



Knossos

Looking for the Labyrinth

Andrew Shapland

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ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD



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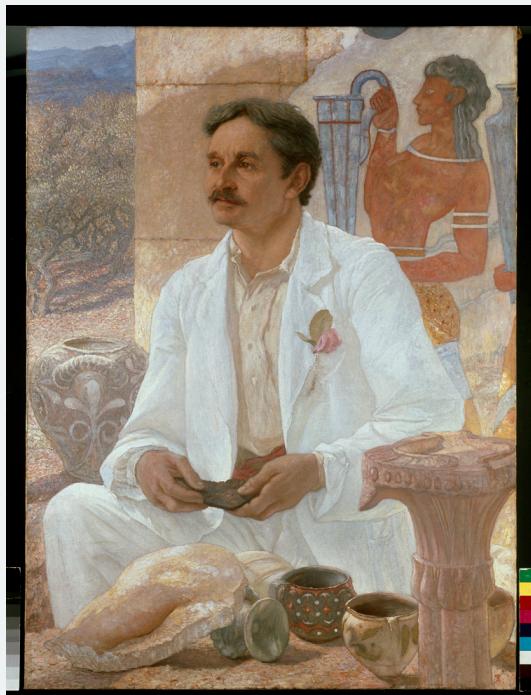
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The Aegean World Gallery: The Cretan collection



Although the vast majority of Minoan antiquities are visible in Heraklion Archaeological Museum and the other museums on the island of Crete itself, the Ashmolean Museum holds the most comprehensive collection outside Greece. This collection was largely established by one man, Sir Arthur Evans, and is focused on the archaeological site with which he is closely associated: Knossos. Visitors to the Museum can see the highlights of this collection in the Aegean World gallery. Museum staff are also working to make these objects and their associated archive accessible online, so they can be viewed from anywhere in the world. The Aegean World gallery was opened in 2009 as part of a major refurbishment of the Ashmolean Museum.¹



Sir Arthur Evans among the Ruins of the Palace of Knossos by Sir William Richmond, 1907. Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Although best remembered for his excavations at Knossos, Sir Arthur Evans was also the Keeper of the Museum from 1884–1908. The Ashmolean Museum opened to the public in 1683 – the first museum of its kind in Britain – but it was Evans who oversaw the collection's move to its present location. The grand neoclassical building on Beaumont Street in the centre of Oxford, designed by Charles Robert Cockerell, was originally the University Art Galleries. In 1894 the collections were merged to become the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology. This project took up much of the first ten years of Sir Arthur Evans's time as Keeper; it was only after this work was completed that he made his first visit to Crete.²

One of Evans's aims in visiting Crete was to build up the Ashmolean collection. He had been brought up with coins and antiquities from an early age since his father, Sir John Evans, was a gentleman scholar who had made important discoveries of prehistoric stone tools and served as President of the Society of Antiquaries. The family paper business provided the wealth to allow both father and son to accumulate personal collections of antiquities, and later to finance the excavations and restorations at Knossos. After a collecting trip to Athens in 1893, Arthur Evans became interested in seal stones bearing what looked like a prehistoric script. These,

he established, originated in Crete, and so he became determined to visit. His later excavations at Knossos uncovered further evidence of this script, as well as the clay sealings that preserved impressions of similar seal stones used for recording transactions.

Between 1894 and 1899 Evans travelled around Crete, at times witnessing the aftermath of violence between the Christian and Muslim populations of the island. A former journalist, he often sent reports to British newspapers and periodicals, both on contemporary Crete and its archaeological remains. During this time he collected a large number of antiquities: at each village he visited he would ask if there were 'antikes' for sale. The first objects from Knossos in the Ashmolean's collection were acquired in this way.³

Evans's collecting activities were well known to the local authorities on Crete, and he does not record any attempts to prevent him from purchasing or exporting antiquities at this time. He was able to take advantage of the unstable political situation in Crete, which had gained autonomy but not independence from the Ottoman Empire. Local officials generally welcomed foreign archaeologists, particularly those like Evans who were willing to denounce the Ottoman Empire in the British press. Ottoman laws governing the export of antiquities were, seemingly, not observed. In common with many nineteenth-century scholars, Evans regarded small, portable antiquities (such as coins and seal stones) as beyond the scope of antiquities legislation, and so felt entitled to collect them in any case. Local officials were more focused on preventing new excavations, in case major antiquities such as sculptures were dug up and packed off to Constantinople Museum.

New antiquities laws came into force in 1899, passed by the government of the newly independent Cretan State. These allowed Evans to excavate at Knossos but not to export any of his finds until a change in the law in 1903. Most of the Ashmolean's objects from Knossos were exported during the short period before Crete was unified with Greece in 1913 and excavators could request 'useless' objects for their collections. A few other significant objects from Knossos were donated to the Ashmolean by the Government of Greece in 1923 in recognition of Evans's contribution to archaeological research, such as the bull-leaper fresco.

There were many important or unique objects excavated at Knossos that Evans was not able to export from Crete: these went instead to Heraklion Archaeological Museum. Instead he commissioned replicas of these which could be displayed in the Ashmolean. The plaster cast of the Throne of Minos and replica of the Priest King on display in the gallery are two examples, as well as replicas of smaller items such as the faience 'snake goddesses' found in the Temple Repositories in 1903. Other replicas appear in the portrait of Sir Arthur Evans that was commissioned in 1907, shortly before he stepped down as Keeper. Although it shows him among the ruins of Knossos, it was painted in London, with the replicas providing the artist, Sir William Richmond, with models for some of the finds.

