A response to Ilse Schoep:
some critical notes on interpreting the palace of Knossos as a temple

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Abstract

Schoep supposes that the building with large court usually described as Knossos palace is actually a temple, but not a palace. Her conclusion is based on the fact that the large court remained immovable during all modifications of the building. From her point of view such practice correlates well with the practice of immobility of the most sacral place of a temple that existed in ancient Mesopotamia. It is rather incorrect to state that ancient Mesopotamia and Minoan Crete had similar practice since they could have different. This Mesopotamian analogy can’t yet be a proof since first of all its correctness and relevance should be proved. I suppose that it is more logical to say that the immobility of the large court could have utilitarian functions: the large court was used to maintain light and ventilation and the immobility of the court was determined by wind rose of the location.

Keywords: Minoan architecture; Minoan archaeology; Knossos palace

1. Introduction into the problem

Ilse Schoep writes that ideas of Arthur Evans were strongly influenced by his Eurocentric, colonial and even racist background (Schoep 2010: 222, 223). Schoep says that Evans tried to emphasize uniqueness of Minoan Crete artificially and tried to depict Minoan Crete as a culture that differs seriously from cultures of ancient Near East (Schoep 2010: 224), and tried to represent Minoan Crete (Schoep 221) as an ancient analogy (or an ancient prefiguration) of British Empire.

According to Schoep, under the influence of Eurocentrism Evans avoided any Semitic influence on Minoan Crete and instead spoke about Anatolian influence (Schoep 2010: 224). Evans interpreted the big building complex with a large courtyard found in Knossos as a palace and then it lead to the problem of absence of temples upon Minoan Crete and Evans resolved the problem by postulating that the building was palace and temple at once; and also it leads to the conception of priest-king (Schoep 2010: 221). The conception of priest-king and the conception of palace-temple elaborated by Evans from one hand set the Minoan Crete somehow apart from those of culture of Near East and Egypt where palaces and temples (kings and priests) were spatially separated (Schoep 2010: 224, 225 – 228) and from the other hand Evans pointed on some analogies between Minoan Crete and certain cultures of ancient Anatolia (Schoep 2010: 224, 225). Schoep points that buildings of ancient Anatolian cultures identified by Evans as palaces (for instance, Lower Palace of Hattusa actually appeared to be Great Temple\(^1\)) actually appeared to be temples, but not palaces (Schoep 2010: 225 – 228).

Then Schoep proves that the big building complex with courtyard (pic. 3) of Knossos had religious functions and that residence of kings could be in another place nearby. Such conclusions are based on the fact that big court remained upon the same place during all modifications of the architectural ensemble (Schoep 2010: 230 – 231). Referring Postgate book about Mesopotamia Schoep states that the practice of spatial organization of Minoan Crete was

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\(^1\) See pic. 1
the same as that of ancient Mesopotamia where most sacral part of a temple usually remains immovable (Schoep 2010: 231). Also she points that immovability of court also could be determined by Minoan cosmology (Schoep 2010: 231)
From my point of view, such interpretations are rather controversial and tendentious.

Pic. 1. The plan of Hattusa (source: Schoep 2010: 229)
2. Racism and colonialism of Evans

First of all I am to note that it’s rather incorrect to name Evans racist and colonialist. I suppose that we should avoid labeling. We always should keep in mind that any anthropologist is actually a ‘product’ of a corresponding epoch. Evans was a person of Victorian and Edwardian eras. And I suppose that racist utterances in his works appeared simply because of influence of the corresponding epoch, and that actually he was no more racist than an average British of that epoch.

3. The uniqueness of material culture of Minoan Crete

The fact that Evans emphasized uniqueness of Minoan Crete is rather logical. Material culture of Minoan Crete differs seriously from those of Eastern Mediterranean region. Of course, material culture of Minoan Crete has some prefigurations among certain continental cultures, however, Minoan culture is first of all product of Neolithic culture of Crete and there are almost no direct continental prefigurations/analogies of Minoan material cultures, i.e.: to find prefigurations of a Minoan item we have to use many intermediate stages and use rather special procedures of comparison which requires certain math and which are in the process of elaboration yet.

