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Flower-Lovers? Reconsidering the gardens of Minoan Crete

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Résumé

Traditionnellement, on a interprété la civilisation de l'Age du Bronze dans la Crète dite "minoenne" comme une société paisible qui aimait bien la nature. Des céramiques ornées de fleurs et des fresques pleines de plantes ont encouragé cette idée. De plus, la plupart des préhistoriens ont accepté sans se poser de question l'hypothèse que les Minoens cultivaient des jardins. Cependant, il n'y en avait jusqu'ici aucune preuve. Cet article examine les localités proposées comme jardins minoens, et les regroupe en deux catégories: des jardins ornant une cour, et des jardins plus grands qui sont contigus à des constructions des élites. De tels jardins, souvent pleins de plantes importées, sont caractéristiques de beaucoup de sociétés partout dans la Méditerranée antique et jouent des rôles importants dans la différenciation sociale. On propose ici une fonction pareille pour les jardins minoens.

In 1900, Sir Arthur Evans began work excavating the Bronze Age site at Knossos in north central Crete, which would become known to the world as the 'Palace of Minos'. Named after a mythological king of the island, this complex structure was the first in a number of so-called 'palaces' discovered on Crete throughout the 20th century. Evans developed a distinctive personal interpretation of the civilisation which built these great complexes in the 2nd millennium BC, a vision which many other excavators followed, and which still looms over Minoan archaeology (Evans 1921-1935). The inhabitants of Bronze Age Crete were seen as peaceful, intelligent, sensitive, and capable of great works of art. The notion developed that the gentle Minoans led a happy existence in a world «whose characteristics were the love of life and nature» (Platon 1964: 28). It was their art in particular which fostered such a belief. Frescoes with scenes of animals and plants, such as those from room 14 at Ayia Triadha (Militello and La Rosa 2000) were hugely influential in developing and reinforcing this idea. Kamare Ware ceramics of the Protopalatial period (c.1900-1700 BC)¹, decorated with intricate organic motifs, and the more realistic floral imagery of the Neopalatial pottery (c.1700-1450 BC), combined with the frescoes to present an image of a society of flower-lovers. This idea of

Minoan flower-lovers is examined here through the lens of garden archaeology.

For Evans, who himself was a keen amateur botanist (Brown 2001: vii), it was a certainty that the Minoans had gardens. He wrote that "the rich burgher class and the Priest Kings themselves could not have been behindhand in their interior garden cult" (PM III: 277)². With his background in Victorian Britain, where suitable genteel pursuits included gardening and knowledge of plants, it seemed to Evans that the cultivation of flowers was natural for the supposedly peace-loving, artistic society he had brought to light. It must be noted however that the gardens that he, and later excavators, were envisaging, were those belonging to the upper echelons of society, as opposed to those used to provide subsistence. Such a focus is therefore echoed here, concentrating only on gardens as they relate to a Bronze Age elite. Claims for garden locations within the palaces, villas and prosperous towns are re-examined, and the whole concept of a Minoan garden is scrutinised.

At Knossos, it has been proposed that a garden existed in the courtyard outside the Hall of Double Axes: this was «probably a garden terrace, bounded on the east and south by a low retaining wall and commanding a view over the valley beyond» (Graham 1987: 87). This part of the palace has been interpreted as the domestic, or



1. - View north across suggested garden at Mallia from within residential quarters (Photo by author).

residential, quarters within the complex. At Mallia, another palatial site on the north coast of central Crete, the French excavators suggested a garden was laid out beyond the so-called residential quarters in the northwest area (Chapouthier, Demargne 1962: 37). This area, stretching from room III.7 to the paved path at the north, appears to have been left without structures during the Neopalatial period, or 2nd phase of building, and so a garden provides a function for this otherwise unexplained blank space (fig. 1).

