

A Pilgrimage Journal



Carolyn Holt's Travel Journal
Crete, 2007

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I signed up for *Carol Christ's Goddess Pilgrimage to the Caves, Holy Mountains, Sacred Centers and Settlements of Minoan Crete* not knowing quite what to expect. I wanted a getaway adventure while my life partner, Bob, finished up his last semester as a school psychologist in New York. Soon I would be settling down into domesticity with a retired partner who would actually be living with me full time, and not jetting in and out every other weekend, as he has been doing for almost five years now. Now, while work kept Bob from traveling with me, an all-women tour was an attractive way to travel. My father was born on the Greek island of Leros, and I had never been to Greece, so Crete had special appeal. At the time I knew little about Neolithic and Minoan history, and had only a hazy idea of process theology, the field of our tour leader. I bought her most recent book, *She Who Changes*, and went shopping for travel gear.

Wanting to really be present for this unusual experience—I had been on vacations and tours, but never on a pilgrimage—I asked Bob for the gift of keeping in touch only by postcards while I was in Greece. This was hard for both of us, as on the days we are apart, we normally meet by computer for a lengthy videoconference. Letting go of these daily conversations was letting go of part of what grounds me. I gave my son's number to the neighbors, and asked Chris to handle any emergencies with the house (and wait till my return to tell me about them). I am glad for these choices; I noticed that tour members who called home or checked their e-mail at Internet cafes were sometimes catapulted back into the messiness of ordinary life, making it harder to be fully available for the spiritual essence of pilgrimage experience. I knew one definition of the pilgrim's journey from having taught *The Canterbury Tales* years ago: *sharing one's story in a community of fellow travelers*. In her introductory remarks as the tour began on Saturday, May 26, Carol Christ offered two additional definitions:

- *Liminal space – stepping outside the ordinary. A disorientation that can lead to something new.*
- *Sacred space – where the physical and the spiritual come together.*

I noted the definitions in my travel journal. I can't remember if I wondered whether I would experience these aspects of a pilgrimage rite. But I did decide to abstain from television and newspapers for the duration.

Saturday night our group met for the first time. We often met in the evenings before dinner to sit in a circle for an hour or so of telling our stories. On Sunday I began to learn some history:

- 100,000 years ago, the first humans migrated out of Africa to the Middle East
- 40,000 years ago, human migration moved beyond the Middle East
- 8,000 years ago (6,000 *bce*), the Neolithic revolution began, marked by the first appearance of agriculture, weaving on the loom, and pottery. Neolithic means new (or last) Stone Age.

The great feminist archaeologist, Marija Gimbutas, calls this period "Old Europe." It ended around 3,500 *bce*, when waves of Indo-European invaders from the steppes of Russia began arriving on horseback, bringing with them the fundamentals of what we have come to call patriarchy: warfare as a means to empire (and rape as a tool of warfare), class divisions and hierarchical organization structures, and "sky god" religions which pre-suppose duality between body and spirit, and between this life and an afterlife. And, of course, the assumed superiority of the male of the species. The last flowering of Old Europe was on Crete, in Minoan Culture, 2,600–1,450 *bce*. The study of history is more interesting today than when it was first introduced to me more than fifty years ago. Point of view is more clearly an issue. The first archaeological site on our tour was Knossos, called a Palace—implying hierarchy—by the Greek government, but called a Sacred Center by Gimbutas and Carol Christ. In the feminist definition, it is a place for communal storage, for workshops to produce ceremonial objects, and for rituals to celebrate the gifts of our Mother, the Earth. Archaeological evidence supports the feminist perspective: Minoan culture left no fortifications or weapons of war on Crete. Rape and war are not portrayed in Minoan art; by contrast, they are a frequent theme in the Greek art which followed. The Old Center at Knossos was built c. 2,000 *bce*. The current palace was re-created by a British archaeologist, Arthur Evans, on New Sacred

Center foundations 1,700-1,380 *bce*. There is a lot of Evan's imagination in the re-creation. He was working in Crete before archaeology became more rigorously scientific.

