



CULTURE | HISTORY





The strategic position of Crete at the crossroads of the ancient Mediterranean civilizations was the main reason for the constant claim of the island by various occupiers. Traces of each occupier are scattered everywhere on the island and are deeply engraved in the customs of the Cretans.

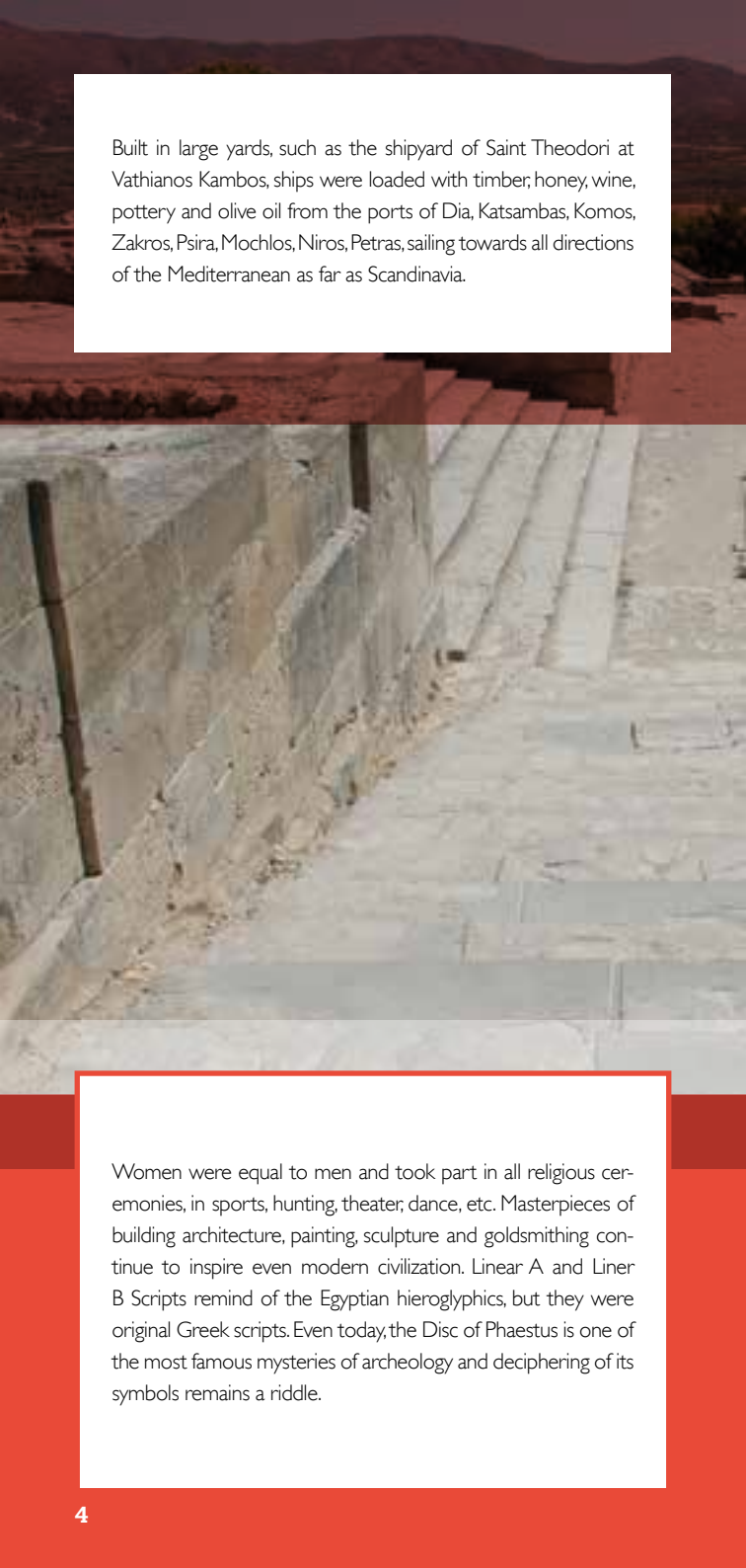


Minoan, the first European Civilization

Crete is the birthplace of the first European civilization, the Minoan, which flourished between 3000 BC and 1200 BC mainly in Central and Eastern Crete. Even today, the majestic palaces of Knossos, Phaestus, Malia, Zakros, Tyllissos, Arhanes, Monastiraki, Galatas, Kydonia and the luxurious mansions at Agia Triada, Zominthos, Amnisos, Makrigialos, Vathipetro and Nerokouros reflect the splendor of the Minoan civilization through architectural, pottery, jewelry and painting masterpieces.



