

The Greeks and The Hebrews



By
Cyrus Gordon

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THE RELATION BETWEEN THESE TWO PEOPLES (Greeks and Hebrews) of the ancient Mediterranean is seldom mentioned. Evidence that the oldest language of Crete is Semitic, however, suggests that the two cultures have common roots.

The classical civilizations of Greece and Judea have traditionally been regarded as entirely distinct cultures, yet today two lines of evidence are combining to support the hypothesis that they have a common background. One line of evidence falls within the realm of historical and literary scholarship; the strength of its case lies in vivid parallels between early Greek and early Hebrew literature.

The other is essentially archaeological and linguistic: in the past few years it has become increasingly apparent that the oldest inscriptions found on the island of Crete are written in a Semitic tongue. My own familiarity with both kinds of evidence arises from the study of the ancient texts, monuments and history of the Mediterranean; it is coincidence rather than intention that has brought me to this dual examination. poles apart in

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If Schliemann had not trusted the Iliad, he would never have sought, let alone uncovered, Troy and Mycenae (after which the earliest Greek civilization is named). Arthur Evans, who believed in the historical reality of the legendary King Minos, dug at Knossos on Crete and revealed Minoan civilization. Scholars who believed in the historical veracity of Scripture similarly uncovered the buried cities not only of the Holy Land but also of the entire Old Testament world from Iran to Egypt.

Until quite recently biblical archaeologists have had an advantage over their colleagues who study ancient Europe. Before the 19th century there were no intelligible texts older than Homer and the Bible; everything earlier was therefore "prehistoric." Old Testament studies were radically changed by the decipherment in the 19th century of Egyptian hieroglyphics and Babylonian cuneiform.

One profound but not always recognized result of the overthrow of the medieval age of faith by the modern age of skepticism was a suspension of belief in the historical validity of both Holy Scripture and pagan legend. On the one hand, the narratives of the Old Testament were often viewed exclusively as sacred writings with no relation to reality; on the other, the Creek legends that reflect the history of another area of the eastern Mediterranean in a period roughly contemporaneous with the Old Testament were often downgraded to a status only a little superior to nursery tales.

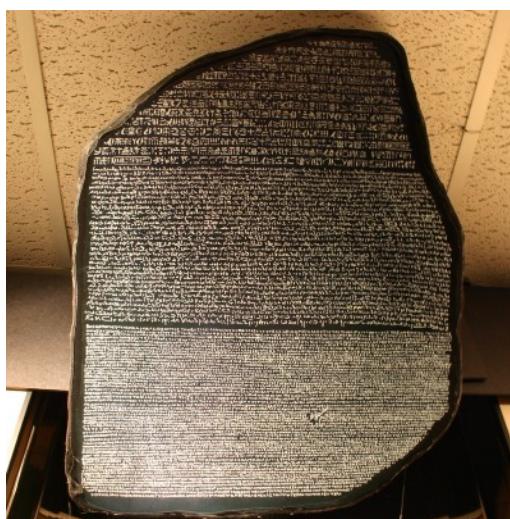
Greek thought and Hebrew religion, however, continued to command general respect. One consequence of this view is that "rational" Greece and "spiritual" Israel have been kept poles apart in Western thought, as

though the ancient Greeks had never known religious inspiration and their Semitic neighbours had been devoid of reason.

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The parallel Greek and Egyptian inscriptions on the Rosetta stone (left) and Darius' trilingual cuneiform texts at Behistun in Iran were keys that eventually helped the decipherers to extend the span of recorded history back to about 3000 B.C. At the turn of the century Evans found a number of Cretan gem stones and other objects engraved with either realistic or stylised pictographs. He also found many clay tablets inscribed in the

related Cretan scripts called Linear A and Linear B, but since no one could decipher them classical archaeologists continued to call Minoan and Mycenaean civilization "prehistoric."

In 1928 a Mycenaean tomb was uncovered by a ploughman at the ancient site of Ras Shamra in Syria. Archaeologists were quick to react to this evidence of Greek connections with an ancient Semitic region.

