

CRETE

Two great civilizations in Greece flourished during the Bronze Age. The earlier one, known as the Minoan civilization (named after the legendary king Minos) was based on the island of Crete. The latter one, known as the Mycenaean (named after Mycenae, one of its principle cities) began on the mainland of Greece on the Peloponnese and later spread to the Greek islands. The Minoan civilization on Crete is the subject of this particular study.

The mountainous island of Crete is positioned about 100 miles south of mainland Greece. It measures 156 miles from east to west, and its greatest distance from north to south is 36 miles. Following the work of Minos Kalikairinos, Arthur Evans began excavations of the site of Knossos on the northern coast of Crete in 1900. He unearthed not only a grand palace but also a great civilization that was only faintly known from Greek myths. Later, other palaces were discovered at Malia, Phaistos, and Zakros. Many of the artifacts from these excavations are on display at the Heraklion Archaeological Museum.

While Crete was settled much earlier, the introduction of metallurgy brought on the Early Bronze Age, which corresponds to the Early Minoan Period. According to Evans, the Minoan civilization dates from 2600 to 1150 B.C., and can be divided into early, middle, and late periods. It can also be organized according to the absence or presence of a palace.

Pre-Palace Period (Early Minoan I, II, III & Middle Minoan IA)	c. 2600-2000 B.C.
Old Palace Period (Middle Minoan IB, II)	c. 2000-1700 B.C.
<i>[Earthquake destroys early palaces about 1700 B.C.]</i>	
New Palace Period (Middle Minoan III & Late Minoan I and II)	c. 1700-1400 B.C.
Post-Palace Period (Late Minoan III)	c. 1400-1150 B.C.

(H. E. L. Mellersh, *The Destruction of Knossos: The Rise and Fall of Minoan Crete* [New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993], 62.)

Much is unknown about Minoan political and social history, especially from earlier times. Regarding the Minoan language, Linear A script (which developed from a pictorial or hieroglyphic system) was used during most of the New Palace period for religious and palace texts, but it has not yet been fully deciphered. Linear B script has been found at Knossos (as well as Mycenae), but only from the end of the Minoan civilization. Although this language was deciphered by Michael Ventris in 1952, the clay tablets that have been preserved mainly consist of lists of agricultural produce, palace stores, military supplies, and other items.

Built around a central courtyard (approximately 80 by 160 feet), the palace complex at Knossos covered about six acres. It was decorated with beautiful frescoes and supported by black and red columns that taper at the bottom (made from inverted cypress trees).



Reconstructed Minoan Palace at Knossos





Reconstructed Minoan Palace at Knossos
(Note the prominent horn symbol in the middle of the photo below.)





Above: The “West Magazines” were long, narrow rooms with rectangular cavities in the floor. These rooms were used to store the Minoans’ commodities. Some of the items stored here may have been used for commercial trade throughout the Mediterranean region, including places like Egypt and Phoenicia.

Right: Two of the giant storage jars (*pithoi*) are featured here. These were used to hold commodities such as olive oil, wine, or grain. About 150 of these jars have been found. They are characterized by many handles and rope designs (which may have been suggested by the ropes used to move them).





Reconstructed Fresco of a Procession (South Propylaeum)
(The two men, depicted with "wasp-waists," are wearing kilts and have long black curly locks.)



The reconstructed Troad fresco features a “bull-leaping” scene. The power of the bull is emphasized by his thick neck and body, juxtaposed by his short legs. One acrobat leaps over the back of the charging bull, while another grabs him by the horns. A third acrobat stands at the rear.



Another reconstructed fresco, located in the queen’s megaron, features striped dolphins. The striped dolphin is one of several dolphin species that inhabit the Greek seas.



Both Sides of the Throne Room

(The griffin—with the body of a lion, head of an eagle, and peacock plumes—symbolizes protection.)



Crete in the Old Testament

The evidence suggests that the island of Crete was the original home of at least some of the Philistines. It is generally thought that the Sea Peoples left their homes in Greece, the Aegean islands, and Asia Minor and migrated to the eastern Mediterranean coast (Canaan). The Bible identifies the origin of the Philistines with “Caphtor,” which most likely refers to Crete (Deut. 2:23; Jer. 47:4; Amos 9:7; see Gen. 10:14; 1 Chron. 1:12). Instead of “Philistines,” other terms like “Kerethites,” “Pelethites,” and “Gittites” are also used for some of the Sea Peoples who occupied the southern coast (1 Sam. 30:14; 2 Sam. 15:18; Ezek. 25:16; Zeph. 2:5). The Phaistos Disk from Crete (c. 1700 B.C.), which is on display at the Heraklion Archaeological Museum, pictures the heads of men with headdresses (or hair) resembling the Sea Peoples depicted on the mortuary temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu in Egypt (twelfth century B.C.). The Arkalochori Axe (2nd millennium B.C.), which is kept at the same museum, has similar symbols. These images corroborate the biblical testimony regarding Philistine origins.

