. Only 16 of those explored and documented were cultic centres. They had to fulfil certain requirements like those at Skotino and Psychro. They needed to:

- be reached after a steep climb as a physical test of a worshipper's devotion
- be large and deep
- have an awe-inspiring atmosphere of stalagmite and stalactite formations that might have suggested monsters, demons and deities to pilgrims
- have rock pools. The lower chamber of Skotino had a pool that at its widest was 20 metres. Votive offerings were found in the silt floor of this pool.

Cult activities associated with animal and human fertility, female maturation and male initiation such as sacrifices, pyres, dancing and feasting, were performed in the areas outside the cave entrances.

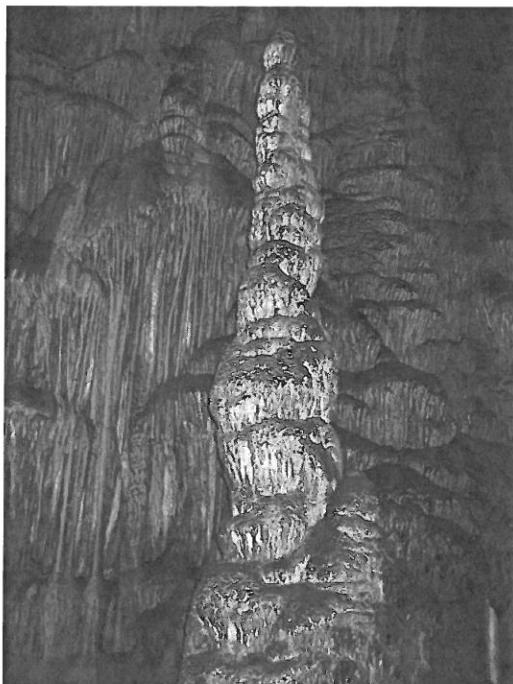
Figure 2.22 Mt Juktas, the site of one of the most important peak sanctuaries in the Minoan world, within sight of ancient Knossos and modern Heraklion

chthonic
relating to the underground or Underworld



Figure 2.23 A cave sanctuary

Figure 2.24 A pillar crypt at Phaistos

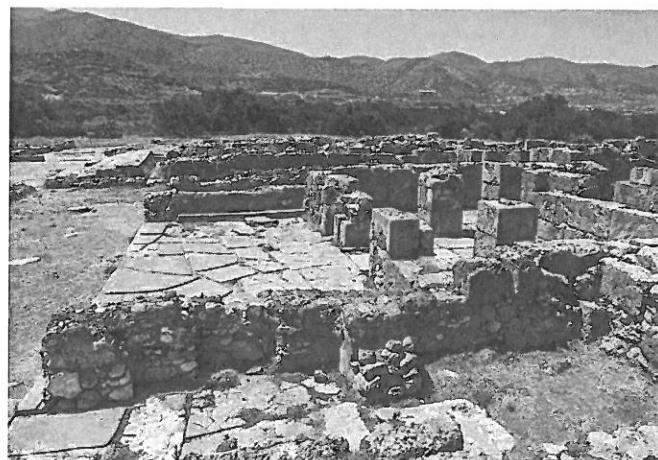
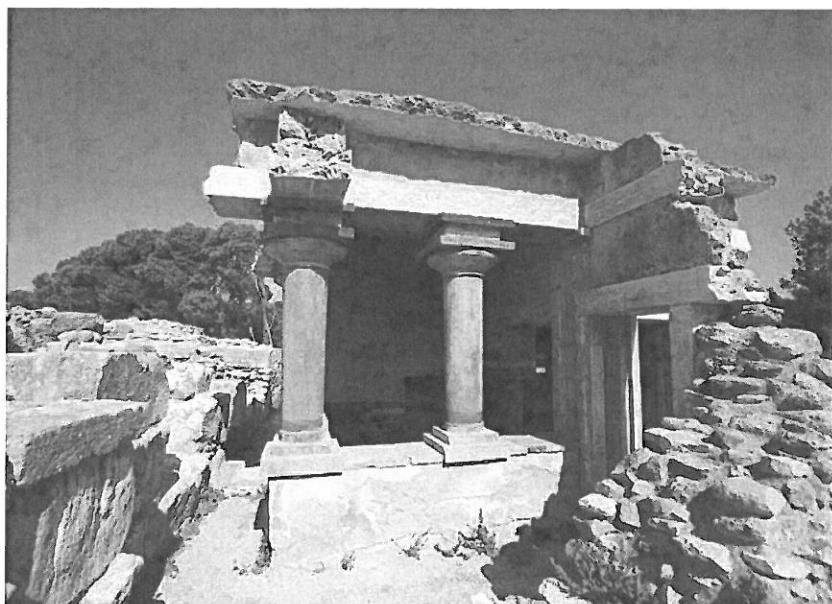