Because the Virgin Mary is the only echo in Christianity of the divine feminine principle embedded in the religions of Old Europe, Christ also took us to several old Greek Orthodox structures in Crete. On Monday, we went to the Paliani Convent, known as "old" in 668 *ce*, where we gathered for a ritual around an aged myrtle tree, said to be more than 1,000 years old. On the bus ride to the Convent, an



Carolyn's Prayer

envelope containing ribbon cuttings was passed around. We each drew one, and at the Convent Carol suggested that we each tie a ribbon to the tree and make a wish. I am not one to believe in wonder-working trees, but I tied my intensely orange ribbon to an ancient branch, between two green shoots, and thought of the vibrant new life Bob and I are building together in our sixties, and tears came. This was one of many times during the trip when I experienced the power of ritual to touch the soul. Ritual, as I think back on it now, is a tool Carol deliberately used over and over to help us "step outside the ordinary" and reflect on our experience in a new way. Orange, a friend told me later, is the color of passion and of creativity. Later on Monday we drove to the village of Zaros in the Psiliotis Mountains, which became our base for the next three days.

By this point in the tour I was beginning to understand more about the ways Greece and America are different, and was beginning to feel the disorientation that comes when the assumptions of ordinary life are no longer relevant. At home, I look around when I walk, sure enough of my footing on level ground. When there are steps inside buildings, they generally conform to building code in terms of step height and tread depth. Handrails are almost always present. In Crete, I learned to look at my feet a lot—everywhere the ground was treacherous, whether due to loose rock on a mountain hike, whimsical practices in building, or construction mess on a city sidewalk. In Crete I needed a helping hand again and again, whenever I would encounter steps too high for my short legs and arthritic knees. Often, the terrain was so difficult I couldn't even look up to see whose hand was helping me. As I walked to my room in Zaros on Monday evening, I was looking around, however, enjoying the beautiful tropical foliage. It was misting lightly, and the level tile under my feet suddenly became as slick as ice. In a heartbeat, I was on my back. Fortunately, I was not hurt; another tour member fell on the same slick tile and had to deal with a foot injury for the rest of the trip, as we were not near medical care until we returned to Heraklion at the end of the tour. I was shaken and decided that while I would enjoy a fish dinner with friends, I would pass on the evening's Greek dancing.

Tuesday, we drove from Zaros, our second base hotel, to Phaistos, an important Sacred Center in Minoan life (first phase, c. 1,900 *bce*; second phase, c. 1,700 *bce*). The design of Minoan sacred centers is an interesting mix of open space, likely for vistas and processions, and labyrinthine connections between smaller spaces. The larger, open spaces and the smaller, more private spaces are generally rectangular in shape. At Phaistos, an earlier Neolithic structure on the site had been excavated: it was round. We sat in a circle here for readings. I felt more connected to the earlier architectural form.



Neolithic Circle

Then we went to Kamilari, site of a Minoan Tholos tomb (2,500-1,900 *bce*). Here we did a lovely ritual—honoring our dead by pouring libations on the earth while we sang words I use at home for a dinner blessing: “From you I receive, to you I give. Together we share, by this we live.” I poured libations for my Mother, my Father, and for a cousin who died of cancer in January. Our rituals were connecting me, one after the other, to the most significant people in my life. Pouring of libations was important in late Neolithic and Minoan sacred rites. Many pitchers have been found. Pitcher shapes or pitcher functionality are at times united in a single piece with goddess forms. The readings and music Carol selected to accompany our rituals played an important role in the creation of sacred space. One of the songs we sang at the Tholos Tomb—Jennifer Berezan’s *She Who Hears the Cries of the World*—touched me deeply; I wrote in my Journal that I hope this is sung at my own memorial service. This day we also stopped in Vori, at a museum of Cretan ethnology. And at Kalamaki for a swim in the Libyan Sea. Our days, more often than not, were chockablock full.



Relaxing at the Lake in Zaros

Wednesday was a free day in Zaros. Nestled in the mountains, Zaros provides beautiful views in every direction. I took it easy: just a little walking, a little laundry, and a little reading. The book I brought with me by Gimbutas—*The Language of the Goddess*—is a joy. My mind is brimful of goddess shapes I want to carve. Wednesday evening we saw a video made by a Norwegian film director chronicling her experience on this same Goddess Pilgrimage several years earlier. As I watched, I began to wrap my mind around all the goddess talk: perhaps I could think of the goddess as a metaphor for what is divine within me. Or perhaps simply as a symbol of the awesome life-giving power of nature. These were comfortable thoughts. Thursday we

checked out of our hotel in Zaros. On today’s schedule was a major hike into the Skoteino Cave. Carol’s lecture today touched on the role of caves in pre-patriarchal religion, and on what happened to this religion’s world view as the Indo-European perspective began to prevail. In pre-patriarchal cultures, the cave symbolized the womb, source of regeneration. Black was the color of rebirth; white was the color of death. The “stiff nude” figurines buried with the dead were white. Stories in Greek myth and in the Bible—which have played such a major role in shaping western culture—have among other purposes the undermining of goddess religion and of Minoan culture, where this religion had its last flowering. Conquerors generally bring the “light of reason” to cultures they take over, though they also co-opt deeply entrenched practices. The Black Madonna images in early Christian churches reflect the co-opting strategy.

