

# Catastrophic Calamities

by Eti Bonn-Muller

**Y**ou may already be familiar with the wonders of classical Greece—its symmetrical temples and flawless sculptures, its brilliant philosophers and groundbreaking democracy. But, did you know that, thousands of years earlier, a civilization flourished on Crete, the largest of the Greek islands? From about 3000 to 1100 B.C.E., the people who lived on the island—the Minoans—maintained a vast **thalassocracy**, whose trade networks extended from Egypt to the Middle East to Pakistan. The civilization prospered for some 2,000 years, even though it was

leveled several times by fiery disasters, triggered occasionally by nature and occasionally by foreign invaders.

## What a Find!

The main hub of the Minoans has long been thought to be the so-called “palace” at Knossos. This site, located in the north-center of the 160-mile-long island, was discovered in the early 20th

century by British archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans. The structure’s fine **ashlar** masonry was chiseled by artisans of exceptional skill, and its colorful wall paintings depict mesmerizing, wide-eyed female deities in tiered skirts,



These figures are so realistic that you can almost put your hands out to accept their offerings!

**Thalassocracy** refers to a naval empire.

**Ashlar** refers to masonry that is made of large square-cut stones and typically used as a facing on walls of brick or stone.

lively sea creatures, and tribute-bearers in procession (opposite bottom). The “palace” even included innovative architectural elements, such as flushing toilets, into its design. There were

also “earthquake-proof” walls that had wood inserted at key places, including around door and window frames. These features were intended to cushion the blows of seismic activity that was well known to the inhabitants of the island.

The site’s most notable feature, however, may be the sophisticated underground maze that sprawls beneath the vast complex. Comprised of narrow passageways that lead to what appeared to be “dead ends,” it inspired Evans to declare enthusiastically that Knossos was the site of the labyrinth of the infamous Minotaur.

According to ancient Greek mythology, this part-man, part-bull creature was said to have trapped and devoured Athenian children within his winding lair, from which escape was impossible. Legend says that the gory sacrifices continued until one day the Minoan princess Ariadne left a thread for a young Athenian



prince named Theseus, with whom she had fallen madly in love at first sight. Leading from the labyrinth’s innards to the maze’s entrance, the thread guided Theseus out to safety after he had killed the Minotaur.

### We’re Still Learning

Today, following more than a century of excavations, Knossos is understood to have been a major ceremonial, administration, and distribution center. Its intricate layout of corridors brimmed with enormous terracotta storage jars (*pithoi*) filled with precious goods—olive oil, wine, and grains, for example. These goods were traded with foreign powers, transported to other large complexes that were located throughout the island, and used in ritual celebrations.

Additional major Minoan “palaces” have since been unearthed at sites such as Mallia, Phaistos, and Gournia, with each yielding key pieces to

**Among the best known of the wall paintings uncovered at Knossos, this scene shows the bull-leaper somersaulting over the bull, as part of a ritual ceremony.**

the fascinating puzzle of this ancient civilization. Even though the Minoans used three scripts—a pictographic script known today as “Cretan-Hieroglyphic,” an official court and religious script known as “Linear A,” and a syllabic script known as “Linear B”—only Linear B, which was used for administrative records, has been deciphered. For this reason, it is the excavated finds that have become primary sources of information about the Minoans. These discoveries have proved a treasure trove of ancient artistry, as the scenes in the paintings burst with playfulness, energy, accuracy, and color. Seal stones are emblazoned with ceremonial bull-leapers (see above), double axes, and **griffins** in exquisite

**Griffins** are fabled monsters, usually pictured with the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion.

miniature detail. **Faience** statuettes depict goddesses clenching snakes in their fists. Multicolored frescoes display monkeys, dolphins, and octopuses frolicking in a striking array of settings and seascapes. **Rhytons** have also been uncovered. Fashioned to resemble bulls' heads (see one at right), they would have overflowed with wine during sacred rituals.

## And—from Sissi!

In recent years, new excavations at sites such as Sissi, in eastern Crete, have contributed to our ever-evolving understanding of

Can you see the excavations at Sissi in this aerial view of the area? They are right in the middle!



Only the left side of this stone-carved rhyton in the shape of a bull's head was found at Knossos. The rest is restoration. The liquid would have been poured into an opening in the neck and then drunk through a hole in the muzzle.

