THE BIRTH CAVE OF ZEUS

ANCIENT logic accepted Immortality more easily than Eternity. Gods might be to all time, but not from all time; and, while Cretans were branded the liars of antiquity for showing on one hill the tomb of Zeus, no one doubted the divine birthplace which they pointed out on another.

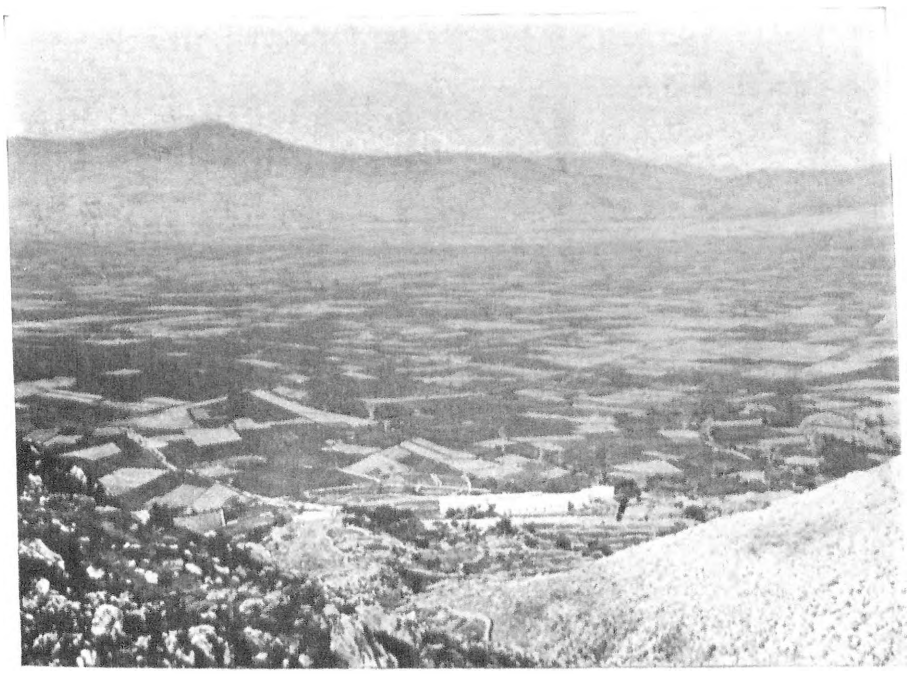
The Greek held devoutly that somewhere on his own beautiful coasts his Father God had once been cradled; and an immemorial tradition, whose source he neither knew nor inquired, pointed to Crete. There were other stories indeed, one giving the honour to Arcadia; but those awful peaks which rose in pale morning and opalescent evening light out of the Southern Sea prevailed with ninety-nine out of a hundred Believers. In this belief, perhaps, the Hellenes showed some unconscious memory of their racial origin, or, at least, some tradition of an earlier civilisation, that had contributed to make their race what it was; but of that it seems they never knew as much as we may learn.

If he was sure of the island to which he owed his God, the Greek was not, however, in his latter days, so sure of the precise spot hallowed by the divine infancy. The God was certainly cradled in a cave, but there were two caves—one in the central peak of Ida, which looks west on Retimo and east on Candia, the other in a lower but still majestic easterly mountain, Lasithi, called by the old Cretans, Dicte. Some who knew of this rival claim tried, like the Sicilian Diodorus,

to reconcile the local stories, making the babe, born on Dicte, be reared on Ida. But more voted for one or other hill, and those of the best authority for Dicte. There the momentous scene was placed by the oldest poet who relates the story of the Zeus-Genesis, the Greek Hesiod; there, too, by the great Latins, Lucretius and Virgil, to say nothing of lesser lights.

The familiar Greek tale, become at last more familiar to the West than the myths of its own primitive creeds, varies little in the authorities. Kronos, who is Time, King of Heaven, warned that a son shall cast him from his realm, determined to devour his male issue as soon as born. But Queen Rhea, wrathful and feeling her hour nigh, fled to Crete, and there was delivered of a boy, whom she hid in a cave on Mount Dicte, while the blind old God accepted a stone in place of his child, even as stones were accepted for mansions of godhead all over the Near East. The baby's whimperings were drowned by the clashing shields of faithful servants; or, as one story has it, by the rooting of a fostering sow. In Hesiod's narrative all this event is connected expressly with the city of Lyttos. Thither the pregnant Queen was sent by the kindly Earth Mother at the first, and thence she set forth by night to lay her new-born babe on the neighbouring hill. That babe grew to be the Immortal One, before whom old Time himself was forced to bow, and in later days still resorted to his birth cave. For thither, as Lucian tells us in his best manner, he led the maiden Europa, flushed and half suspecting, and there the son, whom she conceived that day, sought his Father, when, another Moses, he would give a Law to the Cretans. While the Cretans waited above, so runs the story, Minos descended into the grot and, reappearing at last with the Code, gave out that he had it from the hands of Zeus himself.

