Minoan Civilization

The civilization we call Minoan developed on Crete as early as 3000 BC and lasted nearly 2,000 years. During that time, Minoan ships sailed all over the Aegean Sea—and perhaps further. Minoan colonies grew up on dozens of Aegean islands. Ships laden with trade goods sailed back and forth between these colonies and Crete. Expeditions at Knossos have revealed much about Minoan life. Buildings there were solidly constructed with many private rooms, basic plumbing, and brightly colored artwork on the walls. That artwork has likewise helped historians learn about the Minoan way of life. From images of ships, they can tell Minoan life was tied to the sea: sailing, trade, fishing, even playing in the waves were all common.

Source: “Minoans of Crete,” Susan Ramirez et al., World History: Human Legacy, Holt

The Minoans traded throughout the Mediterranean. Evidence suggests they traded extensively with Syria, Asia Minor, and Egypt. The Minoans even traded at least as far west as the island of Sicily. The biggest exports from Crete were probably olives, olive oil, and grape products, but they also traded wool, as well as timber (wood) much needed in the deserts of Egypt and Southwest Asia. Perhaps the most important trade role the Minoans played was the transfer of ideas and technology from Egypt and Southwest Asia to the budding civilizations of Europe. In their dealings with the civilizations of the Near East, the Minoans also picked up technologies that they took home with them. As Minoan influence spread throughout the Aegean and the mainland of Greece, so did Bronze working and other new ideas. Thus, the diffusion of these ideas to the Europe was accelerated much more than it would have been otherwise.

Source: “Ancient Minoan Trade,” Project History

1. Describe at least two ways trade influenced Minoan civilization.

Two things, both relating to Crete's maritime position, largely determined the nature of the Minoan civilization. First, they had a large fleet, which was useful for both trade and defense. Second, Crete's isolated position meant there was no major threat to its security at this time and therefore little need for fortifications. These two factors helped create a peaceful and prosperous civilization…

Minoan women seem to have had much higher status than their counterparts in many other ancient civilizations. One likely reason was that, in the absence of a powerful warrior class and a constant need for defense, they had more opportunity for attaining some social stature. This is reflected in their religion where the primary deity was an earth goddess. Minoan art also depicts women as being much freer, even participating with men in a dangerous gymnastic ritual of vaulting themselves over a charging bull.

Source: Bronze Age Greece, John Chris Butler, Flow of History (adapted)

2. In what way did Minoan women have greater freedom in society, and what made it possible?
3. What was the purpose of bull jumping, and how did it work?

The Minoan civilization finally ended about 1200 B.C. The reasons for its end are unclear. Could it have been the result of some natural disaster? Did the island become overpopulated? Or was it overrun by invaders? The civilization had withstood previous disasters. In about 1700 B.C., a great disaster, perhaps an earthquake, destroyed most Minoan towns and cities. The Minoans rebuilt the cities with equal richness. Then in 1470 B.C. a series of earthquakes rocked Crete. The quakes were followed by a violent volcanic eruption on the neighboring island of Thera. The eruption was one of the largest volcanic events on Earth in recorded history, and may have affected weather patterns around the world. Imagine the shaking of the earth, the fiery volcanic blast, then a huge tidal wave, and finally a rain of white volcanic ash covering fields and destroying crops. The disaster of 1470 B.C. was a blow from which the Minoans never fully recovered. This time, the Minoans had trouble rebuilding their cities. Nonetheless, Minoan civilization did linger on for almost 300 years. After that, invaders from the mainland of Greece, known as the Mycenaeans, may have taken advantage of their weakened condition to destroy them. Some Minoans fled to the mountains to escape the ruin of the kingdom. Crete’s influence as a major sea power and cultural force was over. By 1100 B.C., a new maritime power, the Phoenicians from the Levant, came to dominate trade in the Mediterranean.