

What follows is from a collection of essays, *Travels in Goddess Land*, written in the 1980's and early 1990's. The experiences described bear little resemblance to the heroic voyages of colonial times. There were no shipwrecks on deserted islands, treks across untracked deserts, attacks by jungle beasts or hostile natives. Nor did I bring back anything of material or diplomatic value. Feverish visions of vanished felicity in a dusty Egyptian tomb; a few old bones eclipsed by history; a bewildered girl queen co-opted by predatory theorists; tragic-comic encounters with Greek men; an elderly Grandmother descended from slaves presiding over a small garden kingdom in the high country of Montserrat, what I took away was more ephemeral, as on the visit to the reconstructed capital of Minoan Crete described below.

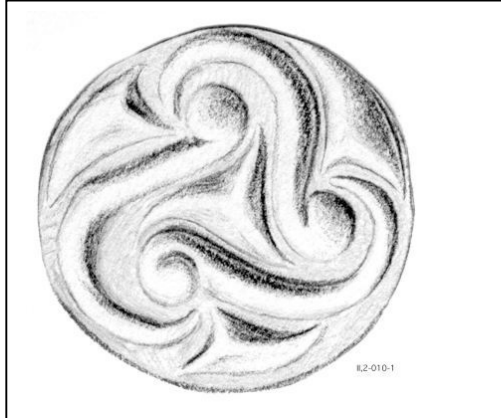
At Knossos

Andrea Nye

Our insight into this early pre-Oedipal phase in girls comes to us as a surprise, like the discovery in another field of a Minoan-Mycenaean civilization behind the civilization of Greece. Freud, "Female Sexuality"

There is no escaping the fact that we read the human past to understand the present, and then interpret it in the light of the future that we fear or desire. Cathy Gere, in Knossos & the Prophets of Modernism.

Freud was neither the first nor the last to be inspired by Sir Arthur Evans' reconstruction of "Minoan" Knossos, supposed nerve center of an ancient goddess-worshipping, nature-loving, peace-loving civilization on Bronze Age Crete. Well before Evans arrived on the scene it was known to locals that a hill near the modern city of Heraklion was the site of an ancient settlement. Traces of a theater were clearly visible. Old coins marked Knos with a labyrinth symbol on the back often turned up buried in the thin soil and found their way to the shelves of antique shops. Cretan women collected seal stones found in the vicinity and wore them around their necks to promote lactation. In 1878 Minos Kalokairinos, a merchant and antiquarian, dug some preliminary trenches and uncovered rows of storerooms housing



colossal jars and bronze artifacts. A few years later, Heinrich Schliemann, fresh from his bumbling excavations at Mycenae and Troy, tried to buy the site with the dream of making Knossos the capstone of his career. But it was Evans, son of a wealthy British mill owner, who in the first months of the twentieth century, bought his way past Turkish officials and gained control of the site. And it was Evans' reconstruction of a vanished pre-patriarchal civilization that fired the imagination, not only of Freud and his

psychoanalytic patient the poet Hilda Doolittle, but of so many other of the “prophets of modernism.”

One day browsing in Athenian antique shops, Evans thought he saw something in images engraved on seal stones he happened to pick up, something not Greek, but not Asian or Persian either, a delicacy and sophistication, a sense of freely flowing natural forms reflecting an ease of life inconsistent with the massive shaft graves and warrior helmets of Schliemann's Homeric heroes. He negotiated the purchase of the hill where seal stones were regularly found. He got permission from the Turks to excavate. With funds from his father he hired teams of workers and solicited advice from the British School of Archaeology at Athens. He spent the large part of rest of his life at Knossos, unearthing, excavating, restoring, reconstructing, rebuilding, and redecorating. Fresh from the blighted wasteland of industrial England, horrified by the gruesome end of the 1897 Greek-Turkish War, he recreated what would become Knossos, capital of a peaceful empire based on trade and commerce, presided over by a nurturing Mother Goddess, dedicated to natural beauty and skilled craft.