Crete was first settled in 6,000 *bce* by late Neolithic (Stone Age) peoples. They built the structure we sat in at Phaistos. Around 3,000 *bce* Minoan (Bronze Age) culture began. Around 2,000 *bce* mountaintops began to be used as sacred sites. Our first stop on Thursday was Mt. Juktas where there is a mountain top shrine. In one deep crevice at this site, thirty-nine feet of goddess figurines have been excavated, including small sculptures of women giving birth. We hiked part of Mount Juktas, and paused for a reading in a Neolithic circle with a stone altar. In some of our rituals, including this one, we moved in a line, ordered by age from youngest to oldest. Even though my body is aging, I feel timeless inside—always the same. But here I was in a line, and there were only four elders in front of me in our group of twenty-one. My attention was captured and focused by the simple act of lining up. I cried a bit on the way back down Mt. Juktas: I am now a Crone. With aging comes wisdom, but also loss of strength and stamina. Many people help me, and I am grateful for their kindness, but a bit embarrassed that it must be so obvious I need a helping hand.

Then we drove on to Skoteino for lunch and the first of several hikes deep into caves. Descent into the Skoteino Cave is physically challenging. No steps. Darkness (the only light is from headlamps).

Tricky footing and steep drops, some of which have to be taken by sliding. I decided to stay in the village. After walking through this tiny, remote village with a friend, we seated ourselves at a sidewalk table like those seen all over Crete in front of tavernas. Generally these tables are occupied by older men drinking endless cups of Greek coffee. I wondered briefly if someone would wave two women away. After a short while, a customer came to the taverna, the first since our group had been served lunch there. It was the village priest. Wearing long black robes, he arrived in his pickup truck with his sons, young boys about nine and six years old. As soon as they entered the taverna, the boys plucked plastic machine guns from a basket on the wall, and raced around the buildings adjacent to the taverna, shooting their imaginary enemies with gusto. When our cavers returned to the taverna, the priest gathered his boys around him before they left. I will never forget the image—the masculine solidarity, the robes of authority, the guns.



Boys and Guns



Interviewing Village Women

Carol had arranged for us to interview our hostess and an older neighbor woman on what their lives were like growing up in a remote Cretan village. I could guess some of it from the home of our hostess. Her bathroom was out back, next to a storage room where she was raising rabbits. Our hostess had been removed from school by her father after second grade. When she told us this, a shadow of sadness passed across her face. Her seventy-nine year old neighbor told of her brothers continuing their education in Heraklion—walking there on Sunday evenings, and returning to Skoteino on Friday afternoons. This woman went to Heraklion at age fourteen to visit her brothers, accompanied by her father and a donkey bearing wood for the brothers’s stove. En route, her father caught a ride with a passing vehicle, and left her with the donkey, who “knows the way to Heraklion.” This woman was allowed to go to school through fifth grade. In a later lecture, Carol shed some light on what we heard in the taverna. Greek culture is intensely patriarchal. Traditionally, marriages were arranged. This is still true today in rural and mountainous areas. Some marriages are arranged by both sets of parents, and sometimes against the will of the young woman. The arrangement can be struck as early as the girl’s thirteenth year, with marriage occurring when she is eighteen. If no strong emotional connection to the husband occurs, the Greek wife will often forge her deepest emotional bond with her son. Men have considerably more freedom. They are often seen sitting out with other men. Greek culture, Carol said, is shame-based, with ample social restraints on behavior; by contrast, American culture is guilt-based. We view something as right or wrong, no matter who knows. Internalization takes the role external social restraints play in a culture like Greece.

