

# Ancient Minoan Civilization: Analyzing Frescoes

The ancient Minoans left behind many colorful wall paintings called frescoes. We can study these frescoes to learn about the culture, behaviors, and values of Minoan civilization. Read the information about the Minoans below, and then analyze the three frescoes that follow.

## Who were the ancient Minoans, and why are they important?



The Minoans built a thriving civilization on the island of Crete. Their capital city, Knossos, supported a robust population and successful maritime economy for over 500 years, from around 2000 BCE to 1400 BCE. Like many island cultures in the region, the ancient Minoans developed their own traditions before being absorbed into the Greek empire around 1425 BCE.

Most of what we know about the Minoans comes from extensive excavations conducted by an English archaeologist named Sir Arthur Evans. He loved Greek mythology, particularly the myth of Crete's King Minos. Evans and a team traveled to Crete to dig for artifacts in 1898. They uncovered over 1,000 interlocking rooms in a palace-like structure with elaborate scenes painted onto the walls. These paintings, called frescoes, were painted onto wet plaster to become part of each wall. The fresco images revealed details about the ancient Minoans' love of the sea and their cultural practices.

Take a look at one of the frescoes Sir Arthur Evans found on the walls of the Knossos Palace. Then answer the question. **Sample answer**

1. This fresco shows five large blue dolphins and several smaller fish swimming. Why do you think Minoans would paint an image like this inside a room? What does it suggest about their culture and what they valued?



The image of dolphins and fish

swimming suggests the Minoans

loved and valued the sea so much

that they wanted reminders of their

natural surroundings inside their homes and public spaces. This type of colorful and lively artwork

suggests that Minoan culture placed a high value on natural beauty and that they were willing to

invest the time and care necessary to produce lasting artistic works to celebrate that beauty.

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Keep going! Take a look at a second fresco. Then answer the questions under the image.

Sample answers



This fresco shows a large bull that seems to be part of a lively ceremony. Many historians believe Minoans, like the ancient Egyptians, painted prominent female figures in white. If that is accurate, the image depicts a woman holding out her arms, a second woman holding the bulls horns, and a male acrobat leaping over the bull's back.

2. What do you think the woman holding her arms out is doing?

The woman with her arms held out could be an athlete or performer leading a team of acrobats.

3. What does this fresco suggest about the role of women in Minoan society?

This image suggests that women played a significant role in Minoan society and that women were not separated from men in athletic events or ceremonies.

4. Scholars believe this fresco depicts either a religious ritual or an athletic event performed for entertainment. Explain which theory you think is more likely.

Answers may vary.

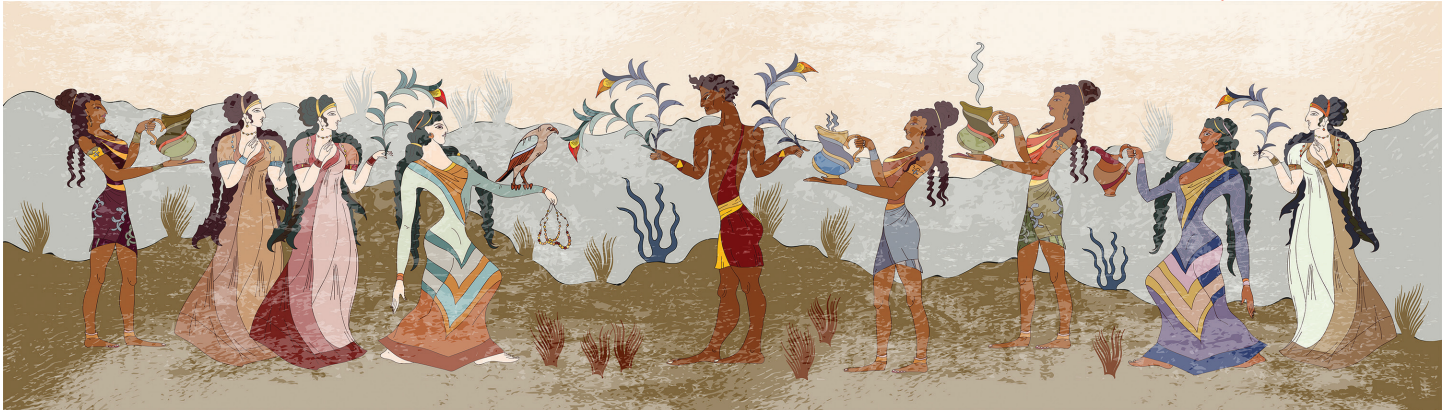
5. If this is a religious ceremony, what could that suggest about the role of bulls in Minoan society?

If this image reflects a religious ceremony, then it is likely the Minoans viewed bulls as spiritually important. The bull is the central focus of the fresco and seems to be interacting peacefully with the people around him. So, the image suggests the bull is a positive religious or cultural symbol.

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Keep going! Take a look at a third fresco. Then answer the questions under the image.

Sample answers



6. This fresco shows a festive outdoor event with women carrying flowers, pottery vases, and a large bird toward an athletic male figure holding beautiful lilies. What might this image suggest about the role of nature in ceremonies in Minoan society?

The image suggests that the beauty of nature was an important element of Minoan ceremonies and festivities. The event is being held outdoors, and several participants are carrying flowers, or a bird, as part of their celebration.

7. Artwork like these frescoes can provide clues to the characteristics of the ancient Minoan social structure, religion, and lifestyle. Read the statements below. Place a check beside the generalizations you think are supported by the images in the frescoes you have examined above.

- Ancient Minoans may have had leisure time devoted to sports, religion, and pottery-making.
- Animals and nature were not important to the ancient Minoans.
- The bull was a prominent and celebrated animal, possibly holding religious significance.
- Minoans did not enjoy living near the sea and seemed to be afraid of sea creatures.
- Outdoor rituals, festivals, and ceremonies were popular in ancient Minoan society.

**Bonus! Select three images (drawings or photographs) that reflect the geographic, social, or cultural values of your family and community. Share with a friend or classmate.**