Pillar crypts

adyton (pl. *adyta*)
a ritual bath for
purification

Figure 2.25 The adyton at Knossos on the north side of the palace

As a way of replicating the distant cave sanctuaries with their stalagmites and stalactites, pillar crypts were constructed deep within the palace complexes and large villas. In Knossos there were two rooms with pillars engraved with double-axes and shallow depressions on either side of the pillars, presumably for libations to the pillars. Since pillar crypts were often near storage



magazines, it is possible that they were associated with harvest festivals.

Palace shrines

In the palaces were small sunken rectangular 'rooms' or 'basins' entered via a number of stairs. Such a space is known as an *adyton*. Arthur Evans believed they were lustral basins for ritual purification, but since there was no facility for drainage with which the Minoans were familiar, and these basins were lined with gypsum, which is water soluble, Evans' interpretation has been challenged.

From the evidence of the Grandstand Fresco at Knossos, painted pottery, other artefacts and excavated sites at Knossos, Gournia and Vathy Petro, it appears that Tripartite Shrines were a familiar Minoan form, although it is impossible to know what activities were carried out before them.

TASK

- 1 What is an *adyton*?
- 2 Why were peaks and caves sacred Minoan sites?

Religious practices

The details of Minoan religious practices are the subject of conjecture. Not much can be said with any certainty.

Goddess epiphanies

W. D. Niemeier in 'The Function of the "Throne Room" in the Palace of Knossos' has suggested, along with other scholars, that the

