NO PREP

Knossos and the Minoans

Europe's First Civilization

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Knossos and the Minoans: Europe's First Civilization

An Island Civilization Rises

Long before Athens built the Parthenon and Sparta trained its soldiers, a sophisticated civilization flourished on the island of Crete. The Minoan civilization — named by the British archaeologist Arthur Evans after the legendary King Minos — thrived from approximately 2700 to 1450 BCE, making it one of the earliest advanced cultures in Europe. The Minoans were not Greek: they spoke a different language, wrote in a script that remains undeciphered, and practiced a religion centered on bulls and goddesses rather than the Olympian gods of later Greece. Yet they were the foundation on which Greek civilization would eventually build, and their palace at Knossos remains one of the most remarkable archaeological sites in the world. Crete's position in the center of the eastern Mediterranean made it a natural hub for trade. Minoan

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Arthur Evans and the Excavation of Knossos

Arthur Evans was a wealthy English archaeologist who purchased the hill of Knossos in 1900 and began excavating immediately. What he found astonished the world. Within weeks, his team had uncovered the remains of a vast palace, colorful frescoes showing bull-leaping acrobats and elegant women in flounced skirts, clay tablets covered in two unknown writing systems (which Evans called Linear A and Linear B), and evidence of sophisticated plumbing including flush toilets and indoor

drainage. Evans named the culture 'Minoan' and spent the next three decades excavating, publishing, and, controversially, reconstructing. Evans's reconstruction of Knossos remains deeply controversial among archaeologists. He used concrete to rebuild walls, columns, and even frescoes, creating a partially restored palace that visitors can walk through today. Many of his reconstructions were based more on imagination than evidence, and modern archaeologists argue that Evans imposed his own interpretations on the ruins rather than letting the evidence speak. His work at Knossos illustrates a fundamental tension in archaeology: the desire to make ancient sites accessible and understandable to the public versus the obligation to preserve what actually survives and not overwrite it with modern guesswork.

Life in the Minoan Palace

Knossos was not just a royal residence. It was simultaneously a palace, administrative center, religious sanctuary, storehouse, and manufacturing hub. Archaeologists have found evidence of olive oil storage in massive ceramic jars called pithoi, workshops where craftspeople produced luxury goods, archive rooms filled with clay tablets recording economic transactions, and elaborate ceremonial spaces where religious rituals took place. The Linear B tablets, discovered at Knossos and later deciphered (unlike Linear A, which remains a mystery), turned out to record an early form of Greek and revealed a highly organized administrative system tracking livestock, grain, bronze, and personnel. The frescoes that decorated Knossos's walls give us our most vivid glimpse of Minoan life. One of the most famous depicts the bull-leaping ritual: young men and women grasp the horns of a charging bull and somersault over its back. Whether this was an actual athletic practice, a religious ceremony, or a symbolic representation remains debated. Other frescoes show dolphins, court ladies with elaborate hairstyles and jewelry, and processions carrying offerings. These images suggest a culture that valued beauty, nature, and the human body: a striking contrast to the military imagery that dominates many other ancient cultures.

Linear A, Linear B, and the Mystery of Minoan Language

One of the most tantalizing puzzles in all of archaeology is Linear A, the Minoan writing system. Evans identified two distinct scripts at Knossos: Linear B, which was used on the Greek mainland as well as Crete, and Linear A, which appears only on Crete and appears to be older. In 1952, the British architect and amateur linguist

Michael Ventris succeeded in deciphering Linear B, revealing it to be an early form of Greek — proving that Mycenaean Greeks had occupied Knossos during the palace's later phase. Linear A, however, has never been deciphered. The underlying language is unknown. Until someone cracks the code, a significant portion of Minoan history will remain inaccessible — a reminder that archaeology does not always provide answers.

The Thera Eruption and the End of Minoan Power

Around 1620 BCE, the volcanic island of Thera (modern Santorini), just 130 kilometers north of Crete, experienced one of the largest volcanic eruptions in human history. The eruption was catastrophic: the entire center of the island collapsed into the sea, generating massive tsunamis and sending ash across the eastern Mediterranean. The immediate impact on Crete remains debated — ash layers and tsunami deposits have been found, but whether the eruption caused widespread destruction at Knossos specifically is contested. What is clear is that Minoan civilization declined sharply after about 1450 BCE, when Mycenaean Greeks appear to have taken control of Knossos and begun using Linear B to run its administration. The Thera eruption has long been proposed as the inspiration for the myth of Atlantis, the legendary island civilization destroyed in a cataclysm described by the philosopher Plato. The parallels are striking: a sophisticated island culture, destroyed suddenly by volcanic or seismic disaster, disappearing beneath the waves. Most scholars are skeptical of a direct connection — Plato wrote about Atlantis in 360 BCE, more than a thousand years after the Thera eruption — but the idea continues to captivate popular imagination. What is certain is that the Minoans were real, their civilization was extraordinary, and they vanished from history leaving behind a palace full of beautiful paintings and a writing system nobody has cracked.