Zakros, on the far east coast, is another palatial site with supposed garden areas. They have been suggested to have existed on the hill terraces, again where no traces of structures have been found (Platon 1985: 255). The excavator noted that the fertile land to the northeast here would make cultivation of gardens possible, «which must have added to the attractiveness of the premises and provided a pleasant resort for members of the royal family» (Platon 1985: 79-80). Another palace, at Phaistos, near the south coast, also has several locations for gardens: the unroofed area 49 in the central North wing, and the southeast corner of the East wing. Interestingly, Maria Shaw has suggested

a rock garden for this second area (Shaw 1993). The bedrock outcrop is pitted with holes, in which she believes the Minoans grew small plants (Shaw 1993: 683) (fig. 2), although not all scholars agree with this interpretation (e.g. Hitchcock 2000: 173). Other sites where excavators have envisaged gardens include Petras, a more recently discovered palace in east Crete, in an area with no architectural remains (Tsipopoulou 2003: 47); at the town of Palaikastro in a space between 2 houses (Shaw 1993: 680); and near the Minoan villa at Ayia Triadha, again in an unexplained space (La Rosa 1988: 330). Finally, beside the cistern at Archanes, Sakellarakis interprets a gathering place with flowers for Minoans to enjoy (Sakellarakis, Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1997: 316).

However all these excavators have tended to shy away from interpretation, and therefore the type of garden which may have existed in these locations must be further investigated. Yet before even attempting interpretation, it is crucial to ask what is the actual solid evidence for gardens in any of these areas? The simple answer is none! While garden archaeology can produce fascinating results, many of its methods are not applicable in



2. - The suggested rock-garden at Phaistos from the east (Photo by author).

the Aegean. The information about the Roman gardens of Pompeii recovered by Jashemski is perhaps the most well-known instance of garden archaeology (Jashemski 1979). Her pioneering work of taking casts of the cavities remaining in the hardened volcanic ash allowed the identification of trees and shrubs once grown there, as well as illustrating the lay-out of the planting within the garden. This method is not applicable to Aegean sites unfortunately, with the exception that possibly some such practice could be carried out at Akrotiri, on the island of Thera (Santorini). Buried by a volcanic eruption during the Late Bronze Age³, this site is known as an “Aegean Pompeii”, and has revealed plentiful information about life in the Cyclades during this period.

Other sources of information on gardens include aerial photography and geophysical survey, as well as careful excavation which can reveal differences in soil indicating paths, terraces, and flower beds (Currie 2005). In the Aegean region, these methods do not appear to have been

successful, although possibly early identification of a likely garden area might bring better results. It must be remembered that to excavate a garden is to pull apart the very goal of the research, and extra care must be taken to wring every tiny grain of information out of the soil, thus potential sites should be noted as early as possible. Palaeobotany is the other main source of information on ancient gardens, and with the constant advances in the discipline, the potential information which can be elucidated is ever-increasing. However, without exploring all the different methods and their accompanying pros and cons with respect to the Aegean in detail, suffice it to note that neither analysis of palaeobotanical remains nor of pollen has been of any assistance in confirming the location of a Minoan garden. Naturally, one cannot help but wonder if the palaces of Knossos or Mallia, for example, were discovered now rather than a century ago, whether the more rigorous methods of current archaeology might further illuminate this issue.

Yet, the search for Bronze Age gardens is not necessarily a lost cause. The types of areas thus far suggested for Minoan gardens can be roughly grouped into two categories. Firstly, a garden has become a useful explanation for medium-sized areas which apparently do not have any structures on them; this applies at Ayia Triadha, Petras, Palaikastro, Zakros and Mallia. Secondly, gardens have been suggested for courtyard-type areas, often beside residential quarters in elite buildings: Knossos, Phaistos, perhaps Archanes, and Mallia fits in here too, as well as the courtyards from other sites where gardens have not been explicitly claimed. In fact, both these possible types have a wide variety of comparisons around the Mediterranean in ancient times, and it is worth examining these for any light which such analogies may shed on Minoan gardens.