Since such myths, credited as they were for very many centuries, must have had some local habitation, a primitive Cave-sanctuary was to be looked for in the Lasithi *massif*; and by preference near Lyttos, whose scattered ruin lies on a spur of the north-westernmost peak of the group of mountains.



The Hollow Lasithi Plain

The Hill locked Floor drains to its North-western End

That imposing pyramidal hill, probably Hesiod's *Aigaion*, is still honoured with yearly pilgrimage and called by the Cretans the Lord's Mountain. But the upland fastnesses of Crete have not, these many centuries past, been any place for the scholarly explorer; and the Lasithi region, which excluded the Venetians and only once admitted the Turks in arms, has remained less known than any part of the classic world. Indeed, jealous and nervous officials on the coast, jealous and arrogant hillmen in the inner country, have kept most of Crete virgin soil to our own day.

Nothing, therefore, was heard in the outer world of any cavern in Dicte till less than twenty years ago. At last, in 1883, a report, reaching Candia, drew attention to a large double grotto, which shows as a black spot on the hillside above Psychró, a village of the inner Lasithi plain. It was said that shepherds, folding their flocks at night or storm time, had found strange objects in bronze and terra-cotta in the black bottom mould of that cavern. Their finding continued, and three years later the first archæologist came to the spot, Frederico Halbherr, of Gortynian fame, accompanied by Dr. Joseph Hazzidakis, who, as head of the Candiote *Syllogos*, held semi-official authority in the matter of antiquities. They were successful in recovering divers primitive objects from peasant hands, figurines of men and beasts, miniature double axes, knives and other weapons, and they even themselves scraped the earth before the cavern-mouth in hope of finding such an altar as stands without the Zeus grot on Ida. But inside the cave they saw that they could do little or nothing, so deep was the cumber of fallen rocks in its upper hall. What they had recovered, however, was so manifestly votive and of early period, that interest was everywhere awakened, and the cave was marked a prize for explorers in more peaceful days to come. Most scholars, who penetrated Crete in the troubled years that followed, contrived to pass a few hours in Psychró, buying what the natives grubbed up from time to time among the boulders; and two, Mr. A. J. Evans and

Mons. J. Demargne, essayed tentative excavations, whereby the first-named gained valuable evidence as to the stratification of the sacrificial deposit, and ascertained the original position of one notable object, purchased in the village. This was a steatite libation-table, inscribed with the group of hieroglyphic symbols, which first assured the finder that he was on the track of a hitherto unknown script.

The opportunity of scholars came at length with the liberation of the island, and the British lost no time in securing the concession of this cave. It fell, in the division of labour, to my own share, and as early in May 1900 as the Cretan climate will allow life in tents at an altitude of 3000 feet, I left Mr. Arthur Evans to his fortunate labours in the Knossian Palace of Minos, and betook myself to Psychró with a few trained men, stone-hammers, mining-bars, blasting powder, and the rest of a digger's plant.

The village proved complacent, nay enthusiastic. I had feared we might be made but little welcome, for with my work the local profits of illicit digging, enjoyed for years, would cease for ever. But Lasithi, like all Crete, was, before all things, minded to justify its new-won freedom in European eyes, and Psychró was not less sensible than any other Greek community would have been to the public attention that the dig would concentrate on its little self. Moreover, from week to week the Prince High Commissioner was expected on a visit to the cave, and lo! here was an opportune capitalist to make at his own charge the needful path and employ local labour. Ready money was short in the village, and tax-collectors proved not less insistent under the new flag than under the old.

Workmen, therefore, came clamorous to enrol themselves, and on a stormy morning, when the hillside was swept alternately by clammy mists and by half-frozen showers, I had no lack of hands to make me a zigzag mule-track up the five hundred feet slope of rock. Knowing that this path would serve for the descent of the black cave mould, prized above all

A Zigzag Track up the Rock

A Practicable Way into the Cave

top-dressings by the farmers of the plain, the peasants finished it in less than a day. Then, while a camping-ground was being cut and embanked out before the yawning mouth, we began to blast a practicable way into the cave itself.

