Labyrinths and Bull-Leapers

In judging everything he found at Knossos to be indigenous, the British antiquarian Sir Arthur Evans misguided generations of Minoan scholars.

by J. ALEXANDER MACGILLIVRAY

Every year more than a million visitors wander through the maze of walls and low foundations at the Minoan palace of Knossos in Crete, where tour guides recount an elaborate tale passed on from the ancient Greeks. It is the story of King Minos and the monstrous Minotaur, who fed on a yearly tribute of seven Athenian youths and maidens until the hero Theseus slew him. The Minotaur, we are told, had a man’s body and bull’s head and was confined in a dark maze designed by the architect Daedalus, who, fleeing from Minos, escaped Crete with his son Icarus on wings crafted from beeswax and feathers.

How did the labyrinth and this fantastic cast of characters become associated with one of the world’s most famous archaeological monuments? One can blame the British antiquarian Sir Arthur Evans. Educated at Harrow and Oxford, Evans had a mediocre career in journalism and as curator of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, before going to Crete in 1894 to find the truth behind the legend of the sinister Minotaur. Six years later, he excavated what he thought was the labyrinth, declaring it was also the palace of King Minos, a clear example of how an archaeological discovery may be no more than wish fulfillment.

A rich man’s son, Evans had set out to find the origin of European civilization, which he felt was linked to the origin of the Greeks. As he joined the modern Cretans in their struggle to throw off the Ottoman Turkish yoke, Evans made invidious comparisons between the free and independent spirit he observed in Minoan art and the monotonous style he saw in Ottoman and ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian art.

Ever since the Turkish withdrawal from Crete in 1898,
the ancient Minoans have remained hostage to Evans' various presuppositions. For example, he insisted the Minoans had been free of all outside influence, even though he was the one who discovered archaeological evidence for strong Egyptian and Mycenaean Greek presences at Knossos. This attitude ensured that he would never be able to read the abundant clay tablets he unearthed there. He refused to consider the possibility that the tablets were written in an early form of Greek, as the English epigrapher Michael Ventris would later show, insisting that the Greeks didn't arrive in Crete until after the decline of Minos and his kin. Evans and other early twentieth-century excavators searched for and found in the Minoans the origins of Hellenic culture because the Christian Greek majority then in control of the island needed historical support for their desired unity with Greece, which eventually came about in 1913.

Indoctrinated in Evans' ideas at McGill University, I only became fully aware of the power of his preconceptions when the excavations I co-direct with Hugh Sackett for the British School at Athens at Palaikastro in eastern Crete uncovered a gold and ivory statuette of a youthful male (see Archaeology, September/October 1989, pp. 26-31). Evans firmly believed that the Minoans worshiped a Mother Goddess, so he classified such masculine figures as mere votaries to his omnipotent female deity. This lowly status seemed impossible to reconcile with the high quality of workmanship and the value of the materials used in the 21-inch tall figure made of ivory, gold, rock crystal, and serpentine, which we dubbed the Palaikastro Kouros. We interpret it instead as the Cretan equivalent of the Egyptian god Osiris, portrayed in Egyptian sources as the constellation Orion and recalled in classical Greece as Diktaean Zeus.

This was just one artifact, yet when I looked again at the diverse scenes on gold ring bezels and stone seals in particular, I noticed many other instances of representations that could be read quite differently from what Evans had proposed. While he led the field at revealing Minoan art to the public, Evans allowed his literal reading of the Greek myths to distort his interpretation. For example, the intricately carved stone bovine heads he discovered at Knossos—very much like a silver example found by Heinrich Schliemann at Mycenae in 1876, and likened by Schliemann to the Greek goddess Hera, wife of Zeus, as a divine cow—became bulls' heads to Evans in his search for traces of the Minotaur. Though extremely well versed in ancient Egyptian ritual, and though he himself had earlier associated the bulls' heads with the Egyptian goddess Hathor, often portrayed as the divine cow. Evans denied the influence of Egyptian religion on the Minoans. Archaeologists today continue to regard these images as bulls, ignoring their possible use in rituals involving the Egyptian goddess or her Cretan counterpart.

More telling is how Evans interpreted the wall paintings he found showing human figures on either side of a charging bull, with a third person flying through the horns and across the top. These became bull-leapers in Evans' foredoom fresco. He proposed that this favorite sport of the Minoans, as he put it, was at the heart of the grisly Minotaur myth; young Athenians were forced to confront raging bulls. This unlikely activity, during which many of the participants must have been gored, is scorned by modern bull handlers who insist that bull-leaping is impossible because bulls twist their heads when attacking. But it has become the accepted wisdom, with scholarly discussion focused only on where the practice took place, usually settling on the open court at the center of Minoan palaces.

Most amazing is how Evans conceived of the well-known ancient Egyptian symbol for the horizon, the slope between two peaks, which adorns colonnades and buildings in Minoan art. He transformed the horizon symbol into what he called Horns of Consecration, ritual symbols that were shorthand for his supposed bull cult of Minos. Evans did note that a double-headed ax, like those of modern lumberjacks, was often depicted between the Horns of Consecration. For him, it was a ceremonial ax used to sacrifice bulls and also (through a convoluted false etymology) labrys, the stem of the word labyrinth that allowed him to identify the Knossos palace as the House of the Double Axes or Labyrinth, still the consensus view.

Modern students and practitioners of Aegean archaeology must come to grips with the extent to which Evans prejudged everything he found at Knossos during his 30-year excavation. Once the trappings of his mythical agenda are removed, we will have to re-evaluate a large body of artifacts in light of recent discoveries in the Levant, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Crete. For example, I don't believe that any actual person ever leaped over a bull's back in Crete or anywhere else. I think that the paintings depict constella-
tions: Orion confronts Taurus, composed of the Hyades and Pleiades (the seven sisters), while Perseus somersaults with both arms extended over the bull's back to rescue Andromeda, recognizable by the rope (not shown in all representations) that extends from her hand. Scenes of bull-grappling or sacrifice in Minoan art may warrant an astronomical explanation, but may also depict other rituals associated with bull cults.

The heavenly configuration I describe came at the end of the agricultural year in ancient Egypt, classical Greece and, I believe, in Minoan Crete. Minoan images of bull-leaping, then, served to recall the astral calendar for both time-keeping and navigation. The so-called Horns of Consecration were likely used to chart the solar calendar with the solstices at each end peak and the equinox in the center. In my view, the Cretans symbolized the equinox by a vertical staff between two equilateral triangles representing the equality of day and night—Evans' double-ax.

The interpretive possibilities are endless. While some conservative archaeologists may discourage critical scrutiny of Evans' views, I predict a brilliant new century of Minoan studies without dependence on earlier agendas. Scholars will examine other aspects of the Cretan genius, for example their documented role in supplying medicinal herbs and magical incantations to their eastern neighbors, or appreciate the sheer beauty of their artworks—once prized by Babylonian and Egyptian kings—for what they really are.