



18 Minoan Bull-leaper

Bronze statue of bull and acrobat, found in Crete, Greece
1700–1450 BC

A small bronze sculpture of a bull with a figure leaping over it is now one of the highlights of the British Museum's Minoan collection. It comes from the Mediterranean island of Crete, where it was made around 3,700 years ago.

The bull and the leaper are both made of bronze, and together they're about 5 centimetres (2 inches) long and between 10 and 13 centimetres (4 or 5 inches) high. The bull is in full gallop – legs outstretched and head raised – and the figure is leaping over it in a great arching somersault. It's probably a young man. He's seized the bull's horns and thrown his body right over, so that we see him at the point where his body has completely flipped. The two arching figures echo each other – the outward curve of the boy's body being answered by the inward curve of the bull's spine. It's a most dynamic and beautiful piece of sculpture, and it carries us at once into the reality – and, no less important, the myth – of the history of Crete.

The image is a literal representation of something that to most people today is just a metaphor – 'taking the bull by the horns' is what we're all meant to do when confronted with the big moral problems of life. But archaeology suggests that about 4,000 years ago a whole civilization seems to have been collectively fascinated by both the idea and the act of confronting the bull. Just why they were is one of the many mysteries of a society at the crossroads of Africa, Asia and Europe that played a key role in shaping what we now call the Middle East. It was a society that Homer described in lyric terms:

Out in the middle of the wine-dark sea, there is a land called Crete, a rich and lovely land washed by the sea on every side; and in it are many peoples and ninety cities. There, one language mingles with another ... Among the cities is Knossos, a great city; and there Minos was nine years king, the boon companion of mighty Zeus.

In Greek myth, Minos, ruler of Crete, had a complex relationship with bulls. He was the son of the beautiful Europa by Zeus, king of the gods, but in order to father her and abduct Europa, Zeus had turned himself into a bull. Minos's wife in turn had conceived an unnatural passion for a very beautiful bull, and the fruit of that obsession was the Minotaur, half-man, half-bull. Minos was so ashamed of his monstrous stepson that he had him imprisoned in an underground labyrinth, and there the Minotaur devoured a regular supply of maidens and youths sent every year by Athens – until, that is, the Greek hero Theseus succeeded in killing him. The story of Theseus and the Minotaur, of man first burying then confronting and slaying his monstrous demons, has been told and retold for centuries, by Ovid, Plutarch, Virgil and others. It's part of the high canon of Greek myth, of Freudian psychology and of European art.

Archaeologists were captivated by these tales. Just over a hundred years ago, when Arthur Evans explored the island and decided to dig at Knossos, the bulls and monsters, palaces and labyrinths of Crete were very much in his mind. So although we have no idea what the people of this rich civilization around 1700 BC actually called themselves, Evans, believing he was uncovering the world of Minos, called them quite simply Minoans, and they've remained Minoans to archaeologists ever since. In his extensive excavations, Evans uncovered the remains of a vast building complex, finding pottery and jewellery, carved stone seals, ivory, gold and bronze, and colourful frescoes, often depicting bulls; and he sought to interpret these finds in the light of the familiar myths. He was eager to reconstruct the role that the bulls might have played in the island's economic and ceremonial life, so he was particularly interested in the discovery, some distance from Knossos, of the 'Minoan' bull-leaper.

It's thought to have come from Rethymnon, a town on the north coast of the island, and it was probably originally deposited as an offering in a mountain shrine or in a cave sanctuary. Objects like this are often found in these holy places of Crete, suggesting that cattle played an important role in local religious rituals. Many scholars since Evans have tried to explain why these images were so important. They've asked what bull-leaping was for, and even if it was actually possible. Evans thought it was part of a festival in honour of a mother goddess. Others disagree, but bull-leaping has often been seen as a religious performance, possibly involving the sacrifice of the animal, and even occasionally the death of the leaper. Certainly, in this sculpture, both bull and human are engaged in a highly dangerous exercise. Being able to vault the animals would have taken months of training. We can say this with confidence, because the sport still survives today in parts of France and Spain. Sergio Delgado, a leading modern-day bull-leaper – or, to use the proper Spanish term, *recortador* – explains:

There has always been a kind of game between men and bulls, always. There is not a proper school for *recortadores*. You just learn how to understand the animal and how he will react to the arena. You only get this knowledge with experience.

There are three main techniques we had to learn: first the *recorte de riñón* [the 'kidney cut']; second it's the *quiebro* [the 'break' or the 'swing']; the third one is the *salto* [or 'leap'], which is mainly jumping right over the bull in a different variety of styles.