Key Information: Knossos and the Minoans

Detail	Information
Civilization Dates	Approximately 2700-1450 BCE
Location	Island of Crete, center of the eastern Mediterranean
Capital/Main Site	Palace of Knossos, covering over 20,000 square meters

Detail	Information
Excavator	Arthur Evans, beginning in 1900
Writing Systems	Linear A (undeciphered) and Linear B (deciphered as early Greek in 1952)
Key Artifacts	Bull-leaping frescoes, pithoi storage jars, clay tablets
End of Civilization	Decline after ~1450 BCE; Mycenaean Greeks took control of Knossos
Possible Atlantis Connection	Thera eruption (~1620 BCE) proposed as Atlantis inspiration; disputed by most scholars

Case Study: Kiros on the Trading Ship

Kiros gripped the rope railing as the ship rolled through a swell and watched the black peak of Thera rising to the north. He had seen it a hundred times on this route — Crete to the Cyclades and back — but the mountain always made the crew uneasy. The older sailors said the gods lived inside it. Kiros was seventeen and did not think much about gods. He thought about the cargo. In the hold sat forty pithoi, the great storage jars that held olive oil destined for Egypt. Each jar was taller than a man and weighed more when full than three men could lift. Loading them had taken two days. Unloading them in the Egyptian harbor would take another two. The merchant who owned the cargo had written the manifest on clay tablets in the careful script the palace scribes used — rows of marks that Kiros could not read. He was a sailor, not a scribe. But he had seen the palace at Knossos once, when the ship's owner took him along on a delivery. The painted walls. The women in their fine dresses watching from a balcony. The sound of music from somewhere inside. It seemed impossible that all of it — the oil, the tablets, the painted walls, the whole carefully organized world of the palace — could ever disappear. Standing on the rolling deck with Thera behind him, Kiros could not imagine the mountain doing anything but standing there forever.

1. Kiros cannot read the Linear A tablets but his world completely depends on the administrative system they record. What does this suggest about how the Minoan palace economy functioned and who held real power in that society?

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2. The reading describes Arthur Evans's reconstruction of Knossos as controversial. Based on what you read, explain one benefit and one problem with reconstructing ancient sites the way Evans did at Knossos.

Multiple Choice

1. What was the significance of Michael Ventris deciphering Linear B in 1952?

    a) It proved that the Minoans were the ancestors of modern Greek people

    b) It revealed that an early form of Greek was used at Knossos, suggesting Mycenaean Greek occupation

    c) It allowed archaeologists to finally understand and fully interpret the meaning of Minoan frescoes

    d) It proved that Linear A and Linear B were the same writing system

2. Why do modern archaeologists criticize Evans's reconstruction work at Knossos?

    a) He incorrectly identified the site as Minoan when it was actually Mycenaean in occupation and culture

    b) He destroyed most of the original frescoes during excavation

    c) He refused to share his findings with the scientific community for decades

    d) His reconstructions were based more on imagination than evidence, overwriting what actually survived

3. What function did the Palace of Knossos serve beyond being a royal residence?

a) It served only as a temple complex for Minoan religious ceremonies

b) It was a school where scribes were trained to write Linear A

c) It was a combined administrative center, religious site, storehouse, and manufacturing hub

d) It was exclusively a military fortress designed and heavily fortified to defend the island

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Minoan	A) The undeciphered Minoan writing system found only on Crete, representing an unknown language
2. ___ fresco	B) Large ceramic storage jars used to hold olive oil, grain, and other goods at Knossos
3. ___ Linear A	C) The Bronze Age civilization centered on Crete that flourished from approximately 2700 to 1450 BCE
4. ___ pithoi	D) The writing system deciphered in 1952 and found to represent an early form of the Greek language
5. ___ Linear B	E) A painting technique where pigment is applied to wet plaster, used extensively at Knossos

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The British archaeologist _____ purchased the hill of Knossos in 1900 and began excavating the Minoan palace, controversially reconstructing portions of it with concrete.

2. The massive volcanic eruption on the island of _____ around 1620 BCE generated tsunamis and sent ash across the eastern Mediterranean, possibly contributing to Minoan decline.

3. The famous _____ frescoes at Knossos depict young men and women somersaulting over the backs of charging bulls in what may have been a religious ceremony.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why does Linear A represent such a significant unsolved problem in archaeology? What can and cannot be known about Minoan civilization as long as it remains undeciphered?

2. The reading describes Knossos as a palace that served many functions beyond just being a royal residence. Using specific evidence from the reading, explain what those functions were and what they reveal about how Minoan society was organized.

3. Why might the Thera eruption have inspired the myth of Atlantis? What details from the reading support this theory, and why do most scholars remain skeptical of a direct connection?