Later generations of archaeologists criticized his methods. They questioned his dates, condemned the unscientific freedom of his naming—the Queen's bathroom, Minos's throne—and deplored his concrete reconstruction of whole areas of the palace complex. If indeed, as Freud claimed, deep in the human mind lay buried a maternal unconscious, Evans, it was charged, had regressed, laying an all but impenetrable veil of personal myth over the ruined remains of Knossos. More compelling than scientific doubts, however, was the eloquence of utopian dreamers who took Knossos to heart. The poet and novelist Robert Graves, Jacquetta Hawkes, Maria Gimbutas, all offered variations, evoking a peaceful egalitarian past, proof that human history was not all war, violence, and imperial conquest, proof that women and men could live and think in harmony with each other and with the natural world.

I cannot say that it was either accurate dating or pacifist dreams that took me back a second time

to the ruins of Knossos. It could have been no more than baking heat in the dusty streets of Heraklion and reluctance to spend a day watching my daughter sunbath at the hotel pool and flirt with the son of a German couple staying in our hotel. It was the long spring break in Paris, and she was off from school, eager for contact with young people and with very little interest in ancient history. The day before, after a short plane ride down the Mediterranean, we had rented a car, a rattling Deux Cheveux, checked into a hotel in Heraklion, ate lunch and headed out to the famous ruins of Knossos on Crete's northern coast. After an hour climbing over what she called piles of rubble and looking at what, with her newly minted Parisian sophistication, she labeled "garish wall paintings," my daughter proclaimed that she had enough. In any case, it was late. Tired and hungry we headed back to the hotel. Now it was the next day and I was on my own equipped with a map and proper guide book from the Heraklion Museum. This time I would not be hurried from location to location as I had been the day before. Linguists might aspire to decipher Linear A, the unknown Cretan language. Archaeologists might work to fix more accurately the dates of Pre-Palatial and Post-Palatial periods. I would attempt no excavations with pick and shovel, carbon dating equipment, or psychoanalysis. I would be content with much less, a flavor or aura that might linger, a feminine ambiance missed by Freud, and perhaps also by Evans, Mackenzie, Kalokairinos, Schliemann, and all the others who had made Knossos their business. When I stopped to pay the entrance fee at the gate, the guard waved me through. "Sunday," he said in halting English, "admission free." Taking it as a good omen, I approached the ruins.

The Corridor of the Procession

Leaving the entrance I followed a walkway down a shady arbor and out onto an open paved space that my map identified as the "West Court." The day was windy, bright, and hot. All around me the body of Crete pulsed in buzzing vibrating heat, shimmering over the town, gardens, olive groves, and vineyards for which Knossos was famous. A dense stand of pines, planted by Evans to protect the opened ruins from erosion, hissed at my back, abrupt and black against the glare of the open court. In front of me, loomed Evans's reconstructed West Façade, its slabs of gypsum still blackened with what would have been the conflagration that destroyed what was left of the palace. Determined not to rush, I sat down on the raised stone edge of one of the stone-lined pits in the paving that a guide of the day before had said were rubbish bins. I would have to find some shade to eat in I thought as the sun beat down on my



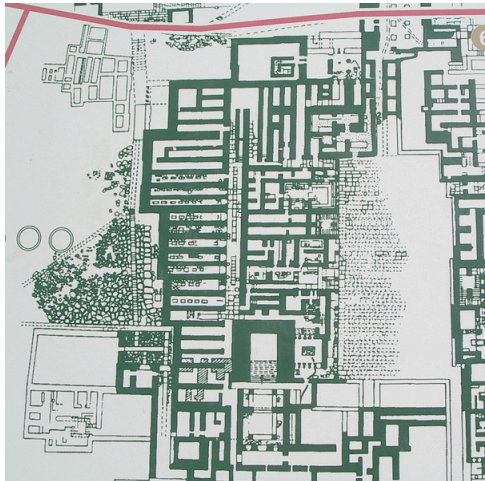
West Court

shoulders; already I was hungry for the dark Cretan wine, coarse country bread and pungent goat's cheese in my pack.

