

THE MINOAN WORLD

Lecture at the Royal Academy of Arts by

SIR ARTHUR EVANS *October 16th, 1936*

IT is strange indeed that a wholly new chapter, though not the least brilliant, in the history of European civilization, should only have opened out to our knowledge within this generation. When in the late seventies of the last century, Schliemann, with his digger's faith, struck the treasures of Mycenae, there seemed no place for them in the prehistory of Greece itself, and the most accredited view was that they had found their way to the Palace of Agamemnon through Phoenician agencies. But succeeding finds more and more disclosed a much more widespread connexion with the actual soil of Hellas than had been at first realized, and, if some cradle of the culture must be sought nearer home, the earliest tradition pointed to that 'mid-sea land' of Crete where is the fabled seat of Minos, the great lawgiver, in 'broad Knossos', in which his craftsman, Daedalos, built him a palace of exceeding splendour.

One clew to the 'Labyrinth' was already at hand. He had observed in the Athens Museum and in private possession certain early seals found in Crete that presented hieroglyphic signs, pointing to the existence there of an independent system of writing—the first hint of the eventual discovery in the great Palace not only of clay documents with hieroglyphic signs, but of some 1,600 tablets illustrating the evolution of a highly developed linear script. Continuing his investigations on Cretan soil it had been possible for him to acquire, as early as 1904, a foothold on the hill-top of the ancient site of Knossos, known as Kephala, on the southern crest of which extensive remains of prehistoric walling were visible, though, owing to the circumstances of

the times, it was not possible to begin its actual exploration until 1900. This, after repeated campaigns—spread over more than thirty years—has actually brought to light the ‘House of Minos’, almost wholly covered by the earth but preserved in parts to the height of two stories.

Thanks to the liberality of the Royal Academy of Arts, an Exhibition illustrating the Excavations of 1900–1901–1902 was already held in Gallery XI in 1903. But the present Exhibition, arranged by him in connexion with the Jubilee of the British School of Athens—though the results of the discoveries at Knossos itself naturally still form the main theme on an amplified scale—the object has been to supply as far as possible the materials for a general survey of the Minoan culture in its widest range, such as has never yet been presented to the public view in any one place. One particular object, moreover, has been to put together a fuller series than has ever yet been placed side by side of relics illustrating the early connexions between Crete and the Nile Valley, from its ‘proto-Libyan’ prehistoric stage of about 3500 B.C. to the days of the Early and Middle Egyptian Kingdoms.

It will be seen that, in these first-fruits of Cretan exploration, the riddle of Schliemann’s Mycenae was already partly solved by the revelation of anterior stages of culture in direct contact with that of prehistoric and proto-dynastic Egypt—which is thus shown to have supplied the first link in the long chain of European civilization. One remarkable feature illustrated by the Cretan remains is that the southernmost district of the Island appears from its intensive penetration by an early Nilotic element—well shown by its primitive bee-hive vaults and their contents—to have actually received an element from that side driven out by Mena’s conquests. At the same time Knossos on the northern shore, linked already, as it would appear by the transit road, of which actual remains have been traced, with a port on the Libyan Sea, was from the first the



FIG. 1. Painted stucco relief of Charging bull and Olive tree (restored)
from W. Portico of Northern Entrance Passage of the Palace, Knossos

chief commercial emporium of this intercourse. So much is this the case that for the imported stone vessels of late pre-dynastic and proto-dynastic fabric, Knossos, where they are constantly forthcoming, is, so far as the existing evidence goes, the only source. We have thus the proof that the direct connexions of the great Cretan centre with the Nile valley preceded those with Syria and the Euphrates valley by about a thousand years.

Supplementing these earlier evidences of contact with Nilotic civilization are a series of chronological equations with the Middle Empire of Egypt. Find-groups of objects, kindly lent by the Keeper and Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum, from Harageh, Kahun, and Abydos corresponding with the reigns of Senusert II (c. 1906-1888 B.C.) and III and of Amenemhat III (c. 1849-1801 B.C.), are here to show that the earlier and later phases of the fine Second Middle Minoan polychrome ware go back to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries before our era.

