Alexandra Radley

(Ground Plan of Knossos)
Recently there have been new Minoan archeological sites discovered in Crete. They are all in the style of past structures assumed to be palaces. There are also many of them, often in close proximity of one another, leading one to question whether each can, in fact, be a palace. Sissi, a site in Crete, started being excavated in 2007. Sissi is located on the northeast side of Crete and only a few kilometers from the palace and town of Malia (Fig. 1). This thesis addresses the issue of whether the recently discovered site of Sissi can actually be called a palace.

The most significant known palace of Minoan culture is Knossos. By examining the floor plan and other structural evidence of Knossos, we can determine a common definition of what constitutes a palace. This is used as the foundation from which to examine the recently discovered Sissi. I believe that this will help to prove that these recent sites, although they appear to be palaces, should not necessarily be assumed as such. At the very least, we will be able to identify significant distinctions between so-called Minoan palaces and Sissi, and address questions that the new site raises.

Crete was part of the rise of what has been called the first European civilization, called Minoan after the mythological king of Crete, Minos. Knossos is located on the Kephala hill and to the west of the Kairatos River (Fig. 3). There were natural advantages to the location because it had supplies of water, materials for building and an agriculturally rich land.

(Figure 1: Map of Crete and Ancient Sites)
With regard to the chronology of Cretan civilization, archaeologist Arthur Evans constructed a system used for Minoan Bronze age archaeology. He divided it into a tripartite system, Early Minoan (EM), Middle Minoan (MM), and Late Minoan (LM). Today, this chronological order is still utilized as the framework for others to create a more detailed time line of Minoan society.

The first period is Protopalatial, which is characterized by palaces and palace towns like Knossos. When studying the Palace of Knossos, it is important first to realize that there are two different palaces at Knossos: First Palace and Second Palace. In the Middle Minoan period (1900-1700 BCE), the First Palace of Knossos was built stretching over 14,000 m. The First Palace probably took about 250 years to construct fully. Other palaces of Phaistos and Malia began construction around the same time. From the beginning, however, Knossos was the biggest and most elaborate of the palaces, and other palaces conformed to a similar plan. This suggests that there was some mutual influence among the palaces. It appears, however, that the groups that built the palaces did not always live in harmony because there is some evidence of fortifications along routes suggesting separate territories or states. This seems to be specific to the period of the First Palace, because during the time of the Second Palace, there is island-wide cultural unity exhibited by, for example, consistent Knossian styles in pottery and architecture.

The First Palace of Knossos is the central monument of Minoan archaeology, and was excavated by Evans in the first decade of the twentieth century. The site had been known before Evans, but with Crete’s independence in 1898, excavation became easier. By 1902, all the ground plans of the Palace had been determined, establishing the presence of a Minoan civilization. Evans concluded that the First Palace was constructed in the MM Ib period, around 1900 BCE. Within this Palace, there were structures that represented a Throne Room and Central Court. The First Palace had many functions, including storage for accumulated wealth, areas for ritual and living quarters for the ruling family.
These components would be appropriate for a palace but also for a ‘temple.’ Although it is labeled the ‘First Palace,’ it still begs the question whether ‘palace’ is the approved word.

In general in Crete, cities and towns with streets, courts, and community interaction were planned, creating an urban transformation in Minoan identity. To the west of the First Palace is a large, open space called the West Court. This is a common feature in Minoan palaces, including not only Knossos but Phaitos and Malia as well. The West Court was structured to function as a communal space for the town and Palace. It is paved with stone with raised walkways, a typical Minoan feature. The walkways had practical value, providing direction for visitors through the courts and also specifically in the case of Knossos, used for ceremonial processions. In Knossos, the north borders of the West Court is formed by a Theatral (sic) area that has rows of low risers that provided seating for spectators. The purpose of the Theatral Area has been debated; some think it was seating for various kinds of performances, the reception spot for ceremonial processions, or for political assemblies. Also in the West Court, there were four large, stone-lined circular pits that Evans named ‘Koulouras’ (after a circular Greek bread) (Fig. 4).

They have been explained alternately as garbage pits and planters for sacred trees. Finally, the main roadway in Knossos was the Royal Road, which led toward the Palace from the west, passing the Theatral Area and then towards the West Court.

