"... the dancing floor which once, in broad Knossos, Daedalus made for Ariadne of the lovely hair."

View from the Palace of Minos looking south. (Alison Frantz photo, courtesy Agora Excavations)

SIR ARTHUR EVANS AND KNOSSES

By Joan Evans

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A passion for the past is apt to run in the blood. ARTHUR EVANS was born of a stock in which it had already proved a dominant trait; his Evans ancestors had been clergymen of the Welsh border who had shared in the antiquarian revival of the eighteenth century; his father, JOHN EVANS, a paper-maker by trade, had, by the time Arthur was ten, achieved a reputation both as a numismatist who had recognized the Greek origin of early British coin-types and as an archaeologist who had recognized the authenticity of Boucher de Perth's discovery of palaeoliths in the drifts of the Somme Valley.

ARTHUR EVANS was born in July, 1851, in the house adjoining his father's paper mill, where he passed his youth among collections of coins, flint implements, and every kind of antiquity. He refused to enter the family business; he went from Harrow to Oxford to read history, in which he achieved a rather precarious first-class Honors degree, and in 1874 emerged as a graduate without a profession or any strong leanings towards one.

He had already traveled fairly widely in Europe and had had his first taste of adventure in 1871, when he visited Paris while the ruins of the Tuileries were still smoking. Later in the same year he traveled with two friends in the wilder parts of Austria, finally wandering on from Agram until they reached the half-
The late Sir Arthur Evans examining one of his discoveries during his excavations early in this century at Knossos, Crete. (British Information Service)

Turkish town of Costainica. The village, with its brightly painted houses, shingled roofs, and picturesque inhabitants, opened a new world to Arthur Evans. He gazed entranced at the whole kaleidoscope of an Oriental civilization; and returned home completely in love with it. Thereafter he set the Balkans before any part of the world in his affections.

In 1875, with his graduation safely behind him, he visited the Balkans again. This time he passed into Turkish territory and explored Bosnia and Herzegovina. The journey ended on the seacoast at Ragusa, and to that city Arthur Evans irrevocably lost his heart.

In 1877 he was established as a roving correspondent in the Balkans for the north of England newspaper, the Manchester Guardian, with headquarters in his dream city of Ragusa. His chief occupation was relief work among the refugees from the Bosnian provinces that were in revolt against their Turkish masters, but such work inevitably brought him into touch with the underground politics and politicians of the Balkans. As inevitable, his lively, pugnacious and sometimes romantic letters to the Manchester Guardian established him as an authority on the Balkan situation, and as a promising recruit to letters.

On the strength of this journalistic success he married a daughter of E. A. Freeman, the historian of the Norman Conquest, bought a house in Ragusa, and settled there in 1878. But the cauldron of Balkan politics was still boiling, and Arthur's sympathies were increasingly with Slav nationalism. He was soon hating the Austrians, who now ruled Ragusa, as much as he had once hated the Turks. He had exciting contacts with the local underground movements; expressed his own views more and more freely in his despatches to Britain; and was astonished and angered when his too-lively interest in the Crivoscian insurrection of 1881 led to his arrest by the Austrians on a charge of high treason. After six weeks in prison (which confirmed Arthur Evans for life in his sympathy with the under dog) he was banished from Austrian territory and thus barred from Dalmatia.

After a brief interlude at Oxford, he visited Greece and found at Delphi and Stiris the familiar enchantments of mountains and flowers, ancient tradition and eternal beauty. At Athens the Evanses encountered Schliemann (whom Arthur Evans had already met in his father's house) and studied his recent finds from Mycenae and Orchomenos. They traveled to Tiryns and Mycenae, and Arthur Evans found in their ruins the strange romantic thrill that "Classical" remains could rarely give him. There was in their Cyclopean masonry, in their architecture of wooden columns tapering toward the base, an inexplicable element that no easy hypothesis of Egyptian and Assyrian elements could account for.

