

DRAMA OF DEATH IN A MINOAN TEMPLE

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We will never know all the details of what happened on that rocky hillside in the unimaginably distant past, but we are more than reasonably certain of these salient facts:

Thirty-seven centuries ago, in a time when savage earthquakes were rocking the island of Crete, a Minoan priest sought to avert final catastrophe with a rare, desperate act: To the deity of his hillside temple he offered up the ultimate sacrifice: a human life.

But the victim died in vain. Scarcely had his death rattle ceased than a climactic temblor brought the temple roof and massive stone walls tumbling to earth, killing the priest beside the body of the young man he had just slain.

At the same time, the falling roof killed two others, probably temple functionaries. One was a young woman; the other a person - whether man or woman we do not know - who appeared to have been carrying a sacred vase of a type used for libations of animal blood.

Completing the destruction, flames swept the temple ruins. Earthquake and fire went hand in hand in ancient Crete, where oil lamps provided interior lighting.

That much of a recently discovered ancient drama now seems clear. But before ever we dared utter the dread words "human sacrifice" aloud, we spent agonizing hours pondering the evidence.

In some respects we were fortunate. The site was compact and our team of workers highly skilled. An associate professor of archaeology at the University of Athens, Yannis was in a position to enlist university colleagues as consultants. For financial assistance we had the generous support of the Archaeological Society of Athens.

When finally we revealed our discovery and our conclusions, we caused quite a stir both in the archaeological world and among the public. Never before, for one thing, had there been strong proof that Crete's prehistoric Minoans practiced human sacrifice, although it had long been suspected.

And our fellow Greeks, it soon became apparent, were loath to believe that the Minoan civilization, forerunner of their own, had a dark side. The Cretans, they had been taught from childhood, were lovers of peace and beauty, a cultured people who would have abhorred such a brutal ritual as human sacrifice. Yet the evidence has been pronounced incontrovertible by many of our scientific colleagues.

The actual skeletons of those who perished in the temple, preserved under the rubble of the building in the positions in which they died, provided telling clues. Nothing had disturbed them, we discovered, between the time of the disaster and the day we brought them to light. Their unusual positions told us immediately that they had died violently. But under what circumstances?

We believe that archaeologists should interpret their finds so as to illuminate human behavior and history. Thus our hillside temple offered not only discoveries of intrinsic worth but also a mystery to solve.

But perhaps we are getting ahead of our story. It begins with Efi's discovery of the hillside site and her belief that beneath the brush-covered slope might lie an archaeologically important ruin. This section of north-central Crete abounds with Minoan remains, best known of which is the palace of Knossos seven kilometers to the north.

For 16 years we had been excavating a lesser known but possibly equally important palace in the heart of Arkhanes, now a large modern village (map, page 208). Meanwhile, we had explored the nearby cemetery of Phourni, which we believe to be the most important in the Aegean of prehistory. Here we uncovered more than a score of burial buildings dating from the third millennium B.C. down to later Minoan times, when the warrior people of mainland Mycenae occupied Crete.

One day, searching the countryside near Arkhanes for undiscovered ancient sites, Efi led some of our Phourni workers to a small hill at the base of Mount Juktas, legendary tomb of the Cretan Zeus. It is a place of singular beauty. The Aegean Sea bathes the shore in the distance, and pungent herbs perfume the air. Because shallow caves believed carved by Aegean gales pock nearby rocks, the local people call the area Anemospilia, or "caves of the wind."

On the north slope of the foothill, the group came upon pottery sherds incised with signs in Linear A, the earliest and as yet undeciphered Minoan script, scattered among the tumbled stones of a very old wall. Probing deeper into the underbrush, the party found a piece of carved limestone they recognized as part

of a sculpture called "horns of consecration." These Minoan symbols, probably stylized representations of bulls' horns, graced the facades of buildings that had religious significance. Efi called Yannis to the site.

"There's something of importance here," he agreed. "We'll dig and find out what it is."

And dig we did in the early summer of 1979. Each morning for more than a month our team of University of Athens students and Arkhanes villagers, many of the latter trained veterans of earlier campaigns, made their way to Anemospilia, half an hour's walk from the village, and worked until late afternoon.

By the dose of the first day's labor we had traced the plan of a freestanding building that we concluded could only have been a temple. For one thing, it had stood in the center of a small walled plot that we identified as a temenos, or sacred enclosure, familiar to us from Cretan works of art. For another, it faced north, often a sign of a building with religious significance.

The Anemospilia temple had contained three narrow rooms. They did not interconnect, but each opened into a corridor that extended the width of the building.

Now we began digging in earnest, starting with the corridor. We had a fright at first when we found a place where treasure hunters had hacked at the walls. But our worries proved groundless. The would-be plunderers had not entered the ruins.

The corridor had had two functions. First, it provided access to the three temple naves. Second, it had been the place where materials for offerings were initially assembled. These went next to what we may call side, or secondary, altars for final arrangement, and were then carried to the central altar, where all offerings were made.