The Ashmolean was also bequeathed Arthur Evans's archaeological archive which includes the original excavation records for Knossos. It contains over 50 notebooks kept by Evans and other members of his team, hundreds of drawings of architecture and finds, and thousands of photos. Some of the drawings of frescoes were made by Émile Gilliéron, father and son, as they tried to reconstruct the colourful fragments into complete designs. Evans drew upon all of these as he wrote up his excavations at Knossos in the massive four-volume work, *The Palace of Minos*, published between 1921 and 1935.⁴ The archive also includes early drafts and proofs of this

book, and other publications by Evans. But the photos also provide a glimpse of life during excavation, including the many Cretan workers employed to work at Knossos and the excavators themselves posing for the camera.

Fragile archive items cannot be put on long-term display in the permanent gallery for reasons of conservation, but many of the objects in the collection are already available on the Ashmolean's website, and as database records are checked, more are being added all the time.

To explore all of the objects in the Aegean World Gallery see [Ashmolean Collections Online](#).



Photograph of Theodore Fyfe and Cretan workmen at Knossos, 1901 Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

NOTES

1. Galanakis 2013

2. see MacGillivray 2000 for a recent biography of Evans

3. Evans 1921-1935

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Looking for the Labyrinth: From Myth to Reality



This article traces how the myth of the Labyrinth inspired travellers and archaeologists to go in search of the ancient remains of Knossos, resulting in the discovery of the Palace of Minos.



THE LABYRINTH IN MYTH AND HISTORY

In Greek myth the Minotaur was a monster with the head of a bull and the body of a man who was imprisoned in a dark underground Labyrinth at Knossos. The Labyrinth was an ingenious maze commissioned by King Minos and designed by the architect Daedalus. In order to escape it after killing the Minotaur, Theseus needed a ball of thread, given to him by the princess Ariadne. Or at least that is the most commonly accepted story – digging deeper into the myth shows that reveals a multitude of contradictory versions. Myths are continually reworked and retold, and that of the Labyrinth is no exception.¹

Knossos, on the island of Crete, is mentioned in the earliest work of Greek literature, Homer's Iliad, which was composed some time before 700 BCE. Intriguingly Homer tells us that Daedalus built a dancing floor for Ariadne at Knossos, but doesn't mention the Labyrinth. Herodotus, the earliest Greek historian, describes an impressive building called a Labyrinth, but locates it in Egypt, at a city called Crocodilopolis. Only later did authors locate the Labyrinth at Knossos. Writing several hundred years later, the Roman historian Pliny the Elder lists a number of different Labyrinths, suggesting that the Egyptian building had inspired Daedalus to build the one in Crete. But of this Cretan Labyrinth, Pliny says, nothing remained.

At the same time as these different accounts of the Labyrinth were being written down, artists were producing a variety of depictions of the myth. Greek vases frequently show Theseus killing the Minotaur with a sword. The coins of Knossos were decorated with a symbol of the city: a Labyrinth design which sometimes had a Minotaur at the centre. This design, unlike most literary descriptions, has a single path into the centre. It appears more like a bird's eye view of a building, and one in which it is impossible to get lost.

Knossos was an important Cretan city in the Greek and Roman period. When the Roman conquest of Crete began in 69 BCE, its citizens resisted. As a result the rival city of Gortyn, 60 km south of Knossos, became the Roman provincial capital. New civic buildings were required, and the stone for these was quarried out of a nearby hillside. This left a network of underground passages going deep underground. From this period onwards, authors start to confuse Knossos and Gortyn, and the location of the Labyrinth started to shift: the Roman poet, Catullus for instance, refers to the home of King Minos as 'Gortynian'. A later Byzantine author, Ioannes Malalias, described the Labyrinth as a cave near Gortyn.

LOOKING FOR THE LABYRINTH

The Renaissance renewed interest in Greece and its myths, resulting in a search for the real Labyrinth. The Florentine priest, Cristoforo Buondelmonti, first visited Crete in 1415 and explored both Knossos and Gortyn. By this time there was little to see at Knossos – it had been abandoned following an earthquake in the 8th century CE – and certainly nothing that resembled the Labyrinth. Buondelmonti described the underground passages near Gortyn, and although he recognised it as a quarry, his map of the island shows the Labyrinth as a cave in the middle of the island.

The debate over the location of the true Labyrinth continued for several hundred years. In the 19th century Captain Thomas Spratt visited the caves at Gortyn while surveying Crete for a new map of the island for the British Admiralty. He described them as “unquestionably a real labyrinth, such as the ancients understood by that term” and wondered if King Minos had kept Athenians prisoners there.² Robert Pashley meanwhile regarded the Labyrinth as “a work of the imagination” but kept faith with Knossos, despite the fact that it had “dwindled down into this miserable hamlet”.³ The location of Knossos had never been forgotten since coins of the city continued to be found there. The problem was that there was nothing to see there for those going in search of the Labyrinth.

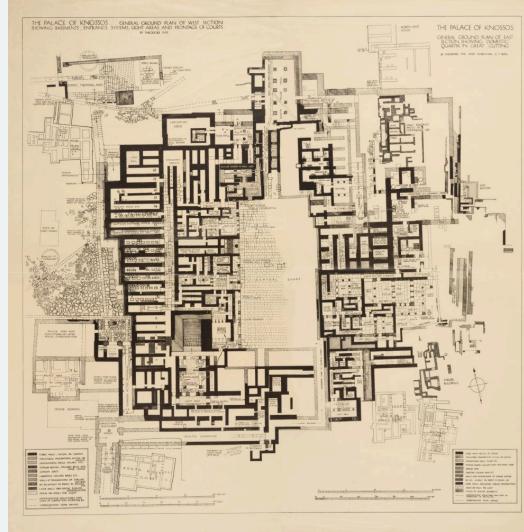
The argument was finally resolved in 1878 by a local businessman named, appropriately enough, Minos Kalokairinos. He had been inspired to dig at Knossos by the excavations of Heinrich Schliemann at Troy and Mycenae. There Schliemann had found archaeological treasures which seemed to link these places with their mythical past. Digging on an area to the south of the Greek and Roman city, on the bare Kephala hill, Kalokairinos soon found the remains of a building with curious symbols carved on the walls. Given its apparent age, he regarded this as the palace of King Minos, but located the Labyrinth in a nearby cave at Ayia Irini. This too was an ancient quarry, and shows Kalokairinos’s faith in the later literary traditions.

