PROFILES

MINOAN STUDIES

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One of the intra-disciplinary divides that marks archaeology generally is between those who study prehistoric and those who study historic periods. Prehistoric archaeologists are often faced with extremely lacunose data sets or remains that can be very rich in some types of data (such as environmental) but poor in others. At the same time, lacking written evidence, these scholars have to build interpretations of all aspects of life from first principles, using material evidence alone. These restrictions tend to lead them to address big questions and broad sweeps of time. Historical archaeology, including in the field of Classics, is often at its best when revealing aspects of life that are overlooked, or taken for granted, by the writers of the past. At the same time, the rich connections between the written and the material records mean that the most stimulating work often disregards disciplinary boundaries between archaeology and the other kinds of scholarship studying the past. Minoan archaeology is one of a small set of archaeologies globally that sits at the fault line between prehistoric and historic archaeology. It is the archaeology of a literate urban society that is only rendered prehistoric by our inability to read its texts. Thanks to violent destructions of its towns and cities, a material culture that gave a prominent place to clay and stone, combined with being a focus for multiple nations' archaeologists for well over a century, Minoan archaeology is extremely rich by comparison to most prehistoric archaeologies. A multitude of settlement sites have been excavated, some with extraordinary preservation. There is a plethora of preserved iconography. Increasingly, archaeologists are making full use of modern analytical techniques to reveal aspects of the environment, production and lifestyle that would previously have been inaccessible. At the same time today's Minoanists have inherited a vivid reconstruction of Minoan society, religion and history from the pioneer scholars of the early twentieth century. Strikingly, some of the themes of this reconstruction, such as theocracy, matriarchy, nature-worship, ecstatic cult and mother goddesses, are themes occurring in the historiographies of other archaeologies dealing with societies that are prehistoric but urban – like those of the Harrapan civilisation in Pakistan or Teotihuacan in Mexico. Perhaps the most high-profile treatment of Minoan Crete in recent years is its inclusion in D. Graeber and D. Wengrow's *New York Times* best-selling *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021). Here, traditional themes in Minoan studies are combined with more recent trends in the discipline, interpreting Minoan society as non-hierarchical. This approach allows the authors to propose Minoan Crete as one of a number of examples of ancient material cultures that demonstrate human societies did not inevitably move towards hierarchy as population sizes grew and economies became more complex. Notably, other prominent examples of this 'path untrodden' selected by the authors are those aforementioned societies that are urban but prehistoric, which have long shared themes in their historiographies with Minoan Crete, like the Harrapan civilisation.

The previous paragraph contains each of the tangled strands that make up Minoan studies today. Amongst the scholars focused on the topic are some who address questions in ways that would be immediately familiar to any scholar of Northern European prehistory.

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Alongside them are scholars who have an approach that would rest more comfortably alongside the study of classical art. Key questions in the discipline focus on its inherited narrative: was it really, as Arthur Evans's generation imagined, a peaceful theocratic kingship, focused on the ecstatic worship of a nature goddess, with Knossos as its capital city? Does the rich material record reveal a society that defies widely held expectations about early civilisations? Or are attempts to make Minoan Crete utterly unlike historically attested neighbouring Bronze Age urban societies better understood as exemplifying prehistoric archaeology's inability to resist any modern romantic narrative about the past imposed upon it?

The last 30 years have seen perhaps the most active era of research on Minoan Crete since the first wave of excavations at the beginning of the twentieth century. A large number of primary publications of archaeological material have emerged, reporting new excavations, restudying old material or combining the two.[1] The discipline has long been characterised by article-length publications – many gathered in long-running series of collected essays (the supplementary volumes of the various foreign institutes at Athens and the *Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel*, together with the Sheffield University, Aegeam, Aegis and INSTAP series). Increasingly, particularly in the last 20 years, these kinds of publications are joined by monographs. Never before has the discipline seen so many in such a relatively short period of time. In order to review this extraordinarily rich field of research in the limited space available, I will focus on some of the key discussions in these monographs, situating them within the broader debate.[2] My aim is not to give fully rounded reviews of rich and multifaceted volumes (these can be found elsewhere), but to draw out particular aspects of these works that articulate the anatomy of the discipline.