The courtyard type will be considered first. This was a small area, forming a bounded unit within the larger architectural complex, with rooms leading directly onto to it. This type of garden is, of course, most familiar from the Roman period, and the numerous peristyle courtyards excavated at Pompeii provide a good idea of both the layout and plants used (Jashemski 1979). It has many precedents though, such as the courtyard gardens of Hellenistic monarchs (Nielsen 2001: 177-80). One such example is the garden in the 3rd Winter Palace of Herod the Great at Jericho, where a colonnade surrounded a tree-planted area, and pots for further plants were sunk into the ground (Gleason 1993). Various Ptolemies and Seleucids also had such gardens incorporated into their palaces. Going further back in time, courtyard gardens were also found in Egypt. These are often depicted in tombs, and have a pool in the centre, which was surrounded by flowers and often trees too, such as that painted in the tomb of Nebamun at Thebes (Carroll 2003: fig. 56). Excavations at the 14th century BC palace at Amarna have revealed a courtyard garden here, again with features like a pool, and flowerbeds (Carroll 2003: 26). All these gardens seem to have had both official and private functions, for the residents of the palaces or houses to enjoy, as well as serving as venues for small official functions and dining.

Turning back to the Minoan evidence, it is obvious that the courtyards suggested as gardens are all relatively small and adjacent to the so-called residential quarters, lack pools, and with the

exception of the Mallia example, are all paved. No traces of raised soil beds were recovered during excavations, and so it is suggested here that pot plants could have been used to create small gardens in these spaces. Both iconography and ceramic remains indicate that the Minoans did indeed grow plants in pots. Flower pot fragments have been identified at sites such as Zakros (Platon 1985: 255), Knossos (PM III: 277; fig. 186. PM IV.2: 1002) and Akrotiri (Marinatos 1970: Pl. 51; Pl. 52.1). These pots have holes in the bottom, an essential in flower pots to allow drainage and so prevent the plant getting water-logged. The difference between these Aegean flower pots and those well-known from other archaeological sites is twofold. Firstly, most ancient flower pots tend to have holes not just in the base, but in the sides too, to allow the roots room to expand and even break out of the pot more easily (Carroll 2003: 88-92). Secondly, the Minoan examples tend to be decorated while the other ones are plain. Both these features indicate that Minoan flower pots, while intended for growing plants in a soil matrix, were not intended to be sunk into the ground, but would have remained visible on the surface wherever they were placed. This, in fact, was Evans's intuition, and he thought that the larger light wells and the Central Court at Knossos, would have held tubs containing plants chosen for their fragrance or bright colours (PM II: 277-79).

It is important to also consider that flower pots made of other materials apart from ceramic probably did exist, but no longer survive. An Amnisos wall painting hints at larger planters, perhaps made of wood (Evely 1999: 183), a shape mirrored on the metal vase of Cretan origin found in Shaft Grave IV of Grave Circle A at Mycenae (Hood 1994: fig. 150). Wooden constructions have also been suggested as containers for trees, possibly to allow transport of the tree as part of a religious ceremony (Marinatos 1989). The use of vases to hold cut flowers can also be assumed, and is shown in the fresco from the window jambs of room 4 in the West House, Akrotiri (Doumas 1992: fig. 63-64).

The second possible type of Minoan garden is the larger open space adjacent to elite structures, and again there are various parallels with other Mediterranean societies. The civilisations of the Near East had a long tradition of gardens, especially ones for the use of royalty and important guests (Wiseman 1983). These gardens were

adjacent to, but not necessarily connected to the palaces, and were of greater size than courtyard gardens (Nielsen 2001: 166). They should also be distinguished from the larger hunting parks, or *pairidaeza*, which were found outside the cities (Carroll 2003:45). King Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 B.C.), for example, planted a royal garden at Nimrud, with exotic plant (and animal) species, and canals and waterfalls (Wiseman 1983: 142; Foster 1998: 323). Surviving reliefs from Room S of the 7th century North Palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh show scenes of the king and queen in a garden, surrounded by trees and shrubs, including grapevines, conifers, date palms, and pomegranates (Albenda 1976; Albenda 1974). A key element in these Near Eastern gardens was the range of plants, and sometimes animals too, with which they were stocked, enhancing the wondrous nature of an already impressive project. It should be noted here that it was not just visually impressive or decorative plants which were popular, but useful ones which provided incense, or fruits, and even fine woods were valued as garden species too.