Connexions with the Oriental side were themselves well established by the beginning of the Egyptian Middle period, and the evidences of it here put together present some strikingly novel features. A gold-mounted cylinder seal of lapis lazuli from Knossos, of which an illustration is here given, already reflects the remoter influences, which from early in the Third Millennium onwards the rulers of Sumer and Akkad were extending to the Mediterranean shores. Sir Leonard Woolley's recent discoveries at Tel Atchana on the Middle Orontes, of which specimens have been kindly lent, have produced vase fragments showing the survival of early M.M. II motives together with the mystic double-axe tree of Minoan religious imagery. Now, too, it is possible—thanks to the liberality of Monsieur Claude Schaeffer and the French Archaeological Mission in Syria—to exhibit a polychrome fragment—the first-fruits of a still unexplored tomb at Ras-Shamra, representing an actual exportation from the Royal *atelier* of Knossos, of one of

the exquisite 'egg-shell' bowls, thus carrying back the direct relation of its priest-kings with the Syrian coast to the beginning of the twentieth century B.C.

Of the splendid strength attained in the plastic art by the closing phase of the Middle Minoan Period a remark-

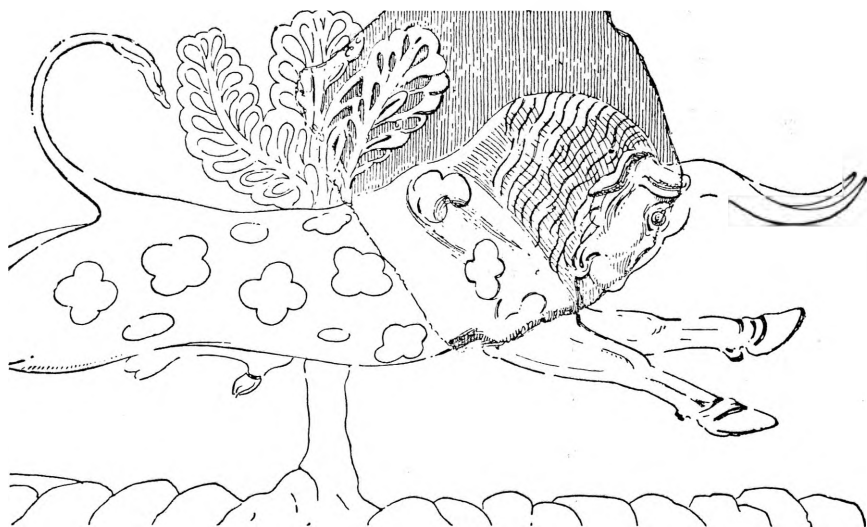


FIG. 2. Fragment of gypsum relief of charging bull with tree behind (partly developed), found outside 'Atreus' façade at Mycenae. (*Elgin Collection, British Museum.*)

able illustration is presented by a specially executed copy of the restored original of the painted stucco relief of the forepart of a charging bull as it existed in the west Portico of the Northern entrance of the Palace. The bull-hunting scene from which the relief was taken, and a companion group once existing in the Eastern Portico—executed together about 1600 B.C.—seem indeed to have influenced a whole series of minor compositions, such as the scenes on the Vapheio gold-cups. They find, too, at Mycenae an interesting contemporary echo in the reliefs from outside the façade of the 'Atreus' Tomb, executed in Cretan gypsum and probably by a Knossian artist. These reliefs, of which

casts are here shown, are among the sculptural treasures brought to England by Lord Elgin and are now in the British Museum. They are, indeed, invaluable for the early dating of the Tomb itself, which, with the closely allied Tomb of 'Klytemnestra', together displays, both in decorative details like the finely cut rosettes and in associated objects—such as in the latter case the typical 'Medallion' *pithoi* in green Cretan steatite—close affinities even with the earlier phase of M.M. III—in other words going back to the Seventeenth Century before our Era. This connexion, moreover, is here well illustrated by the lidded cylindrical vessel of grey limestone in the Wall-case C restored from fragments found in the *dromos* of the 'Atreus' Tomb where the small holes, in this case apparently for pigment (here filled in in white), curiously illustrate a characteristic decorative feature of that Minoan phase.

