

# The Palace of Knossos: An Example in Conservation

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A visit to the site of Knossos after a lapse of 18 years has been an experience of the utmost value. Before describing the changes produced by the hand of time, a brief explanation of the Cretan climate is necessary. There is a rainy season in Crete which begins in the late autumn and persists through the winter until February, or sometimes March. During this annual period storms of great severity, with high wind and driving rain, often occur; snow is constant in the upper regions and is not exceptional in lower lying areas nearer the coast, such as the one in which Knossos is situated. I was quite prepared to see more disintegration than is actually evident. The gypsum paving and many of the wall blocks have suffered severely, especially—and this applies generally—where the material is from a pronounced crystalline stratum. On the other hand, the great orthostatic slabs of the original (Middle Minoan III) west wall and other wall blocks of the same period, being of more closely-knit texture, are still remarkably well preserved: many more years ought to elapse before they lose any of their essential character.

There is practically no evidence of complete disintegration even in the flimsiest rubble walling of the palace, which is a tribute to the tenacity of the binding material, perhaps owing partly to its gradual assimilation of the magnificent lime plaster which covered the surfaces of these walls in their original state. It is clear that Minoan building in material and method was of much greater permanency than would appear at first sight. There was also a careful differentiation of building method to suit various elements in the composition of the palace, which is too intricate a subject to be dealt with here, but it may be said that it increases our respect for the Minoan achievement. The element of wood construction is now very well understood by the world at large, but it has been a standing wonder that the walls could be so remarkably well preserved after the wood had perished and very obviously, in many places, by fire. It now appears evident that most of the lower parts of the rubble walling remain practically as they were built—a mixture of stones, sun-dried brick and the sun-dried clay backing of the lime plaster and woodwork. This was so coherent as, in many cases, to defy destruction.

But after giving due weight to all these factors of permanency, it is quite clear that the palace, as a whole, would gradually become a shapeless and almost unintelligible ruin unless some practical methods were adopted to ensure protection from the elements for its more essential features. These methods have been adopted by Sir Arthur Evans with constant and unwearying forethought in all available time since the first years of excavation. Much of the earlier work of preservation was necessarily tentative and experimental. This is now being replaced to a great extent by more permanent methods, and a lot of additional work has been done. The Cretan mechanic has discovered the properties and uses of reinforced concrete (*béton armée*), and all re-constitutions intended to represent woodwork as well as a

great deal of other necessary construction are now being carried out in this material, by the use of local cement, river sand and gravel (this last of a high quality), together with iron rods and wire in a sound, if somewhat elementary method.

Mention has been made of the word "re-constitution." It is one expressly used and desired to be used by Sir Arthur himself, and it meets the case very well. Such work as this is not, and ought not to be, "restoration." Its objects are (1) to preserve those key positions of the palace plan and structure already existing that are essential for its proper understanding, and (2) to suggest to the competent observer further methods of construction and finish that years of study of evidences in fresco, etc., have elucidated. About the general soundness of outlook in these re-constitutions there can be no doubt whatever: nothing that has been done is either wild or improbable. So far as actual structure is concerned, there is hardly a single bit of the new work that is not based on facts as certain as any such facts can be. Nothing at once so daring or so thorough has ever been attempted on any ancient site in Europe or probably anywhere. The whole achievement is a great example, and the fact that the explorer has carried it out almost entirely with his own unaided resources in single-minded devotion to research is one of which all Britishers may well be proud.

The principal objective of the present year's campaign is the "Royal Villa," an exceptionally interesting house excavated in 1903, in a sheltered position some 200 yards from the N.E. corner of the palace. From the dominant character of its plan (a central seat or throne raised and balustraded from the end of the main hall and lit from above by means of a clerestory well, a most interesting feature) it seems quite probable that this "villa" may have been the summer retreat of some important royal personage, perhaps even of the priest-king himself. The house belongs to the earlier part of the first late Minoan period, which was the great period of the later palace, and it was built at a time when gypsum was relatively plentiful. To this fortunate fact we owe the well-preserved ashlar facing of gypsum blocks in the main staircase and the pillar room with the very complete evidences of wooden beam construction in the floor over the pillar room. Above the first landing the well-preserved main staircase from ground to first floor is bifurcated, and as the only apparent reason for this in the plan is the securing of a certain privacy we have here an additional reason for considering that the villa was a place of some distinction.

Important as are the re-constitution works involved in the provision of the major part of the upper floor of the Royal Villa, they are overshadowed in an archaeological sense by the discovery of additional elements in the great south propylæum of the western half of the palace. It is not possible to say much about these at present; it is sufficient to indicate that they throw a very important light on the relations between Knossos and Tiryns and give greater coherence to the system of upper floor halls

to which they formed the approach. It will now become possible to assemble the entire plan of the propylæum, both in its earlier form, which dates from the last Middle Minoan period (say 1700 B.C.), and in its later form (that of the beginning of the first late Minoan period) after the earthquake, which is the only explanation of certain evidences of destruction and abandonment occurring at a period which might otherwise have had unbroken continuity. In 1900, fallen back from a wall, was found the well-known fresco of the "cup-bearer," belonging to the later propylæum and perhaps the most important piece of Cretan fresco in existence. Beneath the later pavement, .70 cm. down, were found the fragments of the carved stone rosette band, of unsurpassed workmanship and belonging to the earlier propylæum. It is significant of the monumental character of this region of the palace.

Re-constitutions in the western section of the palace now loom as large as, or even larger than, the more obvious ones carried out many years earlier in the Domestic Quarter of the eastern section. When they come to be

finally put on paper and appear in the second volume of Sir A. Evans's book, they will be a revelation of the first importance.

Of the Candia Museum it is difficult to speak in measured terms. It is certainly one of the most important museums in the world. Nowhere else can be found such an unparalleled assortment of objects representing the output of this great civilisation. The museum is bound to grow, as exploration in Crete has still been strictly limited. Sir Arthur has excavated several of the houses near the Knossos palace, but it is clear that there were hundreds of these houses, constituting a great town with the palace, on its acropolis, as a centre. The French have recently excavated an extremely interesting palace at Malia, about 20 miles east of Knossos, near the coast. The Cretan authorities have also laid bare a little ritual centre, right on the coast about seven miles from the port of Knossos, which contained several very large bronze double axes among other finds. The western part of Crete is still practically unexplored.