

THEY LIVED LIKE THIS IN ANCIENT CRETE

Marie Neurath & John Ellis





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They lived like this in
ANCIENT CRETE

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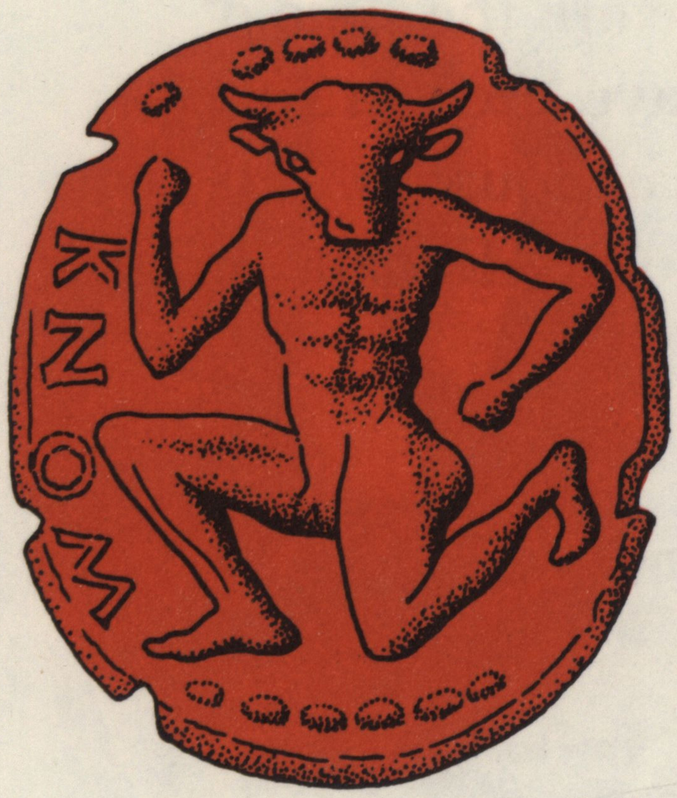
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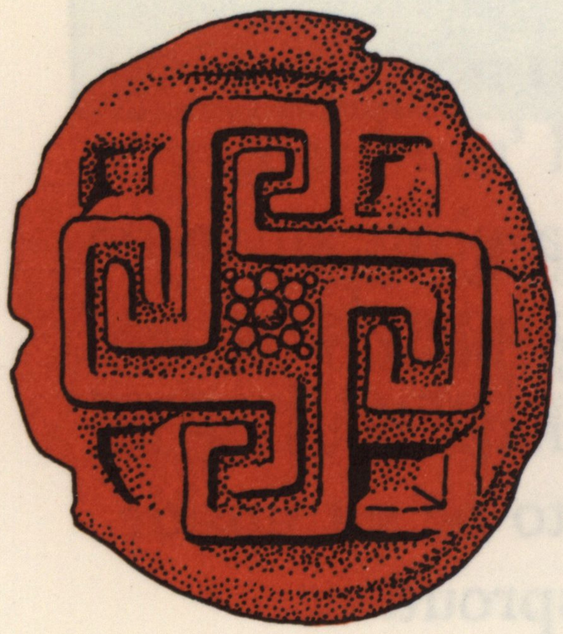
ANCIENT CRETE



Greek legends tell of a mighty king, Minos, who reigned on the island of Crete long ago. He kept a gruesome monster, the Minotaur, which was half bull, half man. The city of Athens had to send a regular tribute of seven boys and seven girls for sacrifice to the Minotaur.

Minos kept him in a labyrinth, or maze, beneath the palace. Here a Greek hero, helped by the princess Ariadne, found and killed him.

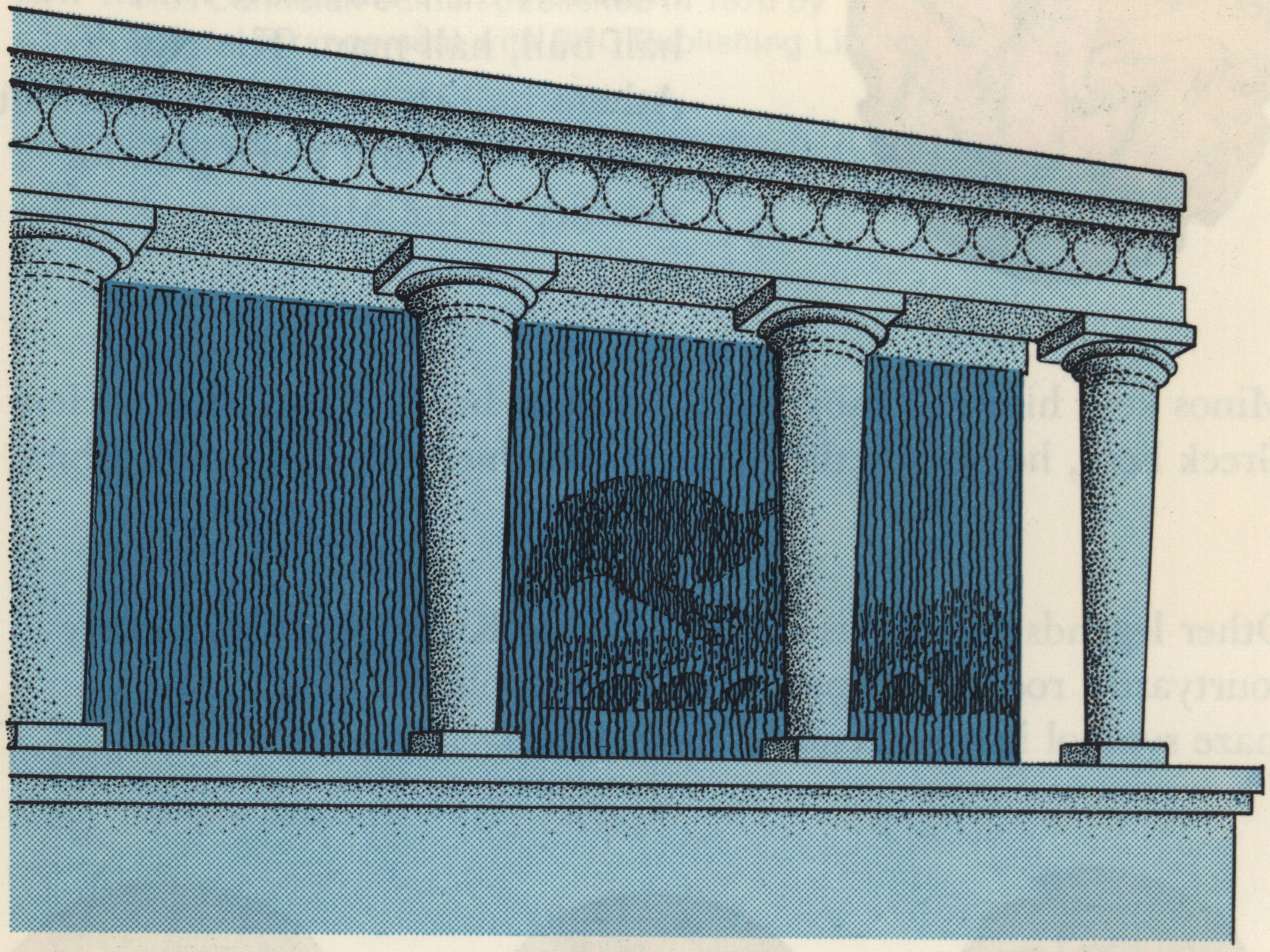
Other legends tell of this great palace at Knossos, with its many courtyards, rooms and passages. The people of Crete used a maze symbol in connection with Knossos.







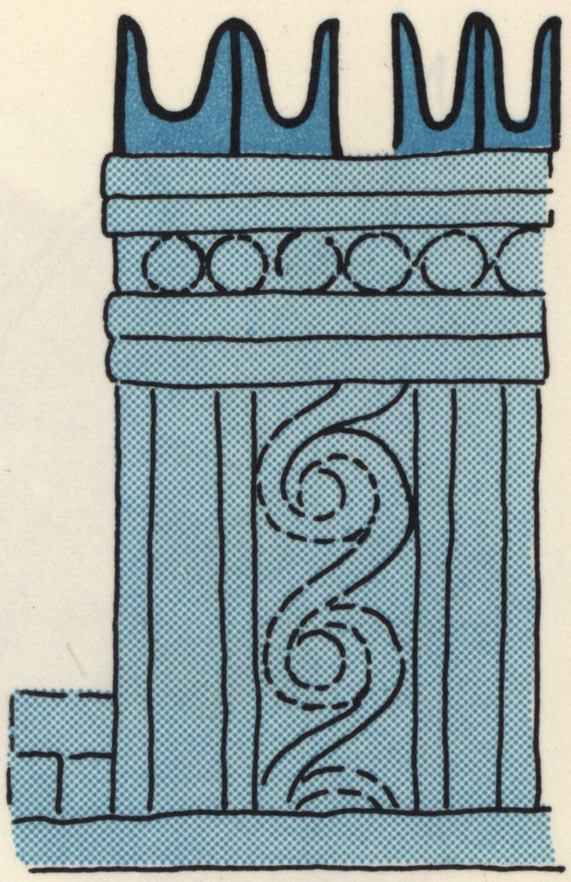
These legends seemed to show that there was a time when the Greeks lived in awe of a mightier king on the island south of the Greek sea. Indeed, palaces where great rulers lived before the time of the Greek cities have now been found. They have been in ruins for more than 3,000 years, destroyed perhaps by earthquakes. But from the ruins we can learn how these early people, the Minoans, lived.



The palaces were the first buildings of their kind in Europe. There were rows of columns in the halls and along the staircases. They are wider at the top than at the bottom, perhaps because the first columns were made of tree trunks which had to be set upside down so that they would not take root again and sprout.



The palaces were destroyed again and again, and rebuilt each time in greater splendour. Earthquakes were the greatest danger on the island. Their rumble may have sounded to the people like the roar of giant bulls. The bull, a sacred animal, was pictured on the walls, and this bull's head, made of dark stone, is hollow, to be used for pouring ritual offerings of wine. Its angry eyes are crystal surrounded by rims of precious red stone. The horns were probably of gold.



The shapes on the top of this shrine represent bulls' horns. They are found on many shrines and buildings. They are one of the symbols used by the Minoans to mark sacred places.



The Minoans enjoyed a gay social life. These are court ladies, well dressed, with jewels and elaborate hairstyles. They are chatting while they look at an open-air performance.

These are some of the things they could have seen. There was music and dancing. The Greeks said that they first learned both music and dancing from Crete, although later they developed their own forms.



There were many sports, like tumbling
and boxing. There was also wrestling.
There are many pictures which show
these sports. They are found on walls,
on vases, and engraved on stones
from which clay impressions were made.