Kalokairinos’s discovery rapidly attracted the attention of foreign archaeologists. They agreed that the building looked ancient but went a step further than Kalokairinos and identified it with the Labyrinth. William Stillman sent a report to the Archaeological Institute of America describing the building with its complicated corridors as the “Daedalian Labyrinth”.⁴ Kalokairinos had been forced to stop his excavations by the Cretan authorities because at that time Crete was part of the Ottoman Empire and it was feared that his finds would be removed to the museum at Constantinople.

EXCAVATING THE LABYRINTH

When Arthur Evans visited Knossos in March 1894, he was shown round the excavations by Kalokairinos and wrote in his diary “I see no reason for not thinking that the mysterious complication of passages is the Labyrinth”.⁵ He was fascinated by the symbols carved on the walls, including a sign in the shape of a double axe. By purchasing a part of the land and waiting until Cretan Independence, Evans was able to establish the rights to excavate.

Evans uncovered the rest of the labyrinthine building he called ‘the Palace of Minos’ between 1900 and 1904. A number of discoveries convinced him that this was indeed the Labyrinth including frescoes of people leaping over bulls which echoed the myth of the Minotaur. He found further carvings of double axes and suggested that since an ancient name for this symbol was ‘labrys’, Labyrinth should mean ‘House of the Double Axes’. In other words the Palace and the Labyrinth were one and the same.



Plan of Knossos, 1928 . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

REBUILDING THE LABYRINTH

Almost immediately, Evans set about restoring, and then rebuilding, this Bronze Age building, now thought to have existed from 2000–1350 BC. Some of the later ‘reconstitutions’ as he called them, used reinforced concrete to promote his theories. The reconstructed bull fresco at the North Entrance, he suggested, had continued to stand even after the Palace had been destroyed, inspiring the myth of the Minotaur and the Labyrinth.



<https://youtu.be/OTjPPf2wuE>

3d model of Knossos Made by the School of Archaeology, University of Oxford University of Oxford

Among those inspired by Evans's reconstructions have been the designers of the game Assassin's Creed: Odyssey. Their version of the Palace of Minos, with the Labyrinth below, shows how the myth continues to be retold in the 21st century.



<https://youtu.be/8mFWOVnHWbw>
Assassin's Creed Discovery Tour of Knossos from Assassin's Creed Odyssey © Ubisoft

NOTES

1. Momigliano 2020

2. Spratt 1865, 45, link

3. Pashley 1837, 208-9, link

4. Stillman 1881, 46, link

5. Brown 2001, 11-12, link

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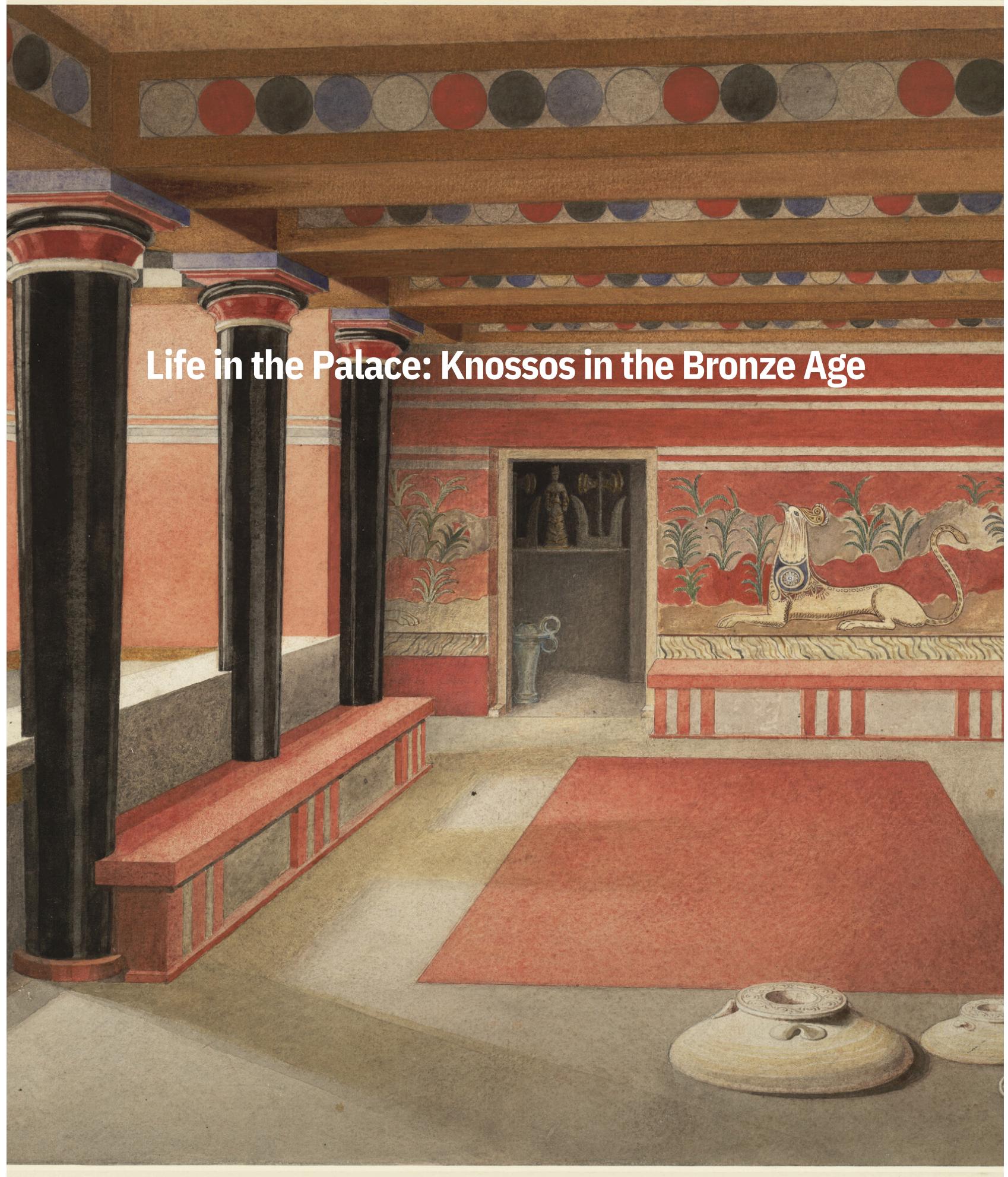
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Life in the Palace: Knossos in the Bronze Age