Here let it be understood that this great cavern is double. There is a shallow hall to right and an abysmal chasm to left, the last not matched in Crete for grandeur, nor unworthy of a place among the famous limestone grottoes of the world. The rock at first breaks down sheer, but as the light grows dim, takes an outward slope, and so falls steeply still for two hundred feet into an inky darkness. Having groped thus far, stand and burn a powerful flashlight. An icy pool spreads from your feet about the bases of fantastic stalactite columns on into the heart of the hill. Hall opens from hall with fretted roofs and the same black unruffled floor, doubling the torches you and your guides must bear. An impassable labyrinth before, where rock and water meet; behind and far above a spot of faintly luminous haze. Fit scene enough for Minos' mysterious colloquy with his father Zeus, and the after cult of a Chthonian god.

The water, that once filled the hollow Lasithi plain, has made both these cavernous recesses. To-day the hill-locked floor, evenly laid as a sand beach, drains at its north-western end, with suckings and gurglings, into a choked pit below a mighty impending cliff. What becomes of the waters thereafter no one knows. Perhaps they reappear in certain large springs which rise among the northern roots of the *massif*; perhaps they find their way to the surface again under the sea. But the alluvial basin, seen from above as a huge chess-board, has not always been exposed. Dry it has been, indeed, or nearly so, since very early Greek times, for "Geometric" tombs exist little above its level near Plata, one of the hamlets of the plain; but before that vague date the western outlet had not opened or was not sufficient for the issue of the waters. A lake, lapping the mountain flanks five hundred feet above, poured its overflow into the hill through this cave of Psychró,

making it a natural marvel, which might appeal to the superstition of primitive peasants. The objects found in it tell us within narrow limits of time when its various parts dried sufficiently for it to be used as a sanctuary, and when, no longer an outlet of the lake, it ceased to be a place of pious resort.

Our blasting charges made short work of the boulders in the upper hall, and luckily the threatening roof held good. Crowbars and stone-hammers finished the powder's work, and in four strenuous days we had not only made a path for laden men to go and come, but cleared a considerable surface of black mould under the farther wall. Then the real dig began, while preparations for further blasts went on, with incessant ringing of mining-bars. Indeed, what with this metallic din, reverberating from roof and walls, what with the heavy hanging fumes of recent explosions, and the mingled reek of hot unwashed humanity and chill newly-disturbed earth, no site could be more trying to a digger than that dim dripping cave. All soil had to be carried up the steep inclines out of the dark and sifted in the daylight, and to this operation and the washing of the blackened pottery was set a gang of women, as more patient in minute search and of less sophisticated temper.

Whenever possible, in all lands, I have mixed the sexes in this sort of work. The men labour the more willingly for the emulation of the women, and a variety is added, of no small value in operations, where the labourers must always be interested and alert, and boredom spells failure. The day, which otherwise might drag on in tired silence, goes merrily to the end in chatter and laughter, and the dig is accepted as a relief in monotonous lives, sought cheerfully at dawn and not willingly abandoned till late. Curiously enough, it is in Moslem lands that, as a master of labour, I have met with the least opposition from feminine prudery. The Beduin women of the northern, or Syrian, half tribe of Waled Aly, who have settled during the last fifty years on the mounds of Gaif in the Delta, came without a moment's hesitation to help their husbands and