Thursday evening we checked into our next hotel, in Agios Nikolaos. On Friday our touring included a Sacred Center in Malia, a small Minoan villa at Nirou Hani, and a cave at Amnisos. Carol lectured a bit on geology so we would understand the formations in the cave. Some Greek islands are volcanic. The African “plate” is pressing under Crete, moving it towards Europe at a rate of three inches a year. The plate is also pushing Crete upwards. Originally, it was under water. The mountains in Crete were formed at the same time as the Alps. Calcium, from shells, forms limestone, and then marble is formed as water seeps through and the softer part of the rock dissolves.

Malia (built c. 1,900 *bce*, rebuilt c. 1,700-1,450 *bce*) is another Sacred Center, like Knossos and Phaistos. The design clearly seems to have included workshop space. Living quarters were built around the center. The famous gold bee pendant was found in Malia, near a burial altar. Here was also found a spout-breasted figurine, likely used for libations, the color of rocks—gray and white—shaped like a mountain, with a bird head. At Malia we did a thanks-giving ritual around a stone ceremonial offering plate found on the site.

Sometimes during the pilgrimage moments of deep emotion came during rituals. Other times they were triggered by the most ordinary events. As I left Malia, I stopped in the tiny gift shop to buy postcards and a government booklet on the site. When I handed my Euros to the Greek man on duty, I found myself telling him, “my Dad was born on Leros,” and tearing up as I spoke. He saw my emotion, and made small talk, telling me of his relatives in the States. Now that I have experienced the strength of Greek culture, I understand better why my Dad was the way he was, and not the perfect father I imagined possible. Maybe he did the best he could. The cultural forces that shaped him were profound. The disorientation of travel was causing my soul to crack open, and tears of forgiveness to flow.

Our cave experience on Friday was the Eilithia Cave at Amnisos, sacred to Eilithia, the goddess of childbirth. I wore my headlamp, but didn't feel steady enough on my feet to carry the lighted beeswax candle for our ritual. People helped me down to the second of this cave's three stages, where I decided to stand by a stalagmite in the process of formation. Beyond it I could see another large stone formation, and beyond that our little group of women with candles in the darkness. If I looked the other way, I could see the light at the mouth of the cave. I was flooded with tears as I recognized my frailty and my inability to manage difficult physical situations on my own: I seem to be unable to handle steps of more than eighteen inches by myself—it's scary, balance-wise, going down, and going up I lack the muscular strength to pull myself up. If I want to have more physical ability, I will have to work hard to achieve it. The aging process is taking its toll. Now I am one of “the slow ones.” And a tour is a lot like a marathon: endurance matters.



Safely out of the Cave!



Carol Christ at Ancient Wash Tubs

Saturday was a very active day. We drove up into the mountains. Our first stop was the village square in the town where the Greek novelist Kazantzakis was born. Here we saw a mountain spring feeding three stone wash tubs and a five hundred year old plane tree. Roots of plane trees go down to springs, so the tree in close proximity to the town's spring was no surprise. Our first ritual of the day was hugging the tree. It took *fifteen* of us, with arms outstretched, to encircle it. Our next stop was the old convent in Kera Kandiotissa, with its chained virgin icon. This place felt darker than any cave to me; I couldn't exit it quickly enough. Back on the bus, we soon found ourselves driving in the Lasithi Plain. This large plain, 3,000 feet above sea level, is ringed by mountains and dotted by villages and windmills. In every direction we saw sheep and goats grazing.

Driving anywhere in Crete is an intense experience. The cities seem to have no rules. The mountain roads pose a different kind of danger. They are narrow, barely two lanes, and because of the

steepness of the terrain are marked by frequent switchbacks. The hairpin turns at the switchback points do not allow a long tour bus to stay in one lane while making the turn. So every switchback offers moments of extreme vulnerability. In some places to stay entirely in one's lane is impossible for other reasons, as when the edge of the road is crumbling into a future rockslide. There are rarely guardrails, and all along the way, the edge of the road is dotted with commemorative shrines, marking the death spot for someone's loved one. When I fully took this in, I realized that Cretan roads were simply a reminder of the random chance that governs life and death in our universe, and that there was nothing at all I could do. I settled into a mysterious serenity, and enjoyed the awesome scenery. I was still aware of danger, but somehow not anxious about it. I was very grateful for our steady, competent driver, Nicos.