The features of this palace had distinctive new urban forms in common with other structures and represented a specific set of characteristics: West Courts, paved streets and walkways, Theatral Areas, and Koulouras. One could say that with these, we have the beginnings of a definition of the Palace.
Evans established the term “palace” in designating these archeological sites. The word “palace” is used to describe a number of different things; however, there is no consensus on what the term signifies. Evans assumed that the buildings he called palaces had several roles, for example; royal residences, administrative centers, economic centers manufacturing centers, and cult centers. Over the years however, these functions have been questioned. Ilse Schoep describes the term ‘palace’ to carry unhelpful meanings, which encourages an interpretation of “palace” as the residence of a royal elite, having a supreme position within a hierarchical structure. The term “palace” may be inadequate, but these structures are unique and their particular aspects are not found in buildings elsewhere.

The term ‘palace’ thus defines a specific phenomenon. John McEnroe recently interpreted the word palace as a range of functions that refer to a group of buildings that share similar elements. According to J. Lesley Fitton, architecturally we can define palaces as complex, multi-functional buildings with rooms arranged around a large rectangular central court, usually on an approximately north-south axis, with a second important courtyard on the western side.

Between MM III and LM IB (1750-1490 BC), the grandest monument in the history of Minoan Crete was constructed, the Second Palace at Knossos. Between MM III and LM IB (1750-1490 BC), the grandest monument in the history of Minoan Crete was constructed, the Second Palace at Knossos. This era was seen as the apogee of Minoan civilization. During this period there was large-scale construction to repair damage to the First Palace probably from an earthquake. During the period of Neopalatial Crete, there was the introduction of so-called ‘villas’ or country houses along the Cretan countryside. This, together with an absence of fortifications, suggests that this must have been a peaceful time in Crete.

The Second Palace was a self-conscious undertaking. The streets fed into the West Court so visitors had a direct view of the Palace. In addition, there were two other aspects of the Palace that would have attracted visitors and stood out. The first is the size of the building. A large and ambitious structure, the Palace displayed evidence of being built as a series of discrete structural blocks with the rooflines that shifted levels so the visitor would have to walk around the building to get a full view of it.
The second aspect was the predominant horizontal expanse of the building. The Palace was low to the ground, but still covered a broad and commanding expanse. The main entrance to the Second Palace was from the North entrance, where visitors would walk along the west porch and see the iconic painting of a bull. The walkway then continues into the Corridor of the Procession where visitors could view the procession fresco. After the corridor, came the final destination, the Central Court. The west façade of the Central Court contains doors that stepped down into the Throne Room, one of the most significant ceremonial areas in the Palace. The north entrance also eventually led toward the Central Court. The entrance to the Residential Quarter from the Central Court was by the Grand Staircase.

The site of Malia is one of the largest urban centers on Crete from the middle and late Bronze Age. Malia consists of large Protopalatial buildings, which suggests existence of several elite groups. Malia was smaller than Knossos, but still had similar palace characteristics; a central court and residential quarter. Because of Malia’s size and infrastructures, it can be assumed that Sissi formed some part of the territory of Malia. Moreover, when excavation started, more information about Sissi was discovered. It is important to excavate Sissi because of its location in relation to Malia. The site of Sissi controls the two ancient land routes; one that connects Malia with the port of Milatos and the other connecting Malia and regions further west. The excavations could reveal evidence of imported goods from all over Crete and possibly the Mediterranean.

Sissi is among the several new sites recently discovered that are assumed to be palaces. Before excavation even started, human bones were identified on the seaward terraces, indicating the presence of a cemetery. Under the direction of Jan Driessen, a professor of Greek archaeology at the University College London, who also excavated at Malia and Knossos, the excavation has led to the identification and numbering of at least thirty rectangular compartments. These form a cemetery of small, rectangular burial structures, also known as house tombs. These tombs date back to Pre-palatial times. House tombs were common in the northern and eastern regions of Crete. The tombs were made with new compartments gradually added onto existing ones, making it hard to determine if the combined compartments belong to the same tomb.
The rectangular compartments were made out of limestone and were small in size. There was no sign of doorways, suggesting that the tombs were accessed from above, and were poorly preserved. Moreover, the pottery that was found was mostly found outside the tombs, suggesting that ritual practices took place in the cemetery.\(^4^1\)

Another part of Sissi that has been excavated consists of at least three large, rectangular megalithic structures from an advanced Late Minoan date.\(^4^2\) The excavation has led to some interesting discoveries, including a large square room that had smaller annexes attached to it (storage spaces, work space, and basement).\(^4^3\)

