

Economic activities were an important component of life in prehistoric Greece. Discuss how Minoan Palaces supported such activities.

In history, Greece has always been at the forefront of technology, philosophy and diplomacy. With ancient Greece being one of the most advanced early civilizations in the world, it must be assumed that the roots of its success are at least partially influenced by its prehistoric past. There were several civilizations during the course of the Greek Bronze Age prior to ancient Greece, including the Minoans and Mycenaeans, which are the two most relevant civilizations when discussing Minoan palace society, the topic in discussion. The Minoan civilization is celebrated as one of the finest to rule within Greece in this quote from Gerald Cadogan and Pat Clarke's book, *Palaces of Minoan Crete*: "The most prosperous periods in Crete's history appear to have been the Minoan and the Roman and, we can add, today. These are the times when settlements have been most dense, and only then – as now – have there been sufficiently long periods of peace to enable people to live on the low hills and flat land by the sea without needing fortifications". This quote admires the Minoan rulers for their abilities to control a large population whilst defending their civilization from attack at sea, suggesting a well-run nation with little to no conflict. The Minoans were residents of the Greek island of Crete and the civilization ruled from approximately 2700BC until its destruction by the Mycenaeans in 1450BC, but the palaces which formed their burgeoning economy only began being built at around 2000BC (Murray, Runnels, 2001: 79), known as the start of the old palace period. These palaces shaped a large part of the Minoan rule, probably governing five separate territories within Crete, allowing the economy to flourish under their leadership by supporting trade in several ways.

The palaces served many functions in Minoan society, such as housing governmental administrative offices, providing workshops and storage spaces for trade goods, accommodating civilians in residential quarters, and offering areas for religious and other public ceremonies (Budin, 2004: 314). The palaces appear to have ruled over what is thought to be five different territories within Crete, each with their own palace governing it, making it easier to rule the citizens. The people of Crete seem to have been kept well under control, with no signs suggesting they ever fought against their

leadership, which, as mentioned later, could be partly due to the large part religion played in their lives. The remains of the palaces suggest they were very elaborate and beautiful, showing they were obviously designed to appear prestigious and serve as a sign of wealth and power. It is easy to see that these palaces were the main centres of society at the time, and so their creation, their uses and their destruction must all be examined in order to discover more about Minoan culture and society, including its economy.

The most famous and excavated of the known Minoan palaces is Knossos, which also happens to be one of the oldest. Many believe Knossos to have been the 'capital' of Minoan Crete, as it is larger, more elaborate and more complex than the other palaces on the island (Hitchcock, Preziosi, 1999: 78). Its earlier architectural features are typical of the old palace style, which itself adopted several common features of the early Minoan period, and include an elaborate large central court, a west court and a monumental western façade (Fleming, Gorin, 2005: 238). An interesting archaeological feature at Knossos is the polythyron, a room which could be altered by rearranging the panels which fitted in the space between the pillars, allowing as much privacy as one desired (Budin, 2004: 315). It appears the Minoan people were highly aesthetic, as there are many painted frescoes adorning the palace walls (Budin, 2004: 315), and the architecture seems well thought-out and visually appealing. Among the frescoes at Knossos is the large 'bull-leaper' fresco in the central court, showing young people partaking in a game or sport known as bull-leaping, which may have been popular during the Minoan rule (Budin, 2004: 315). It seems that these frescoes were heavily influenced by Egyptian wall paintings, showing there was definitely travel between the two civilizations, probably during trade between them (Cadogan, Clarke, 1991: 14). During the old palace period, burials comprised of three types: Larnax, when the body or ashes were buried in a box; Tholos, when the remains were placed in a circular underground room; and Pithos, when the remains were put into a large storage jar known as a pithos (Cadogan, Clarke, 1991: 35). These burials probably formed part of a series of rituals at Knossos, and show that the Minoan people carefully buried most of their people, with the three types of burial possibly being down to one's rank within the community, or maybe just down to preference. Knossos also features a large theatrical area, which it is thought once housed the beautiful 'sacred grove' fresco (Hitchcock, Preziosi, 1999: 82), probably used for

public or religious ceremonies, along with the central and west courts (Castleden, 1990: 100). Knossos was partly destroyed in a fire, the effects of which can still be seen on the palace walls today, even including the fact that the wind was blowing from the South, though it was repaired and lived on as a palace, showing its great importance to the Minoan people (Cadogan, Clarke, 1991: 13). Other large palaces dating back to the old palace period include Phaistos and Mallia, whose layouts and style are very similar to Knossos, and together with Knossos these three palaces are regarded as the three largest and probably the most important in Minoan Crete. The old palace period ended at around 1700BC when it is thought an earthquake shook the island of Crete, damaging the old palaces beyond repair (Haughton, 2007: 50). Among the palaces damaged were Knossos, Mallia and Phaistos, which were effectively rebuilt almost from scratch, creating what is known as the new palace period.

It is extremely difficult to tell which parts of the Minoan palaces were built in the old palace period and which were added on later, as the archaeological remains have to be closely examined to ensure they are reliable (Murray, Runnels, 2001: 81). During the new palace period, many of the old palace period architectural features remained unchanged, though a slight change can be seen in the burial customs, with chamber tombs becoming popular (Cadogan, Clarke, 1991: 55). Despite this, larnax, pithos and tholos burial sites continued to be used alongside this new type. Paved roads also began to appear at many palatial sites, including the 'royal road' at Knossos, added in the new palace period. These roads show the palaces were well linked with one another, and possibly that the leaders of each palace would visit one another, potentially staying in the residential quarters of each other's palaces, keeping relations happy between the individual territories and ensuring the smooth running of the civilization.