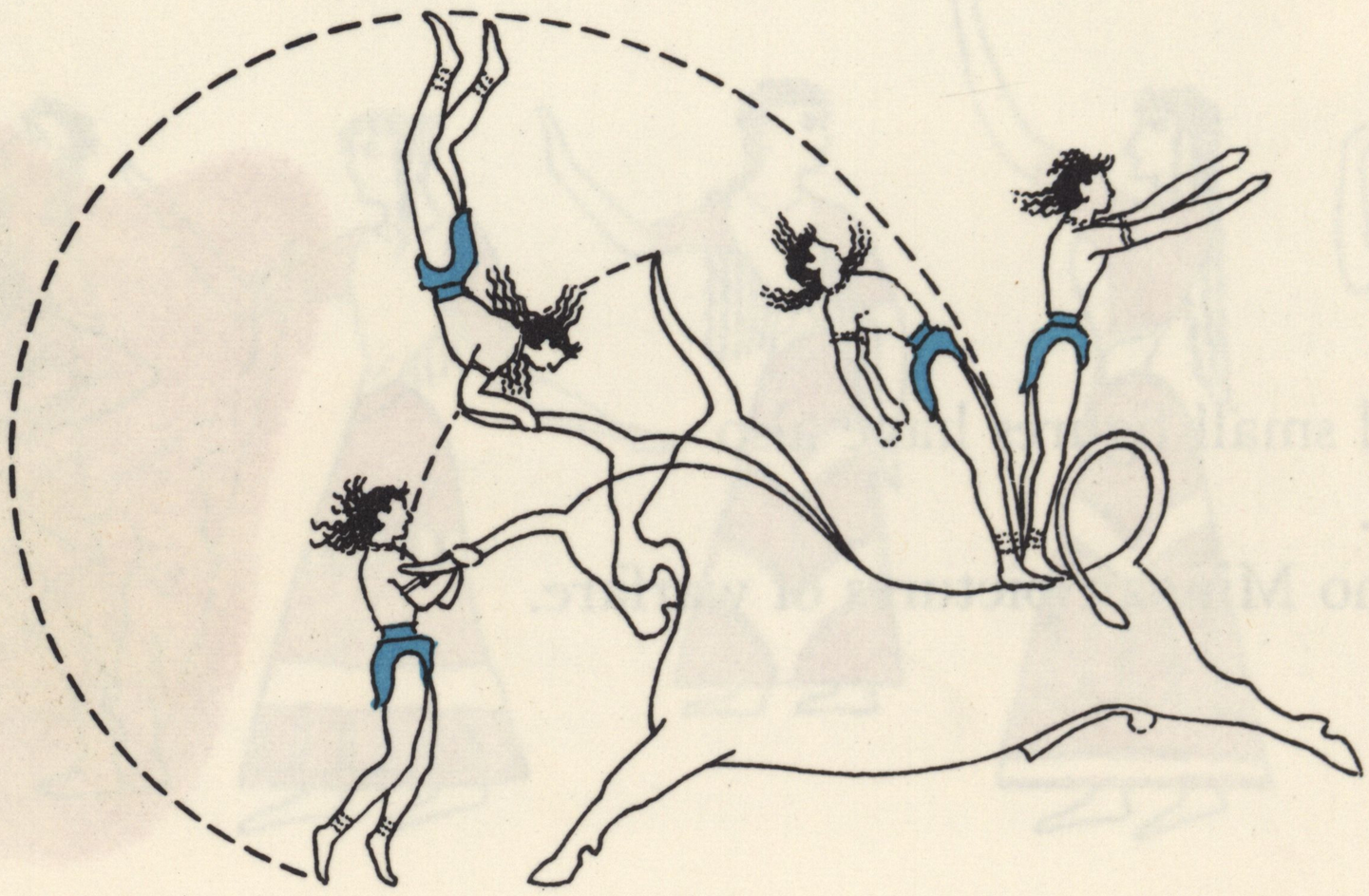
Here we see the narrow-waisted men
in action.
The men have long hair, and for some
sports they wear protective helmets.

Models and small figures have also
been found.
There are no Minoan pictures of warfare.

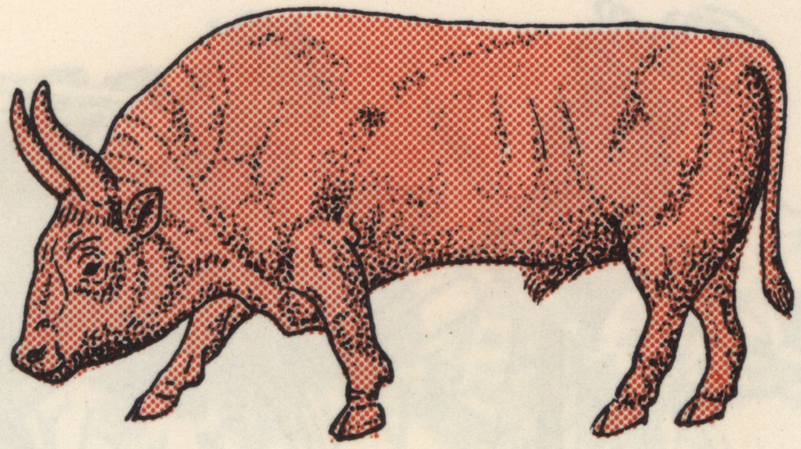




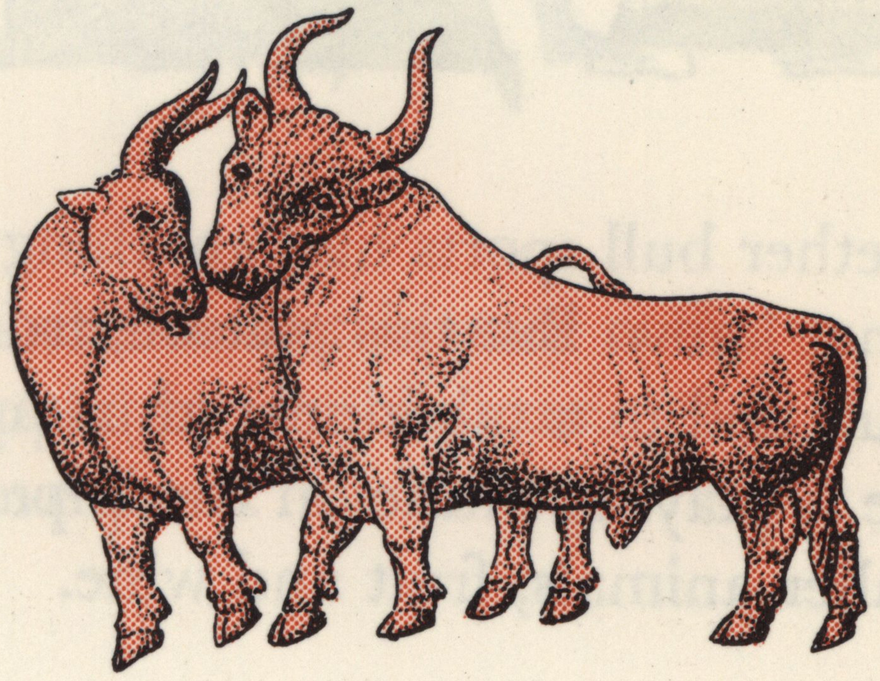
Bull-jumping is the best-known of their sports. This picture from a wall painting shows that both men and women, dressed alike, took part in it. The athlete grasped the bull's horns when it bent its head to charge, somersaulted over it and landed on his feet. The drawing below shows how he may have been thrown back by the movement of the bull's head and landed with his feet on its back before jumping to the ground.



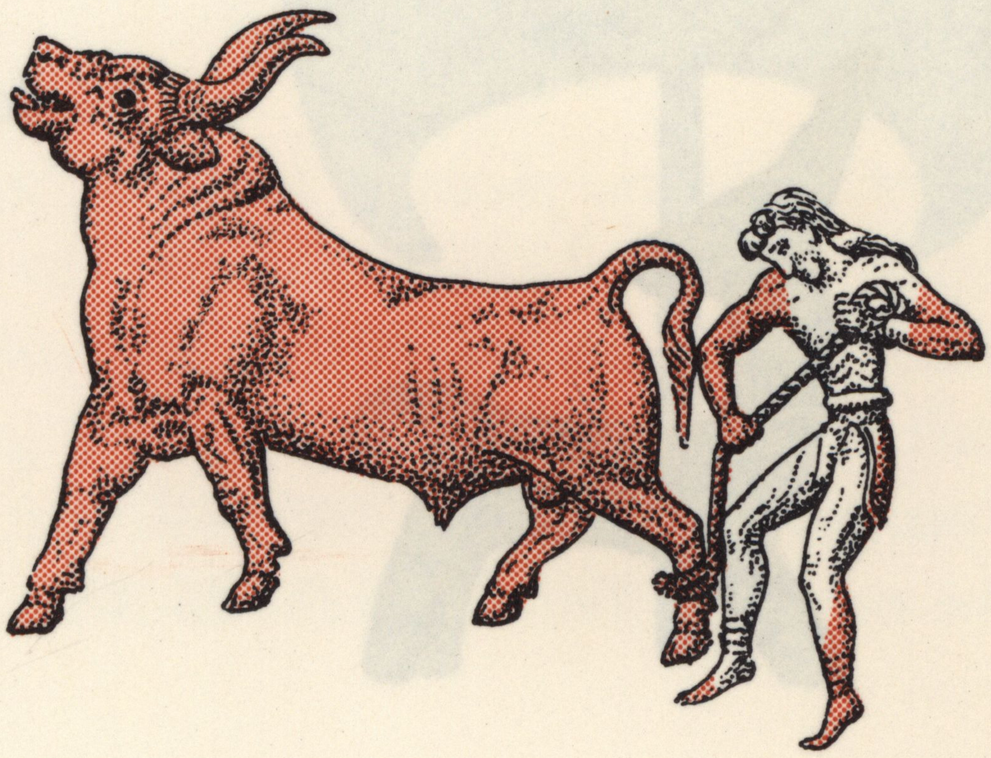
But the wild bulls had to
be caught for the games.



These pictures from a gold
cup of the Minoan period
show one way in which
they were caught.



A tamed cow was used to
attract the bull's attention.
Then a man approached
from behind, and slipped
a noose around its foot.

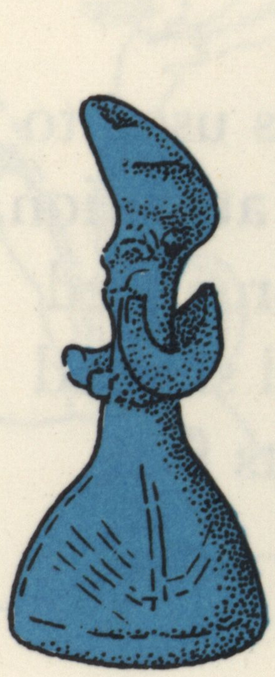


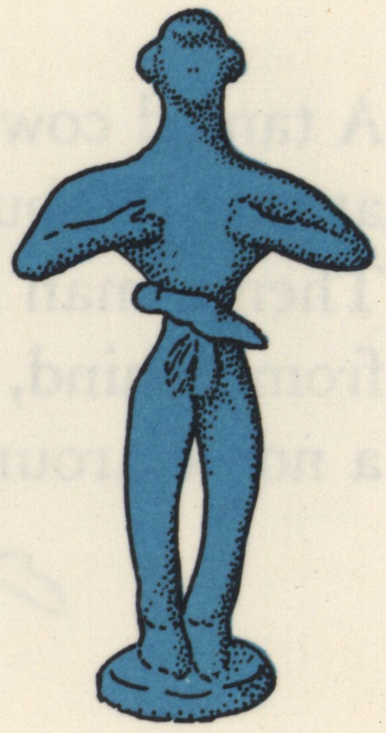


Whether bull sports had anything to do with religious rites we do not know. But this picture, from the side of a coffin, shows a bull tied to a table near an altar, with people performing rituals. One is playing music on two pipes. There are also offerings of smaller animals, fruit and wine.