Beginning in 1929, French expeditions under Claude F. A. Schaeffer have worked steadily at Ras Shamra. Among the many treasures that have been uncovered are inscribed tablets, dating from the early 14th century B.C. to the early 12th century, that record a rich, epic literature in a northwest Semitic dialect akin to Phoenician and biblical Hebrew.

The city at Ras Shamra was soon identified as ancient Ugarit. Its narratives not only acknowledge a debt to Minoan Crete but also contain many parallels bridging the gap between Homer and the Bible. Ugarit's god of arts and crafts is described in the texts as having his workshop on Crete and as having come originally from Egypt. The hero of one major epic poem, King Kret (whose name is reminiscent of Crete), is involved in the loss and recovery of a destined bride paralleling King Menelaus' classic difficulties over Helen in the Iliad.

In reading Homer most of us are inclined, consciously or unconsciously, to impose the cool virtues of Western medieval chivalry on the actions of the Greek heroes; King Kret, in contrast, is unabashedly Oriental. Deprived of his betrothed, his first action is to summon up El, the head of the Ugaritic pantheon, in hysterical fashion:

*He enters his chamber and cries
While repeating words he weeps
His tears are shed like shekels earthward
Like fifth-shekels on the bed.
As he cries he falls asleep
As he weeps deep sleep overcomes him
Yea he lies down in deep sleep.
Then he is startled!*

*For in his dream El descends
In his vision the Father of Man.
He draws near, asking Kret:
"Who is Kret that he should cry?
E'en the Good One, Lad of El, that
he should weep?"*

The friendly El lends a helping hand; he instructs Kret in the ritual necessary to win the aid of the redoubtable deity Baal and advises him to march with an army to the city of Udum, whose king, Pebel, is holding Kret's destined bride. Kret is warned that Pebel will try to buy him off with rich gifts; he is to reject the bribe and to demand the maiden as follows:

*"What need have I of silver and yellow gold
A share of her estate
And eternal slaves
Three horses and a chariot
From the yard of a handmaid's son?
Nay, what is not in my house you shall give.
Give me the Lady Hurrai
The well-bred Your firstborn
Whose charm is like Anath's charm
Whose beauty is like Astarte's beauty."*

In considerably less time than it took the Greek armies to capture Troy, Kret gets the girl; later El blesses the marriage:

*El takes a cup in the hand
A goblet in the right hand .
"The wife that you take, O Kret,
The wife you take to your house
The girl you bring into your court
Shall bear you seven sons
And an eighth (a daughter), Octavia."*

At this time in the eastern Mediterranean, on the eve of the emergence of the Greeks and the Hebrews as historical peoples conquering their own

"promised lands," it is not surprising that epic literature should concern itself with the heroic adventures of royalty. In both Ugaritic and Homeric literature the aristocrats alone are worthy of attention.

Nonetheless, when one finds such a basic theme of the Iliad—a royal quarrel over an abducted woman, conducted with the assistance of the gods—foreshadowed in the literature of a Semitic city in the 14th century B.C., familiar literary material appears in a fresh light and old faces take on a new cast. The narrative of Abraham in Genesis, for example, shows a similar colouring of royal epic.



Left: ROYAL HUNT is depicted on the interior of a gold basin found at Ras Shamra (details are shown in the drawing below the photograph). The charioteer-king pursues a bounding ibex; a group of cattle (two bulls, a cow and a hull calf) completes the scene. Horses, dog, chariot and hunter resemble those in similar scenes from Egypt and Greece; only the royal hunter's beard looks distinctively Semitic. Seven inches in diameter, the basin was made after 1450 B.C. but before 1365 B.C., following the Mycenaean occupation of Knossos..

Of Abraham and Sarah it is said respectively, "Kings shall stem from you" and "Kings of peoples shall issue from her" (Genesis 17). Abraham commands his own troops; he heads a coalition with three other chieftains to vanquish a coalition of invading kings (Genesis 14).

Twice Sarah is taken away from him—into the harem of Pharaoh and later into the harem of the Philistine king Abimelech. Both times Abraham recovers her unsullied (as Achilles did Briseis, although Menelaus was less fortunate in the case of Helen). Thanks to the bridge provided by the Ugaritic epic, the sense of these familiar biblical texts is enriched.