Other works in painted plaster relief, such as the fragments of agonistic figures from the Great East Hall of the Palace, and the low relief of a priest-king wearing a lily crown, show a mastery over the human form hardly surpassed a millennium later in the great days of Hellenic art.

It may be here recalled that both Sir William Richmond, on the technical and artistic side, and Professor Arthur Thomson, on the anatomical side, have placed on record their high appreciation of these works, and in particular of such a careful study of surface contours as suggests not only the underlying veins and muscular tissues, but even the bony structure—so difficult to render—of wrist and elbow.

Of the abundant remains of painting in the flat on lime plaster, one of the most interesting is the Miniature Fresco with the Court ladies gossiping in the front row of the grand-stand of the bull sports. The garden scene from a villa at Amnisos, the eastern haven of Knossos, recently discovered by Dr. Marinatos—also specially reproduced for this Exhibition—with their artificial basins and formal

clumps of irises and lilies, are strangely reminiscent of Versailles.

The unrivalled series of figurines of a religious nature in Case J, including the fine reproductions of the Knossian snake Goddess in faience and the replica of the same divinity in gold-plated ivory, now in the Boston Museum, are also of special value from the artistic point of view. The latter is strangely modern in expression. The 'Fitzwilliam Goddess' here most liberally deposited, of mottled marble (made in two parts in the Minoan fashion) shows a markedly classical profile. The leaping youth from the bull sports is unsurpassed in its *élan*, and a small ivory figure of a boy-God ritually tonsured and with loin clothing in gold plate (never before exhibited), shows a delicacy of pose and execution recalling the best Renaissance work.

For a continuous illustration of the whole extent of Minoan art, covering some 2,000 years, his own collection of seal-stones and signet-rings, here also exhibited, may be found to have a unique value. Scenes of which in the larger art we have only fragmentary remains, are here preserved in their entirety, some of them, like the grappled bull at the Cistern, real masterpieces of the engraver's art. The gold signet-rings and bead-seals of the Thisbê Treasure, here preserved (the authenticity of which has been now fully established¹), as apparently some of the Mycenae signet types, clearly represent scenes of ancient epic. A group of three of the Thisbê seals reproduces three episodes—Aegisthos and Klyemnestra, slain by Orestes, Oedipus stabbing the Sphinx, and again attacking his father Laios. The gold signet-rings presenting religious subjects are of special interest. A gold replica is here preserved of the 'Ring of Minos' (now lost), the finding of which led to the discovery of the Temple Tomb at Knossos. It presents three scenes of the Goddess migrating, partly by sea, from one rock sanctuary to another. But the interest culminates

¹ See note at the end of leaflet.

in the 'Ring of Nestor', found by a peasant grubbing for blocks in the larger bee-hive tomb at Pylos before the German excavation. For here, in microscopic engraving, including seventeen figures, we have the first glimpse of the Minoan Underworld.

As a whole the Minoan signet-rings supply a principal source of our knowledge of the Minoan Religion. Judged from the Christian standpoint, this was on a distinctly higher level than the classical form that succeeded it. It included, indeed, a primitive element in which 'Bethels', in the form of pillar shrines, are by due ritual infused with the divine spirit, often descending in dove form.