At the bottom of the page are some examples of small figures which have often been found near altars. They were probably used as offerings, although some may have been toys.



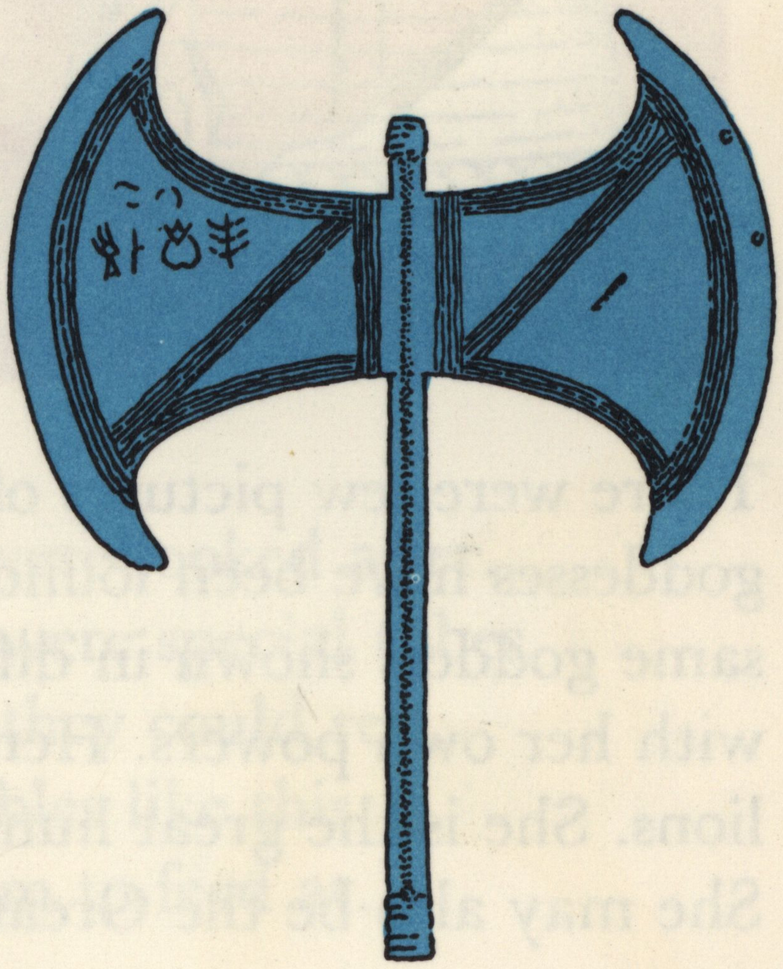




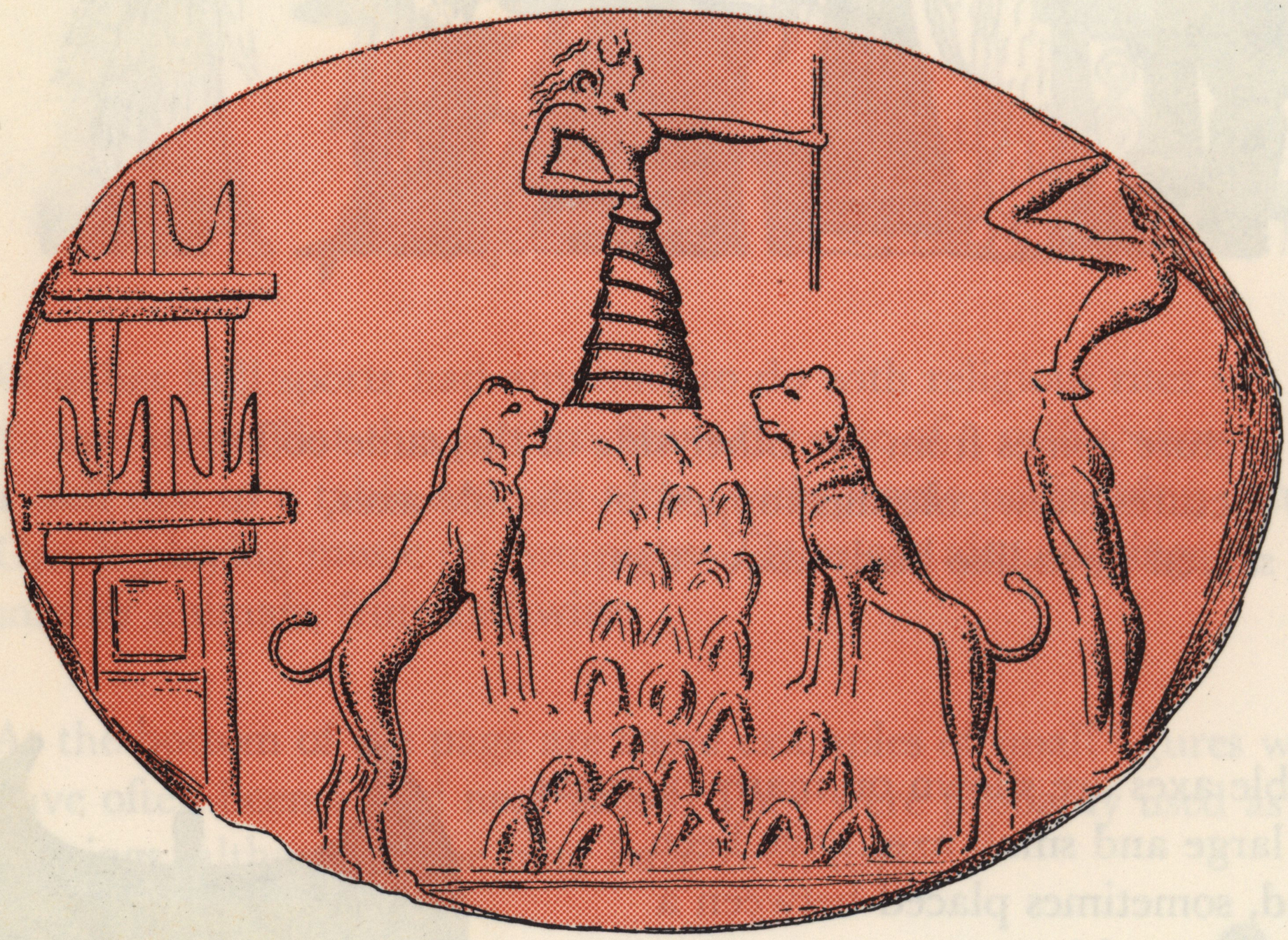


This picture comes from the other side of the same coffin.
Both pictures show columns topped by double axes,
with sacred dove-like birds above them.

Double axes are shown on many pictures,
and large and small axes have been
found, sometimes placed between a
pair of sacred horns.
This miniature double axe, made of
gold, has an inscription on it.
Double axes were engraved on the
pillars of the king's palace.
They were clearly an important
religious symbol, as well as being
used as tools in everyday life.

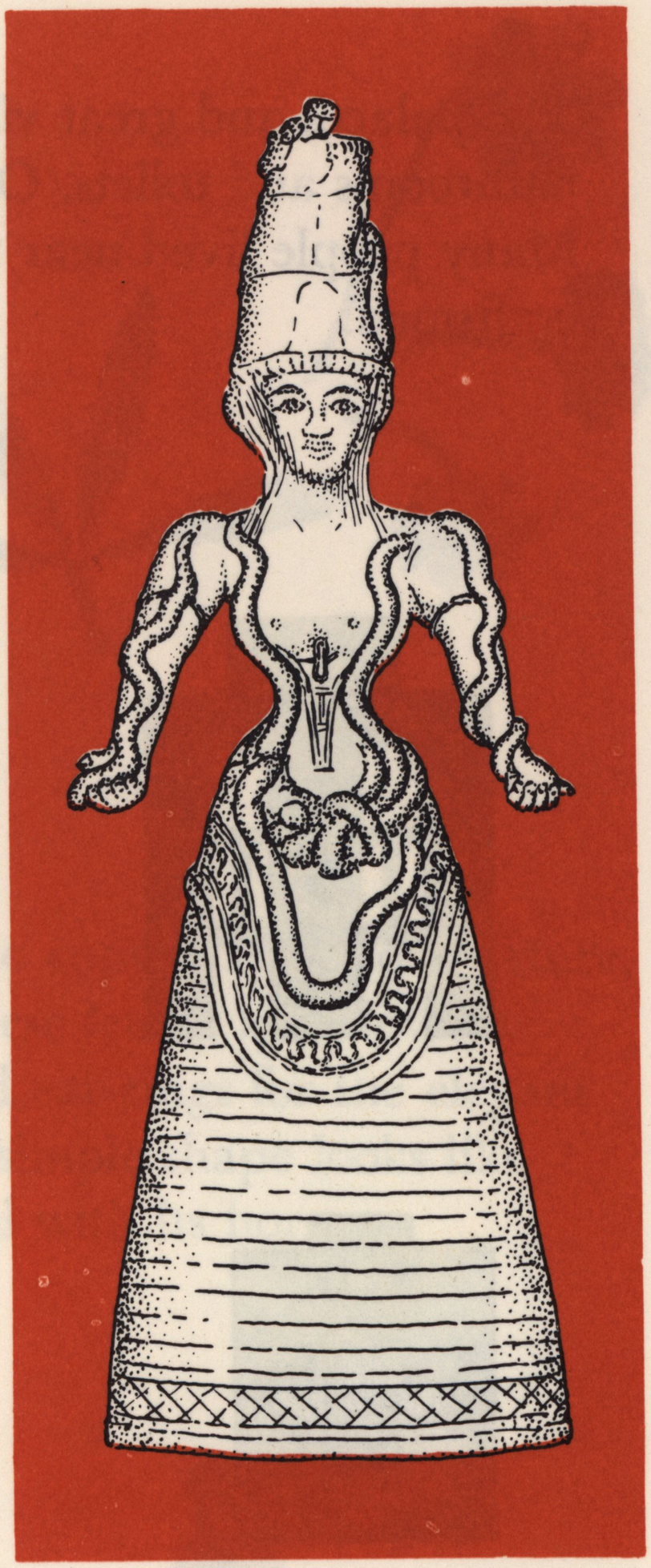


The Minoans worshipped on mountain tops, in sacred caves and in special rooms in their palaces. The kings probably also acted as chief priests.

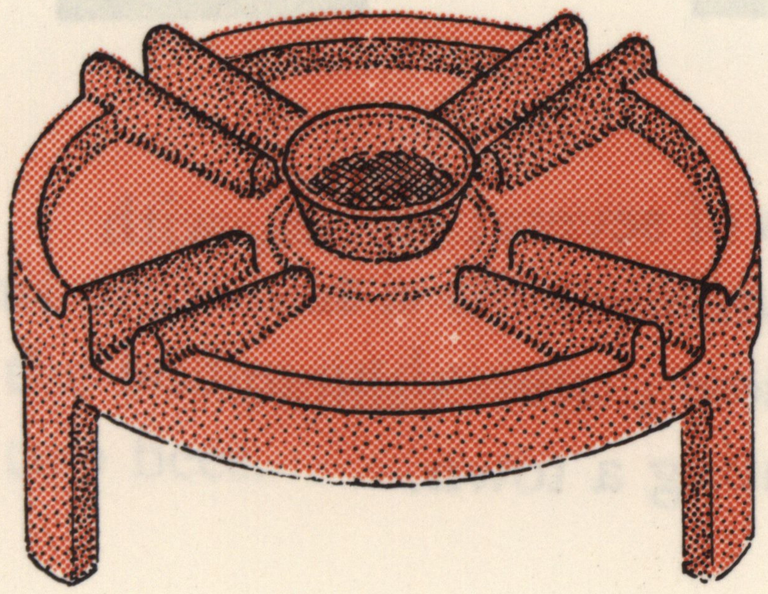


There were few pictures of gods, but many statuettes and pictures of goddesses have been found. We do not know whether it is always the same goddess shown in different roles, or several goddesses each with her own powers. Here is the goddess on a mountain with two lions. She is the great huntress, the mistress of the beasts.
She may also be the Great Mother of the gods.