4. Connections with other locations of the Eastern Mediterranean region

Ideas of Evans about Anatolian connection of Minoan Crete seem to be much more realistic than ideas of Schoep about Mesopotamian influence on Minoan culture. Of course, some points of Evans ideas are rather naïve, for instance: as far as he didn’t know about such sites as Hacilar so he supposed that palaces of Crete could be compared with certain buildings of Hattusa of the Hittite epoch (1750 – 1350 BC). Such comparison hardly can be useful since buildings of Hattusa of the Hittite epoch existed parallel with already formed Minoan palaces, i.e.: it is more useful and correct to compare Minoan architecture with architecture of pre-Hittite cultures of Anatolia (especially with architectural forms of Chalcolithic and Neolithic Anatolia). However, the direction of Anatolia is much more perspective than that of Mesopotamia.

Pic. 2. Map showing locations of regions and sites mentioned in the text
First of all Mesopotamia is much more remote region from Crete than Anatolia (especially Western Anatolia). Also, it’s hardly possible that Minoan people had regular contacts with Mesopotamia in the epoch of formation of Minoan culture (late Neolithic/Final Neolithic period).

Pic. 3. The palace of Knossos (source: McEnroe 2010: 70)

about 4000 – 3000 BC; in that time in Mesopotamia existed Chalcolithic cultures which were followed by Sumerian culture. I seriously doubt that Chalcolithic cultures of Mesopotamia could influence forming Minoan culture.
Also recently has been shown the fact that genes of Minoan originated from Anatolia (Lazaridis et al. 2017).

Moreover, researches on samples of Keftiw/Minoan language recorded in the London medical papyrus show that Keftiw/Minoan verb demonstrate rather close resemblance with that of Hattic\(^2\) language (Akulov 2017a, 2017b). It seems that in the papyrus were recorded samples of a local variation of Keftiw/Minoan language that probably differs somehow from that of Crete. Anyway the fact that it is possible to use the scheme of grammatical morphemes of Hattic verb to decipher Keftiw verb is a good proof that both languages are quite close relatives, i.e.: it looks like they belong not just to the same family/stock, but to the same group.

I am to note that data of genetics and data of linguistics need not to be completely correlated, but languages and cultures are spread by people, so connection of certain cultures has to correlate with certain genetic traces.

I suppose that data of genetics and linguistics are rather trustworthy suggestions which show the most perspective direction of searching for cultures which could be related to Minoan.

5. Whether it is possible to interpret the palace of Knossos as a temple?

Schoep concludes that the big building with large court of Knossos (pic. 3) is temple because large court remained immovable through all modifications of the building. Referring to Postgate (Postgate 1992) she points to the fact that in Mesopotamia existed the practice of immobility of most sacral part of a temple, and then she supposes that the same practice could be in Minoan Crete.

Such conclusion is rather doubtful: taking into account all that has been said in 4 I am to note that it is rather incorrect to project practice that took place in Mesopotamia to Minoan Crete. Ancient Mesopotamia and Minoan Crete could have rather different practices: issues which were usual in Mesopotamia might simply be unknown in Minoan Crete. Evidences of the fact that the big building with large court is a temple are rather weak without the ‘analogy’ with Mesopotamia. Schoep’s conclusion that the building is a temple is based on the immobility of court and on the analogy with Mesopotamia, but this analogy should be corroborated by other facts, i.e.: this analogy itself can’t be proof since first of all its correctness and relevance should be proved.

The immobility of the large court is a noteworthy fact. However, I suppose that it is more logical and natural to say that immobility of the large court could have practical utilitarian functions, i.e.: large court was used simply to maintain light and ventilation of the building (Salichou 2015); and I suppose that immobility of large court could be determined not by sacral/religious causes, but by utilitarian causes, i.e.: by wind rose of the location.

Also I am to note that in the big building with court there was a well elaborated sewerage (Angelakis et al. 2005). It means that the building evidently had utilitarian use and was a place accommodated for everyday life rather than for ritual practices.

As for Minoan cosmology I can only say that now we know almost nothing about it since we have almost no trustworthy sources.

That’s why I suppose that interpretation of big building with large court found in Knossos as a temple is at least rather doubtful.

\(^2\) Hattic is a language spoken by Hattians, an ethnicity that existed in Anatolia before Hittites (at least in 3\(^{rd}\) – 2\(^{nd}\) millennia BC and earlier). Approximate territory occupied by Hattians is shown in picture 2.
References