The reader may well ask why the discovery of a Ugaritic epic was required in order to evoke the hypothesis that both the Semitic and the Greek classics have a common eastern Mediterranean background. The answer lies not in any lack of ancient parallels but rather in the artificial boundary between the two cultures that is built into our education.

Both ancient Greece and ancient Israel recognized the strong bonds that had united them from remote times. The Hebrews included the Ionian Greeks in the Table of Nations; Noah's son Japheth (whose name is equated with Iapetos, one of the Titans of Greek myth) numbered Javan (Yawan, the ancestor of the Ionians) among his sons (Genesis 10). If it is assumed that the Japheth of the Table of Nations is the same as the Japheth of Noah's blessing (Genesis 9:27), a particularly close relation between the ancestors of the Greeks and the Hebrews can be inferred from the text: "May God make room for Japheth, that he dwell among the tents of Shem."

Nor is tented pastoralism the sole Semitic way of life recorded in the Old Testament. The Israelite tribes of Zebulun, Dan and Asher are described as seafaring peoples: "Zebulun shall dwell by the sea coast, yea he is by the coast of ships with his flank by Sidon."



CRETE'S EASY ACCESS to the seaports of three continents made the island a strategic base for the Semitic sea lords of the second millennium B.C. From Crete their merchant vessels could call on the European mainland, on the eastern Mediterranean coast of Asia and on the African littoral from the Nile delta westward. Cretan sites famed for their inscriptions are located on the map; Linear B tablets have also

been unearthed at Mycenae, Pylos and Thebes. Hattusa, in eastern Anatolia, was the Hittites' capital city.

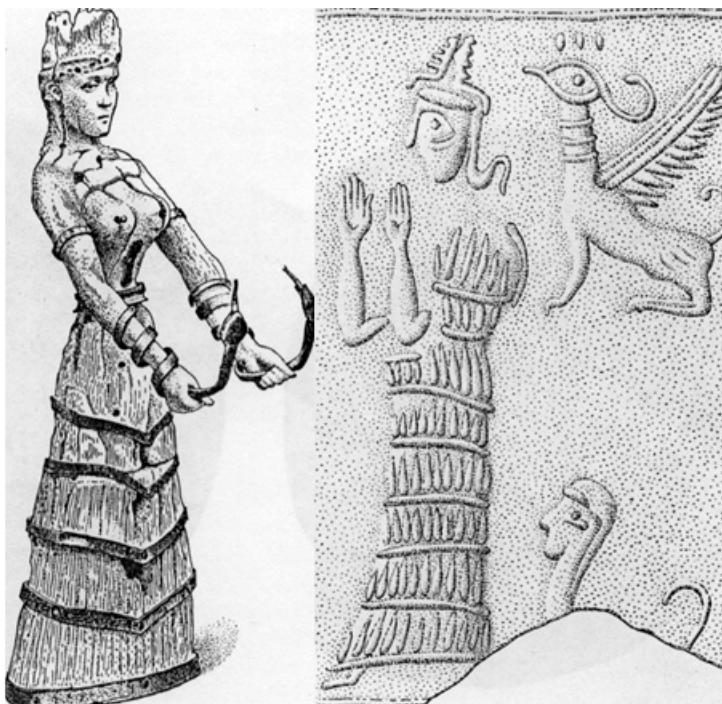
(**Genesis 49:13**); "Why does Dan stay in ships and Asher live by the sea coast, dwelling by his harbours" (Judges 5:17). Evidently some Hebrew tribes shared the seas with such nautical peoples as the Phoenicians and the Greeks.

The Greek legends are even more explicit about ancient ties with the Semites. King Minos, the Greeks said, was the son of Europa, herself a princess of Semitic Phoenicia: Another Phoenician (albeit one from Africa), Danaos, became king of Argos; after him the early Greek heroes were called Danaoi. Moreover, Europa's brother, Cadmus, became king of Thebes and introduced the art of writing to Greece. Scarcely two years ago the historical kernel of the Cadmus legend was underscored when a hoard of cylinder seals from western Asia, dating back to the 14th and 13th centuries B.C., was accidentally uncovered by construction workers at Thebes.

