

THE MIRAGE OF THE MINOTAUR



ANDREW SHAPLAND, curator of a major new exhibition of Minoan culture at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, on the timeless quest for the labyrinth

ABOVE Replica fresco of bull's head. Ashmolean AN 1896-1908.AE.2403
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The Ashmolean Museum's exhibition *Labyrinth: Knossos, Myth and Reality* opened to the public on 10 February 2023. It is the first major exhibition in the UK to focus on the archaeological site of Knossos, mythical home of the Labyrinth, and location of a Bronze Age palace. The palace was largely excavated by the former Keeper of the Ashmolean, Sir Arthur Evans (1851–1941), who did much to promote his finds and connect them with the Cretan myths. The exhibition places the work of Evans within a much longer history of the search for the Labyrinth, the discovery of the palace by Minos Kalokairinos, and archaeological research at Knossos which continues to the present day.

The finds from the palace have long been of public interest, and during Evans's lifetime were the subject of two smaller exhibitions at the Royal Academy in London. The first of these, in 1903, was highlighted by *The Times* in an appeal for donations to the Cretan Exploration Fund for the continuation of work at Knossos. The newspaper noted that 'Mr Arthur Evans is returning to Crete to carry on these remarkable excavations at Knossos which in three years have laid bare the living outlines of what was before to us a merely legendary world'. The article drew attention to the 'small but admirable exhibition of drawings, casts and photographs illustrative of Mr Evans's discoveries [...]'. In that unobtrusive roomful of replicas there is, we think, not a little which must interest even that large and representative majority of us who shudder at the bare idea of diving into archaeological records and turn with instinctive shrinking from a museum.' Among the highlights were the painted plaster reliefs including the 'astonishing bull's head'.

The replica fresco clearly retains its power because, a century on, the Ashmolean marketing team chose it to be the poster boy for the exhibition. Its significance, however, has changed. In the Royal Academy exhibition, Arthur Evans was not able

to display finds from his excavations at Knossos because he did not yet have permission to export them from Crete. As a result he commissioned replicas of the most significant to be displayed in London. The original fresco fragment of the bull's head was discovered in 1900, the first year of excavation, in the north entrance passage of the palace. Another bull fresco had been discovered a few days before and prompted Evans to ask in his excavation diary: 'Was not some one or other of these creatures visible on the burned site to the early Dorian days which gave the actual tradition of the bull of Minos?' When Evans came to reconstruct the Bronze Age palace in reinforced concrete, it was this idea that resulted in the half-ruined bastion with charging bull fresco at the north entrance. It promoted his theory that the bull imagery at Knossos inspired the myth of the Minotaur and has become an iconic image of the palace.

The *Labyrinth* exhibition places the bull's head replica in the context of Evans's excavations and also his vision of the building he called the Palace of Minos. Evans frequently used the myths of Crete as a reference point for understanding his finds. The discovery of a room complete with in situ throne reinforced his belief that this was indeed the

mythical palace. He initially debated whether the throne was Ariadne's but decided that it must have belonged to Minos because the seat was too narrow for a woman's hips. Minos too gave his name to the Bronze Age culture of Crete, 'Minoan', a term Evans popularised.



ABOVE Hellenistic coin from Knossos, 300–200 BC
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Evans was not the first to draw on the myths of Crete to understand Knossos. In fact the inhabitants of the Greek and Roman city of Knossos used the symbol of the Labyrinth on the coins of the city. Some of these coins even had a Minotaur at the centre. Idomeneus, grandson of Minos and a Cretan hero who fought in the Trojan War, was another reference point. He was regarded as the patron of his city and his supposed tomb was a visitor attraction in antiquity.

Surprisingly most Greek and Roman authors agreed that there was no sign of the Labyrinth at Knossos. Pliny the Elder for instance discusses the Labyrinth in Egypt (also described by Herodotus) which inspired the Cretan Labyrinth, but declared that no trace of the one built by Daedalus at Knossos remained in his day. Knossos continued to be occupied until around the 8th century AD when it was finally destroyed by an earthquake and more or less abandoned. The Greek and Roman city was a little to the north of the site of the Bronze Age palace, which was possibly deliberately left as a sanctuary.

In the absence of identifiable remains of a Labyrinth at Knossos, later travellers to Crete were instead shown an underground quarry near the city of Gortyn to the south. Gortyn had become the Roman capital of the island and the quarry produced the stone for its civic buildings. Into the 19th century scholars debated whether the Labyrinth was to be identified with this quarry, which was certainly an underground maze, or at Knossos, where there was very little to be seen.

another site famous in myth. Unlike Troy, the location of Knossos had never been forgotten, and the coins of the city had always provided the link with the Labyrinth. Digging at a bare patch of ground called Kephala Hill, Kalokairinos found a few rooms of what looked like a labyrinthine building, some of them with storage jars (pithoi) in situ. He sent some of these to museums, including that housed by the Educational Society in Heraklion. Unfortunately his peers there persuaded him to stop digging

Kalokairinos mansion in Heraklion, and with it Kalokairinos's finds from Knossos. Only those objects which had been given to museums survived. The pithos in the Labyrinth exhibition was the first object to be inventoried by what is now Heraklion Archaeological Museum.