The Minoan fleet, the strongest of its era, as evidenced by several findings in the Mediterranean, brought wealth to Crete from the trade of the famous Cretan cypress and agricultural products.

A photograph of a stone staircase and a wall, likely part of an ancient Greek site. The wall is made of large, rectangular stone blocks, and the staircase is made of similar blocks, leading up to a higher level. The background shows a hilly landscape with some vegetation.

Built in large yards, such as the shipyard of Saint Theodori at Vathianos Kambos, ships were loaded with timber; honey, wine, pottery and olive oil from the ports of Dia, Katsambas, Komos, Zakros, Psira, Mochlos, Niros, Petras, sailing towards all directions of the Mediterranean as far as Scandinavia.

Women were equal to men and took part in all religious ceremonies, in sports, hunting, theater, dance, etc. Masterpieces of building architecture, painting, sculpture and goldsmithing continue to inspire even modern civilization. Linear A and Linear B Scripts remind of the Egyptian hieroglyphics, but they were original Greek scripts. Even today, the Disc of Phaestus is one of the most famous mysteries of archeology and deciphering of its symbols remains a riddle.



The worship of deities such as the Mother Goddess of fertility, the Mistress of the Animals, protector of cities, the household, the harvest, and the underworld dominated the religious tradition of the Minoans, who used many caves and mountain peaks as places of worship. Pilgrims from all over the island ascended to the peak sanctuaries of Yuchtas and the cave of Hosto Nero to offer their votives, such as Minoan inscriptions or clay idols. Peak sanctuaries were also hosted atop summits Vrysinas, Petsofas, Traostalos, Zhou, Karfi, etc. The Diktaean, Idaean and Kamares Caves also played a prominent role in the worship of gods.



Tip

The Minoan civilization was the first to use underground clay pipes for sanitation and water supply.





The Dark Age

The imposing Minoan palaces and the rest of the constructions developed between 2000 BC and 1400 BC. Around 1700 BC, the Minoan cities were levelled by an unverified factor; probably the eruption of Santorini volcano. The palaces were rebuilt, but the destruction of the large Minoan centers by the Mycenaeans around 1400 BC was the starting point for the decline.

The Minoan superpower was irreparably shaken, could not recover and eventually faded in the following centuries, allowing the Achaeans and the Dorians to conquer the island.



The residents of the coastline, who for the first time felt that an external enemy threatened their island, were withdrawn in the most inhospitable and craggy peaks. This was the outset for the so-called Dark Age (1200 BC - 800 BC), when towns were built in the most inaccessible, naturally fortified locations.

Even today, archaeologists have not confirmed what forced the Minoans to leave their fertile land and build impregnable cities atop windswept peaks, such as the imposing settlements at peaks Karfi, Flektro, Kastro by Kavoussi, Azorias, Vrontas, Kastrokefala, Kyrimianos, Fratiani Kefala, etc.






Classical and Greco-Roman Crete

During the Dark Age, living in such remote and inhospitable areas was so arduous, that a few centuries later those settlements declined and disappeared. During the same period, the Achaeans and Dorians broke the ground for the flowering of Classical Hellenism. They introduced new customs, such as the use of iron, cremation and new clothing habits.

The «island of a hundred cities», as recorded by Homer, gradually came to the fore. Knossos became the administrative center again and new impressive cities were developed, such as Hierapytna, Itanos, Axos, Praesus, Sivrytos, Dreros, Rizinia, Tripitos, and many others.



When the Roman Quintus Caecilius Metellus undertook the conquest of Crete in 69 AD, the capital of the island was moved to Gortys, which later became the capital of the senatorial province of Crete and Cyrenaica. The city still impresses with the remains of the baths, theaters, stadium, hippodrome, citadel and temples. It was served by the ports of Matala, Lasea and Levena (current Lendas). In Gortyna, at the Ancient Theater, which dates back to the Hellenistic period, important events of the time used to take place, while today it is one of the most wonderful sights on the island.

Apart from Gortys, many other cities flourished, with the most impressive archaeological sites being today Eleftherna, Polyrhena, Lyttos, Elyros, Aptera, Lappa, Olous, Lato and Priansus.

