

*Our Third Act — the crone years of midlife and beyond — can offer us an unparalleled opportunity to stretch out beyond our previous boundaries and seek adventure. Traveling to distant lands, increasing our physical strength, learning a new skill, finding new relationships, or facing an unexpected challenge are all ways in which we grow as we age. Share your adventure — however you choose to define it — with our readers by sending your story to: Crone Adventure, Crone Magazine, P. O. Box 687, Forest Grove, OR 97116 or email editor2@bbimedia.com. Happy Trails!*

— Anne Newkirk Niven

### Libations at Knossos

It was mid-day on the ninth day of a two-week tour of Crete. There were sixteen of us – two leaders and fourteen other women from various English-speaking countries. We were staying in Mochlos, a small fishing village. A curve of tavernas hugged the bay, each serving fresh fish, salads, cheese pies, dolmas, eggplant concoctions, and all the Greek food we had come to love.

## Circles within Circles

### MY SOJOURN IN CRETE

When we had gathered for the first time just over a week ago, we sat in a circle of chairs on the rooftop patio of our Heraklion hotel. We took turns speaking, each beginning with the phrase: *I am here, I am whole, I am [our name]*. We repeated this affirmation at each circle gathering at day's end as we shared our experiences.

Our tour began — as all tours in Crete should — at Heraklion's Archeological Museum and the sacred center of Knossos. Our leader Dr. Carol Christ explained that Knossos was not a palace, despite often being mischaracterized as one. Minoan Bronze Age civilization (circa 3,500-1,450 BCE) was an egalitarian





*Clockwise from upper left: view from an Idean taverna; Gournia ruins; “indoor plumbing” at Tyliossos.*

culture which honored the Earth Goddess on mountain tops, in caves, at springs and trees and in ritual centers like this one.

Such centers could be as simple as a sacred stone at the crest of a hill village or as elaborate as the major ceremonial complexes at Knossos, Phaistos, or Malia.

We had been to those centers. At each, we paused before entering to be led in rituals acknowledging the significance of the sites and the women and children and men who had lived around the courtyards

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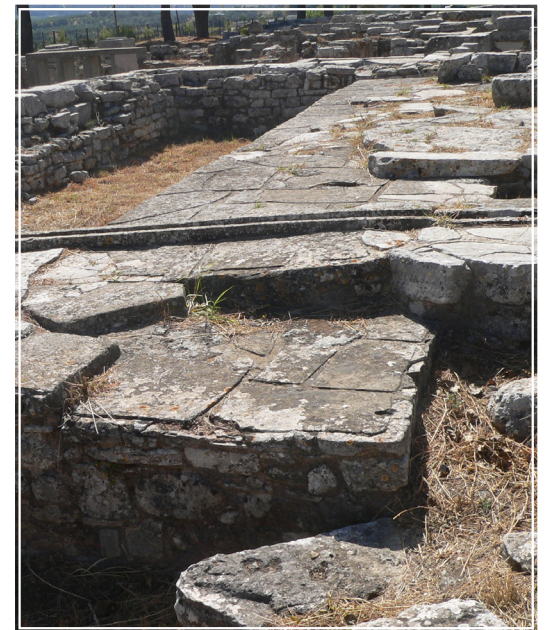
where ceremonies and games celebrated the life force that permeates us all. Often we sang songs or chants that echoed across millennia.

Our rituals were carefully planned by Dr. Christ. We took turns leading the rituals with their concomitant songs or chants and solemn libations. Much of Minoan pottery was meant for pouring libations. Accordingly, we each carried a goddess image and some form of liquid to perform this simple, ancient practice at every sacred site. My image was a replica of



a terracotta Neolithic snake goddess from 4,500 BCE, and my liquid of choice was honey.

By the ninth day of the tour I had become convinced that there really had been a civilization that held the virtues of nurturing and generosity as paramount; a society in which dignity was part of being human. It was more than just the fact that the stone outlines of Minoan dwellings were all about the same size: it was the sense of community that vibrated up through the ruins even after 5,000 years.