The Minoan palaces also contained residential quarters, though it is not known exactly who stayed there, but it is certainly possible that the ruling elite lived in them, or that they were guest suites for important visitors (Haughton, 2007: 51). The residential quarters at Knossos were once very elaborately decorated, and enjoyed a view of the beautiful central court, appearing to be a very desirable place to stay (Murray, Runnels, 2001: 79). If these 'residential quarters' were for other leaders to visit, the elaborate finish would have impressed them, and thus aiding relations between the different

territories of Crete.

The main functions of the palaces, as outlined earlier, fulfilled various requirements within the society, including maintaining control of the people and developing trade into a major source of economy, amongst other things. The palaces heavily supported trade in and out of Crete, providing workshop and storage space for the objects, both imports and exports, which included bronze ingots, oils, base metals, precious metals, ivory, alabaster, precious stones, pottery, stone carvings and even organic goods (Cadogan, Clarke, 1991: 16). These products were mainly exported to the Greek mainland, Egypt, Syria, the Levant, Anatolia and Cyclades (another Greek island). The Minoans imported the base metals copper and tin in order to combine them to form bronze, which would be worked into bronze ingots for export (Fleming, Gorin, 2005: 66). Many of the main Minoan exports were prestige goods, making them highly desirable to potential importers from other countries. It is clear that this trade was one of the main sources of economy within Minoan society, so supporting it was extremely important. Agriculture was another main source of economy, and by supporting trade of farm and organic goods, the Minoan palaces were also helping the farmers of the island. (Castleden, 1990: 105). The Minoan palaces supported trade by providing workshops for the creative artists and artisans to work in, where they would expertly work and rework items for trade (Fleming, Gorin, 2005: 238). The palaces also provided valuable storage space for these items, ensuring the security and quality of the Cretan goods remained high, sealing their reputation as a good civilization to trade with. It is clear from these factors that the Minoan palaces heavily supported the economic activities within Crete under their rule. Within the palace of Knossos, the workshops and storage magazines for trade goods are located very near to the main area of religious practice, the west wing, suggesting a connection between trade and religion, possibly that the workers were influenced heavily and potentially controlled by their beliefs.

Interestingly, the Minoan palaces discovered seem to have been built in alignment with their surrounding topography, the existing natural land. In many cases, this topography includes mountains, which appear to bear ritual significance, and potentially, as has been suggested by many, were used by the rulers to manipulate their people. Many of the frescoes lining the walls of Knossos feature religious connotations (Haughton,

2007: 51), showing that its designers intended religion to play a large part within the society, ensuring the Minoan people would have seen at least some aspect of religion daily. Cave sanctuaries and peak sanctuaries near the palaces draw parallels between the mainstream Minoan society governed by the palaces and the cults of the mountains, with many believing the Minoan palaces were led in a similar way to the cults, being controlled by religion. Peak sanctuaries, such as Mount Iuktas near Knossos, were used for religious ceremonies and contain stone figurines of people and animals, including votive body parts, all thought to be ritual objects (Budin, 2004: 229), and several rituals were also carried out at the palaces. It is not known for certain whether any animal or human sacrifices were part of these rituals at the Peak sanctuaries, however there is compelling evidence for sacrifice, such as the archaeological site of Anemospilia, though these are likely to have been due to desperate measures rather than a regular occurrence (Haughton, 2007: 53). The popularity of religion within society rose and fell along with the palaces, suggesting religion was indeed a highly important part of everyday life whilst the palaces were governing (Garcia, Sorensen, 1998: 204). Many of the palaces also contained religious shrines and hosted religious ceremonies, but it is not clear whether the rulers of the individual palaces were specifically members of the clergy or not (Fleming, Gorin, 2005: 238). Some have suggested that religion was used by these unknown rulers to maintain control over their citizens, which would be beneficial for the running of society, ensuring the people remain placid and docile, though this may not be true, of course.

Being the main governmental centres of the Minoan society, the palaces served as administrative offices, where important facts and events would be noted in writing. The hieroglyphic script used by the Minoans, evidence of which has been found at several of the palace sites, is named 'Linear A' and is yet to be indisputably deciphered by both archaeologists and linguists (Haughton, 2007: 50). It proves however that the Minoans definitely had a system of writing, possibly a key to their success as a civilization, as writing provides a large amount of different uses within society. The use of writing within Minoan Crete would have aided the economic activities of the society, allowing them to keep stock of trade items, write important letters between internal leaders and possibly other countries, and potentially take note of religious ideas and important events

(Haughton, 2007: 50). Though the script has not been deciphered as of yet, it is apparent that the script used by the later Mycenaean civilization in Greece, named 'Linear B' was influenced a great deal by the Minoan 'Linear A', one of several Minoan cultural aspects the Mycenaeans appear to have recycled after their destructive takeover (Budin, 2004: 227).

The palaces were eventually destroyed, along with the Minoan civilization, by the Mycenaeans, the Greek civilization who followed (Murray, Runnels, 2001: 79). The Mycenaeans used many of the Minoan ideas themselves, including a very similar writing method and many art and architectural styles distinct to the Minoans, showing they at least respected the quality of the Minoan style.

In conclusion, the Minoan palaces of prehistoric Greece heavily supported the economic activities of the civilization, allowing for the creation and storage of trade goods, with trade probably being the main source of economy at the time along with agriculture, which they supported via trade. As mentioned, it is probable that whoever was leading within the Minoan palace society was using religion to heavily influence their people, making it a large part of their everyday lives and, it seems, impossible to avoid. However it appears this was, despite being fairly immoral, beneficial to the continuation of the society, as it seems the Minoan people were happy with their leadership enough to remain under control, and the society prospered for many years as one of the longest surviving Cretan civilizations.

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