The Greeks believed that the Great Mother went to Crete to give birth to Zeus, the father of future gods and men. She hid him in a cave on one of the big mountains.

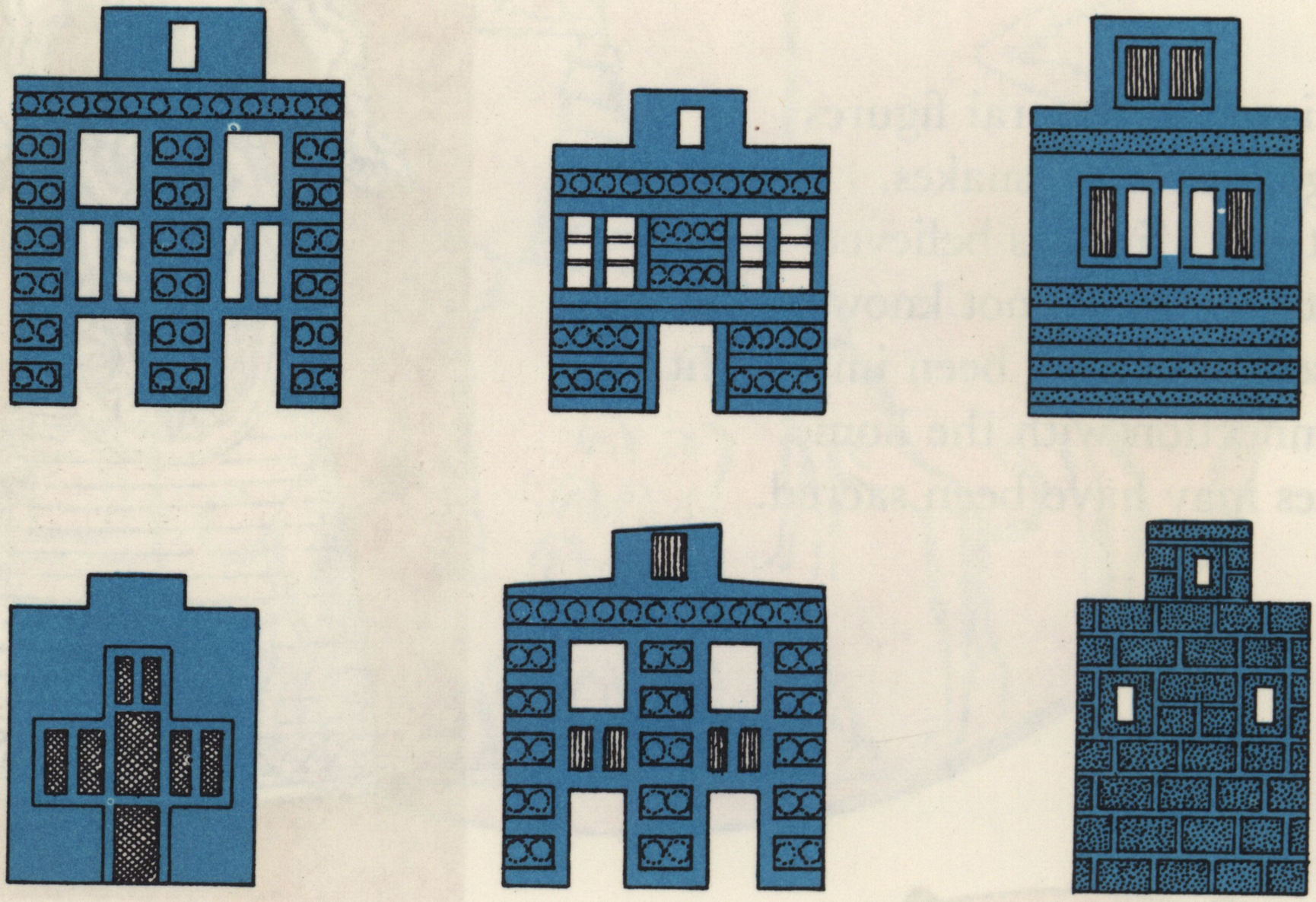


This is one of several figures of a goddess with snakes. What the Minoans believed about her, we do not know. She seems to have been important in connection with the home. Snakes may have been sacred.



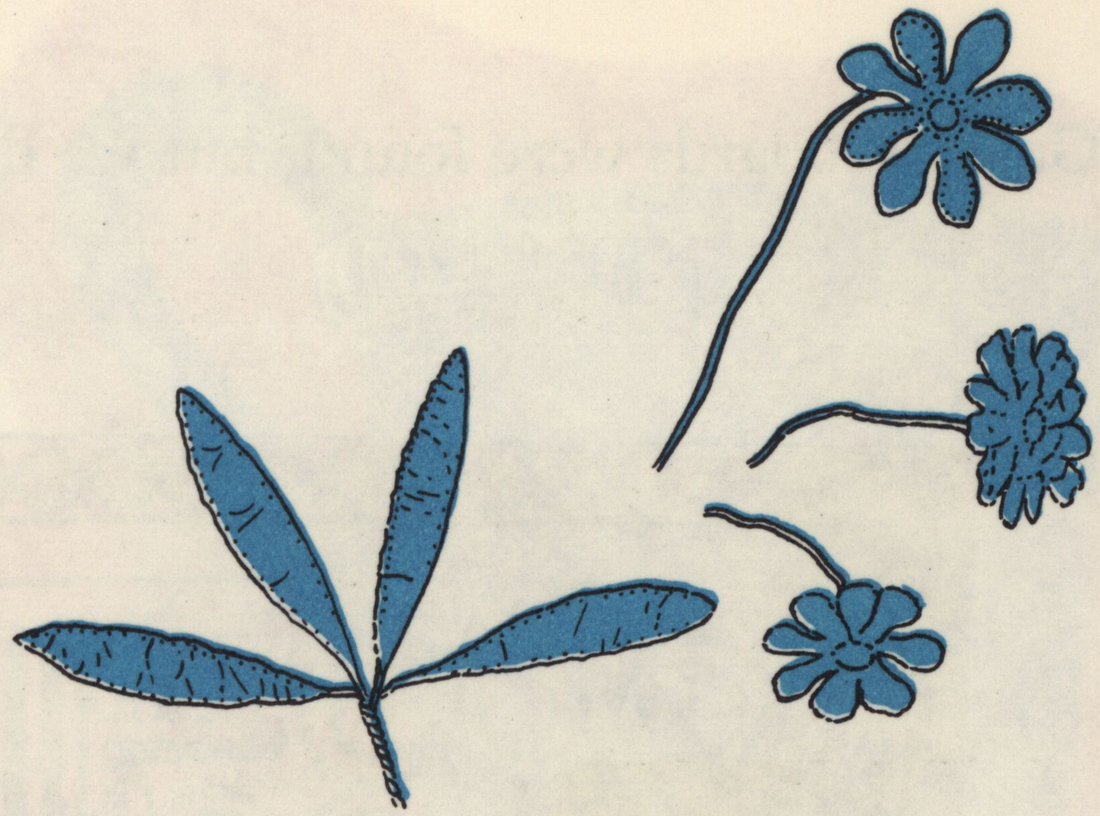
They were looked after. There were special tubes where they could rest, and tables like this for them to feed at.

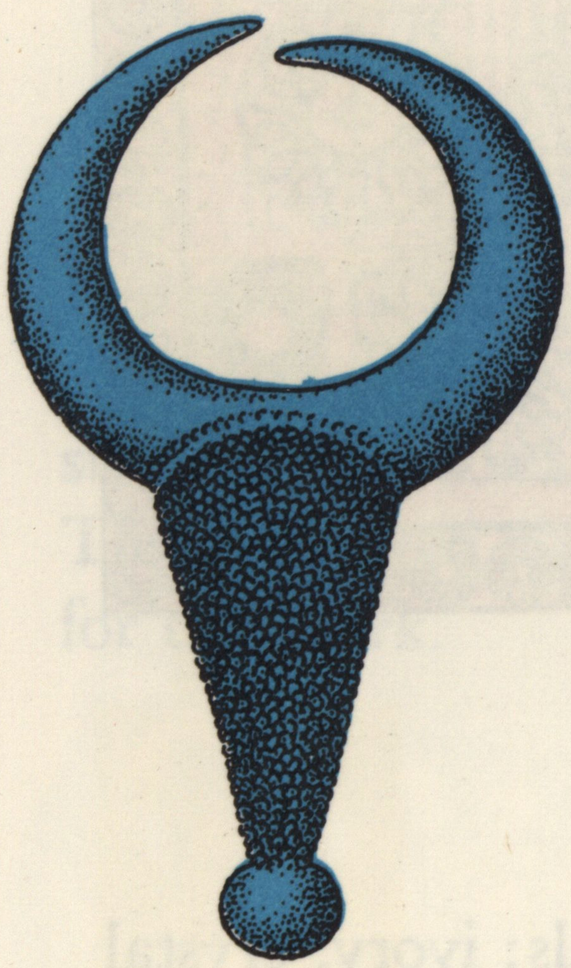
The palaces and great villas of Crete had piped water and drains, bathrooms and toilets. Open courts let in the light and air. Many people lived near the palaces, including the workmen and craftsmen.



They lived in brightly coloured houses of several stories, with storage cellars and upper floors with windows. There are several different types, as these pictures show. They are taken from a design representing a town.

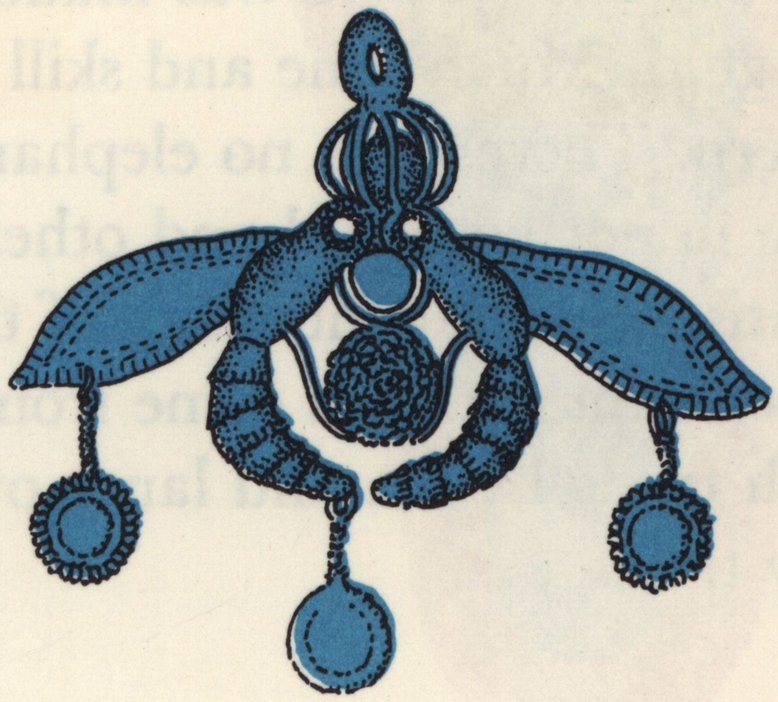
There were many workrooms in the palaces. Among the craftsmen they employed were jewellers who worked in gold.