Incessant Ringing of Mining Bars

A Gang of Women

Sisters, Cousins and Aunts

Lingering to Load Mules for the Gardens below

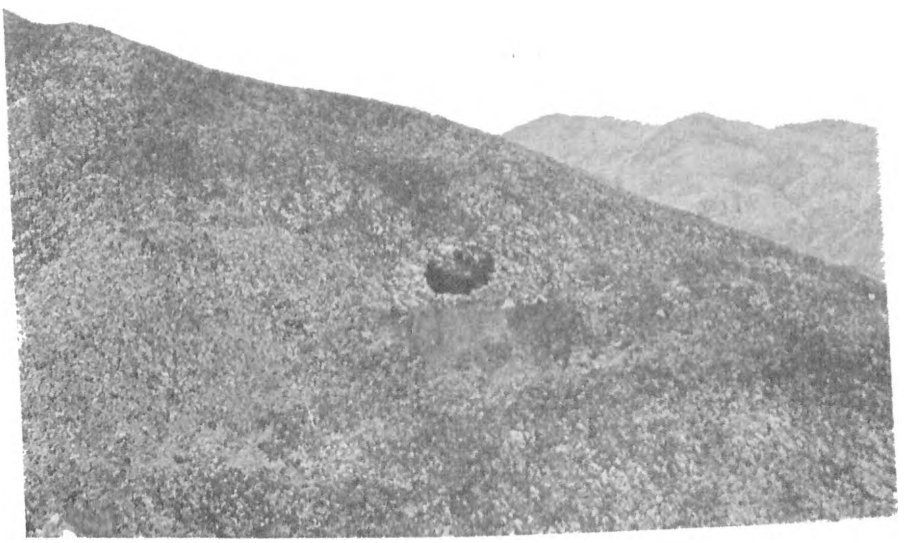
brothers dig out Naukratis. They even brought their babies, and more than one, on the first day, tried to carry a basket of earth on one shoulder, while a brown mite nestled at the breast, receiving a dose of sand in mouth and eyes as its mother unhandily tipped her load. When I forbade babies in arms next day, no one seemed to understand the why of the objection. Not to have had the women in that daily picture would have been great loss. Tattooed and unclean skins, grease-clogged wisps of hair and foul rags were amply atoned for by superb quality of eyes and teeth, and the exquisite refinement of feature and form, which is in these ancient gentlefolk of the Desert.

In Cyprus, Turkish mothers enlisted in our work, and their little girls, engaged more for the pleasure of the sight of them than anything else, turned the Paphian Temple into a riotous playground. But western Greek isles are bond-slaves to Mrs. Grundy. Melos could not be turned from its orientalism, and I feared a like failure in Crete; for there also to labour with strange men is a new thing. At first the Lasithi maidens were very coy, watching from a distance two girls, already trained at Knossos, diligent at their sieves. But, on the third morning, a more cosmopolitan villager, who had fought—or looted—as a volunteer on the French side in 1870, sent up an aged wife and daughter to help his son, and the ice was broken. The laughing mob brandished grain-sieves and demanded all to be written at once, and with their sisters, cousins, and aunts, who brought up the midday meal, they made the terrace before the cave the gayest spot in Lasithi.

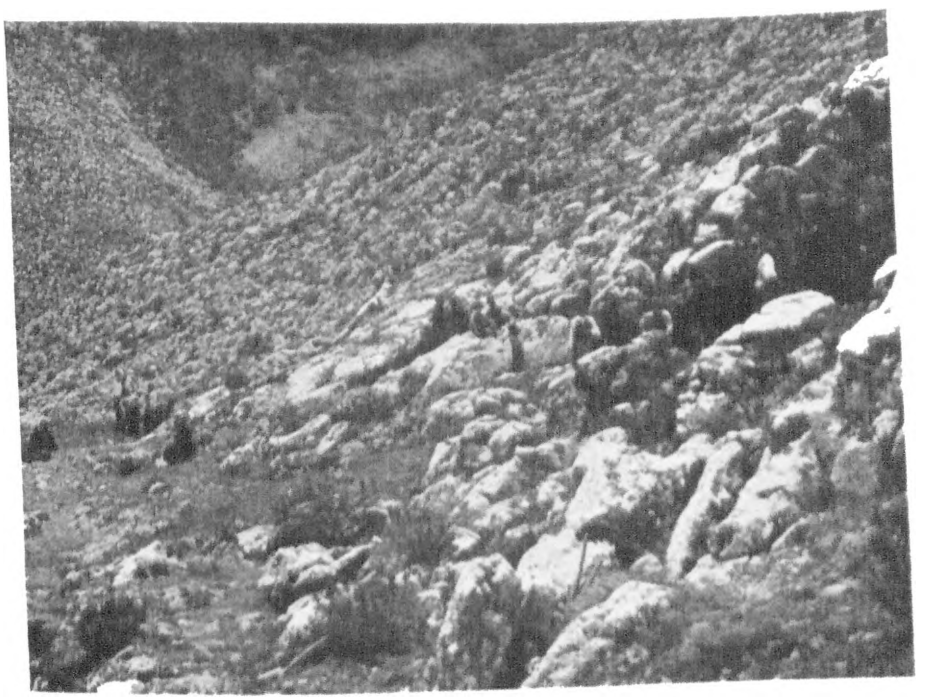
The damp mould lay at the back of the hall from five to seven feet deep, mixed with strata of ashes and sherds, over a thick bed of yellow clay, laid long ago by water, and productive only of bones and scraps of the most primitive "Ægean" ware. The upper layers seemed to be the product of countless burned things, among which many unburned offerings had been laid or dropped in all periods from about the year 800 before our era back to a dim antiquity, roughly contemporary with