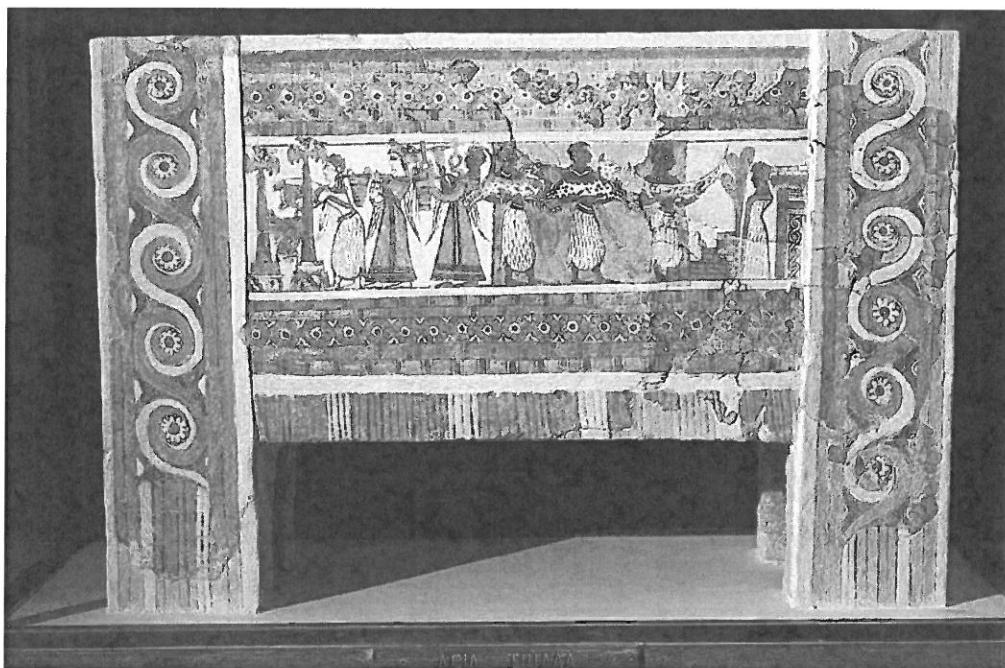


Figure 2.26
A sacrifice and
sacrificial animals
on the Aghia Triada
sarcophagus

'Throne Room' was a centre where a dramatic epiphany was staged. A priestess, dressed as a goddess and seated on the throne, flanked by griffins, received offerings as the epiphany of the Great Goddess.

There are many images of religious ceremonies which show epiphanies of a goddess. Often she is a small figure appearing as if in the distance, behind or above a group of ecstatically dancing priestesses. Sometimes the goddess appears in the midst of the priestesses manifesting as one of their number. We should visualize a common form of religious ceremony in which a group of priestesses sang, danced, chanted and performed sacrifices and other rituals, as a preamble to a climactic event in which the leading priestess ... called the 'goddess impersonator' actually became the goddess.

R. CASTLEDEN, *THE MINOANS: LIFE IN BRONZE AGE CRETE*, P. 132

Sacrifices

One of the most informative sources of evidence for animal sacrifices, apart from blood-stained altars and animal remains in

the ashes of ceremonial pyres, is the Aghia Triada sarcophagus. It shows the sacrifice of a bull, officiated by a priestess and the draining of the bull's blood. Two smaller animals are being carried to the tomb and two trussed-up kids lie beneath a table. The best animals were offered to the deities in return for a blessing.

The Minoans appear to have resorted to human sacrifice only rarely when they were confronting a natural catastrophe or suffering social distress. Perhaps the myth of youths being fed to the Minotaur was a memory of human sacrifice in the distant past.

In the late 1970s, Yannis and Effie Sakellarakis excavated a small three-roomed temple dated c. 1700 (First Palace Period) at Anemospilia on the side of Mt Juktas, proving that human sacrifice did occur periodically. What they discovered was the moment of death of a sacrificed youth of about 18, and the almost immediate death thereafter of what are thought to have been a priestess, priest and a serving attendant by means of an earthquake. Perhaps it was recurring seismic activity that the Minoans believed necessitated a human sacrifice at that time.

In the central room were two clay feet, the remains of a life-sized wooden idol (its gender unknown) and 400 pottery vessels and offerings placed on both sides of the idol. In a room to the right was the body of the

Figure 2.27 Votive offerings



sistrum
a rattle used to accompany singing

young sacrificial victim lying on a rectangular platform with his legs bent as if he had been bound. A long incised bronze knife lay beside the body. Someone had cut his throat and collected his blood in a basin to be presented to the idol in the central room. At this point the earthquake struck and the three celebrants were killed by fallen blocks.

Votive offerings

A votive offering is a small object given, offered or dedicated at a scared place in connection with a vow or promise to a god. These fall into a number of categories depending on what the supplicant is asking for, such as: health (moulds of hands, legs and parts of the body); fertility (figurines of a pregnant woman or a copulating couple); protection and fertility of livestock (models of animals); prosperity in a craft (tools); and success in a male initiation rite or in war (miniature swords, daggers and shields).

Feasts and dances

There is strong evidence for large-scale ritual feasting (remains of jugs, cups and dishes



Figure 2.28 A larnax

at Knossos) and sacred dancing (frescoes at Knossos; a clay model of four women dancing arm in arm; and ecstatic dancing depicted on two gold rings).

Processions

Ritual processions are suggested by the raised walkways excavated at Knossos, Mallia and Phaistos, as well as the scenes depicted on the Harvester Vase and in the heavily restored Procession Fresco from Knossos. In the former, a priest wearing a distinctive cloak and accompanied by a musician playing a sistrum, leads a procession of farmers carrying winnowing forks. It is probably a celebratory procession for the harvest. The latter depicts two lines of male worshippers taking offerings to a female goddess/priestess. The proximity of the raised palace walkways to the grain storage areas suggest that these processions were of an agricultural nature.