I opened my guidebook. *“In Minoan times, the hills around the West Court would have been covered with trees, not pines but rather groves of olives and forests of the cypress Minoans used for timbers. It would seem from fragments of frescoes that the paved space was planted with shade trees and used as a meeting place.”* I unfolded the

map included in the back pages of the guide book and turned it this way and that. Could I find an order, a design, a course to follow through what was left of this complex of more than 1000 rooms, concrete restorations, repainted frescoes, ruined enclosures, broken columns? Could I locate entranceways, corridors, movements in the piles of tumbled stones that seemed so meaningless the day before? Along the east side of the West court over a low barrier I looked down on magazines and storerooms that once held the labeled and monitored wealth of Crete. Here in 1879 was the first real evidence that there was something extraordinary buried on the Kafala hill. When Kalokairinos dug his twelve trial trenches he

found thick tall walls and rows of narrow alleys and vats, He saw intact rows of five foot pithoi still holding bits of grain, beans, peas, and barley, He marveled at labyrinth markings on stone walls and Bronze Age implements.



Knossos Map

All that was left of the thick wall that once protected the magazines from predatory eyes were now a few remains of pillars. A visitor to ancient Knossos would never have been allowed to look down at the wealth of Crete stored there:

harvested grain and legumes, fine wool for weaving, vats of oil, treasuries of silver and bronze for the workshops. To gain entrance a visitor would have to wait, collect him or herself,

cultivate a proper attitude. I looked down into the shallow paved pit on whose edge I was sitting. Perhaps these so-called rubbish pits had other purposes, for offerings or gestures to prepare a newcomer for entrance to what had come to be known as the “Labyrinth” for its intricate twisting passages and turnings.

The guide book again, *“The official entrance to the palace was in the southeast corner of the*

court, at what Evans named the West Porch., a covered area with painted walls. Adjoining the porch are two small enclosures, probably a porter's lodge and guardian's alcove. A door with two leaves leads from there to the long Corridor of the Procession." Looking south, across an expanse of paving I could just make out a discrete sign marked "Corridor of the Procession." Who should I be to make my entrance? A Greek from the Peloponnese on a commercial errand? Attracted by Cretan wealth and hoping to make a profitable exchange of wheat or barley for the finely carved objects of gold and ivory made by Cretan artists? Ready to be contemptuous of the reputed looseness of Cretan women and the slender build of its men? Fascinated none the less by their fleet sailing ships, rich green-gold olive oil, and painted frescoes? But indignant still that he was kept waiting by guards who made him sit and swelter in the court before he was allowed to enter.

I consulted my itinerary: *"The Corridor of the Procession with its long approach and frescoed walls has not survived intact, but a visitor can still follow its course over excavations and improvised bridges. After the earthquakes of 1700 B.C. the corridor was diverted south and east to make an even*

longer approach, although to one side can be seen evidence of smaller doors for service or domestic errands." I get up,

slightly dizzy in the heat and walk over to the raised threshold next to the printed sign. Read again, *"The carved wooden door..."* look down to see the grooves its heavy beams made on the stone threshold. Look ahead. Never would he, my Greek, be allowed to go unattended down the long stretch of passageway over a green marble floor caulked with red plaster. He would have to learn to adjust his step, be weaned from his sense of superiority. There is nothing like it after all, he would have to be made to think even against his will, nothing like it anywhere, no matter

how many seas he traveled, how many ports he entered, how many seaside towns he raided.