the twelfth dynasty of Egyptian Pharaohs. Wherever boulders had checked the village grubbers we found offerings broken and scattered. The objects were mainly in bronze—a model of a two-wheeled car, drawn by an ox and a ram yoked to its pole, and once, as the holes on its foot-plate prove, the vehicle of little bronze figurines; images of bulls, a knife of Mycenæan curve, whose handle ends in a human head of regular sharp profile, such as appears on the Knossian frescoes—a precious document for the history of Ægean art, and the determination of the Ægean type; long hair-pins with heavy ornate heads, such as were found in the Heræum of Argos; lance-points of several types, darts and many various knives; needles of wire, rudely twisted at the head to form the eye, rings, miniature circular votive shields, and fragments of divers sorts. With these lay hundreds of little plain earthenware cups, once depositories of food or incense offerings, and some objects in clay more valuable, if not more significant; for example, a mask with painted lips and eyebrows and lashes, such as has not been found yet among remains of the "Mycenæan" Age, and a great stoup, about which a red polyp twines, half stylised as mere pattern-motive—as fine a Mycenæan vase as exists; ivory ornaments from perished sword-hilts, bone articles of the toilet, small altar-like tables in steatite and limestone, inscribed with "symbols" of the obscure Cretan character, and, in the topmost strata, swords, knives, axes, bracelets, and so forth of iron, with remains of the earliest Hellenic pottery. These lay thickest about a rude block, built up of stones and three feet high, resting on the yellow clay, and no doubt an altar of burnt sacrifice.

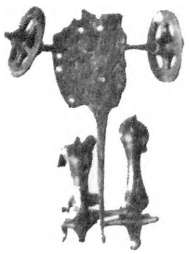
The dark inner recess of this upper hall I left to the last, for the rock-roof was most unsound above it, and great detached fragments overhung perilously. When, however, it proved to be contained within a massive "Cyclopean" wall, and, therefore, to be a *Temenos*, as the later Greeks called a holy enclosure, there was no shirking the risk. And in the event nothing happened beyond sudden thunderous slides of rock