After the establishment of Cretan colonies in Sicily, Marseille and Cyrene in the 7th century BC, trade flourished again and many ports surpassed in power the cities they served. Some ports evolved into major cities such as Falassarna, Lissos, Cheronissos, Lato Kamara and Inatus.



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Tip


One of the most mysterious archaeological finds of Crete is located near the ancient town of Elyros.

This is a carved cone-shaped pyramid, which was probably used as a grave.

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Respect to the Dead

The Cretan land is full of ancient graves, highlighting the great care of the Cretans for the dead. In the Bronze Age (6000 BC-3500 BC) the simple deposition of dead inside caves was abandoned and use of cemeteries was widespread.



During the Minoan era, in some areas of eastern Crete, including Gournia, Mochlos and Palekastro, the tombs were rectangular and could be used again for the burial of many bodies. At Chrysolakos by Malia, Palekastro, Arhanes and Platanos, archaeologists identified entire burial buildings, but the most prevalent types of tombs in Crete were vaulted (tholos) and domed. Large vaulted tombs have been identified at Kamilari, next to the monastery of Odigitria, Koumasa, Maleme, Ahladia, Stylos, Fylaki by Vamos, Margarites, Apodoulou and Gerokambos.



Large cemeteries (necropoleis) of the era, with hundreds of tombs have been found at the hill of Fourni by Arhanes and at Armeni by Rethymnon. The Late Minoan Cemetery of Armeni was discovered in 1965 by a 12-year-old student. Even today, studies are being carried out on the predominantly 220 family tombs found in an impressive oak forest.

During the Roman era, a large number of tombs were carved into the soft limestone that abounds in Crete. The most famous cemetery with carved caves of this season is Matala, where hippies lived in the 70s. Impressive carved tombs are also found at ancient Kydonia (Chania), at Trialonia, at Siderospilia by Prinias and at the lush ravine of Pente Parthenes (ancient Lappa). In particular, the area of Agios Thomas, with the tremendous carved tombs of Gra Mandra, was an important center for the worship of chthonic deities.



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Tip

The largest cemetery of the Bronze Age (4500 BC-3500 BC) in Greece has been excavated at Agia Fotia by Sitia and is home to 302 graves.

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The advent of Christianity

During his journey to Rome, Paul the Apostle stopped in Crete and preached Christianity, lighting the flame of a centuries-old ascetic tradition, signs of which we meet even today in hermitages and monastic establishments of Asterousia range.

Areas that, according to tradition, were visited by Saint Paul and Saint John Xenos, turned to live ascetic communities. Among them, Asterousia and Akrotiri Cape at Chania still retain their monastic character:



The island became an important Christian center, as reflected in the hundreds of religious monuments, which are scattered everywhere. The old temples of Twelve Olympians turned into imposing basilicas and cavernous sanctuaries were transformed into churches.

Remains of early Christian basilicas, which are still awe-inspiring due to their size, are scattered throughout the island. Apart from the colossal basilica of Saint Titus by Gortys, traces of similar religious monuments are located at Hersonissos, Fragokastelo, Elounda, Almyrida, Panormo, Goulediana, Sougia and Eleftherna.



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Tip

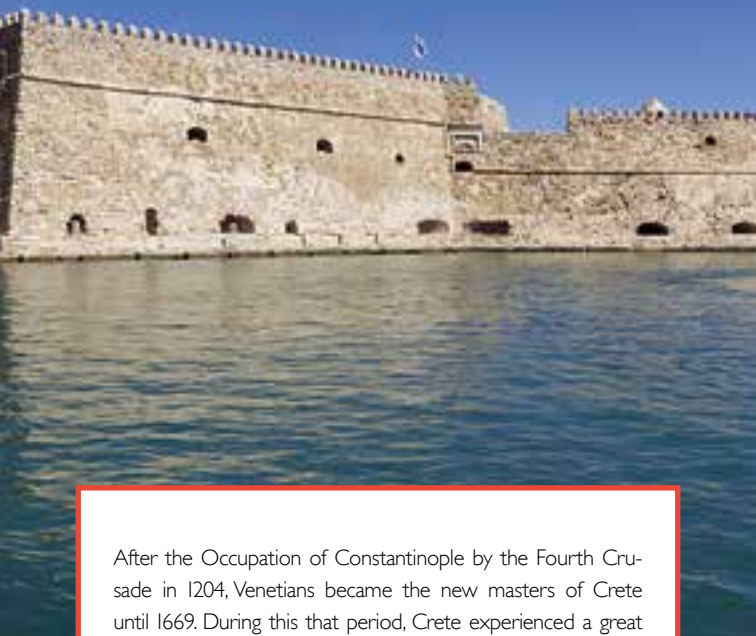
The small cave where Saint Paul lived for two years, according to tradition, is located at Kali Limenes and is open to visitors.