## Becoming a Community

By now, our group had evolved into a community. We had shared ceremonies and meals, laughter and bus rides, and so much more. Each morning as we headed out we repeated a blessing which ended with these words: *As this day dawns in beauty, we pledge ourselves to repair the web.* In the evenings when we shared our stories we repeated the mantra: *I am here, I am whole, I am [our name].*

Throughout the tour, whoever needed help got it. Whoever needed time alone, or comfort, or cash until we reached the next ATM, got it. When I fell ill, Mika brought tea and honey and lemon and Coleen brought ravioli-size cheese pies from a taverna.

Today, the ninth day of the tour, it was my turn to lead the ritual. The owner of our hotel drove me out to the site: a Cretan labyrinth by British tourists a few decades ago. It was adjacent to an old threshing floor on a hill about half a mile outside of town.

The day before, Marie and I had studied the ritual text prepared by Dr. Christ and agreed on which parts we each would take.



*Clockwise from above: Mochlos threshing floor and labyrinth; complex at Knossos; mountain tree (where we read Sappho's poetry), household ancestor's shrine; the Sacred Center at Knossos.*



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I stood at the entrance to the labyrinth and watched as Marie led the participants up the road to the site. Finally, all had arrived, encircling the labyrinth. As instructed, they entered the concentric circles one at a time with their arms raised like the goddess images we had seen in Heraklion. We felt like goddesses. I read the same affirming phrases as each woman circled the circles. I was the last to walk through, finally joining the others on the perimeter to watch Annie,

Alana and Wendy perform a song and dance they had prepared for the occasion.

Having nurtured our souls, we walked down to the village for a late, celebratory lunch.

There are, apparently, few flat places in Crete.

At least not on our tour. With a bad back, I only managed to hobble around the sacred centers and great museums and one of the caves. Whenever I needed help, however, someone offered me an arm or a helping hand.

On one particularly vertical day, we traveled up a mountain and then clambered up a rocky slope to a spring held sacred by Minoans and a gnarly old tree where we stood (in a circle of course) reading Sappho's poetry to each other.

### Hospitality Across the Ages

One day our bus driver, Babi, invited us to his village. One of the locals bought all sixteen of us coffee — a gesture typical of the amazing level of Cretan hospitality. On the last day we used the bus, Babi parked at a roadside shepherd's shrine. I wandered around taking pictures only to discover that Babi and his wife had prepared wine, cheese, and olives we savored under the shade of venerable maples.

In Tylissos, local residents Maria and Stella welcomed our group into their home. They offered us tea — served with grapes, raisins, and cookies — while we all shared our stories. At one mountain taverna in Anoglia, I had roast lamb and listened to the 82-year-old owner regal us with stories of Cretan resistance to the Nazis during World War II.

Mount Ida is Crete's tallest mountain. Those of us who could not climb the path to Idean Cave (legendary birthplace of Zeus) were invited to relax at the taverna overlooking the Nidan plain. The taverna was a rather scruffy, smoke-filled place, that I avoided — until I learned they had best cheese pies on the island — and ventured in. I ate several with the delectable local honey, and did not miss Zeus at all.

**At the summit of the ancient town of Gournia, we circled a sacred stone, offered fruit, and sang. It was a blissful moment when the millennia fell away.**

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Kernos at Gournia with our offerings.

Perhaps our most significant ritual occurred at the ruins of Gournia. With the help of the other women on the tour, I made it to the summit — and sacred center — of this ancient town. There, we circled a Kernos (sacred stone), placed fruits around its perimeter and, after readings and another song, fed them to each other.

And oh the trees! My favorite was the thousand-year-old myrtle at Paliani Convent. We each tied one ribbon in her branches and another around a fallen twig. My twig with its ribbon lies in front of my goddess image (still a little sticky from honey libations) in a corner of my living room.

Above all, this tour was a shift in perception. At some point, I began to understand that there really was a culture that valued women,

a time when we danced in a circle of equals — a circle with no beginning and no ending. I like to think I brought a little taste of that amazing civilization home with me when I returned. ☺



**MIM NEAL, 73, considers her participation in Carol Christ's Goddess Pilgrimage to Crete, ([www.goddessariadne.org](http://www.goddessariadne.org)) as a personal epiphany. Neal earned her living by writing for, among others, Rotary International and the 1999 Parliament of World Religions in Cape Town. Her first book was *Tree Lines, A Memoir* (available on Amazon). She also writes essays, sermons and scripts for ceremonies. Some of these works can be found on her website at [www.mimsprose.com](http://www.mimsprose.com).**