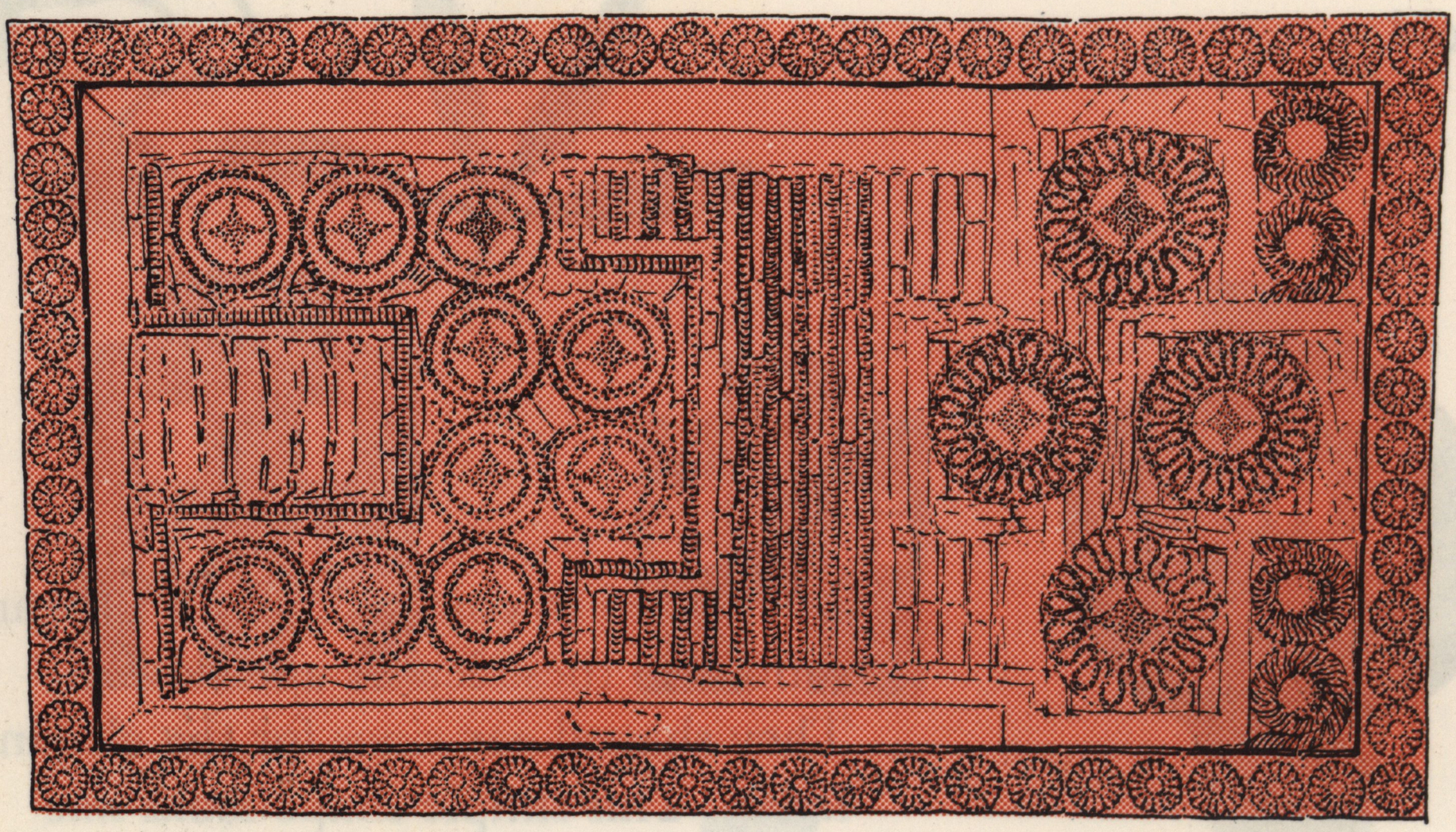


They liked to copy shapes from nature, similar to these leaves and flowers. They shaped ear-rings for the elegant ladies. This simple shape looks like a bull's head with its horns.

This ornament is composed of the bodies and wings of two bees.



Gaming boards were found, but we do not know how they were used.



The one shown here was made of costly materials: ivory, crystal and gold. Much time and skill was needed to cut its lace-like pattern. There were no elephants on the island, and ivory had to be imported. Gold and other metals had to be imported too to satisfy the elegant tastes of the Minoans.
Some of these things came from far away. But there was much trade by sea and land, over long distances, even in those early times.

Some of the craftsmen were skilled in cutting very hard stone to make seals and vases. They invented special tools for this work.

This is a vase of black stone. Some of the pictures on page 7 are from this vase. There is also a bull-jumping scene. In this way vases can tell us about people's ways.





One of the most important crafts was pottery. Minoan pots and vases were prized in other lands.
The potters made many shapes, for many uses, and decorated them with stripes and zig-zags, with flowers and wavy lines. Their free designs twisted gracefully up and around the vase.











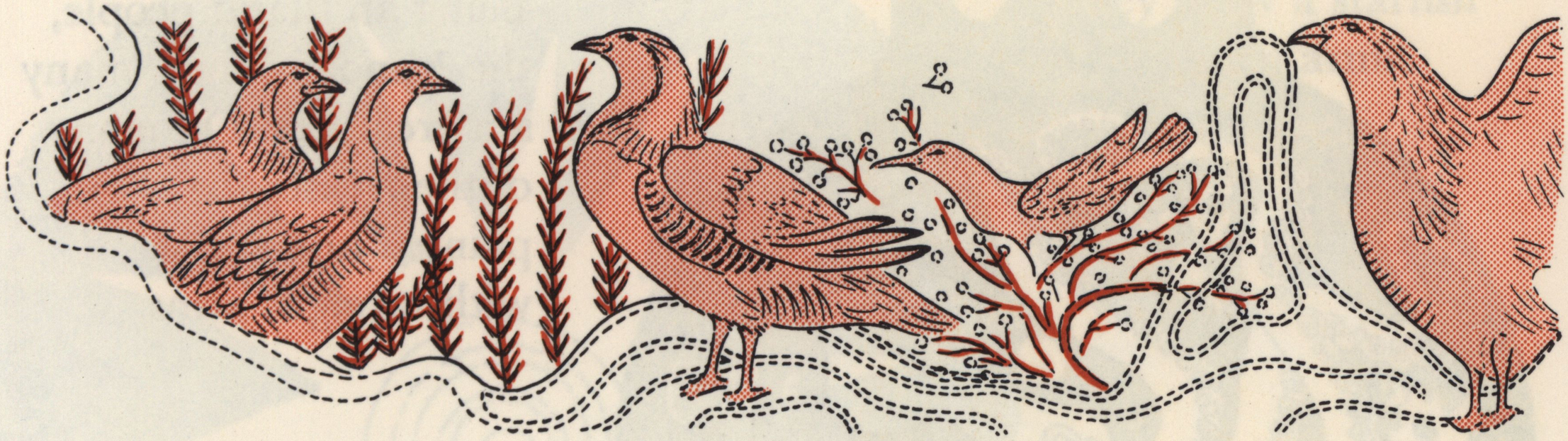
We notice some of the familiar sacred symbols: the double axe and the bull's head with its horns. We also find spirals, single and in pairs. The Minoans made oil and wine and stored them in huge jars in special storerooms. They stored barley and wheat, and probably made some sort of bread – but no ovens have been found.



From designs like these we know that there were tall lilies in Crete. From remains in the storage jars and Greek writings we know that there were grapes and olives. The Greeks, who may have learned how to grow them from the Minoans, spread this knowledge wherever they settled.



The Minoan artists observed the plants carefully before they drew them. They saw how leaves and flowers spring from the stems. They copied the beautiful shapes of nature.



In this picture they showed partridges walking on the ground and a smaller bird sitting in the branches of a bush.

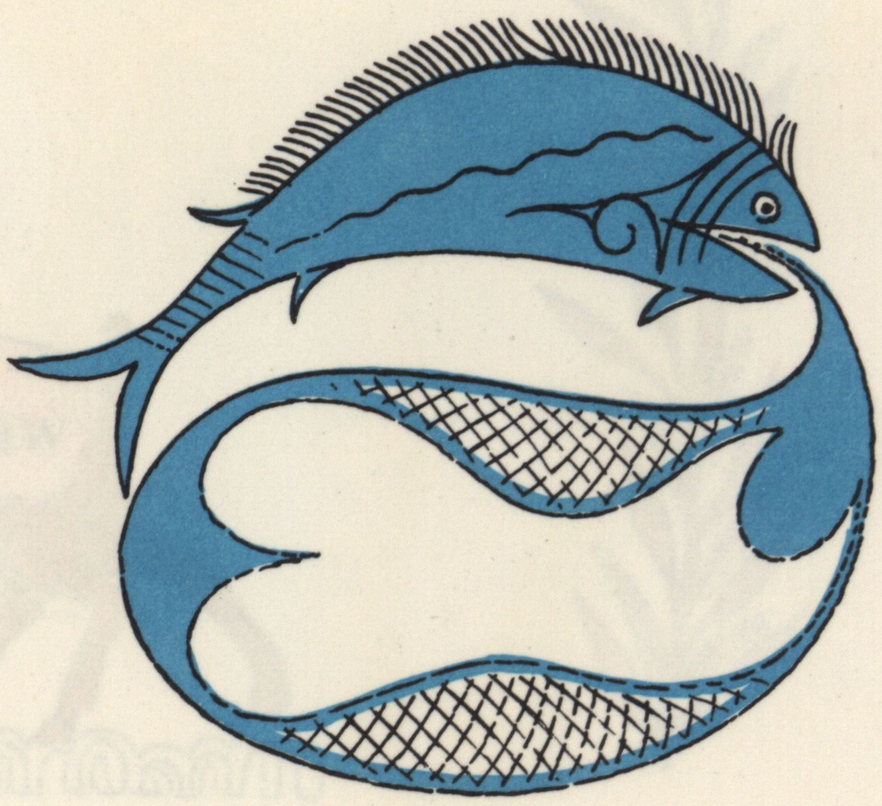
The Minoans hunted birds like partridges and pigeons.
They also hunted stags and boars, and probably trapped animals for their skins. They kept herds of sheep, cattle, goats and swine.
Here is a goat feeding her young.