"We know from a few fragments of plaster that the walls of the "Corridor of the Procession" were painted with



The Lily Prince



The Cup Bearer

what seems to be a procession of figures, hence the name “procession..” Reimagined by Evans team of painters, a figure appears, bearing a tall conical ceremonial cup. Slim, clean-shaven, with long flowing hair and naked to the waist, he walks on, looking solemnly ahead, as if to help our Greek to the proper rhythm of his approach. How men like this must have shocked him with their femininity, wide belts clenching slender waists, silver anklets and armbands inlaid with gold? Were they even men? he might have wondered with a turning in his stomach of something like awe and something like disgust .A long stretch south and now the corridor makes an eighty degree turn. He can hear music faintly in the distance, as the double tier of figures moves with him in the grave clarity of the Minoan palette,, clear gray-blue, dark red-brown, creamy ivory. Light-headed with heat, with the buzzing of insects from outside, with the quickening steps of painted attendants, comes another ninety-degree turn north. On and on, in a coming that threatens to eclipse the urgency of his business.



Lioness-head Rhyton

But now Evans’ artist Emile Gillieron’s reproduction of the Priest King blocks the way with his lily crown, papyrus necklace and wreath, crest of peacock feathers. . “*At the Propylaeum entrance to the Central Court Evans had installed a facsimile reconstructed from a few fragments—a piece of head and crown, a bit of torso and another of thigh, found further back in the south-*

north stretch of the corridor,” It was the closest Evans came to confirming his conviction that Knossos was a royal residence. Didn’t a palace have to have a King, even if it had to be this boy, who judging from the bit of thigh and torso that remained of the fresco was no more regal or powerfully built than any of the other processional figures that lined the walls? And why not enhance the effect and put a plumed headdress on the boy’s head, and attach to the cord that he holds out behind him a royal griffin?

But the music comes louder now, with gift bearers, tapping of feet lightly brushing the green flagged paving, lyres and flutes, the beat of a sistrum. Could he negotiate to such music? He draws back, my commercial traveler, resists seduction. He would have been so sure of his mastery, given his superior height, thick warrior body, and northern pallor beside the slim dark Cretans. He could wrestle any two of them to the floor in a moment. God knows, he can hardly tell the men from the women with their jewels and small waists, except for the women's breasts shamelessly bared above their flounced skirts. For a moment his impulse is what it would have been in Sparta or Mycenae to catch one of them, force her to the ground somewhere outside the palace walls.

But now he and I are at the reception hall, and now out of the confusion of color and movement,



The Throne Room

comes a gesture, an alabaster rhyton in the shape of a lioness' head. An attendant pours a cup of wine and gestures him nearer. The liquid touches cool and fresh on his throat, dry and dusty after the walk up from the port. For a moment he is softened by gentleness, by opulence. Sweetness flows over his tongue, cool and infinite. What wine these Cretans make, he thinks, nothing like the coarse stuff they have at home, tasting of resin from the pine barrels in which it was stored and

always having to be diluted with water. Seeing the look in his eyes, they take the cup from him and lead him up to where the bright expanse of the central court opens to the sky.

High around him are the protective walls of the palace. I wonder if he would have felt a pang of fear. Could he find his way back? Had he had been led on into the labyrinth of the old stories? Was he Theseus, but without any besotted Ariadne to lay the thread that would guide him out to freedom? They gesture him on, across the paved court, down a short flight of stairs and into a small anteroom where he is invited to sit on a stone bench and wait until he is called.

The Throne Room

The anteroom is cool and shaded, down a few steps from the level of the vast central court with its fluted columns. Little by little my eyes adjust to the darkness. How far I am from the entrance is difficult to tell. The distance covered seems immense, but with the corridor's many turnings, it could be that the entrance is only on the other side of the wall against which I sit. Thirsty and dazed, I look at my watch. Not yet time for lunch, for the pleasurable picnic I had planned for myself. As I look up and out of Evan's rebuilt entrance arch, the sun dims. A wind crackles in the tin roofing. I remember old stories of ghostly apparitions in the ruins, of strange unearthly sounds in the lower levels.

