

Bull-Leaping in Minoan Courts: Reality or Myth? Perspectives from Modern Rodeo Arenas
Theodore B. Gatchell (University of Arizona)

Bull-related iconography was a staple of the Minoan visual repertoire. Whether in sacrificial, hunting, or grazing scenes, bulls have always been a favorite theme of the Minoan artists.

Most intriguing, however, are the bull-leaping scenes, best exemplified by the Toreador fresco from the Knossos palace. A bull-leaping scene typically involves one bull and one or more male or female participants who are either standing before the bull (usually seizing his horns), flipping over his back, or standing behind the animal. Both the sequence of acrobatic poses for a bull-leaper and, more importantly, the feasibility of these acts have been debated by scholars (Evans 1964: 212, 223; Younger 1976:128). The Minoan courts have often been suggested as possible places where bull-leaping may have taken place (Evans 1976: 224), but size and safety considerations have weakened their candidacy.

Previous cross-cultural comparisons have focused on the social status and skill of the performers, such as comparing the Minoan bull-leapers to the Spanish toreadors (Evans 1976: 228). This paper shifts its focus to a comparison of the enclosures for performing such activities. In this paper, the visual representations and physical settings of Minoan bull-leaping will be compared with the practices and venues of modern bull related sports in the United States, especially in the Southwest. Although, admittedly, there are differences between Minoan bull-leaping and modern rodeo events, the performance arenas can be subjected to comparison. Through questionnaires sent to select American rodeo venues we inquired about arena dimensions, the size of typically used bulls, and the auxiliary facilities which are necessary to house bulls or to practice.

Such spatial analysis will elucidate our understanding of the practical and technical needs surrounding a bull-related sport/activity and will allow us to reevaluate the compatibility of the Minoan courts for bull sports.