Arthur Evans, however, did not pursue the subject further, but went on to Mount Athos and Salonica, dividing his time between Roman remains, medieval antiquities, and modern politics. When he returned to Oxford at the end of September, 1883, it was to fresh hopes of finding an appointment there. The Ashmolean Museum, still housed in its original building next to the Sheldonian Theatre, was in itself a most curious specimen of antiquity. It housed collections of "cu-
rionsities" that had remained in a state of suspended animation for nearly two centuries. There was a plan afoot to move the collections to new buildings attached to the University Galleries, to add to the collections other University possessions of cognate interest. In June, 1884, Arthur Evans was duly elected Keeper of the Ashmolean and began the congenial task of recreating and reorganizing the Museum.

Fortunately the Keeper was able to spend nearly half his time abroad, if he wished, for Evans was beginning to be haunted by the vision of Crete. He saw Schliemann’s discoveries in Greece not as Homeric illustrations, but as evidence of a Bronze Age civilization. Schliemann’s easy literary explanations could not satisfy him, and by 1894 Arthur Evans, who had been working on Mycenaean gems and seals with minute symbols that seemed to him to be pictographic, had come to think that Crete, the natural stepping-stone between Egypt and Europe, might have been a stage in their development and diffusion and have played an unsuspected part in the history of early scripts. Even in 1887 he had considered the possibility that some of the Egyptian reliefs depicting the invaders of the Nile Valley might include Aegian peoples among those represented. His friendship with Halbherr, dating from 1892, had increased his interest in the island, though at the time Halbherr’s own work lay among early Greek inscriptions.

In the spring of 1894 Evans, spurred by the knowledge that the Frenchman Joubain and the American, Stillman, were showing signs of interest in the site of Knossos, departed to Crete with the firm intention of excavating the site himself. He found it far more extensive than he had expected, far more interesting and far more beautiful. Once again he was able to recognize a place with which he had an innate affinity. The complications of a joint family possession under Turkish law delayed the possibility of beginning excavation for a long time, but he spent the spring and early summer in exploring a good deal of the island and in acquiring an unexpectedly large collection of pre-Hellenic engraved gems, some of the inscriptions being in the pictographic and hieroglyphic scripts which he had earlier recognized. In April, 1895, he returned and continued his negotiations for the acquisition of the site, but the Cretan insurrection against Turkish domination made it impossible to bring them to a successful close. Not until 1899 did he succeed in buying the freehold of the land.

His long researches in the island had by now led him far beyond his original view of Crete as an interesting but integral part of the Mycenaean civilization that Schliemann had discovered on the mainland. He had come to see it as a place with its own civilization, to which he had already given the name Minoan, a civilization in which he was tempted to see the origin of the Homeric world of the Peloponnesse.
D. G. Hogarth accompanied him for the first season's dig, with Duncan Mackenzie, who had already excavated for four years at Phylakopi in Melos, as assistant. Evans and Mackenzie started on the southwest slope of the site, with some thirty workers.

From the beginning their excavation was fortunate. Evans' curious intuition of antiquity had led him, though his experience of excavation was slight, to dig at a place which at once yielded material of the first importance; and the same intuition made it possible for him to recognize from the outset the significance of what he found. After forty years of subsequent research, it is astounding to go through his notebooks and to see how quickly he recognized things for what they were.

As early as the second day, they came upon the remains of an ancient house, with fragments of frescoes. Evans recognized it as being earlier than the Mycenaean buildings on the mainland and compared its relics with those from the Kamares Cave, the only pre-Mycenaean site on the island that had so far been excavated. The walls showed that the Palace—for Palace Evans was sure it was—had ended in a final catastrophe by fire. On the fourth day they found "a kind of baked clay bar, rather like a stone chisel in shape, though broken at one end, with script on it and what appear to be numerals." Evans had been justified; this inscribed tablet was exactly what he had come to find. He engaged more men to work on the site, fresh discoveries came to light on every hand, and each fragment seemed to join the last to form a picture of an unknown civilization. The entries in his journal retain something of the original excitement.

Ap. 5. A great day! Early in the morning the gradual surface uncovering of the Corridor . . . revealed two large pieces of Mycenaean fresco. . . . The figure was lifesize, the flesh color of a deep reddish hue like that of figures on Etruscan tombs and the Kefiu of Egyptian paintings. The profile of the face was of a noble type: full lips, the lower showing a slight peculiarity of curve below. The eye was dark and slightly

Knossos as it is today. The Hall of the Double Axes, photographed by Alison Frantz and reproduced by courtesy of the Agora Excavations.
The southern part of the Palace of Minos today, with the Queen's megaron at center on lower level. Alison Frantz photo, courtesy of the Agora Excavations.