The Grotto as a Black Spot on the Hillside



Before the Cavern Mouth



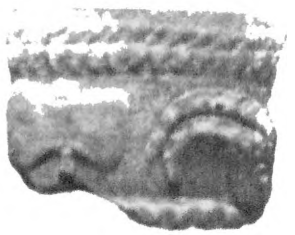
A Model of a Car

A Figurine in Clay

Painted Mycenaean Ware

A Great Stoup

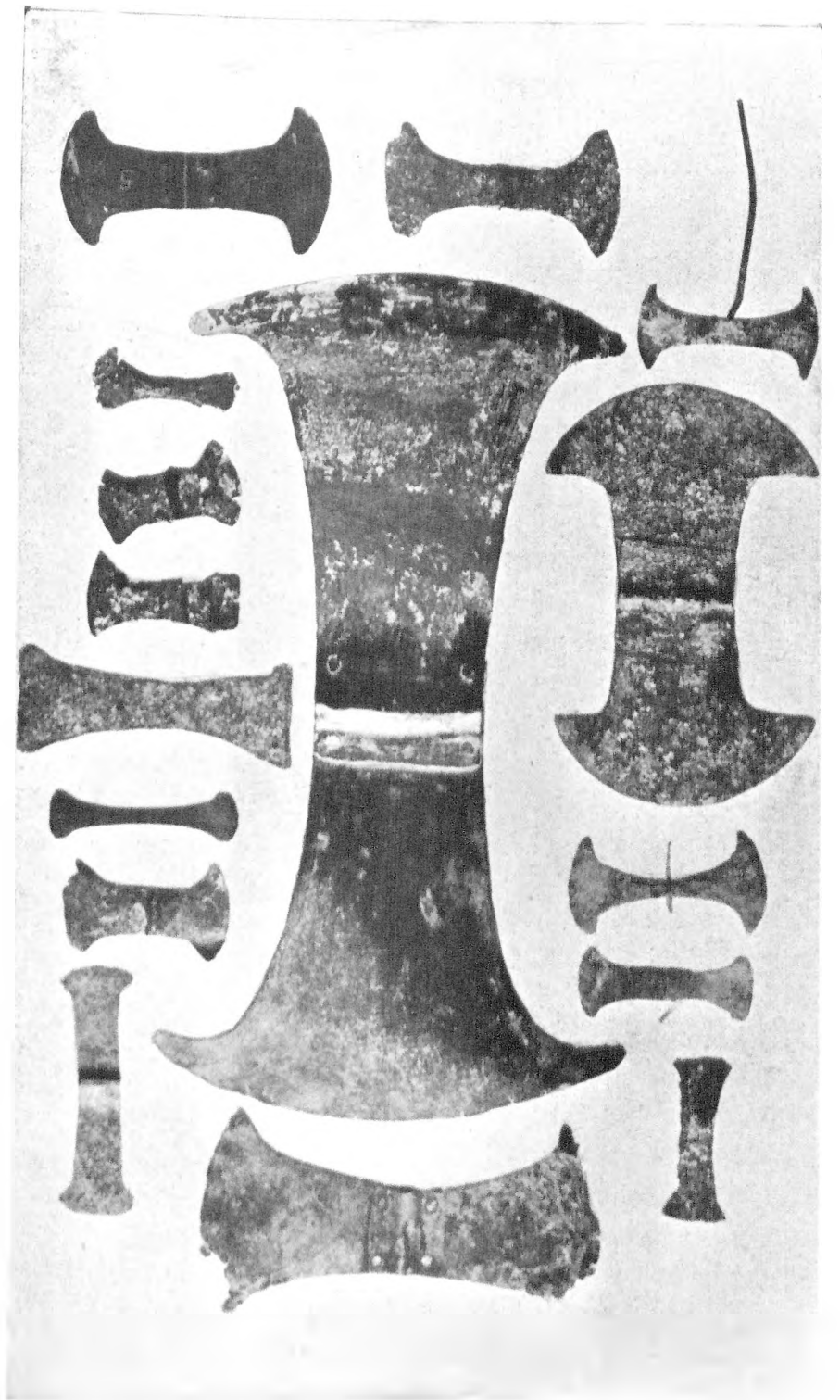
The Symbol of Zeus in Crete



Double Axe and Head of a Wild Goat

hall; and the girls moaned not a little at sight of the clammy mud in which they must now stand and search. It was not inspiriting certainly, even in the upper part of that dark chasm, lighted by smoky petroleum flares. But all complaints presently ceased when first one and then another began to pick bronzes out of the earth-shoot. The earlier diggers, who had pitched this stuff over, must either have been most summary in their method of sifting, or have found an embarrassment of riches, for the lower *talus* was proportionately more prolific than any of the mould in the upper hall. Two objects were especially welcome among the handfuls of bronze that I gathered from time to time from the digging-line—one a little statuette of the god of Egyptian Thebes (Amen Ra), accepted long after by Greeks as Zeus Ammon, in fine work probably of the period of the later Rameses. How came he there? By the hand of an Egyptian or a Cretan devotee? The other was the first perfect miniature battle-axe—a *simulacrum* in almost pure copper—of the traditional weapon with which Zeus went out to war.

As, however, there was not room for all hands on this earth slope, a few of the best searchers were bidden examine the little "pockets" of lime-crusted mud which the water had left in cups and hollows of the lower stalactite floor. Here, too, they found blades and pins; and, working lower and lower into the darkness, till their distant lights showed like glow-worms to the men above, they reached at last the margin of the subterranean pool, and began to grope in the mud left exposed by the water as it recedes in summer time into the hill. So much did that slime yield that in the event we "washed" the floor of the chill pool itself, as far as might be done by dredging waist-deep. Here occurred many rude bronze statuettes, male and female, nude and draped, vicarious representatives of worshippers who would be especially remembered. They raise one hand to the head in salute of the god; the other they fold on the breast—easiest attitude to the early bronze artist. Here, again, were signet gems, mostly sards, engraved with animal figures in



Votive Axes

those conventional attitudes that former "Mycenæan" finds have made familiar. The most show wild goats, single or heraldically opposed, with the sacred *bethel* between; but one bears the hunting of a great bull. Here, too, lay rings, pins, blades, and needles by the score.

