

Book Reviews

Nicoletta Momigliano. *In Search of the Labyrinth: The Cultural Legacy of Minoan Crete* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020, 362pp., 79 illustr., pbk, ISBN 978-13501-5670-8)

Many people are familiar with the phenomenon of Egyptomania, the public fascination with ancient Egypt that resulted in the appearance of Egyptological elements in everything from architecture to religion during the nineteenth century (see, for example, Moser, 2020 and Dobson & Tonks, 2020). But less well known is the related phenomenon of Cretomania—the cultural and social effect of the archaeological discoveries of the Bronze Age Minoan civilization of the island of Crete, as well as the Mycenaean on the Greek mainland. Admittedly this did not have the same wide-ranging cultural impact as its Egyptian equivalent, yet for a period of time during the twentieth century, public fascination with archaeological discoveries in the Aegean was manifest in a dizzying array of media. From poetry to architecture, from ballet to fashion, the Bronze Age inhabitants of the Aegean, and the Minoans in particular, seem to have seeped their way into all elements of culture, from the high to the low, and everything in between. Although studies of this effect have emerged in the last decade, in multiple-authored volumes (Hamilakis & Momigliano, 2006; Boucher, 2014; Momigliano & Farnoux, 2017) or as single authored articles (Cadogan, 2004; Morris, 2020), Nicoletta Momigliano's book is the first sole-authored monograph to consider this 'mania'.

The key foci of Momigliano's book are the myriad variety of creative responses which were inspired by the material remains of the Minoan civilization. Although the majority of the book deals

largely with the twentieth century, Momigliano's discussion ranges widely, as far back as the second millennium BC, and up to the contemporary present, in order to show how this 'civilization' and the memory of them has always inspired responses, even in periods when the archaeological foundations of these responses were still waiting to be unearthed.

Each chapter starts with an informative sketch of both the political and social context of the period in question, and the archaeological activity and publications which occurred in the Aegean during that time, allowing the various 'receptions' to be discussed in a way which highlights how the 'first civilization in Europe' could provide a vehicle for the promotion of various ideas, trends, and ideologies. It also shows how conceptions of the Minoans—such as the idea of the peaceful Minoans contrasted to the warlike Mycenaean, the worship of the Mother Goddess, and the idea of a Minoan thalassocracy—developed and concretized in both scholarly and popular discourse.

In the Introduction, Momigliano sets out the volume's aim: to explore how Minoan material culture has acted as a catalyst for new creativity. This also relates to the methodology used and the examples chosen in the book, as the selection of material is based on evidence of engagement with the material culture of Minoan Crete specifically. As not every contemporary representation of Minoan archaeology or mythology were inspired by the actual material evidence from Crete, famous examples, such as Picasso's

Minotaur works, which draw more on later Classical iconography and literature than the archaeological material itself, are not included. As a result, the examples and responses discussed in the subsequent chapters range from the familiar, such as the 'Theseus' novels of Mary Renault, to the obscure (few today remember the 1930 novel *Son of Minos* by David Cheney). They are not just represented by the Anglophone world either, nor just in high culture—examples include Icelandic and Finnish novels, French comics, American post-metal albums, and episodes of the British TV sci-fi drama *Dr Who*.

Chapter two explores responses to the Minoans from the Bronze Age, through the Classical Greek sources, up to the mid-nineteenth century. It is early in this period, during the eighth century BC, that the first representations of the Minotaur appear in art. However, from the Classical period onwards, the majority of responses until the nineteenth century are based on literary traditions rather than material evidence. It is only towards the end of the nineteenth century that engagement with material artefacts on Crete, such as the 'Cyclopean' walls, develops; and it is also in this period when the term Minoan is first introduced, by Karl Hoeck.

Chapter three covers the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the First World War. Here we see the introduction of 'Cretomania', in particular, although not exclusively, as a result of Evans' excavations at Knossos and the discovery of the material elements from which representations of the Minoans would be constantly assembled and reassembled. This chapter shows how the Minoans emerged at precisely the right time, as they fit neatly into then-current developments in modernist artistic trends, such as Art Nouveau, as well as contemporary politics. Promoted by Evans as the first Europeans, they appealed to Eurocentric and colonial

agendas; their artistic abilities and aesthetics seemed right at home in the *belle époque*. To paraphrase Voltaire, if the Minoans hadn't existed, this was the perfect time to invent them. This chapter also shows that many of the popular conceptions of the Minoans which subsequently developed were not necessarily the result of Evans' work and publications of the period. Rather, the idea of the pacifism of the Minoans found more favour with archaeologists such as Harriet Boyd Hawes, and the idea of the modernity and naturalism of Minoan art, which in turn gave rise to their representation in art, literature, and fashion of the period, owes much to the writings of Parisian archaeologists and art historians such as Salomon Reinach and Edmond Pottier.