Before me down a few more steps is the room Evans christened the "Throne Room" when he first

broke into it three weeks after the excavation had begun. Not a large room, only eighteen by twelve foot, dark and rather dismal. What convinced him that this had to be the seat of Minos the King was the high-backed seat of gypsum set against one wall and on either side stone benches as if for advisors or elders. At one end was what could have been a sunken lustral basin. On the pavement were bits of delicate alabaster vessels. In a corner an almost intact section of plaster had fallen from the wall showing a ceiling frieze of white-striped red dado and the limbs of a recumbent griffin. Evans's imagination blossomed. Surely this was the seat of a King and a place of regal ceremony. Behind the raised seat bits of painted plaster indicated remnants of a landscape shaded by a leafy palm tree, with water plants, sedges and reeds such as one might find along a river bank. And in the foliage was something, yes something that he was sure looked like a paw. Certainly the throne of a King would have a grander framing than a jungle garden. Evans put his artists to work painting blue-plumed griffins on either side of the throne, royal beasts resplendent at their master's side.

Sitting on the anteroom bench, preparing myself to face Evans' brightly colored griffins, I was distracted by a flurry of voices. A guide outside in the Court was lecturing to a group of tourists. I looked up and out through Evans' reconstructed arches and watched him gesture over and down to the excavated west magazines visible now from the east with their long narrow storage bins and charred walls.

"It was probably the olive oil," he raised his voice to get his group's attention, "olive oil that made the blaze that finally destroyed the palace so big. There, you see," pointing down again, "there are still the jars, the very same sort of jars used in our villages today. And down there records were found on clay tablets, names of suppliers and manufacturers, sheep shorn, wool issued, grain harvested." He mimed a scribe writing figures on a balance sheet, "You see, King Minos, he was very rich. Tablet after tablet is filled with the inventory of his treasure." His audience nodded, familiar enough with the arithmetic of commerce.

I bristle. They, the original keepers of the shrines, would never have let strangers look down into the stores, never have exposed the precious vats and treasuries of Knossos to curious covetous eyes as the guide did now. My Greek on his commercial errand would only have guessed at what was below as he weighed the gold in the wine cup he lifted to his lips. Defiantly, I closed my eyes and imagined other keepers of the green and golden treasure that flowed from Cretan orchards, fields, and farms, and rites -- the artifacts proved there were such rites beneath the storerooms deep in the earth--rites never made public celebrated by consecrated priestesses. Even if at some point Greek overlords overran the complex and took ownership of stored treasure as some historians believe, those shrines deep in the earth might

still have practiced that other economy that did not measure out hoarded wealth but kept it flowing in and out without calculation, without partition but with moderation, just as the precious liquid poured out and in golden streams from the vats, flowed into the ivory ladle that dripped it back against the pillar's side into the basin.

No. What was maintained down in the stores was not a hoarding of commercial value, but a circulation that kept dancers turning, grain ripening, sun rising, poppies blooming on the hillsides. To Greek Minos in his horned mask, it might have seemed obscene but harmless. Leave them their rituals. What harm could it do to allow them their indecent duties, while he and his warriors administered the law and defended the island?

The guide herded his little group past me and into the Throne Room. "They say that here in the Throne room just as the final fire, or lava, or foreign soldiers armed with spears and swords rushed in—we do not even now know what really happened—a ceremony was taking place, perhaps to ward off this final disaster." Minos. Would I never escape the "nine-year Cretan King?" In the *Odyssey*, Homer tells the titillating story of how Minos married Pasiphae, and Pasiphae in her lust mated with a white bull given Minos by Poseidon. How she gave birth to a monster, half bull, half man, a minotaur hidden away in the maze of the palace's underground passageways. How Minos demanded tribute from Athens after the Athenians killed one of his sons, and each year Athens had been forced to send fourteen young men to Crete to fight bulls in the Central Court until the hero Theseus comes and with the help of Minos' daughter Ariadne slays the minotaur and restores order.

