

# Archaeological Museum in Heraklion (Crete)

## Minoan Culture

### General Stuff

Advanced

Sometimes one is lucky. The Museum was actually open *and* had most of its stuff on display. That seems to be rather the exception than the rule in many of the countries around the Mediterranean. The Heraklion museum actually was mostly closed in the last 6 years or so. It reopened just about when we hit it in May 2014. It has moved to a new building and when it opened the necessary work of redistributing the goodies in new case and rooms had *almost* been done. What was missing was the labelling of the artifacts and a good museum shop with some books concerning the exhibitions. Only general descriptions of the contents of show cases are given but no details whatsoever. Much of what I state in the following is thus based on educated guessing.

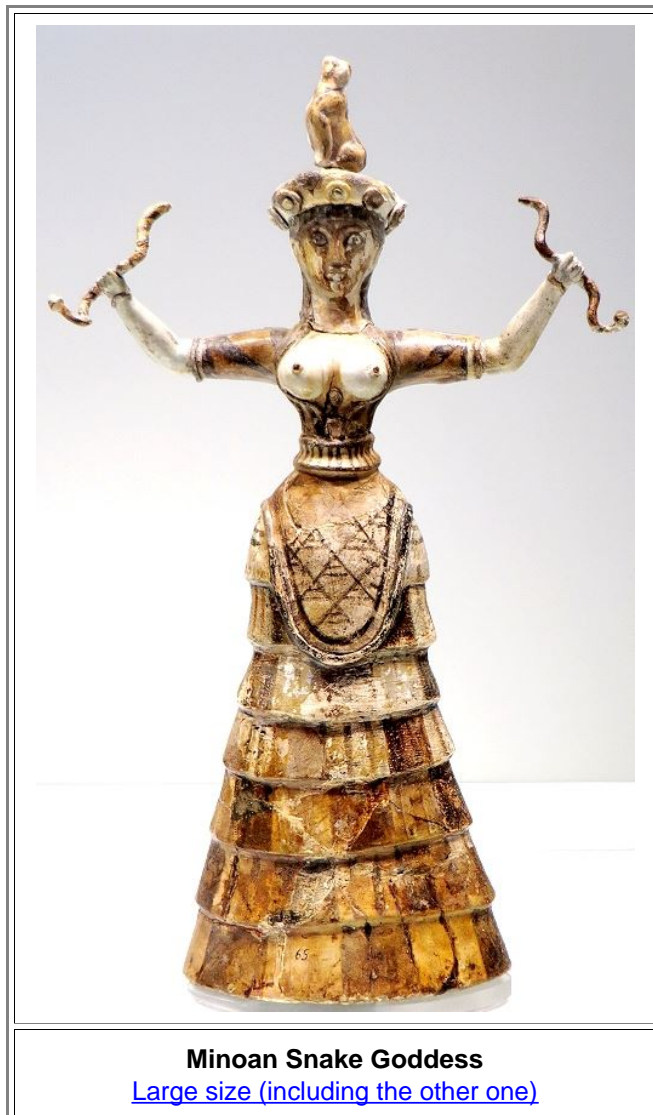
Since there is neither an Internet site nor any book about what you can find in the museum, this is a bit annoying - in particular because highly interesting swords are displayed but forbidden to photograph because the material hasn't been [published yet](#) (many years after finding it!). The best "book", covering some of what you see below, is the Internet contribution from **Stefanie Gröner** and **Andrea Salimbeti**, which I have [copied for you](#).

When I revisited the museum in Nov. 2018, most artifacts have now been labelled. There is still no book, however.

● However, there are many positive points and you should definitely go and visit this museum:

- It contains all the interesting stuff from the **Minoan culture**. The "palace of Knossos" is nearby but there is nothing original there except old walls and a few columns - and most of those are modern restorations.
- The museum contains a *very* large collection of bronze swords, daggers, and other items.
- The artifacts are illuminated rather well. Taking pictures - to the extent that this is allowed - is much easier than in many other places.

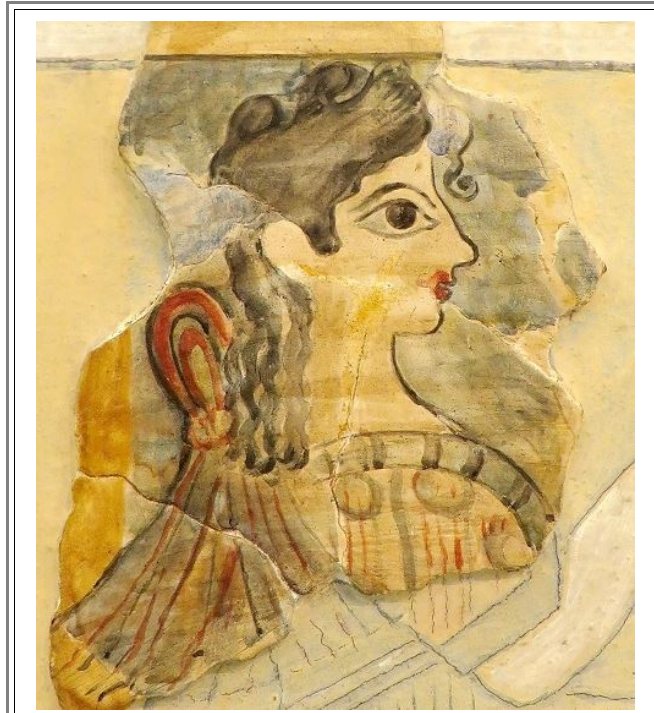
Before I go into the metal stuff, I show you a few of the highlights:



- This is one of the two Snake Goddesses (or possibly just priestesses) "performing a ritual". In other words: we don't know. The figure dates from around 1600 BC.

The 'Snake Goddess' figurines were found in 1903 by **Arthur Evans**, the guy who excavated Knossos. The figurines are made from glazed earthenware. The peculiar dress attracted a lot of (male) attention and speculation. Maybe all Minoan women dressed this way? Knowing that fashion sooner or later repeats itself, there is hope!

- ▶ The museum has most of the famous Minoan frescoes that adorned the walls of the royal palace around 1600 BC. Here are two examples:



**Minoan Lady**

[Large size](#)



**Bull leaping**

[Large size](#)

- Live must have been graceful. The ladies dolled up and young men enjoyed leaping over bulls. The red-skinned figure is a man and the two light-skinned figures are women. There is no sense in risking your life this way without drooling groupies, after all.

- ▶ There are many sculptures. What takes your breath away is a full-size bronze grave statue of a young man from the late Hellenistic period around the 1st century BC, and a full size marble statue of Aphrodite (or just a well nymph) from the Roman period; late 1st century AD. I give you just the heads.



[Large size](#)



[Large size](#)



Since ceramic weathers least, there are plenty of pots like in any archaeological museum. The ones here tend to be prettier than most. Here is one of the many very pretty pots:



### Bronze Swords and Other Objects

The Museum displays not only a very large collection of bronze things, it shows objects I have never seen before. Here are first examples from the Minoan time. Since the Minoan civilization flourished from approximately the 27th century BC to the 15th century BC, this implies that these tools are from around 1600 BC or earlier.

- The fine "hand saws" are remarkable. The cylindrical object appears to be the famous [hollow drill](#) that is often mentioned in the literature, in particular in the context of Egyptian stone working. This is the first one I have seen in a museum.





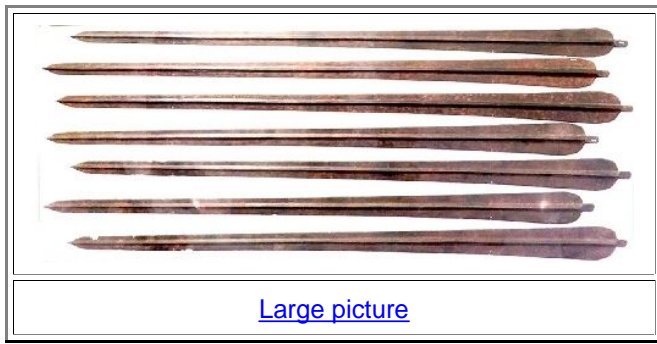
**Small hand saws (about the size of your hand)  
and what appears to be a hollow drill**

As far as bronze swords are concerned, the museum not only shows a very large number of these items but many special ones. In particular [two daggers](#) that look like made from silver but are probably arsenic bronze. That's at least my impression. But remember, I'm not an expert on swords in general and bronze swords in particular. Here are examples found in the Arkalochori Cave (1700 BC - 1450 BC)