By this time more than half the gangs were splashing in the nether pool, eager for the special rewards given to lucky finders; and the tale of bronzes had already been doubled, when chance gave us a last and most singular discovery. A zealous groper, wishing to put both hands to his work, stuck his guttering candle into a slit of a stalactite column, and therein espied the edge of a bronze blade, wedged vertically. Fished out with the fire-tongs from the camp above, this proved a perfect "Mycenæan" knife. But, except by human agency, it could hardly have come into that crevice. The word was passed to leave mud-larking awhile and search the flutings of the colonnades which ran this way and that about the head of the pool; and men and girls dispersed themselves along the dark aisles, clambering above the water on the natural crockets and inequalities of the formation. Shouts from all sides announced quick success. Crevice after crevice was discovered to be stocked with blades, pins, tweezers, *fibulæ*, and here and there a votive axe; often there were as many as ten objects to a niche. The most part slim fingers of the girls extracted readily enough; but to obtain others that the lights revealed it was necessary to smash the stalactite lips that in long ages had almost closed upon them; and in that process much was found that had been wholly hidden. For about four hours the rate of discovery was at least an object a minute, and most prolific were the columns at the head of the pool and a little lateral chamber opening to left; but above the height of a man nothing was found.

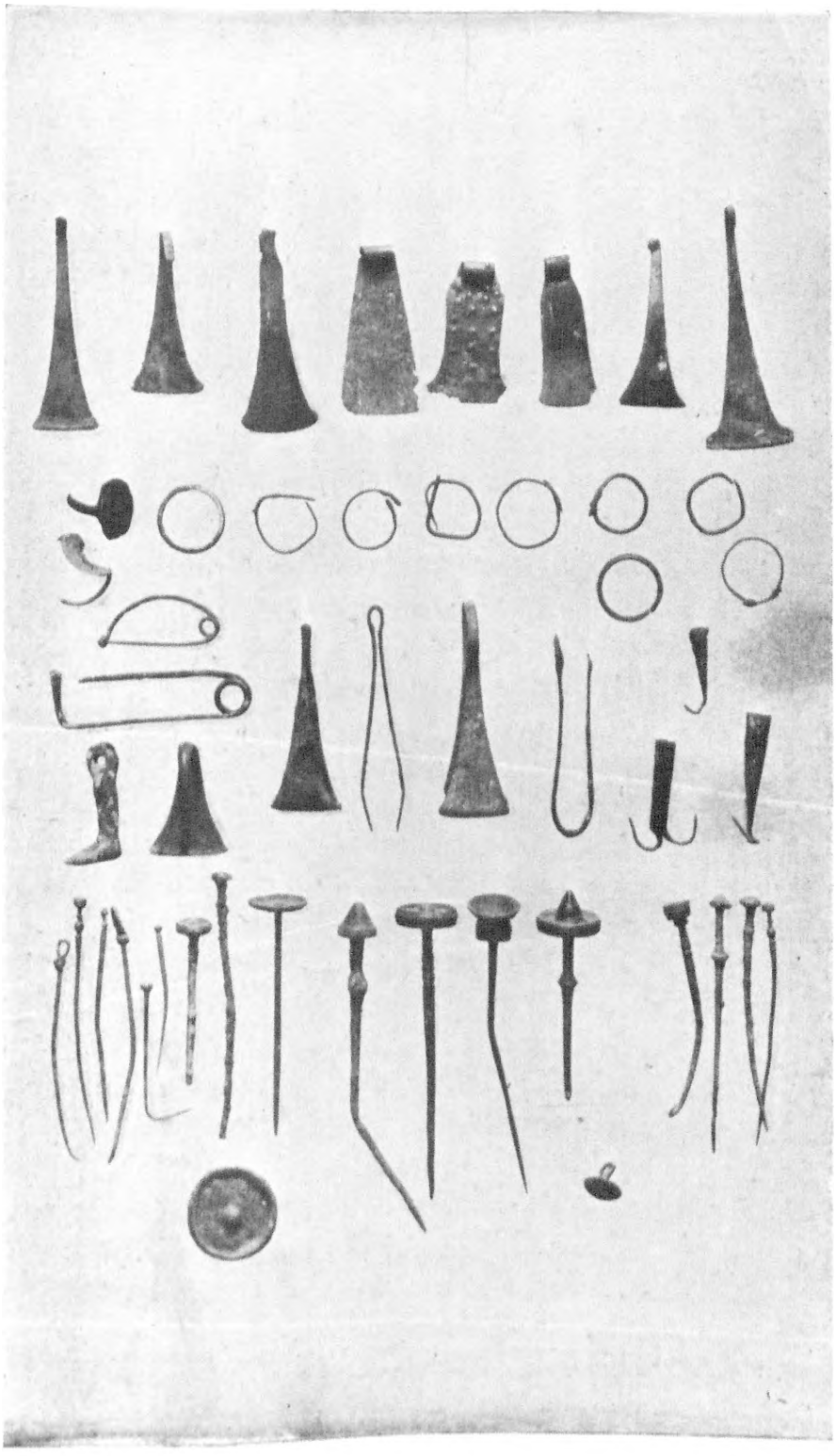
Here, then, after all, was the real Holy of Holies. In this most awful part of the sacred grotto it was held most profitable to dedicate, in niches made by Nature herself, objects fashioned expressly for the God's service, like the axes or statuettes, or