The old Cretans themselves belonged to an ethnic stock the further extension of which can be traced east through a large part of Anatolia and Northern Syria, and the Religion itself belonged fundamentally to Western Asia. It is not strange, therefore, that the form of Christian belief that we still see to-day throughout the Mediterranean area should find some interesting anticipations in that of Minoan Crete. The root idea was matriarchial and the Mother Goddess presides. The adoration of Mother and Child on a Minoan signet-ring, with the Magi in the shape of warriors bringing their gifts, is almost a replica of that (shown here as an illustration) on a Christian ring-stone of the Sixth Century of our era. The Mother here with the Child on her lap is a true Madonna. In another interesting scene the death of a youthful God is clearly referred to, with female mourners bowing their heads above his little gravestone. The idea of resurgence after death also repeats itself in these scenes, symbolized by the chrysalis as well as by the butterfly—a unique feature. But though in such scenes the parallelism with Thammuz and the Great Mother on the Syrian side is unmistakable, the outlook in the Minoan World was purer, and in all branches of its art—extending over so many centuries—no single representation has been brought to light of an indecent nature.

It is satisfactory to record that the classification of the Minoan Age divided into three main parts each again divided into three Periods, proposed by the Excavator some 35 years ago, has now received general acceptance and has been confirmed by the Egyptian and Oriental evidences later forthcoming. The explanation of this may probably be found in a phenomenon that has now repeated itself—the fact namely that the continuous history of the Great Palace, built in a district quite exceptionally liable to seismic disturbances, successive earthquakes have demonstrably supplied the agency through which the several Periods reached their close.

The final overthrow of the Palace was in all probability due to the same cause. The end was certainly sudden. In the 'Room of the Throne' or small Consistory, where the Priest-king himself was wont to sit between the Guardian Griffins on the walls, flat alabastra were in the course of filling from an oil jar here transported, while beside them lay remains of a casket with faience inlays that had been thrown, face downwards, from the neighbouring stone bench.

It will be seen that the delimitation of the Minoan Periods was itself largely the result of physical causes.

NOTE ON THE 'THISBÊ TREASURE'

By A. E. (See p. 6)

THIS unique illustration of L.M. *Ia* and *b* intaglio style, on gold signet-rings and beads, was brought to light in a chamber-tomb at Thisbê on the Boeotian coast (as it now appears), about 1910, and subsequently acquired by A. E.

The intaglio scenes, clearly answering to known episodes of Greek tradition, such as the slaughter of Aegisthos and Klytemnestra by Orestes, and of the Sphinx by Oedipus, were so surprising that many doubts inevitably arose as to their genuineness. At the same time, the presence here of 'heroic' pieces quite agrees with the designs of combat on the 'signets' from the Shaft Graves at Mycenae, which (as

Schliemann first pointed out) clearly represent episodes of ancient epic, some at least recorded in Homer. They form themselves a collective whole, not only in their general fabric, which is purely Minoan, but in the character of the designs, which seem to be mostly from the hands of the same engraver and by curious evidence of their having been one and all subjected, from superincumbent debris, to the same pressure on their backs due to some disturbance (perhaps seismic) of the tomb. This seems to have turned the wooden coffin that may have contained the remains upside down. In the exhibition of the 'Treasure' this is well shown by the electrotypes presenting the backs of the objects, placed beside the series showing the intaglios, one and all of which bear the same signs of pressure or indentation. They were associated (to my knowledge: A. E.) with other gold jewels going back in date to at least *c.* 1500 B.C., including a miniature *pyxis* or round box resembling those from the Third Shaft Grave at Mycenae. To myself such critical instincts as had been personally acquired through a lifetime devoted to such minute studies were quite decisive as to their genuineness; and this opinion was shared by the late Mr. R. B. Seager, who for years had collected Minoan seal-stones, and whose *flair* and knowledge as regards Minoan antiquities as a whole are generally recognized. But in addition to this, a series of crucial points connected with the Thisbê jewels have since received illustration of such a kind as to place the execution of the intaglios outside the capacity of the most skilful forger.

