

Clues to the Location of Bull Jumping at Zakro

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The cult of the bull was one of the major symbols in Minoan society and an important aspect of Minoan religious practices. One facet of this interest in bulls was the extraordinary activity of bull jumping. Although there is little doubt these spectacular feats occurred, questions still remain concerning the exact location of these events. There are, however, clues which point to the central courts of Minoan palaces as the site where these daring activities took place. Three of the four major palaces—Knossos, Phaestos, and Mallia—all possess certain features that may link the bull jump to the central courts of these palaces.¹ An examination of Zakro, the last of the major sites,² was undertaken to determine whether the palace possesses features that could link the bull jump to the central court.

Zakro is located at the eastern end of Crete and, although it is in a remote location, the palace apparently had an important role in the economy of the culture. Zakro was very likely the main link between Crete and the East, which may explain why the Minoans built such a fine palace at this particular location. Remains of materials not indigenous to Crete have been found at the palace.³ Moreover, it seems that Zakro was the nearest and safest port for goods being imported from the East. By landing at Zakro, boats avoided the dangerous path around the northeast tip of the island.⁴

It is appropriate to review briefly the attributes possessed by Knossos, Phaestos, and Mallia that link the bull jump to the central courts: 1) there was access to the central courts without leading the animal through the interior of the palace; 2) there was a suitable area for detaining the bull; 3) the central

1. The actual location of the Minoan bull-jumping exhibitions is still unresolved. Some scholars argue for a central court site while others feel these activities took place outside the confines of palaces. For a detailed discussion on the subject see J. W. Graham, "The Central Court as the Minoan Bull Ring," *American Journal of Archaeology* 61 (1957): 255; J. W. Graham, *The Palace of Crete* (Princeton, 1969), 73-83; James G. Thompson, "The Location of Minoan Bull Sports: A Consideration of the Problem," *Journal of Sport History* 13 (Spring 1986): 5-13; and James G. Thompson, *The Bull Jumping Exhibitions at Mallia*, *Archaeological News* 14 (1985): 1-8.

2. Scholars disagree on palaces classified as major sites. Graham, *The Palaces*, does not include Zakro as a major site. His comments were made several years ago, prior to recent investigations led by N. Platon. Graham, however, stated that eventually Zakro would be very similar to Phaestos and Mallia. On the other hand, William R. Biers, *The Archaeology of Greece* (London, 1987), 30 classifies Zakro as a major site, as does Sinclair Hood, *The Minoans* (London, 1971), 65.

3. Gerald Cadogan, *Palaces of Minoan Crete* (London, 1976): 124.

4. *Ibid.*

courts provided adequate spectator accommodations, including a safe area for viewing; 4) there was a system in place to keep the bull confined to the central court; and 5) there are objects located in the northwest sector of the central courts which have been interpreted by some scholars as vaulting devices used to assist vaulters in their jumps.⁵ Regarding Zakro, I believe it is possible to associate all of the above criteria to the central court and, thus, link the bull vault to that location.

One of the obvious arguments for the central court theory is access to the central court without leading the bull through the interior of the palace. While elaborate systems have been identified at other palace sites supporting this hypothesis,⁶ Zakro appears to offer a much simpler solution. The site plans clearly show two major entrances from the exterior of the palace leading to the central court (Fig. 1): a northern entry, numbered 17, that led to an open area with apparent easy access to the central court and a southern entry, numbered 9. Use of the southern entrance would have provided a direct route to the central court (Figs. 1 and 2) and eliminated the need for an area inside the palace. The animal could have been directed, or, better yet, allowed to find its way to the central court the moment the contests commenced. The other alternative would have been the use of the northern entrance and the detainment of the bull in the large open area adjacent to the central court until the exhibitions started. Either option would suffice.

The features needed for safe and adequate spectator accommodations are present at Zakro. Along the western side of the central court there remains evidence of a staircase which led to a second floor. This arrangement could have provided spectators a safe vantage point for viewing the exhibitions.⁷ Below the second story were apartments (Fig. 1, numbers 2, 3, and 4) which offered a safe view of central court festivities. The eastern side contained the royal living quarters (Fig. 1, numbers 14 and 15) which also could have served as an observation area for the family of the king.