Modern scholars often assume that the Philistines did not settle in Canaan until after they were repulsed by Ramses III from Egypt (1177 B.C.). (This repulsion followed the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization and a mass migration of Sea Peoples to Egypt.) However, this hypothesis does not harmonize with the chronology of the Scriptures. A better understanding is that the Philistines came to Canaan in waves over many centuries. When one reads Genesis, he finds several references to the Philistines living in Canaan during the time of Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 21:32, 34; 26:1, 8, 14, 15, 18). Those earlier Philistines were not as aggressive as the later warriors described in Judges and Samuel. Further, the earlier Philistines were led by a single ruler (identified by the title “Abimelech”) from Gerar (Gen. 20:2; 21:32; 26:1, 8), whereas the later Philistines were organized under five “lords” (*seranim*) who each ruled a city in the pentapolis—Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron (Josh. 13:2, 3; 1 Sam. 6:16, 17).

By the time of the exodus, when Moses was eighty years old, the Bible indicates that the more aggressive Philistines were already present in Canaan. God warned the Israelites not to take the most direct route to Canaan—“the road through the Philistine country” near the Mediterranean coast (Ex. 13:17). The reason given is that he did not want them to encounter war and retreat to Egypt. Although Egyptian outposts were located along this road, the implication is that God did not want the Israelites to encounter *the Philistines* and then turn back. After God parted the Red Sea, Moses and the Israelites triumphantly sang, “Anguish will grip the people of Philistia” (Ex. 15:14). This statement assumes that the Philistines were already established in their land, as were the Edomites, Moabites, and Canaanites (Ex. 15:15). Further, when God described the future boundaries of Israel, he referred to the Mediterranean as “the Sea of the Philistines” (Ex. 23:31). Later, in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses wrote that the “Caphtorites” (Philistines) had already displaced the “Avvites,” a Canaanite people who lived along the coast “as far as Gaza” (Deut. 2:23)—just as the Moabites, Ammonites, and Edomites had already driven out the peoples in their respective territories (Deut. 2:9, 12, 19, 21, 22).

Following the conquest of Canaan, God instructed Joshua in his old age about the land remaining to be possessed. He spoke of “all the regions of the Philistines” as well “the five lords of the Philistines” and their cities (Josh. 13:2, 3). The Philistines were dreaded enemies of the Israelites in the days of the judges (Judg. 3:3, 31; 13:1). Apparently, the repulsion of the Sea Peoples by Ramses III (1177 B.C.) only served to strengthen the power of the Philistines who were *already* established in Canaan.

Crete in the New Testament

The island of Crete is mentioned at the end of Acts, when Paul sailed to Rome as a prisoner. After leaving Caesarea Maritima, the Roman centurion in charge of Paul changed ships at Myra in Lycia, taking an Alexandrian ship heading to Italy. Regarding a part of this journey, Luke reported, “We sailed to the lee of Crete, opposite Salmone” (Acts 27:7). Salmone was on the northeastern end of the island, so the ship sailed along the southeastern coast. They came to “Fair Havens [*Kaloi Limenes*], near the town of Lasea,” which was located at the south-central part of the island (Acts 27:8). Since winter was approaching when sailing became dangerous, Paul warned them not to continue the journey (Acts 27:9, 10). Nevertheless, they were determined to sail farther west to Phoenix and spend the winter there. It was “a harbor in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest,” providing more protection from the storms (Acts 27:11, 12). “They weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete” (Acts 27:13). However, “a wind of hurricane force, called the ‘northeaster,’ swept down from the island” and blew them off course (Acts 27:14, 15)—ultimately leading to their shipwreck. At one point, Paul mildly chastised them, saying, “Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss” (Acts 27:21).