One of the key elements of this chapter is that it shows a tension at the heart of the study and reception of the Minoans that would never really disappear—their seeming ability to be both 'primitive and modern, exotic and familiar' (p. 86). This inherent ambiguity means that from their first real introduction onto the world stage, the Minoans steadfastly refuse to be neatly categorized. Thus, their representations would be equally contradictory, with an inherent ambivalence which allowed them to appeal to both Eurocentric and Orientalists. While, in this period the responses to the Minoans were uniformly positive, in future periods this would lead to considerable variation in their interpretations, for good and for bad.

Chapter four deals with the period between AD 1915 and 1949, a period which included the publication of Evans' magnum opus, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*, as well as major upheavals in the political and social landscape of Greece. A major development in this period is the growing separation, in both scholarly and artistic responses, between the Minoans and the Mycenaeans, and in particular the

crystallization of the dichotomy between peaceful (at times decadent) and warlike tendencies, respectively, which still cling to both. Citing a host of examples from literature, but also travel writing, art, and drama, Momigliano discusses how the pacifism of the Minoans—and the supposed decadence which ensued—could now be viewed more negatively, as the source of their eventual downfall. Rather than mysterious and exotic, the Minoans were now often depicted as sexually extravagant, indulgent: as distant, and ‘other’. This stood in contrast to the Mycenaeans, now more widely regarded as vigorous pre-Hellenic, Aryan Greeks. Works such as Nikos Kazantzakis’ play ‘Kouros’ show the widening distinction between the two civilizations.

Chapter 5 (AD 1949–1974) discusses the continued polarization of the Minoans and Mycenaeans in the wake of the decipherment of Linear B as an early form of Greek. But in relation to this we also see an increased emphasis on gynocentric and matriarchal perspectives of the Minoans in popular responses, in particular the role of women in religious activity and the idea of the Great Mother Goddess. While being increasingly undermined by archaeological evidence, this theme, in which ‘the mother strikes back’ (p. 159), ties in with notions of the Aryan patriarchal Mycenaeans versus the older matriarchal society of Crete, and is found in multiple responses of the period, such as the works of Michael Ayrton and of course Mary Renault. The growth of pacifist movements in the post-war period also saw the Minoans as a kind of lost paradise; the Minoans were now seen as having been destroyed by external factors (prompted by the excavations on the island of Santorini) and not through their own decadent stagnation.

Chapter six covers the period between AD 1975 and 1999, which saw the growth of

scholarly trends such as postmodernism, as well as new archaeological work and interpretation that focused, for example, on the deeper understanding of Minoan settlement patterns. Alongside this, archaeological discoveries of possible human sacrifice suggested a darker side to the romanticized perception of Minoan Crete—a ‘loss of innocence’ which was also mirrored in the growing changes in archaeological interpretations of the period. And while previous representations of the Minoans continued into this period, these new discoveries and approaches influenced novel responses that foregrounded alternative perspectives. Experimental works such as Christa Wolf’s *Kassandra* deconstruct romantic views of the Minoans, while the American author Don Delillo uses Minoan archaeology as a vehicle to explore ideas of identity and selfhood.

As I was reading the book, Jacquetta Hawkes’ statement regarding Stonehenge—that every generation got the version they deserved or desired—came frequently to mind. Like Stonehenge, the Minoans also acted as a vehicle for the relationship between archaeological interpretation and contemporary ideologies, with the Minoans acting as reflections of ourselves. So it was heartening to find that very quote as a subject header in the book’s final chapter. This chapter offers an overview of the themes discussed in the previous chapters, showing that while new responses are evoked by trends, discoveries, and contexts, some common threads persist, both in the way Minoans are presented and the motivations behind these responses. This final chapter ends with a look at where we are now—Minoans in the new millennium—and includes a host of different media through which we are still engaging with and responding to the material past of the Minoans. This final chapter ends with an advisory to modern scholars to consider a deeper engagement

with Cretomania as a way to understand how narratives of the past resonate in the present, allowing for their continuation into the future.

After finishing the book, the reader is left to ponder whether the Minoans were ever allowed to be themselves, or if we will ever really know them after all. While multiple interpretations are by no means unusual for an archaeological society, monument, or site, the Minoans in particular seem to suffer under the expectations of their investigators and recorders. From the beginning, the Bronze Age material remains of Crete were filtered through various lenses, from the legacy of Homeric and Classical literature to evolutionary theories of origin, and shaped by contemporary discourses on nationhood, identity, gender, and race. These, as much as the ancient writers themselves, have led to the development of a multitude of Minoan myths, reflected widely in a range of both archaeological/historical and popular responses. And the inherent contradictions and ambivalence that scholars and artists saw at the heart of the Minoans—the ‘oft remarked upon dual character of Minoan civilization’ (p. 224)—from the start offered significant malleability to the discourse.

Momigliano’s book acts as an Ariadne’s thread that helps us trace the labyrinthine ways these myths have developed, by placing them in both their archaeological and socio-political contexts. Proving that, when it comes to the Minoans, ‘reconstitution’ is not just a rebuilding in concrete, *In Search of the Labyrinth* is a fascinating, wide-ranging, and detailed study of how a ‘civilization’ was created, adapted, and reconstituted from its inception.

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