One pivotal element of the reconstruction of Minoan Crete presented by D. Panagiotopoulos's *Das minoische Kreta: Abriss seiner bronzezeitlichen Inselkultur* (2021) is its defence of the traditional identification of Minoan palaces as the seats of rulers. Central to his case are the parallels between these buildings and palaces in the Bronze Age Near East, and an argument that well-established historical parallels from neighbouring societies are a methodologically preferable interpretative tool to analogies drawn from more exotic case studies in anthropology. J. Whitley's *Knossos: Myth, History and Archaeology* (2023) encapsulates the other side of the argument, in a book that stretches beyond the Minoan period of this long-lived site. He narrates a tale of change, within which the palace began as a communal ritual structure – a focus of competition and performance for various groups in the surrounding community. Only much later, towards the end of the Minoan period, was it 'captured' by one of these groups and turned into a ruler's dwelling. A group of scholars around the universities of Louvain-la-Neuve and Leuven, particularly I. Schoep and J. Driessen, have been particularly active in the underlying research.[3] These scholars emphasise the existence of centres of wealth, administration and monumentality beyond the

[1]J. Driessen and C. Langohr, 'Recent Developments in the Archaeology of Minoan Crete', *Pharos* 20.1 (2014), 75–115; K. Christakis, 'Palatial Crete: recent discoveries & research, 2014–2019', *Archaeological Reports* 66 (2019–2020), 83–115.

[2]In the interests of space, I will limit myself to monographs focused on Crete, excluding some works that have important ramifications for Minoan studies, but are focused on other parts of the Aegean or on the Aegean generally, such as C. Knappet's *Aegean Bronze Age Art: Meaning in the Making* (2020).

[3]Recent examples of their work, containing references to earlier contributions include J. Driessen and Q. Letesson, 'The Gathering: Collectivity and the Development of Bronze Age Cretan Society', *Journal of Archaeological Research* 32 (2024), 1–58; I. Schoep,

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palaces. They highlight the open and centrifugal character of 'palatial' architecture. They question the implicit assumptions of the first generations of scholars and seek to explore the potential of the evidence to be interpreted in alternative ways. Their case has been accepted by other anglophone monographs with wide audiences, such as J. Bintliff's *The Complete Archaeology of Greece* (2012), where it is treated as an emergent consensus. This may be an accurate reflection of its prominence in publications, but, as Panagiotopoulos's volume illustrates, any such consensus is not total.

The debate about the nature of the palaces is a profoundly structural one for Minoan studies – if one alters the power structures of Minoan society from a palatial monarchy to something more akin to a competitive republic, with the palace as its '*forum*',[4] then every other aspect of the way in which the material culture is interpreted will need to adapt. A similarly structural debate concerns the character of the site of Knossos. This is one of the recurrent foci of E. Adams's *Cultural Identity in Minoan Crete: Social Dynamics in the Neopalatial Period* (2017), a book that ambitiously seeks to synthesise the most richly evidenced period of Minoan history. Evans imagined Knossos to be the island's capital for much of the Minoan period – an imperial metropolis ruling over the other cities of the island as well as communities further afield. In the 1980s an alternative model emerged to prominence, suggesting the island remained host to a number of palatial city states throughout the Minoan period, whose shared material culture resulted from the dynamics of competition amongst peers – as with classical *poleis*. It has been claimed that this alternative perspective was always a minority view.[5] Adams thoroughly problematises the issue. She highlights the exceptional nature of Knossos, but questions the empirical basis on which many elements of Neopalatial material culture have been identified as 'Knossian'. She emphasises regionalism and the variety of ways in which the diverse trajectories of different regions could be explained. Here, as elsewhere,[6] she experiments with the parallel of C. Geertz's Balinese Negara – a primarily performative state – to resolve some of the contradictions in the evidence, before deciding that the regionalism of Crete makes this a poor fit for the island. The most significant advance in this area has been the ramifications of the work of the Knossos Urban Landscape Project, as explored by its leader T. Whitelaw.[7] This project, which has radically changed our understanding of the site in a number of eras, has revealed the scale of Neopalatial Knossos. Whitelaw makes a persuasive case that, to maintain the population, the community there would have to have drawn in resources from a

'Building the Labyrinth: Arthur Evans and the Construction of Minoan Civilisation', *American Journal of Archaeology* 122 (2018), 5–32.

[4]This classicising analogy is not drawn within the discipline, which tends in recent years to prefer more far-flung parallels – but it reflects the fact that, with or without palaces, scholars recognise substantial power and wealth differentials in Minoan material culture.

[5]J.S. Soles, 'Hero, Goddess, Priestess: New Evidence for Minoan Religion and Social Organization', in: E. Alram-Stern, F. Blakolmer, S. Deger-Jalkotzy, R. Laffineur and J. Weilhartner (edd.), *Metaphysis: Ritual, Myth and Symbolism in the Aegean Bronze Age* (2016), p. 247.

[6]E.g. E. Adams 'Centrality, "Capitals" and Prehistoric Cultures: a Comparative Study of Late Bronze Age Crete and Cyprus', *Cambridge Classical Journal* 56 (2010), 1–46.

[7]A key article, citing earlier steps in the developing argument, is T. Whitelaw, 'Feeding Knossos: Exploring Economic and Logistical Implications of Urbanism on Prehistoric Crete', in: D. Garcia, R. Orgeolet, M. Pomadère and J. Zurbach (edd.), *Country in the City: Agricultural Functions of Protohistoric Urban Settlements (Aegean and Western Mediterranean)* (2019), pp. 88–121.

