

Sports Illustrated: Sports in Minoan Civilization as Further Evidence of Warfare

The lifestyle and activities of the Minoan civilization have long been contentious topics of debate, due partly to the limited amount of extant information, and past affirmation of Sir Arthur Evans' *pax Minoica*. In opposition, recent studies of weaponry from the Early Minoan and Middle Minoan periods have examined short-range, intermediary-range, and long-range weapons as evidence of warfare in the Minoan civilization (Branigan 1999, McCreery 2010, Molloy 2010). While weapons have been considered in the discussion as evidence of warfare, other evidence of violence and warlike behavior, such as sports, has yet to be considered. As well, the psychological effect of sports must be considered to understand the effect that this behavior had on the Minoan civilization. The goal of this paper is to determine the extent of warfare within Minoan society by examining evidence of their sports and compare this to prior research of weaponry and warfare of the Minoans, using psychological theories of sport and behavior.

While a strong force of unity among individuals and an opportunity to gain individual prestige, sports connote a societal prevalence of combative actions stemming from a culture familiar with warfare. More intense and dangerous sport, therefore, would be an indicator for greater enthusiasm of warlike behaviors. This similarity of expression of war and sports creates an analogous representation which can be used as a basis of comparison (Sipes 1973). The Minoan civilization participated in a series of violent and extreme sports throughout the palatial periods as depicted in art and material culture remains. The sports that I will present in this paper, boxing and bull-sports, display a dramatic yet dangerous view of violence in the Minoan civilization.

Boxing is best distinguished within two distinct pieces in the record of the Minoan civilization. The first and most prominent is the “Boxing Children” fresco from Akrotiri, c. 1600 BC. This image depicts two youths with boxing gloves on their right hands, of which the Minoan civilization may have been the first to use (Murray 2010), and are facing each other in the midst of a fight. As well, a black soapstone rhyton, termed the “Boxer vase,” found at Hagia Triada, c. 1500 BC, has four relief sections which depict several scenes of distress and fighting. This rhyton is characterized by active boxing scenes as well as scenes of individuals running from both fighters and bulls which intend to gore them (Murray 2010). These bipolar scenes of calm sporting and distressful fighting provide a spectrum of sport and violence which the Minoans actively participated in.

Bull-sports appear most famously in the “Toreador” or “Bull Leaping” fresco at Knossos depicting three individuals, one holding on to either side of the bull while a single individual attempts to leap over the back of the bucking bull. Within the context of this sport, I plan to discuss the various skin tone theories of the fresco in association with social differentiation and individual participation in this violent behavior (Kyle 2014). I also look to pull in bull-leaping imagery from lentoid seals, and further discuss the bull imagery from the “Boxer vase”. Based on this evidence, I will discuss the possibilities of an individual’s level and type of participation in bull-sports and the level of danger associated to the individual’s participation links to the danger and adrenaline associated with battle.

Using this information, I look to demonstrate the scope of warlike behavior and activities among the Minoans outside of the obvious weaponry seen in the archaeological record. This data will then be further examined within extant psychological theories in order to interpret the Minoan’s level of participation and individual expression within sports, as evidence of

participatory warfare. Ultimately, this analysis will explore how sports, their participation and psychological repercussions, will expand the topic of warfare in Minoan civilization.

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