Sometimes in town or country, movement simply came to a stop. In a village, it might be because someone parked a van on the side of the road, making it impassable for our bus. When this happened, Nicos would honk, and a few minutes later someone would pop out of a building and move their vehicle. In the country, it was generally because a herder was moving a flock of sheep or herd of goats, and we just waited until all the animals had crossed the road. In Heraklion, later in the trip, Nicos began a left turn at a busy intersection, only to find that a construction project had started on the road he intended to enter. He had no options, as the only other turns were too narrow for a bus. He called our hotel, which knew nothing of the construction a few blocks away. So he parked in the middle of the intersection. We unloaded our bags in the midst of cars and motorcycles whizzing around the bus, and then schlepped them the remaining blocks to our hotel. Two hours later the police came, and stopped traffic so the bus could be backed up to a more viable intersection. Greeks have a way of throwing up their hands, as if to say, "what can be done?" This was a time for that expression. I sorely missed American know-how and planning at times like this.

Our next stop on Saturday was the Dictean Cave, fabled birthplace of Zeus. Access to the Cave is a steep hike up a mountain. The cave itself has been fitted out with lights and steps, hundreds of steps. I really wanted to descend into this cave, so decided to conserve my energy and take the donkey ride to the cave's entrance. This was a different kind of terror. For some reason the donkey chose to pick its way along the very outside edge of the path, along a steep drop-off. I looked at the vegetation just over the edge, and prayed the donkey would not think of grazing. In my fear, I hunkered down over the donkey's back, to lower my center of gravity. This amused the donkey's owner; he tapped my arm and motioned for me to sit upright. "OK, OK," he said. The cave itself was huge. It was a place for religious ceremonies at least as early as 2,200 *bce*. Pottery vessels for food and liquid offerings have been excavated; they had been thrown into the lake at the cave's bottom, or embedded in crevices. I cannot imagine how people got in and out of the cave before the steps and lights were installed. At the end of our walk through the cave, I found my donkey, Katerina, at the entrance, ready for my ride back down. I was so relieved to be back at the dismounting spot when the ride was over that I opened my wallet and pressed a huge tip on the donkey's owner, George, no doubt confirming his impression that I was crazy.



First-time Donkey Rider



Counting my Blessings

asking for a coin. Then I got it: this was a job for her, begging on a path walked occasionally by tourists. So there I was, with my American money, my American education, and my American medical and dental care. And there she was: a peasant, a goat herder. She had none of these benefits; instead, she had missing teeth, and a cough.

When we met for our storytelling ritual on the hotel rooftop terrace Saturday night, the group went through the rocky second stage of group formation (forming, storming, and norming are the typical three stages), triggered by a dissatisfied tour member. At an earlier time in my life, I would have felt anxious, and responsible for rebuilding a sense of harmony. But tonight I was calm; I knew this was not my problem to fix.

Sunday morning we checked out of our hotel, as we were moving our base for the next three nights to a more remote seaside village: Mochlos. Our first stop was a lovely museum in Agios Nikolaos. Here we saw the Goddess of Myrtos—a libation vase from approximately 2,500 *bce*—she is a fun, turtle-like figurine holding a pitcher. We talked about the Horns of Consecration found on peak, mountaintop shrines. Do they represent horned animals? The raised arms of the priestess? The mountains themselves? Items from this period were made of clay, or bone, or stone (Crete's bedrock stone is gray, marble like), or 24K gold, worked by hand. The Minoan coffins in the museum were made of clay, designed to take the whole body in a fetal position, and conveniently designed with holes in the bottom for life juices to drain out. Everywhere in Crete the basic realities of life were in my face: we are born, we grow, live and love, and we die. Then new life comes, and the cycle begins again. The Earth is our life-giving Mother. This perspective makes so much sense to me. With the "sky gods" of the Indo Europeans came the dualities we see in the great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam): we are not our bodies; the earth is not our life-giving mother, but a resource to be conquered and used; sexuality should not be celebrated but controlled; and our real life is not here and now, but in a promised afterlife.