... almond-shaped. In front of the ear is a kind of ornament and a necklace and bracelet are visible. The arms are beautifully modeled. The waist is of the smallest. . . . It is far and away the most remarkable human figure of the Mycenaean Age that has yet come to light. . . . Ap. 10. Interesting discoveries in the N.E. chamber early this morning. The earth here is now passed through a sieve so that every bit goes through a double and even a triple examination and every scrap is noticed and set apart. One result was the discovery of what I had always hoped to find: the clay impression of a Mycenaean signet. . . ."

The work of Halbherr and Pernier at Phaistos and of Miss Boyd at Gournia, if less spectacular than his own at Knossos, nonetheless served to complement it. The summary report of the 1900 campaign, which appeared early in 1901, carried considerable weight and brought subscriptions to help him to carry on the work, though the main expenses were still met from his own funds. The 1901 campaign was largely devoted to more minute work on what had been already discovered, but further excavation on the east side brought yet more sensational discoveries, both of objects and of architectural remains. These important architectural survivals led Evans into the new venture of replacing the perished wooden elements and thus reconstructing the fragment of the vanished hall: a practice which at Knossos had the further justification of protecting from the weather the alabaster used by the Minoans for interiors.

Evans returned to Britain in June, 1901, to receive the recognition he deserved; then went back early in 1902, feeling rather overwhelmed at the amount that still remained to be done. Though he stayed at Knossos until the beginning of June, discovery still followed discovery and he had the sense that the work had but begun. So overwhelming was the mass of material that he took with him to Britain to study that he did not return to Crete until March, 1904. Yet the shorter summer campaign was as fruitful as ever, and there was no sign of coming to an end of the site. He decided to build a house for himself and his staff near the excavation. This, the Villa Ariadne, was ready for him in 1907 and made possible the more detailed work which the vast riches of the site necessitated.

In 1908, after his father’s death, Evans resigned the Keepership of the Ashmolean and made Knossos his main work. He planned a great book on the Palace of Minos, a book which occupied him until 1935. It was less shapely than he meant it to be, for, since excavation continued on the site while it was being written, the fresh discoveries that were made had to be inserted, not always in the place where they logically belonged; yet it remains Evans’ best memorial. He based it on the classification into three periods at which he had arrived very early in his work at Knossos: Early, Middle and Late Minoan, each in turn divided into three. The first volume appeared in 1921, taking the story down to the Third Middle Minoan period, in a scheme as elastic, and at times as epic, as that of a saga.

It is a book so personal that it is easily criticized; the student in a hurry may well find it hard to use. Yet anyone interested in discovering the kind of man that Arthur Evans was will find him there: impetuous in enthusiasm, infinitely patient in detail, learned and ingenious, working more steadily than is apparent at first glance to turn six acres of historic ground and the stones and potsherds, the fragments of clay and metal that he found upon it, into a reasoned whole. It shows him always responsive to the object, always conscious of it as a part and symbol of the civilization that produced it, always seeing that civilization as an integral part of history. It shows him, too, acutely aware of the stony mountains and bright flowers and stormy seas that had formed the setting for the Minoan world and that had endured unchanged after its destruction—and ever conscious of the beauty which that unknown and rediscovered Bronze Age kingdom must evoke.

Once the great book was finished, Evans, now 84, became an old man, yet an old man who was still profoundly interested in archaeology and still capable of work on a smaller scale. He transferred the site and the Villa Ariadne to the British School of Archaeology in Athens, together with an endowment for its maintenance and for the salary of a curator. The transfer had not long been made when World War II came to isolate him from his beloved island.

Arthur Evans died in 1941, three days after his ninetieth birthday. Crete was in German hands, the British Museum had been ravaged by enemy attack, all that he had loved and lived for seemed menaced by destruction. He was deeply moved by their danger and fully conscious of it, yet he died full of courage. He could not know that the German surrender of Crete would one day be signed at his own writing-table in his villa at Knossos; that the site of the Palace would emerge unscathed from World War II; and that the learning and values that he lived for would continue to be a part of the civilization that his countrymen hold dear.