

## The Legacy of Sir Arthur Evans

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Sir Arthur Evans' discovery of a Bronze Age civilization on Crete has sparked a conflagration of controversies in academic circles, many of which kindle on him, his methods and his interpretations. What is not open to argument is that Evans excavated/reconstructed Knossos from 1897 to 1926.<sup>1</sup> Although the current rate of erosion at Knossos will dissolve the site in 200-300 years according to Elias Mariolakos,<sup>2</sup> Evans still established the existence of a pre-Mycenaean culture for consideration by the minds of people in our time, whether or not all agree with Evans' views.

Reconstruction of the site remains perhaps the sorest issue among scholars. However, in his 1901 season, Evans realized that restoration of the Throne Room complex of Knossos was necessary if its gypsum floor were to survive impact of the elements. He decided then and there to rebuild in the "Minoan Style" to avoid incongruities.<sup>3</sup> In 1905 heavy winter rains collapsed the second landing of the Grand Staircase; thus, he had to rebuild it to preserve any idea of its grandeur. Initially, Evans replaced structures with wood and brick, then with double-T steel bars, and finally with reinforced concrete.<sup>4</sup> Rene Dussaud objected by declaring that visitors should have been "spared the unpleasant impression of entering a completely redecorated apartment."<sup>5</sup> "You have to press your imagination hard to image that these [beams and columns] were all wood," Palyvou echoes.<sup>6</sup> Joseph MacGillivray condemns Evans' use of concrete because its very weight causes the ancient foundations to crumble.<sup>7</sup> Yet Evans incorporated original collapsed materials in his rebuilding so well that trained scholars are often unable to identify new from old walls.<sup>8</sup> Palyvou sums up a contemporary sentiment when he says, "though modern restorers would never rebuild to the extent Evans did, deep inside, most of us are not that upset with what he did."<sup>9</sup>

Probably the greatest delight at Knossos comes from viewing the frescoes that Evans also had reconstructed. But these have problems too. Fragments were what were actually recovered. Evans employed Emile and Edouard Gillieron to restore the frescoes on the walls.<sup>10</sup> Their artistic style and Evans' particular taste were both heavily influenced by Twenties Art Nouveau.<sup>11</sup> Mistakes were made in interpreting some scenes from chips, like the "Saffron Gatherer" who was actually a monkey like those in the Akrotiri fresco.<sup>12</sup> Another instance involved substituting papyri for palm trees beside the flanking griffons in the Throne Room.<sup>13</sup> From fragments of a left leg, torso and feathered crown, Evans developed an image of a "priest-king." Recent scholarship suggests these fragments may actually belong to two different figures.<sup>14</sup> Yet, these frescoes more vividly than anything else convey a sense of high civilization in the Bronze Age to their viewers.

Ann Brown in Arthur Evans and the Palace of Minos is willing to admit that some restoration is mere conjecture.<sup>15</sup> But Duncan MacKenzie's twenty-six diaries reveal how careful Arthur Evans tried to be in his excavations. Each stage of excavation was photographed. Precise sketches of the site were also done by Theodore Fyfe as a supplementary source. Evans himself documented each discovery through stratigraphy.<sup>16</sup> Integrity of Minoan structures was his intention if not his achievement.

Because of Knossos' restoration, it is popular with tourists. It averages over a million visitors per year.<sup>17</sup> This fact causes yet another controversy. Tourism damages the site. The steps of the Grand Staircase that Evans restored now have foot tracks worn into them. People often touch original ashlar stones and fresco bits and even jump onto the exposed walls. Attempts to restrict access through a reservation policy for visitors have met with resistance from Cretan economic interests.<sup>18</sup> This problem, too, is a legacy from Evans' reconstruction efforts.