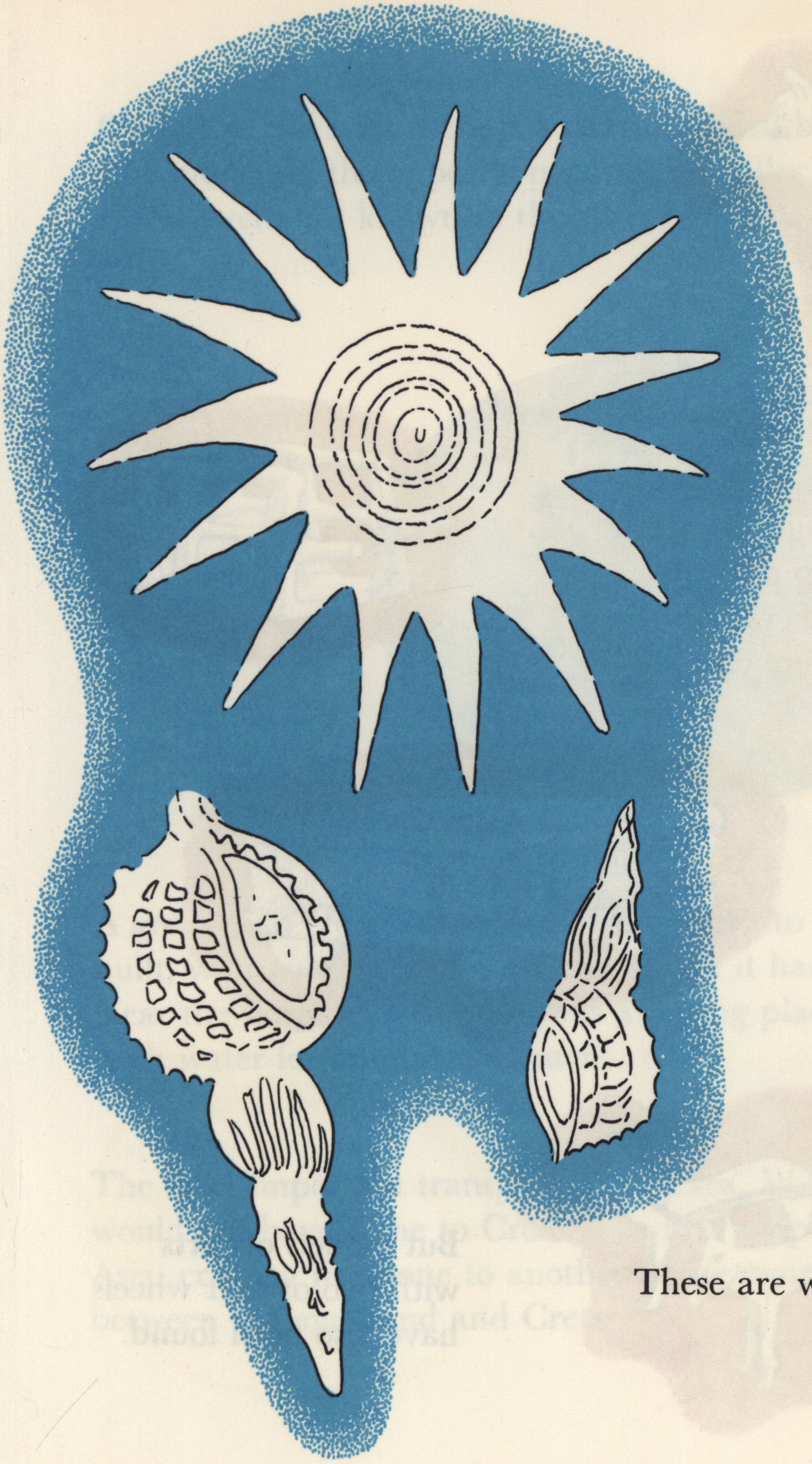




Being an island people, the Minoans knew many sea creatures. On many of their vases they painted an octopus with its eight arms.

They went out fishing in their boats—a difficult task in the deep water near the steepest part of the coast, which had no harbours. But spears, fishhooks and a fish trap have been found.





They drew a starfish
with fifteen arms.

They also drew a great
variety of shell-fish.

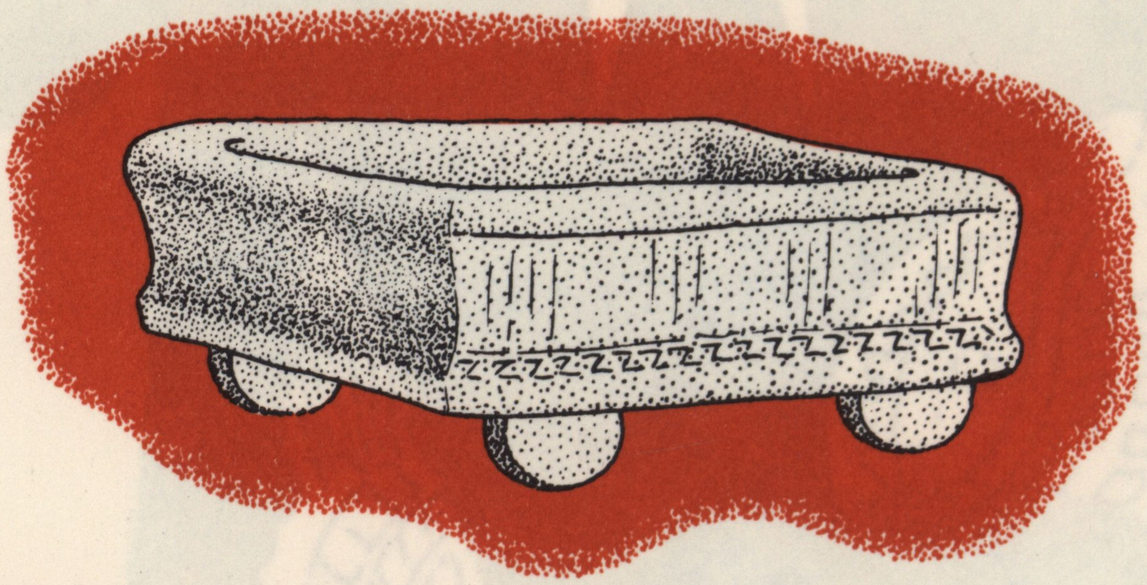
There were mussels,
crabs and oysters
along the coasts.

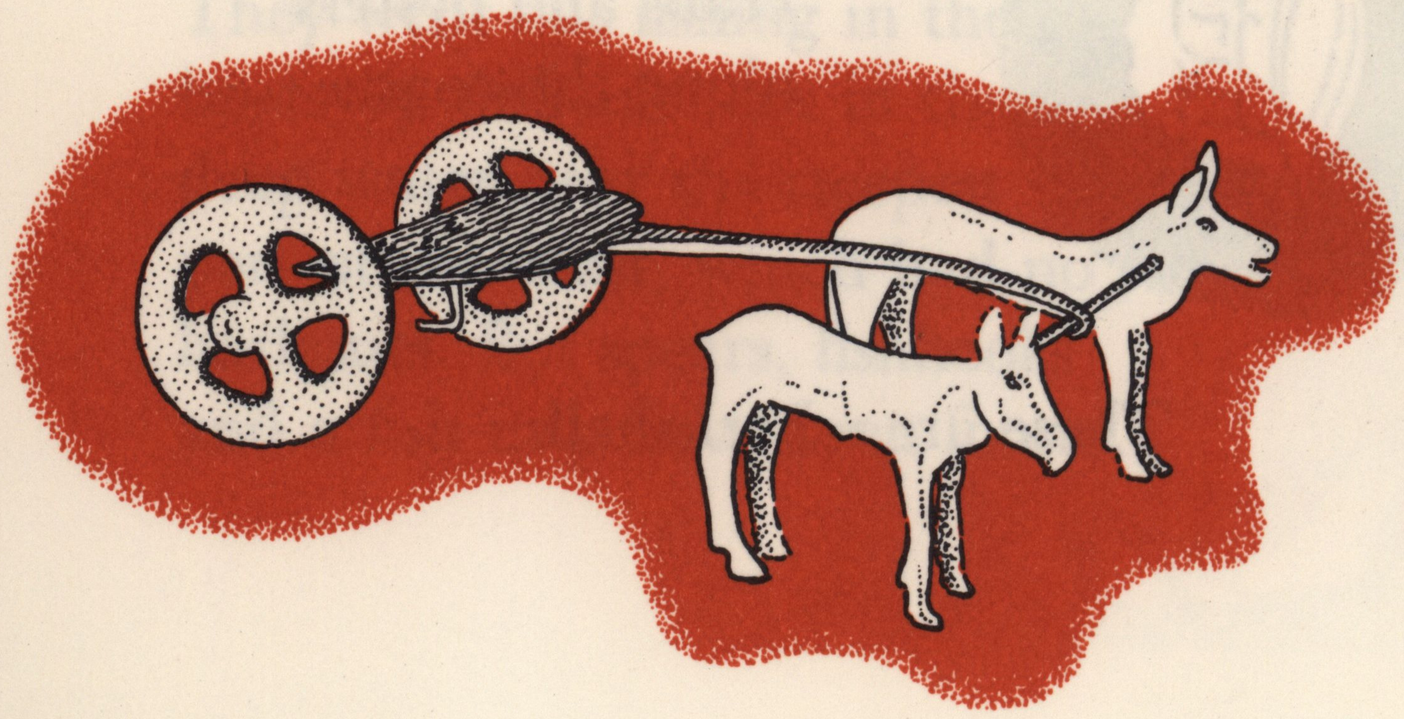
These are whorl-shells.



In Crete, a hilly country, transport was difficult. Goods were carried on long poles or on the backs of donkeys, and important people were carried in litters.

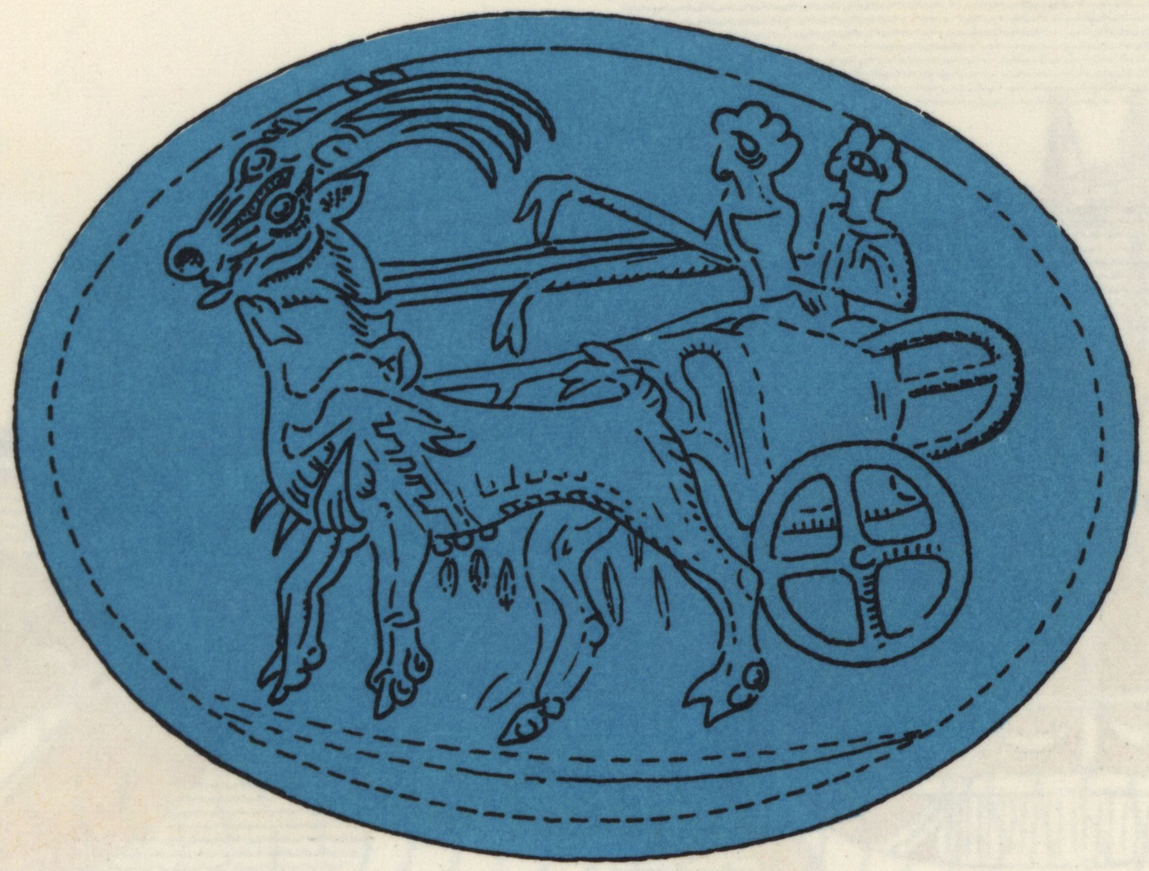






But models of carts with two or four wheels have also been found.