Curiously, Kalokairinos located the Labyrinth instead in a nearby underground quarry because of the traditions which had grown up about Gortyn. Even so his finds attracted the attention of a number of foreign archaeologists who came to visit Knossos and decided that he had indeed discovered the Labyrinth. In 1894 he showed Arthur Evans, the Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, around the site, who wrote in his diary 'I see no reason for not thinking that the mysterious complication of passages is the Labyrinth.'

Evans had come to Crete in search of a prehistoric writing system and was particularly interested in the signs carved on the walls of the building. Among these was a double axe symbol which Evans later argued was further proof that this was the Labyrinth: the ancient Lydian word for double axe was 'labrys', and Evans followed other scholars in arguing that Labyrinth meant 'House of the Double Axe'. This etymology has always been seen as dubious but it shows how as well as excavating the building, Evans also wanted to find the truth in the Cretan myths.

Evans was able to begin his excavations in 1900 because he had purchased the land on which the palace discovered by Kalokairinos stood. He was encouraged to do this by another Cretan scholar and President of the Educational Society, Iosef Hatzidakis, who perhaps saw in Evans a means to secure the site's future. For his part, Evans waited for Cretan autonomy in 1898 and then lobbied the new governor of Crete, Prince George, for new laws which would allow him to excavate the site and then export 'duplicate' finds. The palace, with its labyrinthine plan, was uncovered between 1900 and 1904.

since it was feared that any spectacular finds would be removed to the Imperial Museum in Constantinople, since Crete was still part of the Ottoman Empire at that time, albeit with a degree of autonomy. Sadly the riots which ushered in Cretan independence also destroyed the



ABOVE Ovoid pithos, 1400–1300 BC, Heraklion Archaeological Museum
 □ 1174 © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports, General Directorate of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage, Heraklion Archaeological Museum

The person who resolved this debate was, appropriately enough, called Minos Kalokairinos, the Cretan businessman and scholar who first discovered the palace at Knossos. Inspired by Heinrich Schliemann's discoveries at Troy and Mycenae, in 1878 Kalokairinos decided to dig at



ABOVE Dagger with inlaid griffin, 1450–1375 BC, Ephorate of Antiquities of Heraklion
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Evans continued to work at the site, excavating tombs in the surrounding area, and reconstructing the palace of Knossos, until 1931. Though his concrete 'restitutions', as he called them, have sometimes been criticised, Knossos remains the second most visited archaeological site in Greece after the Acropolis in Athens and is recognised as the centre of the Minoan civilisation which Evans did so much to reconstruct intellectually as well as physically. He published his finds in the multi-volume *Palace of Minos* between 1921 and 1935, and then in 1936 he put on the second display of finds from Knossos at the Royal Academy. This time he was able to show finds exported from Crete which had become part of the Ashmolean collection.

In the 2023 exhibition we are finally able to show the unique finds Evans made at Knossos which he was unable to export. Many of these are now on display in the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, which has kindly lent over 50 objects.

Among these are the 'Goddess' figurine from the Shrine of the Double Axes. The Shrine, excavated in 1902, dates to the time the palace was destroyed, in around 1350 BC. The terracotta figure with her upraised arms echoes earlier depictions of high status women at Knossos, and also foreshadows later figures found across Crete in a similar pose. This shows how the palatial traditions were reworked and transmitted, even as the palace had ceased to function. Although Evans, as he often did, had given the room an evocative name, there was in fact only one small double

axe found there. He reconstructed double axes between the 'horns of consecration' found alongside the Goddess, helping to show how the double axe was an important part of Minoan religion. For Evans the palace was also a temple in honour of the Mother Goddess as well as the seat of King Minos.

The exhibition also shows finds made in the postwar period by Greek archaeologists. One is a religious sanctuary near the palace which has been excavated since 2011 by Athanasia Kanta. It contained a foundation deposit containing bronze, silver, gold and iron double axes. Whatever its exact significance, the double axe was clearly an important cult object. Another offering was a Minoan bronze dagger with ivory handle, whose blade was inlaid in gold and silver with a design of a griffin. It is spectacular, the first of its kind found on Crete. The shrine continued in use until the Roman period and perhaps later. This continuity of tradition shows how myths and stories could have been passed down from generation to generation.

A discovery made in 1979 by Yannis and Efi Sakellarakis provided a tantalising hint of one of these myths. They found a building at Anemospilia which had collapsed during an earthquake, preserving the remains of a human sacrifice within. One skeleton, of a young man, was

found on a platform, a knife nearby. The remains of three other people were found, one of them carrying a large terracotta vessel with the relief image of a bull on it. They suggested that this was for the blood of the victim. Further evidence for human sacrifice in Bronze Age Crete has since been found. It was perhaps carried out in an attempt to avert earthquakes since these are often preceded by warning tremors. Is this the origin of the story of the human victims offered to the Minotaur? Visitors to the exhibition can see some of these spectacular finds and make up their own minds. **A**



ABOVE Bucket vase with bull in relief 1700–1600 BC. Heraklion Archaeological Museum □ 29506 © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports, General Directorate of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage, Heraklion Archaeological Museum