In the Throne Room the guide conjured up the final scene. Minos rises, robed like his priests. He watches the last futile offering of oil pour into the vase from a silver ladle in an amber stream. The sistrum misses a beat, the flute wavers. Thunder. The earth trembles. A clatter of running feet. The final catastrophe is at hand, the earthquake that will end the age of Minos. A spatter of rain on the roof. The ground shaking, stones falling. "Here perhaps, at this very place, just as the fire is coming..,"—the accented inflection of the guide's English adds exotic flavor to his story. The tourists crowd forward, awkward and stiff in their bright synthetic Western clothing—"the last rites were held with the whole palace ablaze, lava falling like black snow, heavy amphora from the top floors falling and cracking open on the paving beneath."

Is this the final destruction, the art-deco griffins, the fortified throne, benches judiciously lined up for elders to administer the rule of law, and at the entrance, the old Minoan lustral basin, moved by Evans to the redecorated Throne room, from which the captive Priestess, one last time, passes the cup? The



Central Court

guide pointed to the shallow bowl with a flourish and dismissed his group to eat the box lunches provided by the hotel.

The East Wing

I unpacked my own lunch in the central court. The cheese was pungent,

ripened by the warmth of my pack. The wine was warm and strong. I looked out past the ruins onto a distant hill glistening burnished brown in the glare of the sun. Between me and the hill, nestled in the valley, I could follow the glittering silver thread of the river Kairatos.

I sat empty of thoughts, glad to be back in the open air. A middle-aged heavy-set Minos settled himself near me, no doubt on holiday from his own throne somewhere in Munich. To his hopeful greeting in German I returned a blank look. He shifted uncomfortably and turned away. What was making me glad, other than the discomfort of the German at my back twisting on his rock, was that no matter how Evans searched, he could find no image of Minos at Knossos. Nowhere in any of the artifacts, in any of the fragments of frescos of flowers, priestesses, animals, or dancers on exhibit in museums at Heraklion, Santorini, Athens, or anywhere was there any reflection of the evil that the rites of the crypts were meant to keep at bay. No royal excess, no exercise of royal power, no warrior King with his legions.

Seeing out of the corner of my eye the German try to again catch my eye, I picked up the remains of my lunch eager to get on. Sun and wine were making me sleepy and I still had the East Wing, designated by Evans the residential wing, to explore. The sun hot on my head, the strong cheese turning in my stomach, dizzy when I stood up, I re-opened my map. *“The East Wing is of special importance because it was meant to be for the private life of the royal family, and for the workshops connected to that residence.”* Certainly, Evans reasoned, a King could not have lived in the cramped rooms of the upper level. Somewhere in the palace complex there would be great halls and chambers suitable for a ruling family. My head was beginning to ache with the strain of following the map, trying to make sense of the channels through which this other life might have circulated. I walked the length of the court to clear away the buzz of heavy wine before I approached what Evans christened the “Grand Staircase” a series of double flights of wide stone stairs leading down to the lower floors. Here it is hard to fault Sir Arthur.



This was the great find in the second year of excavation; a wide partly collapsed stairway around a sunken light well on the opposite side of the court from the Throne Room. There could be no doubt about the dramatic effect or that the stairway had been there in earliest Minoan times, Immediately Evans put his crew to work, replacing the massive wooden beams and posts that supported the upper levels to make it safe for exploration.

The stairway with its landings and turnings is cool and dark after the heat of the open court. I am no longer the Greek, I am a resident, going down after the noontime meal, out of the burning midday sun, down into shaded inner rooms for the siesta required in all hot climates. Slowly, flight by flight, steps conveniently shallow so there would be no abrupt change from level to level, only a gradual descent in the cool of the lower rooms. Somewhere just out of reach in the dust hovers a slight gingerly sweetness, a flowering or a spice, just out of reach and then vanished into a faint clatter of feet. The massive pillared light well to my right is a reservoir of filtered illumination between columns with fluted capitals that move the weight of each landing effortlessly upward. One flight then another, I turn, happy to go on and on around this pool of light, following the line of the hill until at the bottom, a narrow corridor leads to the long double room that Evans called the “Hall of the Double Axes.” Again I catch a faint odor. Ginger? Or saffron?