This article provides an introduction to the archaeological site of Knossos on Crete, highlighting some of the objects on display in the Aegean World gallery. To explore all of the objects in the Aegean World Gallery see Ashmolean Collections Online.



THE PALACE OF MINOS

Between 1900 and 1905, Evans uncovered the remains of the huge complex which he felt must be the palace of King Minos, and he adopted the name 'Minoans' for its occupants. He employed a team of archaeologists, local workers, architects and artists, and together they built up a picture of the community that had occupied the elaborate building 4000 years ago. The Palace of Minos, as he called it, had evidently gone through periods of wealth, destruction, rebuilding, and eventual abandonment.

It is now difficult to disentangle Evans's vision of the palace from the reality. Soon after excavation began in 1900, a room with a stone seat came to light. Evans regarded this as the throne of King Minos (although he originally wondered if it was meant for princess Ariadne). The 'Throne Room' was first reconstructed on paper and then physically. It is now one of the most famous parts of the Palace.



Edwin J. Lambert (1881–1928), 1917, Reconstruction drawing of the Throne Room, watercolour, 38 × 56 cm, AJE/4/2/2/4/3 . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

MINOAN LIFE: EATING AND DRINKING

Elaborate tableware and colourful frescoes are evidence of the Palace's wealth, at least at its height. It was a place for gatherings and celebrations. Wine, meat and olive oil were produced in the surrounding area and brought to the centre for consumption. Evans and his team imagined a sophisticated, nature-loving people, whose civilisation peaked, and then went into decline. Evans suggested that the

finest pottery was used by a royal family, but there is no clear evidence that one existed.

The finest pottery was known as 'Kamares Ware' since the first examples were discovered in nearby Kamares Cave. It was produced in the centuries after the palace was first built, around 2000-1700 BCE. The black shiny finish and thin walls seem to imitate silver, which goes black over time. Later on pottery designs were painted directly on to the surface of the clay. Some of these designs were abstract but others show plants or marine animals.

THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Women appear prominently on frescoes and other objects from the Palace. They often wear elaborate dyed textiles indicating wealth. Weaving and dyeing were important activities at Knossos because these textiles were traded beyond the island of Crete in return for raw materials like metals. It is possible that these high-status women were important players in the manufacture and trade in textiles. Some archaeologists have even suggested that Minoan Crete was a matriarchy, with women in power. Evans, however, believed that women's importance in Minoan society was religious, as priestesses of a mother goddess.

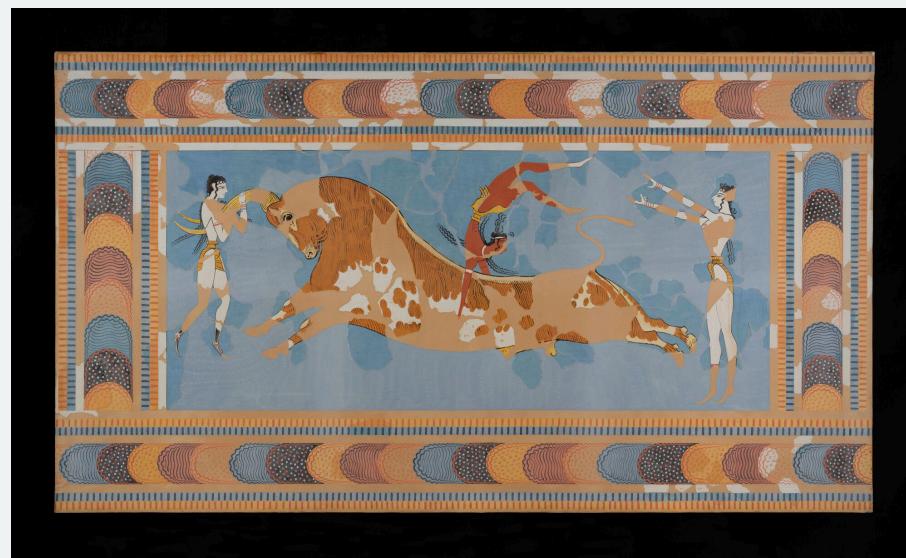


Émile Gilliéron père (1850–1924), Restoration of Ladies in Blue Fresco, undated, watercolour, 95 x 161 cm, AJE/4/1/12/1/3. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

The Linear B tablets from Knossos were preserved by fire when the palace was burnt down in around 1350 BCE. They record an extensive textile industry in which men were shepherds and women were textile workers. By this time there was a king, 'wanax' in charge of the palace but it is not clear how far back this position goes because there are no historical records preserved. When Linear B was deciphered by Michael Ventris in 1952 it became apparent that all of the tablets deal with the economy of the palace.