Evans' interpretations of the culture caused equal controversy. He especially disturbed other Hellenic scholars by denigrating the Mycenaeans, whose cyclopean fortresses were excavated by Schliemann and others on mainland Greece and Anatolia, while asserting that his Minoans were the true source of the Classic Greek civilization that followed Homer's Dark Ages.<sup>19</sup> Duncan MacKenzie bolstered Evans in these contentions by failing to ascribe the Linear B tablets to the stratum in which they'd been recovered -- Late Minoan III -- because Mackenzie felt the pottery from this period exhibited too much decadence.<sup>20</sup> Using the myth of Minos and Theseus as a framework for speculation, Evans insisted that his ancient Cretans were the dominant power in the Aegean, both naval and economic, **throughout** the Bronze Age.<sup>21</sup> Although he found obvious Mycenaean artifacts, Melian amphorae and pitchers in the Temple Repositories,<sup>22</sup> an alabaster lid bearing the cartouche of Khyam, a Hyksos Pharaoh,<sup>23</sup> Cycladic ware in the Vat Room,<sup>24</sup> he continued to assert that Minoan influence on their neighbors had been overwhelming but the reverse -- any neighbor's influence on Minoan cultural development -- to have been non-existent.<sup>25</sup> MacGillivray points to the ubiquitous "horns of consecration" adorning rooftops around the Aegean and compares them to the Egyptian hieroglyph for horizon; the "horns" and the glyph are an exact match.<sup>26</sup> The bull leaper fresco at Tell el-Dab'a in the Nile delta with its typical Minoan style<sup>27</sup> indicates to many Aegean scholars a mutuality of influence between Crete and Egypt.

Furthermore, Evans refused to consider the clues to any Mycenaean occupation of Knossos which were in evidence: the destruction of all major Minoan sites fifty years prior to the abandonment of Knossos; the shift from metalworking to weapons making in the Late Minoan period; the extensive marks of fire and of rebuilding of portions of Knossos revealed in the "Unexplored Mansion" and the "Little Palace"; the Linear B tablets.<sup>28</sup> Because Knossos, Phaistos, Mallia and other Cretan Bronze Age sites lacked walls, Evans construed his Minoans as non-violent, peaceful farmers and merchants in contrast to aggressive Mycenaeans. He failed to consider that the labyrinthine nature of Minoan building could act as defense: small rooms with limited access points surrounded by often-misleading corridors and abundant alcoves in which hidden soldiers could stand to thwart attackers one-on-one.<sup>29</sup> If indeed Evans were correct in his assumption that the Minoan Navy dominated Aegean commerce, then a military skilled in personal combat would be necessitated to hold such eminence and to exact any tribute from neighbors. Also, contests with bulls as depicted on frescoes, seals and sculptures could hardly be considered as lacking in danger and/or violence.

Evans chose to interpret Minoan religion as worship of a mother goddess because many female figurines with flounced skirts, serpent-entwined arms and bare breasts were recovered. Indeed, these could easily be goddess images. They are just as likely to be votive offerings representing priestesses in attitudes of prayer or blessing.<sup>30</sup> However, male figurines of exceptional quality have also been found, frequently in

sacred caves.<sup>31</sup> These could represent male supplicants with their hands on their chests. MacGillivray thinks that the Palaikastro Kouros, though, could be the Cretan equivalent of Osiris since he is composed of ivory, gold, rock crystal and serpentine (yet another link with Egypt).<sup>32</sup> On numerous frescoes, full-figured females dominate among seas of male faces, a feature suggestive to Evans of a matriarchal social order. Yet males have been portrayed on seals in authoritative stances as well as women have.<sup>33</sup> Some scholars question whether the light-colored bull leapers are even portrayals of women. While obvious females are painted light and male figures are painted ruddy in Minoan art (a convention also used in Egypt), the gender characteristics of bull leapers are not clearly presented in these frescoes.<sup>34</sup>