Here was where in his mind Evans staged his great assemblies, ceremonial events, receptions, audiences. Nothing found suggested anything so public. I imagine instead rooms prepared for rest. Doors that divided the large room into two parts made to vanish into clever recesses were half-closed. Defused light from a smaller light well to my right illuminated the inlaid stones of the polished floor. How she, my imaginary Minoan, must have longed for this moment. The underground hall is empty and still. To my left above the row of doors, casements shaded with woven silk ripple in a light draft from the open

colonnade. On the floor in the center of the room on a stand sits a jar of lilies, their spicy scent perfuming the air. I lay down my pack down on the cool polished stone and cross, touching the lilies as I go to a small pedestal with a bowl of fresh water where I wet my lips before I turn and follow the narrow turning corridor to an inner room.



Queen's Room

She, my Minoan, might have sat there on a bench for a moment, looking out to the colonnade where a lotus floats in a pool of clear green water, laid her head on a lavender-scented pillow covered with clean linen, listened to the sound of water as it circulates in the pool. Here nothing can disturb the little regular leaping of her thoughts, images that resurface, of the morning, purple hyacinths just budding, monkeys gathering saffron on poppy-bright hills. A breeze lifts the faces of violets growing in pots around the edges of the columns. Outside also sits a bench and there the pillows are soft, but today she rests inside looking out, letting her thoughts move like trickles of water that keep the lotus fresh and the silver fish quick and spare.

Idly she watches the last triangle of sun reach for the water, for the opalescent sheen of lotus petals. On the opposite wall, Evans had his artists paint dolphins, blue-green on a pale creamy ground. In the dim light, she can just make out their graceful forms gliding and turning in circles among floating anemones and starfish. And up to the a scrolled frieze of shell-like forms, one after another, locked into each other so the eye moves from smoothly from one on to the next. So it is, she thinks, they should all try to be, each a separate turning that flows into the next without conflict or resentment.

There were no windows in these lower rooms built into the hillside. No direct light reached them from the north or west. The L shaped colonnade along the east and south was open to the sky and air but bounded by a wall four or more meters high. Was it for defense? Was she afraid, this alter image, as she lays back in the dark of the inner room with its deep red walls and marble floors? Dolphins, dim indistinct shapes, circle unseen to the murmur, easing now, of cicadas in the fields, strains of melody like threads in the gathering coolness come from outside where a bird begins to sing.

Even Evans noticed the lack of fortification. At the end of the lower corridor a door opened directly out to the hills, river and sea beyond. He found no weapons to speak of, only a few hunting arrows and knives, and swords with handles that indicated ceremonial use more than serious defense. Was it because there was nothing to defend against, nothing that for hundreds of years could stop the current, the quivering of the fish, the blooming of the wild flower meadows each spring, the rosy dawns

pressing back the night. Who would think of stopping it? Of course, there was sickness and death, but at the same time a motion on the surface of things, light on water, a quickening that raises the hackles of hair on the neck, trembling on the poppies' fragile leaves, flickering on the lotus pool.

At Knossos narrow troughs on the roofs carried water down and through the palace when it rained, collecting first in high cisterns to let sediment settle and then released into a great central well, to be pumped back into lustral basins, baths, and pools. Everywhere must have been shimmering surfaces, with a flow checked only to move again down, along channels, out to the small stream that wound down to the river and out to sea from where it evaporated into rain to fall back again on the high tiled roofs of the palace. Through the drains comes a trickle from the conduit as someone above draws water, splashes it over her face to be ready for the evening. She gets up now and moves around the room, my imaginary resident. She takes up the crystal vase of scent, a necklace of jasper and ivory, a comb of amber, or



The Bull Leaper

perhaps the small statuette of a miniature bull-leaper on display in the Museum in Heraklion.

See him as he flies through the bull's horns, his limbs light and quick, supported only by air. See how the sculptor caught him and then let him go to his leap, went with him, is reborn with him as she shaped the fragile line of his body. As depicted in the Minoan frescos these acrobatic performances on the backs and horns of bulls were more dance than any fight to the death.