In the corridor we uncovered rows of vessels that had contained offerings such as fruits, grains, peas, and possibly milk, honey, and wines (below). In some of the jugs, many of them miraculously unbroken, we found charred fruit seeds. People of the countryside often came to visit us, following a deeply rutted, centuries-old path that you can still see bisecting the temenos. When they saw the jars, they were amazed.

"To think," said one man, "we have walked over these things all our lives and never known they were there!"

Pottery styles, decoration, and techniques offer the archaeologist a relatively accurate calendar. From ceramics at Anemospilia we learned that the temple had been destroyed in the earthquakes that many believe had thrown down all the first palaces of Crete around 1700 B.C. We knew too that our temple had never been rebuilt, as were most important places of the so called old palace period. Had it been, its priests would have furnished it with utensils made after the time of its destruction.

Important as was the pottery, the discovery in the corridor of our first skeleton provided the greatest thrill. It was a unique find: The only remains of Minoans heretofore unearthed had been recovered from tombs. Initially, we thought we had found merely an earthquake victim; only later were we able to ascribe to this person a possible role in the drama on the hillside.

When we had finished the corridor, we turned to the central chamber. Our familiarity with contemporary Minoan art led us to conclude that the room must have contained the image of the temple deity, and hence was the heart of the shrine.

Such images were life-size wooden statues that never survived fire or the ravages of time. But from art found at Knossos and in the rich ruins of Phaistos, we know what they looked like.

They often wore headdresses, sometimes curls, of bronze or steatite - soapstone - and were richly gowned. At Anemospilia we recovered no headdress, but we did find bits of burnt wood and a pair of clay feet that had been the idol's base.

Our statue, or xoanon (the word is ancient Greek) had stood on a raised platform. At its feet priests had placed the best and most of the more than 400 pottery vessels we recovered from the temple.

Close to the xoanon had been left unhewn a piece of the hillside rock, symbol of the earth, which with the sea and the sky the Minoans considered the eternal elements of their world. The sacred stone played a role in cult ritual; over it, we believe, priests poured blood offerings to the deity.

After the central room, we excavated the nave to the east. Here bloodless offerings had been arranged prior to being laid before the idol next door. The vessels that had contained them still stood on and before a ruined stepped altar that rang a bell in our memories: Such an altar had been pictured on a rhyton, or libation vase, recovered from the Minoan site of Zakros.

If further proof of the room's liturgical role was needed, it was near at hand in the Iraklion Museum. Here a popular display is a famous sarcophagus from Hagia Triada, painted with ritual scenes; in one appear virtually exact duplicates of ceramic vessels that turned up at Anemospilia.

Now we had only the west room to clear. The team began the job with its usual enthusiasm, but as the hot, dusty days passed, the enthusiasm turned to disappointment, for the trowels unearthed nothing.

And then it happened. Nearing the original floor level, we found three more human skeletons.

Disappointment turned to exhilaration, fatigue vanished.

Two skeletons, both found lying on the floor, clearly were the remains of earthquake victims. Falling debris had broken the legs of one.

The third was another matter. We believed we had found animal remains. They rested upon a platform we recognized - again the Minoan artists! - as an altar upon which animals were sacrificed. Close beside the platform, furthermore, had stood a pillar with a trough at its base. Just such troughs at Knossos, we believe, were used to collect blood as it dripped from the altar.

We began careful clearing of the bones, still thinking they were those of a young bull or other beast.

Suddenly a worker's trowel struck a metal object. We brushed away the earth to reveal a bronze knife such as we have never seen before or since. Still almost razor sharp, it was 16 inches long and weighed more than a pound. Each side of the blade bore the incised rendering of an animal head.

And what an animal this was! Unlike any beast in the natural world, it had the snout and tusks of a boar, ears shaped like butterfly wings, and the slanted eyes of a fox. Apparently the artist had symbolized, in this composite rendition, animals in general. To us there could be only one explanation. This great weapon was a sacrificial knife, used to kill animals for blood libations.

Although more than a year has passed since we closed the season at Anemospilia, our recollection of what followed the finding of the knife is as dear today as if it had happened yesterday.

On his knees in the dirt, patiently cleaning the bones on the altar, Yannis looked up and said in a strained voice:

"This was a human being, not an animal. It is hard to believe, but I think we have found a human sacrifice."

In retrospect, perhaps we should not have been so thoroughly shocked. Written history documents the practice of human sacrifice in mainland Greece; mythology describes it in prehistoric Crete as well, as witness the story of the Minotaur and the Athenian youths and maidens.

In the normal course of events, the Minoans and the Greeks of later years sacrificed animals, with bulls the preference in Minoan blood rituals. But under unusual stress, the ancients grew desperate and offered human lives to angry gods.

Plutarch tells us, for example, that Themistocles sacrificed three men to assure victory at the Battle of Salamis, although some scholars doubt the account. Again, a seer ordered a human slaughtered to rid Athens of a plague in the seventh century B.C. If a crucial battle and a devastating epidemic produced abnormal stress, we can be quite sure that earthquakes would do the same.