THE BULLS OF CRETE

Bulls crop up in several of the myths set in Crete and cattle were closely associated with the Palace of Minos. They appear on frescoes and seal-stones, and there were vessels in the shape of their heads. Sometimes they are shown with people leaping over their backs. This appears to have been part of an event like a rodeo, involving the cattle owned by the Palace. Some people have suggested that this took place in the Central Court. Evans proposed that bull-leaping inspired the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur because the images were still visible even after the Palace was destroyed.



Emile Gilliéron père (1850–1924), Restoration of Taureador Fresco . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

OCTOPUSES

Some animal images from Knossos are astoundingly lifelike and detailed.

Octopuses appear frequently – they almost become an emblem of the Palace. One of the most unusual facts about them is that they are shown underwater, their eyes open – as if being watched underwater, as opposed to looked down on from above. Evans used depictions of marine animals to trace what he saw as the birth, maturity and decline of Minoan art. Although few would use these terms today it is noticeable

that earlier objects are more naturalistic. In the later period of the Palace's existence, the same designs – octopuses and bulls feature frequently – become increasingly stylised.

One of the finest depictions of an octopus was carved in relief on a stone vessel known as the 'Ambushed Octopus'. Designs like these were later transferred to pottery, particularly large jars found in the storerooms of the palace. Even after the palace was destroyed, tentacles were still used to decorate vessels.



Reconstruction drawing of 'Ambushed Octopus' stone rhyton, undated, Ashmolean Museum AJE/4/3/6/2/1. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Catalogue



Labyrinth Coin

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Theseus and the
Minotaur

..... 23



Minotaur sealstone

..... 25



Fresco fragment
showing bull-leaper

..... 28



Replica snake goddesses

..... 30



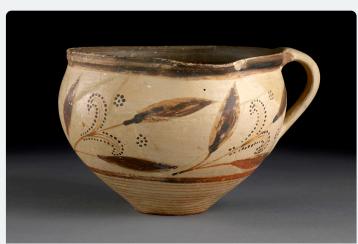
Bull-leaping ring

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Kamares Cup

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Floral Cup

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Sheep tablet

..... 41



Textile worker tablet

..... 43



Octopus Jar

..... 46



Bull's Head Rhyton

..... 49



Ancient Greek silver coin.
Presented by Reverend Charles Godwyn, 1770.
© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford



Labyrinth coin . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Labyrinth Coin

Year	300 BC-270 BCE
Type	Coins
Dimensions	Diameter 26 mm; weight 10.8 g; die-axis 9 o'clock.
Materials	silver, struck
Accession	HCR4579

Coins from Knossos, on the island of Crete, were decorated with a symbol of the city: a labyrinth design which sometimes had a Minotaur at the centre. The design on the reverse of this coin, unlike most literary descriptions, has a single path into the centre. It appears more like a bird's eye view of a building, and one in which it is impossible to get lost.

In Greek myth, the Minotaur was a monster with the head of a bull and the body of a man who was imprisoned in a dark underground labyrinth at Knossos. The Labyrinth was an ingenious maze commissioned by King Minos and designed by the architect Daedalus.

In order to escape the maze after killing the Minotaur, the hero Theseus needed a ball of thread, given to him by the princess Ariadne. Or at least that is the most commonly accepted story – digging deeper into the myth reveals a multitude of contradictory versions. Myths are continually reworked and retold, and that of the Labyrinth is no exception.

Another coin in the same showcase also bears a labyrinth design. This one is marked KNΩΣΙ (KNOSI), short for 'of the citizens of Knossos'. It is evidence of the inhabitants of Knossos using the Labyrinth as a symbol of their city.



Ancient silver coin from Knossos showing the Labyrinth, c.300–270 BCE, HCR4581, on loan from Keble College, Oxford

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Attic red-figure cup depicting Theseus and the Minotaur. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Theseus and the Minotaur

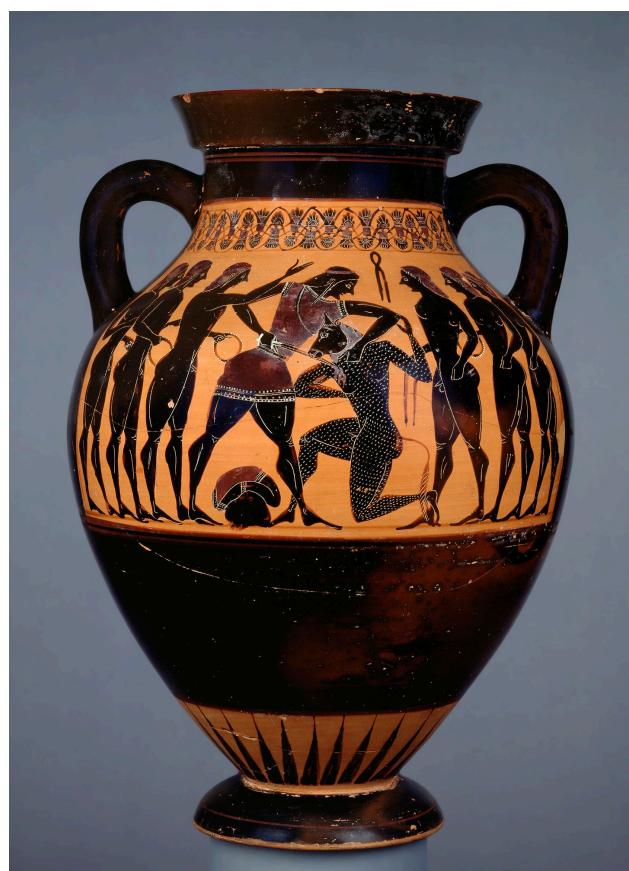
Year	circa 500 BC (Archaic Period)
Dimensions	Height 8.1 cm; rim diameter 20 cm; foot diameter 8 cm; width 26.7 cm; rim thickness 0.3 cm.
Materials	Pottery, with painted decoration.
Accession	AN1896-1908.G.261

On this red-figure cup we see Theseus lunge at the Minotaur, grabbing him by the horn with his left hand and attempting to stab him with the sword held in his right hand.