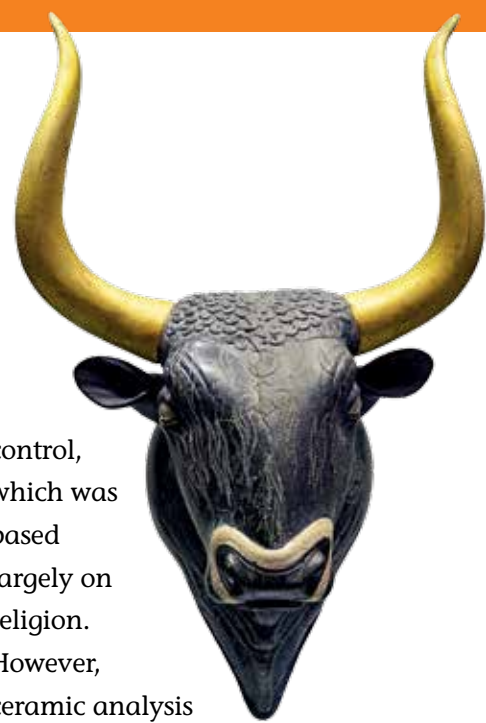
just how the areas throughout the island were organized. Under the direction of Jan Driessen at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium, the team at Sissi has unearthed a large building complex organized around a **trapezoidal** court, a rare shape for a Minoan palace. A unique bench was found along the north facade, which is dotted with artificially made hollows.

For decades, some scholars have seen Knossos as key to the island's prosperity and political

control, which was based largely on religion. However, ceramic analysis that was done at Sissi shows an early 16th-century abandonment of the complex. This may be the result of Knossos having lost influence and power. Discoveries such as this are forcing scholars to rethink how power was distributed and religion administered throughout the island.

## Preservation despite Turmoil

Although the Minoans maintained relatively peaceful relations with their island neighbors, the archaeological record has consistently revealed blackened, burned layers of destruction at various intervals. These offer evidence of the devastating effects that



**Faience** refers to glazed ceramic ware.

**Rhytons** are a type of drinking vessel used in ancient Greece, typically having the form of an animal's head or a horn, with a hole for drinking at the bottom.

48 **Trapezoidal** refers to a four-sided figure that has two parallel sides and two nonparallel sides.

several great earthquakes had over the years. In addition, a powerful tsunami inundated a broad swath of the island, and ash fell following the 1650 or 1520 B.C.E. eruption of a volcano on the nearby island of Thera. The discovery of Thera ash at Sissi suggests that the site may have been abandoned following this great eruption.

Foreign invasions also contributed to the civilization's difficulties. The Mycenaeans from mainland Greece first invaded Crete around 1450 B.C.E. However, instead of destroying the naval empire, the Mycenaeans preserved and assimilated the rich artistic, architectural, and cultural traditions of the Minoans for some 250 years. Finally, between 1100 and 900 B.C.E., with the arrival of the Dorians, warriors who came from the mainland, the Minoan-Mycenaean civilization began to decline.

Yet, even to this day, if we follow the millennia-old, blackened layers of earth, the vivid Minoan remains shine through—punctuated by fresh layers showing rebuilding efforts. All offer evidence of a colorful civilization that, for ages, refused to be buried by catastrophe.

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## Middens

**A**rchaeologists can discover a lot about ancient people by sifting through their garbage.

"Midden" is the term that archaeologists use for an ancient trash heap, where all sorts of unwanted objects, from animal bones to broken dishes, were tossed. Some middens served a single household; others were created for entire communities. The contents provide invaluable information about prehistoric peoples, including the kinds of tools and utensils they used and the foods they ate.

Shell middens, which consist mainly of the remains of discarded shellfish, are a special type. Archaeologists have excavated them along coastlines, rivers, and other places where oysters, clams, and other edible shellfish live. These ancient heaps provide important clues about the diets, cooking methods, and feasting rituals of the men and women who created them. Because of their enormous archaeological and historical value, many shell middens are now protected sites. For example, the South Carolina government recently built a stone retaining wall

around a Native American shell midden on Edisto Island to protect the crumbling, 4,000-year-old mound (below) from water damage from a nearby creek.

Middens act as a sort of time capsule. What do you think future archaeologists might deduce about how we lived from our landfills and other present-day equivalents of middens?

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Writer **Louise Chipley Slavicek** holds a Master's degree in history from the University of Connecticut.

**After this photo of a collapsing Native American midden along the edge of a creek on Edisto Island was taken, the state government ordered the construction of a retaining wall to shield the ancient shell pile from further water erosion.**

