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"Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?":
 Medicine, Myth and Matriarchy
 in the Thera Frescoes

For a quarter century, a cornerstone of feminist studies has been S. Ortner's article, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?", *Feminist Studies* 1 (1972) 5-21, in which the author identifies three ways by which all world cultures seem to devalue women. An examination of depictions of crocus and saffron in the Thera frescoes suggests that a gendered "nature/culture" dichotomy in fact existed in the Late Bronze Age Aegean, but instead of devaluing women it reflected women's power over all aspects of their reproductive capabilities.

The frescoes from one Theran building, Xeste 3 at Akrotiri, include compositions that show elaborately dressed girls in natural settings picking *crocus sativus* for saffron and presenting it to an enthroned goddess shown as Mistress of Animals. A procession of matronly women also presents visual references to saffron-gathering. Another outdoor scene depicts nubile young women in a rite of passage that includes the shedding of blood, perhaps as a metaphor for the onset of menarche, defloration, or childbirth. Men and boys appear in separate scenes which exclude landscape references to the natural world.

All the scenes with women contain repeated references to saffron: crocus blossoms woven or embroidered on costumes, yellow-dyed cloth, and saffron-based cosmetics. All the young women and the youngest, pre-pubescent, boy have eyes with blue-streaked corneas which are an accurate rendering of a side-effect of a saffron-rich diet: high dosages of vitamins A and B (riboflavin), and of carotenids. By contrast, all the men and some older women have red-streaked corneas symptomatic of riboflavin deficiency. Careful control of a saffron-rich diet contributes directly to high birth weights in babies, promotes good eyesight and general health, and may reduce the risk of some cancers and retard aging. Saffron can also be used as an emmenagogue, abortifacient, stimulant, even a narcotic in high doses. Later Greek literature suggests an erotic association for crocus as well.

We suggest that the Theran frescoes, and related depictions of nature on Minoan Crete, have nothing to do with romantic modern notions about "flower loving" Minoans or Aegean islanders, but instead reflect a semiotic language that contrasts female control over, and harmony with, the natural environment, with male control over the constructed or built environment. If art is indeed a reflection of society, the "nature/culture" dichotomy may reflect specific, but complementary, roles for women and men constructed along gendered lines. In later, patriarchal Mycenaean and historical Greek culture, these powerful roles for women seem to have been feared and deliberately suppressed.