Thinking these thoughts, I passed on our next stop, an old de-consecrated church—Panagia Kera—with 14th century frescoes of the life of the Virgin—and instead took Greek coffee in the taverna next door. We went next to Gournia, a Minoan town that gives a sense of what ordinary life for Minoans was like. The excavation at Gournia was done by an American woman, Harriet Boyd, in 1901. She had gone first to Knossos and met Arthur Evans, the Brit who was directing excavations there. At his suggestion, she went to Gournia, traveling by donkey, with a girlfriend, a Greek man, and his mother. At Gournia, she directed excavation of the village rather than the "palaces" excavated by male archaeologists. The settlement at Gournia was the oldest excavation in the world—c. 2000 *bce*—at the time she did it. Harriet must have been very brave. She descended into the DICTEAN Cave during the first excavations there, when the pool was being dredged and figurines were being found at the rate of one a minute. When she began work, the site at Gournia would have been simply a mound of dirt with olive trees planted on it. Of all the sacred sites we visited, Gournia was my favorite. We held a brief meditation there, standing around a kernos stone.



Offerings on a Kernos Stone

We brought nuts, seeds, and fruits for offerings, and placed them in the shallow bowl shapes carved around the stone's edge. Gratitude seems to have played a large role in Minoan and late Neolithic religion, and it seems too absent from my daily life. We Americans tend to feel so entitled. It takes a trip outside the States to see how much we have; indeed, how what we take for granted might cause others to think of us as excessively materialistic. I would like to build some simple morning ritual into my daily life with Bob, so that we give thanks every day for the abundance we are blessed with.

Sunday afternoon we arrived in Mochlos, a small, remote, seaside village. Our bus was too large for its streets, so our baggage was downloaded into our host's pickup for delivery to the hotel. We spent a quiet day here on Monday. Our stronger swimmers visited Mochlos Island—once attached to the land—for a close view of the Minoan sites there. On Monday a video was available for viewing in one of the tavernas—*Signs Out of Time*—the story of the great archaeologist, Marija Gimbutas, who put “Old Europe” on the map and pioneered archaeo-mythology. Monday night before dinner we had a beautiful ritual in a labyrinth near the sea; dinner itself was at an outdoor seaside taverna—a totally magical place that I wished I could share with Bob. Tuesday we were back on our bus for a trip to an archaeological museum at Siteia, on the eastern end of Crete. It includes finds from Mochlos and Kato Zakros. As we drove we passed caves used to shelter sheep when the weather is foul. Also little round huts made of stone and cement—the shepherd's cheese-making spot by the side of the road. The landscape in Crete is the most beautiful and dramatic I have ever seen. Mountains, gorges, plateaus, sandy and rocky beaches—Crete has it all.

Our group hiked down a gorge from Zakros to Kato (Lower) Zakros. The steep descent into the gorge kept me from going. Apparently it was beautiful, with huge oleander shrubs on both sides, and the gorge walls dotted with caves, used to store the bones of the dead. After they returned I saw cell phone



Spiraling Snakes

video of their chance encounter with a pair of whip snakes. They were mating, and it was a beautiful sight on video: each of them upright, and spiraling around the other, as though they had no need of the ground for support. A friend who was there said that it was scary to watch, as bushes were being thrashed violently by their movements.

Later that day we walked Kato Zakros, another Minoan Sacred Center on the side of a hill. We paused as a group for readings at this site, and then fanned out to explore it on our own. Suddenly, the peace and beauty of the day was blasted by the terrifying, ear-splitting man-made whine of a fighter jet, and then the sound of two more fighter jets flying practice maneuvers at each other. I didn't know if the planes belonged to NATO, the USA, or the Greek government, but it was an unpleasant reminder that no site is remote enough in today's world to be free of the evidence of war.

Wednesday morning we left Mochlos for a drive along the Southern coast of Crete. I tried to imagine the North coast of Africa, only two hundred miles away. Our first stop was Phournou

Koriphi, where I watched—with my heart in my throat—as our group did a steep rock scramble to a shrine where the Myrtos goddess was found. One theorist says that small remote settlements like Myrtos functioned as keepers of a shrine. Boats came and went at the base of the shrine. Olive groves, vineyards, and other evidence of farming have been found around the site. When the hiking group returned, our bus headed north into the mountains for the peak shrine of Kato Symi. The bus could not manage the final ascent on dirt roads with hairpin turns, so we transferred to a farmer's pickup trucks, stashed in the truck beds like so many bales of hay. When we tumbled out at the top, it was to find ruins and an ancient, mountain-top spring, that in post-Minoan times became a temple of Aphrodite. We placed goddess figures under a nearby tree. Each of us read a lyric poem by Sappho, 600 *bce*, and poured a libation on the earth. Her poems, like all lyrics, focus on personal life and nature, and evoke a sense of the precious, transient present moment in which we live. The poem I chose to read was very brief:



Descent from Myrtos

My lovely friends
How could I change
Towards you who
Are so beautiful?