In Greek myth, Theseus was the semi-divine hero who killed the Minotaur, a monster with the head of a bull and the body of a man confined in a Labyrinth on the island of Crete. The Labyrinth was an ingenious maze commissioned by King Minos. Following his defeat, Theseus returned to Greece, and became king and the founder of Athens.

The cup has been reassembled from a group of separate fragments with added plaster, and so parts of the decoration are modern.

Another vase in the Greece Gallery shows an earlier version of the same scene.



Attic black-figure amphora depicting Theseus and the Minotaur, c.550 BCE.
AN1918.64 . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford



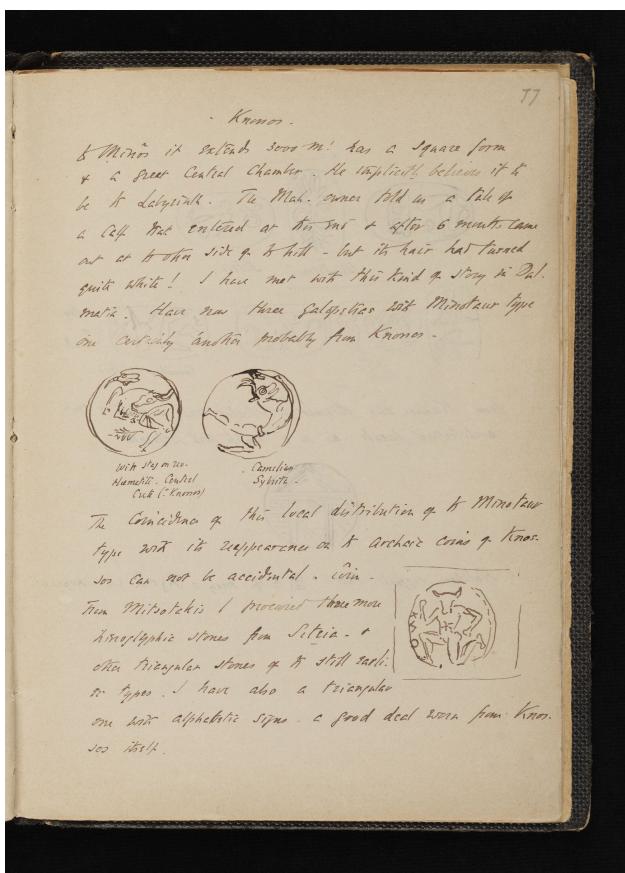
Sealstone with 'minotaur' design . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Minotaur sealstone

Dimensions	dia. 2.4cm
Materials	lapis lacedaemonius
Accession	AN1938.1071
Findspot	Psychro Cave

This is one of a number of 'minotaur' seals collected by Sir Arthur Evans on his travels around Crete. He suggested that designs such as this, with the head of a bull and the legs of a human, could have inspired later coins from Knossos showing the Minotaur. It is now believed that the image was an abbreviated depiction of bull-leaping which was subsequently misinterpreted.

A page of Sir Arthur Evans's notebook compares depictions of the minotaur on sealstones and later coins.



Page from Sir Arthur Evans's notebook, c. 1894 on minotaur coins and seals . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

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Shapland, A.J. 2013. 'Jumping to conclusions: bull-leaping in Minoan Crete', *Society and Animals* 21: 194-207



Fresco fragment showing bullleaper, 1450–1400 BCE. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Fresco fragment showing bull-leaper

Year	1450–1400 BCE
Dimensions	61 × 30 cm
Materials	painted plaster
Accession	AN1896-1908.AE.1708
Findspot	Knossos

This original fresco fragment belonged to one of the bull-leaping panels related to the ‘Taureador Fresco’. It shows an acrobat who has successfully completed their jump. Sir Arthur Evans believed that the white skin indicated a female athlete, following a convention used in Egyptian wall paintings. It is more likely that the skin colour, along with the elaborate hairstyle, depicts relative status – paler skin suggested less time spent outside.



Emile Gilliéron père (1850–1924), Restoration of Taureador Fresco . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

FURTHER READING

Shapland, A.J. 2013. ‘Jumping to conclusions: bull-leaping in Minoan Crete’, *Society and Animals* 21: 194–207



Replica snake goddesses . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford



Replica Snake Goddess . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford



Replica Snake Goddess (Votary) . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Replica snake goddesses

Year	c.1903
Creator	Halvor Bagge
Dimensions	29-34 cm height
Materials	plaster
Accession	AN1896-1908.AE.1106, AN1896-1908.AE.1114

The famous Snake Goddesses from Knossos were found in many fragments and reconstructed to create the forms known today. Arthur Evans originally identified the figure with her arms down, holding snakes, as the Goddess. The figure with her arms raised was originally known as the 'votary'. A cat was found in the same deposit but it is unlikely to have adorned the votary's headdress, as here. These plaster replicas are not authentic copies of an original, but a modern reconstruction.

The originals were found in an underfloor deposit in the palace of Knossos, known as the 'Temple Repositories'. Its contents dated to around 1600 BCE. Many of the objects, including the Snake Goddesses, were made of a glassy material known as faience.



Photograph of the Temple Repositories contents, c. 1903 . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

FURTHER READING

The Many Lives of a Snake Goddess project looks at these famous objects from a variety of different perspectives



Seal ring showing bull-leaping scene.
Presented by Sir Arthur Evans, 1938.
© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford



Seal ring showing bull-leaping scene.
Presented by Sir Arthur Evans, 1938.
© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Bull-leaping ring

Year	c. 1450 BC - c. 1375 BC (Late Minoan II Period - Late Minoan IIIA1 Period)
Type	Signet rings
Dimensions	Height 2.3 cm; width 3.5 cm; diameter 2.2 cm.
Materials	gold
Accession	AN1896-1908.AE.2237
Findspot	Archanes
Description	This gold ring shows a man leaping over a bull. The paved floor indicates that this took place in or around the Palace. The object in front of the bull is probably a folded garment of cloth or leather but its significance is not clear. 1450–1375 BCE, gold said to be from Archanes.