The afternoon work would be starting now in the studios on the other side of the north wall of the East Wing. Can you hear them? Lapidaries turning the great wheels to polish amphora of pink marble. Potters forming the coil of an octopus as the neck of a jar. Ceramists shaping cups of egg-shell thin pottery burnished to look like bronze and banded in appliqué. It was only a short walk down a narrow corridor to see the work and then out onto the steps that lead down to the river.

The Theater

I sit on steps looking out and down to the river, perfectly awake and at the same time perfectly still, having no desire to go further. Behind me are the walls of the palace and I listen in the gilded light of late afternoon to the low hum of bees in the thickets and cicadas in the motionless branches of the pines. It is almost closing time, but I am too tired to go back the way I came, through the palace, back up against the flow, through the workrooms, the Dolphin room, up the great stairway, across the court, past the

Throne Room. Instead I find a narrow pathway and walk around the palace through thickets, traverse the hill and come out again on the West Court from which stretches the long road back to the sea and Heraklion.

The sun is setting behind the trees. Tourists come up out of the ruins with little cries driven by guards who try to catch the eyes of foreign girls in jeans. It will soon be dark and there will be dancing in town. One guard smiles and winks at some blond Swedish girls. Would they like to go to the disco? See real Greek dancing? I am ignored as I sit down and get out my map one last time. “*At the extreme northwest corner of the palace, connected to the West Court by a raised stone pathway was found the remains of a theater with two tiers of steps for the audience.*” Here no doubt Minoans gathered when the work was over for the day, calling to each other as the sun set over the olive trees. In no particular order they came, went, met in groups and drew apart to meet a friend, no rigid rows, no numbered seats. Women and men met, talked, exchanged news of the day. Wine, light and refreshing, was there for refreshment, along with cool spring water and meze spread out on the stones. Music begins, the lyre, the pipe, always the clatter of the sistrum.

Perhaps it was indeed just as Homer imagined it in the *Iliad* on the Shield of Achilles: “*a dancing floor like the one Daedalus made for Ariadne of the beautiful hair...girls dressed in lovely linen and young men in handsome tunics.. stepping nimbly with light step, and a great crowd taking joy in it...*” A few women begin, placing their hands on each other’s wrists. Heads begin to dip and sway. Circular groups form, moving like a potters’ wheel, slowly and carefully at first, and then in rapid circles to which new dancers are admitted one by one, men all but indistinguishable from the women in their gold-threaded tunics, tracing the intricate steps of the old dances marked out on the paving so that no one can forget the intricate spirals and turnings that weave separate movements into one great human vessel. The feet of the dancers brush tiny thyme flowers hidden between the stones releasing a sharp fragrance. Faster and faster the circles turn and multiply, turning inside each other, opening again in two lines that turn, bend, and then miraculously meet again. The eyes of the dancers are half-closed as they open their arms for a new dancer, turn back to each other. All the time the steps trace patterns on the stone as the sun goes down in a blaze of red.

And Minos? Did he watch from his dais, not wanting to mingle with the crowds but only observe these quaint customs with royal condescension? Had he once tried to take the floor himself? Tried clumsily to imitate this women’s dancing? And after that failure—did they laugh at him? —was he less willing to allow the dancing until eventually his clumsiness became an art with women banished from the

dance, and men taking turns to perform alone with heavy clumsy steps? But by then what had been shaped evening after evening in the cool of dusk had cracked and broken into fragments.

“Closing time,” called out a guide to me impatiently from the arbor entrance. He had almost missed me sitting there against the stones. His keys rattled on his belt. “You’re late,” he yelled resentfully. I walked to him over the cracked paving.

"Closing now. Come back tomorrow," he said softening up a bit. Why was it they came and made such a fuss he couldn't understand. Not when the retzina was cool in the tavernas and the sea was warm for swimming. And in the afternoon they came, when anyone with sense was asleep. Good for the island though, brought money in. He looked me over as I approached. Tourist women, even the older ones, were so much more agreeable than Greek girls.