I imagine this was Sappho's protestation of never-changing affection for beautiful friends. But I chose to interpret the word "change" in a different way, asking—in effect—how I might change and grow more like some of the beautiful souls I'd come to know on this trip. We had lunch in Kato Symi, where we celebrated the birthday of a tour member, and then our bus turned back to Heraklion.

Wednesday night we were back in the city, at our original hotel base. Thursday we were on the bus again for a return to the mountains. Our first stop was Tylissos, another Sacred Center. The important "double axe" image was found here, and also at Knossos. Male archaeologists named the axe shape; alternately, Gimbutas traces the shape's development to the transformative butterfly and the sacred triangle. Tylissos has a configuration of stone that suggests a toilet, and I was selected to model the toilet-using position for the group, so we could wrap our minds around how this particular configuration of stones could function for this sanitary purpose.

In a nearby town, Carol introduced us to a beekeeper, who demonstrated a centrifuge he uses to extract the last bit of honey from the comb. Greek honey is awesome. It is served often with the delicious, thick Greek yogurt—I made this combination both breakfast and supper on more than one day. Greek mealtimes are on an altogether different schedule than my American one. Breakfast is whenever; lunch is very late—somewhere around 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon; and supper is very late, often beginning after 9:30 PM. My body didn't like going to bed with a huge meal in my stomach, so I often ate my biggest meal at lunch and made yoghurt with fruit and honey my supper. This served me well, especially when I lacked the patience for leisurely Greek food service.

Our next stop was on Mount Ida, which at 8,000 feet is the highest point in Crete. The Idaean Cave was used for worship in Minoan times; in later, Greek times, it became the cave where Zeus spent his early years. It was a pilgrimage destination for ancient Greeks—visited by Pythagoras, for example. We got to the Idaean cave via a long hike up a dirt and gravel road with numerous switchbacks. The cave is located high above the tree-line, and I was sucking air as I made the hike. Sometimes our fast pace really did me in. But the cave was awesome, and it was easy to see how it could be taken for the womb of the earth, our Great Mother. My legs were too rubbery after the hike to walk the steps down into the cave's depths, especially as there was no guardrail to hold on to. But our group's pilgrimage ritual at the bottom, with everyone holding beeswax candles, was beautiful to see and hear. Then came the walk back down the



Preparing for Ritual in Idaean Cave

footprint. Almost everything I ate in Crete was grown locally. Every hotel room had the room's light and air-conditioning systems linked to the room's key, so that when one leaves the room, energy is automatically conserved.

Friday was the last day of our pilgrimage. Normally this last morning would have been spent in Heraklion's archaeological museum, but the Greek government had closed it for renovation, so instead it was a day of getting ready for our final gift-giving ritual, shopping for souvenirs, and packing, as my cab to the airport was scheduled for 5:30 the next morning. I walked down to the harbor from our hotel twice on Friday, and was reminded of how much I have come to hate the arrogant Greek male drivers who barrel towards crosswalks as though they will get extra points for wiping out pedestrians. We generally stepped into crosswalks en masse, with arms linked, hoping that our number might encourage a foot to find a brake. Walking back to the hotel for the last time, I stopped in a nearby plaza for a frappe with friends. We were serenaded by three different begging children who played the accordion for money, under a man's watchful eye. The girl who begged was scratching her underwear area. I suspected the worst, and left. Our final gifting ritual, on the hotel's roof terrace was lovely. The gift I gave was a brass figurine of the famous snake goddess. The gift I received was a clay bird-goddess. I felt a wonderful sense of closure and also great fatigue. I knew my pilgrimage was over.