Cattle were important animals in Bronze Age Crete. In the absence of natural predators they were probably left to roam around the island and then rounded up when needed. Bull-leaping seems to have emerged from this way of managing cattle, like the American rodeo. A gold ring like this was used as a signet ring, to leave an impression in clay documents as a form of signature.

Perhaps its wearer had distinguished themselves as a bull-leaper.

FURTHER READING

Shapland, A.J. 2013. 'Jumping to conclusions: bull-leaping in Minoan Crete', *Society and Animals* 21: 194-207



Two-handled spouted cup, 1800-1750 BCE, Ashmolean Museum AN1930.645 . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Kamares Cup

Dimensions	h. 6 cm, dia. 18 cm
Materials	ceramic
Accession	AN1930.645
Findspot	Knossos

This cup, with its thin crinkled sides and shiny surface was designed to imitate a metal vessel. The black slip and white paint perhaps indicate a silver vessel which has tarnished (turned black) after reacting with the oxygen in the air.

Pottery of this kind was found in the Kamares Cave in Crete in 1893 by a local shepherd and brought to the museum at Heraklion. There it was seen by John Myres, an

archaeologist who had recently excavated similar pottery in Egypt. Since Egyptian chronology was well known, this meant that it could be dated to the early second millennium BCE. When Arthur Evans began excavating at Knossos in 1900, he was able to use 'Kamares Ware' as a means to date the levels of the Palace in which this pottery was found.



One-handled cup decorated with floral designs, 1500-1450 BCE, Ashmolean Museum AN1938.476 . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Floral Cup

Dimensions	h. 8.9 cm, dia. 11.4 cm
Materials	ceramic
Accession	AN1938.476
Findspot	Knossos

This cup is decorated with stylised flowers, which resemble those of an olive tree. The paint has been directly applied to the bare surface of the vessel before firing resulting in a 'dark-on-light' design, which becomes prevalent in this period. The cup has a spout which suggests that it could have been used for pouring as well as drinking.



Leaf-shaped Linear B tablet recording sheep, c.1350 BCE, Ashmolean Museum AN1938.850 . © Ashmolean Museum,
University of Oxford

Sheep tablet

Dimensions	l. 11.8 cm, h. 2.6 cm
Materials	ceramic
Accession	AN1938.850
Findspot	Knossos

Leaf-shaped Linear B tablet. It is a typical 'sheep-tablet' recording the shepherd (Anthemos or Artemos), the owner or collector (wewesijojo, in genitive that indicates possession), the place where the flock is herded (kutato) and the number of male and female sheep; there is also an 'opero' (shortage) of 50 male sheep.

The transcription is given here. De 1648 is its unique reference number among all the tablets found at Knossos. 117 refers to the person who wrote it, identified by their handwriting. OVIS is Latin for sheep (labelled as both male and female), which is a convention for transcribing tablets. The syllables refer to the sounds of the Linear B signs.

De 1648 ASHM (1938.850) (117)
.A we-we-si-jo-jo , OVISm 58 OVISf 2
.B a-te-mo , / ku-ta-to o OVISm 50

FURTHER READING

Bendall, Lisa. 'Two Linear B Tablets from Knossos', in A. Shapland (ed.), *Labyrinth: Knossos, Myth & Reality* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum), p. 160-1.

Drawing of leaf-shaped Linear B tablet recording sheep, c.1350 BCE, Ashmolean Museum AN1938.850 . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford



Linear B tablet recording grain rations for women workers at Knossos, c. 1350 BCE, Ashmolean Museum AN1910.214 .
© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

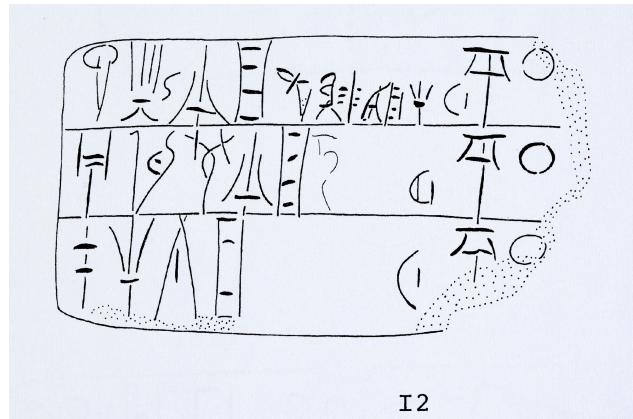


Linear B tablet recording grain rations for women workers at Knossos, c.1350 BCE, Ashmolean Museum AN1910.214 .
© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

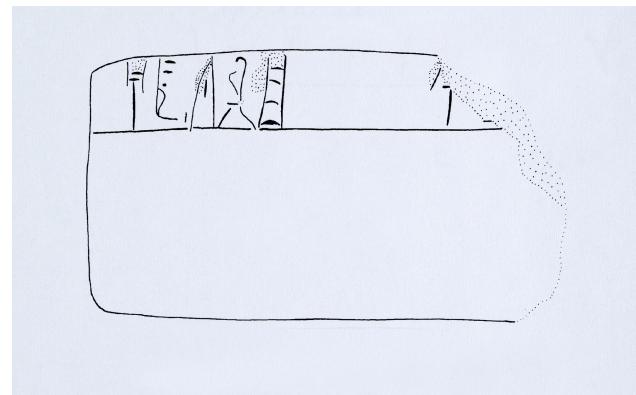
Textile worker tablet

Dimensions	l. 8.1 cm, h. 4.5 cm
Materials	ceramic
Accession	AN1910.214
Findspot	Knossos

Page-shaped Linear B tablet recording grain rations for women workers at Knossos; the lunar sign on the left side of the tablet indicates that the women workers received their rations on a monthly basis (also existence of some sort of calendar); whole text probably a palimpsest; writing also appears at the back.