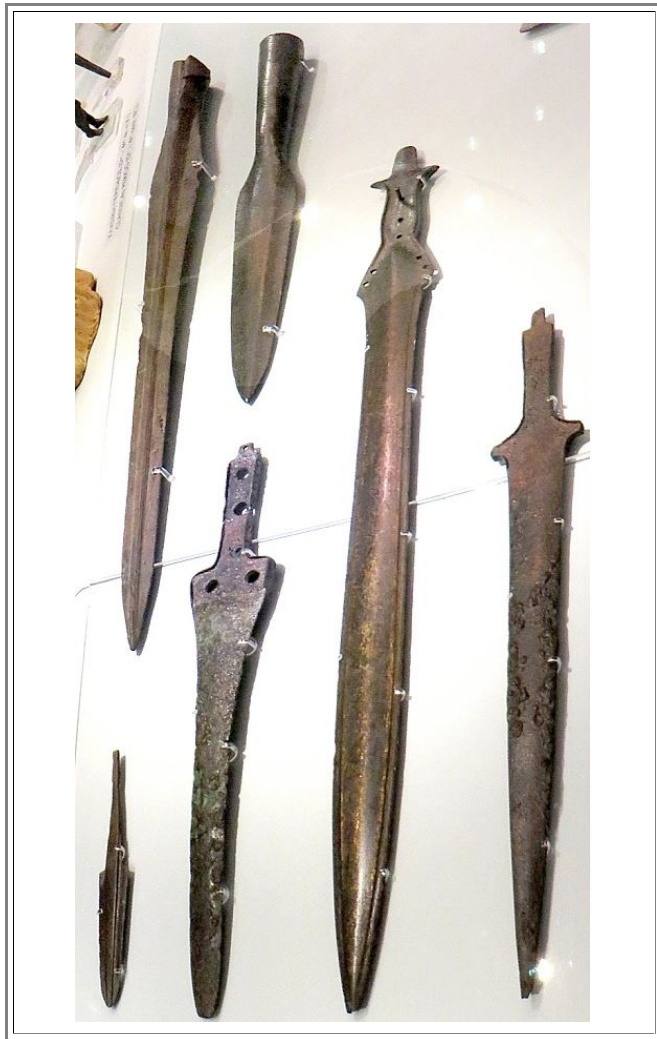
[Large picture](#)





Note that there are no holes for rivets and that there is no damage to the edges. The museum mentions that these are "model swords" but it appears to me that they were just as-cast blanks, designed for trade. Also note that these swords are almost exclusively of the ["Vollgriffschwerter"](#) (Naue I type) variety, i.e. the hilt is a separate piece that has to be riveted onto the blade.

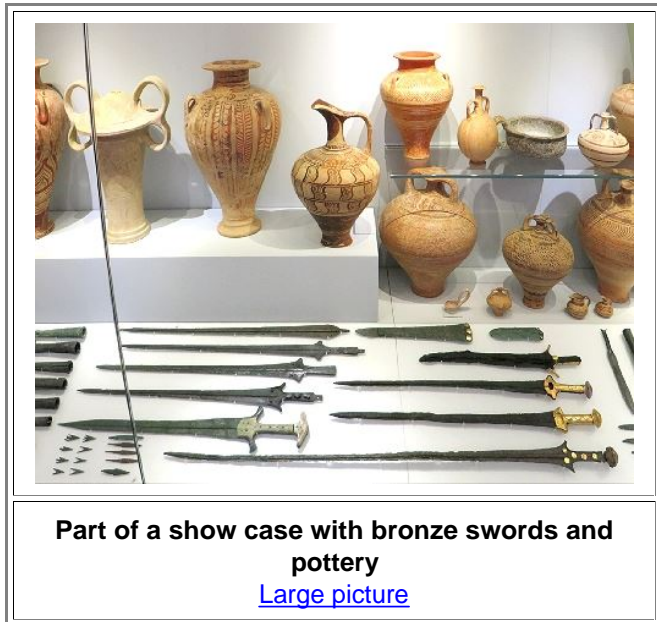
Of course there are also swords of the later [Naue II type](#). The examples below are from the "post palatial period", 1300 BC - 1100 BC.







While swords like these can be seen in many places, the Heraklion museum has another speciality: it shows bronze swords with well preserved hilts:



Part of a show case with bronze swords and pottery  
[Large picture](#)

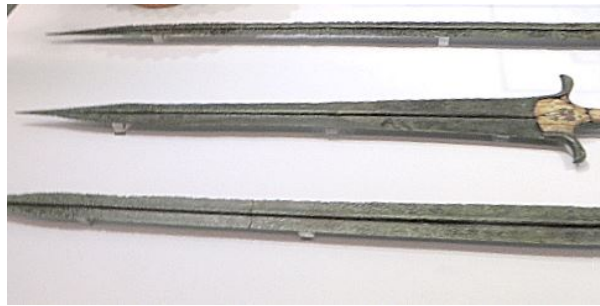
These objects are from the "Warrior Cave" and date to 1450 BC - 1300 BC. Here are details:



### Details of hilts

[Large picture of other hilt](#)

There is much more. A particular speciality are extremely long bronze swords (my guess is 90 cm - 100 cm) with an extremely fine tip and a prominent central ridge:



**Very long and very pointy bronze swords**

However, some objects must not be photographed and I can't give you more than the incomplete picture above.

What about iron objects? Well, the glorious days of the Minoan empire were over well before iron became prominent, so one shouldn't expect too much. They do have two [obili](#), however. Indeed, the objects on display are not particularly remarkable, except perhaps, for the saw:



**Iron objects in the Heraklion museum; Crete.  
The saw is on a different length scale**

[Large picture](#)

Don't miss it! And encourage the people in charge to publish something about their unique bronze swords and objects!