The study of Ugaritic texts has occupied my attention for some years. In the light of the ties between Ugarit and Crete and the parallels between early Hebrew and early Greek literature, I took a special interest in Michael Ventris' brilliant achievement of 1952, which demonstrated that one kind of inscription from Crete, known as Linear B, recorded Greek words in a system of syllabic signs. Of the three principal kinds of inscription found on Crete, Linear B is the youngest, dating from the 15th century B.C. and thereafter. Linear A was in use before 1700 B.C. Oldest of all are the pictographs, some of which may have been inscribed as early as 1800 B.C. All three systems, however, overlap chronologically. Many of the pictographs are repeated in simplified outline in both the Linear A script and the Linear B.

After Ventris' breakthrough a straightforward situation presented itself. Since the scripts of the Linear B and Linear A tablets used essentially the same signs for the same sounds (a number of identical names appear in both systems), it should now have been possible to decipher Linear A, provided that the language it recorded belonged to a known family. Chronologically the language should have been that of the Minoans, who preceded the Greeks on Crete. Minos, the king of the Minoans, had had a Phoenician mother. Could Minoan be a Semitic language?

The first evidence I could uncover favouring such a view consisted of a tablet bearing an inventory of pots, recorded both in pictographs and in Linear A [see illustration on page 109]. Ventris' decipherment had been confirmed by a similar inventory in pictographs and Linear B. In December, 1956, by applying the phonetic values established by Ventris to the Linear A signs on the pot-inventory tablet, I proved to my satisfaction that several of the Minoan words were Semitic names for different kinds of pots.



FLOUNCED SKIRT is worn by a goddess with extended arms, worshiped both in Mesopotamia and the eastern Mediterranean. The Cretan divinity (left) wears a five-tiered skirt; the goddess represented on a cylinder seal from Ugarit (right) is dressed in similar fashion.

The bulk of the tablets uncovered on Crete, whether in Linear A or Linear B, are simply inventories. There are, however, 18 inscriptions in Linear A that appear on stone objects apparently dedicated as votive offerings at

various Minoan shrines. In 1961 the British scholar W. C. Brice published a new edition of these and other Linear A inscriptions, containing drawings and photographs superior in clarity to anything previously available. An examination of the 18 texts confirmed my suspicions of five years earlier. Rendered phonetically, the inscriptions recorded a Semitic dialect closely related to Ugaritic, Phoenician and Hebrew. Unlike the inventory tablets, these inscriptions show sentence structure; one libation table, for example, bears an inscription stating that it was donated "so that the city may thrive."

The 18 texts come from a variety of sites in eastern and central Crete; this distribution indicates that the Semitic language of the inscriptions was not some localized dialect but the official language of all Minoan Crete. Thus the tongue of the people who controlled the island's administration and religion was of the kind the ancient Greeks called Phoenician. This does not mean that the population of Crete during this period was exclusively Semitic. For example, the Linear A tablets provide many personal names; some, such as David, are Semitic but others are not. A number of the names are Egyptian; at least two are names that were common among the Hurrians, a non-Semitic people of Asia Minor.

The largest single group of Linear A texts—some 150 of them—are from the site known as Hagia Triada. They include ritual texts recording offerings of food and drink to such West Semitic gods as Addu (one of Baal's alternate names) and Yamm (the sea god corresponding to Poseidon), to the goddess Tinit and to three other deities familiar in Ugaritic texts: Kret, the deified hero, Agaru and Gupanu (as well as Gupanu's female counterpart Gupanatu).

Still another kind of writing to be found on Crete consists of relatively recent but unintelligible inscriptions cut in stone and using Greek letters. Scholars call these enigmatic inscriptions "Eteocretan," which is to say "genuine Cretan"; the implication is that, even though Greek letters are used, the language they record is the original tongue of Crete. These inscriptions are generally dated between 600 and 300 B.C. In 1962 I studied four Eteocretan texts; they proved to record a late stage of the Minoan language. Since that date, decipherment of two bilingual inscriptions, in Greek and Eteocretan, has further affirmed this identity.



