

Chapter III

MINOAN CRETE

Minoan civilization appeared suddenly on the island of Crete with the period known to archaeologists as MM I (Middle Minoan I). According to conventional chronology, that period began around 2000 B.C.; but there are reasons for reducing the date to about 1800 B.C. In any case, in MM I, the first Minoan palaces were built and a pictographic syllabary was used to record the first real inscriptions, with sentence structure, ever written on European soil.

Evidently a strong wave of newcomers ushered in the new era on Crete, for Minoan civilization made its debut there fully developed, without prior evolution on the island. There were, to be sure, pre-Minoan people on Crete, but they had not gone beyond a Neolithic stage of culture when the Minoan palace builders came. The pre-Minoan Cretans had come from the mainland, some of them from Anatolia. The Minoans themselves must have come from the south, for their palaces have no built-in hearths to protect the residents from the cold and raw days of a Cretan winter. Indeed, the interiors were exposed to the elements by light-and-air wells, thus aggravating the heating problem.

The southern clime whence the Minoan palace builders came is not hard to determine. It must have been the Nile Delta, for Cretan archaeology has yielded a host of artifacts imported from, or imitating the workmanship of, Egypt. The creators of the ivory-and-gold goddess figurines of Crete depended on Egypt for both materials; Crete itself had neither elephants nor any metal mines. Indeed, Minoan chronology is linked to Near East history mainly through Egyptian scarabs and other Pharaonic inscriptions found in the Cretan excavations. Genesis 10:13-14 correctly derives the

Cretans (called the "Philistines" and "Caphtorians") from Egypt.¹

The interrelations between Egypt and Minoan Crete are well attested, but there is a great difference between Minoan and what we call Egyptian culture. This difference is largely due to the fact that most of what we know archaeologically about ancient Egypt comes from dry Upper Egypt and not from damp Lower Egypt. The two Egypts were rather different lands. Upper Egypt was the more distinctive and normally served as the center of nationalism. The Delta, on the other hand, was rather a part of the Mediterranean world, and many of its people were Semites and other non-Egyptians. In a sense, the Delta can be called the cradle of Western civilization because from it emerged the Minoans who founded the first high culture of Europe, and later the Hebrews of the Exodus, who migrated to their Promised Land. Thus the forerunners of classical Greek and Hebrew cultures were kindred Delta folk.

Minoan religion has close links with Canaan. For example, in MM I, natural mountain sanctuaries appear on Crete of a piece with the Canaanite high-places outlawed in the Bible. The West Semitic name for such mountain altars (*bom-o*² in Hebrew) has passed by way of Minoan into Greek as *bōm-ós*. Minoan temple-palaces have no idols, nor any place for installing them, for the official cult was aniconic. This avoidance of idols to represent the great god recalls the Re cult of Egypt. Though Egypt was highly idolatrous, the Re temples had been devoid of idols since Old Kingdom times. It is interesting to note that about twenty personal names in the Minoan tablets from HT (Hagia Triada) end in *-re*; some, perhaps most, of them are Egyptian names ending with the name of the god Re. Thus *ne-tu-ri-re* (HT 3:5) = Egyptian *ntry-r^c*,³ "Re is divine"; *ra-na-re* (HT 47:b:1; 94:b:4; 62:2?) = Egyptian *rn-r^c*, "name of Re";

¹ Called to my attention by Dr. David Neiman.

² Each vowel (called a *qameṣ*) is meant to be pronounced *o*, as is reflected in various ancient records, and as is still perpetuated by the Ashkenazic Jews of eastern Europe.

³ Postvocally, laryngeals such as *°* and *h* lose their consonantal quality and color the preceding vowel in Minoan, much as in Akkadian. Cf. the weakening of laryngeals in Punic (Z. S. Harris, *A Grammar of the Phoenician Language*, Philadelphia, 1936, pp. 27–28). The development from classical Egyptian *Ra°* to *Rê* is like that of *Ba°l* to Akkadian *Bêl*.

a-ra-na-re (HT 1:a:4) = Egyptian *ʿ3-rn-r^c*, “great is the name of Re”; *pa-ya-re* (HT 8:b:4; 88:4; 117:a:5) = Egyptian *p3y-r^c*, “man of Re” (literally, “he of Re”); and so on.