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large swathe of central Crete. Like Adams, he recognises the weak empirical basis on which many elements of Minoan material culture are identified as Knossian, but argues that the extraordinary size of Knossos must have produced extraordinary social and logistical circumstances. Importantly, his reconstruction highlights the fragility of Knossos at its greatest extent – raising the possibility that any truly hegemonic Knossos was only short-lived.

In the case of both of the key debates discussed in the preceding paragraphs, the degree to which we interpret Minoan Crete as being similar to other urban societies of the era in the eastern Mediterranean is the pivotal point. If we see the society as an analogous palatial monarchy, an interpretation of Knossos as the seat of a hegemonic ruler, exercising power over other palatial centres through bonds of vassalage and kinship, like contemporary kingdoms in Western Asia, can be made to fit the evidence. If, however, we feel the evidence differentiates Crete from patterns seen elsewhere, stranger parallels might be drawn upon to make the island a complex mosaic of elite groups focused on competition through ritual performance. Two monographs produced in the last fifteen years identify a high degree of influence and convergence with urban societies on the other shores of the eastern Mediterranean. V. Watrous's *Minoan Crete: An Introduction* (2021; cf. *CR* 72 [2022], 269–71), unusually for a textbook, focuses on the author's distinctive vision of the island and his long-argued view that, in the process of state formation, Cretans made substantial borrowings in terms of power structures and belief systems from the Levant. N. Marinatos's *Minoan Kingship and the Solar Goddess: A Near Eastern Koine* (2013; cf. *CR* 61 [2011], 576–8) is a modern exegesis on A. Evans's schema of a mother goddess and consort son as the structure of religion and power on Minoan Crete. Connecting together pieces of iconography from a very wide geographical and chronological range, Marinatos identifies the former as a solar goddess and the latter as the king. She proposes that this was a pattern of theocratic power reproduced across the eastern Mediterranean, making Crete another member of a wider *koine*. Both of these books resonate with an earlier work of pan-European influence, K. Kristiansen and T. Larsson's *The Rise of Bronze Age Society: Travels, Transmissions and Transformations* (2005). This had positioned Minoan Crete as a jumping-off point from which conceptions of theocratic rule, which they regard as shared across the eastern Mediterranean, spread through the rest of Europe. Marinatos had been a key interlocutor in Kristiansen and Larsson's understanding of Crete, and Watrous adopts their mechanism of transfer for his long-held view that Crete adopted models of statehood from western Asia. Kristiansen and Larsson's mechanism of transfer, based on the work of the comparative anthropologist M. Helms, by which things from far away become supernatural marks of distinction for emergent elites, influences other recent works. E. Anderson's *Seals, Craft and Community in Bronze Age Crete* (2016), for example, gives a transformative role at the dawn of palatial urbanism to seals carved with parading lions on sections of hippopotamus tusks – identifying them as marks of distinction, worn close to the skin, depicting exotic beasts on the ends of giant beastly fangs.

The intimacy that the works of Marinatos and Watrous propose with neighbouring societies to the east and south represents a major departure. The first generation of Minoan scholars identified correlations between Crete and western Asia in the mother-goddess/consort schema. They were well aware of the debt to J.G. Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1890; cf. *CR* 5 [1891], 48–52), for which Osiris and Tammuz were key case studies. But they accounted for these correlations either as due to the Asiatic ethnic origins of the Minoans (Evans, A.W. Persson) or as due to this being a schema natural to mankind's social evolution, found recurrently in primitive belief systems (M.P. Nilsson). Starting with these

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self-same scholars, the tendency in the past has always been to emphasise the independence of Cretan forms, even when influenced from overseas. The idea of a more intimate connection appears to have gained some traction, especially in the US. One example of this is the debate around the interpretation of one of the most complex and important pieces of iconography recently recovered from Crete, the ivory pyxis from Mochlos.[8] This small box features on its lid a scene of several standing figures approaching a seated female figure on a platform beside a tree. Both the initial interpretation of the scene and the fullest response have reached primarily for west Asian parallels to understand the image, in an approach that is encouraged by an imported Syrian image from the same site that features similar elements in its iconography.