taken from the person of the worshipper, as the knives, pins, and rings. The fact does honour to primitive Cretan imagination. In these pillared halls of unknown extent and abysmal gloom undoubtedly was laid the scene of Minos' legendary converse with Zeus. For the lower grot suits admirably the story, as the rationalising Dionysius tells it—the primæval king leaving his people without and descending out of their sight, to reappear at last with the credit of having seen and talked with God himself. That here is the original Birth Cave of Zeus there can remain no shadow of doubt. The Cave on Ida, however rich it proved in offerings when explored some years ago, has no sanctuary approaching the mystery of this. Among holy caverns in the world, that of Psychró, in virtue of its lower halls, must stand alone.

Two days had passed in this strange search, and when nothing visible remained in the crevices, scrutinised twice and thrice, and no more bronzes could be dredged from the clammy bottom mud, I called off the workers, who were falling sick one after another of the unaccustomed humidity and chill. The treasure of Zeus was sorted and packed and sent down to the village on its way to Candia, and two days later we left silent and solitary the violated shrine of the God of Dicte.

The digger's life is a surfeit of surprises, but his imagination is seldom so curiously provoked. One seemed in that dim chasm to have come almost to sight and speech of the men before history. As we saw those pillared aisles, so the last worshipper who offered a token to Zeus saw them, three thousand years before. No later life had obliterated his tracks, and we followed them into the primæval world with such stirring of fancy as a Western traveller experiences in the Desert, that is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever.

I have never struck a camp with sharper regret. The tents had been the pleasantest of abiding-places on that rocky shelf overlooking the vast Lasithi basin, chequered and girt about with hills. This sort of life is the cleanest and healthiest in the world, and the most peaceful. All day there went and



Blades, Pins, Tweezers and Fibulæ

came about one the handsome folk, who dealt as honourably with the stranger as he wished to deal with them, neither distrustful nor presumptuous, but frank with the mountain gentility. As the evening fell, they went laughing down the hill, not as released school-children, but lingering a little to exchange a word, to load mules with soil for the gardens below, and to snigger at the ribald chaff of the cook, whose varied and mendacious career included certain experiences of the burlesque stage in the purlieus of Galata. Then one was alone, free and irresponsible as a Beduin and far safer; for in the distressful isle of Crete, where every peasant has his tale of rapine and murder in his own or his father's time, was now no suspicion of fear. On some nights that scourge of a Cretan spring, the hot Libyan blast, would rush down unheralded from the higher gullies, and set the cook calling on the Virgin while his hot coals scurried across the terrace, and the overseer rushed, calling to witness, for the big powder tin; and half-a-dozen times it seemed we should go, tents and all, by the shortest way to the village, whose lights twinkled five hundred feet below. But poles and ropes held against the worst of the blasts, and far oftener the moon was riding in a cloudless heaven and the flags drooped motionless on their standards. So the night passed, and with the dawn the chatter was heard again, coming up round the shoulder of the hill.

This is not, of course, to live Eastern life as an Eastern lives it. It is the Western, finding pleasure in a momentary return to simpler conditions, but still self-conscious in the presence of his fellow-men, and intolerant of an unfilled day; therefore, demanding intervals of privacy, and something to occupy hands and brain. The true Eastern, and the Western with the Eastern soul, like Burckhardt or Charles Doughty, empties his mind at will of all thought or desire and suffers the long hours with equal indifference, swaying on the camel's hump through a monotonous land, or crouching over a nomad's coffee fire, where the pauses of an hour are broken by a venerable aphorism or a more venerable riddle. Only such

may live as the people and with the people in any part of the Nearer East, even in Greece, where the restlessness of the West shows its earliest symptom in the aimless fingering of the rosary. But other Westerns, though they will not be of the people, like well enough to live beside them, a little apart, but in their simple and natural atmosphere. Simple children of nature are the Lasithiotes to-day. What they may become to-morrow, if the black coat and hard hat must clothe their bodies and the academic commonplaces of the New Hellenism possess their souls, I greatly fear. May the ring-fence of hills long preserve their present simplicity! It is the best I can wish Lasithi in requital of great goodwill.

D. G. Hogarth.

Various Knives