On one of the seals there is a chariot pulled by goats.
The model on the opposite page shows bullocks.
Horses were not known to the early Minoans.

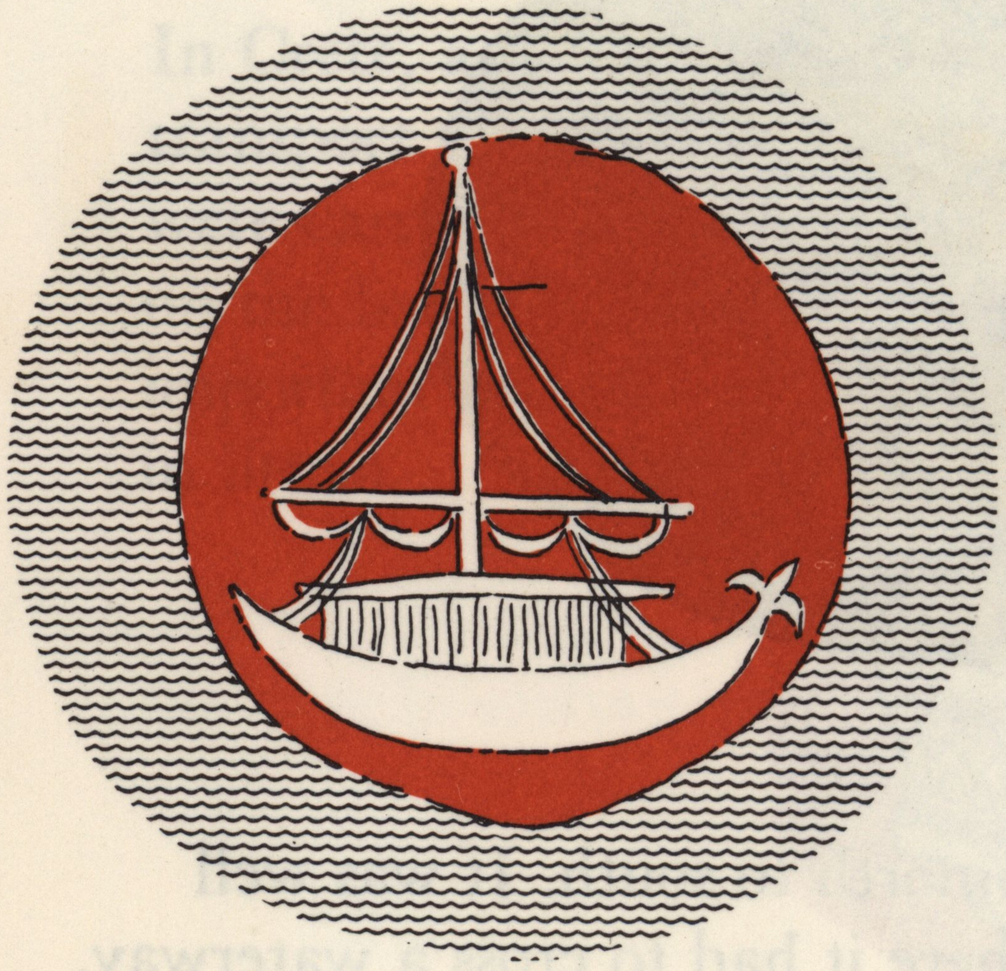


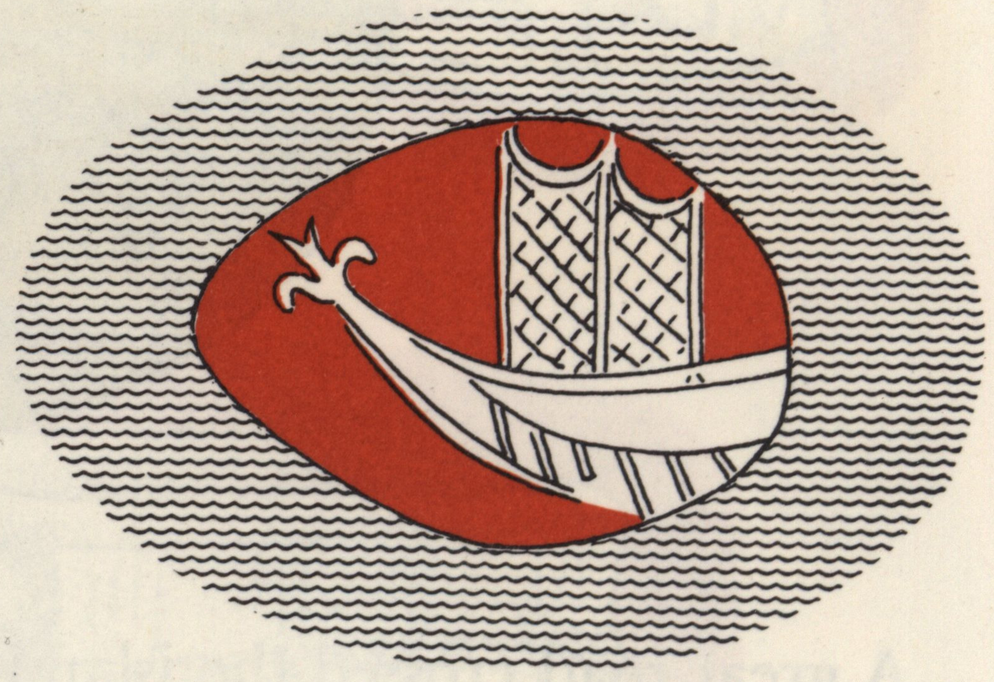
A great road crossed the island from north to south. It was well built, with culverts and a viaduct where it had to cross a waterway. Near the king's palace there was a resting place with rooms and fresh water for animals and men.

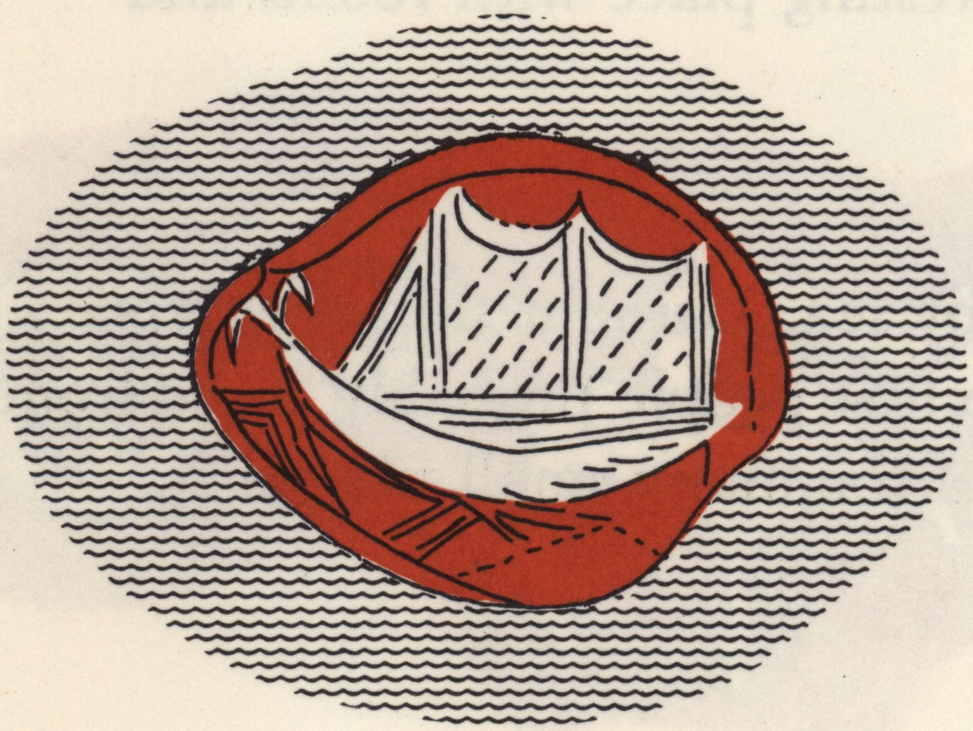
The most important transport was by sea, Without ships, settlers would not have come to Crete. The first people probably came from Asia, crossing from one to another of the many small islands between the mainland and Crete.



Without ships, the people of Crete would have been isolated from the rest of the world.

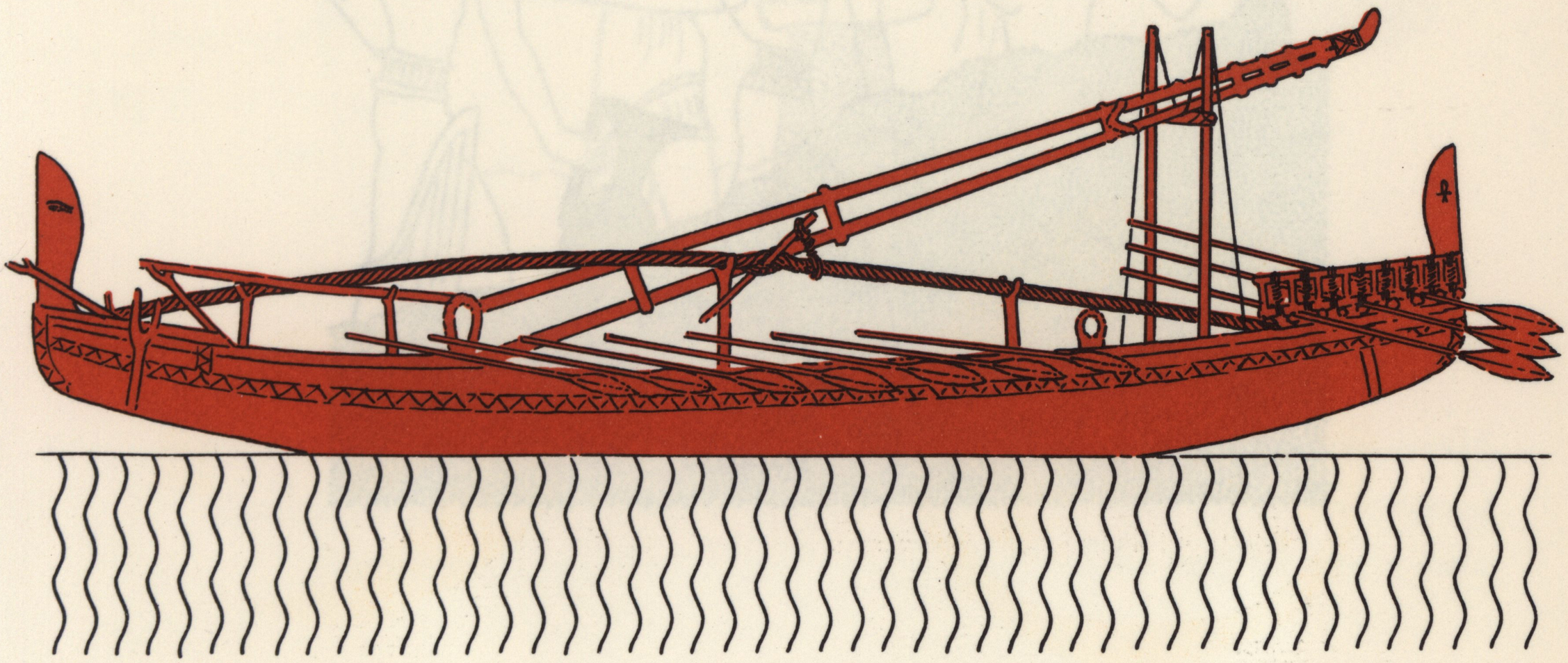






These pictures show that their ships had masts and sails as well as oars for rowing.

