

CHAPTER**2****Geography Activity
The First Civilizations****THE END OF AN ISLAND CIVILIZATION**

Crete rose to the center of the thriving Minoan civilization due in large part to geographic factors. Crete's position as a large island with many island neighbors made it a natural shipping center. So did its location between Europe and the great civilizations of Asia Minor. The people of Crete built a massive shipping fleet to handle trade between the two areas.

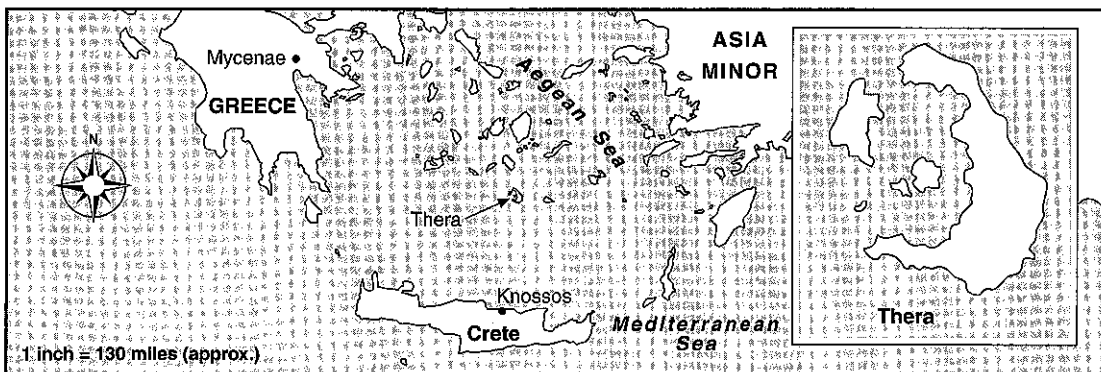
Crete's fertile soil and mild climate made it self-sufficient in food production. Its population turned to developing crafts, trading goods, and administering the powerful Minoan civilization.

Despite all these advantages, Crete and the Minoans lost their power suddenly. For centuries, historians wondered why. Only recently have archaeological and geological finds in the Aegean and Mediterranean seas offered a possible explanation. It now appears that Crete was badly damaged as a result of volcanic activity on Thera (now called Santorini), an island in the Aegean Sea.

Archaeological evidence showed that sometime between 1500 and 1400 B.C., many towns in Crete were destroyed. Geologists found a thick layer of volcanic ash buried deep in the sediment below the Aegean and Mediterranean seas. This layer was estimated to have been there since about 1450 B.C. Finally, the remains of a Minoan town were found on Thera. The town had been destroyed by a volcano and buried under volcanic ash.

Further study showed that one of the most powerful volcanic eruptions ever known had occurred on Thera about 1450 B.C. The force of the volcano had literally blown the top off the island. It sent rock and ash 20 miles into the atmosphere. The eruption opened a huge crater 6 miles wide and 2,500 feet deep.

Thera was transformed from one island into five. Sea water rushed in to fill the crater. This massive displacement of water created huge waves that raced toward the north shore of Crete. The waves also washed the shores of all the islands of the Aegean and even touched the Mediterranean coast. The ash and debris hitting the atmosphere moved east and southeast from Thera. Volcanic dust blanketed a wide area.

Crete and the Aegean

Chapter 2, Geography Activity, continued

Geologists theorize that the waves destroyed the Cretan fleet and flooded the land. Volcanic dust covered the eastern half of the island and destroyed crops. Such a catastrophe must have weakened the entire Aegean area. It probably also left the Minoans easy targets for attack. Study the map on page 3, and answer the questions that follow.

1. What physical features does Crete have that would have encouraged the building of a large fleet of ships?

2. How far does Crete stretch from east to west?

3. How far is Crete from Thera? (Note that Thera is indicated by an arrow on the map.)

4. Look at the inset map of Thera on the previous page. What do you think the island looked like before the volcanic eruption?

Critical Thinking: Human-Environment Interaction

How could the volcanic eruption on Thera have destroyed crops on Crete? What does this suggest about the other environmental changes in the Aegean and Mediterranean and their effects on human settlements?