We now believed we knew the true story of Anemospilia. But confirming it would require expert help. We turned to our friends at the University of Athens. Dr. Alexandros Contopoulos, professor of anthropology and director of the Athens Medical School Anthropological Museum, joined us in Crete with his assistant, Dr. Theodoros Pitsios. So did Dr. Antonios Koutselinis, assistant professor of criminology at Athens University and a master of the coroner's art.

Carefully our friends studied the temple site and all it contained. When they were satisfied, we gathered in the pleasant courtyard of our excavation headquarters in Arkhanes and together reconstructed the final act in the drama of Anemospilia.

The skeleton on the altar, reported the anthropologists, was that of a male, about 18 years old. Well built, five feet five inches tall, he lay peacefully curled on his right side.

And how had he died? Probably from loss of blood, the anthropologists told us. Neither the falling roof nor the fire that followed had killed him.

"There is evidence that when a body with its blood supply intact is burned, the bones turn black," explained Dr. Contopoulos. "But if the blood has been drained before the fire, the bones will remain white.

"When we looked closely at this skeleton, we saw that the bones of the left side, which was uppermost, were white, while those on the right side were black. Thus, I believe that half this man's blood had been

drained before the fire. The loss was more than enough to kill him. The heart stopped pumping, leaving blood still in the body's lowside."

The carotid arteries lie close beneath the skin on the sides of the neck. Knowing from animal sacrifices that through these vital arteries passes the entire blood supply, the ancient executioner, we can reasonably assume, severed the one on the left side to kill the youth and obtain his blood.

But who was the executioner? Surely it was someone whose bones we had found in the temple, for catastrophe had struck swiftly, leaving no time for escape.

We ruled out the skeleton farthest from the altar, that of a woman about 28 years old, of medium build. Other than the fact of her presence in the west room, there was absolutely nothing to connect her with the sacrifice.

One suspect remained: The skeleton lying very near the altar. It was that of a powerful man, six feet tall and in his late thirties. We found him on his back, hands raised as if to protect his face. Coroners, who often see this defensive posture in victims of earth cave-ins and building collapse, have even coined a name for it: the "boxer's position."

The tall man left two clues as to his calling. On the little finger of his left hand he wore a ring of silver and iron, the latter a rare and precious metal in the Bronze Age Aegean. On his wrist he carried an engraved seal of such exceptional artistic merit and obvious worth that only a person of substance could have possessed it. Surely this was a priest, a man of power and standing in the highest classes.

How he had managed to get the strong youth on the altar must remain forever a mystery. A religious zealot or, as Dr. Konstantinos Romaios, ethnologist of the Academy of Athens, has suggested, the obedient son of the priest who slew him, the teenager might have gone willingly to his death.

Or perhaps he had been overpowered or drugged, trussed up like the red-spotted bull being sacrificed in the Hagia Triada painting, and carried to the altar. His legs, at least, had probably been bound, said the criminologist, Dr. Koutselinis, for they had been bent so far back that the right heel nearly touched the thigh bone.

When we suggested the priest as the likeliest murder suspect, Dr. Koutselinis quickly agreed.

"We could make a good case against him in court," he said. "I'd suggest to the jury that after slashing the carotid, he laid the knife on the body where you found it, then began to collect the blood. We can only guess how long he lived before the roof fell."

At some point he or another closed the young man's mouth, which would have started to sag open in death. When we found the remains, the jaws were tightly locked. In the tomb burials we have excavated, the lower jaw was always slack.

The skeleton found in the corridor was in such poor condition that the anthropologists could not even tell us whether it had been a male or a female.

We decided to call it a man; at least we had one chance in two of being right! If the pathetic bones told us nothing, the pieces of a shattered vase scattered next to them gave food for thought. When our technicians put the 105 sherds together, we had an exceptionally beautiful piece of Kamares ware, so called for the Cretan cave that yielded the first examples of such pottery.

We consider it the best of our Anemospilia finds, and we know that spouted bucket-like vases similar to this one were used for the pouring of blood libations.

Perhaps our reconstruction of what took place in the corridor at the moment of disaster is fanciful. But we can suggest a reasonable theory: The man, perhaps a second priest, was carrying what may have been the temple's most sacred vase from the central chamber to safety when the building collapsed. He left two similar vessels of lesser quality behind. Again, he may have been taking the vase, already containing the blood of the human sacrifice, from the west room to offer to the idol in the central nave. Then came the cataclysm, and three and a half millennia of silence, until our trowels disturbed the dust.

A peasant passing the dig one morning reined up his donkey and gazed into the green Arkhanes valley at our feet. Then he turned to us and said:

"You have chosen the right place to work. Here the partridges sing more sweetly than anywhere else."

We may find little more of importance at Anemospilia, but we treasure it for something that far transcends even beauty and serenity. From this lovely height we have the mystic feeling we can look into eternity.

Nothing here can have changed greatly in 3,700 years, nor is it likely to do so for centuries to come. The sea sparkles as always in the distance, azure by day, wine red in the glow of the setting sun. The onkeys serenade their loved ones in the vineyards as always, roosters acclaim the morning of each day.

So in time we will finish at Anemospilia and pay the debt we owe it by leaving it to the sun and the winds. Then, when quiet once more bathes the hillside, the partridges will return to sing more sweetly than anywhere else.