The work covered so far illustrates how new ideas and concepts from the first generations of scholars are entangled in modern scholarship. But another notable trend of recent years has been reassessments that radically recast some of the foundational ideas about Minoan society. Perhaps the most notable example of this is the work of A. Shapland in the monograph *Human-Animal Relations in Bronze Age Crete* (2022) and in a couple of important articles.[9] His work overturns long-held conceptions of the Minoans as nature-loving. Instead, he explores how the use of animal symbolism by the occupants of Minoan Crete related to status and to socially important activities such as hunting. The relationship with animals he charts, therefore, has much in common with that of other ancient societies around the eastern Mediterranean and is distant from any romantic modern notion of 'nature'. Shapland's work poses a significant challenge to another recent trend, which is a reinvigoration of an idea of Minoan culture as animist or shamanist. This trend has witnessed a stream of publications in recent years from scholars working in Ireland, Finland and Australia.[10] As a school of interpretation, it draws much of its legitimacy from anthropological literature on non-western ways of understanding the world, which demonstrate that things we take for granted – like a fundamental difference between people and animals in their internal worlds – are not shared across all societies. By mobilising this theoretical background, the modern tendency seeks to distance itself from tendencies dating back to the earliest scholars to portray Minoan religion as ecstatic and focused on nature. A key figure in the background theory is P. Descola, who draws a distinction between animist ways of understanding the world and those he describes as analogistic, like those that characterised other ancient societies around the eastern Mediterranean. This same body of theory underlies Shapland's work, but one of his key contributions is to demonstrate

[8]J.S. Soles, 'Hero, Goddess, Priestess: New Evidence for Minoan Religion and Social Organization', in: E. Alram-Stern, F. Blakolmer, S. Deger-Jalkotzy, R. Laffineur and J. Weilhartner (edd.), *Metaphysis: Ritual, Myth and Symbolism in the Aegean Bronze Age* (2016), pp. 247–53; B.R. Jones, 'The Presentation Scene on the Ivory Pyxis Lid from Mochlos: a Reconstruction and Reinterpretation', *American Journal of Archaeology* 127 (2023), 481–95.

[9]A. Shapland, 'Wild Nature? Human-Animal Relations on Neopalatial Crete', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 20 (2010), 109–27; A. Shapland, 'Shifting Horizons and Emerging Ontologies in the Bronze Age Aegean', in: C. Watts (ed.), *Relational Archaeologies: Humans, Animals, Things* (2013), pp. 190–208.

[10]The strength of this trend is perhaps best illustrated by the multiple chapters devoted to Minoan Crete in a recent general volume on ecstatic experience in the ancient world: D. Stein, S. K. Costello, K.P. Foster (edd.), *The Routledge Companion to Ecstatic Experience in the Ancient World* (2022).

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extensively how patterns of Minoan material culture are most like that of analogistic societies.

Each of the key debates in Minoan studies, discussed above, demonstrates similar dynamics: a tug of war between the interpretations of the first generation of scholars and new ideas, accompanied by a similar to and fro between models of Minoan society as akin to other east Mediterranean Bronze Age cultures or as something more unfamiliar. In each case the more unfamiliar pole of the interpretative spectrum might be regarded as more appealing to modern liberal audiences worried about ecocide: acephalous competitive groups instead of theocratic kingship, unity through performative theatre states instead of conquest and vassalage, and a ritual system entangled with the forces of nature instead of divinities who are analogies of human power-structures. These tensions are at the core of Minoan studies; understanding them and their roots in the discipline is greatly facilitated by the last volume to be highlighted, N. Momigliano's *In Search of the Labyrinth: The Cultural Legacy of Minoan Crete* (2020; cf. *CR* 71 [2021], 184–6). There have been a couple of high-quality historiographies of Aegean Prehistory, but Momigliano's work is distinctive in situating the history of Minoan studies in contemporary cultural contexts.[11] This is essential for understanding a discipline that has always had a scholarship entangled with the popular imagination. One characteristic of this rich volume is its treatment of Evans. Some earlier work has given a rather one-dimensional view of this founding figure, as a naïve colonialist or as someone whose interpretations arose instinctively out of a background of personal trauma. Whilst these may be aspects of his character, Momigliano's work gives a much more well-rounded view, recognising the complexity of his vision within the multifaceted cultural setting of the early twentieth century. Momigliano's work highlights the importance of continuous critical thinking about how scholars envision the Minoans within the currents of their own time. Evans was a pillar of the establishment whose work was regarded as engaged with the cutting edge of contemporary theory. He was also a master of what we now call 'outreach' or 'impact'. He was a public figure who mobilised cutting-edge scholarship in ways that appealed to popular audiences and a visionary leader, who used networks and patronage to direct the discipline that followed him. He was in many ways the model of an academic archaeologist that institutions still search for today. It is interesting that some of the things that posterity has found most uncomfortable in his legacy are things we are again increasingly demanding from scholars: ideas that resonate with modern worldviews for popular impact.

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[11]W.A. McDonald and C.G. Thomas, *Progress into the Past: the Rediscovery of Mycenaean Civilization* (1990) (cf. *CR* 42 [1992], 226); J.L. Fitton, *The Discovery of the Greek Bronze Age* (1996).

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