There can be little doubt that the later Hebrews also came under the influence of the Re cult and were thereby bolstered in their aversion to idols. Genesis 41:45, 50–51 tells us that Joseph married the daughter of the priest of Heliopolis (the center of the Re cult); she bore him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Moses married the daughter of Reuel, which may mean “Re is god”⁴ (Exodus 2:18). A son of Naphtali is named Ahira (*ʿahî-ra^c*), “Re is brotherly” (Numbers 1:15)—a name formed quite like “Ahijah,” “Yah(weh) is brotherly.”

The widespread notion that the Minoans worshiped a mother goddess needs qualification. It is true that figurines of the goddess with bare breasts are found in Minoan Crete to the exclusion of idols of the male head of the pantheon. Yet the contradiction is apparent, not real. Officially, the chief god was male and aniconic. The popular religion, however, was geared to fertility and venerated the goddess of fertility. In Israel, we find much the same situation. We know from the Bible that the official deity was male and imageless, but the common people persisted in worshiping pagan deities such as the goddesses Asherah and Astarte. In Judean houses down to the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C., we find Astarte images of the nude fertility goddess but no representations of God. We thus find comparable situations, *mutatis mutandis*, in both Crete and Israel: An aniconic male god is worshiped officially as the head of the pantheon; popular worship, however, emphasizes the idolatrous cult of the fertility goddess. If we had no Bible but only the information provided by Palestinian archaeology, we would think that Israelite religion was mainly the worship of Astarte. Now that we have begun to read the Minoan texts, we must (as we shall note below) revise our appraisal of Minoan religion.

Ancient tradition points plainly to the “Phoenician” (i.e., Northwest Semitic) character of the Minoan language. Minos was the son of the Tyrian princess Europa. Her brother Cadmus founded

⁴ Though “Friend of God” is also possible.

Thebes. "Europa" and "Cadmus" are an appropriate pair of Semitic names, meaning "West" and "East," respectively. The earliest recorded Greek tradition concerning the "Phoenicians" who introduced writing to Greece is from the logographer Hecataeus, who around 500 B.C. visited Egypt and wrote that Danaus (son of the Phoenician Belus and brother of Aegyptus) first brought writing to Greece. The Egyptian connections of Danaus are striking in the light of Minoan origins, for the weight of the evidence points to Delta Semites as the main stratum of the literate Minoan palace builders.

The knowledge that the Minoan language was "Phoenician" persisted until at least the fourth century A.D., when a Latin author, Lucius Septimius, described the accidental discovery of ancient literary texts at Knossos in the reign of Nero. The texts were brought to Nero, who assumed them to be Phoenician and turned them over to Semitists for translation. Arthur Evans, the father of Minoan archaeology, found the narrative by Septimius correct in its technical details (except, ironically, for the most important detail of all: the Phoenician identity of the language, which modern scholarship erroneously disfavored).⁵

The Minoan script is essentially a syllabary, whereby each sign stands for a consonant followed by a vowel. While it is not the normal system of Egypt, it operates like what is well known to Egyptologists as either "group-writing" or "syllabic orthography," used especially for Semitic words and names.⁶ Minoan writing is pictographic in origin.⁷ Its clearest and most beautiful pictorial form appears in the Phaistos Disk. However, other Minoan inscriptions also preserve a measure of the original pictorial nature of the script. A stone bowl from Gournes (near Apodulu) depicts the BIRD-OF-PREY and APPLE signs unmistakably.⁸ Ventris, who

⁵ A. J. Evans, *Scripta Minoa*, Vol. I, Oxford, 1909, p. 109.

⁶ A. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd ed., London, 1957, p. 52 (§ 60).

⁷ For comprehensive orientation, see M. Ventris and J. Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, Cambridge, 1956. Maurice Pope gives additional bibliography in "Aegean Writing and Linear A," in *Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology*, Vol. VIII, Lund, 1964. I have described the decipherment of Minoan in *The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations*, pp. 206-217, 300-303.

⁸ The Minoan Linear A texts are published in the original script by W. C.