PHAISTOS DISK (above) is inscribed on both faces with a spiral text written in pictographs. The lines separating groups of pictographs presumably mark off individual words. Although not the same as Egyptian hieroglyphs, the symbols appear to have originated in the Nile delta. Several of them can be recognized in simplified form among the symbols of Crete's two scripts: Linear A and Linear B.

We now know enough Minoan to read the Semitic nouns for four different kinds of pots, for "wine" and "wheat," for "town" and "city," for "people," "man" and "mother." We can decipher the verbs "to be," "to give" and "to set up as an offering," the pronouns "he," "his" and "all," the numbers "seven," "nine" and "10," the conjunction "and" and the preposition "to." We can translate synonymous phrases, such as "fellow citizens" and "people of his city," in which all the elements are West Semitic.

It has taken eight years to achieve these modest gains. It came as a blow to me to discover recently in the writings of a fourth-century Latin author, L. Septimius that the dissolute Emperor Nero (who ruled from A.D. 54 to 68) recognized ancient texts discovered on Crete during his reign as being Phoenician. In effect, the decipherment of Linear A amounts to the rediscovery of what was still known in Rome during at least the first four centuries of the Christian era. How much time and labour might have been saved had more credence been given to L. Septimius!

Minoan script employs the principle of acrophony; this means that the phonetic value of each symbol is the opening sound of the word it depicts. How acrophony works can be demonstrated by applying it to some of the pictographs on the Phaistos disk, which is the most noteworthy pictographic text discovered on Crete [see illustrations on this page]. For example, the pictograph of a man on the disk is equated with the Ugaritic word for "man," bwiushu; thus the pictograph stands for the syllable "bu." This is the phonetic value established by Ventris for the Linear B form of the same sign, the pictographic origin of which he did not surmise.

ACROPHONIC PRINCIPLE provides that the phonetic value of a symbol consist of the opening sound of the word depicted by the symbol. In the three cases illustrated the phonetic values for the symbols in linear script were determined independently by the late Michael Ventris. The author has related two of these script symbols to pictographs appearing on the Phaistos disk and has also demonstrated, in all three cases, that commonplace Ugaritic words for the objects portrayed yield the correct acrophonic sounds.

One of the two commonest "words" on the Phaistos disk—it occurs five times—is a pictograph of a horn plus one of a bird. The Semitic word for "horn" is k(a)rn, and in this case we assign the syllable kr (with the vocalic r, as in the English word "butter") to the horn pictograph. The Ugaritic and Syriac word for a bird of prey is kudr, and we assign the syllable ku to the bird pictograph. This is the same value determined by Ventris for the pictograph's Linear B equivalent on the basis of quite different—and purely cryptanalytic—reasons.

"Horn" plus "bird" is thus pronounced kr-ku, which probably means "town." (In the Eteocretan texts "town" is spelled kark in unmistakable Greek letters.) A number of additional readings from the disk are possible. My colleagues and I interpret one sequence of nine signs, divided into two word groups, as declaring "I have eaten in the house of Haddu." (Haddu, a variant of Addu, is another name for Baal.) Although we are a long way from achieving a complete and consistent decipherment of the Phaistos disk, I suggest that it bears a ritual text associated with a shrine to Baal in the palace at Phaistos.

The bird pictograph on the Phaistos disk also appears, in a modified but recognizable form, on a bowl found near Apodulu. Another pictograph on the bowl is evidently an apple—tuppüh in Ugaritic and tuffäh (plural) in Arabic. Ventris established the value tu for the equivalent of this sign in Linear B; perhaps we now know why. ' In learning English the pupil says "a is for apple"; in learning early Minoan he may have said "tu is for tuppüh."

What do these text decipherments and parallels between early Greek and early Hebrew literature suggest? In my opinion the conclusion is inescapable that both the Greek and the Hebrew heritage are rooted in a single cosmopolitan culture that flourished throughout the eastern Mediterranean during the second millennium B.C. with Crete as its major centre. From this viewpoint the still unreconstructed history of the region before, during and somewhat after this era must in general have unfolded along the following lines.

Starting in the fourth millennium B.C., before writing was widespread, Sumerian civilization had already arisen in Mesopotamia and Egyptian civilization in the Nile valley. Both cultures required contact with the outside world. Sumerian life demanded a supply of stone and metal, and the native soil yielded neither.