The bedrock contained many stones, animal and marine dietary remains, a figurine and much pottery, which included a terracotta lamp, cups, and other Neopalatial objects. A communal building CD was also excavated, discovering the most impressive Postpalatial structures found on the island to date. It was on top of Buffo Hill covering a large area of land with more than twenty rooms. In the LM IIIB time, Building CD was divided into three main sections devoted to ritual, social gatherings and communal dining, and industrial activities.\(^4^4\) Two of the sections are in a long hall that opens through a porch onto the east and south courts. Off of these sections and monumental central room, there are annexes that are devoted to storage and food processing.\(^4^5\)

In the core of the building, a small shrine was found with a possible altar. To the southwest of Building CD, there was a small square room filled with storage vessels and tools related to cooking along with limpets and sea urchin remains suggesting a meal preparation room.\(^4^5\) This cooking room was certainly used in close connection with the south court, providing for communal and feasting ceremonies. A possible earthquake could be the reason for some destruction and abandonment, but it still has not yet been identified. Most of the rooms however, were found almost empty as if the abandonment of the building was planned.
Two other buildings have been discovered, Building E and F. Building E is in Zone 5, on the southern part of the top of the hill. Here, a large structure was excavated revealing sixteen spaces or rooms. The pottery found indicates the building was used during the Postpalatial period and shows evidence of a fire. Due to the discovery of earlier pottery fragments underneath the structure, it seems clear that the area was already occupied well before the Postpalatial. Building F is a large architectural complex on the south slope of the Kephali hill. The rooms found were empty, with only a few pottery remains. The main building is a square construction divided into four rooms. In one of the rooms, there is a low platform in a quarter-circle shape suggesting a kind of industrial installation.

There were storage vessels found resting on the floor near the platform, also suggesting some sort of treatment of liquids such as oil or wine. Along the western façade of the building, there is a large rectangular court made of blue and white pebbles. It is possible to say that Building F was a court-centered building. The north-south orientation of the pebble court resembles that of designated Minoan palaces like Knossos. Another characteristic in common is that the court at Sissi aligns with the top of the Selena Mountains behind. This recalls the siting of Knossos, which lines up with Mount Juktas. The court size is also rather large in relation to the site itself, suggesting traditional Minoan society.

When using the term palace, it appears to relate to the specific architectural form based on its scale, plan, set of rooms, and structural elements. When studying the Palace of Knossos, certain features stand out that would designate it as a palace. Specifically, the palaces that were found all share similar structural features of central courts, formal rooms, magazines, and residential quarters. When looking at Sissi, however, ‘palace’ does not seem to be the right term. Because of Sissi’s size, it appears to be a smaller center that was probably independent from the larger palaces, especially Malia. Some of these sites still had palatial features but were just centralized for storage or administration.
This begs the question of whether there was a strict hierarchy under which smaller centers worked. In other words, there may have been some sort of hierarchy administered by the larger palaces, with smaller satellite communities connected to the larger palaces that nonetheless thrived on their own.

While there is not yet enough evidence to come to a firm conclusion, Sissi may have been one of these smaller communities, rather than an actual palace complex. The problem with the word 'palace' is that it makes the assumption of how the palaces were used. One would need to question at the outset why there are so many of these so-called palace sites, Sissi among them, in such close proximity to one another. More significantly, the multitude of storage spaces and storage containers found at Sissi suggests that the Sissi community focused on storing goods and making distribution to other larger communities, perhaps the actual Palace Malia. As Sissi is still being excavated, more discoveries will be made in hopes to conclude what the site really is. For now, Sissi as a palace does not seem plausible.
Notes

2 Ibid, 4.
5 Ibid, 6.
6 Ibid, 50.
8 Ibid.
9 McEnroe, John C. Architecture of Minoan Crete: Constructing Identity in the Aegean Bronze Age, 50.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid, 51.
12 There has been recent suggestion that the Throne Room does not date from the Minoan period, but in the absence of published research, this information has been disregarded in this paper.
14 McEnroe, John C. Architecture of Minoan Crete: Constructing Identity in the Aegean Bronze Age, 57.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid, 58.
17 Ibid, 59.
18 Ibid, 60.
20 McEnroe, John C. Architecture of Minoan Crete: Constructing Identity in the Aegean Bronze Age, 67.
21 Ibid, 54.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid, 67.
26 McEnroe, John C. Architecture of Minoan Crete: Constructing Identity in the Aegean Bronze Age, 69.
27 McEnroe, John C. Architecture of Minoan Crete: Constructing Identity in the Aegean Bronze Age, 69.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid, 110.
30 McEnroe, John C. Architecture of Minoan Crete: Constructing Identity in the Aegean Bronze Age, 69.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid, 73.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid, 77.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 McEnroe, John C. Architecture of Minoan Crete: Constructing Identity in the Aegean Bronze Age, 89.