Along the eastern side, in front of the royal suites, there appear to have been two columns with some evidence of a foundation between each column (Fig. 1. Columns are represented by two small black squares located in front of the royal family area numbered 14). It is tempting to suggest that the foundation may have served the same purpose as the stone foundation at Mallia,⁸ which contains post holes that held a temporary barrier or fence. Since the foundations are missing, perhaps they were made of wood similar to the foundations along the eastern side of the central court at Knossos.⁹ This would explain the lack of archaeological evidence. The Grandstand Fresco from Knossos suggests that vertical

5. Thompson, "The Location of Minoan Bull Sports," 5-13; and James G. Thompson, "Clues to the Location of Minoan Bull Jumping from the Palace at Knossos," *Journal of Sport History* 16 (Spring 1989): 62-63.

6. Thompson, "Clues to the Location," 63-64.

7. Cadogan, *Palaces of Minoan Crete*, 127. This characteristic was present at other major sites. For additional information see, J. W. Graham, "Window, Recesses and the Piano Nobile," *American Journal of Archaeology* 64 (1960): 333; and Thompson, "The Location of Minoan Bull Sports," 11-12.

8. Graham, "The Central Court," 258; and Thompson, "The Location of Minoan Bull Sports," 11.

9. Graham, "The Central Court," 259.



Fig. 1. Plan of the palace at Zakro (Sinclair Hood, *The Minoans* [London, 1971], fig. 33). Reproduced by permission.

posts were placed in horizontal wood beams and, of course, no actual trace of these beams are in evidence.¹⁰ The fresco has been interpreted as an audience witnessing a bull-leaping contest.¹¹ These arrangements had two purposes: the temporary barrier provided a safe viewing area for spectators and also stood as a restraining fence, thus keeping the animal contained in the central court. It seems plausible that the eastern side of the central court at Zakro offered a similar configuration.

While Zakro seems to possess four of the five criteria deemed necessary by the advocates of the central court theory, the fifth criterion, evidence of a vaulting device, also seems possible.¹² Some type of object is present in the northwest corner of the central court (Fig. 3). Graham has hinted that the square

10. Ibid; and Graham, "Window, Recesses," 333.

11. A. Ward, "The Cretan Bull Sports," *Antiquity* 42 (1968): 119.

12. The vaulting device theory can be considered an attribute only if the arguments presented by Graham, Ward and Thompson are correct. For more detailed information see Graham, "The Central Court," 260; Ward, "The Cretan Bull Sports," 119; Thompson, "The Bull-Jumping Exhibitions," 1-8.



Fig. 2. Southern entrance to Zakro leading directly to the central court. (Photo by author)

construction may have served as a device used by bull vaulters.¹³ Hood refers to the object as possibly the base of an altar, while Cadogan is more emphatic and identifies the square stone as the remains of an altar.¹⁴ An altar, used in a sporting context, seems unconventional to be sure. Ward and Graham, however, are of the opinion that a religious altar could not only have served its ceremonial function, but may have also been used as a jumping off platform or even a place of safety for bull jumpers.¹⁵ Younger is of the opinion that bull leapers may have approached bulls from above, which implies a platform of some sort.¹⁶

It seems that Zakro possesses characteristics consistent with the other major palace sites linking the bull jump to the central court. There is, however, one attribute that Zakro does not have that Knossos, Phaestos and Mallia do possess; that is, similar central court size. Zakro's central court, although oriented in a north-south direction, as the other sites, is smaller. The central court measures approximately 30.30 x 12.15 m., while those at the other major sites are nearly twice as large.¹⁷ It would seem problematic that the smaller court at Zakro (Fig. 4) was adequate in size to hold bull-leaping activities. A smaller central court area, however, could have contributed to better control of the bull by

13. Thompson, "The Location of Minoan Bull-Sports," 13 n. 27.

14. Hood, *The Minoans*, 65; and Cadogan, *Palaces of Minoan Crete*, 126.

15. Ward, "The Cretan Bull Sports," 119; and J. W. Graham, "Egyptian Features at Phaestos," *American Journal of Archaeology* 74 (1970): 232. It should be noted that Pelon disagrees with the idea of altars being used in a sporting context. He suggests they would have been a drawback to the bull-jumping contests. See Pelon, "Le Palais de Malia et Les Jeux de Taureaux," in *Rayonnement Grec* (Brussels, 1982), 56.

16. John G. Younger, "Bronze Age Representation of Aegean Bull-Leaping," *American Journal of Archaeology* 80 (1976): 135.

17. Cadogan, *Palaces of Minoan Crete*, 126. The central courts at Knossos, Phaestos and Mallia measure 52 x 24 m., 51 x 23 m., and 48 x 22 m. For additional information see Graham, "The Central Court," 255.