Lustrations, libations and offerings

Areas (*adyta*) for ritual purification or cleansing (lustration) have been found in the palaces at Knossos and Zakros. Libations are liquids poured on the ground as an offering to the gods and spirits in pillar crypts. Offering tables found in palaces and large villas have small indentations for seeds, fruits, grain, pulses and honey.

Funerary customs and practices

Judging by the possessions and objects of value found in those tombs that have not been robbed (jewellery and weapons), and the remains of libations and offerings of food, it appears that the Minoans believed in some form of an afterlife.

They disposed of their dead by burial (inhumation) rather than cremation, the bodies placed in large *pithoi* or in decorated clay chests called *larnakes*. Some of these were large enough for several burials. N. Marinatos believed the painted designs of forests and mountains on the outside were meant to represent the landscape of the afterlife. The use of *larnakes* became more common over time; however, some bodies were simply laid on wooden biers or beds.

Burials were communal rather than individual, although archaeologists don't know if these group burials comprised extended families or clans.



Cemeteries and tombs were used over and over again. This was possible because once the flesh was removed from the bones they were discarded, or collected and neatly stacked in ossuaries or ‘bone houses’. It seems that skulls were regarded as objects of reverence and the only part of the body worth keeping.

The communal cemetery at Mochlos was one of the largest and most important from the early Bronze Age. Another important cemetery was at Phourni near Arkhanes, but because its burials covered a 1000-year span, it presents a complicated picture.

Different types of burials and tombs

- Simple inhumation in caves and rock shelters in the Early Minoan Period.
- Cist tombs – early Minoan box-shaped pits lined with stone.
- Rectangular ‘house’ tombs c. 2600–2300. Like houses, these were built above ground and found mostly in eastern Crete.
- *Tholos* tombs (pl. *tholoi*) – first built on the Mesara Plain near Phaistos and common in central and southern Crete although only 70 have so far been excavated. *Tholoi* were free-standing circular, domed tombs that varied in size from 2.5 metres to 13 metres. They were made from rough masonry with roofs of wood and rushes waterproofed with plaster or clay. An impressive *tholos* tomb was found in the cemetery at Phourni. At 8 metres in diameter and with 140 pieces of gold jewellery that originally adorned the corpse of an important woman, it was the first untouched high-status burial found in Minoan Crete.

The burial is dated to LM IIIA (c. 1400–1300 BC). The body, most likely female, was found in a foetal position, head to the west and covered with small gold objects. Many of these gold objects belonged to necklaces; there were found three gold signet-rings, a golden clasp, a gold ring and two small golden caskets, iron beads and seal stones of bronze and sard. Rich offerings were placed in the chamber in front of the *larnax* [burial chest]. In the *tholos* itself was found evidence of horse and bull sacrifices in honour of the deceased.

B. BRENNAN, *MINOAN SOCIETY: INTERPRETING THE EVIDENCE*, P. 152



- Chamber tombs – cut into the rock of a hillside and were entered via a long, narrow sloping ramp. Chamber tombs were common in the New Palace Period (c. 1700–1450) and then again between 1300 and 1100 when they were used for prestigious Mycenaean warriors.

An exceptional tomb

The so-called Temple Tomb dated c. 1380 was found on the southern edge of Knossos. It was a two-storey free-standing pavilion with a paved court, walls and floors sheeted in gypsum, a blue ceiling and a sanctuary on the second storey. Although it could have been a royal tomb, there is no evidence of who was interred there.

TASK

- 1 What is a *larnax*?
- 2 Describe a *tholos*.
- 3 What is the difference between libration and libation?
- 4 What evidence does the Aghia Triada sarcophagus reveal about Minoan sacrificial practices?