Egyptian fleets and caravans brought raw materials and finished goods to Egypt from widely separated regions of Asia and Africa. Travel was of course slower than it is now, but the ancients got there just the same; what they lacked in velocity they made up in patience.

Both material and cultural interchange was effected by itinerant merchants and by the establishment of commercial offices and colonies abroad. Not only goods but also people were imported and exported as commodities; a craftsman who could turn out a useful product was a more valuable acquisition than mere samples of his wares. The process of cultural diffusion was more often than not peaceful, because traders usually prefer the stability of peace to the uncertainties of war. But then as now wars brought in their wake waves of refugees who carried their talents to other lands.



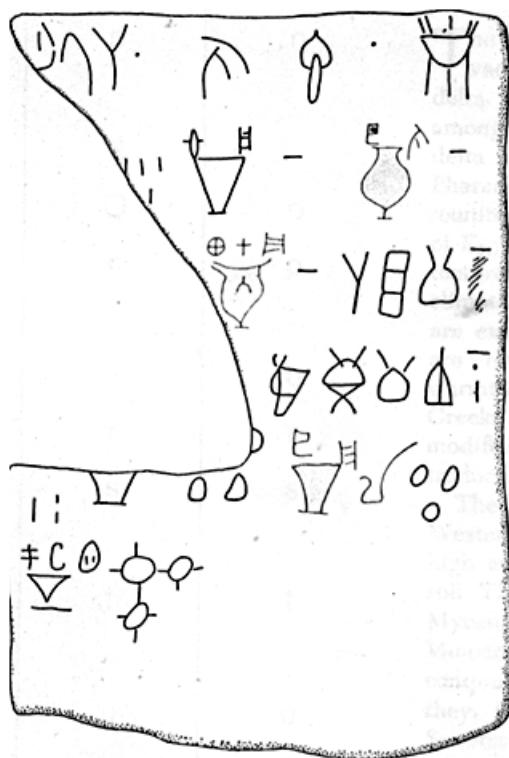
The Akkadian Empire

All these forms of cultural mobility operated in the Mediterranean region during prehistoric times. By the third millennium B.C. there occurred in the eastern Mediterranean an intermingling of several gifted peoples, some of whom were literate. The Sumerians and their Semitic contemporaries and successors, the Akkadians, fostered commercial interests throughout the Levant. Occasionally they backed up those interests with invasions, culminating in Sargon's and Naram-Sin's waves of conquest that reached the shores of the Mediterranean between 2400 and 2300 B.C. Meanwhile Egypt was also trading in the Levant and had established colonies at such key Levantine ports as Byblos.

We must not regard those ancient empires as separated from each other by rigid boundaries. Instead they were interpenetrating commercial empires. Mesopotamia and Egypt had common interests in Syria and Palestine; they learned to live with each other because it was good business. At the same time they were natural rivals because they were the

only lands in the Near East with agricultural resources that could maintain an enduring high civilization.

Canaan (as Syria and Palestine together were then known) was a land bridge between Africa and Asia. Coastal shipping connected its shores with the rest of the Mediterranean region; its Red Sea ports on the Gulf of 'Aqaba joined it to East Africa and the Indian Ocean. Caravans brought to or through Canaan the products of many lands, including the frankincense and myrrh of Arabia Felix. Indo-Europeans—that is, those who spoke languages related to Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and many others, including English—penetrated the eastern Mediterranean in increasing numbers from 2000 B.C. on. Some of them founded the Hittite Empire in Anatolia; the Hittites served as a link between savage Europe and civilized Asia and came to rival Mesopotamia and Egypt in the exploitation of Canaan.



SU-PU = SP (UGARITIC)
(VASE PICTOGRAPH)

KA-RO-PA KARP
(AKKADIAN)
(AMPHORA
PICTOGRAPH)

SU-PA-LA = SPL
(UGARITIC) (POT
PICTOGRAPH)

INVENTORY OF POTTERY,

—from Hagia Triada, combines Linear A symbols with pictographs that show what types of vessels are being counted. In three cases (colour) when the author

used the phonetic values established for the symbols by Ventris, he found the resulting words to be Semitic names for various pot types (see syllables and equivalents, right).