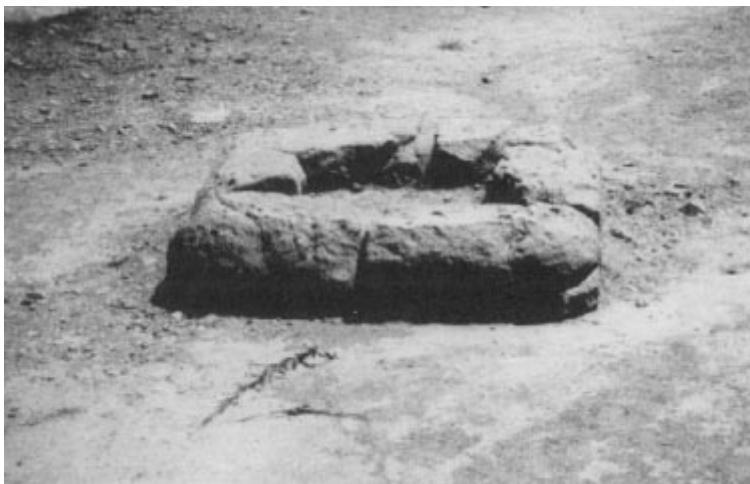


Fig. 3. Stone object in northwest sector of central court at Zakro. (Photo by author)

reducing the area available for running or galloping,¹⁸ and still permit the Zakro bull-leapers the opportunity to attempt their acrobatic maneuvers.¹⁹

While disagreement is abundant regarding the exact location of Minoan bull jumping, the detractors of the central court theory have yet to support satisfactorily their contention of an area exterior to the central courts of the palaces. To date, there has not been any archaeological evidence to support their theory.²⁰ By simply stating that these exhibitions may have taken place in an open field is not very convincing. In fact, Castleden is of the opinion that the central courts were indeed the area where the bull leaping contests took place. He is emphatic about the location since he has labeled the central court as the “bull-court” in the site plans of Knossos depicted in his latest text.²¹ I Moreover, he further states

18. According to David Martin, a rodeo and livestock contractor and producer, a bull would not necessarily have been inhibited in a smaller area approximately the size of the Zakro central court. Martin stated that it is quite common for bulls, after four or five strides, to attain top speed. Moreover, in major rodeo productions the bull “ring” size is deliberately reduced by installing temporary panels in the arena area. Martin said it was an acknowledged fact among rodeo experts that a bull fights better in a smaller area and that the smaller area brought the action closer to spectators. While this article does not address bull fighting, Martin’s comments should allay concerns about the smaller central court area at Zakro when compared to the larger central courts at Knossos, Phaestos and Mallia. For more discussion of the subject, contact David Martin, 1607 Hanover Road, Gettysburg, PA 17325.

19. For different methods and approaches to bull jumping see J. Pinsent, “Bull-Leaping,” in *Minoan Society Proceedings of the Cambridge Colloquium* 1981 (Bristol 1983): 263; A. Sakellariou, *Etudes Crétoises* 10 (Paris 1958): 87; John Younger, “A New Look at Aegean Bull-Leaping,” *Muse* 17 (1983): 72-80; and Younger, “Bronze Age Representations,” 125-129.

20. The only possible exception is the site northwest of the palace at Mallia uncovered by Effenterre. While Pelon suggests the area may have been used for bull jumping, Effenterre believes the site was used as a political meeting place by Minoans at Mallia. Graham and Platon dismiss Pelon’s contention stating the site lacked spectator accommodations, safety of viewers was a problem, and the topography of the area would have prevented a clear view of bull jumping. For more information see Thompson, “The Location of Minoan Bull Sports,” 6-7.

21. Rodney Castleden, *The Knossos Labyrinth*, (London, 1990), 114.

that the courts at Phaestos, Mallia and Zakro served the same purpose as the one at Knossos.²²

Zakro seems to conform to the characteristics present at Knossos, Phaestos and Mallia. Moreover, when one takes into account the various seal stones found at Zakro²³ depicting bull jumping activities, it seems to point to the possibility that the central court at Zakro may have included bull jumping among its activities.²⁴



Fig. 4. View of the central court at Zakro. (Photo by author.) The central court is the largest rectangular area in the left portion of the photo.

22. *Ibid.*, 135-136.

23. Pinsent, "Bull Leaping," 265; and Younger, "Bronze Age Representations," 126-128.

24. The central court had many functions besides the possible site for the bull games. Other sporting activities plus religious functions took place here. For additional information see Graham, *The Palaces*, 74; and Thompson, "Clues to the Location of Minoan Bull-Jumping," 69.