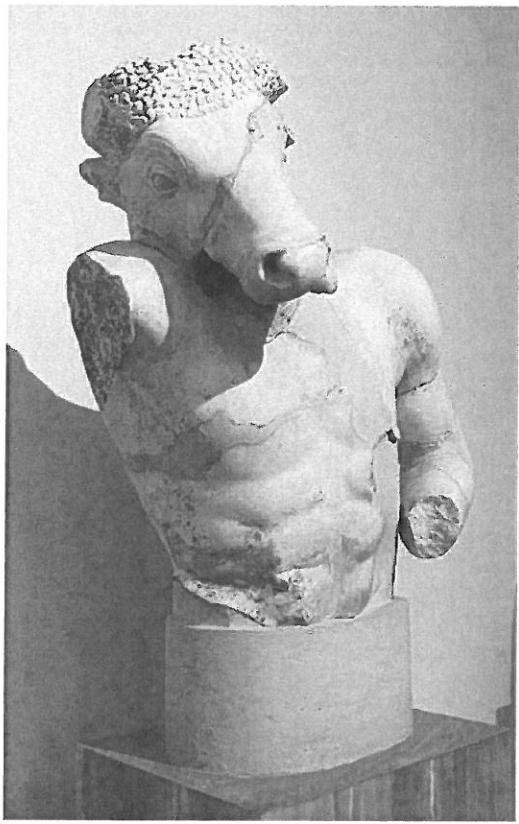
Myths and legends

There are two interrelated myths associated with the Minoans and the legendary King Minos mentioned by Homer and Thucydides. A summary of these myths is as follows:

Figure 2.29 The remains of a Minoan *tholos* tomb showing the *dromos* (entrance) and its typical domed roof

tholoi (sing. *tholos*) free-standing circular, domed tombs that varied in size from 2.5 to 13 metres, made from rough masonry with roofs of wood and rushes waterproofed with plaster or clay

Figure 2.30 The Minotaur



1 Theseus and the Minotaur

- Zeus in the form of a bull carried off a mortal woman, Europa, to Crete and fathered Minos there.
- Minos married Pasiphae who lusted after a bull sent to her husband by Poseidon for sacrifice.
- Pasiphae ordered the court craftsman, Daedalus, to make her a cow suit in order to copulate with the bull.
- She gave birth to the Minotaur – a half-bull, half-man creature – that Minos ordered to be imprisoned in the labyrinth built by Daedalus, and who fed on human flesh.
- Minos waged war on Greece, during

which the Athenians murdered his son, Androgeos. In vengeance, Minos demanded a regular tribute from Athens of young boys and girls to feed to the Minotaur.

- One of the youths sent to Crete was Theseus, the son of Aegeus, the king of Athens.
- Aegeus, reluctant to let his son sail off with the other victims under a black sail, made him promise to hoist a white sail on his return to indicate he had killed the Minotaur.
- On arriving in Crete, Theseus met Ariadne, Minos' daughter, who fell in love with him. She gave him a dagger and a ball of string to unroll the further he went into the maze in search of the Minotaur.
- He killed the Minotaur and he and Ariadne escaped Crete, but Theseus forgot to hoist the white sail, and his father waiting for his return saw the black sail and believed his son was dead. Aegeus threw himself into the sea that bears his name.

2 Daedalus and Icarus

- Minos imprisoned Daedalus the skilled inventor, and his son, Icarus, so that no one would have access to the secrets of the labyrinth.
- In order to escape, Daedalus designed wings out of feathers and wax so that he and Icarus could escape the despotism of Minos.
- Daedalus told his son not to fly too high for fear the sun would melt the wax, but Icarus ignored his father's advice and his wings melted. He plunged into the sea and drowned.
- Daedalus successfully reached Sicily where he became famous as an inventor of great ingenuity.
- Minos is supposed to have met a violent end as he pursued Daedalus.

CULTURAL LIFE

The culture of the Minoans can only be deduced from artefacts that were predominantly made for a social elite. The creativity of many of these artistic objects indicates an intensely dynamic and original

culture,¹⁴ always changing, experimenting and searching for new creative forms.

Although one of the Minoans' greatest cultural achievements was the development of writing, the only written records to have