Even earlier a group of western Semites, speaking dialects closely related to Hebrew, came to control the ports and sea-lanes of the eastern Mediterranean. The Egyptians called them Keftiu; ancient Greek tradition refers to them as Phoenicians. They were not concerned with affairs inland; their way of life was built around access to the sea.

From the third millennium B.C. on these Semites were able to synthesize the accomplishments of the Egyptians, Mesopotamians and other talented predecessors. By 1800 B.C. the seafaring Semites were in control of the entire eastern Mediterranean, including the waters and shores of Greece, of Anatolia, of Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, and the Nile delta. They were not the only seafarers present, nor did they inhabit every community throughout the region; they were, however, the controlling element that imposed order on the whole area.

Greek sources describe these Semites correctly as thalassocrats, or "sea lords." Since the prosperity of the seafaring Semites hinged on Mediterranean trade, they developed the island of Crete as their main base; it was closer than any other island to the continents of Europe, Asia and Africa.: Around 1800 B.C. the sea lords were in control of central and eastern Crete, and it was then that the great Minoan palaces were first built.

The main body of the Minoan invaders came to Crete from the Nile delta. It is quite possible that they were among the Semites forced out of the delta by the strong and nationalistic Pharaohs of the 12th Dynasty, who reunited the upper and lower kingdoms of Egypt. In any case the art and architecture of the Minoans reflect the warm climate of their homeland: the palaces are exposed to the elements and there are no built-in hearths to provide warmth.

Later, when the Mycenaean Greeks from the north inherited and modified Minoan civilization, they introduced the hearth. The Minoans have a

unique place in Western history. They nurtured the first high and literate culture on European soil. The earliest Greek civilization, the Mycenaean, was based directly on the Minoan culture. Before the Hebrews conquered Palestine around 1200 B.C. they, like the Minoans, were western Semites living in the Nile delta. Thus approximately the same eastern Mediterranean culture strongly influenced both Greek and Hebrew civilization, although the Hebrews did not depart from the Nile delta until some 600 years after the Minoans.

At some time after 1450 B.C. the Mycenaean Greeks seized Knossos, the urban centre of the Minoan thalassocracy. The Minoans held out in other parts of Crete, but it was clear that they would have to emigrate or face extinction. In order to base themselves in a more secure area many of the Semitic sea lords of Crete migrated with their followers to the Phoenician cities on the Levant coast, notably to Ugarit. In Ugarit, and perhaps elsewhere, the immigration brought a dramatic flowering of the arts around 1400 B.C. Among the manifestations of the upsurge at Ugarit was a new poetic literature that looked to Crete for its artistic roots.

Thereafter Semites and Greeks diverged for a considerable time, each group creating its own distinctive way of life out of a common heritage. One factor accelerating divergence was the succession of empires in the first millennium B.C.—Assyrian, neo-Babylonian and Persian—that engulfed the Near East but left European Greece relatively untouched. By 500 B.C. a sharp eye and ear would have been required to detect the ancient bonds between -the Athens of Pericles and the Judah of Ezra. Yet the bonds had been there, as one further example will demonstrate.

The notion that sexual attraction is due to the fact that the two sexes were once one appears to have been current in the eastern Mediterranean before the emergence of either the Hebrews or the Greeks. When this concept is encountered in Greek literature—as in Plato's Symposium, in which Aristophanes says of the joining of man, and woman that the action reunites "our original nature, making one of two"—we ascribe it to philosophy. When woman is made from a part of Adam, however, and it is stated in Genesis 2:24 "Therefore man ... clings to his wife, and they become one flesh," we consider it divine revelation. That we do not at

once recognize the common source of both concepts is attributable to our ingrained habit of keeping the two cultures in separate compartments.

Now that the first decipherment of Linear A are demonstrating anew that no such separate compartments exist, there is much to be expected from a united front in eastern Mediterranean archaeological studies. Perhaps the prime target area should be the Nile delta; in spite of technical difficulties, evidence may be unearthed there that will cast new light on the delta Semites who in successive waves established the first high culture in Europe and the first Hebrew commonwealth in Palestine.



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