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Heading to the Venetian Era

The prosperity of Christian Crete under the protection of the Byzantine Empire was fiercely interrupted by the Arabs in 824 AD. The new occupiers of the island converted Candia, today's Heraklion, to a base for their pirate raids in the Mediterranean Sea.

After several failed attempts, the Byzantines eventually managed to liberate Crete in 961 AD under the orders of Nicephorus Phocas, giving a new impetus to the Byzantine tradition of Crete.



After the Occupation of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204, Venetians became the new masters of Crete until 1669. During this that period, Crete experienced a great economic and spiritual development, despite the revolutionary activities of local population. Large cities were reconstructed, adorned with imposing monuments and fortified with massive walls.

Meanwhile, it was a period in which art flourished. Great iconographers and painters came to the fore, such as Dominicus Theotocopoulos (El Greco) and Michael Damascenus.

Moreover, literature, poetry, music and theater experienced an unprecedented bloom and produced masterpieces such as Erotokritos and Erophile. This course was disrupted in 1669 when Candia, the last fortress in Crete, was surrendered to the Ottomans after 21 years of siege.



Tip

Venetian walls of Candia was the largest medieval fortification project in the East Mediterranean.





The Ottoman Era

In the 17th century, after the Ottomans stabilized the possession of Constantinople, they targeted new conquests. Crete soon came to the center of their expansionist policies, because of its strategic position in the Mediterranean.

After fierce battles, the Ottomans managed to occupy the cities of Chania in 1645 and Rethymnon in 1646. However, the last stronghold, the Grand Castle of Candia, remained under the Venetian rule until 1669, when it fell after 21 years of siege. The Fall of Candia was the beginning of a sorrowful period for the Christians of Crete.

The occupation of Crete by the Ottomans soon led locals to numerous revolutions. Especially, the liberation of «Mother Greece» in 1821 rekindles the hopes of Cretans for freedom. After the Great Cretan Revolution of 1866-69, in which the holocausts of Arkadi monastery and Lassithi Plateau took place, liberation seemed closer than ever. However, it took another few hard years before the autonomy of Crete and the union with Greece came true in 1898 and in 1913 respectively.



Tip

The 21-year long siege of Candia by the Ottomans (1648-1669) is the longest siege in the world history.



Modern history

On December 1st, 1913, Crete officially united with Greece, fulfilling the century-long dream of Cretans. The political personality of Eleftherios Venizelos from Chania, who was later to become the Prime Minister of Greece, came to the fore.

However, the struggles of Cretans did not end then, since the Cretans had to fight in the Battle of Crete in 1941, which was one of the most important one of World War II, due to the strategic location of the island in the Mediterranean.



Once again, Crete was reborn from its ashes. Today, there are memorials and monuments scattered all over the island reminding the horror and devastation of war and the great value of peaceful coexistence between nations.



In all places of Crete, the visitor can still see the remains of German military infrastructure. Haunted pillboxes are still hanging on the steep capes of Lithino, Spatha, Aforesmenos, Drapanos, Plakias and at many other places. Visitors can visit the Allied War Cemetery at Souda bay and the German War Cemetery at Maleme, at the site of the Battle of Crete.



Tip

The Battle of Crete is the first airborne invasion in history.





Museums and Collections

The island's archaeological importance is highlighted through museums and archaeological collections. The Archaeological Museum of Heraklion houses the most important findings of the Minoan civilization. Treasures dating back from the Neolithic to the Roman Era can also be viewed in the archaeological museum of Chania, Rethymnon, Sitia, Kissamos and Arhanes, at the Museum of Ancient Eleftherna next to the homonymous archeological site, while in 2023 the renovated museum of Agios Nikolaos and the newly-built museum of Messara will be open to the public. Important local archaeological Collections operate in Ierapetra, Myrtos and Gazi in Heraklion.

Ancient 'Aptera' is a "jewel" of the area thanks to its rich history and impressive beauty, while music and theater performances are given in its ancient theater.