I traveled home with photographs and souvenirs. But the most important thing I brought home was a subtle shift in consciousness. I think I knew already most of the things I learned on Crete, but I learned them in a new way: understanding through physical experience, body knowing, not just through the intellect I have relied on all my life. I did learn some things intellectually, by lecture, reading, visiting museums and archaeological sites, and taking part in rituals:

- Greek Culture – its power to shape lives and its main themes, which I took to be passion and freedom.
- Cretan Geography– a strikingly beautiful, if challenging landscape. Vivid evidence of the powerful natural forces still shaping our world.
- Cretan History – almost a microcosm of human history. Edenic in origin. Then conquered. And re-conquered, and re-conquered, ad nauseum. A sad study of the rapacious forces of empire that have shaped the last 5,000 years of human history.
- Neolithic and Minoan Culture – artifacts from these periods touched my artist's soul with their beauty. And their religious significance—celebrating the natural cycle of birth, growth, death and regeneration—exposed me to a wiser way of living in tune with the earth. Minoan Sacred Centers, Caves, and Mountaintop Shrines were for me sacred places where the spiritual and the physical came together—places hallowed by the pilgrimages of generations upon generations of human beings.

dirt road to our taverna—sucking air was less a problem going down, but the pitch of the road was hard on my knees. After lunch of grilled lamb chops at the taverna, we drove back to Heraklion through some of the most beautiful scenery I have ever seen.

I am bringing back from this pilgrimage a deeper appreciation of the beauty of our world, a deeper understanding of the interdependence of all nature, and a stronger sense of the fragility of our earth, as we walk less and less lightly upon it. In many ways, Cretans put Americans to shame in

matters like the size of their carbon

- Process Theology – reading Carol Christ’s *She Who Changes*, I knew I had found my spiritual home
- Ritual – the nearly daily use of ritual on the tour reminded me that there is hardly anything as useful as a good process. Carol’s rituals were well designed. They helped many of us step unexpectedly into liminal space, with consequent gifts of insight and grace. I noted how many times—as our rituals would honor an individual—the woman being honored with our full attention would become radiant with beauty, lit from within. We could all spend more time fully attending to those we love.



Leaving Mochlos



Tour’s End, in Heraklion

The gifts of bodily knowing that I took away from the pilgrimage were very personal:

- A deeper understanding of where I am in life’s journey, and what being an elder means in terms of health and wisdom
- A sense of peace, of having come home to a spiritual world view that makes complete sense to me and that makes me proud to be a woman
- Experience in living—for two weeks—in an eternal present, and the gifts of serenity and joy that seemed to go hand in hand with being in the now. Unplugged from modern communication devices. No need to plan anything. Two weeks when all I had to do was just show up. Maybe anxiety and fear come from trying to be in multiple places at the same time, or in trying to manage the future while living in the present. As my granddaughter, Alexis Stone, writes in a poem, “Your flower is here, and not there.” I learned to let go of the terror of what could happen around the next bend in the road.
- Experience of interdependence as part of community. Sometimes it was helping hands when the trekking was challenging; sometimes it was kind words that buoyed me up. None of us make it through life entirely on our own.
- Practice in openness, in seeing as clearly as ever, but feeling no need to judge, control, or manage what I saw. The calm that came with openness was as healing as it was unexpected.
- A feeling of readiness for whatever lies ahead in my personal life’s journey. Of having no regrets, no unfinished business. I know this last gift links somehow to finally being able to forgive my father.

These were my personal gifts of bodily knowing from the pilgrimage, and I am grateful to have received them, even though I had to be shaken nearly to my core to be ready to accept them.

After I returned home, I found myself flooded with emotion as I talked to Bob about my experiences in Crete. I asked him what he’d heard from all I’d had to say, and he commented that I seemed to be mourning something, and it had to do not with father, but with mother or perhaps with something that mother symbolizes. He was right, and I am grateful for his intuition about my inner work. I have been grieving the loss of a beautiful world that I discovered only to learn of its loss. I saw evidence in Crete that there was a time when the feminine divine was approached with awe and gratitude, when human beings

lived together in peace, and without huge class differences between rich and poor, when common needs were met and creativity flourished, and when women played leadership roles in religious and communal life. I also learned of the destruction of this way of life, and how new myths were created that turned the distinctive elements of Minoan culture on their head. For the last five thousand years we have lived with war, class differences, a terrible de-valuing of women, and a dangerous disrespect for the Earth. Growing up in a patriarchal society, I had always assumed these forces to be an inevitable consequence of human nature. Now at least I know a happier alternative is possible and workable. I pray we begin to make choices that will take us in this direction. And I hope my own grief and outrage over what we have lost is channeled into productive activism.

This Goddess Pilgrimage in Crete had many components: touring, visiting sacred sites, physical challenge, education, ritual, and opportunities for story telling in a circle of women. It was a deliberate step out of my ordinary world, and it was transformative in ways I never anticipated. But, then, it was Spring, the time for new growth to appear.

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