Later, Paul addressed one of his letters to Titus, an evangelist whom he had left on the island of Crete to work with the congregations there. Titus’ mission was twofold: (1) To “straighten out what was left unfinished,” and (2) to “appoint elders in every town” according to Paul’s directions (Tit. 1:5). We have no record of the evangelization of Crete in the book of Acts, although “Cretans” were present in Jerusalem at Pentecost to hear Peter and the other apostles proclaim the gospel (Acts 2:11). It is possible that some of these became Christians and eventually returned to Crete to start the church there. Even so, the phrases “I left you in Crete” and “what was left unfinished” (Tit. 1:5) suggest that Paul had evangelized the island; he would have preached there between his two Roman confinements. Since the book of Acts ends with Paul in Roman house arrest (Acts 28:16, 30, 31), it must be assumed that he was later released and made a “Fourth Missionary Journey” about A.D. 63-65 (see Phil. 1:25, 26; 2:24; Philem. 22). After that, he was rearrested, tried, and martyred in Rome (2 Tim. 1:8; 2:9; 4:6-8, 16; see Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 2.22, 25).

A significant Jewish population was present on the island of Crete. Philo stated, “Not only are the continents full of Jewish colonies, but also all the most celebrated islands are so too; such as Euboea, and Cyprus, and Crete” (Philo *Embassy to Gaius* 36 [282]). The Jewish

presence on Crete was advantageous to the spread of Christianity, since these people already believed the Old Testament and were anticipating the Messiah. The biblical knowledge and spiritual maturity of the older Jewish men no doubt accelerated the process of appointing elders in the fledgling congregations (Tit. 1:5-9; see Acts 14:23). However, Jewish elements also posed problems in the church. Some from “the circumcision group” no doubt tried to bind the Law on Gentiles (Tit. 1:10, 11; see Gal. 2:12). Foolish controversies were also stirred up by the promotion of Jewish myths and genealogies (Tit. 1:14; 3:9).

Titus was to facilitate the appointment of elders in every town (that had a church of Christ). Many centuries earlier, Homer had written of ninety or one hundred towns of Crete (Homer *Odyssey* 19.172-74; *Iliad* 2.649). Even so, probably only a small percentage of those communities had congregations. It was Paul’s practice to visit the major urban centers and allow the gospel to radiate from them to smaller places by means of other Christians. Even if the number of towns was partial, this was still an important and time-consuming task.

During the first millennium B.C., the Cretans had sunk to a low moral level. A Greek poet named Epimenides (c. 600 B.C.) pointed out their deficiencies, and the statements of later Greek writers agree with his assessment (see, for example, Callimachus *Hymn to Zeus* 8). Epimenides’ works are no longer extant, so what he said must be reconstructed from other sources. What Epimenides wrote was still true in Paul’s day, so the apostle quoted from him: “Even one of their own prophets has said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons’” (Tit. 1:12). (In Acts 17:28a, Paul quoted from this same writer when he spoke before the Areopagus in Athens.)

Epimenides’ charge that “Cretans are always liars” contains a hint of hyperbole; after all, he himself was a Cretan! The statement was generally true, but obviously not *every* Cretan was a liar. Lying was a pervasive problem among the islanders. Just as the verb “Corinthianize” meant “commit fornication,” the verb “Cretanize” (*krētizō*) meant “play the Cretan” or “tell lies” (Polybius *Histories* 8.19.5; Plutarch *Aemilius Paulus* 23.6; *Lysander* 20.2). Paul expected the Cretan Christians to rise above their cultural context and be like God. When Paul began his letter to Titus, he celebrated the fact that God “does not lie” (Tit. 1:2).

The phrase “evil brutes” should probably be understood as ironic. The term “brutes” (*thēria*) refers to “wild animals” or “beasts.” It was well known that wild animals did not roam Crete. For example, Pliny the Elder stated that the island did not have wolves, foxes, bears, wild boars, or other destructive animals (*Natural History* 8.83). Even so, the Cretan people behaved selfishly, uncontrolled, and destructively like wild animals. The Cretans’ lust for wealth was so great that they were “the only people in the world in whose eyes no gain [was] disgraceful”; and, as a result, they were “involved in constant broils both public and private, and in murders and civil wars” (Polybius *Histories* 6.46.3, 9). Further, in order to satisfy their perverse lusts, the Cretan men not only committed homosexual acts with other men, but they also abducted youths for such purposes (Strabo *Geography* 10.4.21; Plato *Laws* 1.636C-D; 8.836B-C). Therefore, the island was not devoid of wild animals after all!