Did Evans deliberately misinterpret his findings? To answer this query, any investigator should examine motivation. Sir Arthur Evans was the son of a prosperous paper mill owner, John Evans, who had gained academic recognition for his pioneering work in the use of stratigraphy on British archaeological sites.<sup>35</sup> Like other children living under the shadows of celebrated parents, Arthur Evans may have become obsessed with proving his own worth to himself and to the world. He was frequently referred to as "Little Evans, son of John Evans the Great."<sup>36</sup> His efforts met repeated failures. He barely graduated Oxford with a degree in history. He was arrested and then exiled from Illyria in 1882 on accusations of espionage because he had written articles for the Manchester Guardian, his newspaper employer, passionately espousing independence from Austria for Illyria.<sup>37</sup> One of Evans' biographers, Sandy MacGillivray, writes that "Up until then [excavation of Kephala] he really had failed at just about everything, so he became obsessed with Crete and was determined not to fail there, and he didn't."<sup>38</sup> Add to this his iconoclasm, a deep-seated need to be "different," (which was also a need to distinguish his identity from his father's) that manifested as joining the Whig party in England, as breaking rules at Oxford, as advocating the scandalous cause of freedom for oppressed people against Late Victorian Era imperialistic ideologies;<sup>39</sup> and thus, Arthur Evans' personal profile shows a degree of desperation in his quest for success. Emotionally, his success on Crete could not share a limelight with other archaeologists. By corollary, neither could his chosen people, the Minoans that he unearthed, share the Aegean with other cultures.

It is doubtful, however, that Evans was aware of these personal needs playing into his interpretations. But he consciously dabbled in local politics on Crete. His disassociation of the Minoans from all Oriental or Egyptian influences strengthened the Christian Cretans' argument for annexation by Greece, which culminated in 1913.<sup>40</sup> He deliberately employed equal numbers of Christians and Moslems in his excavations and arranged joint celebrations of holidays with games and dances to promote a new Cretan harmony to resemble his vision of peace-loving Minoans.<sup>41</sup> As early as 1899, Evans manipulated King George II of Greece through his relationship with the British Royal Family into assisting him in the purchase of Kephala under the noses of interested French archaeologists.<sup>42</sup>

In Joseph MacGillivray's opinion, "finding proof in the dirt is the final stage of a process of wish-fulfillment"<sup>43</sup>; therefore, everything Evans dug up confirmed the theories he desired to believe.<sup>44</sup>

Evans, who died in 1941,<sup>45</sup> left his successors a cohesive vision of Minoan society best recounted in his four-volume work Palace of Minos published 1921-1936.<sup>46</sup> Before and since then, archaeologists in the Aegean have probed his work for the degree of fabrication it contains. The public, confused by

numerous controversies, seems to demand an absolute accuracy for Minoan history. But archaeologists understand that such accuracy in reconstructing any history, even well-documented ones or the current era, is an impossibility -- "a past that was never present"<sup>47</sup>-- due not only to fragmentary survival of material records but also due to the myriad non-material factors of social interactions that cannot be recorded or remembered or noticed as significant in the first place. Every archaeologist uses his own intuition in interpreting culture from finds. Every archaeologist suffers from his own set of predispositions. Evans is not an exception to the rule; he is an example of it.

And, if an absolutism of historical accuracy were feasible, how relevant would it be? In a present that needs images of strong women wielding real political power to inspire change, how stimulating would proposal of an all-male oligarchy of priest-kings ruling Knossos be compared with frescoes intimating gender equality? In a present teetering on the brink of war, would imagining the possibility of a non-aggressive Bronze Age society offer more or less hope to people trying to affect a future? Evans' intuition may also have been responding to Twentieth Century conundrums. As MacGillivray puts it:

"I think what he found was a relative truth, relative primarily to himself and then to those who wanted it most and who engaged him and his colleagues to uncover it, and it was truthful only for as long as the facts he delivered were necessary to support the desired history."<sup>48</sup>

In any event, Sir Arthur Evans gave people, scholars and laymen alike, a vision of a lost society along with some of its material clues. Other scholars, sifting discrepancies in his vision and findings, added more clues and new theories to more closely approach while never reaching historical truth. People, considering the Minoans, have incorporated various ideas about them, whether accurate or not, into their own personal mentalities, thus affecting what will become the future. Inspiration of these thoughts is Evans' genuine legacy. After all, the past can never really be known while history must be lived in the present in order to direct the future.

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## ENDNOTES

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