A good illustration of this is presented by the theme of No. 1 in the arrangement of the group (Fig. 3), where a female figure fills a jar from a ewer beside a tree; to be taken, probably, as a rain-charm, of a class represented by a series of simpler designs of ewers and foliage on a talismanic class of the immediately preceding epoch. The figure pouring into the jar was entirely new, however, and therefore, in the eyes of those who condemned the

Treasure, an invention of a forger. Some years afterwards, however, among remains of seal-impressions derived from



FIG. 3. Goddess in front of fruit tree pouring libation into jar of metallic character. Thisbê bead-seal.



FIG. 4. Seated figure pouring libation into similar jar: with 'sacral horns' in front and tree to right. On clay seal-impression from Knossos (late Palatial).

the 'Room of the Archives' at Knossos, a version of this same scene came to light where the figure here seated pours the liquid offering into a jar of the same general type (Fig. 4). So too the form of the chariot on the bead-seal showing Oedipus and Laios was condemned by a

French critic from the fact that the pole arches forward from the top of the front of the chariot instead of running out from its bottom as on the only type apparently known to him, the 'late Palatial type C'. But the Thisbê form actually answers to the earlier form B—itself of remote Sumerian descent—which fits in with the chronological place of the Thisbê jewel and is paralleled by an amygdaloid bead-seal of contemporary fabric from Knossos. (See *P. of M.*, iv, 816-18.)

Three of the bead-seals, though clearly from the same sepulchral vault, belonged to the 'flat cylinder' type, which as an intaglio form practically dies out in the Late Minoan Ia period. The style of engraving, too, in these cases—Overthrow of man in bull-grappling scene; Matador; Lion seizing Bull—is also finer and somewhat earlier in its affinities. That there were also bead-seals belonging to the 'Treasure', of the same amygdaloid form as those belonging to the better represented parure, but without the engraved lines on the back (the distinctive mark of L.M. Ib) that all these bear, is here demonstrated for the first time by the evidence of a bead-seal that it is now possible to add to the Thisbê series.

The lion-spearing scene, of the later group at Thisbê (Fig. 5), has the shaft of the hunter's spear tied round at intervals: this feature, which points to a compound shaft, made out of three or four reeds, reappears in the case of spearmen both on a signet-ring from the Fourth Shaft Grave at Mycenae, and on a gold bead obtained by the late Professor Bosanquet in 1910 from a Boeotian peasant, subsequently acquired by Dr. Hogarth for the Ashmolean Museum, and on other grounds comparable with the Thisbê series (Fig. 6). A recent examination of the underside of this further shows that pressure marks identical with those on the Thisbê beads are visible. That it formed part of the 'Treasure' there can be no reasonable doubt, and its fine style places it with the earlier group.

The resort to this compound form of shaft, a unique phenomenon that has hitherto escaped notice, may have

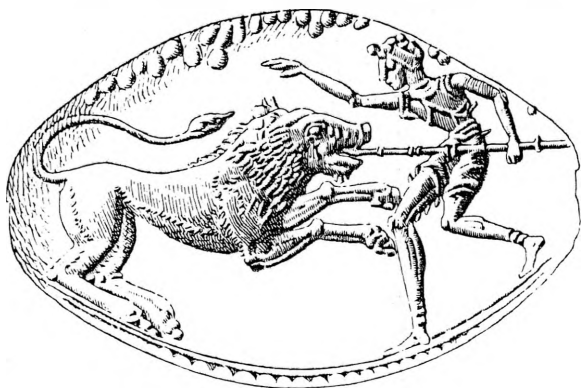


FIG. 5. Thisbê bead-seal: hunter with 'compound' spear attacking lion.



FIG. 6. Two warriors with body-shields attacking each other with spears, showing 'compound' shafts (found in Boeotia and assigned to Thisbê Treasure).

been due to the lack of well-adapted wood in Mainland districts rich in reeds, so plentiful still in many parts of Greece.

In this case too the scene of single combat itself, like the analogous subject on a signet-ring from the Third Shaft Grave at Mycenae in which Schliemann recognized Achilles and Hektor 'of the waving crest', would, doubtless, have found its personal application in some episode of local saga.