Drawing of Linear B tablet recording grain rations for women workers at Knossos, c.1350 BCE, Ashmolean Museum AN1910.214 . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford



Drawing of Linear B tablet recording grain rations for women workers at Knossos, c.1350 BCE, Ashmolean Museum AN1910.214 . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

The transcription is given here. E777 is its unique reference number among all the tablets found at Knossos. LUNA is latin for moon and GRA for wheat, which is a convention for transcribing tablets. These are the monthly wheat rations. The syllables refer to the sounds of the Linear B signs.

E777 ASHM (1910.214) (-)
.1 ko-no-si-ja / ki-ri-te-wi-ja-i LUNA 1 GRA 100[
.2 a-mi-ni-si-ja LUNA 1 GRA 100 [
.3 pa-i-ti-ja LUNA 1 GRA 100[
verso
.1 a-ze-ti-ri-ja GRA 1...0...[

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Bendall, Lisa. 'Two Linear B Tablets from Knossos', in A. Shapland (ed.), *Labyrinth: Knossos, Myth & Reality* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum), p. 160-1.



Jar with octopus motif, 1450-1400 BCE, Ashmolean Museum AN1911.608 . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford



Drawing of jar with octopus motif, 1450-1400 BCE, Ashmolean Museum AN1911.608 . © Ashmolean Museum,
University of Oxford

Octopus Jar

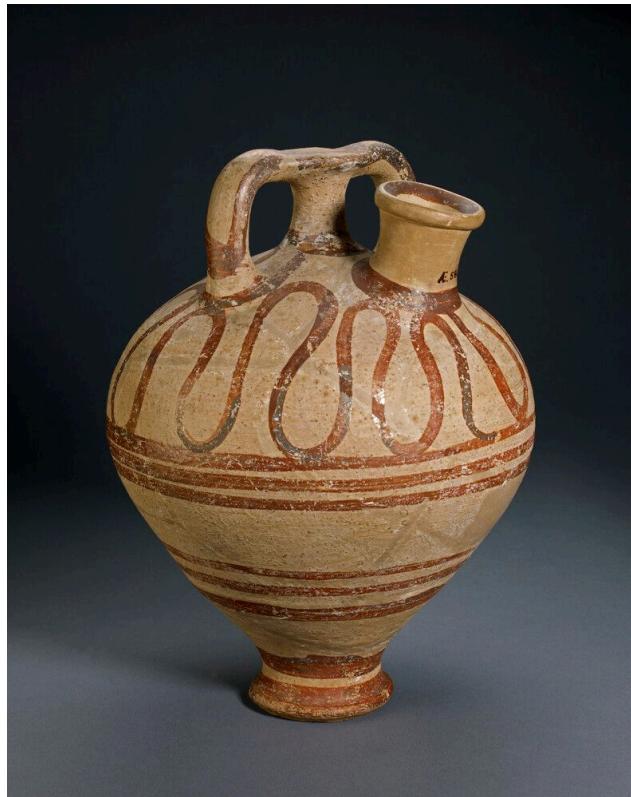
Dimensions	h. 74.5 cm
Materials	ceramic
Accession	AN1911.608
Findspot	Knossos

Standing at an impressive 75 centimetres, this three-handled jar depicts an octopus with six tentacles swimming in an abstract seascape. It was presented to the Ashmolean in 1911 by the government of Crete through Sir Arthur Evans, Keeper of the Ashmolean from 1884 to 1908. The jar comes from the palace that Evans had excavated at Knossos and belongs to a culture he called Minoan, after the legendary King Minos.

In the centuries after 1900 BC, Minoan civilization reached the height of its prosperity and influence and major palaces were built at Knossos and Mallia in the northern part of Crete, at Phaistos in the south, and at Zakros in the east. After 1500 BC, however, there was increasing influence from the Mycenaean culture of the Greek mainland and, around 1450 BC, widespread destruction on the island. Whether this was caused by invading Mycenaean warriors is unknown, but Greek influence on Crete certainly becomes even more pronounced.

Pottery from the period following the destruction shows a blend of Minoan and Mycenaean stylistic traits. The shape of this jar is typically Mycenaean and, because the contents of such vessels – oil, wine and other commodities – were in much demand, examples have been found widely. An octopus had been a popular motif on Minoan pottery where animals were depicted with an extraordinary accuracy that came from a close observation of nature. The Mycenaean approach, however, was – as here – to take naturalistic motifs and abstract them, eventually to the point at which they are almost unrecognisable. The stirrup

jar below, also in the Aegean World gallery, shows how the octopus has become reduced to a wavy tentacle design.



Stirrup jar decorated with painted tentacle pattern, 1300-1200 BCE, Ashmolean Museum AN1896-1908.AE.584 . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford



Replica bull's head rhyton, Ashmolean Museum AN1896-1908.AE.2400 . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Bull's Head Rhyton

Dimensions	h. 41 cm, w. 25.6 cm
Materials	plaster
Accession	AN1896-1908.AE.2400
Findspot	Knossos (original)

Rhyta are pouring vessels. The object which this is a replica of would have been filled with wine, which would then pour out of a hole at the mouth.

The bull's head rhyton discovered during the excavation of the Little Palace at Knossos has become one of the most famous objects found at Knossos on the island of Crete. Archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans, the excavator of Knossos, was not allowed to remove the original from Crete and so

commissioned this plaster replica. It was included in an exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1936 where replicas stood in for objects which remained in Cretan museums.

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About

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