The bulls are not injured before the match, like in bullfighting. The bull never dies in the arena. We are risking our lives here, we get butted and gored as frequently as bullfighters. The bull is unpredictable. He is the one in charge. We never lose respect for the bull.

This continuing reverence for the bull is a fascinating contemporary echo of the suggestion made by some scholars that bull-leaping on Crete at the time of this little statue probably had a religious significance. Even the valuable bronze it's made of suggests an offering to the gods.

The sculpture was made around 1700 BC, in the middle of what archaeologists call the Bronze Age, when huge advances in making metals transformed the way humans could shape the world. Bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, is much harder and cuts much better than copper or gold; once discovered, it was widely used to make tools and weapons for more than a thousand years. But it also makes very beautiful sculpture, so it was frequently used for precious, probably devotional objects.

The British Museum bull sculpture was cast using the lost-wax technique. The artist first models his vision in wax, then he moulds clay around it. This is put into a fire, which hardens the clay and melts the wax. The molten wax is drained off, and in its place a bronze alloy is poured into the mould, so that it takes on the exact form the wax had occupied. When it cools, the mould is broken to reveal the bronze, which can then be finished – polished, inscribed or filed – to produce the final sculpture. Although the bull-leaper is quite badly corroded – it has degraded to a greenish-brown colour – when made it would have been a striking object. It would never of course have been quite as sparkling as gold, but it would have had a powerful, seductive gleam.

The bronze that made sculptures like this one gleam lets our bull move from myth into history. At first sight it is a surprise that it's made of bronze at all, since neither copper nor tin – both of which are needed to make bronze – are found on Crete. Both came from much further afield, with the copper coming from Cyprus – the very name of which means the 'copper island' – or from the eastern Mediterranean coast. But the tin had an even longer journey, travelling along trade routes from eastern Turkey, perhaps even from Afghanistan; and it was often in short supply, because those trade routes were frequently disrupted by pirates.

Within the sculpture itself you can actually see something of that struggle to secure the tin supplies. There clearly wasn't quite enough tin in the alloy, which explains why the surface is rather pock-marked, and also why the structure is weak, so that the hind legs of the bull have broken off.

But even if the proportions of the alloy were less than ideal, the very existence of the tin and copper – both from outside Crete – tells us that the Minoans were moving around and trading by sea. Indeed, Crete was a major player in a vast network of trade and diplomacy that covered the eastern Mediterranean – often focused on the exchange of metals, and all linked by maritime travel. The maritime archaeologist Dr Lucy Blue, of Southampton University, tells us more:

The small bronze statuette from Minoan Crete is a very good indicator of this key commodity, bronze, that was sought after throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Unfortunately, we have only a limited number of shipwrecks to substantiate these trading activities, but one of the shipwrecks that we have is that of the *Uluburun*, which was found off the Turkish coast. The *Uluburun* was carrying 15 tons of cargo, 9 tons of which was copper in the form of ingots. She was also carrying a very rich cargo of other goods – amber from the Baltic, pomegranates, pistachio nuts, and a

wealth of manufactured goods, including bronze and gold statuettes, beads of different materials, large numbers of tools and weapons.

There are still many unanswered questions about the rich Minoan civilization involved in this kind of trade. The word 'palace', which Evans used to describe the large buildings he excavated, suggests royalty, but in fact these buildings seem rather to have been religious, political and economic centres. They were architecturally complex places, housing a great variety of activities, one of them the administration of trade and produce, organizing the large population of craftsmen who wove cloth and worked the imported gold, ivory and bronze. Without that whole society of skilled artisans our bull-leaper would not exist.

Frescoes in the palace at Knossos show large gatherings of people, suggesting that these were also ceremonial and religious centres. Yet despite more than a century of excavation the Minoans still remain enticingly enigmatic and our knowledge remains frustratingly fragmentary. Objects like this little bronze statue of the bull-leaper tell us a lot about one aspect of Crete's history – its central role in the mastery of metals which, in a few centuries, transformed the world. It also asserts the perpetual fascination of mythical Crete as the site where we confront in ourselves the most disturbing links between man and beast. When Picasso in the 1920s and 1930s wanted to explore the bestial elements that were denaturing European politics, he turned instinctively to the palace of Minoan Crete, to that underground labyrinth and to that encounter between man and bull that still haunts us all ... the battle with the Minotaur.