Other peoples living around the Mediterranean also had ships in which they visited Crete. Some came from Syria, but most were from Egypt. The Egyptians had many ships for inland travel on the Nile, but they had also a fleet in the Red Sea and another in the Mediterranean.



The Egyptians imported wood and many other things. They also exported their own products. There was contact between Egypt and Crete for a long time. As the countries developed they traded with one another.

This Egyptian ship had oars for steering as well as rowing.

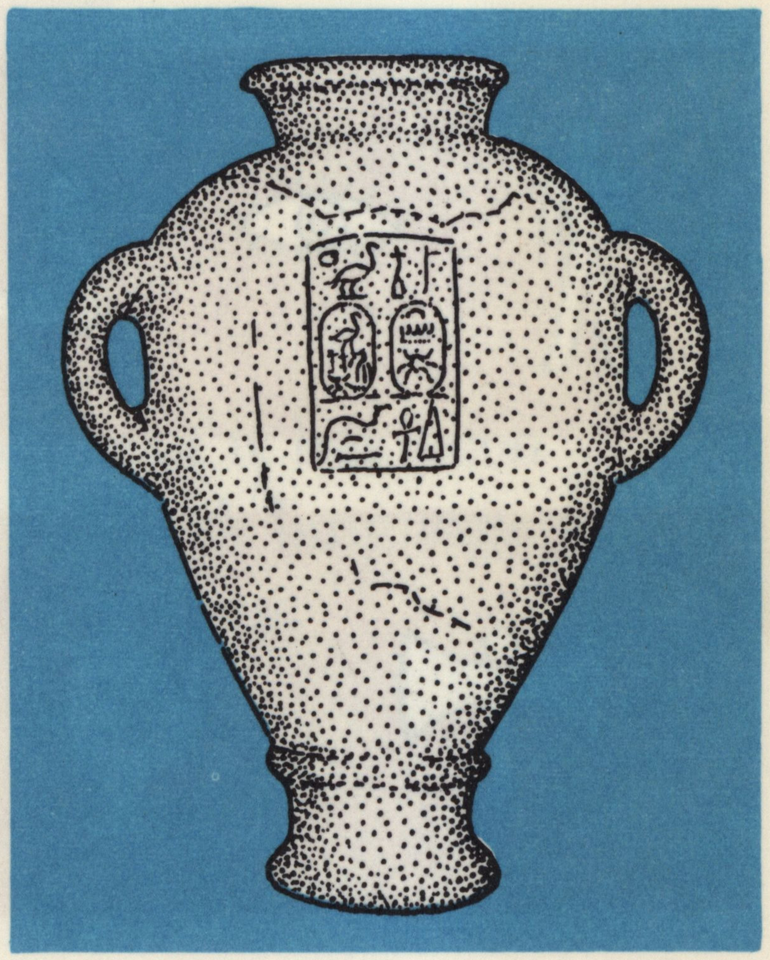


From a number of things found in the two countries and also from pictures like these, we know that Minoans and Egyptians exchanged pottery. This picture was found in an Egyptian tomb. It shows men dressed like Minoans, with tight belts around their narrow waists, carrying pots decorated with the familiar spirals and bulls' heads.

On the opposite page is a picture, made by the Minoans themselves, of cup-bearers, arching their backs as if to balance their heavy loads.



The Minoans bought Egyptian ware too. This vase shows an inscription in Egyptian hieroglyphic writing.



Writing is one of the most important things that the Minoans seem to have learned from Egypt. They took over some Egyptian symbols.



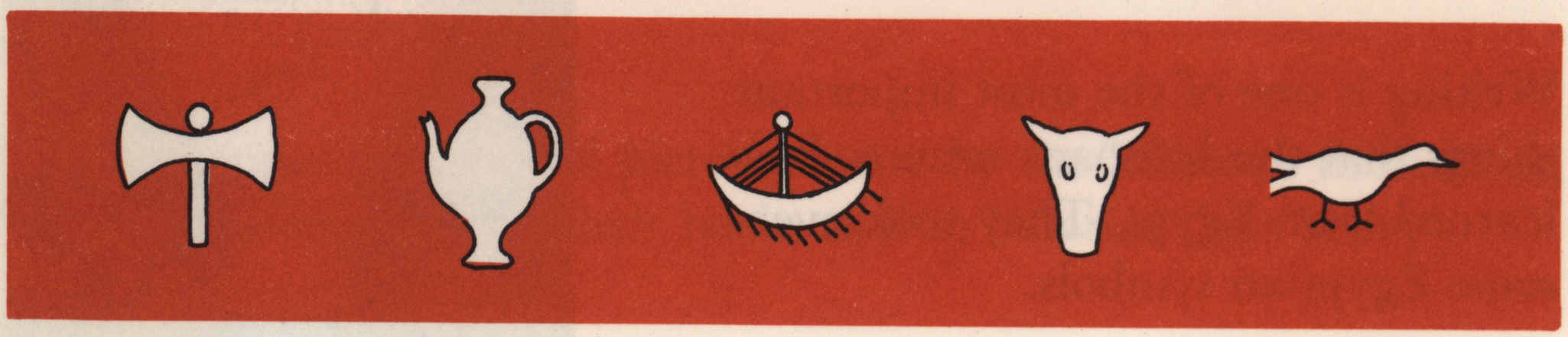


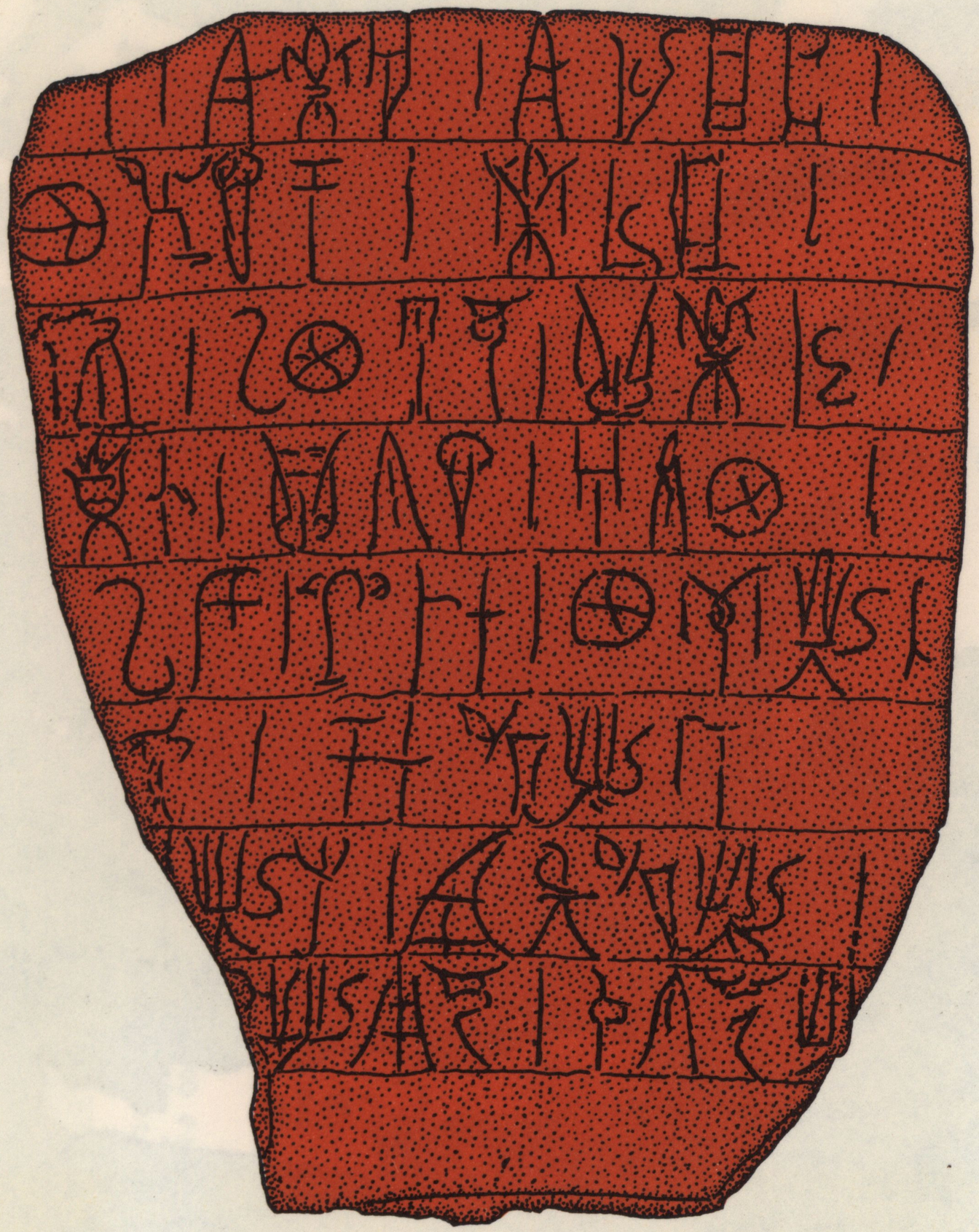
As in most countries, writing started in Crete with pictorial symbols.

But in time, as writing was more widely used, simpler geometric shapes were introduced.

Here are some of the symbols of earlier pictorial writing. We can recognise parts of a man's body and some tools in the first line, and some of the well-known sacred symbols in the second.







Here is an example of later linear writing. Some of it has been deciphered, showing that an early form of the Greek language was in use. The writing records lists of goods and weapons.



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MAY 2 3 2000

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Life on ancient Crete was peaceful. Farming and crafts, trade and art flourished. Crete was the bridge between the ancient civilisations of the East and the new ones growing up along the southern coasts of Europe. The Greek cities were already becoming powerful when fires and earthquakes destroyed the palaces of Crete for the last time.

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