THE CRETAN CIVILISATION

The agricultural revolution of the Neolithic had come to the eastern Mediterrean lands by 6000 BC, and the art of pottery was known soon thereafter. By 3000BC Greece, Ionia, and the Levant formed a distinctive cultural zone, in which sea trade was beginning both to diffuse Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultural influences throughout the region and to lay the foundations for local accumulations of wealth. By 2300BC, various trading cities, such as Troy on the Anatolian side of the Hellespont, were rich and thriving, but by far the most important centre of Aegean civilisation developed on Crete.

Crete was fortunate in several respects. It was large and fertile enough to be able to generate substantial agricultural surpluses. It was ideally situated to conduct sea trade simultaneously with Greece, the Cyclades, Anatolia, the Levant and Egypt. And as an Island, it was relatively immune from any but the most determined outside attack. In these circumstances Bronze Age Crete flourished, and by 2000BC, it had become the dominant commercial force in the Aegean.

Because scholars have so far been unable to translate either the Cretans' phonic script, the so called Linear A, or a hieroglyphic script they also used, what we

know of their history has to be gleaned from foreign and/or later written sources and from what inferences we can draw from their surviving artefacts. The latter are nothing if they are not impressive. Cretan pottery, ceramic statuary, jewellery and metalwork are all of the highest order of sophistication and beauty, and from the vivid frescoes with which the Cretans loved to adorn their palace walls we can catch glimpses of other remarkably advanced technologies in textile manufacture, ship design and the like.

Perhaps most impressive of all are the palaces themselves. As in many other early civilizations, as Cretan wealth accumulated, politico-religious power became more concentrated and eventually began to manifest itself in the erection of great stone places in such quasi urban centres as Knossos, Mallia, and Phaetos. These sprawling, richly decorated places were very large and so complicated in layout that they have given us the word 'labyrinth' (from the labrys, or double axe, a common decorative motif in the place chambers). Functionally, the palaces were at once the residences of kings, temples dedicated to the mother goddess, warehouses and administrative headquarters. The legendary King Minos is said to have governed from the greatest of these palaces, the one at Knossos, and it is from his name that we have coined the

adjective meant to denote Cretan civilization at its most powerful and opulent Minoan.

The Minoan period lasted roughly from 2000 to 1400BC, the high point being the so-called New Palace Period between 1700 and 1450. It is thought that during this time Create established a kind of Aegean commercial empire consisting of many far-flung colonies–or, at any rate, subject trading centres–but few details of this polity are known. What is obvious is that Cretan cultural influence throughout the Aegean area was immune, and it was nowhere more important than the mainland tribes who inhabited the Peloponnese of Greece.