The Historical Museum of Crete offers an overall picture of the history and culture of Crete from the early Christian times to the 20th century, while seasonal exhibitions include subjects of Byzantine or modern art, important personalities of Greece and presentation of historical events. Chania city is home to the Historical Archive of Crete with more than 170 archival collections and the second largest Nautical Museum in Greece, which aims to preserve the great maritime tradition of Crete. The Byzantine Museums of Heraklion, Chania and Rethymnon are also very special venues dedicated mainly to ecclesiastical art.





The war collections and archives intend to commemorate the resistance and struggle of the Cretans against the various occupiers of Crete. The most important of these are the War Museum of Rethymnon at Chromonastiri, the Historical Museum of Vorizia, the Museums of National Resistance at Therisso and Heraklion, the Historical Museum of Keramia, the Museum of Skalidis at Pervolia, the War Museum at Askyfou and the Military Collection of Argyrakis at Episkopi. Additionally, the German Tunnels at Platanias and Makasi Gate at Heraklion Walls are important historical sites.

Museums and collections that highlight the life and work of great Cretan authors, artists and politicians are met all over the island. Venues dedicated to the life and work of the national leader Eleftherios Venizelos are open to visitors. These include the house where he was born at Mournies, his house at Halepa, the Historical Museum at Therisso and the Museum of Venizelos at village Agios Georgios. A very interesting museum dedicated to the great author Nikos Kazantzakis operates at his birthplace, Myrtia.



Moreover, visitors can visit the house, where the great Cretan painter El Greco is believed to have been born at Fodele, and the Gate Bethlehem at the Walls of Heraklion, where objects used for the film El Greco are exposed. Lastly, Viannos houses a museum dedicated to the author Ioannis Kondylakis.





It is worth visiting venues about nature and science, such as the Natural History Museum, the Aquarium of Crete at in Gourmes, the Museums of Cretan Herbs and Fisheries of Kolimvari, the Geological Museum of Zaros and the Museum of Chemistry in Chania. Other special museums in Crete are the museum of Classical Vehicles in Exo Lakonia, the Museum of the National Soccer Team and the Museum of Typography in Chania, the Museum of Musical Instruments at Houdetsi, the Wax Museum at Zoniana, the Museum of School Life in Nerokouros and the Museum of Acritans of Europe in Paleochora, the Museum of Rodanthi in Kritsa, the Museum of Rare and Endemic Plants «Rodanthi», the Museum of Kritsotopoula, etc.





Most museums in Crete are dedicated to the daily life of the Cretans, mainly by exposing objects from rural tradition. Very nice collections are exhibited at the folklore museums of Lychnostatis in Hersonissos, Chania, Vori, Arolithos, Tyliossos, Rethymnon, Agios Nikolaos, Sitia, Vainia, Therisso, Gavalohori, Piskopiano, Somatas, Ini, Asites, Handras, Kandanos, Palekastro, Vrahassi, Gavdos, Pefki, Hamezi, Mohos, Spili etc.

Traditional watermills in Zakros and Chromonastiri are open to visitors. Similarly, venues related to the olive tree include the Museum of Olive in Vouves, the old oil mill (fabrica) of Arhanes and Vatolakos.





Tip

The Naval Museum of Crete manages the Museum of Ancient and Traditional Shipbuilding, where the visitors can see a replica of a Minoan ship called Minoa. In the Olympic Games of 2004 Minoa accompanied the Olympic flame to the port of Piraeus.







Forts

The Minoans left their towns unfortified, as their naval empire was not threatened by external enemies. Much later, Cretan cities such as Gortys, Smari and Polyrhena were protected by citadels and strong walls still visible.

During the Venetian and Ottoman Era, hundreds of forts were constructed to attend the crucial passages throughout the island. At the same time, the main cities of Crete (Candia, Chania, Rethymnon, Sitia and Ierapetra) were fortified with colossal walls.











Large Venetian fortresses, castels, still dominate the key positions on the island. The most imposing is the fortress of Koules in Heraklion harbor. The Fortress Intzedin that protected Souda Bay, Frangokastelo, Firkas at Chania harbor; Kazarma at Sitia, Kales in Ierapetra, Fortezza at Rethymnon and the famous fortified islets Spinalonga, Gramvousa and Souda are all preserved in excellent condition. Remnants of other forts are dispersed all over the island, reminding of their old mission.











Especially after the Great Cretan Revolution of 1866-69, the Ottomans tried to consolidate their aspiration for continuous domination of Crete by building about 150 small and large towers to monitor the passages of the island. The towers, which were called koules, are still visible atop almost every summit of Crete that oversees strategic passages, especially in areas with strong revolutionary action, such as Sfakia and Milopotamos.







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