However, beyond the intriguing blank spaces introduced above, is there any other evidence such a garden could have existed in the Aegean Bronze Age? Certain wall paintings have been interpreted rather tentatively as perhaps showing tamed rather than wild landscape, *i.e.* a park of sorts (Morgan 1988: 92). Both the so-called Nilotic frieze from Akrotiri (Doumas 1992: figs. 30-34), and the Birds and Monkeys fresco from the House of the Frescoes at Knossos (Evely 1999: 247), combine exotic, perhaps imported animals, and likewise plants of foreign origin, such as date palms and papyrus. Similarly, plants from overseas feature in Minoan ceramic iconography, while flowers of an Aegean origin appear in Egyptian and Near Eastern contexts, *e.g.* the lilies and olive trees depicted at Tell el-Dab'a in Egypt (Niemeier, Niemeier 1998: 80). Could it be suggested that Minoan elite were no strangers to gardens stocked with imports, and actively participated in the trade or exchange of foreign plants?

Rulers of the ancient world, and indeed those of more recent empires, often made a point of collecting plants as trophies; for example, Tutmoses III ordered the plants «that his Majesty has found in the land of Retenu», *i.e.* on his Syrian campaigns, be depicted on the walls at Karnak (Schwaller de Lubicz 1999: 636). Assyrian

inscriptions tell of the plants Tiglath Pileser I brought back from his campaigns: «I took cedar, box tree, Kanish oak from the lands over which I had gained dominion – such trees which none among previous kings, my forefathers, had ever planted – and I planted (them) in the orchards of my land. I took rare orchard fruit which is not found in my land (and therewith) filled the orchards of Assyria» (Kuhrt 1995: 310). Botanical imperialism has long been an expression of power, and capturing a country's plant resources can certainly bring economic gain, such as when the female pharaoh Hatshepsut successfully transplanted incense trees from Punt to Egypt. But anthropological work has shown that acquisition of exotic things from foreign lands also acts as a means of social differentiation (Helms 1988). Those who have the means (material wealth and/or power to command) to acquire the fruits of overseas expeditions, in this case plants in particular, are demonstrating their status by creating and controlling a garden of marvels. This is the policy which led to the grand gardens of Versailles, or those of English landed gentry. Moreover, if the plants therein have some special value or symbolism in their country of origin, possessing them can further enhance the new owner's status. Visitors invited to the garden absorb these underlying messages on two levels: both an admiration of the plants themselves as stimulating to the senses, and at a deeper level of interest or awe as to where they come from, how the owner acquired them and maintains them and so on.

Although at first glance the actual evidence for Minoan gardens seems somewhat lacking, especially in comparison with other ancient Mediterranean societies, this does not prevent certain tentative conclusions being reached. It is important to underline however, that the use of analogy does not provide any proof of these “missing” Aegean gardens. Just because gardens were an inextricable part of life for other elites in different Mediterranean societies, and at different periods, it does not mean that the Minoans must have had them too. (It must be added though that the Minoans would be a practically unique society if some form of gardens were not a feature of their civilisation). Crucially, analogies can function as springboards for new ideas, and used here in tandem with the archaeological evidence, have led to new theories about Bronze Age gardens in the Aegean.

The open spaces which may once have been the locations for gardens do exist amongst the ruins of former elite buildings. Iconography also holds enough tantalising hints to make it relatively likely that the Minoans tended certain plants for reasons beyond subsistence. Furthermore the connections between Egypt, the Near East and the Aegean do allow for the spread of ideas across cultures (Davies, Schofield 1995). Most importantly, rather than envisaging mere decorative flower gardens, as some scholars have done (Schäfer 1992), it should be considered that Minoan gardens could contain all kinds of plants, shrubs and trees, with a variety of uses and meanings. Certainly, the idea that gardens are yet another form of display and social differentiation is in accord with the stratified society which existed in Neopalatial Crete. Whether they also had some form of religious function, as with many Egyptian gardens, remains unclear. For the future, one can hold out hope that a garden may be discovered at Akrotiri, and that very careful excavation of open spaces in elite structures may reveal palaeobotanical traces. Finally, it is important to consider that the Minoans may have been flower lovers not just because of some gentle interest in the natural world, but because, like other luxury products, plants and gardens were yet another expression of elite power around the Mediterranean during the Bronze Age⁴.

Notes

¹ Dates following Dickinson 1994.

² PM is the standard abbreviation for Evans 1921-1935. Roman numerals refer to volume number.

³ The date for the eruption is a much-debated matter, and no consensus has been reached. See Manning 1999 for discussion of the issue.

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